

## **Further responses to Mary Beard on Frazer and colonialism, with M\*I\*n K\*nd\*ra**

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*Abstract.* There are some further responses I have to Mary Beard on the relationship between Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and British colonialism: her claim that it provided an image of the empire as a whole. The paper contains two objections, very minor ones perhaps, and some highly speculatively defences. But I find the defences difficult to present in the traditional manner, so I have written the responses as a pastiche imitating a widely read European writer.

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*Behold a cake*

*From the remaining cornflake*

Tamina is sitting on the beach of the children's island, gazing at the waves. She is thinking to herself, or that is what she appears to be doing. I don't know and it does not matter. A beautiful young girl walks down and sits next to Tamina. She arches her knees just like Tamina and imitates her posture and expression. She waits for a response. Tamina registers the imitation, but passes over it in silence. Then the girl speaks.

"What is the relationship of *The Golden Bough* to colonialism?" she says, breaking with her imitation and trying to sound like a British professor.

Tamina is silent. She does not want to be here. The girl continues. "The relationship is not only that it provided a practical aid for colonialists, with governing the natives. It also provided an image, an image of the empire as a whole, a representation of the empire as a whole,

in words!” The girl is immensely proud of her statement.

Tamina remembers *The Golden Bough*. She had to study its opening pages as an ideal example of British prose, in her home town of Prague.<sup>1</sup> “*The Golden Bough* is about an ancient rite. A brutal rite. Why did that rite happen?” she replies.

“It provided an image of British colonialism!” asserts the girl-professor aggressively. She is so short compared to Tamina and decades younger, yet so bossy. “It reported the customs of all the different peoples of the empire.”

“If someone wrote a book doing that, they would just call it *The British Empire and Its Peoples*. It’s so hard to do. And then it’s confusing for readers, with its opening!”

Suddenly the girl gets up and walks towards a mound of sand, or what seems to be a mound of sand. She starts dusting away sand, golden grains of sand. There is a copy of Frazer’s famous book beneath the sand, a New York edition. And a spectacles case as well. The girl opens the spectacles case and wears the glasses. She quotes from the opening: “Page 6: ‘It remains to try whether the survey of a wider field may not yield us the clue we seek.’ That is British for: I am going to provide a survey of our whole empire. No one was confused, only you.” The girl decides that something more is needed for her message to be received: “Tamina, you are really stupid!”

Tamina feels a strong desire to attack, but suppresses it, favouring a question instead: “Why did he not just call it *The British Empire and its Peoples* and cut out the ancient rite stuff? Isn’t that what anyone who made a survey would do?”

“Tamina, do I have to explain everything to you? Are you the stupidest person in the

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<sup>1</sup> I recall reading that Bronislaw Malinowski was presented with the whole *The Golden Bough* like this, in his homeland. But I don’t think it is a very good representation of the British literary tradition, because it seems very untypical, though I really like the opening.

world? People tried that and it always failed and then the clever British realized that you have to proceed indirectly.”

Tamina refuses to be taught by this girl, who would say anything to defend her views. “No, it’s not about the British empire. It’s about an ancient rite. There was a tree in a grove and to become the high priest of the goddess Diana you had to, you had to...”

“Shut up, Tamina!” the girl shouted.

“You had to be a runaway slave and break off a branch of the tree.”

“Shut up, Tamina!”

“And that entitled you to a fight to the death with the current priest. There’s a painting by Turner.”

“o do shut up, Tamina! That painting is unspeakable!”

Tamina has had enough. She begins to chase the girl. There will be a punishment for this, but she does not care. She will be not be lectured to by this child.

## References

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