

Pilate's Wife: An Unproduced Script by Clare Boothe Luce (1951)

“While [Pilate] was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, ‘Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him.’” From this single sentence in the Gospel of Matthew (27:19), a rich and complex set of legends about Pontius Pilate’s spouse, named in later tradition Claudia Procula, has grown up. Some of these concern the content of the dream, some are more fantastic, and in many she is specified as the first Gentile convert to Christianity (Grüll 2010). In the theatrical and film tradition, however, the character of Claudia has largely gone to waste, with some notable actresses languishing in the underdeveloped role. In other instances, she is effaced from the story altogether: Claudia is not mentioned, for example, in Martin Scorsese’s *Last Temptation of Christ* (an incidental reference to her in the first draft of the script was removed before shooting), while in *Jesus Christ Superstar* her dream is ascribed to Pilate himself instead. While the roles of some of the women in the Passion narrative have been filled out dramatically—e.g., Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary—female figures on the Roman side of the Passion story have notably been lacking on stage and screen.

In 1951, Clare Boothe Luce—a remarkable midcentury American figure who not only served in Congress and as a diplomat, but also as a journalist, novelist, and Oscar-nominated screenwriter—worked for several months on a script for RKO entitled *Pilate's Wife*. For Luce, herself a Catholic convert and the wife of a powerful man (*Time-Life* founder, Henry Luce), the story of Claudia was one of deep fascination and identification. As she wrote at the time, “Almost from the day of my conversion, I knew I had to do this picture in Hollywood.... My mind teems with ideas and thoughts. What is clearest, just now, is that this must not be a

‘Spectacle’—a technicolor orgy... It must be pitched at a *psychological* level—for its interior rather than visual impact” (Morris 2014: 284). As a *roman à clef* of her own troubled marriage and, more importantly, as a consideration of the difficult balance between worldly authority and religious conviction, Luce had hoped to present in this film a version of her own story projected onto a first-century past. Although plans moved far enough along that Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh were approached as possible stars, production on *Pilate’s Wife* came to a halt when Luce accepted the ambassadorship to Italy offered by President Eisenhower.

Aside from a short chapter in Sylvia Jukes Morris’ magisterial *Price of Fame: The Honorable Clare Boothe Luce* (2014), there has not been any scholarly consideration of *Pilate’s Wife*. Neither the script (available at the Motion Picture Academy’s Margaret Herrick Library archives) nor any of Luce’s correspondence with executives at RKO (available from her papers at the Library of Congress) have been published. Beyond bringing to light a forgotten work of an important literary figure, I hope to consider *Pilate’s Wife* against a larger backdrop of Cold War Anglo-American Catholicism, a movement that ran as highbrow as *Brideshead Revisited* and as low as McCarthyism, in relation to the popular culture of the day. In a period that produced large-scale films of ancient Judaea that largely relegated women to supporting roles, it is intriguing to imagine what impact this portrait of the wife in an ancient power couple might have had for 1950s movie-going public.

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