Sources, Collaborators, and Critique in *Antigua, Penny, Puce*

John Woodrow Presley

In his public readings of Robert Graves's work, Julian Glover says that *Antigua, Penny, Puce* was written in response to a bet that Graves couldn't put aside all his 'classical stuff' and write a *modern* potboiler or best-seller. Graves had a subject in mind, philately, which when combined with a satirical view of both sibling rivalry and popular literature, made an excellent canvas for a very popular novel.

In an earlier essay, 'Narrative Structure in Graves's Historical Fiction',[1] I described the circumstances under which Graves wrote the manuscript of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* and the irony which permeates the novel, and illustrated some of the narrative devices by which Graves moves the two major plot lines, the legal and the philatelic narratives. Of course, other themes appear in this most successful of the Seizin Press books (*Antigua, Penny, Puce* has remained in print with almost no interruption since the mid-1930s), including Graves's cynical attitude toward popular literature and its means of production.

Alone among his novels, *Antigua, Penny, Puce* is set in then-contemporary England, and is a novel of comedy and manners. Martin Seymour-Smith, in *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, says that in this novel Graves 'was satirising family history, family nastiness [...] some traits in the character of his brother John – who was predictably much hurt by it'.[2] Miranda Seymour finds elements of Laura Riding's character and of the character of Graves's sister, Rosaleen, in the novel's portrait of Jane Palfrey, and in *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* even suggests that the legal aspects of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* reflect Graves's legal concerns in 1934–1936 about his properties in Mallorca.[3]

Graves himself was certainly ambivalent about *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. For a while, he regarded it as a potboiler, apparently, and

intended to publish the novel under a pseudonym. At some point in the writing of the novel, he became decidedly more proud of his effort, and with good reason: the English edition, from Graves's Seizin Press, appeared in 1936, as did a Canadian first impression with a corrected text. *Antigua, Penny, Puce* was the most successful – by far – of the Seizin Press books. An American edition followed in March 1937. Since that time, though, it has been far overshadowed by *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*. But *Antigua, Penny, Puce* has been in print, selling steadily, with editions in 1947-1948, 1968, and 1984 from Penguin. In 1936, Paramount indicated an interest in making a film of the novel, and though it never has been filmed, such interest has continued.

Antigua, Penny, Puce was also a critical success. Philip Larkin, in a letter quoted in R. P. Graves's *Robert Graves: The Years With Laura*, wrote that *Antigua, Penny, Puce* was 'unique among novels […] for its variety of original invention, not to mention its humour'.[4]

For all his ambivalence, Graves worked very hard on the drafts of *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. Graves apparently corrected the autograph draft three times, once with the same blue ink in which the draft was written, once with black ink, and once with pencil. The revisions are mostly stylistic – revisions within the boundaries of the sentence – rather than deletions or jugglings of whole paragraphs or episodes (as often with Joyce), but some alterations do show Graves's changing conception of the novel. The opening paragraphs were revised often and late; Graves apparently found it difficult to evoke immediately the odd combination of colloquial tone and ironic distance which the persona of the narrator developed during the composition of the novel.

But one difficulty, whatever his more general sources for the novel may have been, was that Robert Graves knew little about stamp-collecting and less about the legal backdrops for the actions he imagined for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*.

Graves had at least a schoolboy interest in collecting coins. William Graves first pointed out to me that the seed of the conflict in *Antigua*, the sibling conflict over the stamp-album, might be

first expressed in Graves's letter home from the front dated 20 September 1914. The letter, in pencil, is a will 'in case I get killed'. Exhibited by the Royal Welch Fusiliers at the St John's College Library in August 1995, the letter continues, 'doubtless father would like my sword & mother my school prize & boxing cups [...] Ros my share in the old coin collection'. It is only a short leap to substitute stamp-collecting for coin-collecting. Besides, as his poem 'The Philatelist-Royal' shows, Graves very early on had a comical view, or rather more specifically, perhaps a cold and cynical view, of stamp-collecting.

But in 1934–1936 the difficulty remained that, in writing a novel with a philatelic plot, Graves had no very specific knowledge of philately, either as hobby or industry. Therefore, he enlisted the help of friends and experts. The Southern Illinois University collections of Graves's manuscripts and letters are very revealing of the composition methods Graves adopted. Letters in the collections from Mary Phillips, wife of James Reeves, and Gordon Glover, ex-husband of Honor Wyatt, describe for Graves stamp auctions that they attended in London, along with enclosed stamp catalogues (which Graves annotated for his use in *Antigua, Penny, Puce*). On 15 October 1934, Stanley Gibbons Ltd, possibly the premier English stamp dealers, replied to a detailed questionnaire from Graves, answering questions about Antigua stamps and pre-war Gibbons albums.

Gordon Glover wrote to Graves on Sunday 16 February (probably 1935) to describe for him a stamp auction he had seen; he enclosed a packet of literature about stamp auctions and several catalogues, including the catalogue for the auction which he attended. His is a very detailed letter, with the name and address of the auction firm and detailed descriptions of the auction room, the action and methods used in the auction itself and even a freehand drawing of the room's floor plan. Excepting a chatty half-page about an eccentric pseudo-uncle of Glover's, this detailed description of an auction room goes on for four single-spaced pages of typescript. Glover's letter describes the expectant atmosphere before the auction begins, and includes quite a witty

description of the characters one might find at a stamp auction. For his first draft of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* Graves relied heavily on Glover's description, down to the timing of the auction and the colours of the furniture. (After finishing his assignment, Glover admits to being happy that he is not a stamp collector.)

Mary Phillips, also dispatched as Graves's observer, reports in a letter of 20 February that she attended an auction for air mail stamps, the auction itself being held not in a specialised auction room but in Pagani's Restaurant. Her letter is three pages of single-spaced typescript, very matter-of-fact, with much specific detail about the jargon used in philately, such as *covers* vs. *stamps* vs. *cards* as descriptors of items. She, too, enclosed a catalogue and, like Glover, annotated the prices brought by each sale lot. Doubtless her reportage also helped Graves as a sort of 'deep background' for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. It was Phillips, for example, who noted many of the signals used by bidders and the odd little observation that bidders who are uninterested in the lot being auctioned at a particular moment avert their eyes, away from the auctioneer's podium.

That these – and possibly others who helped Graves with such reports – were very valuable sources of detail for him can be easily demonstrated with just one of the many examples that found their way into the drafts. 'Many of them ran to shag and tweediness; some might have been City clerks, from their clothes. Few women. Three, to be exact. A gaunt, hyper-tweedy one with horn-rimmed spectacles, possibly the owner of a Borzoi' (p. 147) is in large measure directly from Glover's letter, the shag and tweediness a direct quotation in the first sentence. There were only two women at Glover's auction, but the second of the two was quite tweedy, wore the same glasses, and Glover speculated that she had probably left a Borzoi outside.

In writing *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, Graves apparently corrected the autograph manuscript three times, once with pencil. The revisions are mostly stylistic – revisions within the boundaries of the sentence – but some alterations do show Graves's changing conception of the novel. Very interestingly – and most frequently

in the legal or philatelic sections of the novel – not all the revisions are in Robert Graves's hand.

Graves prepared a hand-written list of five questions which was forwarded to Stanley Gibbons Ltd, 'Philatelists and Publishers', by John Graves on 14 October 1934. The Gibbons firm – no individual signature is provided – answered promptly on 15 October, with answers which proved extremely valuable to Graves. Briefly, there was no one-penny 'puce' stamp, since Gibbons did not use this adjective to describe colour, though there are one-penny stamps variously described as shades of red or mauve. Importantly, while Gibbons stamp albums had been issued with various topical organisations, a hand-written series of answers to Graves's questions indicates that at least one *catalogue* is organised into the divisions Graves needed and in the order he needed for his plot device: first the stamps of the British Empire, a section followed by stamps from 'foreign countries'. But these two documents also held one absolutely key piece of information for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*: no penny stamp had been issued before 1862, whatever the colour. And Stanley Gibbons, Ltd, misunderstanding the purpose of the questionnaire, were interested enough to urge John Graves to persuade the questioner to bring in the stamp that had given rise to the inquiry. Surely, this reaction convinced Robert Graves that the 'first' one-penny puce Antigua would be a believable prize over which his characters might litigate the fine point, as it turns out, of ownership.

Four letters in these Southern Illinois collections are from Harold Cooke, a stamp researcher and collector, author of several standard works on philately, who read the *Antigua, Penny, Puce* manuscript. He gathered information on Antigua stamps, especially the pinks, and on the Victorian habit and method of hoarding letters. Perhaps most tellingly, Graves accepted his suggestions for changing the auction room scenes in the novel.

On 9 May [1936] Cooke wrote to Graves complimenting him on the auction scenes and the collectors' jargon in his manuscript, suggesting two changes in diction, both of which Graves adopted, changing 'pocket rules' in the draft to 'pocket gauges' (p. 146) in

later drafts and in the published text, for example. Cooke also pointed out that the Antigua stamp would likely have been auctioned first – doubtless Graves had to ignore this fact for the sake of suspense in his scene – and that a rarity such as the Antigua stamp would first have been certified by the Royal Philatelic Society (Graves inserts just such an approval in later drafts). On technical grounds, Cooke objected to the auctioneer's description of the stamp's being 'duly franked' at the St John's Post Office, a phrase used only in the autograph manuscript. Cooke suggests instead that the stamp would be described as 'cancelled', and Graves adopts this term in all later drafts (154).

The manuscript had been transmitted to Cooke by Graves's brother. Harold Cooke's own research, in 1936, was on the current British stamps that were being produced by photogravure, certainly not Antiguas, but at Graves's request he contacted two Antigua specialists, neither of whom had written about the Antigua pink stamps. He reported on 22 June 1936 that a collection with a large number of Antiguan pinks had been broken up some 20 years previously, and he was pursuing information on these stamps for Graves. Only one week later, Cooke wrote to Graves that this line of research indicated that no Antigua pink stamp was dated until around 1880, and he provided the cancellation number for St Johns – allowing Graves the final version of his description of the rare stamp at auction, 'it bears the familiar cancellation AO2' (p. 154). It is also in this letter that Cooke describes the Victorian habit of hoarding letters and arranging them by date, another important plot device for *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, and he enclosed an actual specimen of the pinks for Graves's use.

The last letter from Cooke in the Southern Illinois University collection brings this correspondence to an end. The letter, dated 10 July 1936, lets Graves know the cost of the specimen stamp and reacts favourably, with offers of help, to Graves's apparent declaration that he intends to take up the hobby of collecting!

But by far the most crucial help came from W. A. Fuller, a London barrister, who served as a paid consultant on the legal

issues in the manuscript. Fourteen letters to Graves, from March to June 1936, provided advice on the courtroom scenes, on the legal plot-line, and on the legal distinction between ‘ownership’ and ‘possession’. (He even researched for Graves a *new* theory of ownership.) Fuller provided information about the legal liabilities of the auctioneer, and information about the procedure of injunction; he provided models of writs and injunctions, edited for use in the novel. Fuller also agreed to read the manuscript for legal verisimilitude.

Fuller, whose help with the novel quickly began to approach collaboration, was first put in touch with Graves by Mary Phillips; a 5 March 1936 letter introduces himself to Graves and indicates that a very nominal fee of only a few guineas would probably be reasonable. An undated letter in the Southern Illinois Collection is probably the next Fuller letter in this sequence, since in this longer note, from Brick Court in the Temple, Fuller indicates that he can answer only a few of Graves’s questions off-hand and will need some research time before answering the others. Fuller here indicates how an injunction is obtained (from a High Court Judge, not a magistrate) and indicates that there would be mechanisms simpler than injunction to stop the sale of a contested stamp. (This advice about the injunction is an ongoing theme of Fuller’s; Graves, one may note, continued his use of the injunction as a plot device, through all his drafts and into the published text.) Fuller also points out that Graves’s first ideas for the legal plot, including an order that would postpone the sale waiting for a rightful owner to claim the stamp and an action based on the claim of a third party to the stamp, are untenable. Fuller also indicates that the second trial would be heard in the High Court – a measure of Graves’s lack of legal knowledge – and suggests that mentioning his help in the foreword to the novel would almost certainly be a violation of Bar rules about publicity.

By 6 April, Fuller was laying out a detailed legal history of the stamp, from 1872 to 1936, with a section detailing the first legal action, the seizure of the stamp, and the second action. He includes a long tutorial on the legal niceties of ownership as

distinguished from possession and the rights of ownership. Graves's early conception of the plot of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* can be inferred from some of Fuller's remarks: he warns Graves that no auctioneer would so easily relinquish possession of a stamp so rare to an unknown person claiming title; Fuller suggests another approach involving solicitors' action, but Graves of course finally decided upon an even more dramatic 'theft' of the stamp ('recaption' in legal terms, as used in the novel). He also cautioned Graves that paying the shipping company or the insurance company one penny, the original value, would not in itself force the company to consider itself compensated for its property. Graves was quick to take Fuller's legal advice to heart: in this letter he suggests that the Whitebillet shipping company not be drawn as a limited company but as an unincorporated sole proprietorship, allowing any property rights to pass directly to Edith, as heir, rather than to what Americans would call 'the founder' of the Whitebillet line, as in the autograph manuscript, and making, later in the same draft, the nature of the Whitebillet firm the focus of Mr Justice Hogtie's first question before his summing up.

Fuller writes a much shorter letter to Graves on 15 April. Here he continues his tutelage on the distinction between possession and ownership; he repeatedly uses the word 'unassailable' to describe certain rights, and it is interesting to see Graves, in the autograph manuscript of the trial scenes, begin to use the same word to describe 'rights' and 'possession'. Fuller cautions Graves to choose as a model for his court scenes a civil action in the King's Bench Division, which would be very different from a criminal case.

One letter in the collection, from Graves to Fuller, arranges for Fuller to actually edit the extensive courtroom scenes in the novel, and in the same letter, Graves describes his plans to use court transcripts from the *Daily Telegraph* as models for scenes in the novel. In fact, the manuscript for Chapter 12, for example, has a news clipping run into the text of the draft. On page 23 of the manuscript for Chapter 12 is a five-line clipping, probably from

the *Daily Telegraph*, with the words ‘Mr Justice Finlay’ crossed out and corrected to ‘Mr Justice Hogtie’ and ‘Mr Wetherell’ corrected to ‘Mr Price’. The exchange clipped from the newspaper survived unchanged into the final text of *Antigua, Penny, Puce*: ‘Mr Justice Hogtie (sternly): You must not call counsel your “friend”. You will be good enough to restrain yourself and avoid being impudent in court. Mr Price: I am sorry, my lord’ (p. 194).

Apparently, while ‘modelling’ his scenes on newspaper accounts, Graves liked this touch, with its revelation of the Justice’s character, so much that he could not resist inserting it whole and using it verbatim.

On 26 April, Fuller had agreed to reading the manuscript. By May 3, he was returning the manuscript (of the court scenes, one presumes) to Graves, ‘corrected and amplified’, and worrying that he had made the chapter too long (Chapter 12 did, in fact, grow from one chapter in the first draft to three chapters in the final text). Some of the corrections Fuller made in the manuscript concerned the definition of ‘partnership’, the use of multiple questions in examining witnesses, questions of evidence balanced against questions of law, questioning one’s own witness, leading questions and other fine points. Most significantly, he has rewritten the judgment rendered by the court, added new and missing material, and deleted the issue of ‘concealed fraud’ with which Graves complicated Edith’s possession of the stamp. Graves duly dropped all mentions of concealed fraud from the manuscript.

By 20 May, Fuller was returning the manuscript of the second trial scene in *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. In his letter of transmittal, Fuller notes that he had to ‘rewrite’ the scene ‘entirely’ and says ‘I’ did the scene in the style of newspaper reports again! He even notes that he is sending *his* manuscript with the 20 May letter, and sending *Graves’s* manuscript back under separate cover. Among his other changes, Fuller gives Mr Merlin a new theory of possession, explaining to Graves that it is more plausible than Graves’s original ‘part and parcel’ argument, which appears in the manuscript. He has also added more historical details for the

Whitebillet line, and cautions Graves that his changes will require adjustments throughout the manuscript, since Fuller has not read the complete manuscript a second time after making his comments. He offers to make a final reading of the proofs if Graves thinks it would be helpful.

The Southern Illinois University Collection contains several loose pages of manuscript in William Fuller's hand. Among them is Fuller's version of the opening paragraphs of the second trial chapter. This Fuller manuscript is in fact virtually identical to the text as published, with only a few stylistic changes and additions by Graves. For example, in sentence one the time is changed to 'yesterday' in the text, and the identifiers 'now the Marchioness of Babraham', 'a rising author', and 'theatrical' are added by Graves to Fuller's draft, as is the phrase 'described as a secretary'. Similarly, in sentence two the time is changed to 'December' and the words 'and astonishing' are added before 'figure of £137,000' (£135,100 in Fuller's manuscript). In sentence three of Chapter 21, only the phrase 'alias Mavis Jongh' is added, along with the word 'very' (pp. 284–285). It is quite clear, from a comparison of Fuller's manuscript of the trial scene with the published text, that his manuscript served as an intermediate draft of this scene, and that Graves made only very minor diction and stylistic changes before the proof stage. And if that seems unlikely, consider the long section beginning with 'Dealing with the point raised so dramatically' (p. 286). This entire paragraph is printed unchanged from Fuller's manuscript, and the exchange between Justice Hogtie, Mr Merlin, and Mr Schreiner which follows, until the appearance of Mildred Young in court (pp. 286–288), has fewer than five changes of Fuller's text, and these are mainly one-word additions. These eight pages of Fuller's manuscript are remarkable proof of just how extensive and important his 'advice' became to the legal scenes in *Antigua, Penny, Puce*. A similar analysis of the autograph manuscript of the first trial scene will show, though it is not so clearly mentioned in Fuller's letters, that portions of at least six pages are in Fuller's hand.

Fuller's letter of 21 May 1936 is particularly interesting. By

now, more than one manuscript was in the mail, and some confusion begins to arise. Fuller restates his warning of possible libel actions if Graves mentions a court doctor, presumably when Edith Whitebillet faints (Graves subsequently deleted his draft reference to a 'Dr Purdew'). He is pleased that Graves has solved some problems of police procedure by changing the draft to specify that the police who arrest Oliver are from Jane's theatre company, and Fuller suggests a new fee of ten guineas. Fuller's remarks in this letter suggest that the character of Mr Justice Hogtie is a caricature of a 'Charles J' who was involved in the 'Norman Lee case', which Graves had apparently been following; Fuller discusses Charles's sudden change toward the case when a certain witness, a 'Mrs. Richards', entered the court. Fuller also encloses a writ that he has filled in for the case of Price vs. Young.

On 28 May, Fuller provides some research results regarding the laws that govern the manufacture of tobacco products, assuring Graves that there is no such law as the 'Adulterated Foodstuffs and Tobacco Act' mentioned in the chapter on 'Folly's Resurrections'. (Apparently, in 1936 it might actually have been possible – at least legally – to make new cigarettes from old discarded butts.) Fuller also provided a precedent for the injunction Graves apparently continued to insist upon, and answered that he would be very grateful if Graves dedicated *Antigua, Penny, Puce* to him.

The interlocutory injunction Graves uses to stop the first auction is again the subject of Fuller's 8 June letter. He includes some eight pages of details and provides Graves with several alternatives for the form and effect of various injunctions (Graves chooses one of these, making the injunction one taken against Oliver and his agents and servants, including the auction firm; the text of the injunction as printed (p. 158) is identical to a text provided in Fuller's hand, except for the first names of Harrow and Hazlitt). Amusingly, another piece of advice Fuller provides here is that he does not believe Graves has libelled Stanley Gibbons Ltd, so there is no point in his avoiding the use of the firm's name in the novel. In the autograph manuscript, Graves

uses 'Tannery Ribbons' to name a stamp album; in the typescript it is 'Anthony Ribbons', but in the final text it appears as 'Stanley Gibbons'. In the last letter from Fuller in the Southern Illinois University collection, dated 15 June 1936, Fuller once again warns Graves that his novelistic use of the interlocutory injunction may not seem credible.

Thus ends, rather weakly, a remarkable correspondence, some 71 pages of letters and many, many manuscript pages in Fuller's hand revised in Graves's hand, or sections in Fuller's hand incorporated into Graves's pages. There are, in addition, many pages of later typescript annotated and revised in Fuller's hand.

The dedication of *Antigua, Penny, Puce*, 'To /WILLIAM FULLER/ in gratitude', is indeed as understated as Fuller might have wished – to satisfy the rules of the Bar on publicity. And it certainly gives no hint of the major role that he – and Graves's other collaborators – had in the creation of this very funny, very successful novel.

The novel's final resolution hints of further cycles of legal storms over possession of the Antigua one-penny. As the narrator remarks, the legal narrative is unresolved: 'in any case we have satisfied ourselves that the newspaper reports quoted give a fair account of both the trials that occur in this book, and if the Judge perhaps gave a wrong decision in the first of these, well – with the greatest respect – judges sometimes do' (p. 311).

Chapters 5 and 6, the most fantastic and the funniest section of the novel, underwent a great deal of revision. Here, where Graves develops Jane's theatrical success and her scientific study of drama, aesthetics, and sex appeal, many pages are glued composites, with lengthy insertions written later in black ink. There are substantial interlinear revisions in the sections dealing with Jane's varied career, from dancer to actor to founder of Folly's Resurrections cigarettes (made from the butts dropped in theatre lobbies). This very funny sequence apparently was among the most difficult sections for Graves to write, demanding sudden changes in tone to match the development of Jane's character. There is some evidence, in the Southern Illinois University

collections of Graves's manuscripts and letters, that even this section of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* used objective material, or at least required extensive research. This evidence includes, for example, another newspaper clipping about a 'Mrs. Ford' and her 'Memories of her 65 years in Theatres' (this clipping, too, probably from the *Daily Telegraph*).

In the years since childhood, Jane has become a figure in popular theatre. After studying acting, Jane had great success playing a sequence of characters, including Doris Edwards, Madame Blanche, Leonora Laydie, and Nuda Elkan (an exotic dancer). For this last character, Jane 'studied the mechanics of sex appeal, and collected stupendous fan mail, including proposals of marriage or worse' (p. 67). Jane's approach to theatre is rational and workmanlike:

> Jane had studied all the ways in which, while keeping technically within the letter of the Lord Chamberlain's regulations about nudity on the stage, one appeared, most of the time, to be wearing absolutely nothing at all. Jane was not lasciviously inclined, but she had no romantic sense of modesty: she wanted to know how to get an audience sweating hot and cold, and she wanted to make the experiment herself. (p. 67)

The money Jane makes from these 'experiments' goes to support her friend from childhood, Edith, who is working to perfect a sort of 'robot' that could be used to replace human actors altogether. In the meantime, Jane chooses her 'foils [...] from the queue at a Labour Exchange', in order to stage 'a dreadful mix of obscenity and piousness' called *The Barber's Pole*.

Eventually, Jane's use of 'foils' is so successful that she creates an entire theatre company from the male and female characters she developed, each one played by one of the 'interesting but socially maladjustable' patients of a Dr. Parmesan. Jane Palfrey Amalgamated is a company composed completely of these types. 'The troupe had taken so kindly to their personalities that Jane had eventually permitted the seven originals to change their names by

deed-poll to the ones she had given them, though of course on condition that if they ever broke their contract they were to change them back again' (p. 78). With 'their artificial obsessions that they were exactly what Jane had told them they were', all live together, including one 'specimen' with six very useful personalities, each with 'different accents and styles', each of which is 'quite stageable'. As the members of the company become more popular, Jane creates details of their fictional private lives for the press.

The focus on Jane's business acumen allows Graves also to poke fun at some new aspects of 1930s celebrity. Jane's stars gain publicity and profit from 'a new method of advertising that Jane initiated. Other theatrical stars wrote only in praise of silk stockings, cigarettes, whisky and the like; but the stars of Jane Palfrey Amalgamated always had something cruelly double-edged to say' (84). The link between theatrical celebrities and the press is manipulated for both profit and malice by Jane when she allows her actors to upstage Oliver's wedding reception with their over-the-top behaviour and faked cases of food poisoning (which of course the 'actors' believe to be real – just as they believe their fictional identities to be real).

The focus on the theatre also allows Graves to develop his commentary on popular art and artists. For example, Jane has a theory of farce which is very similar to Graves's own: 'Jane had a theory that the test of good stage farce was its impossibility in real life. This theory blinded her to the fact that in real life impossible situations do occur' (p. 103–104). This definition will seem familiar to readers of Graves's 'The Devil's Advice to Story Tellers', of course. While actions taken from life might not be extreme enough for Jane's plots, she does take much of her dialogue from real life, from situations she has provoked, or from surreptitious recordings of dinner table conversation (p. 89). Jane will not allow her actors to vary their lives or parts in the slightest, and their contracts require them to adopt, 'for all social purposes, the names and personalities she had allotted to them for off-stage use'. She has a very reductionist theory of the audience's interest in actors: theatre-goers

> are not interested in Uriah Heep, or Bugs O'Gorman, *as such*. It is the highest common factor of all these villainous parts, namely the personality of the actor, his natural off-stage existence with all its individual human detail, that makes the real appeal. But acting is a purely imitative art, and the qualities that make our ordinary, efficient actor do not make an interesting off-stage character. (pp. 75–76)

Obviously, the logical conclusion is to create 'interesting off-stage characters' for the actors to inhabit.

> She had first to invent the appropriate off-stage personalities for her company of ten, complete with circumstantial private histories, temperaments and mannerisms. Then she had to find ten actors who roughly fitted these personalities and were ready to be them just for the fun of the thing, and/or because they were tired of their own dull selves. Finally, when these personalities had become second nature to them, she had to teach them how to let second nature shine through their stage performances. (p. 77)

Eventually, Jane's techniques – all stemming from her youthful dreams of filling a stage with marionettes (later, with Edna's help, the dream turns to robot-actors) – transfer perfectly to the motion picture industry. After Jane and 'The Emu' become partners in the film business, while they are waiting for their studios to be built, they 'learn their job practically at Elstree and begin picking up cameramen and technicians' (p. 244). They create a successful film, *Apes and Peacocks*, but Jane knows the next movie can be better still, 'when the Company had learned to accommodate itself more spontaneously to screen technique'.

Even Jane's approach to stage humour is rational. She reads *Three Men in a Boat*, but not 'merely for amusement. Jane read practically nothing for amusement; nearly everything was for information.' Jane and Edith agree, for example, that jokes aren't funny.

> Edith, a scientist, could not believe in jokes as objective phenomena. Jane meant that jokes were part of her professional stock-in-trade, something to break down the audience's self-possession with, not to laugh at. […] 'Popular humour cannot aim too low,' she once wrote to Edith. 'Jerome K. Jerome was one of the few English humorists who has ever realized this. (Surtees was another.) Jokes about cheese and stuffed trouts in riverside inns, and sea-sickness. But these jokes need a background of really sickening sentiment. The older and more awful the jokes, the more cloying must be the accompanying treacle.' (p. 69)

Jane goes on to analyse the technique as used in *Three Men in a Boat*, which she admires. To combine opposites, sentiment and grief with farce, 'needs courage – courage and perfect shamelessness'. To amplify her point, Jane adds, 'Dickens had both. *Pickwick Papers* is built on the same principle of opposites.'

To illustrate Jane's methods, consider one example of her 'creations'. One of Jane's characters, Owen Slingsby, is based on her brother Oliver: with her notebooks and memories and constantly asking herself how Oliver would 'behave in such and such circumstances', Jane has built up the persona and even the history of Owen Slingsby.

> He had been successively a boy evangelist, a temperance worker, an elementary school master, a ship's steward and a salesman in a Bond Street picture shop [...]. He wrote, too, in an amateur way. He was now supposed to be hard at work on a first novel; first novels are always semi-autobiographical, so one would soon know even more than one knew now about Slingsby's past. His talk and mannerisms were taking on a satisfactorily distinctive tone, and Jane always kept him in the height of fashion. She had decided that he would be revealed in his novel as the natural son of the golf-professional at a fashionable links and the Club-house caretaker's sister. But [...] he was in character and mannerisms the living image of her brother Oliver. (p. 81)

In fact, Jane can't quite reproduce in Slingsby the 'irritable movements of the hands and head' she remembers in Oliver; hence the meeting before 'The Stamp Collector', and hence the request for half the proceeds of the stamp collection, both at first

simply calculated attempts to irritate Oliver and record the results.

To add insult, 'Owen Slingsby' has been writing *Confessions of a Cad*, 'his autobiographical first novel', based of course on Oliver's life (the chapter headings include 'I Commit Perjury' and 'I Poison My Wedding Guests'). This is the occasion for a long aside on the legal technicalities of libel, as is Oliver's first attendance at the Burlington Theatre to see 'Slingsby' act. 'The *Confessions*, which was a hurried collaboration between Jane and Algernon Hoyland, sold so well, so well, so very well, that even a few booksellers found time to read it in their annual holiday' (p. 249). As one bookseller says to another:

> Take the *Confessions of a Cad*, now: it will not *live*, it is not wholesome, it is not humorous, it is not well written, it does not depict decent characters, and yet it ran away with the whole Spring season! That's the devil of it. We'd have been in the red without that book, Jackson. It paid for our passages out here [...] for this new Panama tie of mine [...] for a small flutter at the Casino tonight. I tell you, Jackson, I feel – I feel like a fancy-man living off the immoral earnings of a woman of a certain class. (p. 250)

Other characters in *Antigua, Penny, Puce* changed, too, during Graves's composition of the novel. Oliver, the brother and unsuccessful novelist, is a classic 'also-ran' in life and in school, never quite making first eleven in anything; Graves adds details which make him even more ineffectual. In the first draft, the books on Oliver's shelf are by Henry James, George Meredith, W. H. Hudson, Joseph Conrad, and Virginia Woolf; the final text changes the list to Conrad, Hudson, Mary Webb, Eric Linklater, Sheila Kaye-Smith, and the Powys brothers, a group by and large less impressive, and indicating the superficiality of Oliver's tastes. Though Graves deletes a few oblique references to public-school platonic homosexuality from early versions, emphasis on a bedside photo at Charchester firmly establishes Oliver as a mother's boy – damning, but less so than the early version would

have it. The final paragraph in Chapter 4, which apologises in fine nineteenth century style for lingering at Charchester, is a late addition but affirms that a knowledge of public school 'bloods' is necessary to understanding Oliver.

Oliver's character is presented much more simply than is Jane's. He has a seventh floor flat near Battersea Park, on the wrong side of the river. The pictures and books in his apartment show him to be one of those doomed always to be Second Eleven in achievement and in tastes. His ambition is to be considered 'a good all-round man'. Though Oliver has kept his mother's Dutch miniatures, Rowlandson caricatures, first edition of Spenser, pre-Reformation silver pyx, and fourteenth century French Book of Hours and a carved ivory Madonna and Child, these he keeps in a trunk; it would never have occurred to Oliver to substitute 'these genuine pieces of art for the college photos, Alpine scenes, Medici prints and schoolboy prize cups with which he has decorated his rooms'.

Since leaving Charchester, Oliver has pursued a career as a novelist, but has not achieved any great success:

> Jane's chief criticism of Oliver's first two novels (foreign travel and Riviera life) when she had read them in typescript – and they never went any further than that – was that he got all his characters too soon off the mark. She told him he should introduce them one by one, not throw a great dinner party on the first page and expect the reader immediately to master the identify of everyone present and pigeonhole all the various scraps of conversation for future reference; especially when on this or that nuance, belike, the fate of the story would turn. (p. 94)

To Oliver's assertion that he doesn't 'write them merely for money', Jane accuses him of being a very inferior sort of writer indeed. Her very Gravesian typology of writers is worth quoting in its entirety:

> The first way is to give the public what it wants, just as it wants it – the method of the popular entertainer. Then there is the way of writing without any consideration for the taste of the public: and not complaining if the public is ungrateful. That [...] I must call the method of the eccentric. I admire the conscientious eccentric as much as I do the conscientious popular entertainer: I like to see things published occasionally that are completely unreadable. But you, Oliver Price, are the third sort of writer, the sort that tries to feed the public what he thinks the public will think it ought to like because it's just a little superior. You're the sort that says, 'I don't write merely for money', meaning, really, 'I don't want to choose between being either famous in the present or else famous in the future. I want it both ways.' For which, Brother, both the intellectual reader and the ordinary vulgar reader will unanimously despise you. (p. 95)

When, later in the novel, Jane sends her Australian cousin to switch bookplates in Oliver's copy of *The Shepherd's Calendar*, the reader learns just how abominable a novelist Oliver is when the cousin reads a sentence from Oliver's novel in progress: '"Nay," cried the good bailiff of Hochschloss, "all folk who journey through this bailiwick must first drink the health of my Lord the Duke: in mead, be they poor; in good Rhine wine, be they of the better sort"'(144). His manuscript, we eventually learn, reminds Edith, who is also Oliver's love interest, of Ivanhoe – but the comparison inevitably offends Oliver. Oliver has also written a play, 'a political satire all about Fascists and Communists in a place called Angletania, which was really England'. His play has been turned down by four managers. 'They're all hopelessly the same, won't try anything new,' he complains.

Oliver is a very workmanlike writer, at best a journeyman who counts words. 'It was his habit, every morning when he started work, to write the date in the margin as an encouragement to himself. He arrived at twelve hundred words a day: which meant about seven thousand a week, because he did not work on Sundays – an old scruple' (p. 225). Ten weeks to write seventy

thousand words, another ten weeks of revision, Oliver once figured, 'but it had taken him three times as long, polishing and polishing' (p. 225). Not exactly an inspired writer.

When Oliver publishes his novel, 'he had to pay to get it published and was grossly overcharged'. The publishers ask for even more money for advertising costs, but still the book sells only 'forty-five copies in England and seven in Canada. It is always a mystery in such cases who the forty-five buyers are.' Jane thinks she knows who they are:

> Probably […] forty-five old ladies who come very slowly into forty-five bookshops exactly at closing time and say to the forty-five assistants: 'Please, young man, I want a nice interesting book of the kind that won't keep me awake at night'. […] And the forty-five assistants reply: 'We have the very thing for you, Ma'am. *A Session of the Diet*, by O. Price. It's one long yawn.' (p. 246)

In case Oliver's novel doesn't die of its own merits, 'The Emu' spends 'four days at the Institute of Medieval Studies looking up minor historical points' and locates fourteen anachronisms. Jane finds 'seven faults in grammar and three textual contradictions'.

> Not much of a harvest really. An average drama of real life contains just as many anachronisms, hundreds of grammatical faults, and a textual contradiction every two or three minutes. But fourteen anachronisms, seven glaring grammatical faults, and three flat textual contradictions look pretty bad when listed in a review under the heading: 'History, Fiction – and Hash.' (p. 247)

Since Jane has 'an instinct against anonymous abuse', she signs the review – which she has placed in a leading Sunday paper by a friend – 'Owen Slingsby', the name of the character she based on Oliver in the first place.

One could easily continue, with so much of *Antigua, Penny, Puce* and its appeal centered on such an utterly cynical view of

commercially successful novels and plays and films. Perhaps this is Graves's view of such success. He wrote the novel, as he confided to his diary, 'during [a] money-shortage as a means of extracting higher royalties from Harrison Smith for C. the God'.[5] But he worked very hard to get the details regarding the trials and the auctions and the history of the one-penny stamp *exactly* right. And, of course, Graves had just achieved both critical and popular success with the greatest of his historical novels, *I, Claudius*.

It is in the context of his own methods and aims for composing *Antigua, Penny, Puce* – the calculated choice of subject, the wholesale adaptation and adoption of details from his friends' letters, the collaboration with William Fuller, the absorption of current newspaper accounts of trials into the very manuscript of the novel – that the irony of the contrasting attitudes and methods of Oliver and Jane may be most appreciated. With the cynical and ironic attitudes it displays toward both the 'serious' novelist and the calculating but manipulative playwright – not to mention the cynicism betrayed by its own remarkably similar methods of composition –*Antigua, Penny, Puce* can be read as a thoroughly self-reflexive comic critique of the popular and commercial in the mid-1930s.

Illinois State University

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Once again, I wish to thank the staff of Morris Library, Southern Illinois University, for access to the SIU Robert Graves Collection. I am grateful for their continuing help.

NOTES

[1] John W. Presley, 'Narrative Structure in Graves's Historical Fiction', *Gravesiana*, 1.3, (June 1997), 292–304.

[2] Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work*, rev. edn (London: Bloomsbury, 1995), p. 230.
[3] Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (London: Doubleday, 1995), pp. 17–18, 230.
[4] Richard Perceval Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura* (New York: Viking, 1990), p. 237.
[5] Graves's 1935–39 Diary (University of Victoria, British Columbia); quoted by Seymour-Smith, p. 252.