

Honors 2290
Ancient Rome in Historical Fiction:
Narratives, Sources and Screen Adaptations
Professor: Judith P. Hallett
e-mail jeph@umd.edu

Our seminar will study the *I, Claudius* BBC-TV series, and compare this 1976 “small screen” cinematic treatment to Robert Graves’ novels on which it was based—*I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*— as well as to the ancient primary sources on which Graves mainly relied: Tacitus’ *Annals*, Suetonius’ *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, and the histories of Cassius Dio.

We will examine how Graves’ representation of the emperor Claudius (who reigned from 41-54 CE) compares to that of ancient authors, and how the BBC-TV adaptation of Graves’ novels compares to the representations of Claudius by both Graves and our ancient primary sources. Our focus will be on Claudius’ ancient and modern image as a physically and mentally challenged individual, on his role as a member of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and on the impact of his story on two twentieth century audiences: that of Graves in the 1930’s and that of the BBC-TV series in the 1970’s.

Our readings will also situate Graves’ novels in the context of other 20th and 21st century works of historical fiction about ancient Rome, most notably Thornton Wilder’s *The Ides of March*. The adaptation of Graves’ novels for the big and small screen will be contextualized through class projects on other major films about ancient Rome such as *Gladiator* and *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*.

Ever since their publication in 1934-35, Graves’ two Claudius- novels—ironically written as “potboilers”, to pay the bills for himself and his family—have been extremely popular. They were also well reviewed by critics at the time, and have passed the test of time: indeed, *I, Claudius* has been called the best historical novel of the twentieth century. In 1937 the celebrated British producer Alexander Korda attempted to make a full-length film version of both novels, starring Charles Laughton as Claudius and directed by the legendary Josef von Sternberg. But after the actress cast as Claudius’ wife Messalina, Merle Oberon, was injured in an automobile accident, filming stopped and never resumed. Several decades later, the director Tony Richardson and writer John Mortimer collaborated on an unsuccessful stage version in London’s West End.

We will therefore also reflect upon the success enjoyed by the television adaptation, particularly its enthusiastic reception in both England and the US. In this context, we will address such topics as the readership for whom the novels were originally written and the television audiences by whom the BBC-TV series was eagerly watched. We will also consider the special relevance of Claudius, and the Roman empire over which he ruled, to contemporary US society.

In preparing this course, I have relied heavily on the syllabus and other materials from an honors course at the University of Florida, Gainesville, which was taught by the director of their honors program: Associate Provost and classics professor Sheila Dickson. The class is scheduled to allow us time to view episodes

from the BBC-TV series as well as other films, and to discuss them in the same week.

No knowledge of Greek or Latin is required.

There will be three short papers and a final group project.

Required Texts (available at the Student Union bookstore):

Robert Graves, *I, Claudius* (Vintage paperback)

Robert Graves, *Claudius the God* (Vintage paperback)

Suetonius, *The Twelve Caesars*, translated by Robert Graves (Penguin paperback)

Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, translated by Michael Grant (Penguin paperback)

Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome?* (Mariner Books paperback)

Required Course Materials (xerox packet; available from instructor):

Judith P. Hallett, "The Julio-Claudians and their Legacies" (essay in forthcoming volume)

"Re-reading Laura Riding", expanded version of review in *Amphora* 6.2 (December 2007)

Judith P. Hallett and Wayne Millan, "A Julio-Claudian Who's Who" (appendix in forthcoming volume)

Sandra Joshel, "I, Claudius: Projection and Imperial Soap Opera", in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, ed. Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (Baltimore and London 2001) 119-161.

John Mortimer, *Murderers and other Friends: Another Part of Life* (New York 1994) 27-31.

Jay Parini, "Delving Into the World of Dreams By Blending Fact and Fiction." *Chronicle of Higher Education* February 27, 1998.

Miranda Seymour, *Robert Graves: Life on the Edge* (New York 1995) 212-225, 248-250 and 454-461.

Thornton Wilder's *The Ides of March* is widely available at public libraries and through both bookstores and online book dealers, and has not been specifically ordered for this course at the campus bookstores.

Selections from Cassius Dio, Velleius Paterculus and other ancient primary sources
Thirteen episodes of *I, Claudius*, shown in class.

Students are encouraged to buy their own copies (the DVD version contains—"The Epic That Never Was"—narrated by Dirk Bogarde: it includes surviving clips from the 1937 Korda version and interviews with surviving cast and crew members).

Students are also encouraged to consult the third edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (1996), which is in the McKeldin Library reference room.

Course Grading:

1. Classwork (regular attendance, class participation, preparation of study guide, responsibility for one weekly email class discussion)	35%
2. Three papers	45%
3. Final group project	<u>20%</u>
	100%

Student Responsibilities:

Attendance: You must attend class regularly. Classwork counts for 35% of your grade, A good deal of the material for which you will be held responsible in the three papers and final group project will only be presented and discussed in class meetings.

Preparation: You must come to class prepared. I understand that extraordinary and extenuating circumstances--such as illness, extreme demands on your time and energies by other courses, or difficulties with transportation--may make this impossible on occasion. But on those unusual occasions, please come to class anyway. Let me know before class begins that you are not prepared and I will not call on you if you request. Adequate preparation consists not only of doing the assigned readings (and “watchings”), but also of taking a prompt and active part in our weekly email class discussions. Effort and improvement in classwork will be weighed heavily when classwork grades are computed.

Support Systems: I will be in frequent electronic communication with all of you outside of class: preceding our Wednesday meetings each week there will often be a class email discussion, facilitated by a class member and myself, on assigned readings, at times those from ancient primary sources and at times those from outside secondary readings. If students are amenable to this arrangement, a list of all class members' names, (residential as well as e-mail) addresses and telephone numbers will be compiled and made available after the end of the drop/add period. Keeping in regular and close touch with one or more of your classmates is highly recommended in a course of this sort. You should feel free to obtain from them any assignments or material that you miss if you cannot attend a particular class. You should also feel free to seek their assistance if you experience any difficulties with the work assigned.

Studying with one or more classmates is beneficial to all concerned, even if all concerned have perfect attendance records and are experiencing no difficulties whatever with their work. Collaboration is, however, only acceptable if your collaborator has worked with you and not for you. Students who rely excessively on the efforts of classmates do themselves no service.

Do not be afraid to ask for help from me if you need it. I also want to be as accessible to all of you as possible. Please feel free to contact me--in person during office hours, by phone (in my office or at home), by e-mail at any time--whenever you need information, assistance or just plain moral support.

Papers and Assignments: There will be three short (2-4 page) papers, due on **September 29, October 20, and November 17**. Further details, including “rationale sheets” (which specify the number of points to be allocated for organization, following

directions, content and exposition), will be provided two weeks before each of these assignments is due.

The final, group, project will require you to examine and present two oral reports: one on modern historical novels about ancient Rome, and films about Rome in the classical period. The first will entail comparison of Robert Graves' Claudius- novels with other historical novels set in ancient Rome (e.g. those by Robert Harris, Benita Kane Jaro, Colleen McCullough, Steven Saylor, and Lindsay Davis), the second a comparison between the *I, Claudius* TV-series and a film about ancient Rome. Both will require looking at ancient Roman sources and modern scholarly studies as well.

Every student will be responsible for preparing a study guide for at least one episode of the BBC-TV series. It should include a listing of the major characters in the episode (with a brief description of each); a brief summary of the episode; a series of (4-6) study questions that aid in our understanding of historical events, relationships among characters and significant actions in the episode; a series of (4-6) questions that aid in our understanding of historical events, relationships among characters and significant actions in the related chapters in Graves.

It will also include a comparison between the episode and the related chapters in Graves (noting similarities, differences, omissions and changes, with a focus on one major issue); a comparison between the episode and the original sources on which it is based (noting similarities, differences, omissions and changes, with a focus on one major issue); a list of the relevant pages in the Hallett and Hallett/Millan discussions; and a concluding statement about the episode and its place in both the TV episodes and the novels.

Tentative Schedule

Note: Tacitus and Hallett assignments are given in page numbers (with an indication of where to start and end); Suetonius assignments in section numbers of the specific life.

Week "One"

M August 30	Introduction: Why Claudius?
W September 1	Why Rome I?
M September 6	No Class: Labor Day
W September 8	Why Rome II? (early dismissal for Rosh Hashonah)

Reading during Week "One": Cullen Murphy, *Are We Rome?* "Prologue" (pp.1-23) and "Epilogue" (pp.185-206) for class discussion as well as individual chapters, each assigned to groups of 3-4 students

Reading for Week Two: Graves, *I, Claudius*, chapters 1-3; Suetonius, *Augustus*, sections 79-82, 84 and 87; *Tiberius*, section 14; Tacitus, *Annals* 1.3 (pp. 32-33) "To safeguard his dominion...For Augustus wanted to have another iron in the fire"); Hallett "Julio-Claudians" 1-11 (... "led to her husband's departure"); family trees in the back of Penguin Tacitus volume.

The Main Characters (information about some of them is available in Hallett and Millan):

Claudius: emperor of Rome from 41-54 CE (the narrator)

Augustus: emperor of Rome from 27 BCE-14 CE

Marcus Vipsanius Agrippa, his general
 Livia, Augustus' wife
 Marcellus, Augustus' nephew
 Tiberius and Drusus, Augustus' stepsons (Livia's sons by her first marriage)
 Julia, Marcellus' wife and Augustus' daughter
 Octavia, Augustus' sister and Marcellus' mother
 Antonius Musa, a doctor
 Antonia, Claudius' mother as a girl (daughter of Mark Antony and Octavia)
I, Claudius is narrated by the elderly Claudius as he writes his memoirs. The first episode takes place seven years after Augustus becomes emperor.

Week Two

M September 13 **View episode 1: "A Touch of Murder" (41 CE: 41-12 BCE)**

W September 15 How to write a novel/TV episode study guide

Reading for Week Three: Graves, chapters 4-5; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 7.21-23, 50.

Tacitus, *Annals* 1.4 (pp. 33-34: "nobody had any immediate worries...that they will tear it in two"); 1.10 (pp. 38-39: "And gossip did not spare his personal affairs...in fact they were criticisms"); Hallett, 11-13 ("family *agnomen*"). Parini, "Delving into the World of Dreams by Blending Fact and Fiction."

Class e-mail discussion for week three based on Parini.

New Characters:

Drusus, Tiberius' younger brother, Claudius' father
 Antonia, Drusus' wife, Claudius' mother, Mark Antony's daughter
 Gaius and Lucius, Augustus' grandchildren, children of Julia and Agrippa

Week Three

M September 20 **View episode 2: "Family Affairs" (9 BCE-2 CE)**

W September 22 Fiction and authorial-truthtelling. *Augustus* 34, 64-65 and *Tiberius* 7, 10-13 and *Claudius* 3-5; Seymour, selections from *Robert Graves, Life on the Edge*; Mortimer, selections from *Murderers and Other Friends*; Hallett, "Re-reading Laura Riding" **Class email discussion for week four based on Seymour, Mortimer and Hallett.**

New Characters:

Germanicus, Claudius' brother
 Agrippina, Julia's daughter
 Drusus ("Castor"), Tiberius' son
 Livilla, Claudius' sister
 Herod Agrippa, Claudius' friend
 Postumus, last surviving son of Julia and Agrippa

Week Four

M September 27 **View episode 3: "Waiting in the Wings" (6 BCE-4 CE)**

W September 29 Interpretation and Authorial Intent. **DUE DATE FOR FIRST PAPER.**

Reading for Week Five: Graves, chapters 9-12; Suetonius, *Tiberius* 22; *Claudius* 4, 26, 41; Tacitus, *Annals* 1.3-4 (pp. 32-34: “To safeguard his domination...—they will tear it in two”). Thornton Wilder, *The Ides of March*. **Class email discussion for week five based on Wilder.**

New characters:

Postumus

Asinius Pollio and Livy: Roman historians.

Week Five

M October 4 **View episode 4: “What Shall We Do About Claudius?” (6-9 CE).**

W October 6 Dramatizing Roman history

Reading for Week Six : Graves, chapters 13-14; Suetonius, *Augustus* 97-99; *Tiberius* 22; Tacitus, *Annals* 1.5-7 (pp. 34-36: “Amid this sort of conversation...and stored them up in his memory

Class e-mail discussion for week six based on Wilder.

New characters:

Sejanus, leader of the Praetorian Guard

Camilla Pulchra, chief Vestal Virgin

Week Six

M October 11 **View episode 5: “Poison is Queen” (11-14 CE)**

W October 13 The Legacy of the Roman Republic

Reading for Week Seven: Graves, chapters 15-21; Suetonius, *Caligula* 1-7; Tacitus, *Annals* ???; Hallett 13-15 (“died in 37 CE”).

Class e-mail discussion for week seven on writing the second paper.

New Characters:

Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso, former governor of Syria

Plancina, his wife

Martina, an expert on poisons

Caligula, Germanicus’ son

Week Seven

M October 18 **View episode 6: “Some Justice” (14-20 CE)**

W October 20 Assessing our ancient Roman sources: biography. **DUE DATE FOR SECOND PAPER.**

Reading for Week Eight: Graves, chapters 22-26; Tacitus, *Annals* ???

New character:

Caligula as an adult

Week Eight

M October 25

View episode 7: “Queen of Heaven” (23-28 CE).

W October 27

View episode 8: “Reign of Terror” (28-31 CE)

Reading for Weeks Nine and Ten: Graves, *I, Claudius*, chapters 27-34 and *Claudius the God*, chapter 1 (only pp. 3-6), chapters 5-9 and chapter 10 (only pp. 165-166). Suetonius, *Caligula* 8 ff. and *Claudius* ??? Tacitus, *Annals* ???; Hallett 15-18 (“advised him with Roman senators”); Joshel, “Projection and Imperial Soap Opera.”

Class e-mail discussion for week nine on reading Sandra Joshel

New characters:

Epicata, Sejanus’ wife

Helen, daughter of Castor and Livilla

Macro

Gemellus, Tiberius’ grandson

Drucilla, Caligula’s sister

Calpurnia, Claudius’ friend

Caesonia, Caligula’s wife

Cassius Chaerea, captain of the Praetorian Guard

Messalina, Claudius’ new wife

Pallas and Narcissus: Claudius’ freedmen and advisers

Domitia Lepida, Messalina’s mother

Gaius Silanus, Domitia’s husband and Messalina’s lover

Week Nine

M November 1 **View episode 9: “Zeus, By Jove” (31-38 CE)**

W November 3 Discussion of *I, Claudius* as Imperial Soap Opera.

Week Ten

M November 8 **View episode 10: “Hail Who?” (38-41 CE)**

W November 10 **View episode 11, “Fool’s Luck” (41 CE)**

Reading for Week Eleven: Graves, *Claudius the God*, chapters 22-29; Suetonius, *Claudius* ???; Tacitus, *Annals* ???; Hallett 18-24, **Class e-mail discussion for week eleven based on Joshel’s essay about Messalina.**

New character:

Gaius Silius, Messalina’s lover

Week Eleven

M November 15 **View episode 12: “A God in Colchester” (42-48 CE)**

W November 17 **View episode 13: “Old King Log” (46-54 CE). DUE DATE FOR THIRD PAPER.**

Reading for Weeks Thirteen and Fourteen: Graves, Chapters 30-32 and sequel (bottom on p. 531); Three accounts of Claudius’ Death (*Claudius the God*, pp. 508-513); Suetonius, *Nero*.

Week Twelve

M November 22
W November 24

Meetings of project groups
No Class: Thanksgiving

Week Thirteen

M November 29
W December 1

Imperial Rome on Film
Imperial Rome on Film

Week Fourteen

M December 6
W December 8

Presentation of Final Projects
Presentation of Final Projects