

## An Emperor in Translation: Suetonius, Claudius, and Robert Graves

About twenty years after Robert Graves wrote the novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius the God*, based on the life of the emperor Claudius, he published a translation of Suetonius' *De Vita Caesarum* under the title *The Twelve Caesars*. While Graves' translation is generally faithful, it is colored by his personal ideas about Claudius, which he expresses not only through his two novels, but also in interviews, letters, and other literary works. I argue that in *The Twelve Caesars*, Graves subtly inserts a new and improved, sympathetic Claudius into Suetonius' more negative depiction. To show this, I will compare episodes in Suetonius to parallel episodes in the novels, demonstrating Graves' manipulation of events, themes, and—above all—language.

After giving a brief overview of our evidence for Graves' views on Claudius, I will turn to the two letters of Augustus concerning Claudius, which are quoted by Suetonius and reworked in *I, Claudius*. These are not merely episodes in Suetonius that Graves has adapted, but recognizably the very same letters. In fact, in the second letter, Graves' translation in *The Twelve Caesars* is less precise than his rendering of it in the novel. Next, I focus on the episode in which Claudius is declared emperor, pointing out that in *The Twelve Caesars*, Graves leaves out the damning phrase *prae metu* "because of fear" (Suet.*Div.Claud.* 10.2) to explain Claudius' actions. Finally, I turn to chapters 14 and 15 in Suetonius, in which Claudius' law court activity occurs. I argue that Graves' translation renders Claudius much more capable than the Latin implies and is highly influenced by the court scenes in *Claudius the God*.

Although *The Twelve Caesars* by no means expresses an overly favorable view of Claudius, Graves' "true" Claudius subtly creeps in, imbuing Suetonius' critical depiction with the misunderstood emperor of his novels. In an interview, Graves once explained his choice of topic for his Claudius novels, saying, "Well, with that one I noted in my diary, a year or two

before, that the Roman historians...had obviously got Claudius wrong, and that one day I'd have to write a book about it," (Kernowski, 100). This quotation shows that Graves thought of his books as something of a correction or revision of the ancient sources. Graves does not depart far enough from Suetonius' Latin to exonerate the Claudius, but, dispersed throughout the text, a more positive image of the emperor emerges.

### Bibliography

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