

Book Review

Confronting the Classic: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations

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ABSTRACT

What makes Mary Beard unique among other classicists is her contrarian attitude to reject common facts related to classic world. Beard's rare gift for communicating with a wide range of audiences has caused her to gain some degree of fame beyond the academic environment. *Confronting the Classics* is a collection of Beard's fearless and penetrating reviews and essays over the last couple of decades which have published in the London Review of Books, The Times Literary Supplement and The New York Review of Books. As Beard discusses in the preface, confronting the Classic is about how we can engage with or challenge the classical tradition. It also proves that classic scholarship is still a progress in work which neither completed nor dusted matter. As a matter of fact, the classic traditions seem to be a controversial subject even in the twenty-first century.

KEYWORDS

Adventure, Classic world, Imaginary Assumptions, Innovation, Modern World, Reconstructed History, Tradition, Western Culture

Confronting the Classic: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations

Mary Beard

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310 pp.

\$16.95

ISBN 978-087-1407-16-0

INTRODUCTION

Descripts of *Confronting the Classic*

As Beard explains in the preface, *Confronting the Classic* is about how contemporary western culture can engage with or challenge the classical traditions. It also proves that classical scholarship is still a work in progress, which is neither a completed nor dusty matter. Based on Beard's belief, the classic traditions seem to be a controversial subject even in the twenty-first century.

Beard's revolutionary view urges her audiences to re-examine so many assumptions of the classical traditions, which are accepted as gospel. These assumptions include the actual importance of Cleopatra to Roman history or the notions that the Emperor Caligula was insane and Nero was a monster. Beard's view is adventurous enough in confronting classical traditions that leads to innovation in accepted facts of the classical world. The words of the book's sub-title -Traditions, Adventures, and

Innovations- also reveals Beard's opinion in confronting the classical world. It is a brilliant concept have the classical world considered an "adventure" and an "innovation", as well as a "tradition."

As she argues in the introduction of the book, *Confronting the Classic* answers to two types of questions related to the classic world. First, she addresses the age-old questions that are still controversial among classicists, which include disagreements about the importance of Cleopatra in the history of Rome or considering Emperor Caligula as a simple banker. Second, she considers new adventurous questions asked by curious minds since modern eyes not only find ways to open up new questions related to the classic world, but also find new answers for past debatable questions. As she asserts in an obvious way, her hope is that *Confronting the Classic* brings to life some of the current debates about the classical traditions.

Beard opens an intelligent conversation on the classic investigations. This conversation considers not only the ancient literature and materials, but also scholars who have attempted to interpret the Greeks and Romans over centuries before us. She puts stress on earlier generations of scholars, archaeologists, artists and antiquarians in this book and explains the role that they have had in public awareness and belief about the classic world.

The introduction of the book starts with this question, "Do classics have a future?" To answer this question, Beard demonstrates the critic's views about decline of the classical studies. In her opinion, although classical languages, such as Greek and Latin, are endangered species, there are still permanent interests among the public in the ancient world. A viable witness of these interests is the success of movies like *Gladiator*, *Ben-Hur*, and *Spartacus* or the success of popular classical biographies. Beard emphasizes that survival of the classical culture depends on existence of the classical languages. So classical literature has been considered as an ineradicable dialect of western culture. She claims that there is only one reason for learning classical languages, which is to understand the remaining ancient documents from ancient Greece and Rome. Beard defines the classics as a way that western citizens think about themselves and about their history. Beard states obviously that classics are about western citizens as much as about the Greeks and Romans, and so we cannot escape from Mediterranean culture products. At the end of the book introduction, Beard warns that if we were to amputate the classics from the modern world, it would inflict bleeding wounds in the body of western culture.

Since *Confronting the Classic* is a collection of Beard's reviews, it has been categorized into five separated sections, which in each section, Beard assists her audiences envision the classic world. Throughout the book readers encounter some of the most famous or infamous characters in the ancient history, such as Sappho, Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra and Nero.

Beard proves a challenging notion that the classical history is not only about emperors and victories of military heroes but also about the lives of the enormous majority of ordinary Greeks and Romans. It is an interesting section of the book, which quotes the lifestyles of slaves, soldiers in the army, and millions of inhabitants across the Roman empire living under military occupation. The details of ordinary people's lives are even portrayed precisely. How did they live? What made them laugh? What were their marriages like? Where did they go if they were impoverished? And maybe just as astonishing, how did they clean their teeth? However, other classicists claim that emphasizing classic people's lifestyles with their detailed daily activities are an undesirable influence on classic's popularization. So such approach to the classical studies will debunk this area of academic research inappropriately.

The first section of the book is about ancient Greece. The underlying theme of this section is about what we know about various aspects of ancient Greece and the different ways that we acquired evidence from the ancient world. It is a fact that there are not as many survived products from that era. Beard claims that limited knowledge about ancient Greece is based on the past's assumptions. To prove this claim, Beard quotes Sir Arthur Evans' biography. Evans is considered a remarkable person in rediscovery of Greek prehistory since he reconstructed the remains of a vast palace excavated at Knossos based on his imaginations.

Furthermore, in another example, Beard casts doubt on what is known about Sappho as a famous Greek poet who is a symbol of female homosexuality in the classic world. She believes that few surviving writings cannot reflect Sappho's homosexual orientation.

The final part of the section is related to Alexander the Great. Although numerous ancient literatures of Alexander's extravagant lifestyle have remained, none of these were written contemporarily by Alexander's life. Beard assumes the survived literatures were inscribed against the background of Roman imperialism. So the trustworthiness of the survived literatures is in shadow of doubt. Additionally, that even the basic groundwork of the classical world is an active area of investigation for classicists.

In the second section of the book, Beard discusses on other critical issues related to the classic history. First, she quotes Rome's foundation story. Indeed, she believes that many of the survived evidence from the classic world are more like myths than concrete historical facts. To prove her opinion, Beard explains the story of Romulus and Remus, recognized as founders of ancient Rome. This story provides her audiences with a series of assumptions about the culture of early Rome. Due to the limitation of existing literatures related to early Rome, classicists have reconstructed extensive parts of the documents. Beard declares these survived literatures are unreliable since they are based on imaginations of classicists about early Rome.

At the end of this section, Beard writes about ordinary Romans, asking 'What were the points of view of ordinary Romans about the city and emperor's policies?' She asserts that surviving evidence about Rome were written by affluent and privileged inhabitants. Thus, there is a gap in the surviving evidences about early Rome. She asks how the poor people thought about victories and massacres. Because of the shortage of solid historical evidence, many historians reconstruct the classical events. Beard explains how the Roman historian Livy made a story out of the great war between Rome and Hannibal.

The third section of *Confronting the Classic* turns the spotlight onto some of the most famous names of the Roman empire, such as Augustus and Hadrian, and their enemies, including Cleopatra and Boudicca. Beard declares modern biographies of these emperors, empresses and their enemies seem to be much more of fantasy. Furthermore, she discusses how reputations of these emperors, empresses and their enemies have been formed. Beard believed fictions and movies possess remarkable roles in forming world imagination about Roman imperialism.

The fourth section of *Confronting the Classic* is the most impressive part, where Beard states characteristics of ancient Rome from the point of view of ordinary Romans, such as the slaves or the soldiers who patrolled Hadrian's Wall. Through this section, lifestyles of other Romans who are not rich, powerful or famous are discussed. With no doubt, Beard argues writing a biography for any ordinary Roman is even less possible than an emperor. Nevertheless, the world of poor inhabitants of Rome are portrayed by a whole variety of material that survives from the classic world.

On the other hand, the various aspects of Roman imperialism are pivotal issues of this section. First, slavery as one of the most debatable and puzzling issue raises many questions in this section. Why did Romans free so many of their slaves? What difference did it make to Roman society in general that so many free citizens were ex-slaves, or descended from them? The second aspect is the militarism. Beard encounters audiences with these debates on how much Romans were eager for war. Were they really as committed to brutality as they have often been painted? Another aspect of Roman imperialism is language. As Beard argues, Latin wiped out the other languages, which it met in its path; also, she discusses that different methods of communication took place between the Roman governors, military officials and their staffs, and the provincial populations. The different essays which are reviewed by Beard in this section seem to be the most cohesive ones.

The final section of the book focuses more on people who have introduced classical traditions to the modern world, such as the scholars who have interpreted the classical world, the artists and dramatists who have recreated classical products and also the early travelers and tourists who excavated the Mediterranean lands of the Greeks and Romans.

The Strengths of *Confronting the Classic*

The strengths of the book can be restricted into some main aspects. First, she is adventurous enough to assert new assumptions related to accepted classical issues; furthermore, she is innovative enough to find new answers for these questions. As a result, this book is considered a unique collection of both age-old and recent assumptions related to classical scholarship and Beard investigates a wide range of classical traditions to find logical answers for these questions. Indeed, the title of the book represents her manner in confronting with classic's traditions, adventures, and innovations.

Second, Beard pairs some antique facts with their recent interpretations so in this way she tracks their continuity with modern life. For instance, she mentions John F. Kennedy's use of Roman slogans as a new interpretation of classical tradition.

Third, heroes of this book are not selected only among emperors, empresses and their enemies. Beard also analyzes the points of view of ordinary Romans. Indeed, she describes ancient world based on ordinary people's points of view. This historical method is considered a bottom-up approach.

The last positive point is the narrative characteristic of book. Beard narrates the classical history while she criticizes imaginary assumptions in ancient history. This narrative theme of the book makes it much more interesting for unprofessional audiences. Unprofessional readers who are interested in the classical era enjoy reading this book. Thus, Beard gains a wide range of audiences, such as scholars, archaeologists, artists, antiquarians, travelers, tourists and whoever is interested in the classical world.

The Weaknesses of *Confronting the Classic*

Confronting the Classic also has few limited weaknesses. First, there are plenty of unfamiliar Latin words in the context of the book, which make it especially difficult to understand for unprofessional audiences. Second, Beard asserts her opinions indirectly. The intention of the author is not clear enough so most of the time readers have to guess her intentions. Thus, the author's point of view seems to be ambiguous in some parts of the book. Third, there is no cohesion among subjects of each chapter in one section. In other words, the loose thesis of the book cannot tie all together. And fourth, sometimes the author presents fascinating questions, but their answers are not seen in any part of the chapter.

CONCLUSION

Beard has conservative viewpoints about the modern world. She believes that studying the classical is to enter a conversation. Then she asks why one should enter this conversation even in the modern world. Beard offers a serious argument in this book. If we were to amputate the classical from the modern world, it would inflict bleeding wounds in the body of western culture. As a result, future of western culture can be dark. Also, she demonstrates that research in Classic is the study of what happens in the gap between antiquity and modern world. So, routes of the classic world in the modern world can be tracked, and this shows that classical research is still alive. As there is a reciprocal relationship between culture and technology, routes of the classical in modern technology can be tracked.

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