



Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures, and Innovations

By Mary Beard

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A National Book Critics Circle Award finalist, this is “the perfect introduction to classical studies, and deserves to become something of a standard work” (*Observer*).

Mary Beard, drawing on thirty years of teaching and writing about Greek and Roman history, provides a panoramic portrait of the classical world, a book in which we encounter not only Cleopatra and Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar and Hannibal, but also the common people—the millions of inhabitants of the Roman Empire, the slaves, soldiers, and women. How did they live? Where did they go if their marriage was in trouble or if they were broke? Or, perhaps just as important, how did they clean their teeth? Effortlessly combining the epic with the quotidian, Beard forces us along the way to reexamine so many of the assumptions we held as gospel—not the least of them the perception that the Emperor Caligula was bonkers or Nero a monster. With capacious wit and verve, Beard demonstrates that, far from being carved in marble, the classical world is still very much alive. 17 illustrations

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Offering up 30 years of pointed insights and inquisitions, Cambridge classics professor Beard (*The Fires of Vesuvius*) returns with a collection of primarily reprinted reviews of her classicist peers' work that somehow manages to touch on nearly every notable person, place, and event associated with the Ancient world. But for Beard, while the classics have always been a dialogue with the dead, the dead do not include only those who went to their graves two thousand years ago. Rather, the study of the Classics is the study of what happens in the gap between antiquity and ourselves. It's the back-and-forth sparring between bedeviled Oxford dons, it's Picasso and Shakespeare, it's *Ben-Hur* and *Gladiator*—it's anything that engages in or, as the wonderful title suggests, confronts that gilded and gargantuan Greco-Roman world. So, the chapter about King Minos's legendary palace is much more concerned with how and why Arthur Evans decided to elaborately, and disastrously, restore the site in the early 20th century. The discussion of Cleopatra turns around history's ever-changing, mostly guessing portrait, and ends with Beard finally advising that we just stick with the Augustan myth and Horace's 'demented queen.' And then there's her fascinating, gentle dig at the obsessive, retiring Victorian academic Charles Frazer. All in all, a smart, adventuresome read. Illus. & photos. (Sept.)

From [Booklist](#)

Why should twenty-first-century readers care about Caligula or Commodus, Sappho or Sophocles? In this thought-provoking collection of essays and book reviews, Cambridge classicist Mary Beard explores the reasons that ancient Greece and Rome still matter. Finding surprising substance even in *Astérix* cartoons, Beard convincingly establishes the Roman Forum and the Greek Agora as settings for clarifying issues still vexing the modern world. In the ancient debate over how Cicero invoked emergency powers to quash the Catilinarian conspiracy, for instance, readers find the same issues now perplexing lawmakers debating whether national security justifies abridgment of constitutional rights. Elsewhere—in the gender issues swirling around Livia's crimes, the public-relations tactics transforming fierce Octavian into dignified Augustus, the hermeneutical problems surrounding Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian War—readers repeatedly discover that visiting classical antiquity means seeing modernity more fully. Though far from seamless, Beard's organization of her essays and reviews into four thematic sections unifies and focuses her wide-ranging forays. Lively and engaging, Beard's scholarship brings Pericles, Antony, Nero—and other ancient titans—back to life. --Bryce Christensen

Review

"Engaging...impressive... Through her lively discussion of modern scholarship, Ms. Beard succeeds in her goal of proving that study of the Classics is "still a 'work in progress' not 'done and dusted'." (The Economist)

"These reviews are ideal for providing a basic understanding of classical studies, as they not only pinpoint the strengths and weaknesses of the books she reviews but also elucidate the sometimes tricky nuances of current approaches in the field.... Not to be missed by fans of Beard, this will also appeal to readers generally interested in classical studies." (Library Journal)

"Many of us studied classics not only to read what was written in Latin, but also because poets, writers, and thinkers had blazed a brilliant trail. Beard conveys in her survey of the subject and the people who study it the excitement and romance of that tradition. For someone who has argued vehemently against the need to be glamorous, she makes the study of classics irresistibly attractive." (A.E. Stallings - American Scholar)

“With such a champion as Beard to debunk and popularise, the future of the study of classics is assured.”
(Daily Telegraph (UK))

“Beard’s essays in this volume range from humor in ancient Greece to the reputation of the emperor Caligula to the restoration of Roman sculpture. She writes with grace and wit on a vast array of subjects, and she has a novelist’s gift for selecting odd and revealing details.” (Nick Romeo - The Daily Beast)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Minerva Gagliano:

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