

1981

# Laura Riding Roughshod

Jane Marcus

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview>

Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Marcus, Jane. "Laura Riding Roughshod." *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981): 295-299. Web.  
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.2771>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Iowa Review by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## Laura Riding Roughshod · Jane Marcus

DRIVEN OUT of idyllic Mallorca, where she and Robert Graves wrote poetry and published small volumes of esoteric writing at the Seizin Press, the poet Laura Riding wrote a manifesto. There is nothing odd about a poet writing a manifesto in the thirties. It would be an odd poet who didn't. This three-page document was recently on exhibit at the New York Public Library among a remarkable collection of manuscripts from the Berg Collection in "The Thirties in England," organized by curator Lola Szladits, famous for her acquisition of modern British writers' papers.

Across the room in another glass case were the drafts and typescript of Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (1938). What's odd is how alike the two manifestoes are in theme and argument, though Woolf's pamphlet is written with a speed and grace of symbol and metaphor, sensuous appeals to the eye and ear and every literary trick in the bag—which Laura Riding, purest of pure poets, would have abhorred.

Woolf's anti-fascism was a tri-partite political stance of socialism, pacifism and feminism, her original contribution being the argument that the origin of fascism was not in nationalism but in the patriarchal family. Laura Riding also believed in women's superiority, but in her case it was linked to a belief that because of their domestic isolation, women are better at *thinking* than men. Because of female rationality, men, she suggests, ought to leave the running of the world to women so that war may be abolished and aggression stopped, locally and internationally.

Few feminist protests were heard in what Auden called that "low dishonest decade," especially when they were as high-minded and ferociously honest as Woolf's and Riding's. The last thing that men wanted to hear as they mounted the barricades in a fight for freedom was that war was related to irrational male sex drives. Riding did not get much response to her plea and she and Robert Graves left London for New Hope, Pennsylvania, where their last literary experiment in living broke up in a personal debacle, and Laura Riding married the poetry editor of *Time* magazine, Schuyler B. Jackson. She gave up poetry as too impure a medium for the pursuit of truth, and domestic *thinking* and linguistic study have been her occupation ever since.

Chicago critic Joyce Wexler, who teaches at Loyola University, has

written the first book on this important and influential American poet: *Laura Riding's Pursuit of Truth* (Ohio University Press, 1980). Laura Riding's critical essays and her several volumes of poetry, published from 1926 through 1938, reveal a powerful mind and an authoritative talent. "You are the one to save America from the Edna Millays!" wrote Allen Tate in 1925, commenting enthusiastically on how intellectual, ironic and original her poems were. But the very authority of her intellectual and poetic presence militates against historical recognition of her achievements. She is one of those figures, harsh and splendid in rigor and discipline, whom one would rather read than speak to. The public personalities of her former students and disciples, from Ransom to Tate, now considered to be the founders of American New Criticism, to that grand old man of English letters, Robert Graves, have obscured not only her influence on them, but her original contribution to literary criticism.

Joyce Wexler documents in detail Laura Riding's method of close textual analysis and the way she taught this doctrine to the Southern Fugitives, Ransom and Tate. Wexler also traces the argument which Graves and Riding developed in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* (Hogarth, 1927), an argument William Empson claims inspired his famous *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Wexler has rescued one of those "stranded ghosts" from literary obscurity and has told a fascinating story as well. But just as Riding's poetry has been forgotten, Wexler's book has been ignored by American journals. Irony is one of history's games, too, not just poetry's. For the timing of a Riding revival coincides with the rebellion of feminist critics against the too formal demands of New Critical exegesis. Will we be forced to acknowledge that it was a woman who invented Chinese footbinding of the critical imagination?

Riding's reputation raises many provocative questions, not the least of which are biographical. "Riding's poems portray a mind locked in combat with words and winning," Wexler writes. And so they do. But where did such an original mind come from? How did a Jewish girl from Brooklyn, Laura Riechenthal from Girls' High, become Laura Riding the queen of modernist poetry, reigning secure in the twenties and thirties over the Seizin Press and her London and Mallorca disciples? Her sceptre was invisible, but she actually wore a gold wire crown which spelled out LAURA, and no one found it odd at all.

Naming names is of course what poetry is all about, ever since Adam. In one of Riding's poems she shows her concern about the poetic and human act of naming: "I am because I say / I say myself / I am my name / My name is not my name / It is the name of what I say. / My name is what is said. / I alone say. / I alone am not I. / I am my name. / My name is not my name, / My name is the name." This puzzling "truth-telling" is Riding's definition of the poetic act. And though she won't admit comparisons, that poem was clearly begotten by a literary daughter of Emily Dickinson. Dickinson was a truth-teller too, but canny New Englander that she was, she demanded that the poet "Tell all the truth but tell it slant" for the "Truth must dazzle gradually / Or every man be blind."

Riding, however, didn't want the truth of her poems to dazzle gradually, and she has been impatient with the blindness of critics. Her Jewish socialist father had wanted her to be an American Rosa Luxemburg. But Laura Riechenthal went from Girls' High to Cornell, married a history instructor, became briefly Laura Gottschalk, and went to New York to write poetry. The admiring Hart Crane first called her "Rideshalk-Godding," then, cooling at her authoritative ways, termed her "Laura Riding Roughshod." "Riding" was the name she chose for herself as poet, though now she wishes to be known as Laura (Riding) Jackson. That parenthesis around her chosen name is as distancing as the famous parenthesis in which Mrs. Ramsay's death is revealed in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*.

Riding was a good choice. For "riding-rhyme" is the name of the heroic couplet that Chaucer used, and Chaucer's Cressida is one of the domestic heroines she admires. Her disciples thought of her as Cassandra, but it was Cressida she held up to glory in *A Trojan Ending* (1937) in which we see a woman retelling the tragic tale from a domestic angle as a quarrel between Helen's husbands. Cressida says it is refreshing to get off the subject of victory, "bloody cartsful of it off the battlefield." Riding says she wants to redeem the story of Troy "from its association with schoolboys who do not weep when their mothers die." Her Helen is a housewife who works her cloth as if every stitch brought the war nearer to an end. In *Lives of Wives* (1939), a historical fiction about the ancients, she says that the "male characters are here written of as husbands rather than as heroes."

Riding ought to be restored to the ranks of writers like Hart Crane and Gertrude Stein, where she belongs as a shaper of our speech, a poet of powerful and original irony. In what Riding calls “the stuttering slow grammaring of self,” it is language which makes us human. She is the least sentimental of love poets. For her, words are superior to acts:

And I shall say to you, “There is needed now  
A poem upon love, to forget the kiss by  
And be more love than kiss to the lips.”  
Or, failing your heart’s talkativeness,  
I shall write this spoken kiss myself,  
Imprinting it on the mouth of time . . .

“Riding” is a name not only for a rhyme but also for districts or jurisdictions in a county. And since she named the press she ran with Robert Graves, Seizin Press, we could guess that another territorial imperative was being expressed, for “Seizin” means legal possession of freehold property. Both a “seizin” and a “riding” are far bigger chunks of territory for a woman writer to claim than the “room of one’s own” Woolf modestly demanded. Is Riding’s cult of domesticity feminist? Or does it simply lead to the inequalities of worship that cause poets like Robert Graves to make White Goddesses out of women?

“Analogy is always false,” Riding argued, and tried to purge poetry of metaphor, symbol and myth. What else is left but pure language and thought? If, as she claims, things cannot be known by their resemblance to other things, then the poet is left with a purged language. The reader often finds the poems too abstract, but Riding would claim that thinking itself is not abstract. The title of her second volume of poems, *Love as Love, Death as Death*, conveys what she means. Riding published Gertrude Stein’s poems at the Seizin Press in 1929, and her kinship with Stein is clear. In *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, a major influence on “the Auden generation,” she praised repetition in Stein’s work as having “the effect of breaking down the possible historical senses still inherent in the words.” Since so much poetry alludes to past poetry, this is a revolutionary approach. Riding’s abstract poetry reads like an extreme Modernist manifesto. It resembles nothing so much as the Russian revolutionary early Cubist/Constructivist paintings of Goncharova and Alexandra Exter.

These lines from "In the Beginning," about a daughter's "unpentateuchal genesis," for example, might be painted by a surrealist: "She opens the heads of her brothers / And lets out the aeroplanes. / 'Now,' she says, 'you will be able to think better.'"

The life of the Riding/Graves circle in London in the late twenties consisted of couples, triangles, rectangles, and great bursts of creative activity. It included Robert Graves's wife, Nancy Nicholson, on a barge in the Thames with the children, the disruptions of the Irish poet Phibbs, the erring disciple, and Laura Riding's attempted suicide. She jumped out a window and broke her back but survived to pursue truth in words, an authoritative poet and critic, retreating from the limelight to the solitary pursuit of linguistic purity. Graves and her ex-disciples quarrel about her influence. In an early poem, "Forgotten Girlhood," Riding answers them:

But don't call Mother Damnable names.  
The names will come back  
At the end of a nine-tailed Damnable Strap.  
Mother Damnable, Mother Damnable  
Good Mother Damnable.

Laura Riding's *Selected Poems* (Faber and Faber, 1970) or her *Collected Poems* (Random House, 1938) are good places for the reader to start. Joyce Wexler does not discuss the prose, but both *Lives of Wives* (1939) and *A Trojan Ending* (1937) are fascinating. It was Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press which published her first volume, *A Close Chaplet*, in 1926. Riding's integrity, her withdrawal from the world and her truth-telling suggest a modern Emily Dickinson. For her truth is "the muse that serves herself"; man's need to claim that his half truths are *the* truth leads to "Titanic dissipation." Let us read Laura Riding again, in an attempt to approach her abstract frontier of poetic truth. It is a world where there are no myths to deceive us.