

Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations, by Mary Beard. New York: Liverwright, 2013, 320 pp., \$28.95 hardbound.

Small Latin, and Less Greek

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Once the heart of liberal education, the study of Greek and Latin languages and literatures has unfortunately been reduced to a prestige discipline found mainly in elite universities rich enough to afford the luxury of a classics program. The once universal high school experience of memorizing Latin declensions and reading some Caesar is nearly extinct compared to sixty years ago. These days most people get their knowledge of antiquity from lurid cable television series like *Spartacus*, or historically dubious movies like *Gladiator* and the more recent *Pompeii*. The

foundational ideas, ideals, literature, art, and philosophy of the West are increasingly becoming historical curiosities that like Egyptian mummies or Viking long ships are artifacts, detached from the society and the minds of citizens who continue to live off a cultural capital the nature and origins of which they know nothing.

Those expecting an argument in favor of reviving the study of the classics from *Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations*, Mary Beard's new collection of book reviews, will find misleading the dust jacket claim that the book shows why the classical tradition "still matters." In this collection, Beard, a professor of classics at Cambridge University and a regular on British television, is more concerned with the intramural professional disagreements and conflicting interpretations of ancient literature and culture unlikely to be of interest to a larger audience. Very few, if any, of these essays cover the ancient "monuments of unageing intellect," or the classical "things of beauty" that have delighted and instructed the West for 2700 years. Thus these reviews will "matter" mostly to the few hundred thousand academics and other cultural elites

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who subscribe to the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*—the publications in which these reviews first appeared, and which have little influence on those outside the parochial Lilliputs of academe.

This blinkered vision is evident in Beard's self-proclaimed approach to the classics. In her introduction, which she calls her "manifesto," Beard embraces that narrowness. The "overall strength of classics," she claims, is not to be measured by a wider study of Greek and Latin among the masses, but by "asking how many believe that there should be people in the world who do know Latin and Greek, how many people think that there is an expertise in that worth taking seriously—and ultimately paying for it." You can find the answer to that question in the continuing decline of classics programs, the minuscule scale of those that still exist, and the dearth of jobs for those who finish their degrees and if they're lucky end up working as adjunct helots teaching general education courses in Greek mythology. And if classics "are embedded in the way we think about ourselves," as Beard correctly notes, and if the loss of classics would leave "bleeding wounds in the body of Western culture," then why should

the study of Greek and Latin be limited to a privileged few, with the rest of the people completely dependent on those few mandarins and their prejudices for the interpretation and definition of the "way we think about ourselves"?

Nor is it clear why those people being asked to fund classics programs would find any value in an approach like Beard's that seemingly wants to pick fights with the ancients or earlier scholars—or would understand why the classics have to be "confronted," as Beard's title suggests—rather than understood and admired in terms of their beauty or insights into human nature and history, not to mention their foundational contributions to our civilization. Beard will have none of that old-fashioned recognition of cultural achievement from which we can learn. On the contrary, she writes, "The study of Classics is the study of what happens in the gap between antiquity and ourselves." She has no patience with those who defend the ancients because of their intellectual and artistic excellence. According to Beard, to do so is to keep "viewing the ancient world through rose-tinted spectacles (as if it was a culture to be admired)." As Beard admits, scholars have long acknowledged the "squalor, the slavery, the misogyny, the irrationality" of the Greeks and Romans. But those common human

failings are ubiquitous in history, and to harp on them is to miss the unique achievements that justly demand our admiration.

Obsessing over the sins of the ancients is, in fact, more than a century old, and just as obtuse today as it was then. As the great classical scholar Gilbert Murray wrote in 1921:

We must listen with due attention to the critics who have pointed out all the remnants of savagery and superstition that they find in Greece: the slave-driver, the fetish-worshipper and the medicine-man, the trampler on women, the blood-thirsty hater of all outside his own town and party. But it is not these people that constitute Greece; those people can be found all over the historical world, commoner than blackberries....[W]hat constitutes Greece is the movement which leads from all these to the Stoic or fifth-century “sophist” who condemns and denies slavery, who has abolished all cruel superstitions and preaches some religion based on philosophy and humanity, who claims for women the same spiritual rights as for man, who looks on all human creatures as his brethren, and the world as “one great City of gods and

men.” It is that movement which you will not find elsewhere, any more than the statues of Pheidias or the dialogues of Plato or the poems of Aeschylus and Euripides.¹

The sins of the ancients are the universal sins of humanity. But the virtues of the Greeks and Romans are unique, the direct ancestors of everything that is self-critical and marks the best in our own culture today. Explaining those virtues and their role in creating Western civilization is what has nearly disappeared from the classics, and partly explains the widespread indifference to the classical tradition in the larger culture.

This urge to diminish or even demean the ancients, to see them not as teachers but as equals, or even inferiors, with whom we conduct a “dialogue,” as Beard says, is of course the default ideology of the postmodern university. It has been fostered by the introduction of various intellectual dogmas—deconstruction, poststructuralism, Foucauldian historicism, and feminism, to name a few—that practice a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” a reflexive distrust of

¹Gilbert Murray, “The Value of Greece to the Future of the World,” in *The Legacy of Greece*, ed. R.W. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1921), 14.

excellence and beauty that serves a resentment of authority, an egalitarian hostility to superiority, and a philistinism that cannot appreciate beauty. In the main, Beard herself avoids the woolier manifestations of this orthodoxy, particularly the political agenda that boils down to an elaboration of the Leninist motto “who, whom.” The most readable of the reviews are those focusing on more popularizing works, such as Stacy Schiff’s *Cleopatra: A Life* or Philip Freeman’s *Alexander the Great*, in which Beard provides a useful historical and scholarly context for understanding the authors’ claims.

Despite her own more traditional practice, however, Beard still thinks theory has some value in restoring classics. In her pointed attack on Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath’s *Who Killed Homer*—which in 1998 blamed the demise of classics on the careerism of elite professors, whether traditional philologists or promoters of theory—Beard makes a preposterous claim. Responding to Hanson and Heath’s charge, Beard writes, “Maybe it is precisely because professors of Classics have refused to engage with modern theory and persisted in viewing the ancient world through rose-tinted spectacles (as if it was a culture to be admired) that the subject is in imminent danger of turning into an antiquarian

backwater.”² The blinkered traditionalist hiding from daring theory was a raggedy straw man way back in the late nineties.³ The profession of classics has long been dominated by “modern theory,” now orthodoxy in most programs, and over those decades that dominance has accompanied the downward spiral of the profession. To think that jargon-ridden, pretentiously vacuous, intellectually incoherent theories are going to impress anyone in the real world beggars belief. It will no more attract students and others to classics than can the scholarly disputes and quibbles that make up most of the books Beard reviews. A key theme of *Who Killed Homer?* was that the condescending grandee of the past who would not deign to defend or widen his discipline among the wider public has been replaced by the bookend postmodern theorist, whose conferencing, esoteric

²Mary Beard, “Do the Classics Have a Future?” The Robert B. Silvers Lecture, New York Public Library, New York, NY, November 30, 2011, audio/video, <http://www.nypl.org/audiovideo/mary-beard>.

³See, for example, my “The Enemy Is Us: The Betrayal of the Postmodern Clerks,” review of *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*, by John Peradotto, *Innovations of Antiquity*, by Ralph Hexter and Daniel Selden, and *History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama*, by Barbara Goff, *Arion* 5, no. 1 (1997): 165–216. Reprinted in Victor Davis Hanson, John Heath, and Bruce S. Thornton, *Bonfire of the Humanities: Rescuing the Classics in an Impoverished Age* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2001), 137–91.

research, and reduced teaching load are camouflaged in faddish theory rather than philological gymnastics.

On occasion Beard's own analysis reveals both these impediments to creating interest in ancient culture. Discussing an anthology of ancient Greek female lyric poets, she faults the editor for missing an allusion to Homer in Sappho's poem conventionally called "Hymn to Aphrodite," in which the poet calls on Aphrodite for help in how to deal with a girl who has spurned her. The point of that Homeric allusion, according to a feminist interpretation Beard endorses, is to focus "our attention on the distance between the male world of epic heroism and the private domain of female concerns; it shows the poet reading and reinterpreting Homeric epic to give it a new meaning in distinctively female terms," appropriating the language of warriors to effect a "tactical inversion of dominant male language." But this imposition on the aristocratic Sappho of modern bourgeois romantic and feminist obsessions misses what the poem is about—the aristocratic concern for honor, dishonor, and revenge, and the destructiveness and danger of sexual passion. The girl who rejected Sappho must be punished for that dishonor by experiencing the pain Sappho is suffering, and the poet calls on

Aphrodite for help in inflicting that revenge, just as in the *Iliad* Diomedes prays to Athena for victory in battle. And given that other lyric poets such as Archilochus, a precursor to Sappho, uses Homeric battle imagery to communicate the destructive power of *erôs*, it's unclear why Sappho's sex makes her similar use some sort of "inversion" rather than the generic convention it is.

Technical disputes over translation, a frequent pastime of classical pedants, also crop up in Beard's analyses. For example, she is unhappy that the famous Melian dialogue in Thucydides's history is a "foundational text of 'realist' political analysis," to her a misuse of the classics to legitimize an unsavory modern foreign policy "agenda." So she quibbles over the best-known translation of the most famous sentence from that passage, Richard Crawley's "The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must." Beard endorses instead Simon Hornblower's version, "The powerful exact what they can, and the weak have to comply." But given that the Athenians will go on to kill the men of Melos, enslave their women and children, and confiscate their land for Athenian colonists, it's pretty clear in the context that "exact" and "comply" communicate the same brutal realism communicated by

Crawley's "do" and "suffer." The "truth" of Crawley's "jingle," as Beard sneeringly calls it, is indeed that of Thucydides.

Beard is learned and readable, and compared to much of today's scholarship on the classics vastly superior. Yet she still cannot escape

the constraints of professional deformation, leaving this book not very useful for restoring classics to its rightful place in liberal education, and avoiding the costs of that neglect predicted over a century ago by Jacob Burckhardt—"simply accepting our own decline."