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Of Mice and Women: Pat Barker's Retelling of the *Iliad*

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Abstract: The article discusses Pat Barker's latest novel, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), which follows the events of the *Iliad* from the perspective of Briseis and other women abducted and reduced to sex-slaves during the Trojan conflict. The analysis focuses on the ways in which Barker challenges the ellipses of the Homeric original. By freeing the silenced voices of unwilling and powerless participants in the epic events, she deconstructs one of the key myths of the Western civilization, exposing its inglorious, misogynistic underpinnings. Additionally, what comes under scrutiny is Barker's exploration of the immediacy of sensory experience as she describes the viscera of war, as well as the messy realities of life in a rat-infested army camp. The author's decision to foreground devastation, excess and waste leading to a pestilence raises the question about the real cost of wars waged by men, and perhaps of human activity in general, which may serve as a very apposite warning in the current context of a global pandemic and climate change.

Keywords: the *Iliad*, rape, trauma, pestilence, Trojan war

O myszach i kobietach: przepisywanie *Iliady* przez Pat Barker

Streszczenie: Artykuł omawia najnowszą powieść Pat Barker, *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), która stanowi przepisane wydarzeń *Iliady* z perspektywy Bryzejdy i innych kobiet wziętych w niewolę i sprowadzonych do roli nałożnic w trakcie wojny trojańskiej. Analiza ma na celu prześledzenie sposobów, w jaki Barker rozprawia się z przemilczeniami homeryckiej opowieści. Uwalniając stłumione

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głosy bezsilnych kobiet, wplątanych wbrew woli w przedstawione w eposie konflikty, pisarka dekonstruuje jeden z kluczowych mitów zachodniej cywilizacji, odsłaniając jego niechlubne, mizogiczne podstawy. Ponadto artykuł zwraca uwagę na wyeksponowanie bezpośredniości doznań zmysłowych podczas opisów okropności wojny, a także w obrazach życia w obozowisku wojskowym dotkniętym przez plagę szczurów. Decyzja Barker o wysunięciu na pierwszy plan problemu dewastacji, nadmiaru i marnotrawstwa prowadzących do zarazy, rodzi pytanie o rzeczywisty koszt wojen toczonych przez ludzi, a być może ludzkiej działalności w ogóle, co wydaje się być bardzo trafnym ostrzeżeniem w kontekście obecnej pandemii i zagrożeń związanych ze zmianą klimatu.

Słowa kluczowe: *Iliada*, gwałt, trauma, zaraza, wojna trojańska

“**A**ll my interest in war comes from what is not said”, confessed Pat Barker back in 2007, having published the first volume of the *Life Class* trilogy (Barker, qtd. in Kemp 2007: 4). Ellipsis is a driving force behind her work: over the past two decades, her fictions have featured soldiers muted by trauma (*Regeneration*), grieving relatives stunned into numbness (*Toby’s Room*), artists and reporters trying to capture the unspeakable (*Double Vision*), war-shaken families hiding dark secrets (*Noonday*). *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), a tale of women’s fates during wartime, also stemmed from a fascination with the left out aspects of one of the oldest extant narratives in Western literature, the *Iliad*. As Barker herself explains,

In his novel *The Human Stain*, Philip Roth has a character who points out that European literature started out in the quarrel between two powerful men – Agamemnon and Achilles – over a woman. And this girl doesn’t say anything. So if, for men, all of European literature starts with a quarrel, for women, it starts with a silence. (Barker, qtd. in Robinson 2018: 10)

It is the silence from the opening of the *Iliad* that rings in the ears of Elinor Brooke in *Life Class* after the outbreak of the First World War is announced¹. This is probably when the idea for *The Silence of the Girls* germinated; Barker decided to shift her focus from history to myth. In all her previous war novels, she was careful to include the female perspective, but this time the larger bulk of the story is spun from the voices of these who have no agency in the epic conflict – the enslaved women of Troy, many still in their teens, reduced to the position of servants and subject to sexual abuse. The novel does not depart very far from the original Homeric plot, and yet the reader is never allowed to get lost in the heroic part of the tale. Instead, the spotlight falls on the details of which the bards prefer not to sing: the horrors of rape and murder, the rot and filth of the battlefield, the messy realities of a plague of rodents. Barker consistently focuses on disclosing the simple truth, formulated so well in Elaine Scarry’s groundbreaking work, *The Body in Pain*, that “[t]he main purpose and outcome of war is injuring” (Scarry 1987: 62). It is also possible to detect an influence of Simone Weil’s 1940s essay “*The Iliad, or the Poem of Force*”, containing reflections on how

¹ “The women have gone very quiet. It’s like the *Iliad*, you know [...] it’s a bit like that. I don’t suppose men ever hear that silence” (Barker 2007: 111).

“violence obliterates anybody who feels its touch [...] [t]he conquered brings misfortune to the conqueror, and vice versa” (Weil 1965: 17). Barker’s retelling of the Homeric narrative carries a deeply anti-war message: it is a gritty, unflinching record of misery and waste, as if the author wished to erase the notion that art could ever celebrate combat.

The first lines of *The Silence of the Girls* confront the legend of Achilles, making it clear that the epic context will undergo a deflation: “Great Achilles. Brilliant Achilles, shining Achilles, godlike Achilles... How the epithets pile up. We never called him any of those things; we called him ‘the butcher’” (Barker 2018a: 3). When the gates of Lyrnessus yield to the invading army, the non-combatants, mainly women and children, have to witness scenes they will never be able to erase from memory. Their male relatives are all hacked down before their eyes, young boys included – their fingers, with which they cling to their mothers’ skirts, chopped off by impatient soldiers. Pregnant women are “speared through the belly on the off chance their child would be a boy” (Barker 2018a: 5). The visceral immediacy of violence and the absence of compassion in the warriors performing the sacking places the reader firmly on the side of the defeated; the *Iliad*’s valiant men lose all their allure when shown indulging in casual brutality. Through a sequence of appalling episodes, Barker introduces one of the main themes of the novel: the trauma of confrontation with death and suffering one is powerless to prevent. Recounting the slaughter of her brothers, the main protagonist, queen Briseis, observes: “For the first and only time in my life I was glad my mother was dead” (Barker 2018: 14). In the final stage of the city’s downfall, attention turns to women, in accordance with the accepted model of aggression, which, as Jonathan Gottschall points out, is even sanctioned in the Greek language:

These events are not the rare savageries of a particularly long and bitter war. Rather, when the Greeks sack a city the pattern is virtually always the same: city looted and destroyed, men killed, women carried off into concubinage and bondage [...] The symbolic relationship between toppling of citadels and the violation of women within is expressed in the [Greek] words, *kre-demnon luesthai* (to loosen a veil), which can either mean to sack a city or to breach a woman’s chastity. (Gottschall 2008: 75)

With their safe space violated, Briseis and countless other women who have not leapt to death from the citadel walls, are transported to an army camp where they undergo fresh assessment². Beauty and youth are obvious advantages: as slaves, the captured females are not only meant to perform the daily chores, but also become sexual prizes, awarded to men in recognition for their valour – or, to adopt Scarry’s perspective, for achievements in the recent slaughter. In the darkly carnivalesque atmosphere of the sacking’s finale, some of the captives may hope for a lucky reversal of their previous position (a former servant, if fertile and attractive, can become a warrior’s wife – and Barker does not ignore such scenarios³).

² Barker’s harrowing descriptions of transportation and subsequent segregation of the captives evoke the testimonies of Holocaust survivors: “We were lined up outside the huts and inspected. Two men, who never spoke except to each other, walked along the line of women, pulling down a lip there, a lower eyelid there, prodding bellies, squeezing breasts, thrusting their hands between our legs. I realized we were being assessed for distribution. A few of us were singled out and pushed into a particular hut while the others were led away. Ritsa was gone. I tried to hold on to her but we were pulled apart.” (Barker 2018: 19).

³ Describing the community of captive women, Briseis mentions a kitchen slave becoming the favourite concubine of a great lord, so besotted with her that he sends his wife away to perform menial jobs. Many

Briseis, however, whose descent in status is bound to be dramatic, awaits new developments with great apprehension, dreading the worst fate – being handed over to common soldiers. Advised by Nestor to forget her past life, she is motivated to do the contrary: “*Forget. So there was my duty laid out in front of me, as simple and clear as a bowl of water. Remember.*” (Barker 2018a: 20, emphasis in the original).

Bearing witness and filling out the silence to save the memory of the conquered from oblivion has been a popular strand of literary enquiry, and revisionist retellings of classical stories have indeed proliferated in recent years – Natalie Hynes’s *A Thousand Ships* (2019) or Madeleine Miller’s *Circe* (2018) are among the most prominent examples. Yet Barker’s novel additionally attempts to chart a different territory in that she chooses to foreground the kinaesthetic aspect of war, exploring how human subjectivity can dissolve in a cesspool of devastation. The degradation of the eponymous girls is mirrored by the wastelands of battlefields and encampments, full of decomposing bodies, blood, faeces, dirt and vermin. Barker deftly uses animal imagery, picking up on the fact that the *Iliad* contains one of the earliest mentions of pestilence in the history of Western literature⁴. She offers an epic of mice and women⁵, drawing parallels between patriarchal dominance and oppression of nature, which, as the narrative warns us, can exact vengeance in the form of a plague.

When Briseis, still reeling from shock and grief, is chosen by Achilles as his prize of honour, she literally assumes the perspective of a rodent. Realizing that her agency is limited, she remains watchful, enduring the nightly rapes, and keeping a low profile during the day. “[P]assive and abnormally vigilant” (ibid.: 41), she concentrates on observing her captor and on learning his ways:

Yes, I watched him. Every waking minute – and there weren’t many minutes I allowed myself to sleep in his presence. [...] When I said “I watched him” I very nearly added “like a hawk”. That’s how you describe an intent, unblinking stare. But it was nothing like that. Achilles was the hawk. [...] I watched him *like a mouse*. (ibid.: 39, emphasis in the original)

Gradually, she acquires good knowledge of Achilles and his immediate circle while staying relatively inconspicuous herself. She suspects that even in the most intimate situations, her existence is barely registered:

He had no curiosity about me, no sense of me as a person distinct from himself. When at dinner, I put food or drink in front of him, he never once glanced up. [...] in bed [I was] a collection of body parts. Body parts, he was familiar with: they were his stock-in trade. (Barker 2018: 40)

bed-girls quickly adjust to their new situation and improve their status by bearing male children to their oppressors; Ajax’s prize, Tecmessa, who became a slave at a very young age, appears to be genuinely in love with her captor.

⁴ Book One of the *Iliad* contains a description of a vile plague – “deadly infectious evil” (Homer 2006: 8), inflicted on the Greek army by Apollo. It is a punishment for Agamemnon’s refusal to return Chryseis to her father, Apollo’s priest. Abducted in a raid, Chryseis is Agamemnon’s war-prize. The sickness subsides only after Agamemnon relents: the girl is given back, and a sacrificial offering is made to appease the god.

⁵ The persistent rodent motif in the novel brings to mind Robert Burns’ poem “To a Mouse”, in which a farmer ploughs up a mouse’s nest, rendering her homeless. Seeing the creature’s discomfort, he ponders over “man’s dominion”, trampling thoughtlessly over the lives of other beings, and comments on the futility of all endeavour: “The best-laid schemes o’ mice an’ men, gang aft agley, an’ lea’e us nought but grief an’ pain for promis’d joy!” (Burns 1971: 102).

Though with time Achilles' attitude towards Briseis becomes more personal and passionate, she never ceases to perceive him as a predator. The strange tan on his skin, resulting from continual wearing of helmet and armour in sunshine, reminds her of tiger stripes: "he was probably the most beautiful man alive, and he was certainly the most violent, but that's the problem. How do you separate a tiger's beauty from its ferocity?" (ibid.: 56). Another unsettling feature of Achilles is that he finds it impossible to get rid of blood, embedded in the cuticles of his fingers.

With her mouse-like characteristics, Briseis is capable of sneaking out of her room to explore the space of the Greek army camp. The trope allows Barker to construct a plausible story: within the confines of her captivity, the minor character of the *Iliad* that Briseis is must be given a way to learn about the fortunes of war. Insignificant enough, she is not kept under lock – "[W]hy would they bother? They knew I had nowhere to go" (ibid.: 25) – but at the same time, as Achilles' concubine, she has some insight into the preoccupations of the Greek heroes⁶. During her secret outings at the break of day, Briseis bathes in the sea to cleanse herself after the nights with Achilles. She also goes on walks and contemplates the Trojan countryside, ruined by the protracted war:

For nine years, they'd been fighting on the Trojan plain, the frontline moving to and fro – never very far; neither side was able to break through. What had once been fertile farmland was now a waste of mud, for in autumn and winter the two rivers that meandered across the plain regularly overflowed. The trees had gone, cut down in the first winter of the war to build huts and repair the ships. The birds had gone too. (ibid.: 46–47)

Like the Great War Barker has written so eloquently about in her previous fictions, the conflict between Greece and Troy is a war of attrition, fought on muddy battlefields. By felling the trees, the fighting armies create an environment similar to the wet grounds in Belgium and northern France. Yet the wasteland image also resonates with more contemporary concerns, such as the impact of human activity on the state of the planet. The same can be said of the outbreak of pestilence in the camp, originating in an enormous rubbish tip, which becomes a breeding ground for rats:

As I was passing the tip, I noticed a rat running between piles of rotting food. A lot of good food got wasted in that camp, because nobody there had worked long hours to grow the crops or tend the cattle. No doubt that accounted for the size of the rats because I'd never seen rats as sleek and well fed as these. (Barker 2018a: 66)

Even though Barker retains the *Iliad's* motif of divine intervention (Apollo sends the plague to avenge Agamemnon's rape of Chryseis), the epidemic has a perfectly rational explanation. There is an ecocritical ring to depictions of animals and then humans dying in scorching heat, after a period of excessive consumption and denial that something is amiss. Images of dead rats – at first numbered, then too many to count – are interspersed

⁶ Occasionally, Barker lets Achilles and Patroclus take over the narrative, to create a fuller picture of the complex relationship between the *Iliad's* males, often with Briseis present, but hiding, as rodents tend to, in the background. It is a challenging task, to give the women of the *Iliad* a voice in what is essentially a male-dominated story – Achilles' story, "His, not mine" (Barker 2018a: 325), as Briseis emphatically observes. Throughout the novel, she is unsuccessfully trying to extricate herself from it.

with scenes of warriors guzzling wine and feasting on confiscated food, then barring the doors despite the hot weather, to keep the rodents away.

As the crisis is brewing, Briseis fervently prays to Apollo, lord of mice and god of the plague, to avenge the suffering of the Trojans. Despite the unpleasantness of the rubbish tip, she is drawn to it, as it confirms her own sense of guilt and shame:

Something in me welcomed the contact with decay and decomposition. I actually thought this was where I belonged; *here*, among all the other rubbish. At that moment, I didn't blame Achilles or the Greek army or even the war for what I'd become. I blamed myself. (Barker 2018a: 66, emphasis in the original)

Compromised by rape, deprived of her name (Achilles refers to her as "it") and exposed to public view without a veil, Briseis experiences a longing to erase herself – her world has been thoroughly unmade, but as long as she is embodied, she is violable⁷. At this stage, she is unable to disown the responsibility for what is being done to her. She feels unclean because of merely trying to survive, unlike some other women who chose suicide over enslavement, hence her identification with rodents or vermin, and the persistent use of metaphors of entrapment⁸.

Mindful of the old adage upon which all the girls known to her are brought up, "Silence becomes a woman" (Barker 2018a: 294), Briseis understands that voicelessness is a prerequisite for staying alive. Quiet like a mouse, she does not risk interacting with her captors beyond necessary responses to questions. The only moments when she has a chance to speak more freely are those in the company of other women slaves, and – to a certain degree – of the kindly Patroclus⁹. Despite these precautions, she very nearly gets blamed for the spread of pestilence in Achilles' quarters, again having no other strategy of coping with the threat than keeping her mouth shut until a sudden reprieve arrives and her potential accuser, Myron, dies of the plague.

The Trojan women's greater immunity to the disease renders them useful for caring for the sick and laying out the dead, yet at the same time creates the danger of easy scape-goating¹⁰. Barker underlines this point on several occasions, showing how, despite being

⁷ Scarry would describe her position as one of absolute non-reciprocity, comparable to the ultimate form of torture where the injured is kept "in a state of radical embodiment by [the body's] awareness that it is at any moment deeply woundable" (Scarry 1987: 80). In the classical worlds described by Homer and Barker, rape of women is "not an isolated event or moral transgression or individual interchange gone wrong but an act of terrorism and torture within a systemic context of group subjugation" (MacKinnon 1989: 172), and hence it fits the definition of abuse of violence.

⁸ Later on, when Briseis gets transferred to Agamemnon's quarters, she does weaving work with other women slaves. Describing their shared predicament, she ironically corrects her language to emphasise their lack of agency: "we spent the nights curled up like spiders at the centre of our webs. Only we weren't the spiders; we were the flies" (Barker 2018: 122).

⁹ The novel paints a very positive picture of bonding between the women in the camp. Their company creates a safe space, as they offer mutual support and comic relief, defying masculine authority. Of all the *Iliad*'s males, Patroclus is the most ethical and compassionate, and he seeks contact with Briseis, gradually gaining her trust.

¹⁰ Barker is careful to nuance the idea that Trojan slaves are unaffected by the disease: "several of the common women had died, crawling under the huts and dying alongside the dogs, but [...] we weren't dying in anything like the same numbers as the Greek fighters. And the few deaths that did take place among the women went almost unremarked. After all, who's going to notice a few dead mice among so many squealing rats?" (Barker 2018: 89).

powerless and reduced to objects of exchange between men, women are regularly the target of male anger. Helen of Troy, the ostensible *casus belli*, is pilloried in soldiers' drinking songs¹¹. She spends her days weaving a tapestry, so a rumour develops that "whenever Helen cut a thread in her weaving, a man died on the battlefield. She was responsible for every death." (ibid.: 129). Similarly, when Achilles loses Briseis to Agamemnon, which results in a bitter feud that nearly costs the Greeks their victory, she has every reason to worry about her changed status:

I was no longer the outward and visible sign of Agamemnon's power and Achilles' humiliation. No, I'd become something altogether more sinister: I was the girl who'd caused the quarrel. Oh, yes, I'd caused it – much in the same way, I suppose, as a bone is responsible for a dogfight. (ibid.: 123–124)

In the atmosphere of toxic masculinity that energises the war, the suffering of women remains largely unrecognised. Men indulge in a symbolic exchange of elaborate insults – Agamemnon's claim on Briseis is one of them – and are at liberty to sulk, grieve, or respond with wrath. Even in defeat, they emphasise their pre-eminence, like king Priam, who visits Achilles to beg for the body of Hector with the words: "*I do what no man before me has ever done, I kiss the hands of the man who killed my son*", a confession to which Briseis can only reply in her thoughts: "*And I do what countless women before me have been forced to do. I spread my legs for the man who killed my husband and my brothers*" (Barker 2018a: 267, emphasis in the original).

Despite it being such a common phenomenon, the heroines of the ancient world cannot hope for any sympathetic acknowledgement of the sexual abuse they are subject to. For instance, Helen's testimony of being raped as a ten-year-old girl is never believed by anyone but Briseis; even the Trojan women of her household prefer to see her as immoral and loose, due to her exceptional beauty. Similarly Briseis, appealing to king Priam to salvage her from her entrapment as Achilles's concubine, receives a string of evasive answers: "Well, then, you know what happens to women when a city falls [...] you're not thinking straight [...] that's war [...] How do you think Achilles would feel if I stole his woman?" (ibid.: 283–284, emphasis in the original). Patriarchal culture upkeeps the model of male sexual entitlement; the woman's torment is irrelevant in masculinist power games.

In fact, Priam's observation that Briseis might end up in far worse bondage after the ultimate fall of Troy is one of the reasons that dissuade her from escaping, mouse-like again, by hiding herself in the cart that carries Hector's body away. The dream of travelling back home to recover her lost self, "a person with family, friends, a role in life" (ibid.: 288–289), appears completely unrealistic. The best Briseis can content herself with is sending her personal message to Trojan relatives as she prepares the corpse for the journey:

I put sprigs of thyme and rosemary between each layer of cloth: I wanted the women who unwrapped him, his mother and his wife, to know that some care and reverence had gone into this, that he hadn't just been sluiced down and bundled up by indifferent hands. (ibid.: 274)

¹¹ The songs are modelled on those sung by English rugby fans. In numerous interviews, Barker explains that she has included a few such anachronisms in her novel, to jar the modern reader and to highlight the misogynistic undercurrent of demotic culture.

It is in passages like these that Barker manages to convey the extent of female suffering in wartime most effectively. When, during Achilles's vengeful wrath, the mythic hero kills an astonishing number of men, Briseis supplements the Homeric catalogue of the slain with moving descriptions of how their mothers remember them, not as warriors, but as little boys. The feminine care that goes into child-rearing, as well as to tending livestock or growing crops, gets contrasted with masculine wastefulness, not only during battles but also during sacrificial rituals to honour the most powerful men, and gods. The scale of needless excess is fantastic: a hecatomb of bulls to appease Apollo and avert the plague, a giant boar with its throat cut for Zeus, to sanction Agamemnon's (false) oath that he never slept with Briseis, twelve Trojan youths, horses and dogs murdered on the occasion of Patroclus' funeral, so that his blood-soaked pyre would hardly get to burn.

As the novel's plot plays out, Barker allows more space for the caring, maternal perspective, which is apposite, because Briseis finds herself unexpectedly pregnant with Achilles' child and is therefore forced to focus on the practicalities of "making [her] life work" (Barker 2018a: 292) in the camp. This brings the main protagonist closer to Tecmessa, whom she once despised for becoming Ajax's spear-bride and bearing his son. With motherhood approaching and Achilles' days numbered, Briseis is given in marriage to Alcimus, "a bit of a fool, perhaps, but [...] a good man. And, anyway, there are worse things than marrying a fool" (ibid.: 324). Her survival seems now ensured, but before the readers can put Barker's harrowing novel down with some sense of relief, they are subject to the final part of Briseis' testimony, describing the defeat of Troy. When another cycle of violence unfolds, the women of Lyrnessus attempt to comfort their newly-enslaved counterparts, though they cannot in any way alter their horrible fate. In a particularly brutal sequence, possibly inspired by Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, Briseis and Hecamede have to accompany Polyxena, King Priam's virgin daughter, to her sacrificial end at Achilles' tomb. Shivering with shock, Briseis makes an effort not to avert her eyes. She remembers her duty:

Why had I watched it? I could have looked away or down at the ground and not seen the actual moment of her death. But I wanted to be able to say I'd been with her to the end. I wanted to bear witness. (ibid.: 318)

The same moral obligation drives Briseis to support Polyxena's mother, queen Hecuba, who still has to face the sight of her grandson's open skull, before being dragged away into slavery by Odysseus, his killer. While the Greeks unceremoniously hasten the traumatised women onto ships, Briseis uses her position as Alcimus' wife to perform a symbolic gesture of defiance: she unbinds Polyxena's corpse and removes a gag which was used to silence her before execution.

It is through gaping wounds – "the deep gash in [Polyxena's] throat [making] her look as if she had two mouths, both silent" (Barker 2018a: 322) or a fracture in a child's head "deep enough to expose the brain" (ibid.: 320) – that the slain bodies of antiquity may communicate with the modern reader, recipient of Briseis' tale. As Barker explains, it was a conscious decision to foreground the somatic and kinaesthetic aspects of war trauma, in order to reach out to contemporary audiences:

[T]here were times when I thought, ‘How do you take the reader into a world which is so unimaginably different from ours in so many ways?’ And you do it through the body. Because the human body, as far as we know, has not changed or evolved in any dramatic way during our time. (Barker 2018b)

Building on her decades-long study of the viscera of war, Barker develops a literary language which closely engages with the realm of the senses. She explores the relation between bodily margins and subjectivity, exposing the threatened boundaries of the bodies violated in conflict. Rape, combat, mutilation and sickness leave behind the acute memory of tactile horror, and Barker is unsparing in its preservation. Her female protagonists in *The Silence of the Girls* have to do the post-fighting clean-up work, so they see many young bodies “decapitated, gutted, skewered, filleted, disembowelled” (Barker 2018a: 129), clean the corpses whose flesh is “white and dense as dead cod” (ibid.: 273), tend the wounds, pressing and probing them, “listening to the skin” (ibid.: 180) for the sound of gas gangrene. Inconspicuous and quiet like mice, the women in the novel remain in the background and close to the ground, having little opportunity to rise above material, corporeal concerns.

By narrating the flip-side of the Trojan war, Barker has attempted to fill the silence of the Western canon with rather unpalatable truths. Her book makes for a draining read, because it obligates the reader to be a witness to Briseis’ account, to acknowledge her muted perspective on a story she does not consider her own, and from which she would much prefer to walk out. She is also self-aware enough to know that freeing the gagged mouth may be a bold gesture, but does not ensure that anyone will be willing to listen:

What will they make of us, the people of those unimaginably distant times? One thing I do know: they won’t want the brutal reality of conquest and slavery. They won’t want to be told about the massacres of men and boys, the enslavement of women and girls. They won’t want to know we were living in a rape camp. No, they’ll go for something altogether softer. A love story, perhaps? (Barker 2018a: 324)

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