



Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures and Innovations

Mary Beard

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Mary Beard is one of the world's best-known classicists - a brilliant academic, with a rare gift for communicating with a wide audience both through her TV presenting and her books. In a series of sparkling essays, she explores our rich classical heritage - from Greek drama to Roman jokes, introducing some larger-than-life characters of classical history, such as Alexander the Great, Nero and Boudicca. She also invites you into the places where Greeks and Romans lived and died, from the palace at Knossos to Cleopatra's Alexandria - and reveals the often hidden world of slaves. She brings back to life some of the greatest writers of antiquity - including Thucydides, Cicero and Tacitus - and takes a fresh look at both scholarly controversies and popular interpretations of the ancient world, from The Golden Bough to Asterix. The fruit of over thirty years in the world of classical scholarship, Classical Traditions captures the world of antiquity and its modern significance with wit, verve and scholarly expertise.

Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures and Innovations Details

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From Reader Review Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures and Innovations for online ebook

fonz says

3,75

Bueno, un pelín engañosa la sinopsis, más que conjunto de ensayos se trata de una recopilación de reseñas sobre libros de historiografía grecorromana (más romana que griega), si exceptuamos la crítica al álbum "Astérix y la Traviata", de Uderzo. Las reseñas siguen todas la misma estructura y no sé si se han reescrito para la ocasión, básicamente Beard presenta un tema, se extiende tres o cuatro páginas sobre él y finalmente entra a comentar un par de obras ensayísticas, las reseñadas, sobre dicho tema, obras que en su mayoría se llevan unos cuantos palos repartidos con implacable parsimonia británica.

Dicho esto, en general me lo he pasado bastante bien leyendo el libro aunque quizá es demasiado para británicos en ocasiones (normal, son reseñas publicadas en medios ingleses en su mayoría). A pesar de que no se profundiza todo lo que yo hubiese deseado en alguno de los temas tratados y que el conjunto carezca de cohesión y sea un mero cajón de sastre, Mary Beard es una reseñista muy inteligente que sabe hacer las preguntas adecuadas y meter el dedo en el ojo, resulta amena, y consigue despertar el interés, aunque a veces se pase de categórica en sus valoraciones, hay unos cuantos "estoesasíporquelodigoyo" repartidos por el libro que dan cosica.

El capítulo de Tucídides me ha flipao particularmente, como los antiguos tenían un nivel de sofisticación que nos cuesta asumir o imaginar. En concreto, partes de la crónica de la Guerra del Peloponeso son ininteligibles si están correctamente traducidas y no adaptadas, porque simplemente no podemos entender muchos de sus giros, sus juegos de palabras, sus referencias culturales, es como si dentro de dos mil años alguien intentara leer el Ulises de Joyce desconociendo gran parte del contexto en el que fue escrito. Otro tema que me ha parecido muy interesante es que aunque tengamos material grecorromano para analizar durante varias vidas, la cantidad de lo que se ha perdido es inmensa, existen muchos autores latinos y griegos de los que sólo se les conoce por referencias o fragmentos de un par de frases. A pesar de la abundancia de restos, escritos, obras artísticas, etc, todo lo que se sabe de la Antiguedad está envuelto en niebla.

Y finalmente me ha gustado mucho el apartado de reseñas de ensayos sobre la vida cotidiana en Roma, que presenta un Imperio mucho más heterogéneo de lo que se piensa, tanto en población, como en idioma como en el ejército o en costumbres. Y es que la mayoría de los testimonios sobre Roma que nos han llegado son de fuentes pertenecientes a las élites sociales e intelectuales o textos dirigidos a ellas. Ah, y el capítulo de Astérix (soy muy fan) aunque breve, está muy bien, Beard conoce perfectamente los tebeos de Astérix y su reseña es bastante certera.

Manray9 says

Mary Beard's *Confronting the Classics* is an uneven jumble of essays and book reviews previously published in the Times Literary Supplement, the New York Review of Books and the London Review of Books. It has generated many favorable reviews in various media and been roundly praised by dozens of GR members. It struck me as lackluster and uninteresting. The back flap mentions a New York Times description of Beard as "the closest thing, if it exists, to a celebrity classics professor." That, in fact, may be the problem. It barely

passed my threshold into Three Star territory.

Kyo says

An interesting read about (recent) studies about the Classics. The chapters are in general a nice length and many of them are reviews of (recently) published books/articles about the classics (so be warned, if that's not for you, you might want to put this book down again!).

I thought it was quite ironic that Beard complains a few times about writers who don't publish pictures of things described in their book or accuses others of being difficult to understand if the reader wouldn't have a certain background, because Beard herself was sometimes guilty of this fault herself.

Anyway, I'd recommend this book to anyone who's interested in Classics/classical scholarship and wants to read a varied, not too difficult, book about it!

Happy reading :)!

Claudia says

I truly wanted to give this book a 5-star rate. But I simply cannot do that based on the reason that any author who thinks they ought to make a book consisting merely of their own book reviews, is missing the point of books in the first place. And that is coming from the perspective of an enthusiastic book reviewer.

I love reviews because people give so generously of their time to not only read but review a book for literally no payment at all. This book turns this around. It brings reviews repackaged as book stories. While I remain a sceptic on whether several reviews a worthy book maketh, what great reviews Mary Beard has written! We hear from some of the key topics making the rounds in classics nowadays, She starts with the Greeks (always a good start) and we get stories about Knossos and the Minoan Culture, Sappho and early feminism, we hear from Cicero, Alexander and so much more. Then we turn to the Romans.... and enjoy reading about the early Roman culture, and the Roman Empire Making of, as it were! And all about their politics. We hear about Roman Emperors and Roman Culture from the bottom up. Truly a remarkable work by Mary Beard. But I wasn't a fan of the review format. I truly think it more suitable for blogs instead. For that, she gets 4 stars.

Nikki says

I enjoyed Mary Beard's book on Pompeii, and I think I've read a couple of others, or at least seen her work cited. She's always struck me as pretty level headed, unlikely to get carried away with conjectures, so I wasn't really surprised by the fairly sceptical tone of most of these reviews (though I did begin to wonder if anyone, anywhere, could produce work she'd give the green light). It's a little odd reading a book of essays that are adapted (I'm not sure how much they've been changed) from reviews of particular books: some of them seemed very disconnected from the books they purportedly reviewed, which worked fine in this context, but seemed a bit odd when she did start discussing the books.

It's not just criticism of other people's theories, although there's a lot of it there: there's a general survey of

the literature, some discussion of issues that the study of the classics faces in general, some windows into little bits of history.

Mostly, though... it is a book about other books; a rather disparate collection, however much I might want more. The essays are fine, and I did enjoy reading it, but I didn't feel like I really learned anything new. Just what not to believe!

Myke Cole says

I always feel like there's something wrong with me when I have an allergic reaction to a book that is so popular and successful, written by an author as universally loved and respected as Beard.

But this book gave me a rash, for two reasons:

1.) It's a collection of wonderful essays that are fascinating and illuminating explorations of a range of aspects of the classical world, including underserved areas like laughter, and the lives of freed slaves.

BUT

Every single chapter is 50% what I've just described, and 50% Beard attacking previous scholarship on the topic, often with a kind of condescending insouciance that I'm more used to with sealioning Twitter trolls. Confronting the Classics isn't a book of history, it's a book of Beard's reviews, and who the heck wants to read that? Not me.

The final chapters aren't even discussion of classics at all, but of the academics (like Beard) who interpret them for us. It's self-licking ice cream cone territory, an exercise in ego rather than scholarship.

2.) I really got off the bus when Beard nostalgically gives a pass to the groping of history students in her chapter on Eduard Fraenkel. She acknowledges that it's sexual harassment, but she also waxes eloquently on the link between pedagogy and eroticism, which, frankly, turned my stomach. If this is a thing to be nostalgic about, then clearly I'm missing the point. I'm surprised that Beard hasn't been more seriously taken to task for her casual treatment of what I regard as a very serious crime.

Karen Wellsbury says

Not my favourite MB.

Part explanation/ discussion and part dissection of other books/ media regrading ancient Rome/ Greece.

Allegra Byron says

Leer a Mary Beard es un placer en sí mismo.

Manny says

"I do not want to belong to any club that would have me as a member," said Groucho Marx in his most frequently quoted line - one that I thought of several times while reading *Confronting the Classics*. Good grief, Mary Beard is doing just what *I've* done! She's taken a bunch of reviews, tidied them up a bit, stuck on some linking text, and called it a *book*! I mean, come on. I've tried her formula, and I know all the drawbacks. No doubt the individual reviews are quite good, but the construction is choppy and fragmented. It has no coherence. And she's never really addressing the reader. A lot of the time, it's painfully obvious that she's invited me into her text and then, in an elementary *faux pas* that no society hostess would dream of committing, she's blatantly ignoring me while she talks to the author instead. What kind of behavior is that?

Embarrassingly, though, Professor Beard is able to muster one point in her defense: her method appears to work. Despite doing three years of Latin at school, I have never felt very interested in classical studies. I passed my Latin O-level with difficulty and have never learned any Greek. I am extremely vague on classical history. But having read a few dozen of her reviews, I discover that I am rather better informed about the subject than I was before. Book reviewing, as everyone on this site knows, is an enjoyable spectator sport. I found myself paying close attention as she rapped one author over the knuckles for analyzing Latin dramas that possibly never existed, or spent half a page discussing why another didn't bother to mention in his biography of a certain famous classicist that the gentleman in question had a habit of sexually harassing his female students. She made the subject exciting. It becomes apparent than many of the so-called experts in this field are perilously close to the boundary which separates speculative research from out-and-out fraud. The facts are hard to obtain, and the temptation to extrapolate and add more or less fictitious details is enormous. She can spot them cheating when I'd gullibly swallow their stories, and it's fun to watch. And while you do that, in a manner that's familiar to anyone who hangs out on this site, you find yourself learning. After all, if you don't familiarize yourself with the background you can't follow the match.

Well... I don't know. It's hard to argue with results; maybe this isn't such a bad format after all. In fact, I almost wonder if I shouldn't try it again myself...

Ed says

Mary Beard's writing is accessible, but not condescending to the general reader. She keeps academic score settling to a minimum. You may be already well versed in the classics or a person trying to figure the people, customs and events both great and small from 20 centuries ago out for the first time or, more likely, between those poles. Maybe you have been to Italy, marveled at the Coliseum, the aqueducts and the Pantheon, made a trip to the foot of Mount Vesuvius and wondered about the people of Pompeii and Herculaneum going about their business one minute, being engulfed in boiling lava and ash the next. Or you studied Plato, Aristotle and the rest of the great minds of fifth century BCE and remained interested in them or saw the amphitheaters where "Antigone" and "Electra" were first performed. No matter, just about anyone not in grad school in Classics will learn something new or find a new way to look at familiar topics.

Beard discusses the boredom and gloom of Roman soldiers stationed in cold, rainy Britain, unlike the sun kissed plains of Umbria as can be. Regarding slavery in Rome, she makes the point that for many slavery was a temporary condition and not a life sentence and that many (perhaps even a majority) of the free population were ex-slaves or closely related to them must have made a difference in how former slaves were

treated by the ordinary man or woman. Her vey cogent chapter on the Roman military makes the point that while Rome, both the Republic and then the Empire, was a militarized state constantly at war at the margins of its settled territory, armed soldiers weren't allowed into the capital itself. There was an emphatic split between the demilitarized center and the zone of military activity, a split reflected by the standard Latin for "at home and abroad", domi militiaeque.

Beard shows how we construct versions of the classical world to suit ourselves. Alexander the Great's reputation is an obvious example. For many he has remained a positive example of a great general heroically leading his army to victory in battles increasingly distant from Greece. Dante had him in the seventh circle of hell, screaming in pain in a river of boiling blood, surrounded by such monsters as Attila the Hun and Dionysus the tyrant of Sicily. A contemporary historian summarized his career: "He spent much of his time killing and directing killing and, arguably killing is what he did best."

In addition to Alexander, fifth century B.C. Athens is viewed through a contemporary and anachronistic lens. We have chosen to invest the fifth-century Athenians with the status of 'inventors of democracy'; and have projected our desire for an origin onto them. While our word 'democracy' derives from the Greek Beard says that "As far as we know, no ancient Greek ever said so and anyway democracy isn't something that is 'invented' like a piston engine.

This is an excellent book for anyone interested in the classical world and those who study it.

Peter McLoughlin says

Mary Beard in this collection of essays on the classical world is about modern interpretations by scholars and the public as much as it is about the ancient Greeks and Romans. There is a bit of a stigma attached to the classics they seem to reek of old school (especially old British Public school) about them. It used to be that education in the classics was a passage into the British colonial elite of the 19th century and modern classics have retained the taint of being for upper crust old white men. This is unfortunate a large part of the west and its culture was formed in the classical world and amputating the classics in education would disfigure our knowledge of our culture.

The Greeks and Romans of 2000 or so years ago are very different than what we think they are. They have been reinterpreted in the modern period in ways that fit their era. Yes old colonizers and some Nazi's were enthusiasts of the classics but so were the founding fathers and Karl Marx. The classical world has not only been used by elites but by radicals as well. Rosa Luxemburg's communist uprising in Post WWI Germany was called the Spartacist movement after the Slave revolt in the Roman Republic in 70BCE.

The book itself is a collection of essays and interpretive looks at Greek and Roman topics including the archeology of Knossus the area mentioned in the Myth of the Minotaur and the home of Mycenae. We learn about the cat fights among archeologists over interpretation and how infighting among archeologists is fiercer than other disciplines. We see interpretations in books like I Claudius and the later TV series to understand popular consciousness of characters like Livia and

Caligula. The classics have always been an interest of mine but Beard's essays may appeal to a newcomer. A fun book.

notgettingenough says

The thing about a good bookshop is that it encourages speculation. This was another book I picked up in Daunt Books on Marylebone High St. Mary Beard will be familiar in particular to the British, but I'm guessing to a lot of other English speakers, as a high profile academic, with a public presence I imagine is unusual for somebody in this discipline. She is the Classics editor of the *TLS* and it is a hodge podge collection of book reviews she has written over quite a long period of time, linked together by various themes, that form the basis for this book. The units are small, I found myself looking forward to a tale and a cuppa for a week or two.

I hadn't done any Classics since school and this was a bit of an eye-opener for me. I hadn't realised just how much surmising has come from so little evidence. How many careers, books - an entire academic industry, not to mention a popular one too - has been extracted in a manner that one could rather precisely say 'literally' brings to mind blood from a stone. The big theme of this book is explaining how our view of this ancient period is dictated by interpretation in a way that makes me, as a historian of more modern times, aghast. It's all made up! Almost. The characters, the stories, the very palaces we visit to pay homage to our ideas of how things were.

I exaggerate a little, of course: it isn't ALL made up.

Rest here:

<https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress.com/2014/07/13/reviews-mary-beard-s-the-classics/>

Susanna - Censored by GoodReads says

3.5 stars.

Trice says

okay, I admit it: I thought the book looked interesting in general, but I really bought it for the one essay/chapter on Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I read from the beginning of this book through that particular essay, and then a bit further... and then I kind of lost motivation. It's still sitting on my bedroom bookshelf, which implies it being on deck for being picked up again, and I did find it interesting, but it also felt highly focused on the small details that are important to translators, but which didn't seem so important to the level at which, e.g., I'm reading the above mentioned history. In that particular article she discusses the translation of a particular word and the nuance she was suggesting for a correction of the translation didn't seem to change the overall meaning or understanding of events or speeches. Perhaps at some future date I will arrive back at that essay and find it helps me to an ah-ha moment, but at present, it is interesting while inessential to my reading/studies.

Gerald Sinstadt says

This is not a book for the layman, nor does it pretend to be. Therefore the views of this layman - who acquired it partly by chance and partly from having enjoyed the lighter side of Professor Beard's writing - should be taken for what they are worth.

Confronting the Classics is a collection of book reviews contributed to various publications over a number of years, together with an Introduction and an Afterword. The Introduction is the equivalent of an angler tossing bait into the water to entice the quarry. Here are hints of many juicy bits to follow, and sure enough they do, surrounded by a great deal of erudite observation on the way of life and thought in ancient Greece and Rome.

Not all of this could be expected to wow the lay reader, but plenty does - for example, the suggestion that the Palace at Knossos (which this lay reader has visited) are a case of "rebuilding ruins"; or the details of daily life for a squaddie stationed at Hadrian's Wall; and much more. Made readable by an author who can invoke the Carry On Films and make them relevant, or who can offer a comprehensive guide to the Asterix books both in the original French and their English translations.

The fact that these are reviews of books by other academics of course offers ample scope for points scoring in a notoriously competitive field. They are not resisted but are invariably fair and balanced. In any case, the clever professor makes that very point in her Afterword. Or that's how it seemed to this lay reader.
