

# Refining the chemical attraction of humanities scholarship

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*Mary Beard* argues that it is time to stop searching for the eureka moment

A few years ago I was working on a project on Roman laughter. It was an attempt to think about how to explore cultural and historical *difference* through a phenomenon that is often taken as natural. My prime exhibit was a Roman joke-book, compiled in the 4th century AD, with some of the oldest old chestnuts, and shaggiest shaggy dogs in the ancient world. It's a collection that has long been known, was a great favourite in the 18th century, but hasn't been much worked on recently.



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In the course of this project, I went to another university to give a lecture on what insights that joke-book might give us into the culture of Roman laughter. It was a university with a very active communications department and a very winning way with press releases, as I discovered on the train on the way there. Every 10 minutes or so, I got a call on my mobile from some journalist enquiring about the book. These conversations tended to go the same way ... the second or third question being, where had I *found* it. When I answered truthfully that I had

found it in the library, rather than dug it up with my bare hands from the sands of Egypt, interest immediately evaporated. My attempts to explain how it could change our minds about the way laughing and joking worked across time, and how I was looking at it in a radically fresh way, fell on deaf ears. It didn't count as a discovery; it wasn't new.

This little story raises a big point. That is to say, it raises the question of how we explain and discuss what counts as *new* in the arts and humanities – and how, by and large, we are failing to engage a wider public with novelty that doesn't fall into the standard model of often *scientific* 'discovery', but rather with the kind of 'novelty' that is much more about changing ways of seeing things, new connections, new questions, changing interpretations. Now, I say that we are '*by and large, failing*'; there are some glorious exceptions (Melvyn Bragg's *In Our Time* programme must count as one of the best exceptions that we have). And, of course, you sometimes find new interpretative material embedded in television documentaries and such like. But if, for example, you go through the running order of the *Today* programme for a couple of weeks, you'll find that almost every day they



Mary Beard at the Parthenon in Athens, in the BBC television series *Civilisations*.

have an item on some form of academic scientific ‘advance’ (you know the kind of thing, scientists have discovered that drinking 3 pints of water a day may increase your chances of not dying by 2.9 per cent, or – and this is a real one – researchers have found that using sweets as a reward in young offender institutions improves inmates behaviour). Very rarely is there anything that reflects frontline research in arts and humanities, and almost only when it matches that particular model of *newness* (archaeologists have discovered that Neanderthals are 1 million years older than you never knew they were in the first place, or researchers show that Jane Austen was gay).

The *Today* programme is typical. There is no equivalent for the arts and humanities of Jim Al-Khalili’s *The Life Scientific* (the radio programme which explores the individual human story behind scientific discovery – the nearest we get is *Desert Island Discs*). And in more than a decade of regular publication, my own university’s research showcasing magazine, *Research Horizons*, has rarely featured humanities, and when it has, the subject is usually some version of archaeological discovery, literally dug up from the sands of Egypt, or when you could put the word ‘digital’ in front of it.

Now many of my scientific colleagues, I know, feel very uncomfortable about that ‘eureka’ model that still

underlies how science gets in the news. It’s not how most science is done, and in some respects it’s the model that Al-Khalili is trying to unseat. All the same, it does keep science in the news, and so publicly underlines its *importance* for society at large. The first question I want to throw into the ring is what more could *we* be doing to give a greater sense of contemporary urgency to work

in the humanities, perhaps to adjust the standard definition of innovation or novelty that seems to exclude us. This is not just a matter of blaming the media agenda, and ‘news’ culture; I don’t think we in the humanities have got our heads around this one.

It relates to a wider problem, though, about the more general contexts and opportunities we get – or make for ourselves – to discuss the big cultural, literary, historical and artistic issues so central to the Academy. This really struck me in the reaction to our recent TV rebooting of Kenneth Clark’s *Civilisation*. Now I am

not talking about the pluses and minuses of the critical response; there were bad as well as good reviews, and so there should have been (a glorious celebration of world cultures that everyone liked would have been worrying). But what unsettled me was not so much the sloppiness of the commentariat (though I have to say I would like to get Mr Quentin Letts into my living room, sit him

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down in front of the television and ask him to show me *where* I say that the Greek sculptor Praxiteles was a rapist, or that prehistoric Mexican sculpture is aesthetically more distinguished than the Greek Apollo Belvedere). My real disappointment was how little media debate the series prompted, beyond the endless column inches spent weighing us up versus the Clark original, usually in Clark's favour. The fact was that the new series was raising issues that couldn't be more pressing in modern global, cultural politics. How do you define civilisation? What happens when you put an 's' on the end of it? What kind of aesthetic judgements are possible across global art (can you usefully compare a prehistoric Mexican head with the Apollo Belvedere anyway)? And what are the politics of our modern attempts to debate 'civilisation' and barbarity? Almost none of those issues were taken up in any wider public discussion.

Now to be fair, this was a case where social media did better than usual. And David Cannadine usefully interrogated the word Civilisation in a great programme on Radio 4 (but that was the BBC valiantly sponsoring debate about itself). Otherwise the big issues were almost entirely ignored. At the end of one episode, I made a big, contentious and intentionally aggressive claim, that 'civilisation was in the end no more than an act of faith'. No objection, no response. I might as well have been talking to myself. Maybe we just didn't hit the spot, we didn't *get* people engaged. But I can't help feeling that – for all its ranting, all its identity politics, all its outrage – modern cultural debate has rather forgotten how to argue constructively and publicly about these big issues which actually lie at the heart of what our British Academy does.

It wasn't always thus. I want to finish on a brighter note, by going back 80 years – to a story focused on James

Frazer, author of *The Golden Bough*, one of the founding Fellows of this Academy, and a now decidedly unfashionable anthropologist. He was not unfashionable in the decade or so before his death in 1941, and his birthday on 1 January was increasingly lavishly celebrated, with some increasingly bizarre spectacles (including one notable operetta based on *The Golden Bough*). Every year newspapers tried to explain to readers why Frazer was so important. My favourite one, though it includes some 'oddities', is this from 1937. It's from the *News Chronicle*, the forerunner of the *Daily Mail*. Frazer, it reads,

has changed the world. He has changed it not as Mussolini has changed it: with coloured shirts and castor oil; nor as Lenin has changed it, boldly emptying out the baby of the humanities with the filthy bath of Tsarism; nor as Hitler with the fanfaronade of physical force. He has changed it by altering the chemical composition of the cultural air that all men breathe ... This quiet sedentary student has a mind similar to the body of Sir Francis Drake, ranging distant countries and bringing back their treasures for his own kind. But Frazer left the past no poorer for his rounds – and the present infinitely richer.

Never mind the contemporary politics, it is something about the 'chemical composition of the cultural air that we all breathe' that we are trying to get across – and to get discussed. ■

This article is based on a speech given by Professor Mary Beard at the British Academy on 15 May 2018.