Acta Universitatis Sapientiae, Philologica, **16**, 1 (2024) 100–115

DOI: 10.47745/ausp-2024-0007

On the Margin of the Web: The Story of Briseis

Andreea PETRE
Transilvania University of Braşov (Braşov, România)
Department of Literature and Cultural Studies
andreea.petre@unitbv.ro
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-5277-5251

Abstract. Pat Barker's novels *Silence of the Girls* and *Women of Troy* are part of some female authors' successful approach, which emerged after the 1980s, to rewrite Homer's fundamental texts from the perspective of the female character. Without changing the fate of the Homeric heroes, the author proposes a reassessment of the relationships between the characters by adopting an internal point of view of Briseis, the queen who became Achilles's slave. Constantly contrasted to the glorious androcentrism in Homer's epic, Pat Barker's texts aim at shifting women's place from the margins to the centre, from the insignificant status of a slave to that of a generator of powerful conflicts in the dominant world of men. Exposed and humiliated, Briseis understands that the major danger is not death but the loss of identity, the brutal reduction of a woman to a mere object. Thus, a different perspective on the events in Homer's *Iliad* emerges, a different angle, able to question the central, seemingly indestructible status of the male collective.
The present study aims at discovering how, after the protagonist's encounter with the strong, powerful characters of the epic, their hidden aspects are brought to surface and a fine weave of correspondences that the author creates between periphery and centre, the dominator and the dominated, the vanquished and the victor, meaning and nonsense is highlighted.

Keywords: female character, androcentrism, marginality, centre, correspondences.

1. Introduction

The British author Pat Barker, known in the 1990s for her poignant evocation of the dramas of soldiers from the First World War in the *Regeneration Trilogy*, surprised in 2018 with the novels *The Silence of the Girls* (2018a), followed in 2021 by the second volume, *The Women of Troy*. Both novels are inspired by

Homer's *Iliad* (1967). When asked in an interview about the change in approach, the writer clearly highlighted the difference between the constraints imposed by history, which do not allow for anachronisms, and the freedom offered by the ancient text: "The freedom of myth, the freedom to be naughty and deliberately anachronistic is also very stimulating and a relief after the other. After so many years of writing in a different way" (Barker 2018b, 20).

In fact, the writer's approach is not singular; we can talk about a tradition that begins with the German writer Christa Wolf, who in 1983 published the novel *Cassandra*, and in 1996 *Medea. Stimmen*, followed in 2005 by Margaret Atwood's novel *The Penelopiad*, a retelling of the story of Odysseus from Penelope's perspective, and in 2018 the American writer Madeline Miller published *Circe*.

An important aspect must be noted here: the return of these women writers to the fundamental works of Greco-Roman Antiquity is done from a different, feminine perspective, announced as early as 1976 by Hélène Cixous in her manifesto text *Le rire de la Méduse* [*The Laugh of the Medusa*]. In Cixous's view, the dominant masculine writing must be opposed by a new type of creation, by women about women, which the author calls *écriture féminine* and whose power she believes can change the rigid, phallocentric mental mechanisms entrenched in both social and cultural structures (Cixous 2010, 44).

Therefore, some common aspects can certainly be identified. First, the reference, or hypotext – using Genette's terms (1982, 13) – of these texts is ancient literature. Specifically, the novelists propose a rewriting of the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, a creative initiative consecrated throughout the history of European literature, considering the numerous versions that the Homeric texts have known, given that "Antiquity is always dynamic in the imagination" (Bost-Fievet and Provini 2014, 30). Then, the emphasis is laid on the emergence of femininity from the ordained history imposed by masculine thinking and the discovery of a writing about and for women.

Last but not least, we are talking about texts that fit into paraliterature, which have enormous public success, considering that both Madeline Miller's novel *Circe* and Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* have been sold in the United States and the United Kingdom in an impressive number of copies, with both texts later being considered for screen adaptations by major streaming platforms such as HBO and BBC.

The creative endeavour of these authors highlights the dynamic nature of literature, whose boundaries are not impermeable. They allow the entry of "new discourses" that do not impoverish literature but, on the contrary, emphasize the "positive function" of paraliterature: to reinterpret, to correct, to illuminate what is unspoken in the canonical text (Boyer 2008, 82).

Therefore, Pat Barker's novels are fictional worlds constructed as an alternative to the incompleteness of the universe of the *Iliad* (Pavel 1992). The solution

chosen by the writer is to create a new, distinctly feminine meaning of the ancient text world, whose ontological coherence was given by the dominance of masculinity. With its weakening, the fragility of the ontological universe also appears (Pavel 1992, 229), as well as the need to propose to the reader another fictional pact, with an evident compensatory effect. Thus, Pat Barker's texts resume the plot of the hypotext, without changing the fate of the characters, but the narrative perspective will be subjective, with the discourse being led, except for the chapters about Achilles and Pyrrhus, by the female character. This distancing from the epic favours a sensitization of the contemporary reader, who will perceive the dominant androcentric universe from another angle, that of the analytical Briseis.

This paper will follow two key aspects present in both novels: captivity and mirroring. We will see how not only the women taken as slaves are in captivity, but captivity is also present, in various forms, in the strong universe of the oppressors. Through mirroring, the visibility and depth of the most important characters change, revealing a fine correspondence between the marginal and dominant characters.

2. Why Briseis?

As far as Briseis is concerned, Homer's epic does not tell us much. As already mentioned, the author uses sources that post-date the Homeric writing to shape her personality (Attali 2021, Lanone 2020). However, she carefully selects these sources, considering that from Ovid's *Heroides* she retains only her status as the queen of Lyrnessus, the city conquered by Achilles: "Your weapons saw the fall of Lyrnessus / At home, I may have been of some importance too" (Ovid 2007, 90).[1] In Ovid's work as well, Briseis sees how Achilles kills her brothers, and her brave husband "reddens the ground with the blood from the wound in his chest" (Ovid 2007, 89). However, in Ovid's verses, Briseis is among the unfortunate ones whose fate is doomed and must be accepted with serenity. Moreover, in Ovid's text, a love story develops between the two. However, as Phillips Paige asserts, a perspective like that of Ovid can no longer resonate with current times, and the duty of a modern author is "to reverse these proclamations of love, as history and academia have progressed past assuming enslaved people are in any way lucky to be in such situations" (Phillips 2024, 16).

Refugees in the citadel's tower, the women comprehend the disaster with their gaze. The conquest of the citadel is carefully described, foreshadowing the fall of Troy. Briseis may be very young, yet she has a strong character, previously forged

1 The translations from Romanian and French literature and/or specialist literature are my own throughout the article.

by the prolonged war she had waged for several years with her mother-in-law, who despised her for not having children, thereby risking the kingdom being left without an heir. Married very young, motherless, the young wife lives in a loveless marriage but dutifully accepts her destiny. In a very short while, all the men of the city are massacred while trying to defend it. Briseis's husband and brothers die with discreet dignity, killed by Achilles himself, unleashed in battle, followed by Greeks encouraged by his distinctive roar. The city's defenders, overwhelmed by the number and violence of the invaders, fall one after another. From above, on the battlements, the young queen portrays Achilles from a perspective clearly polemical with Homer's text. Achilles is not the "great," "brilliant," "genius," "divine" figure but a butcher who kills with almost elegant precision all the fighters who cross his path (Barker 2018a, 3). After the last fighter is eliminated, the city is looted. Before reaching them, the women witness another form of rape, that of the city. The material identity of the place, which synthesizes the work of past and present generations, is systematically torn apart by the looters compared to a "swarm of locusts." In one day, an entire civilization disappears piece by piece and is carried onto the invaders' ships. Under the terrified eyes of the women witnesses, each devastated home equates to the loss of a protective space, which for them is the centre of the world. The image of the Greek predators encompasses all invaders from the tumultuous history of humanity. What the author emphasizes in the eschatological tableau of the dismembered city is not only the violence of the fight but also the astonishing ability of man to suspend any trace of humanity in such a short time. The proportions of destruction and death are so great that the silent and modest dignity with which the defenders fought no longer matters. Moreover, after death, the defeated become rich food for dogs and crows. Incidentally, the crows patiently waiting for their turn at the feast, after the dogs have had their fill, are a grim leitmotif of the first volume, followed in the second novel by large black flies covering Priam's corpse. These details do not merely mark the imperturbable rhythm of nature, which indifferently pursues survival by seeking any resource. The crows, with their waiting and impudence, are predators of death; they steal the dignity of the dead and finish what the invaders started. They correspond to the hundreds of ships docked on the shore: "I looked along the curve of the bay and saw hundreds of black, beaked, predatory ships, more than I'd ever seen in my life. More than I could ever have imagined" (Barker 2018a, 19).

Once the city is destroyed, the women are taken into slavery, but not before the pregnant women and all the young boys are killed. A conquered city means the elimination of the male lineage: "The worst attack that can be done to the power of a city is to kill its men (this is the normal fate of female prisoners of war) or, worse still, its young boys. […] This was to jeopardize the civic norm in matters of sexuality since it amounted to reducing the future leaders of the city to the rank of slaves and depriving the city of any future" (Vigarello 2011, 63).

From above, on the citadel's battlements, Briseis experiences a time of trauma, a suspended time, where her gaze painfully resonates with the reality of contemporary wars because, as the author herself emphasizes, "Nothing happens in the book that is not happening in the contemporary world. Nothing happens in *The Iliad* that isn't happening in the contemporary world, give or take changes in weaponry, which doesn't make it worse. It just makes it different" (Barker 2018b, 19).

Everything is recorded in detail by the women's terrified eyes, and the pinnacle of the macabre spectacle is the throwing of women into an arena, intended for the men's entertainment. Thus, the celebration of victory in war and the marking of the unleashed virility "manifested through combat and violence" (Bourdieu 2017, 85) does not stop here. The final mission is the collective rape and transformation of women into sexual slaves.

Briseis lives through all these successive deaths, knowing that nothing can save her. Her strong survivor's nature prevents her from following her cousin, who throws herself into the void to escape slavery.

Once in the hands of the men, the women who had taken refuge in the citadel's tower are sorted by beauty and youth. A subtle relationship between visibility and invisibility is hinted at in the text, but a clarification must be made: in the ancient Greek world, the visibility of women, spatially speaking, is conditioned by their role. Whether noble or slave, women are familiar with hiding, living indoors (Duby and Perrot 2002, 241). On the battlements, Briseis is invisible to the Greeks and observes everything that happens. Once in the hands of the Greek soldiers, she, along with the other women, experiences a humiliating and aggressive exposure, where women "are reduced to the state of objects" (Bourdieu 2017, 74). Social status is inexistent; as Nestor tells Briseis, the old life must be forgotten: "That's all over now—you'll only make yourself miserable if you start brooding about it. Forget! This is your life now." (Barker 2018a, 20). Weighed, fondled, measured, the women regressively slip from a human condition to an animal one, typical of slaves: "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 here, a lower eyelid there, prodding bellies, squeezing breasts, thrusting their hands between our legs. I realized we were being assessed for distribution" (Barker 2018a, 19).

The value of femininity is given only by physical appearance, and those who are able to appreciate it are only the most powerful leaders. Only those who have distinguished themselves in battle through bravery can choose the trophy women first. The arena here becomes the public square, a space designated for men, where the group of women moves towards a traumatizing visibility under the phallocentric gaze of victorious masculinity. The final decision belongs to Achilles, the hero in battle. He chooses Briseis, and the special attention he gives her equates to sharing her with the others, but also to her migration towards the centre, understood here

as the point of maximum intensity of all the men's desires. It is the only time Briseis will belong to everyone: "'Cheers, lads,' he said. 'She'll do.' And everyone, every single man in that vast arena, laughed" (Barker 2018a, 22).

At the same time, this visibility has a political effect. To use Bourdieu's terms, Briseis becomes a "symbolic instrument of masculine politics" (2017, 74), a signal sent to all, consolidating the dominant figure of Achilles. In fact, about Briseis as the most prized war trophy and the conflicting political implications her selection generates, Catherine Lanone spoke in her study, "Pat Barker's *The Silence of the Girls* and the State of Exception" (2020). What interests us particularly is identifying the strategies of resistance that the female characters adopt, often involuntarily.

These strategies represent the "new song" of the British author's books and are an act of defiance against the brutally imposed destiny or, better said, an attempt by femininity to break free from limits and to preserve its identity, as Altin states (2021, 855). They are indissolubly linked to captivity and involve, as we will see, a complex mirroring of the dominated in the dominant, of marginality in the centre.

3. Captivity

Captivity is one of the keywords that structures the relationships between the characters. Interesting in the author's books is the complexity of this state. It characterizes not only the women who have become slaves but also the dominant androcentric structures. Therefore, we will identify the various forms of captivity that generate unexpected and different resistance strategies, whose effect is the long internal process of recovery and the construction of female identity.

The first form of captivity is that of smells, which foreshadows the loss of human dignity and the annulment of hierarchies. The image of small, dark rooms where women are confined appears frequently in the novels, thus marking a symbolic reversal of the positive meanings of the room as a space of protective intimacy. The youth of the bodies is negatively valued here, and the space becomes an antechamber of hell: "Within a few hours, the smells of sweaty bodies, of milk, baby-shit and menstrual blood had become almost unbearable. […] Hot, close, airless space, wailing babies and, as the night wore on, a stink of shit from the bucket we were obliged to use. I don't think I slept at all" (Baker 2018a, 19).

Indeed, smell plays a significant role in the text, but its connotations, all related to the general context of captivity, are different. If at the beginning of the novel the unbearable smell of cramped bodies is a prelude to the trauma the women will experience, the striking scent of mimosas that Briseis notices as the procession of prisoners leaves the citadel marks a temporal suspension in the young woman's

shattered destiny, an olfactory boundary of a tragic nature meant to delineate the life in Lyrnessus, definitively lost, from the terrifying perspective of the present.

The actual captivity takes place in the Greek camp, situated between the shore and Troy, on a strip of land teeming with warriors and slaves, "socially organized according to the relationship between the dominator and the dominated" (Bourdieu 2017, 81). In Achilles's imposing hut, Briseis spends the first night at the edge, in the immediate proximity of death, overwhelmed by the weight of events. In a state of shock, terrorized, the young woman awaits Achilles, the one who killed her husband, brothers, and so many defenders of the citadel. The experience of rape is another form of death; it marks a painful split in identity and the definitive entry into the invisibility specific to slaves. The image of the camp, as an abyssal space of darkness and death, painfully contrasts with the bright image of Troy, which the girl sees in the distance, bathed in the symbolic light of civilization and freedom: "Troy, whose palaces and temples and even streets are lit all night. Here, the paths between the huts were narrow, blood-black. I felt I'd come to a dreadful place, the exact opposite of a great city, a place where darkness and savagery reigned" (Barker 2018a, 30).

In the new life, the chance of survival is absurdly conditioned solely by youth. Slavery overturns old hierarchies; the old mistresses end up outside, seeking shelter and food near hearths, without any assurance of receiving a bowl of food or being able to sleep in a bed. Instead, their young slaves are taken by important Greek leaders, and their status changes compared to their previous existence. We can speak of a scaling of dehumanization. All women experience uprooting, but in the camp, the lowest form of life is not sexual slavery to a master but the commanders' decision to offer them as a prize to ordinary soldiers, nullifying any form of human dignity. Agamemnon has this habit, and women live in fear that their fate depends on a whim of dominant masculinity. In a universe centred on honour, glory, heroism, and protocol, there is an unbridgeable abyss between the meaningful life of a man and the life of a woman: "Honour, courage, loyalty, reputation—all those big words being bandied about—but for me there was only one word, one very small word: it. It doesn't belong to him, he hasn't earnt it" (Barker 2018a, 109).

In these conditions, the relationship with divinity offers no support to the female character. The writer presents a desacralized world, in contrast to Homer's hypotext. The gods exist, but not to help humans, and even less so women. Briseis is convinced that slaves' prayers do not even reach the gods. They appear in the text, but the prose writer does not intervene in the destiny of the male heroes. The short and enigmatic appearances of the goddess Thetis, Achilles's mother, highlight a complicated mother–son relationship in which Achilles, abandoned as a child, cannot assimilate her decision and, no matter how much glory he has, suffers unappeased. There is no trace of a divine aura. Moreover, the author uses

an internal, feminine point of view, which allows her to distance herself from Homer's epic, especially when Briseis, slightly amused, minimizes the divine dimension of Achilles's vulnerability:

> Achilles's heel. Of all the legends that grew up around him that was by far the silliest. His mother, in a desperate attempt to make him immortal, is supposed to have dipped him in the waters of Lethe, but she held him by the heel, making that the only part of his body that was not invulnerable to mortal wounds. Invulnerable to wounds? His whole body was a mass of scars. Believe me, I do know. (Barker 2018a, 308)

Achilles is a mixture of divine strength in battle, but his soul's pain is purely human, no matter the era he lives in. Therefore, this distancing from the supernatural aspect of the male character offers the prose writer the possibility to amplify Achilles, we might say, but on the human plane, in the depth of experience. It seems that the writer allows the gods' presence only because the preserved thread of the Homeric text demands it. Otherwise, the relationship with divinity no longer has substance, so in the second volume, it is reduced to a formal respect. Briseis observes that the gods have blank stares: "Cutting across the arena, where the blank eyes of the gods followed me" (Barker 2018a, 66); and she knows that nothing happens when you pray to the gods: "Nothing happened. Well, of course nothing happened! Isn't nothing what generally happens when you pray to the gods?" (Barker 2018a, 64).

The fundamental moment of the epic, where the old Trojan priest in the temple of Apollo, Chryseis's father, comes to the Greek camp and demands her from Agamemnon, who had taken her as a trophy, is experienced with great intensity by Briseis. As is well known, this moment establishes the crisis of power relations between Agamemnon and Achilles. Agamemnon refuses a grieving father who is asking for his daughter back from slavery. Agamemnon's defiance and pride establish the state of exception, explained in Catherine Lanone's study (2020). With bitter pain, the old priest asks the god he serves to send a plague upon the Greek army. Unwillingly witnessing the priest's prayer, Briseis also prays, without being very convinced of the prayer's effectiveness. Her gesture falls more within what has already been mentioned, one of the resistance strategies that Briseis, as well as the other women adopt without necessarily being aware of it, far from an authentic relationship with the gods, arising from the surprising strength of the spirit to find forms of survival. These strategies trigger a complex mechanism that manifests in different ways and decisively contributes to maintaining the internal coherence of the character. In this sense, the gesture by which Briseis keeps, amazed, the small stone gifted by the sea can be interpreted. She cannot explain why the little stone is sharp and edged, why, out of millions of stones

polished by the sea, she found this one. However, she intuits something and decides to keep it: "It mattered to me, that obstinate little stone, and it still does. I have it here now on the palm of my hand" (Barker 2018a, 35). Symbolically, the stone represents resistance, the refusal to accept internal disappearance, and is a mineral alter ego with which Briseis will identify. Another boundary is drawn, this time not olfactory, between the merciless fate that polishes identity to extinction and the force of a strong, different structure, like that of the young woman. This metaphor will also be found in the second volume, when, on the shore, Briseis and the Trojan priest Calchas, now Agamemnon's advisor, witness the impressive scene of a wild and majestic eagle, almost drowned in the sea waves, then thrown onto the beach by a gust of wind, suddenly so diminished by powerlessness, only to, in a spectacular effort, regain its strength and rise powerfully and as a survivor. The girl senses that it is no coincidence she and Calchas are witnesses, but she cannot interpret it. She asks the priest to explain the event, but he either refuses or does not know what to say because the gods are too distant from mortals and no longer send them messages.

If not the gods, the sea certainly influences Briseis's fate. The aquatic element, heavily present in the novels, marks the author's pragmatism and detachment from the source text. Chance plays a significant role in what happens to the young woman. When Achilles falls asleep, Briseis takes refuge on the shore, where she experiences unusual events. On the one hand, the sea maintains the connection between the young slave and her dear dead ones, left on the streets of Lyrnessus. Looking at its ever-moving expanse, the young woman knows that without funeral ceremonies, her brothers are forbidden the entry to Hades, condemned to eternal wandering, but she is convinced that they are carried by the sea waves, as if the sea, in its eternal rocking, could facilitate their restless souls' oscillation between the forbidden land of Hades and the shore where their sister is, also lost between her former life and all the forms of death she experiences in the Greek camp.

We can speak of different meanings of water: the purifying one, which erases the traces left on women's bodies by Achilles for Briseis, by Pyrrhus for Andromache, is a water of humiliation, completely different from the warm, fragrant, triumphant water that slaves must always have ready to bathe Achilles's body.

The water of the sea, this time, creates a strange connection between Briseis and Achilles. On the shore, the girl sees Achilles swimming, sometimes hears him speaking, indecipherably, with Thetis, herself a daughter of the waters. When, by chance, the smell of the sea remains on the young woman's skin, Achilles transforms the tactile relationship between them. Briseis is no longer a mere sexual object; the taste and scent of the sea take the hero back to a childhood painfully marked by his mother's early departure. Unexpectedly, for Achilles, returned to his past, Briseis becomes a hybrid femininity that oscillates between the sexual slave and the lost mother. Thus, the young woman will have access

to another facet of the mythical hero, so feared in battle, respected by comrades-in-arms and enemies alike, but also an unappeased child. Not only Briseis is captive, but also the invincible Achilles, whose battle cry is heard from afar, lives a double captivity: in the destiny of a short and glorious life, traced by the epic's thread, and in the difficult relationship with his divine mother. Two people know the secret: Briseis and Patroclus, both, in turn, enclosed in Achilles's life. Indeed, captivity brings to the forefront another keyword of our study, mirroring.

4. Mirroring

The mirror motif appears frequently in the novel. Briseis observes that Achilles has a very valuable mirror in his rooms, a war trophy, the height of a man. In the mirror, Patroclus looks at himself before putting on Achilles's armour to go into battle in his place. In turn, Achilles, awaiting Patroclus's return, understands in front of the mirror that he will not return alive from the battle. The mirror conveys messages: to Patroclus, dressed in Achilles's armour, with his helmet on his head, it announces glory; to Achilles, unarmed, it announces Patroclus's death, and in the second volume, to Pyrrhus, it confirms that he will never be like his father. If it is not covered, the mirror can bring back the spirits that have just departed to Hades, but after Achilles's death, Briseis breaks the superstition, not covering it because she knows that Achilles, although he could traverse the way back from Hades, would not harm her. Moreover, Briseis is a point of irradiation of a complex mirroring mechanism that captures all the characters. More than that, we observe that the hypertext mirrors the mother text, revealing the solar glory of Homeric heroes, but also the pale, modest light, yet so stubbornly clinging to life, of captive women. The weak and insignificant will reflect in the strong and will highlight new, complex, and profound meanings of understanding human relationships and the way characters seek a sense, a salvation.

In this sense, we will understand the relationship between Briseis and Helen. The 12-year-old girl arrives in Troy, in the midst of the long war. She meets Helen, who is so desired and hated at the same time. A friendship blossoms between the two because Briseis is not a threat to Helen. Too much of a child to envy her, Helen feels she can trust the little girl and one day she shows her what she is weaving. The metaphor of weaving present in Homer's text has been discussed (Attali 2021, 160). And in Pat Barker's novel, the women weave incessantly, even when death, brought by plague or the wounds of fallen soldiers, looms in the camp. The significance of the fabric woven by Helen is special because she lives a form of captivity. She is detested by all the women in Troy, desired by men, whether they are Trojans or Greeks. Isolated in Troy, she weaves the fabric of the entire war, with all the glory and death of the men who wage it. Briseis's

gaze, which sees the fabric, seeks Helen. From the immense reflection, she is the only one missing, the one who triggered the disaster. Wondering, Briseis tries to understand the absence of the protagonist and realizes that the fabric is Helen's way of controlling her story. It is Helen's protest, who tries, through absence, to find her place in a masculine world, whose upheaval starts from her. What little Briseis does not yet know is that, not too long from now, her own story will begin to weave its own fabric, in which visibility will be different, the great chariot leaders will be seen, but differently, and from the new fabric, all the faces of the captive women will not be missing.

Modest Patroclus is reflected in Achilles, under Briseis's gaze. He is also caught in the destiny of the Homeric hero, as she is. Patroclus's story begins in childhood, when Achilles suffers too much after the brutal departure of his mother, and his father, Peleus, gives him Patroclus, hoping that another child will be able to soothe his suffering. A friendship grows between the two, to which the author delicately preserves the aura inherited from Homer, but new nuances descend into the profound structure of the relationship between the two characters. Patroclus has something special. Of all the men in the camp, he is the only one who treats Briseis gently and will earn her trust. She speaks openly to him, while the greatness of Achilles, always accompanied by violence, keeps her in a permanent state of fear. Patroclus is Achilles's subordinate, but there is an intimacy between them, which Briseis captures during one of her wanderings along the shore: "Once, I saw them walking together on the beach, Patroclus resting his hand on the nape of Achilles's neck, the gesture a man will sometimes make to a younger brother or a son. Nobody else in the army could have done that to Achilles and lived" (Barker 2018a, 38). Captivity sharpens the young woman's sense of observation; it is what Bourdieu calls "a particular perspicacity of the dominated" (2017, 55), so she will always be attentive to details, always sensitive to non-verbal communication between men. With all the fineness of her observation, she still cannot fully understand the relationship between the two, but she intuits that it is something so powerful that it surpasses sexuality, even love.

The death of Patroclus is an episode of overwhelming emotion. Briseis is no longer the "bard" (Altin 2021, 852); the narrative discourse becomes objective. Altin associates the change in narrative perspective with a bisexuality of the text: "Though limited, the bisexuality of the text undermines the man and woman dichotomy" (Altin 2021, 859). However, this point of view is exaggerated. Objectification, we believe, allows the author to focus all attention on the male character of the epic. The same technique is present in the second volume, to highlight Pyrrhus.

A double reflection appears here, and the images of the two friends change in size and depth. To curb the victories of the Trojans, who were about to defeat the disoriented Greeks left without Achilles, Patroclus agrees to take his place,

to encourage the Greeks and frighten the Trojans. Dressed in Achilles's armour, with his helmet on his head, Patroclus is the perfect reflection of Achilles, and, for the first time, he is his equal. Patroclus, the human and kind one, experiences a moment he had always dreamed of: to be Achilles, and, for a moment, in the mirage of glory, the images reflect to the point of identity: "Wearing Achilles's armour had changed him, and changed the relationship between them. He was Achilles's equal now—in his own estimation, at least. The increased confidence showed in his walk, his gestures, even in the way he held his head—and it made him utterly convincing" (Barker 2018a, 196). However, the perfect double comes only from death, which sends ghosts, and Achilles knows that this moment is not far away. The feverishness with which he tries to follow the battle, Patroclus's last cry, and the void that follows his death change Achilles's image. Pain, helplessness, mourning, and loneliness in suffering alter his heroic dimension as an invincible leader, diminishing it, but amplifying in depth the humanity that had been so overshadowed by the pride of glory. This is how his attitude towards Priam must be understood; Priam enters the Greek camp, comes unarmed before Achilles, astonishing him, and asks for the body of Hector, his son killed in battle. Hostility is temporarily suspended, and in the pain of mourning, Briseis observes how the two reflect each other: Priam, old but dignified and courageous, was once a tumultuous warrior, just like Achilles, while old age with its imposing aura is denied to Achilles: "They seemed to be standing at opposite ends of a time tunnel: Priam seeing the young warrior he'd once been; Achilles the old and revered king he would never be" (Barker 2018a, 265).

For a brief moment, the confrontation of the armies is suspended. Priam has won Achilles's respect, so the two are equals, even though Briseis sees Priam as superior to Achilles. The old king leads Troy, a great kingdom, while Achilles is merely the armed leader of predators.

We observe that the mechanism of reflection is also present in the second volume. After Achilles's death, his place is taken by Pyrrhus, his son. The narrative perspective changes, distancing allows for detachment from the female character's point of view and focusing attention on the male character. Another relationship, of captivity, between young Pyrrhus and his famous father is foreshadowed. Achilles dominates all those who knew him, so the son is captive in the father's shadow. No matter how hard he tries to live up to Achilles, Pyrrhus only increases his importance. He imitates Achilles's decisive gestures, kills Priam, drags his body just as his father did with Hector's, but does not possess the perfected confidence of his father, and Priam dies hard, tormented by the clumsiness of the executioner. More than that, before receiving the final blow, Priam places Pyrrhus in an inferior category, establishes his place, and draws a humiliating difference between father and son: "'Achilles's son?' he says. 'You? You're nothing like him'" (Barker 2021, 13).

Several women witness the entire scene. Among them, Amina is so close that she clearly hears Priam's words. After the women of Troy are taken captive, the girl becomes Briseis's companion. We can say that the second volume belongs to Amina.

According to Achilles's last wish, to protect Briseis, who carries his child in her womb, Achilles decides that one of his trusted lieutenants, Alcimus, should become her husband. The death of Achilles signifies the end of a story, yet in Briseis a new life grows, marking thus another beginning, at the end of which the woman becomes the subject (Altin 2021, 860). Thus, the young woman's status changes. Motherhood elevates her rank. She is no longer a slave; she has security and respect from everyone because she carries Achilles's child.

Moreover, motherhood is a new song of captivity, through which the author makes a reference to current times, ravaged by wars, and to the situation of all women, sexual slaves. It is a bittersweet motherhood, in which the pain of the horrors caused by the fathers of the future children, half Greek, half Trojan, mixes painfully. The enslaved women who become mothers will lull their children with the songs they know from another life lived in the conquered city, thus preserving the great spirit of the Trojans. We can say that *The Women of Troy* is about salvation. The wild wind that does not let the victorious Greeks leave represents another form of captivity because it keeps everyone together, predators and oppressed. Troy is burned and desolated. The situation of the enslaved women still depends on the phallocentric attitude of the men. Yet, even if almost imperceptibly, their silent strength changes the perspective. If in *The Silence of the Girls* the women find a purpose in a rather individual effort, Briseis and Rista care for the wounded, prepare herbal remedies, in this second volume, Maira's motherhood and Amina's courage give meaning and succeed in uniting the women.

Maira, a heavy and silent Trojan girl, becomes pregnant before the fall of Troy. She is so overweight that no one realizes she will be a mother, which saves her from the Greek sword that killed all pregnant women. All the girls protect her, and the birth of a Trojan boy mobilizes them in the desperate attempt to keep the child from being discovered, as he would not have been spared. Birth is the moment of female solidarity. To avoid attracting the attention of the men in the camp, the girls sing and cover Maira's screams. The birth of a boy puts them all in difficulty, especially since the young slave, unattractive and plain, clings desperately to the baby. The group saves them both. Thus, in one of the predator's cities, after the wind subsides and the ships leave, a Trojan offspring will arrive, a fragile but concrete message of continuity and hope that the great people led by Priam have not perished. The collective, discreet heroism of the group is not singular in this novel. Amina, a small girl with bulging eyes, seemingly insignificant, is one of the witnesses to Priam's humiliating death. Before her eyes, Achilles's triumphant glory dissolves into the image of Pyrrhus,

who is a failed copy of the Homeric hero. In his desire to be recognized by deeds, not just by descent, Pyrrhus leaves the Trojan king's body unburied after dragging it behind his horses. He repeats his father's gesture, but the reflection is imperfect because Pyrrhus lacks greatness. He knows this and constantly waits for validation from the warriors who tolerate him but do not recognize him as a leader because Achilles is unique and, in his glory, far from everyone, even his son. More than that, Amina defies his orders and goes to bury Priam with her bare hands. She is there together with Briseis, but her situation is much more serious because, unlike Briseis, Amina is just a slave. Caught by the soldiers, Amina confronts Pyrrhus and bravely takes responsibility for her act alone. She refuses any attempt by Briseis to protect her. For her, the stake is restoring Priam's dignity. The two reflect each other for a moment, and Pyrrhus remembers the girl's exact attitude: "She's the one who stood up and stared him out when all the others ran away. It takes a moment for the implications to sink in. She'd seen it all: his desperation, his clumsiness, his repeated, cack-handed attempts to dispatch an old man who should've been as easily killed as a rabbit. She'd seen everything" (Barker 2021, 194). With the same crazy courage, she repeats to Pyrrhus the words Priam said to him before he died, validating that the king of Troy recognized only Achilles as a hero, casting Pyrrhus into an unbearable inferiority. Pyrrhus does not accept this diminishment, feels awkward in front of Amina, and kills her to silence her. He kills a witness but knows that the girl was not the only one there; there are more witnesses. In fact, he understands that all the other women know how Priam died; they all have the true image of him. And the women, despite their inferior status, are many; they cannot all be killed, and they will talk. Even though they do not have the value of Greek warriors, Pyrrhus knows that their words will spread. The hero is an anti-hero who killed an old king, Andromache's child, sacrificed Polyxena, Priam's youngest daughter, and now killed a slave. Even this insignificant slave is the heroine of the novel. The reflection changes its angle. Thus, at the end of the novel, the words of those who have no rights will influence the commanders' decisions, and Priam will be buried with honours, as a great king deserves. Therefore, Amina's death was not in vain; the strong thread of her short life adds to the new tapestry in which Briseis's story is woven.

5. Conclusions

Two important messages emerge from the two novels that were the focus of our study, and both share a common element: vitality.

On the one hand, we consider the vitality of literature and its infinite power to renew and rejuvenate itself. Thus, classifying Pat Barker's prose as paraliterature

is not a pejorative categorization; on the contrary, it acknowledges that paraliterature encompasses the innovative dimension of literature.

In 2008, Alain-Michel Boyer emphasized that the complex nature of paraliterature stems from the terminological level, given that "para" means not only "against," "opposed to" but also "alongside," "around" (Boyer 2008, 9). Therefore, the author's prose is constructed around the ancient text without diminishing its epic brilliance. The novelist's approach starts from a different perception of the world and highlights, as Boyer also tells us, that literature dynamically reflects the relationship with the world, and, in its infinite creative availability, it does not establish rigid boundaries with the types of discourse it interacts with over time, knowing that the great questions about the human being are in constant dependence on historical and social changes.

Therefore, the creative formula of these novels is not unique; it highlights the vitality of literature by addressing topics that foreground femininity as alterity, in an attempt to problematize established, clichéd perspectives and to deconstruct mental patterns.

On the other hand, the author's desire to shift the centre of gravity of Homer's universe is related to an attempt to reassess the dominant masculine perspective, serving as a reminder of the existence of an ethical background. There is a migration from the periphery to the centre, in the sense of valuing the peripheral image of the woman, whose surviving vitality offers a significant model to the contemporary world, which is itself in a deep identity crisis.

However, the author's merit lies both in the elegant manner in which she approaches and distances herself from the mythical narrative, maintaining its solar grandeur intact, and in rekindling interest in reading a canonical work that might seem too boring and outdated to the younger generations.

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