

# Professor Mary Beard

## Honorary doctorate award ceremony

UOC

**October 30, 2019, 6 pm**  
**Saló de Cent,**  
**Barcelona City Council**

[w.uoc.edu/hc/mary-beard](http://w.uoc.edu/hc/mary-beard)  
[#honoriscausaUOC](https://twitter.com/honoriscausaUOC)

Universitat Oberta  
de Catalunya





# **Professor Mary Beard Honorary doctorate award ceremony**

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**01**

**Entrance of the presiding  
committee**

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**02**

***Wild World*, written by Cat Stevens,  
is performed by Rita Payés and  
Elisabeth Roma**

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**03**

**Ada Colau, the Mayor of Barcelona,  
opens the ceremony and gives her address**



## **Pastora Martínez, UOC Vice President for Globalization and Cooperation, pays tribute to Professor Mary Beard**



Mayor, President, Professor Beard, dignitaries, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

Good evening.

It is a privilege for me – as a woman, as a scholar, and on behalf of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya – to pay tribute to Professor Mary Beard today, as our university awards her an honorary doctorate.

Before reviewing her many merits, which are too many for me to do her proper justice in the time allocated, let me take you on a brief trip back to antiquity for the story of a Hispano-Roman relative of Cordoban philosopher Lucius Annaeus Seneca – specifically, his aunt. Strikingly, she is invisible in history – her name is not mentioned or recorded for posterity.

According to the sources, his aunt was the very model of the respectable woman of the time. So, during the sixteen years that her husband spent in Egypt, she did not appear in public, keeping to the inner rooms of the house... as was expected of Roman women of that time.

But her destiny changed dramatically when, during the voyage home, they were shipwrecked and her husband died in her arms. Suddenly, she displayed leadership, courage and virtues that were a source of admiration. As her nephew said, “how many noble deeds of women are lost in obscurity!”<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Seneca, *Consolazione alla Madre Elvia*, XIX, <http://www.filosofico.net/consolatioh.htm>.

Without meaning to, this phrase from Seneca recognizes two things. Firstly, he highlights women's bravery. And, secondly, how women struggle for this or other qualities to be recognized in a society where they – where we – start at a disadvantage.

Nothing that far from what we see today. Professor Beard herself made this clear in her recent work, *Women & Power: A Manifesto* when she said that: "You cannot easily fit women into a structure that is already coded as male; you have to change the structure."

And true to her word, her career is a case in point. She has always been linked to Cambridge, only leaving for a few years to teach at King's College London. But in 1985, she returned to her *alma mater*, Newnham College, and for a period she was the only female member of the Faculty of Classics. It is not surprising to read her description of how women in academic institutions have at times felt like "foreigners in a native male preserve"<sup>2</sup>.

However, being a pioneer was not enough, and she strove to prove her worth, soon gaining international recognition as an expert in Ancient History, Classical Art and Archaeology. She has received numerous awards as a result; for example, to name just two, she received the Princess of Asturias Award in Social Sciences in 2016 and was appointed Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 2018.

Far from hiding away in academia, Professor Beard has been able to combine research and teaching with a clear desire to reach out and connect with the general public. From the adaptation in 2010 of her book *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town* for television<sup>3</sup> – which was a great critical and popular success – to her, more recently, copresenting the BBC's *Civilisations*, our new honorary doctor has shown herself to be both acclaimed and congenial. Thanks to these TV documentaries, Professor Beard has also increased her presence in traditional, digital and social media, to the extent that she has made quite an impact internationally.

No doubt, people may well wonder what intriguing path brought a prestigious Professor of Classics to become a leading feminist in the digital age. Personally, I think it all boils down to the same thing: Professor Beard's desire to bring rationality to what appears irrational.

As she herself has said, it was a visit to the British Museum at the age of five that gave her to understand that the world was a lot more complicated than it seemed. Something did not quite fit. She was caught up in the same feeling when, on a family visit to Pompeii before she started university,

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Beard, "Looking for the loo", *London Review of Books*, 15 August 1991, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v13/n15/mary-beard/looking-for-the-loo>.

<sup>3</sup> There are two. The first: *Pompeii: Life and Death in a Roman Town* (2010: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WbwQJxfepz0>). The second: *Pompeii: New Secrets Revealed* (2016: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB27l\\_RjHlI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB27l_RjHlI)).

she saw that the classical texts in Latin she had read did not fit with the archaeological evidence<sup>4</sup>.

This curiosity, this desire to know and understand, this ability to bring rationality to things, has been ever present. In a textbook from 1985, *Rome in the Late Republic*, written with Michael Crawford, you can already see this style which, while staying true to the facts and being critical of the sources, managed to intertwine a fresh, lively and captivating discourse on one of the most interesting and complex periods of Roman history: the end of the Republic.

This search for rationality led naturally to the sharing and dissemination of her knowledge. Because for Professor Beard, only a society that is empowered by a knowledge of history can (as she said in her acceptance speech for the Princess of Asturias award) “think historically” and thus be competent in its present actions. Her activism, in accordance with these principles, has moved on to social media as she looks to defend freedom of expression, women’s rights, science, knowledge and rationality.

Professor Beard does not hold back, and fearlessly she has been among the first to highlight “social media at its most revolting and misogynistic”<sup>5</sup>. As she herself has said, when faced with this cyber-bullying, “I could have chosen to ignore it, but I decided not to. For centuries women have put up with this sort of thing in the hope that if you shut up, it’ll go away. It doesn’t work. I’m also such an academic that if someone says something I don’t agree with, my autopilot response is to answer back.”<sup>6</sup>

We have known for a long time that silence and submission is not the right strategy. As Professor Beard has pointed out, our reflections on this can go at least as far back as *The Odyssey*, in which Telemachus tells his mother, Penelope, to shut up. Maybe we have had enough misogyny; maybe we have had enough irrationality.

So, coming back to her commitment to rationality: this commitment is now backed by knowledge and academia, and manifests itself in the quality of the knowledge she shares and an attitude that is both civil and critical in her contributions across the media. Obviously, her career has not been completely free of doubts, controversies or rectifications. Indeed, these are vital. Knowledge, just like people and principles, needs to be reviewed and rebuilt all the time. At times when the legitimate nature of

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<sup>4</sup> Stuart Jeffries, “The Saturday Interview: Professor Mary Beard”, *The Guardian*, 21 April 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/apr/21/professor-mary-beard-saturday-interview>.

<sup>5</sup> Zoe Williams, “Mary Beard: ‘The role of the academic is to make everything less simple’”, *The Guardian*, 23 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/23/mary-beard-the-role-of-the-academic-is-to-make-everything-less-simple>.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Beard, as quoted by Jo Bostock, in *The Meaning of Success: Insights from Women at Cambridge*, 2014, Cambridge University Press.

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things is questioned – be it in academia, democracy, politics or values – it takes courage to bring everything into doubt – everything, that is, except rationality.

No one said it should be easy. But fortunately, if we can say that breakthroughs in knowledge were made during the Enlightenment thanks to our standing on the shoulders of the giants who came before – giants who, by and large, were male –, we can now call on a female giant. As Rebecca Mead wrote, Professor Beard “is a role model for women of all ages who want an intellectually satisfying life”<sup>7</sup>.

Thank you very much.

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Mead, “The Troll Slayer. A Cambridge classicist takes on her sexist detractors”, *The New Yorker*, 25 August 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/09/01/troll-slayer>.

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05



**Pere Fabra, General Secretary of the UOC, reads the decision reached by the Governing Council**

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06

**Professor Mary Beard receives her honorary doctorate from the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, bestowed upon her together with the university's medal by Josep A. Planell, the UOC President**

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07

***Space Oddity*, written by David Bowie, is performed by Rita Payés and Elisabeth Roma**



**[Speech by Professor Mary Beard](#)**



**[Watch the video of the award ceremony](#)**



**[Read about Professor Mary Beard's career](#)**



## Speech by UOC President, Josep A. Planell



Mayor Colau, Professor Beard, Dr Martínez Samper, President of the Board of Trustees of the Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, Dignitaries from academia and other institutions, Ladies and gentlemen,

If we take a little time to reflect on it, we can see the hallmarks of Ancient Rome are still ever present today. From the layout of the roads that surround us to the columns of the ancient Temple of Augustus, or the remains of the 4th-century walls or even the very language I am using to address you all. It is, obviously, an ancient legacy, but no less present today.

Indeed, the research carried out by Professor Beard, our new honorary doctor, is characterized by its proof of how this classical past remains alive and present, and by the keys it gives us to better understand the world around us. What it does not offer is simplistic determinism.

This is worth repeating: it's free of simplistic determinism. In current times, when black or white responses seem to have taken the place of civil debate, when the gulf between the two sides of an argument drowns out reason, when immediacy denies us the chance to calmly reflect, when those in power want to make us play with marked cards...

When all this is going on, the worst thing we can do as humanists, scientists, researchers, university staff, students and academics is to let ourselves be bowled over by what is irrational, teleological and simplistic. Instead, and now more than ever, it is our duty to generate, connect, spread and multiply knowledge. And this knowledge cannot be isolated on our campuses; we

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need to reach out to people, make knowledge available and defend it in public forums. This is how we can serve society, by collaborating to mould a better future.

Because, as Professor Beard has said in the past, the role of academics, no matter what their field, is not to simplify problems, but to explain their complexity.<sup>1</sup>

And this means having to question any given truths in search of incoherence, so as to find the most plausible explanations and ensure our work benefits society. To do what Professor Beard so ably does. Adapting her discourse to each different format and audience, while maintaining her convictions.

Coherence and belief are required at all times, whether in a lecture theatre, article, book, documentary, traditional or social media, or when facing Boris Johnson<sup>2</sup>.

By awarding an honorary doctorate we can create genealogical links that bond people from outside the UOC to our University as a sign of where we set our sights, as a sign of what sort of paths we want to follow, and what sort of people we identify with and commend.

Professor Beard today joins this honours board as a model for our students to aspire to. As Vice President Martínez-Samper has already stressed, she does so for three reasons: for her academic and scientific career, for her commitment to generating and sharing knowledge, and for her contributions to the public debate and her defence of women's rights in particular.

As regards this last point, although the times when Professor Beard was the only woman in Cambridge's Faculty of Classics are now long gone, we still have a lot of work to do. And any plans for the future that we make today must include feminism. This is true of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Goal number five specifically focuses on gender equality, but the issue is echoed throughout all seventeen goals.

Indeed, as the Prime Minister of Iceland Katrin Jakobsdottir recently said, if everything is interlinked, then that includes the threats we face. In her words: "Human rights, social justice and gender equality are all intrinsically connected to the fight because climate change affects the poor more than the rich, the underprivileged more than the privileged, and women differently than men."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Zoe Williams, "Mary Beard: 'The role of the academic is to make everything less simple'", *The Guardian*, 23 April 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/23/mary-beard-the-role-of-the-academic-is-to-make-everything-less-simple>. The exact phrase is: "What is the role of an academic, no matter what they're teaching, within political debate? It has to be that they make issues more complicated. The role of the academic is to make everything less simple".

<sup>2</sup>"Greece vs. Rome", debate between Boris Johnson and Mary Beard, 19 November 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2k448JqQyJ8>.

<sup>3</sup>Katrin Jakobsdottir, "The Ice Is Leaving", 17 August 2019, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/iceland-glacier-climate-change.html>.

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**Speech by UOC President,  
Josep A. Planell**

In other words, we have to embrace everything if we really want to guarantee our citizens' welfare and unity. We have to embrace everything when innovating: from education and training to research, from climate change and human rights to equality. This commitment is personified in Professor Beard, and this is the line of thinking we want to develop in the coming years, both as the UOC and from the UOC.

Thank you very much.

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**10**

***Gaudeamus igitur***

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