



*Riding's edits note the scene's season and date and appear fainter
While Graves's appear in a boxed insertion and are more darkly inked.*

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

Anett K. Jessop

The problem of determining the true story of Troy is not one for the scholar at all. It is a poet's problem, requiring a delicate balance between a sense of the past and a sense of the present—since a story of past events must include the present from which they are viewed.

Riding, *A Trojan Ending* (1937)¹

Abstract: This article reports on the recent recovery of a screenplay, 'Greeks and Trojans' (c. 1937), which is based on Laura Riding's historical novel *A Trojan Ending* (1937), adapted for film by Robert Graves, and which enlarges the corpora of both Riding and Graves. Background is given on Graves's commercial venture with London Film Productions founder and producer Alexander Korda, the aborted filming of *I Claudius* in the 1930s, as well as Korda's interest in the 'Greeks and Trojans' project. The essay gestures to continued contemporary public interest in Graves, Riding, and the Trojan cycles.

Keywords: classical revisionist studies, literary adaptations, cinema studies, Trojan War

The colorful history of the literary partnership of Robert Graves and Laura Riding has, of late, become something of a screen sensation. William Nunez's 2021 biopic *The Laureate* won Film of the Festival at the 2021 Oxford International Film Awards as well as Best Feature, Best Director (Nunez), and Best Actor (Tom Hughes). *The Laureate* dramatizes an early period in the Graves-Riding relationship, during the mid- to later-1920s, through the depiction of an often-

tumultuous love triangle entangling Nancy Nicholson, Graves, and Riding – then, later, Irish poet Geoffrey Phibbs. Graves's literary legacy has, more importantly, found its way to film through other genres as in the highly successful 1976 BBC Television adaptation of his historical novel *I Claudius* (1934), with its all-star cast to include Sir Derek Jacobi as Claudius, Dame Siân Phillips as Livia, George Baker as Tiberius, Sir John Hurt as Caligula, Sir Patrick Stewart as Sejanus, and many other now notable British talents.

As it happened, the *I Claudius* film had been slated for a much earlier staging under contract with Alexander Korda, the Hungarian-British film director, producer, and founder of London Film Productions (1932) and Denham Film Studios (1935/6-1952). Graves's enormously successful *Claudius* books had unsurprisingly attracted Korda's attention, as he had been successful with a run of historical re-enactments, including *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933), *The Rise of Catherine the Great* (1934), and he was busy filming *Rembrandt* (1936) during this period in the mid-Thirties. Korda visited Graves in Deià in January 1935 to discuss a contract for the film rights to *I, Claudius*. He planned for the Austrian American filmmaker Josef von Sternberg to direct the film and to cast Charles Laughton as Claudius, Merle Oberon (Korda's wife) as Messalina, Emylyn Williams as Caligula, and Flora Robson as Livia. Graves's March 1935 diary records the projected filming timeline, the signing of the contract, and Korda's interest in other projects including Graves's and Riding's collaborative novel *No Decency Left* (1932) and a screenplay based on T. E. Lawrence's life.

Following their evacuation from Mallorca on 2 August 1936, at the start of the Spanish Civil War, and while in London, Graves (and sometimes Riding) visited with Korda at the Denham Studios where Korda expressed interest in additional projects, including a Graves-Riding sketch about Spanish refugees. According to Richard Perceval Graves,

Elizabeth Freidmann, and others, the notion for a dramatization of Riding's soon-to-be-published historical fiction, *A Trojan Ending* (1937), was Graves's idea and Korda was receptive to the proposal. Korda's interest in Riding's novel's subject is not surprising as, while working in Hollywood, he had directed the 1927 black-and-white silent film *The Private Life of Helen of Troy*, an historical romance that made his reputation in the American film industry. Graves soon shouldered the task of adapting her novel to dramatic form.

Filming of *I Claudius* began in February 1937. Unfortunately, after one month, on 18 March, Merle Oberon was injured in a car accident and the shooting was soon stopped. Many film scholars have lamented this thwarted project, even though there were problems with Charles Laughton's handling of the role of Claudius. Critic Warren Clements of *The Globe and Mail* remarked: 'A truly wrenching what-if was the loss of the 1937 version of *I, Claudius*, with Charles Laughton as the limping, stuttering, intensely admirable soon-to-be-Roman-emperor Claudius.'² Footage from Korda's abandoned filming of *I Claudius* surfaced in a 1965 BBC-TV documentary, *The Epic That Never Was*, hosted by Dirk Bogarde.³ The documentary is shot in the crumbling remains of Denham Studios and offers footage of the extraordinary sets, brief cameos of the actors speaking lines, and interviews with Graves, Merle Oberon, Flora Robson, Josef von Sternberg, and others.

Collaboration & Adaptation

'Greeks and Trojans: A Play in Six Scenes' is Graves's adaptation of *A Trojan Ending*, Riding's extensive rewriting of the last year of the legendary battle between Troy and Greece, including the sacking of the Trojan stronghold. In particular, Riding works to redress the infamous or damaged

reputations of her chosen subjects: Helen of Troy, Cressida, Cassandra, and even the Trojan army legendarily defeated by the Greeks. Scenes unfold almost entirely in domestic spaces, rather than battlefields, as sites for dramatic action – the palace bedrooms and the viewing tower, presented as alternative seats of power where women might be present and able to speak. Just as Graves reanimated Roman and Byzantine emperors in *I, Claudius* (1934), *Claudius the God* (1935), and *Count Belisarius* (1938) with distinctly modern pathologies, so, too, did Riding imbue her legendary women with contemporary complexities and ambitions in both *A Trojan Ending* and her other historical novel *Lives of Wives* (1939).

Riding's recovery of historical women in her novels as well as in the screenplay adaptation offers an example of feminist re-envisioning of the classical past concurrent with variations proposed by other modernist-period women writers, to include Mary Butts, Naomi Mitchison, Mary Renault (Eileen Mary Challans), Virginia Woolf, and the notable classicist Jane Ellen Harrison, to name but a few examples. These authors ventured creative refigurations and variations on historical narratives – what Riding would later term 'suppositious histories' or, as more recently proposed by Saidiya Hartman, 'critical fabulations'.⁴ Such essays provide exemplars for the now robust academic fields of classical reception and classical revisionist studies, as well as Mediterranean modernisms.⁵

Across the period of their working partnership (1926 through 1940) Graves and Riding collaborated on projects and consulted with one another during the writing process for works in draft. Both writers did considerable research for their history projects and Graves provided background notes for both of Riding's historical novels. Their collaborative spirit extended to the many initiatives that attracted and engaged writers, artists, and intellectuals arriving in Deia to

contribute to the dictionary projects, Seizin Press publications, as well as to work on their own books and art ventures.⁶ In his screenplay adaptation of *A Trojan Ending*, Graves animates key scenes and dramatic exchanges among the principal Trojan and Greek players and he continued to work on the script following the couple's removal from Mallorca and as they lead a somewhat itinerate life across Europe and to the United States. Following their breakup in 1940, Riding gave Graves control over the 'Greeks and Trojans' play project and permission to proceed with it under his own name as an adaptation of her novel. Apparently, Graves was reluctant to do so, and he abandoned the script as he moved forward after the war with a growing family. In the end, the 'Greeks and Trojans' screenplay project was never finalized, published or produced.

William Graves, Robert's oldest surviving son and his literary executor, informed me about the unfinished screenplay now housed in the Special Collections Research Center at Southern Illinois University (USA).⁷ In June 2022, I spent a week reading through the university's Graves's collection with hopes that I would successfully locate a complete script, which was complicated by its dispersed placements across the collection files and the presence of two (possibly three) parallel manuscripts: one version with handwritten edits by both Graves and Riding and then several retyped revisions. Graves was a commendable paper recycler and so many of the 'Greeks and Trojans' script pages are on the reverse sides of Graves's drafts in progress, most often projects from the 1940s and 50s. As such, the script pages were often out of sequence, in verso, and dispersed across multiple files and folders in the collection. I identified 300 separate pages and had them scanned and subsequently printed out. I have since assembled the several versions in proper order and now have a full and complete transcription of the screenplay which is currently under review at an

academic press.

The Afterlife of Scripts

Invasions, wars, conflicts are still much with us and the classical period, including the Trojan War, distinctively, continues to occupy contemporary cultural space. The 2018 BBC/Netflix collaboration *Troy: Fall of a City* is case in point and already it has generated scholarly discussion: as in the 2022 collection *Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City*.⁸ As to the afterlife of Graves and Riding's screenplay? 'Greeks and Trojans', because of the continued attention being paid to Graves and Riding, in part springing from the efforts of The Robert Graves Society, The *Fundació* Robert Graves, and related organizations, it may yet receive a first-time staging, as did Graves's *But Still It Goes On: A Play* (1929), which was finally performed at Finborough Theatre, London, in 2018.⁹ Thus, [with some luck] *may it still go on: an adaptation*.¹⁰

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NOTES

¹ Laura Riding, *A Trojan Ending* (London: Seizin/Constable and New York: Random House, 1937), p. xxvi.

² Warren Clements, 'A boxed set of virtual Marilyn: A new DVD package contains one of film history's great what-ifs.' *The Globe and Mail*, 26 May 2001 <<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/a-boxed-set-of-virtual-marilyn/article1338231/>> [accessed 8 May 2023]

³ 'The Epic That Never Was', BBC, 1965. Currently available on YouTube <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUbt0sweIjI>> [accessed 8 May 2023]

⁴ In the Afterword to *Lives of Wives*, written in 1988, Riding claims that her stories are 'suppositious histories, but the foundations are factual. Fancy, in them, imitates knowledge, and delineation, truth' (*Lives of Wives*, London: Cassell and New York: Random House, 1939), pp. 327-28. Cultural historian Saidiya Hartman outlines her notion of 'critical fabulations' as narrative theory in her essay 'Venus in Two Acts' (*Small Axe*, 12, 2 (2008), pp. 1-14) <<https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/3/article/241115> N1 - Number 26 [accessed 9 August 2023]

⁵ For an analysis of Riding's classical revisions, see Ruth Hoberman's *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). I have also addressed this subject in several articles: "'Untranslatable" women: Laura Riding's classical modernist fiction', in *The Classics in Modernist Translation*, eds. Miranda Hickman and Lynn Kozak (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019): 131-41; n. 228-30; 'The Classical Past and "the history of ourselves": Laura Riding's Trojan Woman', in *Brill's Companion to Classical Receptions: International Modernism and the Avant-Garde*, eds. Adam J. Goldwyn and James Nikopoulos (Brill, 2017): 182-98; 'Geopoetics and Historical Modernism: Gertrude Stein, Laura Riding and Robert Graves in Mallorca, 1912-1936', in *Mediterranean Modernism; Intercultural Exchange and Aesthetic Development, 1880-1945*, eds. Adam J. Goldwyn and Renée M. Silverman (Palgrave-MacMillan, 2016): 123-48.

⁶ While researching in the Special Collections Research Center at Southern Illinois University (SIU), I found several pages of evidence related to the dictionary projects. Extant markers of the collaborations taking place in Deia include the extensive handwritten marginalia by Graves, Riding, Alan Hodge, and others on manuscript pages in the SIU Graves collection.

⁷ For those interested in the Southern Illinois University special collection archives: it holds a sizeable repository of Graves's handwritten and typed drafts from significant publications across his career, including fiction, essay collections, translations, plays, poetry, as well as correspondence from the 1920s onward. Of particular interest are the nearly 100 letters Graves received from Siegfried Sassoon, as well as correspondence with T. S. Eliot, E. M. Forster, Wyndham Lewis, Graves family members and many others. There is also a beautiful full-size poster for *Claudius the God* and accompanying drawing by John Aldridge. I am happy to email the Graves collection inventory to anyone interested: contact me at <ajessop@uttyler.edu>.

⁸ See *Screening Love and War in Troy: Fall of a City*, eds. Antony Augoustakis and Monica Cyrino (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022).

⁹ For information on the 2018 Finborough Theatre production of *But Still It Goes On: A Play*, see <<https://finboroughtheatre.co.uk/production/but-it-still-goes-on/?archive=2018>> [accessed 9 August 2023]

¹⁰ Most of my readers will recognize that this essay's last line is an echo of Robert Graves's *But It Still Goes On: An Accumulation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1930).