

REVIEWS

I, Claudius and *Claudius the God*

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Edited with an Introduction by Richard Francis. Carcanet Press, 1998, £25.00, ISBN 1-85754-279-7.

Carcanet's new, one-volume edition of *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* is edited by Richard Francis, Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Manchester, whose own most recent novel is *Taking Apart the Poco Poco*. It is appropriate to ask a novelist to prepare introductions for the Claudius novels, for it is the conception of the novels, not any bibliographical or editorial crux, that seems to engage editors.

I, Claudius was first published by Arthur Barker in 1934, and was an immediate success, so much so that Graves did not revise the text until the two-volume edition for Allen Lane The Penguin Press in 1941. *Claudius the God* was also first published by Barker in 1934, and the two-volume Allen Lane Penguin did not appear until 1943. The novels have been in print, without exception I believe, for almost 65 years now—usually with a choice of multiple editions available in any given year.

The most recent editions, prior to Carcanet's, were prepared by the Folio Society in 1995 and were based, as almost every edition has been, on the revised 1941 and 1943 texts. The Folio Society editions of 1995 are a boxed set, editions meant to be instant collectors' items; the books are set in Centaur and printed on Eagle Wove Paper, with very Dali-esque illustrations by Neil Packer. As attractive as these editions are, the much more reasonably priced Carcanet edition, set in Ehrhardt, with the Carcanet logo for their Robert Graves series decorating the end papers, is more useful—if you can live without the illustrations.

The Folio Society edition of *Claudius the God* is introduced by John Mortimer, who claims the Claudius books for "that rich seam of literature, the autobiographical novel," and argues that "Robert Graves reedited Claudius with his own Stoic sense of irony, the quali-

ty which makes his autobiography so attractive." The Folio Society's version of *I, Claudius* has an introduction by Allan Massie (author himself of the Roman novels *Augustus*, *Tiberius*, and *Caesar*). Massie focuses on the psychological realism of *Claudius*, and touches very briefly on the 1934 publishing context (the *Claudius* novels appeared one year after Mitchell's *Spartacus*) and on Graves' preparation for writing the novels (most Graves scholars know that T.E. Lawrence questioned the use of "assegai" to describe a German spear, and that Eirlys Roberts thought Graves had the wrong colour for the hem of a prostitute's gown—Graves changed neither detail, in fact.) Graves replied to a question about the change in *Claudius*'s character in *Claudius, the God*, "I didn't think I was writing a novel. I was trying to find out the truth about *Claudius*." Before he began writing *I, Claudius*, Graves said, "I had noted in my diary, a year or two before, that the Roman historians—Tacitus, Suetonius and Dion Cassius but especially Tacitus—had obviously got *Claudius* wrong, and that one day I'd have to write a book about it" (Peter Buckman and William Fifield's 1969 interview of Graves, in Frank Kersnowski, ed., *Conversations with Robert Graves*, Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1989).

It is in the introductions that the Carcanet edition distinguishes itself. There Richard Francis sets three tasks for himself: to "set the books in the context of Graves' own work," to consider "their Roman history and psychology" and to reflect "more largely on the nature of the genre and on Robert Graves's central contribution to it."

To accomplish this first task, Francis points to the biographical evidence indicating that Graves wrote the *Claudius* novels in 1933 as a response to his need for money—24,000 in today's currency—to finish buying land and constructing a road to the *cala* for his house in Majorca. Thus, his claim that the novels were "potboilers," as he always maintained, "may not have been simply a matter of authorial modesty." Francis shows that Graves returned to an idea he'd noted in his diary three years earlier and "put the whole project on a par with writing a pop-song," but Francis also argues against considering their writing mere "hack-work" by pointing out the immense research, the "imaginative vigour and the psychological insight" of the novels. Some of their astonishing popularity is no doubt, Francis asserts, due

to the historical era Claudius lived through—"bestrides" would be an exaggeration, of course. Claudius was, though, an intimate or relative of the first three Emperors and the "adoptive father of the fifth." And his "intellectual and spiritual remoteness from the birth of Christianity" might well be, for modern readers, "riveting." Moreover, Claudius himself is a character not "merely complex, but self-contradictory." All the classical sources align themselves at one extreme or the other: Claudius the scholar and benevolent Emperor vs. Claudius the Fool. Suetonius, who was perhaps Graves' most-used source, quotes the letters of Augustus, who one day questions whether Claudius has "full command of his five senses" and the next day marvels at Claudius' "nobility of principle" and that he could "speak so well in Public." Francis does a very credible job of presenting the point of view taken by virtually every classical author who mentions Claudius. While Seneca's hostility has an obvious source, (his banishment by Claudius to Corsica) other authors, not eye-witnesses like Seneca, probably "attempted to do justice to the whole range of rumours and conflicting traditions that were handed down." Whether, as Dio hints, "inconsistency" is "itself a psychological trait" or whether, like Tiberius, Claudius suffered a slow deterioration in his faculties "as a result of the influence of freedmen and women," Graves seized upon one central way of explaining Claudius' personality. Suetonius dismissed the claim, which Dio barely mentions, that Claudius "had feigned stupidity from childhood," as Claudius told the Senate, that "it had been a mere mask assumed for the benefit of Caligula, and that he owed both life and throne to it."

Graves' stroke of genius was to accept this point of view, that—as he recorded in his diary—"Claudius escaped both succession and assassination at the hand of claimants to the succession by a parade of his physical infirmities, an affected lowness of taste, and a cultivated weak-mindedness." But Graves took the thesis one step further: why did Claudius continue to act the fool when he was himself finally Emperor? How reconcile the "ghastly tableaux" of court life in Claudian Rome depicted by Tacitus with the "efficient administrative machine depicted by Momigliano" and modern historians? For Graves, it was simple: Claudius was (like us) a republican, and one who finally decides, as Graves' diary entry says, "to do his best to

bring Caesardom into disrepute by playing the fool." Francis insists that it is Graves' decision to "make Claudius become a bad emperor on purpose" that allows Graves and his readers to see Claudius as "a psychological entity, a man who has an inner life, who can suffer loneliness and trauma, who has emotional depths." Importantly, Graves' Claudius can even teeter on the balance between self-delusion and knowledge, as his sudden marriage to Messalina and his slowly falling deeply and deludedly into love, may illustrate. Why have the Claudius novels been so wildly popular, constantly remaining in print since their publication in the 1930's, and veritably defining the genre of the historical novel? Francis argues that the Claudius novels are a conscious reaction against the modernist device of fragmentation (as in *The Waste Land* or in Pound). Not "casual bits and scraps" that the reader sees "assembled there for us to make sense of as we may," Graves "gives us motive and end and moral; he reconciles fact with fact: it is by providing a psychologically coherent account of Claudius and showing the reasoning that determined the strategies he adopted, that he ensures the whole reads 'human and exact.'" (After all, as Francis points out, "The Devil's Advice to Story-Tellers" is just that: the *Devil's* advice.)

Finally, Francis succumbs to the temptation to link Graves' character and life with Claudius' portrait. Graves' Claudius was "a man who succeeded in exiling himself from his own existence, an appropriate subject for a writer who produced an autobiography called *Goodbye To All That*," and who became "almost the icon of the expatriate artist." He rejects Miranda Seymour's idea that Livia is a type of Laura Riding "at her most imperious." Rather, Francis asserts, Graves' Livia "is evil on the scale of Lady Macbeth, whom she much resembles and with whom she can be compared without embarrassment." The final contradiction: Graves' Claudius is a republican, while some modern historians now see Claudius as "the most effective opponent of senatorial power of all his family, the first of them genuinely to make the transition from *princeps* to emperor (Barbara Levick, *Claudius*, 1990, p.41)," and while Graves wrote two long novels focused on recreating the strategy of this most ironic of the first four Emperors, Francis points out that the political themes were prescient and relevant. These novels were published "shortly after Mussolini

and Stalin had achieved power, while Hitler was in the process of becoming Fuehrer, and five years or so before Franco became dictator of Spain." All this was a potent mix for potboilers, indeed.