

Classicist confronts critic in war of words

When A.A. Gill criticised her scruffy appearance on a TV show, Cambridge professor Mary Beard responded in style. But did she react too sensitively to the reviewer's harsh pen?



CLASSICS
ENGLISH & MEDIA

In one corner, we have A.A. Gill, feared critic and friend to controversy. In the other, Mary Beard, the Cambridge professor famous for bringing Classics to the masses. In a very public spat, the two are well-matched opponents.

Their dispute began last week, when Gill gave *Meet the Romans* – Beard's latest television documentary – a less than enthusiastic review. His venom was not just directed at the show's portrayal of Rome. Its 57-year-old presenter, he wrote, 'should be kept away from the cameras altogether. She's this far from being the subject of a Channel Four dating documentary.'

The quip was a barely-veiled reference to *The Undateables* – a show which follows the love lives of people with facial disfigurements.

Beard was not impressed by the attack. And yesterday – inspired, perhaps, by the gruesome revenge scenes so common in classical tragedy – she published a cut-



Television critic A.A. Gill and his new nemesis, Mary Beard © Getty Images

ting response to his 'misogynistic pen'. 'Men like Gill are frightened of smart women who speak their minds', she wrote. 'Even the greenest of my students would not present me with an essay as ill-argued and off the point as Gill's critique'.

If that is a fair assessment, Gill should be blushing: he has been perfecting his acid-tongued art for years. Along the way, he has racked up an impressive list of enemies. From the Welsh ('pugnacious little trolls') to Norfolk ('the hernia on the end of England') to Gordon Ramsay ('a second-rate human being'), very little escapes his wrath.

Two years ago, sports presenter Clare Balding joined that list when Gill described her as a 'dyke on a bike.' Furious, she complained to the Press Complaints Commission. It agreed that in judging her on her sexuality rather than on the quality of her work, Gill had crossed a line.

That argument, however, is not likely to

worry the renegade critic. In 2010 – when attacking Beard's appearance in another television show – he seemed confident that his words weren't sexist or irrelevant. 'If you are going to invite yourself into the front rooms of the living,' he wrote, 'then you need to make an effort.'

IN FOR A GILLING?

Some argue that Gill has a point. Television, they say, is all about show: both the men and women who appear on it should be easy on the eye. By taking a TV job, Beard buys into that superficial world. She should not complain when she is judged by its standards.

Others think Gill's attack is a symptom of something darker. Men, they say, aren't told to get off the telly for having grey hair and a few wrinkles. Gill's review perpetuates the sexist approach of women being judged not on personality or intellect, but physical attractiveness. It must not go unchallenged.

Q & A

Q Why should I care about this?

A Good question. Some pundits have argued that Mary Beard would have been wiser to ignore Gill's comments. By responding to him, they say, she just draws attention to a man who makes a living from being controversial and cruel.

Q What would her other options be?

A She could have made a complaint to the the PCC about Gill – in fact, an incredible 63 complaints have already been made against the writer. Some worry, however, that taking this step has a harmful effect on journalism as a whole. Being able to say risky and sometimes insulting things, many say, is essential to press freedom. If journalists are worried about action being

taken against them, they might become reluctant to criticise indiscretions from politicians and others in power.

SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Today's media is completely sexist.'

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

Gruesome revenge – The tragedies of Ancient Greece and Rome are packed with bloody examples of revenge. In one particularly grim tale, King Atreus of Mycenae discovers that Thyestes, his brother, has slept with his wife. He not only kills his brother's sons, but bakes them in a pie and feeds them to their father –

before revealing the true ingredients of the meal by unveiling the dead boys' hands and feet.

Greenest – Although usually used to refer to the colour, the word 'green' can also describe someone young and inexperienced. This meaning is a reference to the greenness of shoots or branches that are just emerging from the soil.

Press Complaints Commission

– The PCC is the regulatory body for British newspapers and magazines. Publications join the body, and commit voluntarily to its codes of practice in areas like accuracy, privacy and discrimination. If someone makes a complaint to the PCC, members decide whether it is justified: if a publication has broken the code, they must respond appropriately – with a written correction, for example, or letter of apology. The PCC does not issue financial penalties.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is television too focused on looks and attractiveness?
2. Should journalists have the right to say cruel and upsetting things?

ACTIVITIES

1. In groups, think of three jobs in which it *would* be acceptable to consider the looks of potential employees – and justify your decisions.

2. Think of a television programme that you found particularly unenjoyable. Write a scathing and witty review of it.

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 NOTES

