

Two retellings of the *Iliad*

The blood was up

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Pat Barker

THE SILENCE OF THE GIRLS
336pp. Hamish Hamilton. £18.99.
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Michael Hughes

COUNTRY
314pp. John Murray. Paperback, £12.99.
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Rose Byrne as Briseis in *Troy* (2004)

Two new novels rewrite Homer's *Iliad*, exploring male attempts to possess women and land. For Pat Barker, this represents a departure from her previous work, not only because *The Silence of the Girls* is set in ancient Troy, rather than the battlefields of the First World War or the back alleys of north-east England, but because it involves a shift of perspective. To echo Virginia Woolf's praise for "the man-womanly mind of Shakespeare", I have long admired the ~~womanly man~~ mind of Barker. In *The Ghost Road* (1995), for example, she makes us see ~~the blue vein on a woman's breast~~ through the eyes of a sex-starved soldier. In *The Silence of the Girls* she attempts the reverse exercise, namely to give voice to a woman who has, quite literally, become a possession: Briseis, the slave over whom Achilles and Agamemnon fall out. Her rewriting is part of a well-established trend (think Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* or Carol Ann Duffy's *The World's Wife*), yet Barker takes on the task with unusual seriousness and a sense of uncertainty.

Narration from the point of view of Briseis raises some technical difficulties, since she cannot know many of the events Homer recounts. Barker gets around the problem by having her enter rooms unnoticed or eavesdrop from behind closed doors. Still, as the narrative develops, Briseis' perspective recedes and Barker ends up writing entire chapters in the third person. This allows her to stay closer to Homer and yields some of the best pages in the novel.

The unfortunate truth, though, is that Briseis fails to reach us even when she reports on what she is best placed to know. The central question of the novel – what happens to her once Achilles consents to handing her over to Agamemnon – is hardly answered: "Nothing I hadn't been expecting" ~~is all~~ Briseis tells us. When, later on, Achilles asks her, she chooses to remain silent, neither confirming nor refuting Agamemnon's own claim that he never touched her. As for the effects of Agamemnon's violence, we are allowed to see them only through the eyes of a male observer: "he saw she had a split lip".

All this points to the psychological as well as the narrative difficulties of rewriting the *Iliad* from Briseis' point of view. We are never told, for example, to whom she is telling her story, even though her interlocutor occasionally formulates a question, which is printed in

italics. Here, for example, Briseis recalls how Achilles changed, in bed, after she took to bathing in the sea:

He pummelled my chest with his clenched fists and then, restraining himself, began stuffing wet strands of my hair into his mouth. Then down to my breasts again, taking the whole nipple into his mouth and clamping down hard with his jaws. You may be thinking: *Why did this shock you so much?* I can only say again: this wasn't a man, this was a child.

Perhaps, despite the suggestion of dialogue, Briseis is talking only to herself. Yet still we learn far more about Achilles' psyche, including his longing for his mother (the sea nymph Thetis), than about Briseis.

The question, then, becomes whether captive "girls" (Homer's term, as well as Barker's) must necessarily remain silent ~~in such narratives, which treat them as objects~~. Or, to put it bluntly: is the girl here silent because she needs to be or because Barker fails adequately to give voice to her? The answer, it seems, is both. Barker's attempt to give voice to Briseis is never facile, or forced, and for this restraint she deserves great credit. At the same time, it really does seem that she finds it harder to inhabit female characters than male ones.

A comparison between Barker's novel and *A Woman in Berlin*, an anonymous day-by-day account of what happened when the German capital fell to Soviet troops at the end of the Second World War, proves instructive. When the army entered, the women had little choice: they were raped and raped again, in an act of territorial as well as sexual conquest. Faced with the same treatment, they reacted differently: some committed suicide at the prospect of violation, others managed to endure the most brutal attacks. The author herself, after being gang raped, put on a pretty dress and went out looking for the highest Soviet officer she could find, "a wolf to keep away the pack". And she began to write. Different choices came down to age, experience, education, luck, but also to more intimate qualities – including a preparedness for passivity and surrender. Barker ~~barely explores any of these ideas~~. We are told that Briseis is beautiful, for example, but we never find out what she makes of her own beauty. Even Homer's Helen is more articulate than that: she curses her own attractiveness (in her language: "Aphrodite") yet also realizes ~~its use as~~ her only protection. In Barker's novel we see Briseis train her eyes on Achilles – "an intent, unblinking stare", the


stare of a mouse watching a hawk. But we learn little about what it feels to be that mouse. Ultimately, even while listening to Briseis, we retain our male perspective and feel observed by captive eyes.

Barker is at her most eloquent when she lets go of Briseis and simply tells the story. She never strays into sensationalism, despite her subject – a quality she shares with Homer. She offers similes that match those of the *Iliad*: the moon is caught behind a tree, "like a glinting silver fish in the black net of its branches"; the mouths of dying men open "like scarlet flowers". *The Silence of the Girls* confirms Barker not only as an exceptional writer, but as a patient and perceptive reader of Homer.

Where Barker's novel is restrained and even muted, Michael Hughes's *Country* explodes with verbal invention, rapid juxtaposition, brutality and fun. "Fury. Pure fury" is how he starts.

The blood was up. Lost the head completely. Achill, the best sniper the IRA ever seen. All called him Achill, but his name was plain Liam O'Brien. After the da, Big Liam O'Brien, who came out of Achill Island and bore the name before him. So the son was called Achill in his turn, though he was born and reared in Castlebar and he'd never set foot in the place, for the da always said it was a fearful hole.

And so Hughes continues, playing with names: the Iliadic priest Chryses becomes Crisis Cunningham, a "Prod farmer from up the country"; Patroclus is Pat; the low-life Thersites is a man known as Thirsty; the pub where the IRA meet is called "The Ships"; Agamemnon is, quite simply, "Pig".

More important even than the names are all the ~~plot~~ details of plot. The point is to remain faithful  to the Homeric storyline, even while telling a mighty tale of strife within the Republican Army during the 1996 ceasefire. Those who know the *Iliad* can easily write down references to specific lines and passages in the margin of almost every page. Those who do not may end up enjoying *Country* even more, as they won't be yanked out of the narrative in order to ~~appreciate~~ the artistry. Instead they can focus on Hughes's linguistic dexterity, his ear for dialogue, his understanding of character, the energy of his prose, his quick summing up of politics: "wait to outbreed them, then push for a referendum".

The book is gripping, though I did wonder to what ends Hughes ~~needed~~ Homer. Surely he is well capable of crafting a good plot without having to rely on the *Iliad*. Perhaps the choice comes down to a surplus of cleverness: reworking the ancient epic is a way for Hughes to keep himself amused. He has done this before, writing as Blake and Milton in his first novel, *The Countenance Divine* (2016); or, as he puts it himself, "when you hear some of the stories, you can see plain that the old times were not a bit different than today". More interesting is the specific choice of alignment, particularly given current politics: in Hughes's novel, the IRA are the Greeks; in Homer, the Greeks eventually win the war.