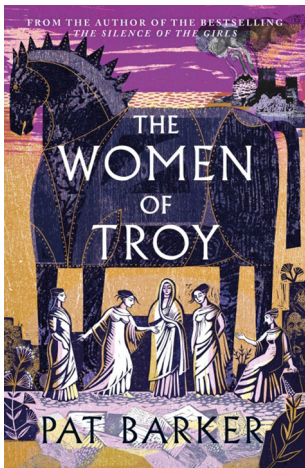


The Women of Troy

Barker (P.) Pp. 307. London: Hamish Hamilton (Penguin Random House UK), 2021. Cased, £18.99. ISBN: 978-0-241-42723-1.

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After the success of *The Silence of the Girls*, this sequel needs little presentation; in beautiful, deceptively simple prose, Pat Barker invites us to revisit the fall of Troy through compelling characters and a naked look at their experiences.

The book starts with the warriors inside the Trojan horse and finds its resolution, if we can indeed talk about resolution, with the departure of the ships from Troy. The story is told for a 21st century audience who want to listen with sympathy to female voices, and one of the main appeals

of the novel is the opportunity it lends to move behind the scenes and see the conflicts in the Trojan war with modern eyes. Those who loved *The Silence of the Girls* will want to read this book to find an uplifting end to the story. However, it can also certainly be enjoyed independently. Indeed, I would recommend it as a first point of contact for mature students who want to explore classical reception or find ways into classical literature through modern voices.

As a classicist, it is impossible not to read the novel as a response to earlier versions of the story. There is a superb intertextual conversation with Homer and an array of different literary and artistic works, from the *Antigone* to modern films. However, good knowledge of classical literature is by no means necessary to cherish what is, essentially, a magnificent piece of storytelling in its own right. An excellent example of this is the fascinating use of similes throughout the novel. Whereas classicists will inevitably read them as a response to their Homeric predecessors, the sheer artistry with which they invite you into the story will be compelling to an audience from any other background. They leave an imprint: days after reading that Cassandra has ‘a network of raised blue veins like drowned worms under the skin’ (p. 121), the thought still creeps me out. The same is true of the invitation to hear female voices and explore their previously mostly invisible world. For instance, the moving singing performance in chapter 12 presents an opportunity to admire humanity, companionship and literary enjoyment. Still, for the classicist, it will be complemented by a contrast with Phemius and Demodocus, and their audiences. The text provides a unique opportunity to reinterpret and challenge the universal values presented.

Teachers of Latin, Greek and Classical Civilisation will want to consider this book as complementary reading for A-Level students,

but it is not a straightforward choice. The main caveat is that a strong trigger warning is necessary: the depictions of abuse do not hold back and drag the reader into the raw realities of violence. Also, the presentation of the characters is so well crafted and convincing that there exists a risk that some students will find it challenging to draw the line between the original texts or translations they have read, and the story as presented by Pat Barker. Finally, some may find the anachronisms in the book inadmissible, but this is a work of fiction and not a historical account, and part of its appeal lies precisely in the fact that it is neither our world nor the world of Homer.

I would like to finish this review by praising the material quality of the hardcover edition. Sarah Young’s print for the jacket and internal artwork is absolutely delightful, and it suits incredibly well the high quality and care that have gone into binding the book. All in all, this is a book that should be present on the shelf of every classicist.

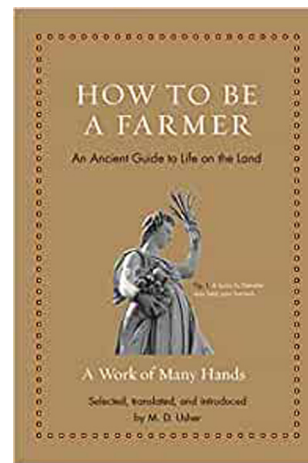
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How to be a Farmer: An Ancient Guide to Life on the Land

Usher (M.D.) pp. xvi+247. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021. Cased, £12.99, US\$16.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-21174-9

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This handsome book is an interesting selection of a wide range of texts in celebration of country living. 24 passages are chosen from: Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns, the Orphic Hymns, Cato, Plato, Virgil, Horace, Lucretius, Varro, Pliny (the Elder), Columella, Musonius Rufus, Longus and one telling inscription which ends the book. The passages chosen show different aspects of rural life from the idealised and the idyllic to the shared experience of tilling the land as a source of scientific observations, to the practicalities

of naming dogs, choosing rams or appreciating the humble donkey. The agrarian lore contained in it is (Usher admits) of limited practical value to anyone setting up a farm today—he describes it (p. xi) candidly as ‘dated, locale-specific and often outmoded or inaccurate’. The book aims for ‘variety and accessibility’ in making its selections and the result is an engaging mixture of history, philosophy, poetry, prose treatise, epigraphy and satire. Varied it certainly is. In his spirited introduction, Usher makes an apology for the fact that much of the ancient evidence presents us with a

world where women and enslaved persons were subordinate to citizen males, and he seeks to rescue from the sources some sense of the joy and the goodness of working the land for oneself.

The text is supported by a facing translation, as in the Loeb Classical Library from which many of the texts are taken. The marrying of the text with the translation is not always managed at the ends of pages; and the publishers have in many places inserted empty spaces into the text-pages to allow the English to catch up (which gives an odd appearance to the text). Usher prints *-is* accusative plural endings in 3rd declension nouns and adjectives (rather than the more user-friendly *-es*).

The translation is uneven in quality. The version of Hesiod (for instance) is stilted and there were places where I had to use the Greek to understand the English rather than *vice versa*. Doing justice to Virgil's *Georgics* ('the best poem by the best poet' as John Dryden opined) was always going to be impossible, but Usher's version of the *makarismos* of farming life makes it very hard to see why Dryden got so excited about this text. There are words translated oddly (at 2.464 *vestes* surely means 'clothing' and not 'carpets': at 273 *vilibus* surely means 'cheap' rather than 'ample') and there are places where the Latin is misconstrued (2.477 *caelique vias* is the object of *monstrent* but Usher makes it go with *accipiant*, turning the accusative into some sort of local ablative ('on the paths of heaven') which not only misses the hendiadys but gives a misleading impression of the meaning of the sentence). That said, there are some lovely turns of phrase elsewhere: the description of the town mouse as 'a mouse haughty of tooth' (*dente superbo* at

Horace *Satires* 2.6.87), or 'roiling' for *tumultuosum* at Horace *Odes* 3.1.26, or the inspired word 'awash' in describing how 'these days ... most women are awash with luxury and idleness' (*nunc vero cum pleraeque sic luxu et inertia diffluant* (Columella Book 12 Preface 9.2).

There are also some surprises in the selection of texts. There is no Theocritus and no Tibullus for instance, and Usher has to work quite hard to make Lucretius 1.146-264 (which is arguing for the conservation of matter and energy) into a piece on 'the philosophy of compost' (when Lucretius does not actually mention compost and the disquisition on early mankind at 5.1361-1411 would surely have been more appropriate for the book). The lengthy excerpt from Plato's *Republic* arguing for the theory of the division of labour is of only marginal relevance to the farming life. It is a pity that a passage like Horace's account of his Sabine farm (*Epistles* 1.16.1-16) did not make the cut, whereas Columella is treated to four separate excerpts on a range of animals—but then the point of a book like this is to open our eyes to the unexpected in the world around us, and Usher certainly does that.

Typographical mistakes are few (the most egregious being that Horace only composed one volume of *Epodes* and so the reference on p. 97 to *Epodes* 1.2 should simply read *Epode* 2). This suitably sturdy volume is small enough to fit easily into the knapsack or the pocket of the hill-walker or the eco-tourist and would give him plenty of food for thought as he eats his ploughman's lunch.

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