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A NON-CLASSICAL HISTORY OF ROME

Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, Profile Books, London 2015, 606 pp., with illustrations

Writing about ancient history in the 21st century is a highly risky business, for several reasons. It would seem that everything has already been said and consigned to paper. Actually, it is quite the opposite. Jerzy Axer argues that „the world of antiquity is there to be discovered anew. Apparently ubiquitous, it still remains obscure and hidden. It has ceased to be boring and began to astonish instead”¹. The astonishment breeds new questions and exceedingly interesting interpretations, though as Mary Beard asserts we must not consider ourselves better than our predecessors².

The book with which this review is concerned is not an old story told with different words and sold to the mass reader, although it does happen to be found in bookstores next to „Harry Potter and the Cursed Child”. If only that! It is not even history in the classic sense. Idols of the traditional history – individuals, politics and chronology – are paid little tribute here³, while the legendary origins of Rome or the founding myths are cited for an altogether different reasons than elucidation of the city’s beginnings. What is more, „SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome” is fairly often more akin to *lettres*, although the scholarly bias is ever present. It is a story which is alive, an authorial vision of the brilliant Mary Beard, in which Roman past is interpreted from a different standpoint, and not infrequently interfaces with the contemporary times. Antiquity is no longer

¹E. Stefaniak, Przekraczanie granic, czyli o sile i słabości współczesnej humanistyki. Rozmowa z profesorem Jerzym Axerem, „Profundere Scientiam”. Biuletyn Centrum Studiów zaawansowanych Politechniki Warszawskiej, 5, 2011, p. 4.

²M. Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome*, London 2015 (hereinafter as SPQR).

³F. Simiand, Méthode historique et science sociale, *Annales. Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*, 15, 1, 1960, pp. 117-118.

a sealed-off past, harbouring fossilized truths and unverifiable dogmas. Many historians, in my opinion misguidedly, demonstrate downright dread of any juxtapositions of past and present, fear to look for analogies or similarities, as this would amount to the sacrilege of cultural imputation or anachronisms, punishable by scientific infamy or ridicule. It is much safer to claim that antiquity, laid to rest ages ago, has nothing in common with things contemporary. Hence, one should isolate ancient history completely, enclose it within hermetic language thus narrowing the number of readers to the limited circles of the initiated. Mary Beard has no fears or inhibitions of that kind, and when writing about Rome, boldly ventures references to the present day, arguing that:

Ancient Rome is still important. To ignore the Romans is not just to turn a blind eye to the distant past. Rome still helps to define the way we understand our world and think about ourselves, from high theory to low comedy. After 2,000 years, it continues to underpin Western culture and politics, what we write and how we see the world, and our place in it⁴

This is no trivial allusion to a simplified observation of Cicero's about history being the teacher of life, but suggests a certain cultural continuity. In so doing, it corresponds with a remark of Katarzyna Marciniak:

Antiquity is a cultural code which is understood everywhere where the Greco-Roman heritage managed to reach: from the first Greek colony of Kyme, established in 757 BCE, to the countries very remote from the Roman Empire, where today's Hollywood blockbusters about heroes and gladiators are readily available thanks to globalization⁵.

Since its publication, „SPQR” (2015: London, New York, 2016: Barcelona, Milan, Paris, Frankfurt/Mein, Amsterdam, Poznań⁶ and elsewhere) has had its readers enchanted and enthralled. It has been awarded with such accolades as The National Book Critics Circle Awards (2015) for non-fiction, Princesa de Asturias de Ciencias Sociales (2016) and many others. Also, it is constantly lauded in successive reviews, written by recognized authorities, e.g. Clifford Ando's „The Rise and Rise of Rome” published in „The New Rambler”⁷ or ordinary readers⁸. What makes SPQR so exceptional?

⁴M. Beard, SPQR, p. 15.

⁵K. Marciniak, Tradycja antyczna w XXI wieku – cui bono?, [in:] idem (ed.), Antyk i my w Ośrodku Badań nad Tradycją Antyczną, Warszawa 2013, p. 204.

⁶Polish translation of the book by Norbert Radomski will be released by REBIS on November 22nd, 2016.

⁷The rise and rise of Rome [online]. New Ramble Review [access: 2016-11-21]. Available at: <<http://newramblerreview.com/book-reviews/classics/the-rise-and-rise-of-rome>>. Another note-

First of all, there is the extraordinary person of the author. Apart from the fact that she can read in stone and does not have „a wooden ear stuffed with cotton wool and Cicero’s boring platitudes” as the classical scholar from Herbert’s poem, Mary Beard works at Cambridge, publishes in „The Times Literary Supplement”, writes the blog entitled „A Don’s Life”⁹, comments on the current developments in politics¹⁰ (and more), and does not stay away from social media, either¹¹. Some of her publications include „Classics: A Very Short Introduction” (with J. Henderson, 1995); „The Parthenon” (2002); „The Roman Triumph” (2007); „Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town” (2008), „Confronting the Classics: Traditions, Adventures and Innovations” (2013); „Laughter in Ancient Rome: On Joking, Tickling, and Cracking Up” (2014) and quite a number of other titles. She won great popularity thanks to collaboration with the BBC: many TV viewers were given the opportunity to join Mary Beard and „meet the Romans”¹².

The author is an exceptional researcher, whose fascination with antiquity is unencumbered by unhealthy misconceptions, exaggerations and uncritical affirmations. In an interview, Beard underlines that „es importante no admirar a los romanos. Fueron brutales, si no genocidas incluso”¹³; in another, she admits she would never ever want to live in antiquity. Possessed of tremendous knowledge, she tackles myths and half-truths, taking them apart in a very accessible fashion. What was the incentive behind writing „SPQR”? The author explains it in the preface: „It is driven by a personal curiosity about Roman history, by a convic-

worthy review is Michael Kulikowski’s *They were all foreigners*, *London Review of Books* 38.1, 7 January 2016, pp. 15-16.

⁸ E.g. the following comment: „Perchè Roma ha dominato il mondo? è questa la domanda che si fa l'autrice e investiga la storia romana con grande competenza e dominio delle fonti, ma anche con grande capacità narrativa e divulgativa. davvero un capolavoro di divulgazione, in cui la chiarezza del linguaggio e la capacità di scrittura si conciliano perfettamente con la padronanza dei temi e la capacità di affrontare problemi complessi” by k.oxor, customer of the Italian amazon [online]. Amazon [access: 2016-11-21]. Available at: <<https://www.amazon.it/SPQR-Storia-dellantica-Mary-Beard-ebook/dp/B01G7X1SOA>>.

⁹ *A Don’s Life* [online]. *The Times* [access: 2016-11-21]. Available at: <<http://timesonline.typepad.com/>>.

¹⁰ For instance, Mary Beard commented on Donald Trump’s victory in US presidential elections [online]. *TLS* [access: 2016-11-21]. Available at: <<http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/trump-words-lose-meaning/>>.

¹¹ Mary Beard [online]. *Twitter* [access: 2016-11-21]. Available at: <<https://twitter.com/wmarybeard>>.

¹² *Meet the Romans with Mary Beard* (3 episodes, aired April 17th-May 15th, 2012, BBC). Each episode of the show was watched in Great Britain by approximately 2 million viewers.

¹³ Mary Beard: „Es importante no admirar a los romanos” [online]. *El Periódico* [access: 2016-11-21]. Available at: <<http://www.elperiodico.com/es/noticias/ocio-y-cultura/entrevista-mary-beard-princesa-asturias-5168257>>.

tion that a dialogue with ancient Rome is still well worth having and by the question of how a tiny and very unremarkable little village in central Italy became so dominant a power over so much territory in three continents¹⁴.

„SPQR” comprises a prologue, twelve chapters, epilogue, illustrations, maps, suggested reading, timeline, and an index. In terms of chronology, the work spans the period from the beginnings of Rome (including the legendary element) to 212, the date of the Edict of Caracalla. However, throughout the book one will not find a narrative based solely on recounting so-called historical facts or linguistic analyses of passages from the classics, which would have certainly bored even the most avid reader. The book takes off in 63 BCE, the year which witnessed the conspiracy known as Catiline’s, a figure whom Beard literally calls a terrorist. At any rate, whenever necessary, the author does not refrain from calling spade a spade, blunt though it may appear¹⁵. Beard attempts to untangle the intricacies of the conspiracy „against a grain”¹⁶, but also enlightens the reader as to the contemporary ramifications, observing that „it is a strong hint that, just under the surface of Western politics, the dimly remembered conflict between Cicero and Catiline still acts as a template for our own political struggles and arguments”¹⁷. For this reason, „SPQR” offers examples of the contemporary uses of the incipit of Cicero’s first diatribe against Catiline: „Quousque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra” (quoted by Hungarians protesting against the party of Victor Orbán in 2012¹⁸). In Chapter Two, entitled „In the beginning”, Mary Beard takes a look at the beginnings of Rome from the standpoint of murder – fratricide, brutality and violence, showing the dark side of the history of Rome and undoing the myths. In a way, Beard accounts for it towards the end of the book: „we do the Romans a disservice if we heroise them, as much as we demonise them”¹⁹. The consecutive chapters are an intellectual feast, and a demonstration of how closely myth and history become bound together. Among other things, the reader will find an interesting interpretations of the Law of the Twelve Tablets, the conflict between the patricians and the plebeians, or Roman expansion. Chapter Seven offers a particularly important observation, namely „the empire created the emperors – not the other way round”²⁰. It is that point of

¹⁴ M. Beard, SPQR, pp. 16-17.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 59.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 45.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 51.

¹⁸ See: Cicero’s words still hit this spot [online]. The Times [access: 2016-11-21]. Available at: <http://timesonline.typepad.com/dons_life/2012/02/ciceros-words-still-hit-the-spot.html>.

¹⁹ M. Beard, SPQR, p. 536.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 257.

view which determines the entirety of the narrative. It would be impossible to address even a fraction of the extensive spectrum of issues discussed in „SPQR”, because this vivid tale of Rome is also, or perhaps above all, a story of Romans – their daily affairs and struggles, their life and their death. In the course of the book, we also learn more about Cicero as a person, who mourns the death of his beloved daughter Tulla. The last four chapters are dedicated to selected aspects of the history of Rome, from Augustus to Caracalla. Mary Beard tries to get to the bottom of the phenomenon of Cesar’s adopted son and explain why later emperors so often invoked his memory. When discussing the issue of succession after Augustus, Beard claims that „things did not all go Augustus’ way”²¹. The fourteen emperors who followed are described in one of the last chapters. The author emphasizes that accounts of the „good” and „bad” rulers should be approached with substantial scepticism, but these are not the affairs of succession or stories of the cruelty of emperors that will have the reader riveted. In Chapter Eleven Beard depicts the life of those who enjoyed the possession of estate and chattels and those who had nothing; the question of child labour is raised as well: „skeletons of the very young have been discovered in excavations with clear signs in their bones and joints of hard physical labour”²². Even when we realize that childhood is a much later invention, it is worth remembering that there are still places around the globe where little hands still have to carry heavy stones. The final chapter of the book addresses life outside Rome, the frontiers of the Empire, the role of the army and Christianity. „SPQR” ends with an epilogue entitled „The First Roman Millennium”, in which it is revealed why Rome, though inconsiderable at the outset, grew into the world’s sole superpower. The author accomplished her goal and therefore „SPQR” is in fact a dialogue with Romans rather than a historical study executed in the classical sense. The aspect which leaves me somewhat unsatisfied is absence of a greater number of Latin terms (such as *cursus honorum* and others), but I am aware this is due to the fact that SPQR is not intended exclusively for the fanatic adherents of the „dead language”. As regards the reading list, I would suggest adding Miroslaw Kocur’s „We władzy teatru”, which the author could not have known, since its English translation will be published only in early 2017 by Peter Lang publishers (in the series „Interdisciplinary Studies in Performance”).

²¹ Ibidem, p. 374. Regarding succession see the most recent book by Paweł Sawiński, *Sukcesja władzy cesarskiej w okresie rządów dynastii julijsko-klaudyjskiej* (30 p.n.e.-68 n.e.), Poznań 2016 (in Polish, summary in English).

²² M. Beard, SPQR, p. 448.

In my private ranking of contemporary books concerned with ancient Rome, „SPQR” takes the third place, right after „Historia Rzymu” by Adam Ziółkowski²³ and the unparalleled, never-to-be-dethroned „L’Empire gréco-romain” by Paul Veyne²⁴. An undoubted asset of „SPQR” is the vivid language (no translation will match the pleasure of reading the original), dynamic narrative and contemporary references. The book is written from a perspective of a person living in the 21st century, therefore deliberations on Romanization, Roman citizenship and a society relying on „others” feel very relevant today, when Europe is struggling with the so-called migration crisis. The references to the present day are a genuine advantage of the book rather than a shortcoming of any kind. Jacek Bocheński is right in observing that „we are, by default, thinking subjects anchored in the present day, and our contemporaneity is an obvious starting point for all our references to history”²⁵. Consequently, I would recommend „SPQR” to all enthusiasts of antiquity as well as those for whom its study is not a tedious pursuit, but a refreshing discovery.

²³ Poznań 2008 (in Polish). International readers may opt for *Storia di Roma*, Milano 2000.

²⁴ Paris-Seuil, 2005, 876 p. Polish edition: *Imperium grecko-rzymskie*, transl. by P. Domański, Kęty 2008.

²⁵ J. Bocheński, *Antyk po antyku*, Warszawa 2014, p. 34.