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“The ever-dissolving image of deceptively tranquil antiquity”: Classical Myth and Literature in the Prose and Poetry of Laura Riding

Elena Theodorakopoulos

Abstract

This essay discusses the poet, critic and novelist Laura (Riding) Jackson (1901-1991), and her engagement with classical myth and literature. The focus is on her poetry and on the novel *A Trojan Ending*. The aim of the essay is to establish Riding as a significant voice in the reception and interpretation of classical myth and literature during the 1920s and 30s.

This essay considers the poet, critic, and novelist Laura Riding, known later as Laura (Riding) Jackson, and her engagement with classical literature and culture.¹ It should be seen within the context of recent scholarship re-establishing the role of women writers within classical reception studies, spear-headed most notably by Fiona Cox in two monographs on contemporary women writers (2011 and 2018) and by Isobel Hurst in her book on Victorian women writers and the classics (2006).² In Riding’s case, the engagement with classical myth and literature is, as I will show, closely linked to her thinking and writing about women, and about what it means to be a woman; the two subjects, women and classical myth, are linked in her first collection, *The Close Chaplet* (1926), in *Collected Poems* (1938), and in her novel *A Trojan Ending* (1937), as well as her long essay *The Word ‘Woman,’* drafted around 1934 and published posthumously in 1993. Reading her work in the context of ‘women’s writing’ is complicated by the ambivalence, often hostility, (Riding) Jackson displays towards other women writers, and her dislike of the category ‘woman writer’ (for example 2011: 53-55).³ Reading Riding’s work in the context of classical reception is complicated by the ambivalence, often contempt, she brings to bear on the display of classical learning in other poets’ work, and by the oblique and refracted manner in which she herself approaches classical material.

In the *Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the US*, Jo-Ann Wallace asserts that “Given the quality of Riding’s poetry...her relative critical neglect can be explained only by her refusal to cede interpretive authority over her life and works” (Davidson and Wagner-Martin 1995: 726). While I believe that Wallace is substantially correct, and the later writings of (Riding) Jackson provide ample

evidence of this refusal, Riding’s near erasure from literary history is also closely related to the role she plays in biographical and literary critical studies of Graves’s work. Her association with Robert Graves, which began in 1926 and lasted for over a decade, and included a number of co-authored works, is a particularly poignant aspect of the history of Riding’s reception.⁴ The afterlife of that relationship, in the form of the often negative association of Riding with Graves’s *White Goddess* (1948), throws an especially important light on her own writing on women and myth. In this essay I will start by outlining some of the treatments of Riding in Graves scholarship, before considering more closely her poetry on women and myth and then focusing on her tense and often ambivalent relationship with classical learning and her reception of the character of Helen in particular in her novel and poetry.⁵

While there are a handful of articles on *A Trojan Ending*, there is no scholarly treatment I know of to date of classical reception in Riding’s poetry. It is useful therefore to start with an overview of her classically inspired poems: in the posthumously published collection of her early poems (*First Awakenings*), almost all of which were written before her departure for England in 1926, and never anthologized or published, there is a great deal of work on classical and mythological themes.⁶ *The Close Chaplet* contains an opening poem invoking the classical muse Erato, and a poem featuring Helen of Troy, along with other classically and mythically inspired work. In the 1938 *Collected Poems*, the greatest concentration of poems dealing directly or indirectly with ancient motifs and subjects are found in the first section, titled “Poems of Mythical Occasion.” Here we find a pair of poems about Helen, “Helen’s Burning” and “Helen’s Faces,” presenting a treatment of Helen that corresponds very closely to *A Trojan Ending*.⁷ In “Poems of Immediate Occasion,” dating mainly from the period up to 1929, we find engagement with both antiquity and classical scholarship in poems such as “Many Gentlemen,” “Elegy in a Spider’s Web,” and “Faith Upon the Waters.” In the final two sections (“Poems of Final Occasion” and “Poems Continual”) there are just two important classically themed poems, “The Unthronged Oracle” and “Divestment of Beauty.” The latter is especially important as it connects Riding’s thinking about women and femininity with her ambivalence towards classical material. Finally, the slender volume of *Selected Poems* published in 1970 includes almost none of the poems engaging with antiquity explicitly, suggesting that the author did not consider these to be key pieces –however much they may be of interest to establishing Riding’s significance in the story of classical reception in the 20th century. My survey here of Riding’s engagement with classical subject matter is thus undertaken with the explicit acknowledgement of the fact that she herself, in establishing her canon, did not consider some of the poems I will discuss as representative of what, finally, she wanted to say.

Not a-muse(d)

Like most women poets, Riding was uncomfortable to the point of outright hostility with the idea of a muse- and it has been noted that she often expressed her opposition to Graves's casting her in this role.⁸ Her claim, made in various publications after *The White Goddess* appeared in print in 1948, is that Graves's book presents a distorted version of her work, and that it appropriates and misinterprets her as a person. For instance, she wrote in 1975 of the ‘wickedness’ of the purpose of the *White Goddess* which is to “murder the actuality of my thought” and to “distort the personal character of myself in the malignant version of revered, loyally hated, goddess muse,” and that the entire book was “a literary machine designed for the seizure of the essence of my reality” ((Riding) Jackson 1993: 209). The most chilling implications of Graves's cult of the White Goddess emerge in a passage in which he warns of what happens when the Muse ‘turns into a domestic woman’ and would have the poet “turn similarly into a domestic man.” Graves goes on to say that the White Goddess is the “perpetual ‘other woman,’ and her part is difficult indeed for a woman of sensibility to play for more than a few years because the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity lurks in every maenad's and muse's heart” (Graves 1948: 444).⁹ Riding herself is cited by name in the *White Goddess* as having ‘spoken on her [the Muse's] behalf’ in three memorable lines:

Forgive me, giver, if I destroy the gift:
It is nearly what would please me
I cannot but perfect it. (Graves 1966: 444)

This enshrines Riding in the role she spent much of the rest of her life rejecting, and it gives plenty of ammunition to those biographers who wished to equate Riding with the White Goddess.¹⁰

Within Graves scholarship, where she is cast as either muse or domineering shrew, Riding does not stand much of a chance. In a recent edited volume titled *Robert Graves and the Classical Tradition* (Gibson 2015) Riding receives a number of mentions, but almost every one of them is connected to Graves's subjection or subservience to her. For instance, with reference to *Count Belisarius* (1938) two different essays in the volume cite Miranda Seymour's assertion that Riding was amused and Graves derived masochistic pleasure from the idea of the eunuch Eugenius as the narrator; one of these also refers to Laura Riding as Graves's “personal White Goddess.”¹¹ In another essay Miranda Seymour's assertion that Livia in *I Claudius* “bears a striking resemblance to Laura Riding at her most imperious” is cited (Perry 2015: 261, citing Seymour 1995: 216). Finally, the relationship between Claudius and Messalina is seen to ‘echo’ Graves and Riding, and once again Seymour is referenced as evidence for this notion (Gibson 2015: 275, and 286 (citing Seymour-Smith 1982 and Seymour 1995); 292). In the introduction to the volume there is talk of the “theatrical affair” with Riding, and of Graves abandoning his wife Nancy Nicholson “after a gothic denouement,” and finally Graves “escaping from the turbulent relationship with Laura Riding” (Gibson

2015: 3-4, citing Graves 1990, Seymour 1995 and Seymour-Smith 1995; my emphases).¹² While the influence of Graves’s biographers is palpable in many of the essays, there is no sign of any contributor to the volume having consulted Elizabeth Friedmann’s biography of Laura (Riding) Jackson.¹³ Tales of Riding’s domination over Graves are fed, at least in part, by the almost universally accepted identification of Laura Riding as the embodiment of the White Goddess and Graves’s muse.¹⁴ According to Friedmann this identification goes back to an essay by the poet Randall Jarrell published in 1956, in which he asserts that he believes “that it is simplest to think of her as, so to speak, the White Goddess incarnate, the Mother-Muse in contemporary flesh.”¹⁵

“in archaic daze embalmed”

Despite her often antagonistic and spiky attitude towards other women, Riding’s feminism shines through in her work. In both prose and poems, Riding’s words about women are tied to her sense that society has arrived at an important point (she thought of it as the end of history). In looking back from that point she is able to tell the story of how women came to be “women,” to perform the roles of what she calls “picture queens” in her poem “The Tiger” (CP: 54). Riding’s tiger does not burn bright like Blake’s, because it is hidden inside the speaker who is only now beginning to understand it, and herself: “The tiger in me I know late, not burning bright.” Through the course of the poem it becomes clear that the tiger is a form of desire (“earlier than lust, not plain”) that has been subdued somehow (“Beware that I am tame”) (CP: 54). As the “inner animal revive” it is hard not to see an allusion to Shakespeare’s notion of a “tiger’s heart wrapped in a woman’s hide” (*Henry VI, Part III*, Act I, Scene 4) when Riding’s tiger breaks out:

They cage me on three sides.
The fourth is glass.
Not to be image of the beast in me,
I press the tiger forward.
I crash through. (“The Tiger” CP 54)

After this, the speaker becomes a hunted animal, fleeing perhaps the very civilisation (“our learned ways”) that is responsible for women’s imprisonment:

A woman in a skin, mad at her heels
With pride, pretending chariot wheels –
Fleeing our learned days,
She reassumes the brute. (“The Tiger” CP 55)

When she is caught, the speaker resumes the charade of womanhood (“with lady-ears I listened”), and resigns herself to life indoors: “Like any picture queen she hides/ And is unhappy in her room,” (“The Tiger” CP 55).

In “Auspice of Jewels,” a poem about women recognising the truth of what they are and relinquishing what she calls the “forgeries of ourselves” we have a later example of Riding’s thinking about womanhood as a performance (CP: 277).¹⁶ The

poem begins with the line: “They have connived at those jewelled fascinations” and then develops the idea that men decorate women with gleaming jewels that draw the eye towards a false glittering spectacle, a “masquerade,” (“Auspice of Jewels” *CP* 278) in which true communication is no longer possible. In an extraordinarily insightful stanza she draws out the strange alienation between men and women that is the result of the “gleaming,” “brilliance” and “glitter” affixed to women:

Until now- when this passionate neglect
Of theirs, and our twinkling reluctance,
Are like the reader and the book
Whose fingers and whose pages have confided
But whose sight and sense
Meet in a chilly time of strangeness (“Auspice of Jewels” *CP* 278)

Here Riding apportions some of the blame to women: their “twinkling reluctance” suggests flirtation and in effect, collusion, in the masquerade the simile of the reader meeting the book without proper understanding is a strong indictment of the effect of all this falsehood. It is illuminating I think to compare this poem to the discussion of women’s appearance in *The Word ‘Woman.’* So she writes in a chapter on the accentuation of femininity in contemporary women’s appearance that

the modern business-woman, no matter how masculine she may appear during office-hours, in the evening relapses into unrestrained femininity, triumphantly demonstrating that vigour of action does not conflict with beauty of person. Never has woman ‘done’ so much; yet never has the feminine dressing-table been such a complicated laboratory of beauty. (1993: 116)

She continues to discuss feminine beauty as in effect a role dramatized in literature, and finally to focus on what she calls the “female mask,” crystallising her sense of femininity as a performance (1993: 119-20). Looking back to the past, she remarks that women’s appearance was often intended to conceal, to “shroud woman in mysteriousness” (1993: 90). In another important poem, “Divestment of Beauty” we find Riding returning to the subject of female beauty and the objectifying male gaze. The poem begins:

She, she and she and she-
Which of these is not lovely?
In her long robe of glamour now
And her beauty like a ribbon tied
The wisdom of head round? (“Divestment of Beauty” *CP* 300)

The poem envisages the outward trappings of femininity, what she calls “lady-swaddlings” (“Divestment of Beauty,” *CP* 300) as constraints (the ribbon tied around the head in the first stanza). Strikingly, she also connects these constraints with antiquity and with classical learning, which must be rejected along with the powerful, debilitating gaze of the past:

Forswear the imbecile
Theology of loveliness,

Be no more doctor in antiquities—
Chimeras of the future
In archaic daze embalmed—
And grow to later youth,
Felling the patriarchal leer (“Divestment of Beauty” *CP* 300-301)

One way in which women are “embalmed” in “archaic daze” is through literary works in which they are cast as figures from ancient mythology. Some of Yeats’s poems ‘about’ Maude Gonne, in which Gonne is cast as Helen of Troy, or Leda, come to mind as instances of what Riding may have in mind with the “patriarchal leer,” as we will see shortly. Shakespeare of course does it, too —we saw how Riding takes him on in “The Tiger,” and we will see her do it again in her novel, and in another important poem. But perhaps more significantly, there are a number of examples of Graves using classical mythology to represent Laura. I think that these poems form an important context for her own rejection of the classical, and for her feminism. A well-known poem by Graves, first published in 1930 titled as “The Age of Certainty” and later retitled “New Legends” is often read as a tribute to Laura. In four stanzas, each of which begins with the line “Content in you,” the poem lists a series of characters from Greek mythology, each one reversed or overturned so as to provide the speaker with, at least according to one critic, “liberation” from the constraints of “his patriarchal conditioning” (Carter 1989: 230). It may be true that in the poem Graves seeks freedom from the traditional gender roles enshrined in conventional readings of the myths he lists. So Andromeda unchained is “queen of air and ocean” and not asking to be rescued, and Niobe has no children and thus no “calamity.” The final two-line stanza brings the poem to a close with a new version of Helen, as “foiler of beauty” —that is one who defeats, outdoes or surpasses beauty itself. The suggestion must be that this is a Helen who is not confined by her looks.

Content in you,
Helen, foiler of beauty. (Graves, “New Legends” *CP* 316-317)

The poem may be, as has been suggested “a celebration of woman,” or a celebration of Laura Riding (Carter 1989: 230). But read alongside Riding’s own work, this (alongside other poems that cast her in the role of classical mythological heroines) is also an example of the mythologising of ‘woman’ that Riding so abhors and excoriates.¹⁷ Andromeda, Atalanta, Niobe and Helen —however ‘new’ they are in the form given them by Graves, can only ever be ‘picture queens’: women turned into myths and images to be looked at.

“be no more doctor in antiquities”

Before we move on to discuss Riding’s own engagement with the classics, I want to consider a description of Riding published by Graves not long after their break from each other. Apparently in praise of her originality and uncompromising integrity he says: “She was the one poet of the time who spun, like Arachne, from her own vitals without any discoverable literary or philosophical derivations” (Graves and Hodge 1940: 200, as cited in Graves 1990: 331). I am struck by Graves’s use of Arachne as

a comparison for Riding: it is not by any means straightforward praise to cast her in the role of Athena’s victim, only half-saved from suicide by hanging, and condemned to life as a headless body, engaged in repetitive and visceral activity as a punishment for hubristic creativity. Arachne only has to spin “out of her own vitals” because of Athena’s punishment which robs her of her skill and artistry. And to say that there are “no discoverable literary...derivations” is to deny Riding’s deep learning and wide reading and scholarship in order to turn her into an icon of primitive female creativity. Indeed, looking to Graves’s explanation of the “White Goddess” we find that she is: “Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust — *the female spider* or the queen bee whose embrace is death” (Graves 1966: 24, my italics). Casting Riding as Arachne is not an endorsement of her work; it disempowers her by making her part of a dark and primitive myth of female power associated with the body rather than the mind. The phrase “out of her own vitals” denies the brain in favour of the body—precisely in opposition to Riding’s own work in which the cerebral is always triumphant, as in the early poem “Pride of Head”: “My head is at the top of me/Where I live mostly and most of the time...I, the idol of the head” (CP 10).¹⁸

Riding herself wrote two spider poems. In an early work, “The Spider,” published only in *First Awakenings*, she shows awareness of the precariousness of the spider’s existence (for instance: “don’t spin away/ your whole body”), and appears to draw a clear distinction between her own ambitions and Arachne’s fate. The humility and penance of Riding’s spider may also be looking to Emily Dickinson’s spider poems, in which the (male) spider’s creation is often threatened by women wielding domestic apparatus, as in “The Spider as an Artist” where the “neglected son of Genius” is threatened by brooms and housemaids, or in “The Spider holds a Silver Ball” in which the spider’s creation ends up dangling “from the Housewife’s Broom.” Dickinson certainly does not appear to use the spider as a positive image for artistic creation as is evident also in “The Spider as an Artist” in which the creature “has never been employed” as such.

In a later poem, “Elegy in a Spider’s Web” (CP 86), Riding links the spider’s web with death and the passage of time in an echo of a key passage from Catullus’s elegiac poem 68 in which the spider’s web stands for the passage of time and the loss of memory, while the poet’s words remember and keep alive the name of his friend:

*notescatque magis mortuus atque magis,
nec tenuem texens sublimis aranea telam
in deserto Alli nomine opus faciat*
Let him be known more and more now he is dead,
Lest a spider high up above, weaving a slender web,
Should cause the name Allius to be forgotten. (Cat. 68b. 48-49)

Stylistically, Riding’s poem pays homage to Gertrude Stein, so that the distinctive style dominates any reading of the poem, almost erasing the classical allusion. In *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* Riding and Graves offer a rather harsh critique of a poem by Allen Tate that cites the lines about the spider’s web from Catullus 68. This

critique in my view offers a key to what Riding is up to in “Elegy in a Spider’s Web.” Riding and Graves accuse Tate of indulging his “snobbish prejudice in favour of classical phrasing” (Riding and Graves 1927: 235). This is not unusual for *A Survey*, which is throughout highly critical of “classical bias” (Riding 1937: xvii). The book also contains a final chapter that argues strongly for the superior virtues of Stein’s “barbarism,” turning on its head Eliot’s criticism of Stein as “one of the barbarians” (Eliot 1927: 595).¹⁹ Riding and Graves’s point regarding Allen Tate’s poem is that the Catullus lines are just learned showing-off. They despise this as can be seen in their condemnation of Ezra Pound’s “abnormal cultivation of the classics” (1927: 140), and H.D.’s “false ‘classical’ atmosphere” (1927: 122). In my reading, Riding’s Steinian spider poem rescues the Catullan citation from the ‘snobbishness’ of Tate’s quotation by framing it in Stein’s ‘barbarian’ style —a style that is stripped bare of the accretions of tradition and classical allusion. It is notable that the classical name Arachne is not used in “Elegy in a Spider’s Web.” A few sample lines from this long poem show how it recognises the correspondences present in Catullus 68b between the poet’s, or the speaker’s, own creativity and the spider’s weaving, illustrating these through the poem’s style of interweaving words:

What to say when I
When I or the spider
No I and I what
Does what does dies
No when the spider dies
Death spider death
Death always I (“Elegy in a Spider’s Web” CP 88)

I discussed this poem at such length to demonstrate that Riding is not the visceral Arachne of Graves’s imagination, but a very learned and precise poet, who takes great care to work with a subtle understanding of classical (and other) allusions, while maintaining her own and distinctive style, carefully distanced from the classicism of other modernist poets. The notion of her ‘spinning from her own vitals’ has far more to do with Gravesian myth-making than with the realities of Laura Riding’s education and poetic practice. The evidence of her poetry, *A Trojan Ending*, and the three volumes of *Epilogue* very clearly proves her learning, and there is no question that her classical education, both at Brooklyn High School and at Cornell, was solid, as attested by her biographer, Elizabeth Friedmann. The idea of Riding’s lack of education is evidently a part of her denigration in, for instance, Seymour-Smith’s biography of Graves, where it is mentioned several times, substantiated only by an assertion made by her first husband, Louis Gottschalk (Seymour-Smith 1995: 115).

“As Well as Any Other”

The programmatic “As Well as Any Other,” the first poem in her first book, is an early assertion of Riding’s insistence on independence from classical sources. The

poem is both an invocation of Erato and a dismissal of the conventions of love poetry (See Adams 1990: 50; Jessop 2016: 185).

As well as any other, Erato,
I can dwell separately on what we know
In common secrecy,
And celebrate the old, adoréd rose,
Retell—oh why—how similarly grows
The last leaf of the tree.

But for familiar sense what need can be
Of my most singular device or me,
If homage may be done
(Unless it is agreed we shall not break
The patent silence for mere singing’s sake)
As well by anyone?

Reject me not, then, if I have begun
Unwontedly or if I seem to shun
The close and well-tilled ground:
For in untraveled soil alone can I
Unearth the gem or let the mystery lie
That never must be found. (“As Well as Any Other” *The Close Chaplet* 65)

The deft elegance of the first stanza makes a heady start to the book, and introduces the reader to the theme of Riding’s tense relationship with the idea of the muse. It is worth bearing in mind here the striking phrase coined by the young Laura in an early poem (“How Can I Die”), in which she says that she is her “self’s own Pegasus” (*First Awakenings* 34) showing that the idea of independence from poetic inspiration and from the Muses goes some way back in Riding’s poetic output. Much later, in the long poem “Laura and Francisca,” composed during her stay in Mallorca, she writes: “My Muse is I...what shall we think?” (CP 415)

In “As Well as Any Other” it must be noted that it is only the punctuation in the first line that allows us to read here an invocation of the Muse Erato. Without the commas, we would be looking at “As well as any other Erato,” which would suggest that “Erato” is used as “any muse” and that the first two lines would read, in prose as it were: “I can write poetry about love as well any other muse can.” Using the two commas to turn “Erato” into a vocative, so that the poet is addressing the Muse instead of *being* a muse is a deft move which goes straight to the heart of Riding’s life-long preoccupation with the ways in which as a female poet, she is pushed into the role of muse. The commas placed around Erato separate the poet’s ‘I’ from the Muse, and enable her to have fun, in the first two stanzas, with the clichés of love poetry, that can be done “as well by anyone”: “the old adoréd rose,” an exasperated aside in “Retell –oh why,” condescension in “mere singing.” Overall, the sense of the first two stanzas is very much that the classicising tropes associated with Erato can be used by any hack, and that this sort of poetry would be pointless therefore –as stifling and unproductive as the romantic notions of the poetess as, herself, a muse.²⁰

The poem changes tone in the final stanzas with the appeal to “Reject me not,” or as in the edited version published in the *Collected Poems* “Mistrust me not” (CP 43). Indeed, the fairly major revisions to the final stanza indicate that it is this part of the poem that perhaps carries the most weight as far as the poet herself is concerned:

Mistrust me not, then, if I have begun
Unwontedly and if I seem to shun
Unstrange and much-told ground:
For in peculiar earth alone can I
Construe the word and let the meaning lie
That rarely may be found. (“As Well as Any Other” CP 43)

In both versions of this final stanza, Riding imagines poetry as somehow hidden in the earth, perhaps alluding to Pegasus striking the earth with his hoof to make the spring of Hippocrene. The changes made to replace the more decorative “gem” and “mystery” with the much starker “word” and “meaning” show the mature Riding at work, stripping out what she would later refer to as “small felicities of utterance [that] magnify themselves into a persuasive appearance of truth” ((Riding) Jackson 1972: 66-7). The somewhat conventional “untraveled soil,” clearly an echo of the ‘untraveled world’ of Tennyson’s Ulysses, is now replaced with the striking phrase: “peculiar earth,” asserting her independence from the classical tradition. In all then, Laura Riding’s opening salvo in her first book confronts the reader straight up with her insistence on originality and truth seeking, and with a resolutely original take on classicising tropes.

“Picture Queens”

One of the very small handful of poems to survive from the *Close Chaplet* through *Collected Poems* and make it into the *Selected Poems* is the enigmatic “Lucrece and Nara” (CP 24). It is an important if difficult poem that seems to address the problem of bodily existence and its transcendence in mythic images. I have not found any readings of the poem that explain it, or the identities of the two title characters, particularly satisfactorily. (Riding) Jackson herself does not do much to clear things up in a 1974 essay which asserts that the two characters in the poem are “personifications of the woman-man forms of Being” and that “Lucrece is an impersonal projection of the identity of the author of the poem” (Jackson 1974: 6). She claims that the “second name,” Nara, “strikes a note of mystery,” but given that she also refers to Nara as “the man-other” (ibid., 10) it is not too far-fetched to assume an allusion to the Hindu god and primal man Nara, a divine version of the *Mahābhārata*’s hero Arjuna.²¹

I think that one key to understanding the poem more fully is to recognise the significance of the hitherto unremarked allusions to Shakespeare’s long poem *The Rape of Lucrece*. The choice of the form of the name as used by Chaucer and Shakespeare (instead of the far more common classical form, Lucretia) should alert readers to the possibility of Shakespearean allusion, which is confirmed by the ironic

but very specific use of language from Shakespeare’s poem in the character Lucrece’s first utterance.²² Echoing the “perfect white” and “pearly sweat, resembling dew of night” of the Shakespearean Lucrece’s hand, gazed upon by Tarquin as he prepares to attack her, Riding’s Lucrece asks her lover:

How is the opalescence of my white hand, Nara?
Is it still pearly cool? (“Lucrece and Nara” CP 24)²³

After this opening the poem continues towards ever-greater abstraction, denying the corporeality of the two figures, and along with it also rejecting the beauty and poetry of the Shakespearean description. Lucrece and Nara become lovers in an abstract, almost primordial universe where there is only darkness and silence, with Tarquin’s gaze, and his violence, written out of the picture after the brief glance at the white hand. Given that so much of the focus of Shakespeare’s poem is on Tarquin’s gazing upon and desiring physical domination of Lucrece while creating elaborate descriptions of her beauty, it is especially striking to see how Riding’s allusion is part of the poem’s movement away from poetical beauty and physical desire and towards truth and abstraction.²⁴

The poem’s ironic take on the objectification of women through beautiful description reverberates in *A Trojan Ending*. In “Lucrece and Nara” the Shakespearean Lucrece is no longer the virtuous and chaste victim of rape, just as in *A Trojan Ending* Cressida is not the harlot-seductress of Shakespeare’s play.²⁵ Riding Jackson’s suggestion that Lucrece stands for the poet, Riding, also chimes well with her use of Cressida in the novel as a mouthpiece for many of her own ideas —about women, physical love, and about truth-seeking. Both Lucrece and Cressida are trenchant examples of the way in which women are mythologised, one as the chaste matron and victim, the other as the seductress. If, as I suspect, “The Tiger” is at least in part suggesting Margaret of Anjou’s response to York’s misogynistic monologue in which she is both a wolf and a tiger, then we have here a group of Shakespearean picture queens, Lucretia, Cressida, and Margaret, rewritten and liberated from “the lechery of time” (“The Tiger” CP 54). Helen of Troy completes our set, as we will now see.

Helen of Troy is perhaps the archetypal picture queen, and Riding’s interest in her is attested in the early poem, “Virgin of the City,” and then again in the pair of Helen poems, “Helen’s Faces” and “Helen’s Burning.” The ambiguity inherent in the title “Helen’s Burning” (Helen is burning/the burning of Helen) is typical of Riding’s interest in language, grammar, and punctuation, while also alluding to the similar ambiguity inherent in the dream of Hecuba as recounted in Apollodorus and alluded to in Euripides’s *Trojan Women*, where Paris is the firebrand that destroys Troy.²⁶ I think that the title also alludes to Yeats’s Helen poem, “No Second Troy,” (“nobleness made simple as a fire” and especially the final line “Was there another Troy for her to burn?”), and very likely also to Yeats’s identification of Maude Gonne with Helen, both in “No Second Troy” and elsewhere.²⁷ Here is Riding’s poem “Helen’s Burning”:

Her beauty, which we talk of,
Is but half her fate.
All does not come to light
Until the two halves meet
And we are silent
And she speaks,
Her whole fate saying,
She is, she is not, in one breath.

But we tell only half, fear to know all
Lest all should be to tell
And our mouths choke with flame

Of her consuming
And lose the gift of prophecy. (CP 52)

It is not an easy poem –especially the second half. The first stanza seems a clear enough, revisionist feminist take on the objectification of Helen, and on what might happen when she is allowed her own voice. This is made clear from the first line: “Her beauty, which we talk of” sets up a gulf between Helen and those who speak about her, but only tell half the story. It is only when “we are silent” that she can speak for herself. If “we” are the poets, which would include Homer and Yeats, as well as others, then the mysterious image of mouths choking with flame makes much more sense: poets claim the gift of prophecy since antiquity –but Riding was always too keen on poetry as a form of truthfulness (e.g. Riding and Graves 1927: 125; see Wexler 1979) to allow this claim to go unquestioned. The final stanza then seems to castigate poets for their “half-truths” and their fear of truth.

In all, the poem must surely be read as a critique of poetic treatments of Helen. “She is, she is not, in one breath” is Helen speaking the truth –to be contrasted with poetic elaboration. The flame that would choke the poets and cause them to lose their prophetic status is Helen’s. This would be in keeping with Riding’s overarching ambition –to find truth in poetry.

“Helen’s Faces” is a first person poem in which we see clear correspondences with Riding’s other poems and with prose that discusses the myth and the mythologising of women and womanhood.

Bitterly have I been contested for,
Though never have I counted numbers -
They were too many, less than all.
And kindly have I warded off
Contest and bitterness,
Given each a replica of love,
Beguiled them with fine images.

To their hearts they held them.
Her dear face, its explicitness!
Clearly, of all women, the immediate one
To these immediate men.

But the original woman is mythical,
Lies lonely against no heart.
Her eyes are cold, see love far off,

Read no desertion when love removes,
The images out of fashion.

Undreamed of in her many faces
That each kept off the plunderer:
Contest and bitterness never raged round her. (“Helen’s Faces” *CP* 53)

The most striking aspect of this poem is its reference to the post-Homeric notion of Helen’s *eidolon*, attributed to Stesichorus’s famous *Palinode* and developed in Euripides’s *Helen* in which the phantom image is made by Hera, as Helen explains in the opening monologue:

she gave to king Priam’s son not me but a breathing image she fashioned from the heavens to resemble me (όμοιώσας’ ἐμοὶ /εἴδωλον ἔμπνουν οὐρανοῦ ξυνθεῖσ’). He imagines—vain imagination—that he has me, though he does not... (Eur. *Hel.* 33-6, trans. D. Kovacs)

The language of Riding’s poem (“replica,” “fine images,” “the original,” “images out of fashion”) resonates with the idea of Helen’s *eidolon* and with the language of Euripides’s *Helen*. The fact that Graves will later also refer to Stesichorus’s *eidolon* in connection with Helen adds weight to the idea that Riding’s is a conscious and meaningful allusion (Graves 1960: 367). ²⁸ Onto Stesichorus, Riding has superimposed her own consistently held persuasion that women are subject to being forged, through linguistic and physical adornment, and simply through the power of the stories that are told about them, as we saw clearly in “The Tiger.” “Divestment of Beauty” and in “Auspice of Jewels.” In “Helen’s Faces” we can link Riding’s language of forgery and masquerade to Euripides’s language of the manufacture of the image of Helen from cloud (νεφέλης ... ἄγαλμ', *Hel.* 12019). (See Zeitlin 2010: 273.) Riding’s Helen, perhaps most importantly, “lies lonely against no heart” and “her eyes are cold,” suggesting that the poem should be read also with reference to Graves’s Helen “foiler of beauty.” The speaker of those lines may claim to be “content in you,” but he deceives himself just as Euripides’s Paris who thinks he holds Helen in his arms.

“deceptively tranquil antiquity”

Riding’s novel, *A Trojan Ending*, has received some attention in scholarship on classical reception—notably in articles by Annett Jessop and in Ruth Hoberman’s treatment of historical novels set in antiquity by modernist women (Hoberman 1997; Jessop 2016). Hoberman’s analysis of the novel places it side-by-side with *The Word ‘Woman,’* which was written in Mallorca while Riding was living there with Robert Graves during the 1930s (1997: 61). Jessop reads *A Trojan Ending* as subverting or refuting canonical versions of history, and misogynist stereotypes such as Shakespeare’s *Cressida* (2016: 185). My interest here is to explore the ways in which Riding’s prose treatment of Helen corresponds to her poems. No one has, to my knowledge, put the poems together with the prose treatments, although

Riding’s comments on the difference between the novel and poetry, from the preface of the original 1937 edition of *Trojan Ending*, seem to me to justify this approach:²⁹

If I had been surer of my story I should have written not a scholarly treatise but a poem about the War of Troy. That I have written only a novel, a tentative prose account of this first concentrated world experience should be taken as my apology for its faults of facts and truth. A novel, whatever its faults, has at least the endearing virtue of homeliness. (Riding 1937, xiii)

Riding’s portrayal of Helen in the novel does at times have exactly this endearing virtue of homeliness, but it is backed up by the starker, and more difficult, truths contained in the Helen poems, and I think it gains much from being read alongside these. For instance, early on in the novel, Helen picks up a mirror to adjust her hair, and then puts it down again “because the frame distracted her. She picked up two silver mirror-cups—these gave a clear, dark reflection: by holding one in front and moving the other behind she could see all round her head” (Riding 1937: 71). In light of the two poems it is hard not to comprehend the significance of Helen’s rejection of the framed image provided by the highly polished electron mirror in favour of the two halves

provided by the cups. It is done in a ‘homely’ way, by way of a domestic scene - but the meaning of “Helen’s Faces” is surely here as “the two halves meet.” A similar light touch is applied in a brief exchange between Helen and Paris when they are talking about Castor and Pollux and Paris quips:

‘Their names have such a legendary ring - one can’t quite believe in them as real people.’
‘Real enough to have rescued me from Theseus,’ Helen said, smiling primly.
‘Unless you don’t count me as real.’
‘Oh better than real, my dear. It doesn’t take very much to make a person what is called “real.”’ (Riding 1937, 77)

Here we get the impression that the idea of Helen’s *eidolon* is almost understood between Helen and Paris, with Paris happy to be deceived –she is “better than real.” Riding returns to the question of the reality or unreality of women and men throughout the novel, not always only in connection with Helen. For instance, Cressida appears to turn inside out the idea of the phantom Helen when she explains to Pandarus that women’s purpose in life is “making men real –for if there’s one thing a woman can’t endure it’s to be surrounded by phantoms” (1937: 254).

Elsewhere, Cressida reflects at some length on Helen, beginning with the idea that “she had let herself become an abstraction to her own mind,” and then suggesting that she was like

a woman in a dream. Her beauty was like that— difficult to put together into a face when one was not looking at her, not carefully remembering the precise cast of the features. ...the ever-dissolving image of deceptively tranquil antiquity. A lie! Antiquity was turbulent, violently miserable. (Riding 1937, 258)

This is followed a little later by the thought that Helen “was like air and wind and leaves rather than flesh” (1937: 258-9). Cressida’s long reflection on Helen resonates

not only with the Helen poems, but also with Riding’s exhortation in “Divestment of Beauty” to cast off the “archaic daze,” reflected here in the idea of Helen’s “deceptively tranquil antiquity.” But the almost abstract evocation of Helen, and especially the idea that she is like “air and wind” must also evoke the reminiscence of a past Helen in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*:

And at first I would say that what came
to Ilium’s city was a spirit
of windless calm,
a gentle adornment (ἄγαλμα) of wealth,
a soft glance darted from the eyes,
a flower of love to pierce the soul. (*Ag.* 739-742, trans. A. Sommerstein)³⁰

Aeschylus is not alluding to the *eidolon* of Helen here; but the level of abstraction in the four neuter phrases used to describe her is striking, and the effect of it is highlighted by the phrase used to introduce them (I would say, λέγομ⁹ ἀν). And the use of the word *ἄγαλμα* in l 740 could be argued to bring to mind Stesichorus’s *eidolon*, as it does in Euripides’s *Helen*. Aeschylus surfaces again towards the end of the novel when Menelaus speaks to Odysseus about his feelings as he is preparing to hand Helen over to Deiphobus:

You don’t know how cruelly everything in my palace will remind me of her. I will have to break every female statue in the palace. When she was with me I used to keep saying ‘Every goddess is Helen, and Helen is every goddess.’ She was always threatening to break the statues to stop me talking in this strain- I suppose I really was a wearisome old fool. (1937: 359)

Riding is clearly thinking here of the chorus’s evocation of the deserted Menelaus, haunted by a phantom Helen, for whom the grace of statues has become hateful (εὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν/ ἔχθεται χάρις ἀνδρί, *Aesch. Ag.* 416-7).³¹ Like Riding’s Menelaus seeing Helen in every ‘goddess,’ Aeschylus’s Menelaus sees merely the absence of his wife in every image of ‘Aphrodite’: ἔρρει πᾶσι’ Αφροδίτα (*Ag.* 419) is hard to translate, but it refers to the statues mentioned a few lines above, and means something along the lines of “all the Aphrodite-likenesses are for nothing.”³² Again, Aeschylus is not directly referring to an *eidolon* of Helen, and neither of course is Riding in *Trojan Ending* –but both Aeschylus and Riding imbue Helen with a ghost or dream-like quality, and with a form of abstraction. As Froma Zeitlin puts it: Helen is “a figurative sign, even close to an abstraction, always available as a site of projection of fantasies, a receptor of the overflow of reality. There is Helen, and there is ‘Helen’” (2010: 268).

To come to a preliminary conclusion then on the subject of Laura Riding and classical antiquity I hope to have shown that, by considering very closely her poems and her novel and their intricate intertextuality we can recover an important and original voice for the story of classical reception in the early twentieth century. The relatively recent re-evaluation of modernism which has more fully acknowledged the influence of women as writers and, even more significantly, as editors, has not been as generous to Laura Riding as it has to a number of her

contemporaries, such as Gertrude Stein, Marianne Moore, or H.D.³³ (Riding) Jackson herself was, as we have seen, partly responsible for the neglect she has suffered. The viciousness of some of the writing about her by Graves’s biographers and critics resulted in the creation of an elaborate and persistent myth around her person, which threatens to obscure her work. But once we leave behind the myth of the ‘witch’ Laura, I hope that in this essay I have been able to establish Laura Riding as an important voice in the story of women’s responses to the Classics. Regardless of the myths created around her person and biography, her work stands for itself and deserves close study by anyone interested in the ways in which classical myth and literature continue to affect us.

¹ I will refer to her as Laura Riding when discussing the works she published under that name, and as (Riding) Jackson elsewhere. Her engagement with classical themes effectively ceased after she abandoned the name Laura Riding. For an excellent introduction to Riding as a poet of the 1930s see Dowson 1996: 96-101. I am grateful to Jacqueline Fabre-Serris and Emily Hauser for inviting me to take part in their SCS panel at San Diego in 2019 where I first put some of my thoughts on Riding together. Seminar participants at the universities of Bristol and Nottingham gave me a lot to think about. I am especially grateful to the Riding scholars and editors Mark Jacobs and Jack Blackmore, and to her biographer, Elizabeth Friedmann, for their interest in this work and for their generosity in sharing their own research.

² See also: Cox and Theodorakopoulos 2013, 2019; Hall and Wyles 2016; Worman 2018.

³ In 1976 (Riding) Jackson recalled with pride how she was welcomed to the Fugitives by Allen Tate with the words "you are the one to save America from the Edna Millays!" In 1925 she writes with contempt of "the modern female lyricists who squeal with dainty passion under the fine pin-pricks of life." Many of her contemporaries were similarly dismissive of other women writers, as though their own success depended on being different from the rest of their gender (See Dowson 2002: 7-12 and 15-27).

⁴ e.g. Riding and Graves 1927, Riding and Graves 1928.

⁵ I omit close discussion of the notorious and long-standing mis-attribution of *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* to Graves alone, or to Graves as first rather than (as in the original edition) second author. For this see Jacobs 2015. Examples of the misattribution include Steiner 1960: 341, and more recently Gibson 2015 where the bibliography lists *A Survey* as authored by 'Graves, R. and Riding, L.' Since all printed copies of the book list Riding as the first author the carelessness of the error can only be explained by bias against Riding in Graves scholarship.

⁶ I intend to discuss these early works more closely in a more wide-ranging study of Riding's work. They include poems on Eurydice and Daphne which will benefit from comparison with works by poets such as H.D., Anne Sexton, and Sylvia Plath.

⁷ On the two Helen poems see now the introduction by Jack Blackmore to the new edition of *Poems: A Joking Word* (1928). The poems appeared together for the first time in this book, although not as a pair as they ultimately appear in the CP.

⁸ For Riding and the Muse see Schultz 1992: 6-7; Rees-Jones 2005: 21-22. See also the account of an exchange of letters between Riding and W.B. Yeats (featuring his 'joke' that "the muses are women and prefer the embrace of gay warty lads") in Friedman 2005: 279-80.

⁹ See Murray 2008: 328-30 on this passage in *The White Goddess*. Also on the muse and women poets see Greer 1995: 1-35.

¹⁰ See Vogel 2006. One prominent example for the effect of the identification of Riding with the White Goddess was the myth formed around Sylvia Plath in connection with it. Rees-Jones 2005: 21-22 and 98-107 is much better on this than Kroll 1978 who claims that "The White Goddess myth, when Plath first encountered it, seemed to her to order her experience" (42). The basis for this claim is a conversation with Ted Hughes, cited as saying that the myth of the white goddess "gave shape to what had happened to her" (Kroll 1978: 220 n.19). Plath's poem "The Disquieting Muses" which depicts the muses as "Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head" tells rather a different story (See Rees-Jones 2005: 98-99). In Kroll's narrative the influence exerted by *The White Goddess* overwhelms the direct influence of Riding's poetry on Plath, so that we have a story in which Graves's myth once again overwhelms the reality of Laura Riding. Note the rejection of Kroll's narrative in (Riding) Jackson 2011: 275-93. Typically unkind, (Riding) Jackson's verdict on Kroll's criticism is that it is "decked out in costumery selected from the crammed wardrobes of myth-lore" (283). More importantly, (Riding) Jackson makes the point that Kroll relied too much on Hughes's interpretation of Plath and that this obscures the work itself: 'in the judging of Sylvia Plath's work and herself in relation to her work, Ted Hughes ought to be eliminated preliminarily from consideration (278). Also see Friedman 2005: 400.

¹¹ Tougher 2015: 91 (cites Graves 1990 and Seymour 2003 [Seymour 1995]), and, for "personal White Goddess" Coulston 2015: 100 (cites Graves 1990, Seymour 1995, Seymour-Smith 1995). Tougher also claims that "It is often observed that Graves was in effect the devoted slave of Riding, which raises the possibility that he was Eugenius to her Antonina" (91). Coulston says that Antonina and Theodora in *Count Belisarius* "bore aspects of Laura Riding, attributed to them by Graves whilst under her domination and deep into White Goddess (ir)rationalization" (104).

¹² Gibson 2015: 3-4, citing Graves 1990, Seymour 1995 and Seymour-Smith 1995.

¹³ Friedmann 2005. For an example of how Friedmann redresses some of the bias in the Graves biographies see p. 387, or her account of Seymour-Smith’s correspondence with (Riding) Jackson in 1964 (Friedmann 2005: 403-4). The extraordinary list of entries under “Riding, Laura” in Graves 1990 includes page references for individual items such as “intellectually inflexible,” “rumoured abortion,” “high opinion of herself,” “mentally unbalanced,” “hysterics,” “RG obsessed by,” “strange rumours,” “sinister, a “witch”?” For a critique of the representation of Riding in Graves biographies see Ruthven 1991: 254-5.

¹⁴ The identification of Riding with the White Goddess almost becomes a matter of fact in the biographies of Graves as can be seen in Ford 1995 (a review of a batch of Graves biographies) in which Mark Ford asserts as fact that Riding “undoubtedly did perceive herself as the implacable, enigmatic redeemer of poems.”

¹⁵ Jarrell 1956. See Friedmann 2005: 404, and 538 n33.

¹⁶ See Adams 1990: 72-3 for a good discussion of the poem as one of a group of three that express Riding’s antipathy to female ‘adornments’.

¹⁷ Other examples include “Pygmalion to Galatea” and “Galatea and Pygmalion,” “Farewell to Pasiphae,” and “Leda.” See also Graves’s description of Laura as the incarnation of Isis (and Hecate, and Lilith) as cited in Graves 1990: 1991. There are comparable later poems connected to other so-called muses of Graves’s, e.g. “Eurydice” linked to Margot Callas.

¹⁸ A much longer version of the poem, titled “Body’s Head” was published in *The Close Chaplet*. See Hoberman 1997: 58-60 on Riding’s rejection of the fashion for identifying female power with goddess worship and primitive matriarchy. Poems such as “Back to the Mother Breast” are also important examples of this.

¹⁹ The final chapter of *A Survey* corresponds very closely to chapter 2 of Riding’s *Contemporaries and Snobs* “E. Hulme, the New Barbarism, and Gertrude Stein.”

²⁰ See Greer 1995:17.

²¹ I am grateful to Ken Dowden for help with Nara/Narayanya/Arjuna.

²² See Adams 1990: 49-50 on the “shadowy background of uncontrolled lust” provided by the myth. Adams does not mention the link to Shakespeare’s text.

²³ I quote the version printed in the *CP*, which differs from the version in *The Close Chaplet*. The passage in full in Shakespeare’s poem is: “Without the bed her other fair hand was, /On the green coverlet; whose perfect white /Show’d like an April daisy on the grass, /With pearly sweat, resembling dew of night.”

²⁴ See also her remarks on Shelley’s women: “Their bright eyes, white hands, crimson mouths, their light, fair and tender feet –all the paraphernalia of female appearance are carefully identified” (1993: 115), or on Shakespeare see 1993: 116.

²⁵ See Riding 1937: xix on Shakespeare’s Cressida: “This theatrical sophistication, this coy, mean philosophy, is no Cressida –but the universal flirt of the Elizabethan stage in whom women are magnanimously forgiven their devious stories” (xix). See Jessop 2016: 189.

²⁶ And see Ovid’s Paris using the image of fire for his love in the *Heroides* 16. 7-10.

²⁷ On “No Second Troy” see McKinsey 2002. On Maud Gonne and Helen see the third chapter in Hassett, 2010.

²⁸ And of course, Helen’s *eidolon* is a key theme for H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt*, published some decades after Riding’s poems. I plan to write on the relationship between Riding’s and H.D.’s Helen in more extended, forthcoming work on Riding.

²⁹ There are other aspects of the portrayals of Helen and Cressida in the novel that are in need of further exploration in further work. For instance, Helen’s weaving is explored very prominently throughout the novel and is connected with ideas about female authorship of both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The novel is also in need of discussion in terms of its relationship with Graves’s work. For instance, the cult of Cybele and stories of ancient Cretan matriarchy are also linked to Helen in ways that resonate in Graves’s *White Goddess*. The narrative itself very often takes the form of mythological commentary highly reminiscent of Graves’s style in the *Greek Myths*.

³⁰ The lines that follow immediately are also echoed in Cressida’s exclamation about turbulence and misery and show up the ‘lie’ behind the calm projected by Helen: “But she swerved aside and brought about/ a bitter end to the marriage’ ... “a Fury who made brides weep” (*Ag.* 744-49).

³¹ I thank Patrick Finglass for reminding me of this.

³² See the commentary by Raeburn and Thomas 2010 for a discussion of this tricky passage.

³³ See Dowson 2002: 125-71.

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