
Robert Graves and the Emperor Claudius

Christopher G. Simon

Abstract: Discussion of Robert Graves's two historical novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* and their subsequent treatment in other media, film, theatre and television.

Keywords: translation, media adaptations, Roman history, collaboration, Robert Graves, Deià, Laura Riding, John Mortimer

Robert Graves began researching Claudius in 1929, but put aside the project shortly thereafter. He began writing *I, Claudius* in 1932 and the book was published in May 1934. *Claudius the God* followed just six months later. The narrative device is that the books are Claudius's secret history of his life, written entirely by himself in Greek (not Latin). At the beginning, Claudius/Graves writes 'in the present work, I swear by all the Gods, I am my own mere secretary, and my own official annalist'. In contrast, Graves himself did not work alone.

The novels were written when he and Laura Riding were living in Mallorca on the edge of the village of Deià. During the 1930s, a steady stream of interesting people came to stay with Graves and Riding. One young woman, Mary Ellidge arrived in Deià at the time Graves began working on the books. Graves induced her to type the manuscript in return for finding her housing in the village.¹ Other visitors included Eirlys Roberts and her partner Jacob Bronowski. Eirlys Roberts, who had studied classics at Cambridge, ended up carefully proofreading the manuscript of *I, Claudius*. She found few corrections were needed and was astonished by

Graves's knowledge of ancient Rome.² Graves was also assisted by his brother John who provided a translation of a surviving Claudian edict for *Claudius the God*.³ Laura Riding is thanked in the introduction to both books for her suggestions on the congruity of the English.

The Claudius books were immediately successful. They helped Graves deal with his dire financial problems and they saved his home, Canellun. The novels are remarkable works of historical fiction, which, in addition to describing the machinations of the Imperial court, include detailed accounts of adventures throughout the far-reaching Roman empire. Graves, not surprisingly, showed himself very familiar with military history with a clear anti-German bias. He has Claudius's brother, the general Germanicus, write in a letter that 'The Germans ... are the most insolent and boastful nation in the world when things go well with them, but once they are defeated they are the most cowardly and abject'.⁴ In addition, the books cover Roman education, the different approaches of the Roman historians Livy and Pollio, the administration of the empire, the detailed workings of the senate, and a thorough account of the career of Herod Agrippa.

Graves identified strongly with Claudius. In a 1969 interview for *The Paris Review*, he explained:

I didn't think I was writing a novel. I was trying to find out the truth about Claudius. And there was some strange confluent feeling between Claudius and myself. I found out that I was able to know a lot of things that happened without having any basis except that I knew that they were true.⁵

The Claudius books were then an early example of what Graves later called the 'analeptic method', 'the intuitive

discovery of forgotten events by a deliberate suspension of time'.⁶

Laura Riding didn't like the books and Graves himself, in a 1935 letter to his friends Tom and Julie Matthews, insisted that 'neither of them is of any real worth. How can the reviving of anyone as dead as Claudius be justified except as a literary conjuring trick'.⁷ Despite this, Graves was sensitive to comments about the accuracy of the books. In the introduction to *Claudius the God*, he wrote:

Some reviewers of *I, Claudius*, the prefatory volume to *Claudius the God*, suggested that in writing it I had merely consulted Tacitus's *Annals* and Suetonius's *Twelve Caesars*, run them together, and expanded the result with my own 'vigorous fancy'. This was not so; nor is it the case here.

He then lists a large number of ancient sources, some quite obscure, to demonstrate his thorough research.⁸

In reality, Graves always had a complex and uneasy relationship with academe and was not fully confident in his scholarship. In May 1934, Graves wrote to Tom Matthews, pointing out:

Needless to say I'm not a Classical scholar or anything of that sort but there is a story somewhere hidden in that confused and rather dreary history and I have tried to dig it out. If I had been a Classical scholar my historical conscious would not have let me invent a thing.⁹

When Edward Marsh wrote to say how much he liked the second book, Graves wrote back in November 1934:

I am so glad that you liked *Claudius the God*: it meant a lot of work for me because I was never a Classical

scholar of any distinction and stopped dead off when the war broke out; and you know how careful one has to be even in fiction.¹⁰

The success of the Claudius books owes most to its dramatic portraits of the Imperial family, especially the women – Augustus’s wife the scheming Livia and his errant daughter Julia, Claudius’s cold mother Antonia, and his difficult wives Messalina and Agrippina. The imperial women in the book are ambitious, scheming, murderous and fond of the use of poison and witchcraft. One of the few sympathetic women in the books is Calpurnia, Claudius’s faithful prostitute, although she does not come to life as a fully realized character. This complex presentation of challenging and unusual women has been fodder for commentators and biographers. One may note particularly Livia’s refusal to sleep with Augustus, and Messalina’s contrivances to avoid sharing a bed with Claudius. The biographers have all been quick to compare this with the strange realities of Graves’s apparently sexless life with Laura Riding at the time the books were written.¹¹ In the collection of autobiographies of living authors *Authors Today and Yesterday*, published in 1934, Riding wrote ‘I like men to be men and women to be women but I think that bodies have had their day’.¹² This is in line with an earlier condemnation of sexual relations in her essay ‘The Damned Thing’ in her 1928 book *Anarchism is not Enough*. To quote one striking sentence from that essay: ‘Woman, to save herself from boredom, is obliged to enliven the scene with a few gratuitous falsetto turns which he interprets as co-operation’.¹³

Not long after their publication, there was hope of more success for the stories with a filmed version of the Claudius novels. Graves had sold the film rights to Alexander Korda who, with Josef von Sternberg as his director, planned a very ambitious cinematization of the story with an illustrious cast

of British actors, including Charles Laughton as Claudius, Flora Robson as Livia, and Merle Oberon as Messalina. Rushes from this doomed project are all that survive but provide tantalizing glimpses of a remarkable performance by Laughton, and indicate that the film would have been a striking visual spectacle.¹⁴ However, the production was beset with difficulties, including challenges with Laughton's performance. He clearly had great difficulty getting into the part and became obsessed with modeling his performance on the abdicated King, Edward VIII. When Merle Oberon was injured in a car accident in March of 1937, it was decided to abandon the film. The book prepared by Graves to go along with the film, *The Fool of Rome*, was discarded. This was the point when Graves probably formed his idea of a Claudian curse on attempts to film or stage these novels.

Twenty years later, in 1957, Graves returned to the world of the Roman Emperors when he translated Suetonius, *De vita Caesarum* (*The Twelve Caesars*) from Latin to English for Penguin. Again, Graves had no shortage of helpers. His faithful secretary, Karl Goldschmidt (who had anglicized his name to Kenneth Gay) helped him with the book. Also, Alastair Reed, a classical scholar, did a rough first translation of the Latin for Graves to revise. In a fascinating memoir of his at times difficult relationship with Graves in the *New Yorker* in 1995, Reed describes Graves's pencil corrections all of which Reed considered improvements. Graves apparently didn't focus on the Latin, but gave Reed a master class in writing. Reed writes 'He became for me the reader over my shoulder'.¹⁵ *The Twelve Caesars* was one of a flurry of translations that Graves worked on in the 1950s. The art of translation is, of course, a complex one. In his introduction to one of his most successful translations, *The Golden Ass*, published in 1950, Graves wrote about translation that it is 'essentially a moral problem: how much is owed to the letter, and how much to the spirit'.¹⁶ Graves was not a literal

translator and there are examples where he departs from, or modifies, the original.¹⁷

The idea of filming the Claudius books persisted. Korda's younger brother, Vincent, started a project in 1956 which would have starred Alec Guinness in a script written by Graves. This project came to nothing. In 1971, John Mortimer, the barrister and author, wrote a screenplay for a proposed Claudius movie to be directed by Tony Richardson.¹⁸ Unfortunately, no one had told Graves about this project, and he wrote an angry public letter to the *London Evening Standard* stating he was surprised he hadn't been consulted. He reminds readers that no film has been completed yet 'due to the emperor's objection to having his unfortunate physical disabilities paraded on the screen'. He continues in his letter: 'I sincerely hope that Tony Richardson's version will not once more draw down Claudius's divine anger, and much regret that my advice on this matter has not been asked.' The letters editor of the *Evening Standard* must have been delighted and added the bold headline to the letter section 'Claudius' wrath by Robert Graves'.¹⁹ Richardson could not raise the funds and so this project too was abandoned. Mortimer then produced a new script for the stage in lieu of a film script.

The staged version, directed by Tony Richardson, opened at the Queen's theater in London on 11 July 1972. Despite an appreciation for the work of the actor, David Warner, who played Claudius, the reviews were terrible and still today are difficult to read. In *The Listener* magazine, the reviewer Aidan Higgins mocked the dialogue: 'You don't miss the brothel, do you, Calpurnia?'²⁰. Calpurnia also played a prominent part in Mortimer's screenplay for the unmade film. It may have been a mistake to dwell so much on Calpurnia who is not a particularly believable character in the books. The play closed two months after it opened.

Graves himself enjoyed the play and wrote to a friend who was surprised by its abrupt closure: ‘The gallery and upper circles loved “Claudius”, the stalls (who pay the most) liked it the least. I hope it goes to the USA where they would not make the same mistakes’.²¹ Graves attended a party before the opening of the play with Mortimer, Richardson and the liberal party leader Jo Grimond where Graves announced: ‘Of course Jesus Christ lived to the age of eighty, went to China, and discovered spaghetti.’²² Graves was now seventy-seven and age was beginning to take a toll.

Finally, the 1976 television adaptation of *I, Claudius* broke, or almost broke, the curse of Claudius. Two of the key creators of the BBC series, the producer Martin Lisemore and the writer Jack Pulman died within a year of the series ending. Also, Brian Blessed (who played Augustus) recalled one of the extras choking on his food and dying at an ‘I, Claudius’ party.²³

The television series was remarkably lacking in the striking visual scenes Korda was aiming for in his version. Entirely filmed on the BBC set at the Television Center near Shepherd’s Bush, London, the series avoided spectacular imagery. Games in the Colosseum just showed the imperial family’s box with loud sound effects to suggest the unseen crowds and the gladiatorial events. The television series focuses on the Imperial family; the scheming women and their husbands, sons, and lovers, and pays less attention than the books to the wider Roman Empire.²⁴

Graves visited the set in July 1976, aged eighty-one. There he met the actors and saw some of the filming. Derek Jacobi (Claudius in the series) later revealed he was shocked by Graves mental deterioration – at lunch, Graves announced he was one hundred and forty years old.²⁵

Graves would never have watched the television series – he did not watch television, nor did he have one. The success

of the series led to increased sales of the books, which helped pay for Graves's care in his last years.²⁶

Some elements of the television production would have shocked him. Half-naked African dancers appear in the opening scene. Graves's inherent modesty meant that he avoided using the most salacious details from Suetonius in the novels, omitting, for example, the graphic details of Tiberius's sexual appetites. One of the most unforgettable images in the television series was Caligula appearing after having apparently cut open his own sister to remove their unborn incestuous child from the womb. This gruesome event is a creation of Jack Pulman's and is not in any ancient sources or in the Claudius books.²⁷

The regeneration of the Claudius books continues. A BBC Radio 4 adaptation appeared in 2010 and in 2011 HBO was said to be considering a remake (which has not yet appeared). The afterlife of the 1930s' 'potboilers' has indeed been remarkable although none of the adaptations have truly captured the quality and charm of the original books. The continued attempts show how strongly the books impact those who read them. From the beginning, as we have seen, Graves was conflicted about the success of these books. In a 1969 interview, he stated: 'I am a poet and I put very little value on my prose work'.²⁸ However, he was also pleased with the recognition the books received, and not just because their success helped solve his financial difficulties. We have seen how he was both proud and insecure about his scholarship. His work, especially his interpretation of the Greek Myths, has been criticized by some classical scholars but, nevertheless, one of his dearest friends was the Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, Sir Hugh Lloyd-Jones, who appreciated Graves's searching and poetic mind.²⁹ Graves saw himself as an outsider, especially after he felt forced to leave England for Mallorca in 1929. This may help explain his sympathy for the stammering, limping, unlikely emperor

Claudius. Graves encouraged and, in some cases, was directly involved in, many of the Claudius film and theater projects. He also became more and more deeply invested in his own myth of Claudius; Claudius who cursed attempts to film his works and at the same time Claudius who always seemed to provide Graves with funding when he needed it. His real work on Claudius however was completed in 1934. After that point, he worked tirelessly on countless other projects while always prioritizing his poetry. His tombstone in Deià simply reads *Robert Graves Poeta*.³⁰

Christopher G. Simon is an independent scholar with a background in classics and classical archaeology. His parents met Robert Graves and his family in Devon, England during World War II in the summer of 1942, became family friends: Robert visiting the Simons in London and the Simons frequently visiting Deià. His sister, Julia Simonne, became Graves's last muse in October 1966. The author may be contacted by email at cgsimon@berkeley.edu.

NOTES

¹ Richard P. Graves, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura 1926-1940* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson: London, 1990), pp. 188-89.

² *Years with Laura*, p. 207; Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (Doubleday, London, 1995), pp. 214-15. See also 'A Recollection', by Eirlys Roberts, c1998
<<https://drbronowski.com/eirlys.htm>> [accessed 10 August 2023]

³ *Years with Laura*, pp. 216, 218. Two surviving edicts are included in *Claudius the God* (1934 UK, 1935 US, Vintage International, New York, 1989), pp. 435-39 in an unusual page where Graves breaks the first-person narrative for the only time until the peritextual collection of translations of ancient sources at the very end of *Claudius the God*.

⁴ Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* (1934, Vintage International, New York, 1989) Chapter 19, p. 249.

⁵ *Conversations with Robert Graves*, ed. Frank L. Kersnowski (University Press of Mississippi, Jackson and London, 1989), p. 100.

⁶ Robert Graves, *King Jesus* (Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1946),

p. 421. Note also Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (Creative Age Press, New York, 1948) Chapter 19, p. 280.

⁷ Robert Graves, *In Broken Images; Selected Correspondence* ed. Paul O'Prey (New York: Moyer Bell, 1988), p. 242. Graves was also disparaging of the books as early as December 1933 in correspondence with T. E. Lawrence. See Martin Seymour-Smith, *Robert Graves: His Life and Work* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York, 1982), p. 256 ('Claudius is only the most stupid side-activity').

⁸ In the Author's Note to *Claudius the God*, Graves also thanks Aircraftsman T. E. Shaw (T. E. Lawrence), and the distinguished classicists Jocelyn Toynbee and Signor Arnaldo Momigliano (whose study of Claudius, recently published in an English translation by Oxford University Press, Graves used when writing the second Claudius book). The references to these scholars provide further evidence that Graves was sensitive to his books' scholarly reception. See note 3 above which references Graves's insertion of translations of surviving Claudian edicts in the second book. Also, *Robert Graves: The Years with Laura* p. 218.

⁹ *In Broken Images*, p. 349.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹¹ *The Years with Laura*. pp. 216-17.

¹² *Authors Today and Yesterday*, ed. Stanley Kunitz (The H. W. Wilson Company, New York, 1934), p. 565. See Deborah Baker, *In Extremis: The Life of Laura Riding* (Grove Press, New York, 1993), p. 238.

¹³ Laura Riding, *Anarchism is Not Enough*, ed. by Lisa Samuels (Jonathan Cape, 1928, UC Press, 2001), p. 208.

¹⁴ Surviving scenes from the film were included in the 1965 documentary *The Epic that Never Was* (BBC 1965, director and writer Bill Duncalf). See Anett K. Jessop's article 'Collaboration &

Adaptation: Laura Riding & Robert Graves's "Greeks and Trojans"

in this issue.

¹⁵ Alistair Reed, 'Remembering Robert Graves', *New Yorker*, 4 September 1995, p. 77.

¹⁶ See Philip Burton, "'Essentially a Moral Problem': Robert Graves and the Politics of the Plain Prose Translation" in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition*, ed. A. G. G. Gibson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 143-63.

¹⁷ *Robert Graves: Translating Rome*. ed. by Robert Cummings (Manchester, England: Carcanet, 2010), pp. xvi-xx. I am also grateful to Leanna Boychenko for sharing her paper based on her talk to the Classical Association of the Middle West and South (CAMWS) on 28 March 2015, 'An Emperor in Translation: Suetonius, Claudius, and Robert Graves', in which she demonstrates how, in some cases, the translation from the Latin of Suetonius was more accurate in the novels than in the official translation.

¹⁸ A copy of the screenplay is in the collection of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Copies of Mortimer's screenplay and his stage play script are in The Personal Papers of Robert Graves held at St. John's College, Oxford.

¹⁹ *Evening Standard*, 24 August 1971, p. 7. See A. G. G. Gibson, 'Josef von Sternberg and the Cinematizing of *I, Claudius*' in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition*, pp. 289-90.

²⁰ Aidan Higgins, 'High Old Times', *The Listener* 20 July 1972, pp. 93-5. Other reviews noted by Gibson in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition*, pp. 290-91, notes 71-3.

²¹ Richard P. Graves, *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940-1985* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1995), p. 478.

²² Mary Beard, *Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations* (Liveright Publishing Company, New York, 2013) pp. 131-32 (review of *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, eds. Sandra B. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald McGuire Jr. (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2005)). See also John Mortimer, *Murderers and Other Friends* (Viking, London, 1994), pp. 27-30.

²³ ‘*I, Claudius*: A Television Epic’, BBC, directed by Paul Vanezis, 2002.

²⁴ For a thorough discussion of the television series, see , Sandra Joshel ‘*I, Claudius*: Projection and Imperial Soap Opera’, in *Imperial Projections*, pp. 119-61. Digressions into the further parts of the Roman Empire are a feature of Graves’s books which is shared with the works of the ancient historians Tacitus and Suetonius.

²⁵ Seymour, p. 458.

²⁶ Graves had sold the production rights of *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God* to London Films long ago. *Robert Graves and the White Goddess 1940-1985*, p. 496.

²⁷ Beard, p. 137 (review of Aloys Winterling, *Caligula: A Biography*, trans. by Deborah Lucas Schneider, Glenn Most and Paul Psounis (University of California Press, Berkeley 2011)).

²⁸ *Conversations with Robert Graves*, p. 78 (see also p. 71). Note also Andrew Bennett, “‘It’s readable all right but it’s not history’: Robert Graves’s *Claudius* novels and the Impossibility of Historical Fiction’ in *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition*, pp. 39-40, and above note 7.

²⁹ Seymour, pp. 431-32.

³⁰ An earlier version of this paper, entitled ‘Creation and Translation: Robert Graves, Suetonius, and the Julio-Claudian Dynasty’, was presented on January 6, 2023, at the Annual Convention of the Modern Languages Association in San Francisco as part of a panel on *Regenerating Graves: Media Adaptations of the Work and Thought of Robert Graves*. I am grateful to Annett Jessop of the University of Texas at Tyler for inviting me to participate on that panel.