

Ceremony to award Professor Mary Beard an honorary doctorate

Saló de Cent, Barcelona Town Hall

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 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.

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.

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.”



«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.

Josep A. Planell