

# The Claudian Dilogy and Its Early Criticism

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to present an overview of the Claudius novels criticism from 1956 to 1999. In this text, I intend to show three central pillars of this criticism: Graves's merging of the past with the present, fiction with history, etc.; structural perceptions of his novels; and interpretations of Claudius.

**Keywords:** *I, Claudius, Claudius the God*, Robert Graves, critics, scholarship

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Since Robert Graves considered himself a poet first and foremost, it is not surprising that scholars attracted to his oeuvre have been predominantly concerned with its Parnassian part. Of course, this does not mean that Graves's other writings have commanded no critical attention. His autobiography, literary criticism, and historical novels have also been frequently chosen as objects of study by researchers. Amidst Graves's prose, the Claudius dilogy is one of the more studied works. Over the course of more than seven decades, criticism of these novels has grown substantially and, I believe, merits its own study as well. Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to present an overview of the criticism of the Claudius novels.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I concentrate on its early developments (beginning in 1956 and ending in 1999) and point out its three key pillars: Graves's conflating facets of the real – past and the present, private life and history, fiction and history, etc.; the structure of his novels, structural takes on the texts as prototypes or versions of the White Goddess myth; and, finally, interpretations of the character of Claudius.

The first work of criticism concerned with the Claudius novels is Martin Seymour-Smith's for-beginners guide to Graves's oeuvre published in 1956. In the section covering historical prose, the

author advances the thesis that the scarcity of ‘the inventive type of imagination’ and avid preoccupation with patterns of human behaviour propelled Graves to write historical novels. According to the critic, given the general frame of events, the writer concentrated on filling in the information gaps with knowledge derived from his intellectual inquiries and personal experiences. To substantiate this thesis, Seymour-Smith gives examples of how Graves employs the affinities between himself and his heroes to build up a masterly psychological profile of his characters. The writer’s interest in men capable of history-making determined his choice of god-like Belisarius and Jason as well as divine Claudius and Jesus as objects of his fascination. Additionally, Seymour-Smith suggests that having an interest in soldiering in common with Belisarius and a sense of solitude with Claudius made Graves empathetically comfortable writing about them.<sup>2</sup> To point how the writer drew on his own life to give depth to historical figures, Seymour-Smith is the first one; and so, it is thus to him that one should attribute laying the groundwork for one of the pillars of Graves criticism. Graves’s merging his private life with antique ones, as it is to be shown, became for the early critics one of the key points on which to expand in various directions.<sup>3</sup>

Most likely, capitalising on Seymour-Smith’s idea that Graves translates his experiences into his works, J. M. Cohen investigates the captivating illusion that there is no ‘lapse of time between event and description, and that there is no attempt on the writer’s part to put the past into perspective’.<sup>4</sup> Although this idea seems not to be explicitly related to Seymour-Smith’s, the proposed line of arguments reveals some affinities between these two views. First, Cohen argues that the novelist’s main tool to achieve the mentioned illusion is through closely modelling the language of the Claudius novels on the rhythms of his own real-life conversations. Second, the use of the analeptic method – suspending time and thinking in bygone terms – is to have enabled Graves to abandon himself in a detective-like pursuit of concealed truths and, *post hoc*, recreate the outcome of this pursuit as if the investigated events took place recently rather than in a remote past. And third, Graves’s use of

the new historical novel's assumption about 'the unchangingness of human motive and action' (aiding him in explaining past events by means of psychology and the language of twentieth-century England) is held to be yet another of his tools of creating the adduced illusion of no lapse of time (pp. 70-79, 93-94).

As might be noticed, Cohen's arguments, explicitly informed by the perception that Graves concatenates his and bygone historical contexts, contribute to yet another pillar on which criticism of Graves's historical prose rests. In what follows, the reader might notice how other scholars of the dilogy also delve into what and how narrative techniques and tools are used in the dilogy to create particular effects.

The baton of Graves's relation to *Zeitgeist* is taken up by George Stade,<sup>5</sup> who discusses how contemporary events, people, and theories impinge on the writer's oeuvre. Among the abundant observations Stade offers, his view on the modernist blurring of boundaries emerges as especially worth highlighting. The author maintains that 'the difference between fiction and history is not a clear one to Graves', and substantiates the thesis with two arguments. Firstly, commenting on the writer's idea that 'pure fiction is something beyond [his] imaginative range', he reminds his reader that just as Graves wrote 'history disguised as novels', so he also created 'fiction disguised as history'. Having enlarged on the above, Stade moves on to indicate that Graves's use of the analeptic method, according to which the researcher '*saturates* himself in the details of whatever he is investigating', assumes the blurring of this very boundary as well (emphasis mine) (pp. 34-37). Although my intention is not to show some teleological advancement of Graves criticism, I do believe that Stade's articles leave little, if any, doubt that Graves's merging (in this case, history and fiction as well as the past and the present) was crucial for the early critics of the dilogy. First, this and the two preceding texts deal with the question of how various aspects of the writer's life, especially psychological and socio-cultural ones, affected his works.<sup>6</sup> Second, one might notice that early Graves criticism focused strongly on the authorial creation or use of various narrative tools in the dilogy.

That the above claims are not merely suppositions based on three sources is supported by the tendencies of other early critics. In the vein of those of his predecessors who were interested in the tools that Graves employs in his historical novels, John B. Vickery investigates the recurrence of certain motifs in some of these texts. The motifs which, as the author claims, might be prototypical or analogous to those presented in *The White Goddess*.<sup>7</sup>

However, from among these, I would like to adduce one that is also connected with the earlier mentioned pillar, that is Graves merging, in this case, facts and their interpretation. Even if Vickery, rather unduly, reads into Graves's suggestion that 'history is the record of infamy and the historian a dispassionate chronicler' (pp. 27, 37), when reflecting on *King Jesus*, he brilliantly demonstrates that the text is constructed in line with Frazer's model of establishing facts.<sup>8</sup> Adhering to the Frazerian method, Graves is shown to draw forth happenings from the abstruse, inconsistent, and often distorted past in such a way so that they 'square with known rituals as well as with the demands for historical and documentary consistency'. Accomplishment of this task is, for the writer, the first step before he refines and presents the obtained data in the form of a historical novel that offers 'an accurate imaginative re-creation of [...] life, a re-creation that both records and interprets (pp. 50, 52-53).<sup>9</sup> Although Vickery might seem inconsistent with his claims, he might also be seen as the one who shows yet another way in which Graves merges contrastive ideas; facts and their interpretation in this case.

Robert H. Canary is a scholar interested in the narrative construction of the Claudius books, and thus, appears to contribute to the construction of the 'structural' pillar of Graves criticism. In his text, he attempts to establish whether it is the novels' construction *per se* or their 'appeal to [fundamental] fantasies' that lies at the core of their success (pp. 83-86). Interestingly, while endorsing the factual value of these texts, Canary denigrates their structure. Neither does he find a unified plot in them, but merely distinct lines of action that coalesce into a story which, despite its 'miscellaneous character', does not differ from the framework modern historians often adopted; nor a radical portrait of Claudius

or misrepresented facts or tone of the used sources (pp. 83-86).<sup>10</sup> As to why these count as drawbacks, he remains elusive but considers listing them enough to imply that, despite its ingenuity, the structure of the novels lacks extraordinariness.

What seems extraordinary to him, and what he deems responsible for attracting the public's attention to the dilogy, is that, while *I, Claudius* is an 'archetypal form of a Cinderella story' (the young hero is humiliated and endures much suffering before becoming the emperor), and *Claudius the God* is a story of betrayal (Claudius is punished for becoming a god), both these texts are also versions of the White Goddess myth (pp. 86-89). On the one hand, we might observe that Canary subscribes to the view of his predecessors that Graves implements in the novels the idea which crystallised in his mental universe years later. On the other hand, the author's novelty is the proposed Cinderella and betrayal structure; the latter of which might also be seen as the underpinning for the upcoming and much better-developed theories on Claudius (the third of the mentioned pillars of Graves criticism of the dilogy).<sup>11</sup>

The first full-scale work to explore Robert Graves's historical prose is Katherine Snipes's 1979 monograph. In her text, the author first recounts some of the achievements of earlier scholars: Graves's approach to myths is comparative and genealogical, the themes of the good man in an evil world and the futility of war permeate *Count Belisarius*, and historical fiction combines history and fiction.<sup>12</sup>

She then offers some novelties. For instance, Snipes is the first critic to see the novels in terms of 'studies in the dynamics of power', and hence, the first one to attribute yet another but also very interesting structure to the dilogy. From her perspective, Claudius is a tragic hero corrupted by power, who, after 'painful self-examination', decides on self-destruction. This observation entails, for the author, the following evaluation: if the novel's main axis is the clash of a man with external forces, Claudius becomes an embodiment of the 'psychological conflict of a man with his own nature' (pp. 173-88). In this way, Snipes's work contributes to the perception of Claudius as a tragic hero. Finally, she uncovers the 'Myth behind [Graves's] Myths', and brings forth the already

familiar theory that all his characters are versions of the White Goddess myth figures: the heroines realise the pattern of the White Goddess who simply *is*, whereas the heroes are the failure-preordained *doers* (pp. 196-98).

Although it might be surmised that, typically for a biography, Seymour-Smith's account of Graves's life would be limited to interweaving the facts of the writer penning and publishing historical novels into the ongoing description of his life, it also offers evaluative commentaries on the dilogy. For instance, the biographer considers the Claudius books an escapist measure taken by Graves to flee from debilitating bankruptcy and subjugation to Laura Riding. The sublimation of these problems in the book is supposed to make *I, Claudius* an objective correlative for the writer's quandary, and the central figure of Claudius his caricature.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, in this way, the biography contributes to all the three mentioned pillars, i.e., the one concerned with how Graves's life merges with his writings, the structure of the dilogy, and the perception of Claudius.

Interestingly, Seymour-Smith's most important point, which might be extended to the Claudius books appears in his commentary on the proleptic-analeptic method used in *King Jesus*. Not only does Seymour-Smith define the method but also allows the reader to notice its intellectual 'origin'. According to him, Graves combined '[p]roleptic thought [...] defined as "the anticipation, by means of a suspension of time, of a result that could not have been arrived at by inductive reasoning", [with] analeptic thought [understood] as "the recovery of lost events by the same suspension"' (pp. 389-94). The outcome of this procedure was then subjected to continuous and 'perfectly conscious' corrections with a view to retrieving, finally, the non-deformed past in question (p. 395). Although Seymour-Smith does not reflect on the background of Graves's historical techniques, readers may notice that he clearly draws from late nineteenth-century (conscious corrections) and early twentieth-century (interest in mentalities) ideas on history writing.

'The Values of a Classical Education' by Philip Burton offers a very similar take. In it, the author proposes that Graves draws on various facets of the Roman world to satirise contemporary leaders,

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events, etc. Among the examples he gives, we read about Messalina serving as an accidental mockery of Mussolini, the demoralised ninth-century Germans ridiculing the twentieth-century Germans, the quandaries of ancient Britons' education travestyng the malfunctions of the modern British schooling institutions.<sup>14</sup> Having adduced in detail these and several other examples, Burton discusses the dilogy as an Apollonian text, including examples of Claudius visiting Apollo's oracle, performing a hymn to Apollo and Diana, discussing the Apollo-inspired type of history writing, and self-assuring that Greek (the language of Apollo) is everlasting.<sup>15</sup> As we can see, Burton is the first scholar to note explicitly the satiric character of Graves's texts; an observation picked up in later texts.

For instance, by John Woodrow Presley, who reads *I, Claudius* as 'a tapestry of ironies', and elucidates how the book is pervaded with irony at numerous levels. The author shows that irony is discernible in the novel, for example, in the cosmic irony of the Sibylline prophecy on the descent of the Julio-Claudian emperors, the dramatic irony of the reinterpretation of classical history, and the verbal irony of Claudius's undermining his own historical prose style, and thus, making himself an unreliable narrator.<sup>16</sup>

Although it is Presley who is most concerned with the figure of Claudius, the three preceding studies also propose interpretations of the novels' central character. By this token, these texts contribute to the respective pillar of Graves criticism; however, they do so in different ways. For Snipes, Claudius is tragic; for Seymour-Smith, he is either tragic or satiric; for Burton and Presley, he is distinctively satiric. One may thus observe that, just as the criticism that focused on Graves's merging of often contrastive aspects of reality generated contrasting perspectives, so, too, did the criticism concerned with Claudius as a hero.

In *Statement and Story: Robert Graves's Myth-Making*, John Smeds argues that Graves's interpretative models make for 'a central vision, a unified image of reality and poetic experience' that permeates his oeuvre.<sup>17</sup> In other words, he argues that the majority of Graves's writings are versions of the White Goddess myth; the idea which the readers of this article have already seen

in scholarly use. His other points also rehearse insights and ideas already present in the growing canon of Graves criticism, e.g., the untenable boundary between Graves's fiction and non-fiction; which, in the case of the dilogy, translates – to simplify – into the idea that its characters are either matriarchs of the proto-White Goddess type (e.g., Livia and Messalina) or 'classic example[s of ...] the Dying God' (e.g., Claudius) (pp. 1-25, 251-59, 297-308). Thus, in a slightly ectypal manner, Smeds also contributes to the three mentioned types of Graves criticism of the dilogy.

*New Perspectives on Robert Graves* contains, among other texts, Ian Firla's investigation into the structures and techniques of Graves's narratives and Chris Hopkins's comparison of the Claudius novels with the political historical novel of the 1930s. In 'Epics Are out of Fashion', Firla shares his observations on Graves's historical writing method and narrator. He asserts that, when writing *Count Belisarius*, the multitude of conflicting records enabled Graves to select historical material that befitted his aim to present an 'honest' version of Belisarius's life. The scholar does not extend his observation to the writer's other novels, but the technique of materials selection to support a thesis seems to be applicable to the Claudius novels as well, and hence, by extension, enrich our knowledge on the nuances of their structure.

As to the narrator, Firla recapitulates many theses of earlier critics – for example, that, by speaking through the narrator, Graves creates a 'subtle subtext [in which the writer] continues his attack on the society that he shows to have been "turn-coatish"'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, he identifies the narrator as the key rhetorical device by which the writer asserts his beliefs and ensures that the reader sees in the novels more than just tales (p. 127). This, of course, allows us to see Firla's text as yet another contribution to the scholarly knowledge of how Graves merges various facets of the real.

In the same volume, we find Chris Hopkins's juxtaposition of the Claudian dilogy with the leftist political subgenre of the historical novel of the 1930s. First and foremost, Hopkins demonstrates the writer's pull both to the Rankean idea of objectivity (which highlights the need for detailed and critical research, as well as for

an evaluation and criticism of various sources) and to the interpretative approach to history. He is thus the first critic to indicate clearly and explicitly Graves's use of methods emblematic of both late nineteenth and early twentieth-century historiography.<sup>19</sup>

Hopkins also touches on the differences between the dilogy and the political historical novel of the 1930s, which indeed offers a new perspective in the context of the many researches showing similarities between Graves's mental universe, his writings, and his socio-intellectual context. Essentially, the author notes that Claudius's scant interest in the Republican political system and his avid preoccupation with the Republican virtues emanate from Graves's presuppositions about the irretrievability of liberty and inherent corruption, and his shift of interest from 'the possibilities of politics to the possibilities of an individual'. Hopkins reckons as well that the 'striking peculiarity of Graves's Claudius novels' consists in the passive hero construction. He believes that the protagonist is only a passive participant in events and their honest chronicler. The oxymoronic character of this claim does not prevent him from elaborating on the hero's *function* as an honest recorder of events, who offers his reader 'simultaneously personal and objective' truth and 'confidential history [...] completely private and completely public' (p. 134). In this way, Hopkins's text adds to the list of ways in which Graves merges / reconciles contrastive elements: in this case, kinds of truths.

Although the first fifty years of criticism of the Claudius novels might not seem to provide 'epic' clashes, the value of the discussed tests should not be underestimated. While some of the insights and ideas they propose might no longer be topical or tenable, without them, the state-of-the-art would not exist or be much poorer. Contemporary critics can propose new perspectives on Graves's texts also because of the achievements of their predecessors, to whom one must thank for creating a field as well as a body of work and keeping it alive.

Furthermore, many ideas of the early critics still serve as starting points for twenty-first-century discussions. Atypically, the texts of early Graves scholars are not homogenous and, by and large, escape

ectypality. What I do believe is their strongest feature is that they kept proposing various perspectives on the recurring subjects.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This overview includes criticism of Graves's other historical novels or texts only when such criticism sheds light on the Claudian dilogy. Digests and bibliographic data of the less pertinent criticisms of the dilogy are given in endnotes. I avoid working with the titles early Graves critics gave to their works because almost all of these combine the name of Robert Graves with a subtitle. In order not to confuse the reader with a number of texts entitled *Robert Graves*, I offer almost all the data in respective endnotes.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves. Writers and their Work*, 78 (Harlow: Longman Group, 1956), pp. 8-11.

<sup>3</sup> Conversely, in the sequel to this article, the readers might notice that, in the case of later criticism, scholars virtually unanimously disagree with Seymour-Smith's other claim, i.e. Graves being ectypal (in the sense of unoriginal or derivative). See, for instance, John Leonard, 'The Construction of Authenticity in the Claudius Novels', *Gravesiana*, 2 (Summer 2001), 259-72; Frank L. Kersnowski, *The Early Poetry of Robert Graves: The Goddess Beckons* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), p. 45; *Graves and the Goddess: Essays on Robert Graves's The White Goddess*, ed. by Ian Firla and Grevel Lindop (London: Associated University Presses, 2003); and *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. by Patrick Quinn (London: Associated University Presses, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> J. M. Cohen, *Robert Graves. Writers and Critics* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 68.

<sup>5</sup> George Stade, *Robert Graves. Columbia Essays on Modern Writers* (Irvington, New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 6-8: 'The

irony of Graves's career, then, is that the nature of his work is as much determined by the *Zeitgeist* as that of any poet'.

<sup>6</sup> James S. Mehoke usefully classifies the approach that juxtaposes the author's life story, psychological development, and works, as 'biographical-psychological-literary'. James S. Mehoke, *Robert Graves: Peace-Weaver* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), pp. 25-26.

<sup>7</sup> John B. Vickery, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), passim. The Claudian diology was published in 1934-1935, while *The White Goddess* in 1948. Although early critics tend to see Graves's novels as proto-versions of the White Goddess myth, recent critics beginning with Firla and Lindop offer push-back against this claim.

<sup>8</sup> There is much more to the books than meets Vickery's eye. He appears to be oblivious to the passages that present, for example, Claudius's scholarly, intimate, architectonic, etc., adventures.

<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, Vickery reformulates Seymour-Smith's thesis on the reasons behind Graves's choice of the historical novel genre. He also notes the irony with which Graves imbues the story of Jesus. However, these are informative rather than critical notes. The issue of the historical novel as a form of recreation of the past is also briefly mentioned in Robert H. Canary, *Robert Graves* (Boston: Twayne, 1980), pp. 112-13.

<sup>10</sup> These passages first appear in Robert H. Canary, 'History and Fantasy in the Claudius Novels', *Focus on Robert Graves*, 1 (1972), 3-8.

<sup>11</sup> It is doubtful whether Cinderella can be treated as an archetype. I would argue that Cinderella is a representation of the archetype of the maiden. R. K. Belcher, 'The Modern Cinderella in Chains: The Maiden in Servitude', *Hohonu. A Journal of Academic Writing*, 10 (2012), 62-65 <<http://hilo.hawaii.edu/academics/hohonu/documents/vol10x16themoderncinderellainchains.pdf>> [accessed 24 April 2014]. Furthermore, the Cinderella and betrayal *structures* are an inalienable part of the books' appeal.

The next relevant study of the historical novels of Robert Graves, and yet another inquiry into the translation of the writer's life into his oeuvre, is by James S. Mehoke. In it, the critic sets himself the task of outlining a relationship between Graves's thinking and the political-intellectual trends of post-war Europe. In his opinion, Graves's unfavourable treatment of Christianity in *Count Belisarius* stems from his post-war disillusion with the religion that engendered either orthodox attitudes of fanaticism and asceticism or pacifism and libertinism. The repudiation of Christianity

and the turn toward the White Goddess visible in *King Jesus* is reckoned to be the writer's attempt to reconstruct these values, which Christianity was no longer able to make meaningful for him. Although Mehoke does not delve into Graves's worldview further, his claims that the writer uses his books to comment on his reality add to the texts-reality affinities listed by earlier critics of his historical novels.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine Snipes, *Robert Graves* (New York: Ungar, 1979), pp. 116-17, 167-72, 182. The first critic to describe Graves's preoccupation with the men who try to mould history is Martin Seymour-Smith (*Robert Graves*, pp. 8-11). Snipes picks up the topic, and Ian Firla enlarges on it 'Hello Again: A Return to the Themes of *Goodbye to All That*', *Focus on Robert Graves and his Contemporaries*, 2 (1993), 8-11.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), pp. 226-36. Seymour-Smith repeats his observation in Frank Delaney, 'Meridian: Robert Graves Special', *BBC iPlayer Radio*, 30 November 1982 <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p03m0n4p>> [accessed 1 August 2021]

<sup>14</sup> Philip Burton, 'The Values of a Classical Education: Satirical Elements in Robert Graves's Claudius Novels', *The Review of English Studies*, 46 (May 1995), 191-207.

<sup>15</sup> Although one more work might be discussed at this point (Hyam Maccoby, 'Robert Graves and the *Nazarene Gospel Restored*', *Gravesiana*, 1 [June 1996], 46-51), I omit it from the main body of the text for two interrelated reasons. It delves into the details of the proleptic-analeptic method on the basis of *King Jesus*, and hence, segues into details that would not change the tenor of this article and does it not aptly. Maccoby criticises Graves's 'intuitive yet rational' method of reconstructing the past on the grounds that his analeptic technique seems too intuitive to be acknowledged as a historical method of research. For Maccoby, fallouts of this pseudo-epigraphic technique, in which the writer recreates certain incidents by hypnotically sinking into ancient times, are compelling but can be valuable only when supported by comprehensive historical knowledge and in-depth research into the available sources. Perhaps the greatest irony of this work is that Maccoby's argument might be turned against itself. He appears not to realise, as Presley observes, that the analeptic technique was just one of Graves's tools. For details on Presley's argument, see John Woodrow Presley, "'Every Variety of Misrepresentation': Unreliable Narration in Chaucer and Graves", *Gravesiana*, 3 (2012), 592-614.

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<sup>16</sup> John Woodrow Presley, 'Narrative Structure in Graves's Historical Fiction', *Gravesiana*, 1 (June 1997), 292-94, 301-04.

<sup>17</sup> John Smeds, *Statement and Story: Robert Graves's Myth-Making* (Åbo: Åbo Akademis förlag, 1997), p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Ian Firla, "'Epics Are out of Fashion'", in *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, ed. by Patrick J. Quinn (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1999), p. 125.

<sup>19</sup> Chris Hopkins, 'Robert Graves and the Historical Novel in the 1930s', in *New Perspectives on Robert Graves*, pp. 128-35.



