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THE TROLL SLAYER

A Cambridge classicist takes on her sexist detractors.

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Beard says, "There have always been men who are frightened of smart women." Photograph by Victoria Hely-Hutchinson

In February, Mary Beard, a classics professor at the University of Cambridge, gave a lecture at the British Museum titled "Oh Do Shut Up Dear!" With amiable indignation, she explored the many ways that men have silenced outspoken women since the days of the ancients. Her speech, which was filmed by the BBC, was learned but accessible—a tone that she has regularly displayed on British television, as the host of popular documentaries about Pompeii and Rome. She began her talk with the *Odyssey*, and what she referred to as the first recorded instance of a man telling a woman that "her voice is not to be heard in public": Telemachus informing his mother, Penelope, that "speech will be the business of men" and sending her upstairs to her weaving. Beard progressed to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which Tereus rapes Philomela and then cuts out her tongue so that she cannot denounce him. Beard alighted on Queen Elizabeth and Sojourner Truth before arriving at Jacqui Oatley, a BBC soccer commentator repeatedly mocked

by men who were convinced that a woman couldn't possibly understand the sport. A columnist for *The Spectator*, Beard noted, currently runs an annual competition to name the "most stupid woman" to appear on the current-affairs show "Question Time."

Finally, Beard arrived at the contemporary chorus of Twitter trolls and online commenters. "The more I've looked at the details of the threats and the insults that women are on the receiving end of, the more some of them seem to fit into the old patterns of prejudice and assumption that I have been talking about," she said. "It doesn't much matter what line of argument you take as a woman. If you venture into traditional male territory, the abuse comes anyway. It's not what you say that prompts it—it's the fact that you are saying it." Such online interjections—" 'Shut up you bitch' is a fairly common refrain"—often contain threats of violence, a "predictable menu of rape, bombing, murder, and so forth." She mildly reported one tweet that had been directed at her: "I'm going to cut off your head and rape it."

Beard belongs to a generation that came of age during the feminist movement of the late sixties and early seventies, but as a scholar she does not specialize in writing about women, or about gender in the classical period. Her doctoral thesis was a study of Roman religion based on the letters of Cicero. Her later books have included social histories of the Parthenon and the Colosseum.

In common with other scholars of her generation, Beard often brings a proletarian focus to the world of the ancients, one that incorporates the experience of ordinary people. In "The Roman Triumph" (2007), Beard considers not just the symbolic power of the empire's lavish victory celebrations but also their more prosaic elements: "What, for example, of those who flogged refreshments to the crowds, who put up the seating or cleared up the mess at the end of the day? What of the spectators who found the sun too hot or the rain too wet, who could hardly see the wonderful extravaganza that others applauded, or who found themselves mixed up in the outbreaks of violence that could be prompted by the spectacle?" In "The Fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii Lost and Found" (2008), she points out that the ancient city lacked zoning regulations, which meant that a blacksmith's noisy shop could lie on the other side of the wall from a wealthy family's frescoed dining room. Her deductive observation from the presence of tartar on the teeth of skeletons—that Pompeii was a city of bad breath—is a typical Beardian turn.

Beard's ancient world can seem, at least on the surface, rather like the more urban and liberal parts of our own. Her Rome is polyglot and multicultural, animated by the entrepreneurialism of freed slaves in overcrowded streets. At the same time, Beard warns against the danger of smoothing away the strangeness and foreignness of Roman life. Her latest book, "Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up," which has just been published, is an engaging exploration of what made the Romans laugh—bad breath, among other things—but it also explores dimensions of Roman sensibility that have become elusive to us. Beard observes that there is no word in Latin for "smile," and makes the striking suggestion that the Romans simply

did not smile in the sense that we understand the social gesture today. (Writing in *The New York Review of Books*, Gregory Hays, a classicist at the University of Virginia, has challenged the claim: “It may well be that the Romans did not smile, as we do, to indicate greeting or willingness to serve. But the smile of amusement, pleasure, or approval is probably as Roman as gladiators and stuffed dormice.”) Beard’s popularizing bent is grounded in a deep knowledge of the arcane, and she gives new insight into the hoariest of topics, according to Elaine Fantham, a well-known Latinist who is a generation Beard’s senior. “If you are a Latinist, you are always being asked to talk about Pompeii,” Fantham says. “When Mary does something, it is not old hat. It becomes new hat.”

Beard’s academic concerns have kept her busy for decades: she can be seen scouring the classics library at Cambridge with her arms full of volumes, like an eager undergraduate. But in recent years, and somewhat to her surprise, Beard has found herself cast in the very public role of a feminist heroine. Through her television appearances, she has become an avatar for middle-aged and older women, who appreciate her unwillingness to fend off the visible advancement of age. Beard does not wear makeup and she doesn’t color her abundant gray hair. She dresses casually, with minor eccentricities: purple-rimmed spectacles, gold sneakers. She looks comfortable both in her skin and in her shoes—much more preoccupied with what she is saying than with how she looks as she is saying it.

Beard, in her unapologetic braininess, is a role model for women of all ages who want an intellectually satisfying life. She estimates that she works thirteen hours a day, six days a week. On more than one occasion, I have e-mailed her at 8 p.m. or later from New York, expecting to hear from her by morning, only to discover an immediate and exhaustive reply in my inbox. Among those in the audience for “Oh Do Shut Up Dear!” was Megan Beech, a student at King’s College, whose spoken-word ode “When I Grow Up I Want to Be Mary Beard” was posted on YouTube last summer. (“She should be able to analyze Augustus’s dictums, or early A.D. epithets / Without having to scroll through death, bomb, and rape threats.”) Peter Stothard, the editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*, where Beard is the classics editor, sometimes appears with her at literary festivals; together they conduct a seminar on how to read a Latin poem. “Afterwards, a few people will come and talk to me,” he told me. “And there will be a line of schoolgirls and middle-aged women lining up to have their photo taken with Mary.”

Beard’s output is prodigious. She has written a dozen books, produces scholarly papers and book reviews by the pound, and appears not only on her own television programs but on shows such as “Question Time.” She is a frequent contributor to Radio 4, the British equivalent of NPR, offering audio essays on subjects as varied as dementia, the four-minute mile, and academic testing. She has written for the *London Review of Books* since the late eighties. (A decade ago, the *L.R.B.* opened an eponymous bookstore in Bloomsbury, near the British Museum. Beard’s was one of the first inscriptions in the guest-book: “Nice feel. Rather understocked with the works of M. Beard.”) She is a familiar presence in the *Guardian*, a

principal organ of Britain's liberal intelligentsia, but she has also contributed to the *Daily Mail*, the voice of lower-middle-class conservatives.

Beard is an avid user of social media. On Twitter, she is dauntingly willing to engage in intellectual discourse with strangers, sometimes clarifying matters of Latin grammar. ("Some first declension nouns ending in 'a' are masculine.") She does not hesitate to tweet more mundanely; on a British Airways flight from Istanbul, she wrote, "Been told off by cabin crew lady for having my feet in bulkhead."

Since 2006, Beard has maintained a blog, *A Don's Life*, which features jaunty accounts of her studies, travels, and domestic life. Her husband, Robin Cormack, an affable Englishman sixteen years her senior, is an art historian specializing in the Byzantine period. They have a daughter, Zoe, whose doctoral thesis is on the history of South Sudan, and a son, Raphael, who is studying for a doctorate in Egyptian literature. (Beard is brisk about her children's geographic adventurousness: "Zoe can ring up from somewhere in the middle of South Sudan—actually, it's quite irritating. I am trying to do some work, and she's telling me the bus hasn't come.") Beard and Cormack live in a handsome Victorian house in Cambridge, appointed with antiques and art works acquired at local auctions. Beard's study, upstairs, looks like the den of a very precocious and very messy teen, with books strewn on a chaise longue and piled on the floor; Cormack's is neater, with a pane of Pre-Raphaelite stained glass in the window. The spacious kitchen is decorated with woodwork in Cretan blue, and it has a dumbwaiter that has been restored to working condition; a taxidermied stoat is displayed on one wall, but comes down when vegetarian guests are dining. In the garden behind the house is a concrete replica of the Farnese Hercules, which Beard and Cormack picked up for fifty pounds. In a recent blog entry, Beard expounded on spousal differences over the aesthetics and practicalities of installing a clothesline in their garden: "Most of the obvious places would involve stringing the damn thing across the path to the car and dustbins. And the husband would be bound to decapitate himself (shouting 'I told you so' in his final seconds)."

Beard's charming command of her subject has had a palpable effect in England, where the university study of classics is on the rise, even as French and German are falling off. Readers of *Prospect*, a political magazine, recently voted Beard the seventh-most-significant world thinker—behind Amartya Sen and Pope Francis, but above Peter Higgs, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist. In 2013, *The Oldie*, a magazine devoted to counteracting the unearned deference paid to youth in popular culture, named her its pinup of the year. And the Queen recently appointed her to the Order of the British Empire, for services to classical scholarship. Beard, who is generally a republican in the British sense, dithered about accepting it, and decided that she could refuse it only if she refrained from ever mentioning it. "So, I thought, would I really not tell anyone?" she wrote on her blog. "Answer, no, of course I'd blab . . . at some evening or other after half a bottle more of pinot grigio than I should have consumed." She later filed a report of the ceremony at Buckingham Palace, making note of the Edwardian wooden seats in a "truly wonderful ladies'

loo.”

The observation was consistent with Beard’s presentation of the ancient world: how the ancients relieved themselves is a recurring theme in her popular work, providing a vivid means of conveying familiarity and difference. In her Pompeii book, she points out that the city’s public amphitheatre offered no lavatories. A memorable sequence in “Meet the Romans,” a BBC series that aired in 2012, shows Beard speculating about the logistics of an impressively preserved communal toilet in the port city of Ostia. She sits atop a two-thousand-year-old latrine, swinging her legs and merrily invoking a scene of “everyone shitting together, tunics up, togas up, trousers down, chatting as they went.”

Appearing on television made Beard famous in the U.K., but what has made her even more famous has been the suggestion, put forward by certain male observers, that she is too old or unprepossessing to be on television at all. A. A. Gill, the television critic for the *Sunday Times*, greeted her Pompeii series by remarking, “Beard coos over corpses’ teeth without apparently noticing she is wearing them. . . . From behind she is 16; from the front, 60. The hair is a disaster, the outfit an embarrassment.” Gill dismissed “Meet the Romans” by declaring that Beard “should be kept away from cameras altogether.”

After a “Question Time” appearance in the Midlands, in which Beard argued that recent immigrants were not a burden on the local economy, she was repeatedly vilified on an Internet message board. One user described her as “a vile, spiteful excuse for a woman, who eats too much cabbage and has cheese straws for teeth.” (British comments sections can seem to be haunted by the ghost of Roald Dahl.) Less creatively, another commenter posted a doctored photograph in which an image of a woman’s genitals was superimposed over Beard’s face.

There is an injunction among users of social media that one should not pay attention to online detractors. There is even a Twitter account, @AvoidComments, which issues monitory statements: “You wouldn’t listen to someone named Bonerman26 in real life. Don’t read the comments.” Beard argues, instead, that comments sections expose attitudes that have long remained concealed in places like locker rooms and bars. Bonerman26 exists; his vileness should be contended with. In this spirit, she posted the image of herself-as-genitalia on her blog—it was surely the first time that the *T.L.S.* site might have needed a Not Safe for Work warning—and suggested possible responses for her supporters to take, such as flooding the offending message board with Latin poetry. The story made international news, and the message board soon shut down.

Beard responded to Gill’s snark, meanwhile, by contributing a piece to the *Daily Mail* in which she observed, “Throughout Western history there have always been men like Gill who are frightened of smart women who speak their minds, and I guess, as a professor of Classics at Cambridge University, I’m one of them.” She suggested that Gill, who had not enjoyed a

university education, had been obliged to resort to insult as a substitute for well-reasoned argument. (Gill, who is profoundly dyslexic, studied at the Slade School of Fine Art.) She then offered—or perhaps threatened—to expose him to her tutorial method should he agree to visit her study at Cambridge’s Newnham College.

I met Beard recently on a bright morning in Oxford, in a café in the vaults of St. Mary’s, a medieval church in the center of town. In conversation, she is good-humored and confidential, with the optimistic affect of someone immersed in stimulating studies. She ordered a cappuccino and admitted that she was slightly hung over: the previous night, there had been a ceremonial dinner at Brasenose College, and she had partaken of more after-dinner drinks than were strictly advisable.

Gill’s review of “Meet the Romans” had been a turning point, Beard explained. “That is when it became kind of a personal calling, because I spoke out and said, ‘Sorry, sunshine, this is just not on,’ ” she said. “The people who read the *Mail* are middle-aged women, and they look like me. They know what he’s saying. For all the very right-wing, slightly unpleasant populism that the *Mail* trades in, its readership is actually people who know an unacceptable insult when they see it. They’ve got gray hair. He’s talking about *them*.”

The targeting of Beard is hardly a singular instance of online misogyny, and she is quick to note that there are differences of degree. A comment about one’s teeth is rude; a rape threat is criminal. After Caroline Criado-Perez, a thirty-year-old activist, launched a campaign last spring to have an accomplished woman represented on the British ten-pound note, she was subjected to multiple threats of rape and murder via Twitter. (Her effort succeeded nonetheless: Jane Austen will soon appear on the currency.) Stella Creasy, a Member of Parliament, received similar threats after expressing support for Criado-Perez. Last summer, Caitlin Moran, the newspaper columnist, mobilized a day of “Twitter silence” to protest the site’s slow response to threats of violence against women; Beard intended to participate, but broke her silence when she received a tweeted bomb threat, which she reported to the police as well as to her followers. When the hour of the threatened explosion had passed, she tweeted, with sang-froid, “We are still here. So unless the trolling bomber’s timekeeping is rotten . . . all is well.”

In another highly publicized incident, Beard retweeted a message that she had received from a twenty-year-old university student: “You filthy old slut. I bet your vagina is disgusting.” One of Beard’s followers offered to inform the student’s mother of his online behavior; meanwhile, he apologized. Beard’s object is not simply to embarrass offenders; it is to educate women. Before social media, she argues, it was possible for young women like those she teaches at Cambridge to enjoy the benefits of feminist advances without even being aware of the battles fought on their behalf, and to imagine that such attitudes are a thing of the past. Beard says, “Most of my students would have denied, I think, that there was still a major current of misogyny in Western culture.”

Beard's zest for the online fray seems indefatigable. If there is a newspaper comments section excoriating her, readers may be surprised to come across comments from Beard, defending herself. If there is a thread praising her on Mumsnet, a popular British site for parents, she may pop up there, too, thanking her admirers. When she feels that she has been misrepresented in a newspaper article, she takes to her blog to explain herself further. If she gets into a Twitter spat, it is likely to be reported on by the British press, to whom she will give a salty, winning quote. When asked by the BBC what she would say to her university-student troll, she replied, "I'd take him out for a drink and smack his bottom."

There is, she acknowledges, an irony in the imbalance of power: as a prominent scholar, she does have a voice, however unpleasant the threats to silence her may be. Most of her Twitter detractors are grumbling to only a handful of followers, at least until she amplifies their audience. She has discovered that, quite often, she receives not only an apology from them but also a poignant explanation. After she published the genitalia photograph on her blog, the man who ran the site where the image had originally appeared wrote her a long letter. "He explained his personal circumstances—he was married with kids—and he said how he should never have done it, in a way that was very eloquent," she told me. After a "Question Time" viewer wrote to her that she was "evil," further correspondence revealed that he was mostly upset because he wanted to move to Spain and didn't understand the bureaucracy. "It took two minutes on Google to discover the reciprocal health-care agreement, so I sent it to him," she says. "Now when I have a bit of Internet trouble, I get an e-mail from him saying, 'Mary, are you all right? I was worried about you.' "

The university student, after apologizing online, came to Cambridge and took Beard out to lunch; she has remained in touch with him, and is even writing letters of reference for him. "He is going to find it hard to get a job, because as soon as you Google his name that is what comes up," she said. "And although he was a very silly, injudicious, and at that moment not very pleasant young guy, I don't actually think one tweet should ruin your job prospects."



"Can I put this on your bulletin board? The one in the hall is totally crazy."

At the same time, Beard questions a narrative in which her troll is recast as her errant son and she takes on the role of scolding but forgiving mother—a Penelope who chastises Telemachus for being rude, then patiently teaches him the error of his ways. "There is something deeply conservative about that reappropriation of errant teen-ager and long-suffering female parent—it is rewriting the relationship in acceptable form," she says. "If I said to my students, 'What is going on here?' and they just came out with a happy-ending story, I would be very critical. I would say, 'Haven't you thought about how the same sorts of gender hierarchies are written in different forms?'" Despite this analysis, she feels emotionally satisfied with the outcome. "Some of these adjectives we use, like 'maternal'—try putting 'human' in there instead," she told me on one occasion. "If being a decent soul is being maternal, then fine. I'll call it human."

For all her openness to interaction, Beard has found it useful to respond to many of her critics personally and privately—to take the brawl inside. An early online experience was instructive. Just after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Beard was asked by the *London Review of Books* to contribute her thoughts. She argued, astringently, that it served little purpose to decry the attacks as "cowardly," or to go no further in analyzing the motivations of the perpetrators than to call them terrorists: "There are very few people on the planet who devise carnage for the sheer hell of it. They do what they do for a cause; because they are at war." The attacks needed to be understood not merely as an atrocity but as a response to Western foreign policy, and she alluded to a common sentiment in her community—"that, however tactfully you dress it up, the United

States had it coming.” She received angry e-mails from correspondents who understood her to have callously suggested that the workers in the Twin Towers deserved to die.

Beard has had a great deal of opportunity to reflect on that event, she told me one afternoon in her study at Newnham, which has pale wooden floors and French windows that open onto pretty gardens. “I think if people get very upset at what you say, and you didn’t mean them to, then you got it wrong,” she said. Her first, knee-jerk response to the criticism was to keep quiet; then she reconsidered. “I thought, This is stupid. You have written something which is really upsetting people, and you didn’t mean what they thought you meant, so for God’s sake tell them.” She wrote to her critics individually, clarifying what she had meant, and replied to their replies.

Her wrongness lay not in her political position, she explained to me, but in the language she chose to express it. Beard believes that there was a very brief moment after 9/11—“a kind of extra-ordinary rhetorical aporia”—when there was not yet a consensus about how to define the attacks, and that this gap had firmly closed in the interval between her composing her contribution and its publication, two weeks later. In the years that followed, she added, “we have constructed a series of ways in which we can disagree about 9/11 without it being hurtful.” Beard remains in occasional contact with some of the people who were angered by the *L.R.B.* essay, and feels grateful to all those who engaged with her rather than demonized her. Through listening, she made herself heard.

Beard was the only child of professional parents: her mother was the headmistress of an elementary school, and a feminist; her father was an architect. Beard grew up in and around the market town of Shrewsbury, and her voice retains the soft inflection of the Midlands rather than the plummy tones of Oxbridge, where she has spent most of her adult life. Beard’s intellectual inclinations began to emerge when she was a student at Shrewsbury High School, a private school for girls, where she studied French, German, Latin, and Greek. “Bright kids at that age do like doing things they’re good at,” she says. “I was an intellectual control freak, and Greek was quite good for that—you could be good at it. You could *master* it.” She appreciated the ancient languages precisely because nobody spoke them anymore. She told me, “Part of the pleasure of knowing Latin is that you don’t have to learn to say, ‘Where is the cathedral?’ or ‘I would like a return ticket, second class, please.’ You actually get to the literature. You don’t always have to be making yourself understood.”

Coupled with her pleasure in encountering Virgil and Tacitus was her discovery of archeology. She joined a dig where archeologists were uncovering the remains of a Roman settlement not far from her home and trying to discern what happened there after the Romans left. “The guy who was running the excavation was really keen to say, ‘Look, everybody wants to see the glories of Roman civilization. But how was the city used when the Romans were gone?’” she recalls. “So we’re in the blasted Dark Ages, and there is not much to find. Slightly differently colored bits of soil, with a posthole where the post was—that kind of stuff.” She later adopted this orientation

toward the unsensational in her own work, although, at the time, her discoveries were largely social. “There was lots of sex, drugs, and rock and roll, all under the banner of this activity that was so intellectually proper.”

In 1972, she planned to apply to King’s College, Cambridge, founded by Henry VI, which had begun admitting women that year, but her headmistress advised her against being in the vanguard of change. Instead, Beard successfully applied for a scholarship at Newnham College, which, then as now, accepts only women. Before entering the university, Beard was not especially engaged by feminist issues, though she was politically animated. She had a particular interest in Angela Davis, and kept a poster of her on the wall, and had considered submitting an essay in praise of Davis for her Cambridge entrance examination. Her headmistress vetoed that, too.

At Cambridge, the inequities of gender began to dawn on Beard. “Most of the people who taught us in the faculty were blokes,” she says. “There were only twelve per cent women among the students, and you thought, Actually, there is an issue here. You go into a dining hall of a men’s college, and everybody’s portrait was a bloke. Well, perhaps some female founder back in 1512, some lady who gave the cash—and everyone else was a bloke. For the first time I saw that, somehow, I was there as sort of a favor.” She attended women’s groups and joined campaigns to open the university further to women. The women of Cambridge were undertaking more personal voyages of discovery, too: in a drawer somewhere in Beard’s house is a plastic speculum that she acquired at one consciousness-raising gathering.

Beard left Cambridge in 1979, for King’s College London. She completed her Ph.D. in 1982; two years later, she returned to Newnham as a fellow. At the time, she says, she was one of only three women on the classics faculty, out of a total of twenty-six; before long, both of her female colleagues left. (Now there are roughly four men to each woman.) The following year, she published her first book, “Rome in the Late Republic,” which she wrote with Michael Crawford, an ancient-history professor then at Cambridge. She married Cormack in 1985, and Zoe was born the same year; Raphael arrived two years later. It was a second marriage for Cormack, who had older children. He was teaching at the Courtauld Institute of Art, in London; they maintained an apartment in the city, and he commuted back and forth.

Institutionally, there was little support for working mothers at Cambridge, Beard says. Nor, despite her being at a women’s college, was there necessarily much precedent. Her most illustrious predecessor at Newnham, Jane Harrison, who, in the first decades of the twentieth century, wrote a series of influential books about Greek history, was both childless and imperiously demanding toward junior colleagues. A few years ago, Beard wrote a lively meta-biography, “The Invention of Jane Harrison,” drawing on previously unpublished documents about Harrison’s early career which she had found in the archives of Newnham and Girton Colleges. In a preface, Beard calls her book “a product of that familiar combination of irritation and gratitude, devoted loyalty and rebellion, that almost anyone feels for their own institution and its icons.”

Beard says of her own early years at Newnham, “The idea of how you managed children with a job was something that people didn’t talk about—they did it, and they sweated, and they regretted that they hadn’t shared their experience.” Her response was to write a non-academic handbook, “The Good Working Mother’s Guide,” which was published in 1989. Beard offered advice on managing housework—“pay for as much help around the house as you can afford”—and made stern diaper recommendations. “Any working mother who willingly chooses nappies that need washing and sterilizing deserves no sympathy,” she wrote.

Colleagues at Cambridge say that she was supportive in a very practical manner. Helen Morales, a classicist who now teaches at the University of California, Santa Barbara, says that while she was a junior colleague at Cambridge she spent a period as a de-facto single parent. “The men’s response was sympathy—some of them had the mommy-track idea,” she says. “Mary did things like go to the supermarket and buy ready meals and stick them in the fridge and give me a gin-and-tonic.” Beard was marked by a reflexive egalitarianism, according to Clare Pettitt, a professor of English literature at King’s College London who was formerly at Newnham. She and Beard worked on a Victorian-studies research project at Cambridge. “In one of our first meetings, we were talking about the Victorians and what they thought,” Pettitt says. “And Mary said, ‘Well, the *cleaners* didn’t think that.’ ”

One morning last spring, I joined Beard at the British Museum for a visit to the basements, which are off limits to the general public. “This is where antiquities come to fade away,” Beard said lightly, as we entered one of the musty storage recesses, fitted with shelves that held fragments of ancient statuary. The scene suggested a morgue after a brutal urban bombing: a severed hand, a foot with its delicate sandal straps intact but no sign of the leg to which it was once attached, a row of heads as inert as cabbages in the marketplace.

We lingered over one head in particular: a skull, carved in marble. Beard had discovered it in a museum catalogue while researching her most recent television show, a program about Caligula, who reigned bloodily for less than four years before being assassinated by members of his Praetorian Guard. The sculpture, which had been found on Capri, at the palace of Tiberius, Caligula’s great-uncle and imperial predecessor, was extremely unusual. “I’ve never seen anything like it in my life,” Beard said.

In “Caligula with Mary Beard,” which aired on the BBC last summer, she tells viewers that the skull was a centerpiece. By the time that Caligula was a young man, Tiberius had already caused the deaths of Caligula’s two brothers, as well as of his mother, Agrippina, and, quite possibly, his father, Germanicus. “Anyone sitting around this at the imperial dining table must have been aware that their lives hung on a knife edge,” Beard told her viewers. It is a very plausible theory, given the Romans’ penchant for artistic reminders of death. In Petronius’ “Satyricon,” the banquet of Trimalchio is interrupted when a servant brings in a silver skeleton with articulated joints; the host urges his guests to “live then while we may.” But Beard’s description is necessarily

embroidered by imagination. There are no records of the skull's ancient use or function. When it entered the British Museum's collection, in the nineteenth century, it was assumed by some scholars to have been used for the teaching of anatomy. For Beard, the skull's function as a tool of tyranny can be deduced from understanding the culture of the reigns of Tiberius and Caligula, under whom, she says, the lineaments of modern dictatorships can first be discerned. The concluding words of her "Caligula" program—"When that group of disgruntled army officers decided to rid Rome of the monster, sure, they left him in bits on the palace floor, but all they got was more of the same"—were an oblique but unmistakable allusion to contemporary global affairs.

As Beard continued through the basement, her eye fell on a dozen Roman tombstones arrayed against a wall, in a gloomy half-light. They were from a site on the Black Sea, and each was engraved with a standardized image of the dearly departed. "They look horrible, don't they?" she said. "It's good to come along and say they are awful. You are so trained to admire them. At school, the older the object is the more respect you were supposed to give it. But you can look at them there, all piled up, and they appear to be what they are: mass-produced, not very good gravestones. Thank God the ancient world was democratic enough that it turned out crap."

At the end of another corridor, we entered a conservation room. An enormous statue in several fragments, depicting the goddess Europa riding a bull, was being restored, and to facilitate this process the pieces had been suspended from a frame with slings. Even tied up like a pork loin ready for the oven, the statue was impressive, but Beard cautioned against unexamined veneration. "You say to students, 'Before you admire it, remember: this is rape,' " Beard said. "The bull is such a brutish idiot. Look at him, all spaced out."

In 2000, Beard wrote a scathing column about "A Natural History of Rape," by Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer, for the *L.R.B.* Her essay included an account of being raped in 1978, while she was travelling through Italy as a graduate student. She was waiting for a train in a station bar in Milan when she met an architect on his way to a site outside Naples. He offered to help upgrade her ticket from a seat to a sleeping car. It was not until they were alone in the train compartment that she discovered the architect was not merely being kind, and that she was entirely vulnerable in the face of his intentions: "With two heavy cases and a backpack I couldn't make a dash for it." She continued, "He bundled me in, took off my clothes and had sex, before departing to the upper bunk." Later, she awoke to find him repeating the activity. "Even now, more than twenty years later, I can still rage at the memory of waking up to find him doing it again," Beard wrote.

The essay was a blunt announcement of a previously private experience. "To all intents and purposes, this was rape," she wrote. "I did not want to have sex with the man and had certainly not given consent. If I appeared compliant, it was because I had no option: I was in a foreign city, with enough of the local language to ask directions to the cathedral maybe, but not to search out a reliable protector and explain convincingly what was happening." But the account was also a subtle analysis of the event and its subsequent reverberations. Her experience was "relatively

harmless," she wrote—she was coerced, but not forced. Beard did not report the assault, and the next day she told her friends that she had been "picked up." Over the years, she explained, her understanding of what happened had slid between "rape" and "seduction." She had even found herself "making sense of the incident as a much more emphatically willed part of my sexual history: the perfect degree-zero sexual encounter between complete strangers."

The difficulty of knowing how to talk about rape is not limited to those who have experienced it, she wrote. It is an enduring cultural problem, one that was familiar to Roman authors, who had to contend with their city's being founded on a large-scale program of sexual violence—the rape of the Sabine women. "Rape is always a (contested) story, as well as an event," Beard wrote. "It is in the telling of rape-as-story, in its different versions, its shifting nuances, that cultures have always debated most intensely some of the most unfathomable conflicts of sexual relations and sexual identity."

Beard had not set out to write her own rape story, she told me one afternoon, over tea in her Newnham study. But, she continued, perhaps she had been grateful that the book-review assignment granted her the opportunity to tell it. That journey in Italy had served an important function in her intellectual development. "You can hold two views," she said. "You can say I would rather not have slept with that guy on the train—true. But have I got a lot out of that experience, in terms of thinking about how sex operates, about power relations, about issues of compulsion and assault? Yes. A huge amount."

The way that the Romans thought about rape is another reminder of the gulf in sensibility between the ancients and us. "Rapes can have very happy endings in the Roman world," Beard observed, with dry amusement. In "Laughter in Ancient Rome," she notes that sexual assault was used as a comic plot device by Terence in his play "The Eunuch": A young man besotted with a slave girl pretends to be a eunuch in order to gain access to her, then rapes her. A satisfactory resolution is achieved when the young man agrees to marry her at the end of the play.

In her Newnham study, Beard observed that Roman authors varied in their treatment of rape. The historian Livy de-eroticizes the Roman soldiers' abduction of the Sabines by reporting that "many just snatched the nearest woman to hand"; Ovid, in the "Ars Amatoria," presents the soldiers as making a considered selection. "These issues are constantly being brought to the surface in Roman literature, if you have eyes to see them," Beard said. "And, of course, having eyes to see them—that's what the trick is."

In "Oh Do Shut Up Dear!," Beard's lecture at the British Museum, she referred to one of the very few occasions in Roman literature when a woman is permitted a public voice. After Lucretia, the wife of a nobleman, Conlatinus, is raped by Tarquin, a royal prince, she denounces her rapist, then kills herself to preserve her virtue. This rape story, as told by Livy, sets into motion the founding of the Roman Republic: Lucretia's defenders swear that hereditary princes will no longer assume privileges through violence. In her lecture, Beard acknowledged that it is easier to

document ways that women have been silenced than it is to find a remedy to their silencing. (Virtuous suicide is not an option.) The real issue, she suggested, is not merely guaranteeing a woman's right to speak; it is being aware of the prejudices that we bring to the way we hear her. Listening, she implied, is an essential element of speech.

The lecture was itself an instance in which a woman's voice was resoundingly heard, as Beard acknowledged from her privileged place behind the lectern. Even A. A. Gill reviewed it with a measure of respect: "As television, frankly, 'Oh Do Shut Up Dear!' was radio. But as a lecture, it was rather good." In her quieter, private, remedial interactions with her critics—the late-night e-mails exchanged and the awkward conversations conducted over improbable lunches—Beard has also demonstrated the potency of descending, inquiringly, from the podium. What might an authoritative woman sound like? She might sound like Mary Beard, listening. ♦

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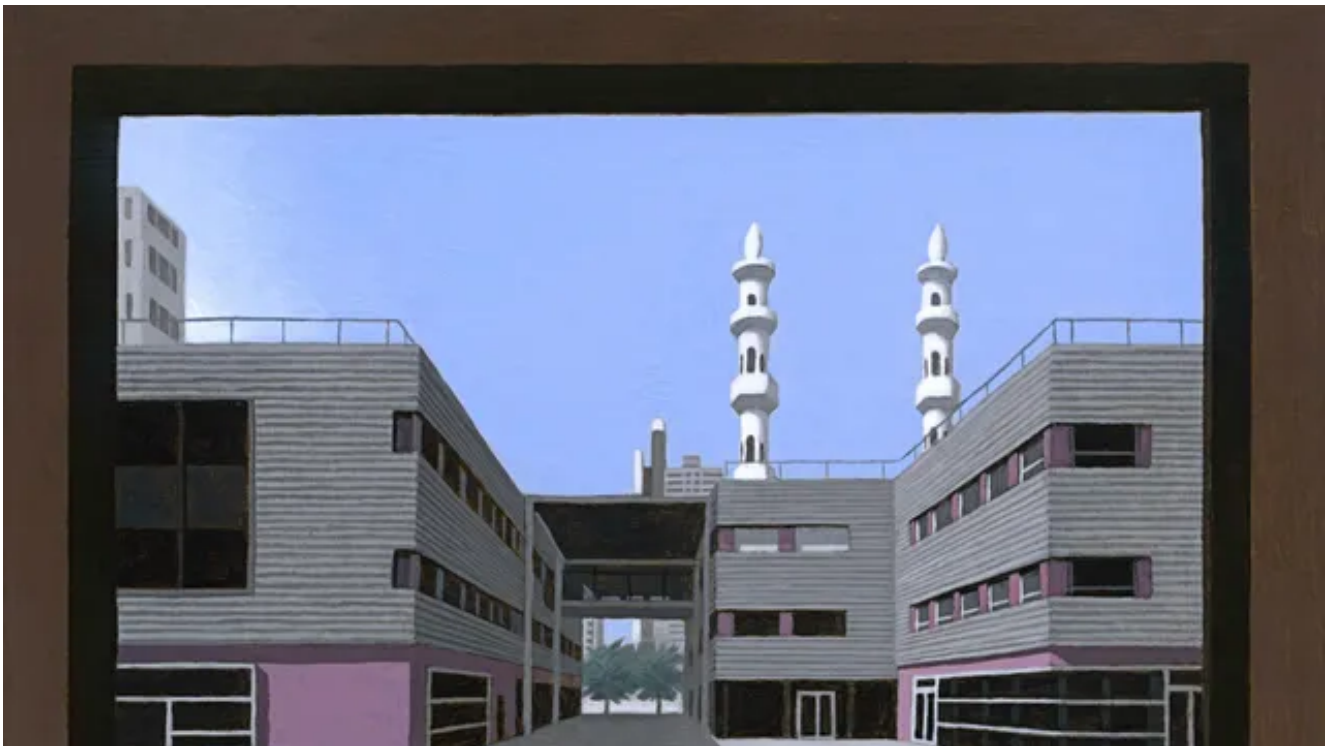


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