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Silence becomes a Woman

Briseis' Voice and Agency in Homer's Iliad and Pat Barker's The Silence of the Girls

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1. Introduction

Helen, Penelope, Andromache, Briseis – all women from Homer's major classical works, written of and about for centuries in both literary and academic circles. While it would be remiss not to mention notable contributions such as Karl Goldmark's Briseis in the opera *Die Kriegsgefangene* (1899), Carol Ann Duffy's Eurydice in the poetry collection *The World's Wife* (1999), or Margaret Atwood's Penelope in the novel *The Penelopiad* (2005), modern literary works that centre these or other mythological women have been the exception rather than the rule – at least until fifteen years ago. Fortunately, the landscape is shifting. More and more novels, poems, and plays are handing these women pen and paper to tell their own stories. In this article, I will compare Homer's Briseis in the *Iliad* to Pat Barker's Briseis in *The Silence of the Girls* (2018), studying how the latter gives the floor to those who have not (yet) told their stories.[1] My focus lies on Pat Barker's reception and interpretation of the *Iliad's* gendered gaps and silences, and how she manages to give a voice to the Homeric women – particularly Briseis – in *The Silence of the Girls*. I will explore this issue through the lens of Rebecca Solnit's theory of voice and Naila Kabeer's definition of agency.

The Silence of the Girls narrates the events of the *Iliad* yet includes in its narrative span the fall of Lyrnessus and Briseis' abduction (before the *Iliad*) as well as Achilles' death, the fall of Troy, and the Greeks' departure from the battlefield (after the *Iliad*). The novel concludes with the Greek soldiers leaving the Trojan shores to return home, accompanied by Briseis, now pregnant and married, along with numerous other female war captives. *The Silence of the Girls* was met with generally positive reviews, being called "important, powerful, memorable"[2] and an "impressive feat of revisionism."[3] Specific to Barker's work is that the novel is focalised mainly through Briseis. *The Silence of the Girls* tells the story of the former queen of Lyrnessus as she becomes a pawn

[1] All *Iliad* passages follow the translation of Alexander (2015).
[2] Wilson (2018).
[3] Scholes (2016).

in the games between Agamemnon and Achilles and includes in its narrative the lives and stories of many women who appear in the *Iliad* only as background characters to an epic war. It builds on Homer's work but receives the poet's tales in its own manner, exploring how Barker read the *Iliad*, identifying the silences she noticed in the core text and illustrating how she fills them with the voices and stories of both famous and forgotten women. Due to this new perspective, Solnit's theory of voice and Kabeer's concept of agency are rewarding angles from which to study Barker's reception of the *Iliad*.

2. Theoretical Framework

Rebecca Solnit argues that our voices are a fundamental aspect of our humanity; being silenced, from this perspective, amounts to being dehumanised. Indeed, being silenced is a prerequisite for oppression – a fate Solnit deems central to women's history. The silencing of women is a historical act of violence against everything a voice entails in the broadest sense possible: "the right to self-determination, to participation, to consent or dissent; to live and participate, to interpret and narrate."[4] Indeed, their being silenced destroys women's ability to participate, to speak up, and to experience themselves as free subjects. The unsaid is unheard, repressed, and erased. Having a voice and a story, and having one's story heard by others, is thus intimately linked to issues of power and powerlessness. Liberation, in turn, concerns itself with creating the conditions for those who have been silenced to speak up and be heard, which in Solnit's view will alter the *status quo*: since those who are heard define the *status quo and move to* the centre, and those who are not heard are shunned to the side, "we redefine our society and its values" by "redefining whose voice is valued."[5] Voice, then, seems to be the antidote to the oppression of silence, and the silence of oppression.

If "silence separates us", leaving us "bereft" of help or solidarity,[6] words and stories are what bring us together. Speaking out, relating our experiences to those of others creates a bond like the interconnected roots of nearby trees, strong enough to weather the roughest winds. Yet having a voice and sharing one's story goes beyond creating groups of support: Solnit argues that gaining the right to exercise one's voice has an important political dimension. Indeed, she writes,

> "[s]peech, words, voices sometimes change things [...] when they bring about inclusion, recognition: the rehumanisation that undoes dehumani-

[4] Solnit (2017) 19.
[5] Solnit (2017) 24.
[6] Solnit (2017) 18.

> sation. Sometimes they are only the preconditions to changing rules, laws, regimes to bring about justice and liberty."[7]

If made to be heard, women's voices can upend power relations and counter dominant narratives. In fact, the entire history of women's rights can be considered in terms of voice – that is, as a history of imposing silence and breaking it. Naming things, concepts, and experiences is the first step in the process of healing and recovering. In sum, liberation is "in part a storytelling process", a process of breaking old stories, interrupting silences, and making new stories; or in Solnit's words, "[a] free person tells her own story", and "[a] valued person lives in a society in which her story has a place."[8] Indeed, voice is a central aspect to feminist philosophy.

At this point, it is important to note the difference between voice in the broadest sense of the word and voice in the literal, auditory sense. As *The Silence of the Girls* is narrated mainly by its protagonist Briseis, the reader is intimate to her inner thoughts and feelings, that is, her "voice" in the broadest sense of the word. Despite the abundant rendering of her inner world, however, there are few moments in the text where Briseis speaks out loud, especially to her captors; that is, she uses her literal voice only infrequently. As both voices are intricately intertwined, this article focuses on an intermediate type of voice, one which entails more than merely "speaking up" (which, given the social structure, is all but impossible) but also goes beyond Briseis constructing her story in her mind. The significance of Briseis' voice lies in her constructing the story and narrating it to posterity, so that the tale of her life (and of her fellow captives' lives) will not disappear among the many stories about Achilles, Agamemnon, and Hector.

Voice as a mechanism is supported by one major requirement for liberation: agency. Naila Kabeer defines agency as "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them" but recognises that the concept goes beyond merely observable action: agency "also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or 'the power within.'"[9] It includes less noticeable processes of bargaining and negotiation, subversion and resistance, and reflection and analysis. Especially the latter two are practices that often go unrecognised as acts of agency, as they are not geared towards external action or "decision-making"[10] but address individuals' ability to make choices and act on them. Significantly, agency does not operate in an empty playing field. Kabeer stresses the interdependence of individual and structural change in the process of empowerment, as structures greatly impact or at times constrict agency: they "define the parameters within which different categories of ac-

[7] Solnit (2017) 20.
[8] Solnit (2017) 19.
[9] Kabeer (1999) 438.
[10] Kabeer (1999) 438.

tors are able to pursue their interests, promoting the voice and agency of some and inhibiting that of others."[11] The ability to choose – a central component of agency – is thus qualified by the conditions of choices (whether there are alternatives and what those alternatives cost), the consequences of choices (whether they are life-determining or of less relevance), and the transformatory significance of choices (whether they challenge social inequalities or reproduce them). In sum, forms of agency can appear in a variety of ways, some obvious, some subtle, and they are always conditioned by the structures in which they are made.

Indeed, voice and agency are intricately linked in several ways – a connection that will become clear in both Homer's and Barker's texts. In the remainder of this article, I will first analyse the significance of Briseis' speech in the context of the Homeric epic, both in terms of personal expression and agency; then compare these observations to Briseis' speech on an individual and collective level in the context of *The Silence of the Girls*.

3. Briseis in Homer's *Iliad*

Though this article focuses on Briseis in particular, a few remarks need to be made about women's general position in the Greek camp. Captive women's status in Homer's literary representation of the Trojan war is characterised by sexual abuse in warfare and slavery. In both situations, the sexual violation of women has a specific social purpose, going beyond mere physical lust. The large-scale raping of women in ancient wartime, Kathy Gaca writes, must be seen as a weapon of war like it is today, rather than a mere "sporadic and small-scale operation."[12] Girls and women were routinely andrapodised – a term referring to the turning of war captives into slaves and subjugates. This is the second phase of a two-phase procedure as divided by age and sex, with the first step being the murder of adult men. Gaca thus explains andrapodising as

> "to engage in partly lethal practices of premeditated and systematic violence against the remaining inhabitants once the male inhabitants in the community or region have been killed off or sufficiently maimed so that they can pose little resistance or threat of future retaliation."[13]

Central to the practice of andrapodising are aggravated battery and sexual assault, whereby captors use captives as seen fit and sell the rest. In some cases, Gaca contends, rape is used to tame women, but not to the extent they become unexploitable, while at other times rape is employed as ruthless punishment, sometimes fatally. In any case,

[11] Kabeer (1999) 461.
[12] Gaca (2011) 74.
[13] Gaca (2011) 80.

male aggressors "regularly sought, as one driving objective, to commandeer through sexual violence the female bodies among the enemy or outsiders."[14]

In the *Iliad*, Nestor admonishes the Greeks to avenge their fallen fighters through the violent sexual abuse of Trojan women:

> "Therefore, let no one press to return home
> before he has bedded the wife of a Trojan man,
> to exact requital for the struggle and groaning over Helen."(Hom. *Il.* 2,354–356)

In this case, rape is used as a form of punishment: women become victims of a war waged between men. Their bodies are a way for the Greek soldiers to strike back at the Trojans for abducting Helen. Similarly, as the Greek and Trojan armies form a truce while Menelaus and Paris duel, the men pledge that neither camp will attack the other as long as the duel is still taking place. In this oath, all agree to the following conditions: "those who first do harm in violation of the sacred treaty [...] may their wives be forced by other men" (Hom. *Il.* 3,299–301). Nancy Felson and Laura Slatkin write that conflict bares the connection between the institutions of war and gender, as competition between men is conducted through women. Indeed, they conclude that "[i]f marriage is the peaceful exchange of women among men, war is its violent counterpart."[15] Barbara Rodriguez agrees that "bounty is the purpose that leads men to war, and women always form a main part of the spoils."[16] The sexual violation of women and the development of war are thus intricately connected.

Gaca argues that female captives belonged to the captors "and were theirs to treat as seen fit by the commanders and soldiers."[17] Among the possible fates of these women, she includes forced prostitution, concubinage, marriage, forced impregnation, and non-sexual exploitation, several of which appear in the *Iliad*. The notion of concubinage in particular is well recorded in the text – Briseis is Achilles' bed-girl, Iphis Patroclus', Chryseis Agamemnon's, and so on – though other fates remain more obscure. Thus, Gaca writes, "sexually specific, and largely female-targeting, violence on the part of warriors has historically been central to warfare and to the creating of enslaved or other subjugated persons in antiquity."[18] A main goal is to "tame" the female captives so that they are "broken in and made exploitable,"[19] yet not so harshly they are no longer "useful" "in the sex and other trades of the ancient world."[20] Indeed, Clinton also considers rape a form of punishment meant to consolidate social relations.[21]

[14] Gaca (2011) 88.
[15] Felson / Slatkin (2004) 95.
[16] Rodriguez (2017) 99.
[17] Gaca (2011) 80.
[18] Gaca (2011) 80.
[19] Gaca (2011) 86.
[20] Gaca (2011) 87.
[21] Clinton (1994).

These social relations between captor and captive, Greek and Trojan, man and woman, are embodied clearly in the *Iliad*.

Many scholars argue that Homer acknowledges the sorrows and losses of both victims and perpetrators, including Caroline Alexander in the introduction to her translation of the *Iliad*.[22] I do not mean to argue that the bard intentionally silences Briseis or any other female characters; rather that, as Homer's tale focuses on war and wrath, certain sides of the story naturally remain unexplored. Such are the gaps Barker interprets in her own work. Consider, for example, Patroclus' funeral games in Book 23. Among the prizes ("tripods and cauldrons, horses and mules and strong heads of cattle"; Hom. *Il.* 23,259–260) are also "fair-belted women," (Hom. *Il.* 23,260) and the first prize in a horse race is "a woman skilled in flawless work of hand to lead away" (Hom. *Il.* 23,263). While the warriors engage in a highly dramatic chariot race, this woman remains in the background, silent, not mentioned again until she is given away to the victor of the games. Though she has just undergone what might be a life-changing event, her story does not make it into the main narrative, and her thoughts and feelings are delegitimised by this narrative silence. In the *Iliad*, Briseis undergoes a similar fate.

In Homer's epic, Briseis speaks but a few sentences herself. As her only significant speech in the *Iliad*, the girl's lament for Patroclus has been the subject of abundant literary criticism and theories, which analyse the event from different viewpoints and, at times, in wildly different directions. Almost half a century ago, Farron argued that while Homer emphasised the emotions experienced by the women of the *Iliad*, the bard simultaneously conveyed his female subjects' helplessness and the inability to determine their own lives through the men's consistent disregard of those sentiments. In Farron's perspective, the women are "ineffectual" "in getting their men to take their feelings into consideration."[23] More recent scholarship acknowledges the subversive resistance of captive girls such as Briseis and acknowledges that the lament in particular offers such a means of resistance.[24] Indeed, as Briseis' only represented speech, her lament for Patroclus takes on significant value. The enslaved girl's lament for one of her captors is not merely an expression of grief: it is a way for Briseis to express herself in a narrative that refuses to listen to her, as well as a means through which she enacts her (limited) sense of agency.

Casey Dué's seminal work defines formal laments as "powerful speech-acts, capable of inciting violent action"[25] and of providing women with an opportunity to speak in ways they usually cannot, namely, to voice subversive concerns. Women of all walks of life can use the language of the lament to manipulate listeners and achieve personal

[22] Alexander (2015) xi–xxxix.
[23] Farron (1979) 24.
[24] Dué (2006); Nappi (2012).
[25] Dué (2006) 8.

goals. The lament is the only female mode of access to a sanctioned public voice, and the only way for captive women to defend themselves in such desperate circumstances. Dué argues that "ritual lamentation gives Greek women a public voice that they are not allowed in any other context", meaning "women can use lament to protest their position in life and the status quo."[26] The formal lament, even in non-ritual contexts, gives women in subordinate positions the possibility of commenting on their lives and positions. Indeed, only when framed within the poetic and social conventions of the lament do women get the chance to "explore the full range of [their] experiences" before their community.[27] The lament allows women to articulate opinions in a socially acceptable way, as, for a short while, the audience briefly explores the agony of women in war.

When Briseis sees Patroclus' body "cut asunder by sharp bronze," (Hom. *Il.* 19,283) she "wrapped herself about him and cried shrill, and with her hands tore at / her breasts and soft cheeks and lovely face" (Hom. *Il.* 19,284–285). The enslaved girl cries that Patroclus, alive when she left him, has now died, and she laments the memories of her own unbearable fate: before Patroclus, it was her husband and brothers who were slain. She concludes her lament by saying that after the sack of Lyrnessus, Patroclus "never [...] let [her] weep" (Hom. *Il.* 19,297), but used to promise her a marriage to Achilles. After Briseis' lament, her fellow captives "in response mourned for the sake of Patroclus, but each mourned for her own cares" (Hom. *Il.* 19,302). Briseis' lament focuses on her connection with the deceased, retracing his affection for and protection of her.[28] The loss of this affection and protection has a significant impact on the enslaved girl's life: now that Patroclus has passed away, any chance at a marriage to Achilles – and the resultant (relative) safety and stability of such life – has disappeared. Indeed, Briseis' hope of a "marriage feast among the Myrmidons" (Hom. *Il.* 19,299) is cut short by Patroclus' death. In mourning Patroclus, Nappi writes, Briseis mourns her own misery, loneliness, and any other consequences of Patroclus' death on her life.[29] The lament is meant to legitimise her situation and her position, as she mourns for her own concerns as much as (or even more than) she grieves for the deceased.

Indeed, I would argue that in the Homeric epic it is difficult to see how Briseis' lament could be motivated by anything but the long-awaited public expression of the girl's own sorrows. As the poem focuses on the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, or the battlefield actions of Odysseus, Ajax, and Hector, other – female – characters remain in the shadows of the warriors' spotlights. The Homeric narrator offers little insight into the girls' lives and feelings, never focalising through any of the enslaved. Perhaps Briseis and Patroclus did enjoy a certain degree of friendship,

[26] Dué (2006) 38.
[27] Dué (2006) 38.
[28] Nappi (2012) par. 17.
[29] Nappi (2012) par. 21.

or perhaps they used to have somewhat open conversations (as Barker will interpret their relationship); yet as Homer's perspective is focused on the battlefield and the courtroom, any such interpretation is left to the reader. The enslaved girls' opinions of their captors constitute a silence in the story, to be filled by those who receive the poem.

In addition to expressing sorrows about her own fate, Briseis uses the lament to "protest [her] position in life" and to "voice [her] concerns and emotions before the community."[30] In doing so, her lament contains a notable example of Kabeer's agency.[31] Briseis publicly reminds not only Achilles but the entire community of a dead man's promise: to have Achilles marry her. Addressing the deceased, she reminisces about how Patroclus "would make her godlike Achilles' wedded wife and take her on the ships / to Pythia, and give a marriage feast among the Myrmidons" (Hom. *Il.* 19,298–299). As an enslaved girl, Briseis never could have confronted Achilles with this demand directly, but Patroclus' promise fits in with the form of the lament, and it is thus legitimised through the girl's subversive manipulation of "a public voice that [women] are not allowed in any other context."[32] The fact that there is an audience to her request only serves to render the demand more urgent. Nonetheless, it is important to remember that this argument is based solely on two lines spoken by Briseis. Due to a lack of close focalization the reader knows little of Briseis' internal world, and inferring that she means to compel Achilles into marriage requires some reading between the lines. In *The Silence of the Girls*, Barker makes her reasoning explicit, an argument I will return to below.

In short, Homer's Briseis carefully chooses her words to not only express herself in a situation that systematically denies women a voice, but also to carry out a significant act of agency through her lament. However, Homer offers his readers little to go by: aside fourteen lines of speech, Briseis' character is left to the reader's imagination. As a recipient of Homer's work, Barker revises the *Iliad* to focus on such previously inaudible voices, pulling Homer's Briseis out of the shadows into her own spotlight. Barker's narrative is focalised mainly through the enslaved girl and centralises her experiences, sorrows, and words.

4. Briseis in Barker's *The Silence of the Girls*

As early as the eighth century BCE, when the *Iliad* was (presumably) written down, it was a known fact that women suffer greatly in war. Several stories and remarks in Homer's poem demonstrate how women were captured, subjugated, and abused by

[30] Dué (2006) 38.
[31] Kabeer (1999) 438.
[32] Dué (2006) 38.

men at war. Nonetheless, the *Iliad* does not extensively explore a female perspective on or representation of their experiences. One gap Barker tries to fill in *The Silence of the Girls* is the silence that follows warriors' rape, humiliation, and abuse of captive women. The sexual violation of women starts in the text with the fall of Lyrnessus, when the warriors have looted the city and "[turn] their attention to [the women],"[33] and continues all throughout Briseis' time in the Greek camp. As discussed in the previous section, Gaca argues for a perspective of sexual violation as a weapon of war rather than a mere "sporadic and small-scale operation."[34] Included in her definition of sexual violation are practices of forced prostitution, concubinage, marriage, and impregnation, several of which appear in *The Silence of the Girls*. Although they remain unnamed, several of Agamemnon's bed-girls are given away to the lord's soldiers once he is bored with them.[35] As it did in the *Iliad*, the notion of concubinage is well recorded in Barker's text, with Briseis as the bed-girl of Achilles, Iphis of Patroclus, Chryseis of Agamemnon, and so on. In fact, all named enslaved girls are assigned to one of the Greek lords. A small number of them are forced into marriage, as Tecmessa is to Ajax, and many bear their captor's children – as Briseis does for Achilles. Non-sexual exploitation occurs frequently too, as Briseis and many others work long days at the loom.[36] This is a first moment of reception on Barker's part: to the stories of war and (male) suffering the author adds stories of female exploitation and sorrow, supplementing the ancient narrative with (female) victims' perspectives to nuance the heroes' experiences.

To Gaca's theory of sexual violation Catherine Clinton adds that in slavery, rape is not merely an interactional process but also an institutional one: it entails a collective as well as an individual means of social control. To name this concept she uses the term "penarchy," or "a system whereby the males of the elite use sexual terrorism to control women of all classes and races, as well as men within the subordinate classes."[37] The usefulness of this term lies in its focus on power, as it considers not merely the binary man versus woman but also other possible factors of oppression, such as class or race. A telling example of class-related differences in sexual violence can be found at the beginning of the novel. The sexual violation of women starts in Lyrnessus, as the slave women are pulled from the basements and one woman is "raped repeatedly by a gang of men [...] passing [a wine jug] good-naturedly from hand to hand while waiting their turn."[38] Significantly, this fate appears to be limited to the already enslaved women in the basements of Lyrnessus, while the royal women are told that "[n]obody is going to

[33] Barker (2018) 16.
[34] Gaca (2011) 74.
[35] Barker (2018) 49.
[36] Barker (2018) 121.
[37] Clinton (1994) 208.
[38] Barker (2018) 16.

hurt [them]."[39] Through repeated instances of sexual violation, the aggressors perform their control over their victims and solidify both positions in the social hierarchy. Thus, rape "is not so much an abuse of the system of slavery as it is a mechanism used to enforce it."[40]

In what the newly enslaved woman aptly terms a "rape camp,"[41] Briseis undergoes her first night in Achilles' bed. Though he is not cruel, merely doing what he has "a perfect right to do", Briseis mourns that "[s]omething died in [her] that night."[42] Earlier that day, she was a queen; now, she has become a lord's slave, a fact that is made painfully clear to her by his absolute power over and access to her body. Indeed, I would argue the common point in both Gaca's and Clinton's theories lies in power – or precisely the absence thereof. The warriors' rape of an unnamed female slave in Lyrnessus, Achilles' and later Agamemnon's rape of Briseis, and the raping of the other captive girls all demonstrate to these women that they are not the ones in control; they are subject to the power of their captors. Rape both displays and confirms the relationship between Greek man and Trojan or Lyrnessan woman, between captor and captive, as one of unequal power. As Briseis tells us, she is "[Achilles'] slave to do what he liked with; [she is] completely in his power."[43] If one day he beats her to death, she muses, no Greek would bat an eye.[44] As Kabeer would argue, it is clear that the social realities of Briseis' and the other captured girls' lives "define the parameters" of their agency and voice in a highly restrictive manner.[45]

It should be noted, however, that despite the common denominators of slavery and sexual violation, there are differences between the women that cannot be disregarded. Briseis and her companions are relatively well-off: while virtually all women in the camp suffer from objectification and sexual abuse, at least the concubines of Achilles and other high-ranking lords do not have to fear homelessness and starvation. A concrete example of the difference social standing can make, the few women who die from the plague are said to be common women, "crawling under the huts and dying alongside the dogs."[46] While the novel's events are highly traumatic to its characters, every now and then Barker grants the girls a glimpse into the lives of other women to warn them that it could be worse. Though at times she fears so, Briseis is never sold to a slave trader or handed over to Agamemnon's men "for common use,"[47] nor are any of the other girls. It would be reductive to claim their situation is in any way com-

[39] Barker (2018) 17.
[40] Jansen (2021) 21.
[41] Barker (2018) 324.
[42] Barker (2018) 28.
[43] Barker (2018) 39.
[44] Barker (2018) 39.
[45] Kabeer (1999) 461.
[46] Barker (2018) 89.
[47] Barker (2018) 120.

fortable, but it would be just as short-sighted to consider all women's experiences in the Greek camp equally dreadful. Aspects such as beauty, class, and age intersect to differentiate between different women's different experiences.

Nonetheless, silence and voicelessness remain common to all. At several moments in the narrative, Briseis comments on the great Homeric heroes and their antics. "*I do what countless women before me have been forced to do*,"[48] she thinks – thinks, not says. For all her sharp observations, Briseis hardly ever speaks in her own narrative. When Achilles complains that the gods defy him by restoring Hector's corpse, Briseis incredulously repeats "*The gods defy you*?"; for "one horrible moment" she fears to have spoken out loud, an act that would be severely punished, but "*of course* she hadn't."[49] The girls' silence runs as a thread throughout the narrative. Returning to Solnit's theory of silence, voicelessness equals powerlessness, as being silenced is a main indicator (or even cause) of being dehumanised. Silence denies women the humanity common to all. The fact that silencing is indeed intricately linked to objectification and dehumanization becomes clear when remembering how Achilles and Agamemnon continually "carved meaning" into Briseis' face,[50] pronouncing their own messages to one another rather than letting the girl speak. Yet the ultimate act of silencing we find in Polyxena's fate. In front of thousands of enemy soldiers, this girl finds the courage to address Agamemnon; immediately, she is muted first with a gag, then by having her throat cut. Though not all as extreme as Polyxena's, the eponymous novel is filled with silences of the girls, and together, these silences tell a story of their own – one of objectification, dehumanization, and imposed powerlessness.

Being silenced has concrete influences on the lives of the oppressed. When Achilles addresses his men, he paints a picture of Briseis as the girl that caused a quarrel between two lords "like a couple of drunken sailors in a bar,"[51] resulting in the death of many young Greeks and a lot of suffering and grief for their army. Achilles blames Briseis for the death of Patroclus, and in this moment she knows "there is no hope:"[52] powerless to change his story of her, Briseis has become the *causa belli*, a second Helen, serving as the scapegoat for two grown men's self-important, pride-fuelled clash. From this moment on, she no longer contributes to Achilles' honour, instead "[keeping her] head down"[53] in the hope not to be sold to a slave trader. Thus, Briseis' voicelessness, which is directly linked to her powerlessness, keeps her in a precarious position – that is, until she is ready to reclaim her voice and come into her own story, as well as to assume responsibility for the other girls' stories. Crucially, voice cannot be considered

[48] Barker (2018) 267 emphasis in original. Unless mentioned otherwise, all emphases are found in Barker's original text.
[49] Barker (2018) 271 emphasis added.
[50] Barker (2018) 120.
[51] Barker (2018) 209.
[52] Barker (2018) 209.
[53] Barker (2018) 237.

only in acoustical terms here: though Briseis starts using her spoken voice more in conversations with other enslaved women, Patroclus, and even Achilles,[54] of interest here are the stories she comes to claim as her own. "Voice" thus concerns power, humanity, and ownership as well as – and sometimes contrary to – speech. As I will argue in this section, voice and stories function on two levels in *The Silence of the Girls*. First, Briseis' voice presents an individual opportunity for her to enact her agency. Second, stories are a collective tool through which Briseis connects the girls' experiences into tales that will be remembered by generations to come.

Individually, Briseis' voice is a way for her to enact her agency. In the *Iliad*, Briseis' lament entailed the possibility for an enslaved girl to comment on her situation of captivity and enact a certain yet limited sense of agency by reminding Achilles of his dead comrade's promise of marriage. In *The Silence of the Girls*, the lament carries on the original resistance of this speech tradition. As did Homer's Briseis, Barker's protagonist remembers how Patroclus had "once told [her] not to cry, that he'd promised to make Achilles marry [her];"[55] the narratee then intervenes to accuse Briseis of arranging her marriage to the Greek soldier. "*[Y]ou made bloody sure everyone else remembered it as well*,"[56] they note, remarking that Briseis' reminder of marriage pressures Achilles to consider wedding the girl. Whereas the *Iliad* only discursively mentions this promise, *The Silence of the Girls* spins it out so that no reader should miss the significance of Briseis' observation. If Dué characterised (Homeric) laments as "powerful speech-acts, capable of inciting violent action,"[57] Barker gives Briseis the adequate recognition of exactly how powerful this speech-act is.

Interesting is the absence of direct speech in Barker's interpretation. Closely focalised through Briseis, the passage does not contain a single quotation mark, indicating the lack of direct utterances by the girl herself. The lament does contain all elements present in the *Iliad* – that is, Briseis' loneliness, her grief for her husband and family, Patroclus' promise of marriage, and the mention of the enslaved women using his death as "a cover to mourn [their] own losses"[58] – yet none of them appear in the direct form of Homer's epic. Barker instead focuses on the girl's thoughts and feelings. Significant among her feelings is Briseis' genuine affection for Patroclus, "one of the dearest friends [she] ever had": though she and the other girls "to some extent" use his death to express their own feelings, their grief is in no way staged or insincere.[59] By displaying Briseis' feelings and inner turmoil at her friend's death, Barker rounds out one of Homer's background characters and gives her a story; she reinterprets the

[54] Barker (2018) 292.
[55] Barker (2018) 212.
[56] Barker (2018) 212.
[57] Dué (2006) 8.
[58] Barker (2018) 212.
[59] Barker (2018) 212.

classical material in such a way it ensures narrative justice for Homer's Briseis. The lament thus represents an act of agency, but its narratological form also aids Briseis' characterization as more than "the bone of contention" in a war between two men.[60]

Individually, voice has proven to be a noteworthy source of agency. Collectively, Briseis' voice will enable her to braid the other girls' lives into a story to be remembered for decades, if not centuries to come. "Silence becomes a woman."[61] It is the premise on which most of the girls have been brought up,[62] and it serves them well to remember this admonition in the Greek camp. Silence becomes synonymous with safety, security, and survival. It also becomes synonymous with oblivion: that is, if Briseis were not present to break the narrative silence and deliver the girls' stories to posterity, they would be forgotten. Though via Briseis' perspective, the reader is privy to her thoughts and inner stories, the historical silence of the girls is of concern here. In Solnit's words, stories "can be both prison and the crowbar to break open the door of that prison" as they "lift us up or smash us against the stone wall of our own limits and fears."[63] To liberate themselves from the narratives that imprison and obliviate them, the girls must tell their own stories, since liberation "is always in part a storytelling process."[64] Considering the importance of voice and stories from a philosopher's perspective, Miranda Fricker offers relevant insights into epistemic injustice: injustice relating to who is thought to be a "knower" – thus listened to and believed – versus who is not. An important component of epistemic injustice is hermeneutical injustice, or "the injustice of having one's social experience denied and hidden from communal understanding."[65] Lacking communal understanding, social injustices are not interpreted within a relevant framework and are not met with adequate social responses. The people affected have no means to understand their experience, to bond over shared grief with others, or to organise themselves. Indeed, as Catherine Lanone points out, the captive women have few ways to grieve for their losses, except, for example, after Patroclus' death.[66] To counter this injustice, storytelling becomes a collective tool used by Briseis, who on several occasions proves to be the voice for other girls' stories.

As remarked earlier, an important moment of silencing occurs when Polyxena is first gagged, then killed by Pyrrhus; though with her final words she attempts to denounce Agamemnon, the duty to carry on her story falls on Briseis' shoulders. The latter stayed with Polyxena until the very end, watching even the exact moment she is

[60] De Jong (2018) 30.
[61] Barker (2018) 294.
[62] As Briseis notes, "Every woman I've ever known was brought up on that saying." Her statement presumably only considers women of royal birth, or at least freeborn women, without considering that the social relations in enslaved women's lives might be (even) more restrictive than those she is familiar with, see Barker (2018) 294.
[63] Solnit (2017) 19.
[64] Solnit (2017) 19.
[65] Fricker (2007) cited in Chemaly (2018) 188.
[66] Lanone (2020).

killed because, in her own words, she "wanted to bear witness."[67] Later, as her very last act in the novel, Briseis returns to Polyxena's corpse and frees the girl from the bondages that silenced her. Turning over the body, Briseis remarks that "[t]he deep gash in her throat made her look as if she had two mouths," both of which are silent;[68] she painstakingly works the knot on Polyxena's gag until her mouth is free again. The task is traumatising, and Briseis barely makes it to the end before having to turn away, yet it perfectly represents the difficult duty that lies at the core of the novel: to remove the silence of the girls and tell their stories. As Polyxena will not be able to tell her own story, Briseis shoulders the task to make sure that the tale survives for those who are willing to listen. In fact, Briseis assumes responsibility to remember all enslaved girls – not only Polyxena but also Iphis, Ritsa, Hecuba, and many others – as well as the acts of agency they carried out. In the end, she often thinks back to Achilles and Patroclus, but, as she notes to herself, "it's the girls I remember most."[69] She "becomes the voice of communal memory, retrieving the tales of silenced women, both famous and forgotten ones,"[70] and as such takes a valuable step towards achieving hermeneutical justice for those famous and forgotten girls.

Briseis' voice is the force that ensures a legacy for Polyxena, Iphis, and many others, a feat that subverts an entire tradition of songs, poems, and stories dedicated to the heroic lives and deaths of famous young men. With Achilles' lament for the premature Greek deaths stuck in her head, Briseis looks at the newly enslaved Trojan women and realises that they "need a new song": one that accurately renders the fates of these and other women in the long war, depicting the specific pain and sorrow of their "amputated" lives.[71] The girls need a song that conveys the truth about the "brutal reality of conquest and slavery" – that is, "the massacres of men and boys" and "the enslavement of women and girls" in "a rape camp"[72] – without turning it into a love story between master and slave. Indeed, Briseis has realised that their survival, their songs, and their stories are intimately linked:

> "*We're going to survive – our songs, our stories. They'll never be able to forget us. Decades after the last man who fought at Troy is dead, their sons will remember the songs their Trojan mothers sang to them*."[73]

The song that will survive, Briseis suggests, is perhaps not the *Iliad*; rather, it is the songs that captured women sang to their Greek-Trojan children. Additionally, the cha-

[67] Barker (2018) 318.
[68] Barker (2018) 322.
[69] Barker (2018) 323.
[70] Lanone (2020) 10.
[71] Barker (2018) 314.
[72] Barker (2018) 324.
[73] Barker (2018) 296.

racters that will survive are perhaps not only Homer's Achilles, Agamemnon, and Patroclus, but also Barker's Briseis, Iphis, and Chryseis.

Finally, to substantiate the individual and collective uses of storytelling in *The Silence of the Girls*, we can consider two narratological aspects: the narrator's retrospective point of view and the narratee she addresses. First, despite Briseis' proximity to the plot, there is a temporal distance between the moment of narration and the narrated events: Briseis looks back on her time with Achilles, Patroclus, and Agamemnon from a posterior point of view. In Herman and Vervaeck's typology this amounts to subsequent narration, which, as is the case in *The Silence of the Girls*, often relies on past tense.[74] In certain moments, however, this past tense is laced with verbs in the present tense as well as present reflections that accent the narrator's position posterior to the events of the novel. Sentences such as "I wish I could forget, but I can't"[75] or "Looking back, I can see that there were changes"[76] are examples of simultaneous narration and, as I will detail below, serve a specific narrative function.

Second, at several moments in the narrative, Briseis explicitly or implicitly addresses a narratee, who in turn also talks to Briseis. According to Herman and Vervaeck's theory,[77] the narratee in *The Silence of the Girls* is dramatised, that is, they appear as a character in the story. Although the narratee is never named or physically described, they puncture Briseis' narrative with questions and remarks about her story: for example, when Briseis describes her captor at length, the narratee observes, " *You seem to have spent a lot of time watching him*."[78] At other times, the narratee intervenes in Briseis' story to ask whether she really would have married her brothers' killer,[79] or whether she regretted praying for Apollo's plague.[80] The relationship between Briseis and her narratee is reciprocal, with Briseis frequently reassuring the reader that, within the narrative world, there is someone listening to her story. Her addresses to the narratee are at times explicit, for example when she describes her rather informal conversation with Achilles and remarks, "[a] rather strange conversation, you might think, taking place between owner and slave."[81] In other moments, these addresses are more indirect, such as Briseis' observation that "[she is] trying – rather desperately perhaps – to convey [her] first impressions of the camp,"[82] presumably for the narratee's benefit.

The narrator's retrospective point of view and her addressing the narratee have a joint function: namely, to signal from the beginning of the novel on that Briseis has

[74] Herman / Vervaeck (2019).
[75] Barker (2018) 14.
[76] Barker (2018) 54.
[77] Herman / Vervaeck (2019) based on Prince (1971).
[78] Barker (2018) 38.
[79] Barker (2018) 93.
[80] Barker (2018) 89.
[81] Barker (2018) 274.
[82] Barker (2018) 37.

survived her life in the camp and that she has succeeded in telling her own and the other girls' stories to posterity. Indeed, from the very start onwards, the narratological set-up of the novel signals to its readers that Briseis has accomplished her dual mission of "liv[ing] long enough to see Achilles sizzling on his funeral pile"[83] – which is made clear by her narrating the story from a safe, future point of view – and of composing "a new song"[84] by "bear[ing] witness" to the girls' stories[85] – which is made clear by her telling these stories to the narratee. The latter part of the mission is thus not accomplished as much as it is in the process of being accomplished, in the present tense, since the girls' stories will travel on into the future even "[d]ecades after the last man who fought at Troy is dead."[86] The memory of Briseis, Iphis, Chryseis, and all the other girls is a work in progress that will be advanced by generations of sons and daughters to come.

5. Conclusion

How does Pat Barker receive and interpret the *Iliad*'s gendered gaps and silences, and how does she manage to give a voice to the Homeric women – particularly Briseis – in *The Silence of the Girls*? How does Barker read the *Iliad*, which gaps does she notice, and how does she fill them? As Barker focalises her story mainly through Briseis, she gives centre stage to the girl who has remained in the shadows of powerful men for centuries, emphasising her sorrows and experiences over the men's stories. She supplements Homer's focus on war and warriors with tales of female suffering, thereby nuancing their dominant perspective. Though the Iliadic Briseis expresses herself and acts upon a sense of agency, her voice does not fully unfold within the epic narrative. In *The Silence of the Girls*, on the other hand, Briseis' voice allows her to enact certain forms of agency as well as weave together the other girls' stories and ensure these tales are told to posterity. Barker's key reception thus lies in her revelation of how the captive girls in *The Silence of the Girls* overcome the oppression of silence to find their voices and tell their stories, successfully giving the floor to the girls and women who have not yet seen their stories told.

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[83] Barker (2018) 318.
[84] Barker (2018) 314, emphasis removed.
[85] Barker (2018) 318.
[86] Barker (2018) 296, emphasis removed.

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