

## ***The Golden Bough* as the handmaiden of colonialism? A response to Mary Beard**

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*Abstract.* This paper responds to Mary Beard's assessment of the claim that Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* was popular because it provided practical aid for colonialists. Beard rejects this as an inadequate explanation: reference to colonialism is part of an adequate explanation, but a full explanation must go beyond this particularism. I present two objections to the case she makes for her inadequacy conclusion, though I don't think his book aided much with colonialism.

*Draft version:* Version 1 (November 5<sup>th</sup> 2022)

*Tissue in washing machine mists*

*But I sense this game exists!*

The question of whether anthropology was the handmaiden of colonialism – a discipline which served colonial projects – has been discussed for a few decades now, by anthropologists and historians of anthropology (Mair 1978). Also Mary Beard, now well-known as a television popularizer of classics but who probably does not qualify as either, made a contribution to the topic. She wrote on the popularity of Sir James Frazer's book *The Golden Bough*:

We rarely think very carefully about why we continue to buy *The Golden Bough*, and still less about the process by which the book gained its classic status in the years between its first publication and Frazer's death. (1992: 213)

There are different questions which this quotation gives rise to, one of which is why the book was popular in Frazer's lifetime. That is a question which Beard focuses on. An answer she

considers is: “Its close relationship to British colonialism – that is what explains its popularity.” Beard argues that this explanation is inadequate in itself, though its relationship to colonialism is part of an adequate explanation – one has to take into account other things apart from its relationship to colonialism. This paper responds to Beard’s arguments for her inadequacy conclusion. But before doing so, it clarifies the explanation she judges inadequate.

### **Clarifying the colonialist answer: the obvious way**

“Its close relationship to colonialism – that is what explains its popularity”: a natural response to this “colonialist” answer is to ask for some elaboration of the close relationship. What exactly was involved? Here is an obvious clarification:

- (i) At the time when *The Golden Bough* was published, there was a large British empire.
- (ii) There were a lot of people involved in working for this empire, such as in government departments, in businesses, etc.
- (iii) *The Golden Bough* provided information for these people to aid with their projects
- (iv) The fact that it provided this information explains why it was popular.

Beard presents this obvious clarification, albeit not this explicitly. She also quotes a friend of Frazer who says, “many mistakes would have been avoided... if more attention had been paid to the knowledge which Sir James has revealed of habits, customs and traditional beliefs.” (1992: 217)

And Beard notes a second link to the British colonial project, which I shall mostly pass over, except in the next part of my paper, which I suppose is just some fun for literary analysts: that it provided an “image” of the British colonial project as a whole. I cannot at present see that it provided this image. (By the way, she tends to use “imperial” rather than colonial.)

### **Beard's objections: but to what exactly...**

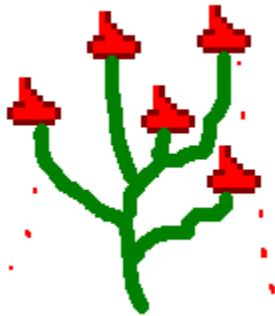
This is part of Beard's final paragraph of her section on colonialism – it identifies her target and makes a first objection to it:

The extraordinary popularity of *The Golden Bough* cannot depend solely, however, on the book's reassuring projection of British imperialism. First, Frazer's work was not particularly distinctive in this respect. Most late Victorian anthropological literature was concerned at some level with negotiating and justifying the role of British white imperialism. Frazer might have surpassed his contemporaries in the breadth of his geographical coverage or in the number and range of primitive customs that he managed to include. But he did not create a new or unique link between anthropology and the politics of the British empire.

(1992: 217)

Regarding the opening sentence of this quotation: I interpret Beard to also be objecting to the colonialist answer on the obvious (i)-(iv) clarification above, because otherwise "What are her objections to this answer?" beyond the minor complaint that it omits a second and subtle link to colonialism; but the opening sentence does not encourage this interpretation. Taken literally, it sounds more focused on the second link which she identifies. (A strange section structure: present the obvious thesis that the book provided practical aid for British colonialists, hence its popularity; then present a second and subtler link to the colonial project; then focus on this subtler link and object to it as providing an explanation, forgetting about the obvious thesis! Nevertheless, I feel there is also something familiar about the image-providing thesis and this accompanying structure, as if one carries around memories of a college video game with content

like “On this planet, use the thesis to open the gate and the structure to sort out the nose bleeds”!)



### **Beard’s first objection: nothing new here**

The crudest version of Beard’s first objection to the colonialist answer is this: there is nothing new in *The Golden Bough*. Probably this is too strong a claim for her (1992: 209), but I cannot see any gain here with working with a less crude version. Here is a reconstruction of her objection as an argument, starting from two premises:

- (1) If there is no new information in *The Golden Bough*, then we cannot adequately explain its popularity at the time by saying that it provided practical aid for colonialists.
- (2) There is no new information in *The Golden Bough*.

Therefore (by modus ponens):

- (3) We cannot adequately explain the popularity of *The Golden Bough* by saying that it provided practical aid for colonialists.

I should say that the second part of premise (1) is, more fully, “then we cannot adequately explain its popularity at the time by saying that it provided practical aid for colonialists, or elaborating this point – something else is needed.” And “colonialists” refers to Europeans abroad aiming to extend or maintain European empires, the focus here being chiefly on the British.

The conclusion follows from the premises, but premise (1) is doubtful. Even if there is no

new information, the book could nevertheless be an achievement as a practical aid for colonialists because it presents the information in any given earlier source in more accessible form, in terms of vocabulary or ordering of its content; or because it gathers together information that was scattered in many sources (and perhaps difficult to find sources, for your average British colonialist). Regarding the accessible form, the opening pages of *The Golden Bough* at least are breathtakingly well-written but it is easy to get lost in the text, so the claim of accessible form is not a straightforward one to justify. Regarding the gathering-together point, there is a case for this. Examine Frazer's references: I suspect what he tells you about a single country, say, was hard to find! Why wouldn't the gathering-together point be enough to explain its popularity, even if none of the information was new?

I think Beard's first objection should not convince someone who accepts the colonialist answer. The objection would only work in a simplified economist's model in which all previously existing information was known by everyone and sure to be used where relevant.

### **Beard's second objection: non-empire stuff**

This is the second objection she presents:

Second, *The Golden Bough* covers many topics that lie quite outside the ethnography of the British colonies. The savage customs of the empire's inhabitants are certainly prominent in the book but so also (as I have already stressed) is the world of classical antiquity, as well as the folk traditions of rural Britain. No explanation of the book's success can be satisfactory if it fails to take account of the distinctive combination of themes woven together by Frazer...

And this is my attempt to reconstruct this objection as an argument, again starting from two

premises.

- (1) If *The Golden Bough* includes a significant amount of information which is not about the natives of British colonies, then we cannot adequately explain its popularity at the time by saying that it provided practical aid for colonialists.
- (2) *The Golden Bough* includes a significant amount of information which is not about the natives of British colonies.

Therefore (by modus ponens)

- (3) We cannot adequately explain its popularity at the time by saying that it provided practical aid for colonialists.

With this argument as well, premise (1) is a weak point. I present two doubts.

(a) *The still-buying doubt*. The first doubt assumes that popularity is to be measured in terms of sales, which is a way that Beard herself encourages – see the quotation early on in this paper. If I am a British colonialist and I regard this book as having useful information for me on the natives, how much of it do I have to find useful before I buy? Let's say 50%, though that seems high. Even if half of it does not matter to me at all, I am still going to buy that book. And Beard is still going to say that it is popular, because she is using sales as a measure! So one can explain its popularity purely in terms of its being an aid for colonialists even if there is a significant part of it which is not about natives of the British empire territories. The person who accepts the obvious colonialist answer is not going to be persuaded by Beard's second objection, because they will just reject premise (1).

(b) *The similarity-of-savages doubt*. Frazer's theoretical framework says that there is a single sequence of evolution from savage to civilized, with different societies at different stages of the journey (– all capable of it by the way; there is no claim that the biology of some races

prevents this). Two societies at the same stage will be the same in a number of important respects. This commitment is what allows Frazer to use contemporary societies to shed light on an ancient rite. It also makes information from outside the British colonies relevant to people working in those colonies. Beard's second objection overlooks Frazer's entire theoretical framework and how it entails that information which is about some other people or society is relevant! She does not argue that readers rejected the framework. If not, here is a predictable reaction: "Savages are basically the same. Even if these pages are about savages in Cambodia, which is not a British colony, it is still useful to me, a British colonialist."

### **A final remark**

If someone thinks *The Golden Bough* was popular because it provided practical aid for colonialists, I don't think Beard's arguments against should convince them. But I find it strange to think that *The Golden Bough* was much of an aid. The reliability of its sources is famously disputed (Marett 1923: 107; Gluckman 1965: 20) and, in much of the text, it moves so quickly from one society to another. Even granting the evolutionist theoretical framework, it seems to me a sustained focus on fewer societies would be much more helpful.

**References.** Beard, M. 1992. Frazer, Leach, and Virgil: The Popularity (and Unpopularity) of the Golden Bough. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34 (2): 203-224.

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