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# Mary Beard

Professor Mary Beard OBE FBA is Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge. A video of extracts from this interview can be found via [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/beard](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/beard)

Q

What was the initial spark that made you want to go into your field?

**Mary Beard**

I have been interested in the ancient world as long as I can remember. In my own mythology, it goes back to visiting the Elgin Marbles when I was five, and being gobsmacked by them. Later, classics for me represented a subject where you could be the kind of intellectual dilettante that I slowly realised that I was. You could do philosophy, and you could link up philosophy, history, art and archaeology. And you could put it together with the way we are still embedded in the classical tradition. For me, classics doesn't mean studying the ancient world on its own. It means studying us and our relationship with the ancient world. It has grown with me for a long time, I suppose.

Q

What part of your published work are you most happy with?

**Mary Beard**

I like pieces that I've written that have shaken the field up a bit. I don't think I'm the sort of person who writes three-volume histories of the Roman Consulship, taking 50 years. There was one essay I did about Cicero's letters that did change the way people read them, and it was my intervention into the field. I feel pleased with that.

What I like about classics is the way that you can explore different bits of it, and change your expertise within a single field. It has been a privilege to engage in areas of study of the ancient world, where you still can say, 'Let's look at this differently. Did the Romans have a mythology? Well, try looking at it this way.' Thirty pages, and on to the next thing.

And the great thing about British intellectual life is that it has room for everybody. It has room for three volumes on the Roman Consulship, and it has room for people like me who try to shake things up.

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Q

What does classics contribute to our understanding of our own culture?

**Mary Beard**

The important thing about classics is that, like it or not, it remains at the heart of the Western cultural enterprise. You could put it like this: ultimately, when Dante was writing, he was reading Virgil, he was not reading Gilgamesh. In a way, Western culture remains in dialogue with the classical world. You couldn't take classics out of Western culture and leave anything behind but a torso; it would no longer make sense. That is claiming quite a big privilege for the classical world and for classical studies, but I think it is true.



What is Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* except in dialogue with the ancient tradition of tyranny? Where do we learn about what killing a tyrant is, if not from the assassination of Caesar? It is no good denying that. People often say, 'Look, didn't the early 20th century and the rise of Modernism finish the classics off? Wasn't that when we stopped teaching arts students by making them copy ancient sculpture?' No, go and look at Picasso's work. It is absolutely rooted in a conversation with the ancient world.

I don't mean by that in any way that we have to admire the ancient world. The ancient world is horrible, it is deeply unadmirable in all kinds of ways. But it is nevertheless part of the conversation that Western culture has always had. Western culture is about talking to antiquity.

This is not to say a kind of multicultural vision in which people study Chinese or Polynesian culture is irrelevant to us – of course, happily it is not. But it still remains the case that the Western European literary tradition, on which much of our cultural talk is founded, goes back to Homer and Virgil and other classical authors. You *can't* read Dante without knowing something about Virgil. You *can* read Dante without knowing something about Gilgamesh.

Q

What can we still get from Homer?

**Mary Beard**

After five minutes' talk to people, they can see that we are still thinking with *The Odyssey*. That's not just James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The Coen Brothers' *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* movie is explicitly citing itself in relation to *The Odyssey*. Why is it in relation to *The Odyssey*? What has *The Odyssey* still got to teach Western culture? Actually, it is the prototype of almost every novel that there is: bloke is away, comes back to wife through trials and tribulations,

and in the course of that he discovers what it is to be a man, what it is to be a hero; he discovers and explores the notion of civilisation and barbarity.

A great example in *The Odyssey*, which always gets people going, is when Odysseus is captured by the one-eyed giant, the Cyclops. Very resourcefully, with that well-known ruse, he manages to escape from the cave of the Cyclops, where he and his companions have been penned in, first of all by blinding the Cyclops with a burning stake in one eye, and then hiding underneath the sheep, which the Cyclops was letting out of the cave. This is the very beginning of the Western literary tradition. What it is asking you to say is: do we like Odysseus for doing that? The Cyclops was a nasty cannibalistic giant that was going to eat them up. But do we feel sorry for him when Odysseus drives the stake in? Of course we do. Homer talks of the awful sizzling sound made by the stake, and we can almost feel the Cyclops' pain. We start to see the kind of culture clash there that we are still negotiating.

**Q**

What other insights do we get from classics?

**Mary Beard**

Classical culture and literature help us debate what it is to be good citizens. The debate in the West about what politics is, what citizens' rights are, has long been discussed very profitably through thinking about classical precedents.

To take one very obvious example, the most famous speeches to survive from Republican Rome are Cicero's speeches against Catiline 'the terrorist'. Cicero denounces Catiline, who he claims was trying to overthrow the state, and he puts the co-conspirators to death without trial. A few years later, after he has done that, he himself is exiled for that very crime.

What we are seeing in 63 BC are the roots of our issues about homeland security, about how far the state should be able to suspend its normal rules of operation and the normal rights of a citizen, in order to protect itself against terrorist threat. It has been discussed in those terms from Ben Jonson to Ibsen, precisely saying, 'What does this tell us about how the state should respond to threats from the inside?' If we want to understand not just how we now debate big issues of citizenship, and we want to follow that through in thinking about how people before us have debated those issues, and why we might want to change our minds about them, we cannot do that without thinking about how we have done that by talking to antiquity.

This is not a plea that every 10-year-old should learn Latin in order that they can talk to antiquity for themselves. What is important within our modern cultural operations is that we have *some* people who can do that. The cultural operation that any society launches is a collaborative one. That means we do not all have to do everything – that would be impossible. But in order for our culture to know where it has come from, and why where it has come from is important to us and has formed how we are, we have to have *some* people who can offer expertise in that area.

**Q**

Can you explain that a bit more?

**Mary Beard**

We can't say, 'We don't need people studying classics anymore, because we've got everything translated. We've got a library, so we've got it there for us, done and dusted – that's fine.'

One: everything *hasn't* been translated. There are plenty of works of Galen waiting to be translated by someone who has got the time to do it.

Two: more Latin and Greek is being discovered all the time. One of the most exciting public discoveries in this country over the last few decades has been the letters from the Roman soldiers and their families at Vindolanda. If we hadn't had anybody who knew Latin, we would never have known about what was going on in Vindolanda.

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**Knowledge can't be set in stone or pickled in aspic. It's not a set of things you can consign to a library. Knowledge is something that is dynamic and changing.**

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That is not the most important thing. The important thing is that knowledge can't be set in stone or pickled in aspic. Knowledge is only knowledge if it's an active verb, if somebody is doing it. It's not a set of things that you can consign to a library and say is there. Knowledge is something that is dynamic and changing.

You see that terribly clearly if you say, 'Okay, we've got everything translated, they've been translated for years; let's go back and look at Gilbert Murray's translations of Greek tragedy from the early 20th century.'<sup>1</sup> They are meaningless to us. That's not just because Gilbert Murray perhaps wasn't the greatest poet; it's not because he was rather flowery. It is because translation is always about a rediscovery, which changes all the time. Our Greek tragedy is not the same as Murray's tragedy. It's close to unreadable because we are now engaging with Greek tragedy in a different way from how we did 100 years ago. Murray's engagement is still interesting to us, but it can't be ours.

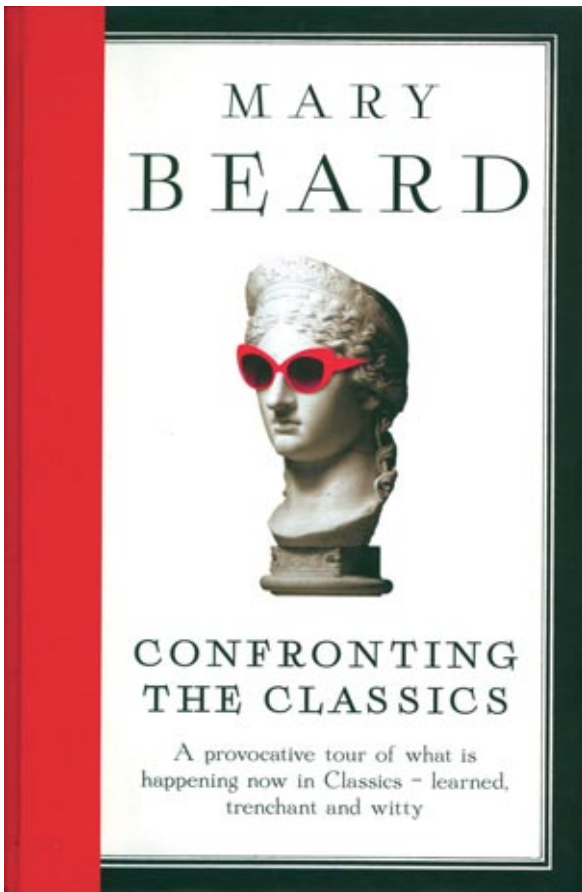
**Q**

So each generation has a new conversation with the ancient world?

**Mary Beard**

There's a very important strand of the humanities, which is always taking that conversation afresh, it is renewing it. What I think I am doing is: I am talking to the Greeks and Romans; I am ventriloquizing the Greeks and Romans, because they can't talk to us. I am engaged in a conversation with them, and I am engaged in a conversation with the other people who have studied them over the centuries

<sup>1</sup> Professor Gilbert Murray (1866-1957), Fellow of the British Academy.



and, in a sense, have handed them down to me.<sup>2</sup> It's not that you can just throw away the history of classical scholarship and say that it is irrelevant. In no way is that the case: I still use books day-by-day that were written 100 years ago. But it is always essentially a process of making it new again, and making it for us.

You can see that very clearly in the way classics is engaging with the popular audience. People will often say, 'How do you explain the fact that classics has had a renewal and is so popular? We have classical movies and there are people like you making television programmes. That's really new.' You have to say, 'It isn't new.' When I was a kid, we had the biographies of Michael Grant,<sup>3</sup> and we watched *I, Claudius* on the television. Go back to the late 19th century, and people are reading *Ben Hur* or *The Last Days of Pompeii* in their hundreds of thousands.

What you try to get across to people is that it's not that it is literally new. It's not that there are more and better people engaging in a popular way now. It is that every generation discovers it for themselves. The wonderful thing about classics is every generation really does have a new engagement, which *is* new for them.

Q

And those different engagements with classics can also help us understand other parts of our past?

<sup>2</sup> Mary Beard, *Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures and Innovations* (2013).

<sup>3</sup> For example, *Julius Caesar* (1969), *Nero* (1970).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Herring's Leicester Square Theatre Podcast, Episode 19, Mary

Mary Beard

If we think about 19th-century politics, we're going to think about Gladstone. What did Gladstone do every night when he came home? He wrote books on Homer. If we're going to see how even the recent past formulated its ideas and its decisions about what to do, what was important, the priorities and moralities, we can't understand Gladstone unless we understand what he was doing with Homer. That was his passion.

Q

You communicate your work through different media.

Mary Beard

I don't really see a difference between interventions in some very austere periodical, and interventions in literary journalism. Some of the things that I have done that have made a difference have been published in the *Times Literary Supplement*. There is something nice about the seamlessness of that culture, where you can write things that are really hard-core serious, while making them approachable, in a wide variety of fields, and on the radio. We are very lucky that we have got public service broadcasting here. There is not a gap for me between writing for the *Journal of Roman Studies*, writing for the *TLS*, and doing something for Radio 4. It is all part and parcel of the same thing. You reach some of the same people, you reach some different people.

Q

Talk a bit more about reaching different audiences.

Mary Beard

One thing that I have been able to do is extend classics into some different constituencies. Partly, it is terribly important that classicists still talk to people in neighbouring humanities disciplines, rather than becoming a very narrow specialised ghetto. But it is wider than that. Classics matters on a much broader front. People in general are a bit frightened of it, partly because of the name. It sounds as if you have to be rather reverential about classics. But I did a comedy gig in Leicester Square with a stand-up comedian talking about the Pompeii Exhibition.<sup>4</sup> It was in fruitier language than I would use in a seminar about the statue of Pan making love to a goat, but the issues were just the same.

In 2013, the Pompeii and Herculaneum Exhibition at the British Museum<sup>5</sup> was big, and it has got thousands of people into thinking quite complicated things about the ancient world without quite realising it. I wrote an article for the *Sun* about Pompeii and what we could learn about it. It was approachable, but it was making big points about slavery and freedom, and about mortality, the issues that we are all talking about in the academic world about Pompeii. What was fascinating about that was my text was exactly the same as I submitted it, but it just had this fantastic headline: 'rompy Pompeii'. It became a *Sun* piece, and people really liked it. But it was talking about the real issues. It wasn't dumbing down.

Beard (June 2013). [www.comedy.co.uk/podcasts/richard\\_herring\\_lst\\_podcast/episode\\_19\\_mary\\_beard/](http://www.comedy.co.uk/podcasts/richard_herring_lst_podcast/episode_19_mary_beard/)

<sup>5</sup> 'Life and death: Pompeii and Herculaneum', British Museum exhibition, 2013.

There's a tremendous fear that somehow, if you move outside proper academic modes of dissemination, it's dumbing down. People don't want to be dumbed down to. People don't know about the ancient world, they are ignorant about it quite often, but they're not stupid. Also, you want people who really know about antiquity talking to ordinary people; they don't want to be fobbed off with someone who isn't the expert.

**Q**

What was the reaction to your article in the *Sun*?

**Mary Beard**

One of the things that is great about online newspapers is you can read the comments of people who are reading what you say. What was very striking for me was that people were picking up on precisely the issue that underlies almost everything about our study of the ancient world – which is that in some ways the ancient world is terrifyingly like us, and in other ways it is absolutely, alien-ly different.

It doesn't take much to see that point. Here is a lovely cradle. Inside there was a little baby being rocked. So they had cradles and babies just like we do. But who is rocking the cradle? It's a slave. What happens if you start to think about how a society operates with slavery? One of the nice things about the ancient world is that it is such a long time ago, we can all talk about it without somehow that feeling of raw involvement that we have still when we talk about black slavery in America. Classics is a privileged zone for discussion and for thinking about issues that still matter to us.

**Q**

You also communicate through social media.

**Mary Beard**

The quality of debate about humanities in general, and the classics in particular, has been enhanced by new social media – blogging, tweeting, and so forth. The way that you can engage directly with people about your subject has expanded. The pleasure of being able to blog about something that I have seen in a way that reaches 40,000 or 50,000 people is a privilege.

I have been involved in blogging for a long time. When I wrote my first blog I think I had never read anybody else's, and I was very dubious about it. I had been urged to do it by the *Times Literary Supplement*. I thought, 'This is a fashion that will not last.' And I thought, 'I am never going to be able to get really complicated ideas over in 600 words.' I quickly found that it was quite different from that. I found that, paradoxically, I could write things on a blog at a level of complexity that I could not write in a mainstream broadsheet newspaper. That is partly because of links. You can say, 'Let's talk about the autobiography of Emperor Augustus' on a blog, because you can put a link to the text for people.<sup>6</sup> Blogging, for me, has been a way of bringing all kinds of things into the popular arena.

**Q**

And do you also get feedback through social media?

**Mary Beard**

What is very moving, as well as gratifying, is the way that, in the feedback between aca-demics and the wider public that social media offers, you can see how things you have done affect people. For me, in making the television series *Meet the Romans*,<sup>7</sup> which was in its own way quite difficult – there was lots of Latin in it, there was no dumbing down, we were reading Roman tombstones in the original Latin – it was humbling how it affected people's lives.

I had a letter from a prisoner to say that he had watched it in prison and was now going to learn Latin. I had endless tweets and emails from kids who said, first, how interesting it was, but now they were going to go and do classics at school, that they were going to get their mum and dad to take them to Pompeii in the summer. This spread through all cultures, ethnicities, and social groups. One issue about classics in particular, but humanities in general, is there is a kind of sense that it is a bit dead, white, European male, and that it is not speaking to a wide demographic. I have plenty of old ladies from the English shires who watched *Meet the Romans*. But the kind of reaction that I have had from all



'Meet the Romans, with Mary Beard' aired on the BBC in 2012.



<sup>6</sup> Mary Beard, 'A nice new fragment of Augustus' Res Gestae – so there!', posted to 'A Don's Life' blog, *Times Literary Supplement* (13 August 2012). [http://timesonline.typepad.com/dons\\_life/2012/08/a-nice-new-](http://timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2012/08/a-nice-new-)

[fragment-of-augustus-res-gestae-so-there-1.html](http://timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2012/08/a-nice-new-fragment-of-augustus-res-gestae-so-there-1.html)

<sup>7</sup> *Meet the Romans, with Mary Beard* (BBC, 2012).

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kinds of very different people, wide cultural diversity, has been extraordinary. There was one amazing black woman rap artist who did a video rap song about *Meet the Romans*. You think, 'Gosh, you can't get more real than that.'

Now that communication is instant, it can spark all kinds of new conversations that spiral off something you have written.

**Q**

Your television work has brought you public recognition.

**Mary Beard**

I have found a position in which I can talk, and people will take notice, whether that is to agree or often to disagree. And I have had more recognition than I need, honestly. It is important to see that this is not a one-woman operation. You have to be a bit careful about thinking that the only way to do it is a Beard-like one: she goes and blags her mouth off on the telly and people get interested.

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## **We do not want a world without the history of Western culture still present in it.**

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The contribution to arts and humanities is of many, many different types. It is terribly important that we don't forget that, if there is a standing on the shoulders of giants in my particular neck of the woods, then some of those giants are the people who sit in the library, year after year, and work out what Thucydides was trying to say. They don't do it in a glamorous telly-like way. They might be slightly retiring people. But they provide many of the most important discoveries that we are all the beneficiaries of. It is terribly important to realise that we still can't translate Thucydides. We bandy his name around in international relations as if we knew what he was saying. I want some boffins in the library working hard on that.

For part of my life, I am that kind of boffin. I write some really technical hard-core stuff, as well as doing more approachable things. But we can't turn arts and humanities disciplines into a series of showpiece events. There is a lot of hard work that has to be done, and a lot of it is not glam at all.

**Q**

What is the argument for the public funding of that kind of scholarly work in the humanities?

**Mary Beard**

The argument for public funding of the humanities seems to me an absolute no-brainer. There are a lot of people who would say, 'What is the point of learning Latin when you could do physics?' When you go back to basics with most of these people, whether they are in government or the

media or education, they turn out to be false enemies. They turn out underneath not to be as opposed as they find it convenient to pretend to be. There is nothing worse than the backbench politician from any party who thinks they can get a few philistine cheers by saying that classics is done and dusted. You get them eyeball to eyeball, and you find they don't really mean that.

If you were to say to people, 'Look, we have got all kinds of new reproductive technologies, we have got all kinds of new scientific advances, do you think we want to go down the new reproductive technology route without thinking about what it means to be a human being; without thinking about what the philosophy of this is?' – of course people don't want to do that. Of course they need Plato, because you can't talk philosophy unless you start with Plato – still the most read philosopher in the world.

The same is true of a more literary culture in general. When you say to people, 'Do you want there to be a London stage in which we never see Greek tragedy? Do you want there to be a world in which nobody knows who Virgil was?' – of course they say, 'No'. That is where the idea of active knowledge comes in, because if we want to have these things, it's not a question of just putting a preservation order on them; it's a question of going on doing them. If you go on doing them, you have to pay people to do it – it's as simple as that.

We do not want a world without the history of Western culture still present in it. We don't want to go to art galleries where nobody knows what the Renaissance painters were painting, because nobody knows what Ovid's *Metamorphoses* said. We know we don't want that.

I suppose I remain a broad optimist on this, because I think that Western culture, our culture, is not in the end so stupid that it will give it away. For all the faults of the British political system, in the end we are not going to cut off our limbs, we are not going to leave a bleeding torso – so that nobody understands what happened in the past. We know that more would be lost than ever could possibly be gained.

**Q**

But the case still has to be argued?

**Mary Beard**

The question isn't whether we should justify what we do, but what counts as justifying. If I have a resentment about governmental requirements, it is that they tend to be expressed much too crudely in terms of instant profit and loss. The point about humanities work – the way the work in the humanities productively ignites our own cultural and political environment – is that happily it isn't easily relatable simply in cash terms. So, the philistinism of seeing justification being entirely economic is an area of resentment.

But also it's a resentment of the *short-term* economic dimension. We are laying foundations for what is going to happen in 50, 100, or 150 years' time. Judging it by what

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happens next year is short-termism of a rather foolish kind. Should I justify what I do? Everybody should justify what they do. But I shouldn't necessarily justify it on whether it can be shown next month to have added a particular number of pounds to the British economy.

**Q**

What did election to the Fellowship of the British Academy mean to you?

**Mary Beard**

When I was elected to the British Academy, I had many different reactions. I was gobsmacked. I thought this would never happen to me. I was absolutely overwhelmingly delighted, because I thought, 'It is a validation. Someone has wanted me'. Those guys out there thought I was good enough, and that was hugely important.

It has been wonderful. And I suppose I have discovered it is good sometimes to have one's prejudices not confirmed. Although I had always thought of them as a load of old codgers, they turn out to be rather acute and with a good sense of debate about the humanities in general and where it is going. It's been fun.

**Q**

Where should the humanities be going?

**Mary Beard**

I think we have a fantastic opportunity to expand intelligent public debate, which is informed by all the kinds of different aspects of the areas of study that the Academy represents. You can't think interestingly about migration unless you have some sense of what the history of migration and the history of ideas of citizenship have been.

One of the things that the new media enable us to do, and that we have to grasp, is they help us take that kind of high-level informed debate outside the walls of the British Academy onto people's laptops, onto people's iPhones, into the world at large. It's exciting.

And we're going to reinvigorate a sense of inquiry into the human past and human culture, throughout the British educational system and beyond.