

## **‘All You Need is Love?’ The Robert Graves Society Panel at the 2024 MLA** *Anett K. Jessop and Michael Joseph*

**Abstract:** An account of The Robert Graves Society’s successful application to the Modern Language Association to become an Allied Organization, and the privileges of being an Allied Organization, along with a brief conspectus of the Society’s 2023 MLA panel and introduction to the papers presented at the convention following

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In 2023, The Robert Graves Society became an official Allied Organization of the Modern Language Association (MLA) with panels guaranteed at every annual meeting.

The MLA defines its Allied Organizations in its policies handbook, as:

learned societies or professional associations whose interests encompass disciplines represented by the MLA and whose purposes and activities are closely allied to those of the MLA. Since many of their members may also be MLA members, holding sessions during the MLA convention helps attract the maximum number of persons who share their interests. Further, these sessions enrich the range and diversity of the convention offerings.<sup>1</sup>

The approval process is rigorous and requires that the organization have a record of at least six years of operations and the means and methods by which members and the public can participate in and be enriched by its activities. Additionally, the organization must have

been selected by the MLA conference committee to host two or more panel sessions during past conventions. Given the almost thirty-year existence of the Robert Graves Society (1995–present) and its recent participation at the MLA conferences in 2016, 2018, and 2021, these requirements were easily met.

The Robert Graves Society joins an august body of organizations that includes The Robert Frost Society, The William Faulkner Society, *Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana*, Henry James Society, The William Morris Society, The Wallace Steven Society, The Samuel Beckett Society, *Feministas unidas*, GEMELA: *Grup de Estudios sobre la Mujer en España y las Américas* (pre-1800), The John Donne Society, and societies supporting scholarship in the work of Eliot, Kafka, Pound, John Clare, Dostoevsky – about seventy altogether.

Along with its guaranteed annual panel, Allied Organizations may also petition the conference planning committee for up to two additional sessions as well as the opportunity to request space during the conference for business meetings, social events, or informal networking. These are opportunities the Society should keep in mind as it continues to expand its international membership and member activities.

### **Inaugural Panel**

Our inaugural panel, ‘Robert Graves in The Sixties: “All You Need Is Love?”’ took place in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on 6 January 2024. The panel proposed to explore aspects of the life and work of Robert Graves during the nineteen sixties, a time of tumultuous personal and cultural upheaval. As a celebrated author who made numerous speaking tours both to the USA and elsewhere, Graves was becoming a venerated elder statesman as the decade began, as well as countercultural hero – an Ambassador from Otherwhere, as Richard Perceval Graves writes. As airplane travel developed, some of the young people whose lifestyles he influenced travelled to Deia where one could live cheaply and without the inconvenience of a cold winter. Celebrities, too, numbered among his visitors:

Kingsley Amis, Jorge Luis Borges, Michael Caine, Ava Gardner, Alec Guinness, Julian Huxley, Ralph Vaughn Williams, to name but a few. Prizes and distinctions of various sorts found him. From 1961 to 1966, he held the Chair of Poetry at Oxford (where his daughter, Lucia, was a student), he received the Gold Medal for Poetry from Queen Elizabeth II and was made 'Adopted Son of the village of Deià'. While not awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, he was shortlisted, together with Lawrence Durrell and John Steinbeck (the eventual winner). Additionally, Graves lectured around the world and published several volumes on literary theory and poetics: *Oxford Addresses on Poetry* (1962); *Poetic Craft and Principle* (1967); *On Poetry: Collected Talks and Essays* (1969).

However, while Graves ascended to the position of international celebrity, there were also problems. The so-called muses, as necessary as they were for Graves's poetry, visited complexities upon his life and work. While the nineteen-fifties saw the production of some of his most astonishing poetry, the poems of the period after 1965 are often viewed as a falling off, containing merely flashes of his former incendiary genius. The great scholarly works of the 1950s would never be surpassed, and although he had been a productive novelist (despite his protestations of diffidence toward the form), Graves gave up novel writing in 1957.

And yet, while biographers mark the downturn in his creativity, Graves remained steadfastly active and influential in various intriguing cultural venues, as his letters document. His involvement in literary, religious, and anthropological conversations continued to prove influential. Ever the iconoclastic polymath, while Graves was mingling with the hippies, inspiring witches like Derick Boothby and Gerald Gardner (as Grevel Lindop and Stephen Stroud have noted in these pages), and celebrating true love, he was also collaborating with serious scholars, reviewing intellectually ambitious books by classicists like Moses Hadas, and participating in international cultural events, such as the Mexican Olympic Games of 1968, where he won the Gold Medal for Poetry for his poem 'Torch and Crown'. So, the question we hoped to raise in our panel was, through what lenses should we view the life and work of Robert Graves in the 1960s? Was it a decade of decline, or of

profound intellectual engagement and growth? A decade of self-indulgence or a decade of new accomplishments and accolades, of generative friendships, of exemplary service to The Goddess, the intentional object of Graves's poetry?

Calls for Papers were posted in March 2023 both to members of the Robert Graves Society and to academic billboards. The panel attracted a rich variety of proposals, from which we chose speakers who brought a fresh perspective to familiar themes in Graves criticism and touched on new topics: Jonahs, Kneitly, a Ph.D. candidate in English at Texas A&M University, in the USA, and author of 'Rappaccini's Queer Daughter: Heteronormativity in Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter"', in *The Explicator Journal*; Elena Theodorakapoulos, a Classicist at the University of Birmingham, UK, where she specializes in Latin poetry and the reception of Greek and Roman literature and culture in modern and contemporary literature, and co-editor of *Homer's Daughters: Women's Responses to Homer in the Twentieth Century and Beyond*; and Joseph T. Thomas, Jr., a professor in the department of English and Comparative Literature at San Diego State University, former Director of the National Center for the Study of Children's Literature, and author of *Poetry's Playground: The Culture of Contemporary American Children's Poetry* and *Strong Measures*.

Mr. Kneitly raised the question of how Graves's work relates thematically to the poetry of the Beat poets, a group which he would seem, at first glance, to have little in common, in his paper, 'Robert Graves and the Beats: Poets of Unrest'. Professor Theodorakopoulos played devil's advocate in questioning Graves's ultimate purpose in keeping company with the famed muses in her paper, 'Obscene or Sentimental: Graves and the Muses of the 1960s', and interrogated classical references in Graves's poetry. Professor Thomas foregrounded the similarities between two veterans of the Great War in his paper, 'Robert Graves and J. R. R. Tolkien: World War One and the Sixties Counterculture'.

To draw the attention of Graves scholars to the Society's activities at the MLA, and to share with them work in progress, while also encouraging scholars at all stages of their academic careers to examine the work of Robert Graves and his

contemporaries, *The Robert Graves Review* decided to publish the MLA papers among its Notes. Introducing scholars to the publications of The Robert Graves Society, we also offer panellists the opportunity to work with our editors and reviewers to develop their papers into articles for later submission.<sup>2</sup> We're very pleased indeed to bring two fine scholars to the readers of *The Robert Graves Review*, Jonah Kneitly and Elena Theodorakopoulos, in addition to a frequent contributor, Joseph T. Thomas, Jr.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Modern Language Association, 'Policies for Forums and Allied Organizations', <<https://www.mla.org/Events/Planning-a-Convention-Session/Policies-for-Forums-and-Allied-Organizations>> [accessed 8 July 2024].

<sup>2</sup> A video recording of the three presentations with introductions by Anett K. Jessop can be found at <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sP12Sjqt9s&list=PLxSJdULph-juL12sXR1Gu4beVd8wb\\_E1L](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3sP12Sjqt9s&list=PLxSJdULph-juL12sXR1Gu4beVd8wb_E1L)> [accessed 26 September 2024]