

Mary Beard: A don's life | Column

Classics in Zurich

By [Mary Beard](#)



I am just back from three days in Zurich, where I gave a lecture plus workshops on “where Classics is now - and where it might be in half a century”. The attendees ranged from pre-undergraduate to faculty members, via former master’s and PhD students who were now high school teachers, and current students doing a whole range of subjects in ancient and modern history and literature - plus some interested visitors, friends and relations.



It was, in some ways, a stamina performance: two hours of lecture and questions on Thursday evening, four hours of workshop on Friday, eight hours on Saturday (including lunch, I admit). But there was a real benefit from this total immersion, in getting to know the students and in keeping the momentum of argument up. If you are trying to get a “group” feeling with people you have never met before, this is the best way of doing it.

There was plenty to discuss, and for me it was especially interesting to talk about this subject outside the UK or USA, because the idea of what Classics as a subject is, and the disciplinary divisions that define it, are very different from country to country. Classics as a combination of Greek and Roman language and literature, philosophy, history, art and archaeology and linguistics was really a UK invention in the nineteenth century, largely but not entirely adopted in the USA. It really doesn’t exist in France, for example, where you would struggle to find many libraries in which you could easily put books on Tacitus next to books on Roman art. And Classics is not the same as “German-style” Classical Philology (which is very focused on Greek and Latin literature) or even the wider *Altertumswissenschaft*.

So, I was keen to find out how “the crisis in Classics”, or the call to “burn it all down”, was discussed in Switzerland. Actually, it turns out that it is not all that different from the UK. The students had done a lot of work on the current critiques of the subject, and had watched the notorious debate on “[The Future of Classics](#)” at the Society of Classical Studies conference in San Diego in 2019 (out of which few people came out well, and some badly). They had many of the same concerns, and they were keen to discuss misogyny, white supremacy, far-right politics and the implications of these for studying the ancient world.

We had good discussions on [Winckelmann](#). I was determined to say that he is not to be “blamed” (as he often is) for the admiration of white sculpture, which goes back to Renaissance debates about colour and form. Instead, the main issue (for many of the attendees, as for me) was his claim that the *ideal* form of man was a version of the “[Apollo Belvedere](#)” - because that was soon used to construct racist hierarchies of the human form, with the Apollo at the top of the pyramid. But it wasn’t just Winckelmann. We also talked about the image of rape in antiquity, and especially the rape of Lucretia (and how it appears in modern Latin textbooks). And loads more.

My abiding memory, however, will probably be of the fluency in English of all the participants. Okay, they were a self-selected group (and very few who were not fluent were likely to sign up for two days of workshop in English), and a handful were part-native speakers. But all the same, it made me realize just how tongue-tied I was myself. I can read and pretty well understand spoken German, but to actually construct an argument in German myself (in anything other than the present indicative) wasn’t what I had ever been taught. In fact, when I learned Italian at school, we were explicitly told that the point of the lessons was to enable us to read Dante. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity, but it left me with a weird vocabulary and a lot of catching up to do.

I am truly in awe of the young (and old) Swiss.

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