

Beard's Roman Women

by [Martin Phipps](#)

Consider the following piece of advice from a 72-year-old Anthony Burgess, and ask yourself how much all this is genuinely stern, stentorian, man-to-man-type stuff, and how much it's just a parody of the same, with a smile hiding behind the blunt, unflinching gravitas:

Youth ends early and it ends with marriage. Lissom girls soon become steatopygous monsters. Men pine, grow thin but pot-bellied and have red noses. They get drunk and a wife in curlers waits with the rolling-pin. Ruined males sigh after pretty seaside girls while fat wives look thunder. There is nothing tragic about all this frustration: this is what life is, and the sooner you settle into a deprived middle age the better. As for sex, beer, football, and carrier pigeons are an adequate substitute. (*One Man's Chorus: The Uncollected Writings*, 152)

But even if this imperturbably square-on acceptance of the unhappy career of the typical (or stereotypical) male libido can be taken as Burgess's definitive feelings on the subject, one would have to conclude that it came to him late in life (the essay excerpted dates from 1989), because when he wrote *Beard's Roman Women* in the summer of 1975, beginning with the frankly autobiographical premise of a 50-year-old widower suddenly at relational loose ends in the late 60s, the prospect of "a deprived middle age" being "what life is" was, to judge from the text, much more problematic—no role to easily and philosophically "settle into"—and resulted in his rich little comedy about a mediocre script-writer named Ronald Beard, who finds himself stuck in Rome while a lot of jarring opposites—sex versus platonic love, past versus present, reality versus fantasy, life versus death—contend for his attention, with not a carrier pigeon or a soccer match in sight.

Compact and frequently slapstick in its comedy though it is, the novel also succeeds as a substantial meditation on marriage, memory, and the meaning of civilizations, large and small—the big public national ones and the small private domestic ones formed between two people out of love or camaraderie, each with their respective set of words, symbols and referents, their "complex semiotics" that is so hard to translate or transplant, in time as well as in space. Beard loses his wife to liver cirrhosis after two and a half decades of marriage, and feels, despite an exhilarating new sexual relationship with a woman 20-odd years his junior, the absence of something irreplaceable: "The end of a marriage, whether through the death of life or of love, was also the end of a civilization. More than 26 years spent in constructing a mythology, a joint memory-book, a language, a signalling system of grunt and touch—all gone, wasted" (*Beard's Roman Women*, 38) ; "No more nuances of speech, then, no codes, no

shared culture of diet, jokes, memories, quotations”(39). Between Welsh wife and Italian lover, there are few resemblances, and nothing from the old relationship can be carried over into the new one to enrich it: “Beard remembered that he and Leonora had had a salve for any careless wound one gave to the other’s self-esteem. An ‘unpremeditated ’urt,’ they would call it. Try explaining that to Paola. ‘Well, you see, tesoro, the last line of the Shelley stanza mentions unpremeditated art, and that’s meant to rhyme with wert, do you see, do you see?’”(40). Still, reasons Beard, what’s gone is gone, and his new present offers substantial compensations—namely “the international language of sex,” which, however, in the way that it needs no “shared culture” or “nuances of speech” to make its point, “was no language at all.” If this isn’t clear enough to Beard early in the book, the point is later driven home by one of the four Roman girls who “rape” him, when she tells him “there won’t be any language problem” during the immanent orgy: “Not that there’ll be any need for language. Sublinguistic activity, let’s call it”(87). The fact that the sex that ensues is coercive and impersonal—paradoxically non-intimate—and occurs in an apartment stripped of all its furniture, all its private mementos and associations, makes Beard wish for more familiar, homelier pleasures: “He had a sudden great longing for some roast Welsh lamb, mint sauce, and

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(92). Clearly, a real civilization—whether domestic or national—depends for its integrity on the solidities of place and presence and a shared knowledge of a common past, or else it becomes a debased parody of the real thing. The trivialized, stereotyped versions of international cuisine and costume offered on Beard’s flight to the U.S. are an example of this, as are the scripts Beard himself writes—with their literary premises dumbed-down and sexed-up for TV and the popular stage. A culture, it is implied, only discloses its real riches to intimates—to habitués, not tourists—and so when the language of intimacy, the endearments of lovers and friends—the dialect of particular civilizations, so to speak—are overheard by outsiders in the book, they always strike them as absurd. Beard, for example, snorts at the “Prrrrrp” that was Paola’s former pet-name for P.R. Pathan, her estranged husband; Beard’s old drinking buddy from Malay, Gregory Gregson, makes jokes in Malay that Beard catches and delights in Beard’s recitations of comic versions of Christmas carols written in their youth, but to onlookers in the bar, he’s just some silly foreign drunk. True cosmopolitanism, a truly inclusive cultural mindset, the suggestions seems, is a difficult feat, and failures to achieve it fill the book: Pathan the English-educated West Indian (with his preposterously effete patrician accent) hates blacks, and although he briefly hitches up with a gorgeous black model who is “the ultimate in the glamour of the great world, golden deprovincializer of shoddy Rome or Venice or Florence” and full of “cosmopolitan insolence”(33), he ultimately returns to Paola and his old prejudices; Beard’s venture with Paola fails and he finally returns to Welsh cooking and domesticity in England, “tied to one tongue as to one cuisine and one insular complex of myths”(119); Greg Greg remains cheerfully racist throughout the book; Europeans regard Britons as stereotypical “fish and chip and beer consumers...[and] football rowdies” (30) and are regarded as wogs, wops and Eyetie bints in return; and the aptest anthem for the whole book (though it has countless musical references) is the singing of the

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at the Trasteverine “annual self-glorification...called the

Festa de Noi Altri

, meaning the feast of us others, us ourselves, none else, blast you.” The locals of Trastevere, it is noted, are “very keen on regional loyalty”(64), and since it is from their ranks that the

impressive poet Belli emerges, the implicit conclusion may be that, pace Ezra Pound, regionalism is the inescapable prerequisite for a vital civilization, and a modern global culture (such as ours is increasingly becoming) is likely to be as insipid as “Esperanto and Volapük”(38), a far cry from the “days of the lovers of Leman”(30), when peripatetic Englishmen like Shelley and Byron held high places in European culture. (Shelley, indeed, is buried in Rome.)

In addition to these reflections on civilizations big and little, the book dramatizes another set of ideas, ones that address the uncanny persistence of the personal past—the way in which private echoes can stubbornly reiterate, whether one likes it or not, paths and people one has known and then seen superseded. Amid imagery of ghosts, revenants, doppelgangers, and Gothic monsters, old friends and lovers cross Beard's path in Rome, often forcing him to revisit long-standing views of himself and his life. Beard spends almost the entire book in near-pathological guilt over what he regards as his wilful neglect of his first wife, whose alcoholism he did nothing to discourage, even when it became terminal. “I've failed in charity, knowingly, deliberately”(114), he eventually confesses to a psychiatrist, and the confession affords him some limited relief, but before this, in Rome, guilt haunts him as he tries to start a new life with Paola: and the haunting takes on apparently literal form as he begins receiving phone-calls from what sounds like his dead wife Leonora, insisting she hasn't really died and wants to resume their old relationship. Beard, after his new love Paola briefly leaves him for work in Israel, finds himself painfully alone—the victim of the “so closed, even incestuous”(38) institution of marriage, which excludes other intimacies, and an intensely solitary profession, the combination of which leaves him with no close connection to any other human being, until Greg Greg turns up out of the blue. The result is that a mood of unreality imbues this part of the book, subtly rendered and relieved by flashes of humour but nonetheless eerie. Beard intermittently doubts the existence of Paola (““There,”” he says after thumb-tacking up some photographs she has taken. ““She's here now. She's with me. She exists””(67)). He suspects acts—in particular the act of love—may be capable of “indenting the natural order”(36) with possible supernatural consequences. He “be[gins] to understand...about ghosts”(13), and registers the fact of numerous doubles and doppelgangers among his acquaintances: there are two Paolas (one his lover, the other his “rapist”), two Pathans (the second of whom Greg Greg knows, in Malaya), two Leonoras (the one on the phone and the one in the past), two Miriams (the lissom young one and the cancerous older one) and two Bellis (the surname of Paola and the dead poet—who himself has two translators, Beard and a restaurant guitarist Beard meets). Greg Greg's name is an echo of itself, and, when on the brink of death (or imagining himself to be so), Beard undergoes a mirror-image of the experience of his dying wife Leonora—he falls down in the Roman street under a statue of Belli, and sees Rome reflected in the rain (and, in fact, mirror images of Rome, in the form of photographs of rainy Roman pavements, interspersed the text in the original edition). “The dead shall live, the living die”(124) runs the line of Dryden that Beard hears sung at the end of the book, and its image of opposites surreally commingling is apt: the past and the present keep wanting to change places during the story, as do two sets of women—the women Beard has actual dealings with during the course of the narrative, and their imaginary, often mnemonic, fantasy doubles that enliven—and sometimes threaten to imperil—his mental universe.

Since these many women do hold eponymous pride of place among the book's characters, they call for a closer examination. An essay called "The Art of Liking Rome"(1984) may aid in this, because in it Burgess mentions Rome and women in almost the same breath:

I have towards...Rome an ambivalent attitude which I cannot easily classify. It is compounded of physical lust, loathing, possessive passion, affectionate exasperation, jealousy—all the attributes of a sexual relationship. Cities being feminine...men feel more strongly about them than women. To a woman a city is an emporium, something to use. A man is used by it, bought, sold, sometimes enslaved. (*One Man's Chorus*, 65)

It's worth noting that the emotional responses Burgess has toward Rome here are precisely the ones that Beard exhibits during his stay—when he is very much more acted upon ("used") than himself an actor. After all, it is Paola who initiates their sexual relationship, commands him to stay behind when she leaves for Israel, orders him to submit to radically changed living arrangements when he returns, and then breaks off their relationship when she believes Beard is still married. Apart from some ineffectual blustering about marriage and their future, he is largely passive through it all. And Paola is not the only agent that acts upon Beard P.R. Pathan strips his flat of all its possessions, and the four modern-day Maenads strip him of all his clothing and most of his dignity; and it is Greg Greg, in his hearty heedless way, who restarts their drinking friendship. Beard himself does do some shopping, some cooking, and some writing, but the big things seem to be beyond him: he can't even successfully commit suicide. He is powerless, within the great "feminine" thing called Rome, against the female energies that beset him. This fact is driven home, without pity, by another of his Roman women: the middle-aged Miriam, an old lover of his who has been a mere masturbatory memory until he coincidentally runs in to her in an airport and learns that she is dying of cancer, and also that she is his tough-minded, unsentimental opposite. Beard, endlessly burbling "*tesoro mio*" and "*a more*

" to Paola while scorning her political activism, is scorned in his turn by Miriam for being a fantasist "scared of life"(74), who lets women go off to war while he sits at home writing about Shelley and Byron, who were escapists like him, she says, and very unlike Mary Shelley: "It took a woman to make a Frankenstein monster. Evil, cancer, corruption, pollution, the lot. She was the only one of the lot of them who knew about life.... [W]hat in God's name do you know about life?"(75). By this point in the book, poor beleaguered Beard knows one thing, at any rate, about life in Rome: it is not for him. It's a hostile, poisonous place, and he needs to escape it. Seen as a symbol here, Rome the city (a word of course derived from the Latin *civitas*

) links with the idea of marriage as a civilization, to suggest a dead culture that somehow goes malingering on into the present, like Beard's marriage to Leonora: "when a civilization died, it became as evil as rotted meat" (38), which would explain why Beard's early impressions of Rome were that it was "venal" and "cruel"(7). After he returns to England and remarries into the culture with which a lifetime of marriage has made him familiar and regains some lost happiness, the contrasting imagery is apt: "Mrs Ceridwen Beard served a special dinner [of]...a piece of beef and a small chicken cooked slowly together with leeks, onions, carrots, potatoes in

good meat stock..."(109). The tone of the closing pages of the book, although they include a medical diagnosis that leaves Beard with little time to live, is comparatively serene and suggests he has gained a certain

rapprochement

with his past; and even though one particular "voice" from it continues to speak to him, now it is humorously indulged and pitied, not feared.

And so if Beard, unlike Burgess the elderly essayist, can't quite look without flinching on "what life is," he does at least eventually come to terms in some measure with his own woes, and his women.

