

## ***The Golden Bough* and colonialism: on Mary Beard's other relationship**

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*Abstract.* Mary Beard considers the thesis that Frazer's book *The Golden Bough* was popular because it provided practical aid for colonialists. But she introduces another relationship between the book and British colonialism: that it provided an image of the British colonial project as a whole. I present two objections to the proposal that there was this relationship, as well as – in the appendix – flagging a concern about the internal coherence of Beard's paper with the introduced relationship.

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*“Against the king in times of need:*

*The West African and the Swede!”*

What is the relationship of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* to British colonialism? A proposal is this: it provided practical aid with colonial projects, such as governing natives. Mary Beard considers this thesis but draws our attention to another relationship, or at least one she believes in:

But we should not understand *The Golden Bough's* links with empire and imperialism just in practical terms. By laying out within a single framework the various customs of the different parts of the empire, Frazer provided for his readers a useful image of the British imperial enterprise: He offered a manageable way of re-presenting imperial subjects to their masters. (1992: 217)

I am not fully sure what Beard has in mind here, but my guess is that the book apparently provided a representation of the British empire as a whole, rather than focusing on just one colony or a few. I shall make two objections to this claim, as well as flagging a concern about internal coherence in the appendix.

*Objection 1: other stuff.* There is a lot of other material in *The Golden Bough* apart from information about British colonies, most obviously about Ancient Greece. This would not be a problem if it was neatly separated out – or if it were neatly separated out! – in a chapter which says, “Non-British material,” for example, but it is all mixed together. It looks as if Frazer groups his examples together not by place of origin but by the practice that they illustrate, taking examples from all over the place based on whether they are instances of that practice, such as the practice of beating or killing the king in times of scarcity, or disposing of him: Swedes do it, West Africans do it, the people of Loango do it, the Burgundians did it, and more (1894: 47).

*Objection 2: the extraction problem.* There are several volumes of the book and even abridged versions come in multiple long volumes. That raises the problem of how this book can provide an image of the British empire as a whole if it is very difficult to form an image of the book’s contents as a whole. A sidepoint: this objection reminds me of a question which has been raised about Jean-Paul Sartre’s lengthy study *L’Idiot de la famille*, even to the point that “we” can just use my second objection to Beard instead, rather than puzzling over “totalize”:

How could *L’Idiot* totalize Flaubert if the reader could not totalize *L’Idiot*?

(Champigny 1972: 4)

## **Appendix**

Beard does not think its relationship to British colonialism can explain the popularity of

Frazer's famous book, one of her reasons being the following:

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 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... (1992: 217)

There is a difficulty in reconciling:

- (a) Beard's interpretation of the book's relationship to British colonialism – beyond any practical value, it provided an image of the British empire as a whole;
- (b) A reason she gives for why one cannot explain the book's popularity at the time in terms of its relationship to colonialism – there is all this other stuff.

If there is all this other stuff, how can it provide this image of the British empire as a whole?

## 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.

Champigny, R. 1972. Trying to Understand L'Idiot. *Diacritics* 2 (2): 2-6.

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