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This interview with Emma Bridges was recorded in London on 28th June 2016.

EB. Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me today, Emily. Your novel, *For the Most Beautiful*, takes a perspective on the end of the Trojan War which is quite different from other versions of that story, in that it is narrated primarily by Briseis and Chryseis, two women about whom we learn very little in the *Iliad* itself. Could you start by telling us why you felt drawn to explore their characters, and their roles, in more detail than had been done before?

EH. I've always been interested in Homer's women; I wrote my undergraduate thesis at Cambridge on the *Iliad* and one of the things which kept coming up was the other story of the women who were hidden behind the walls of Troy, and who were observers of the action, but were never quite in the action. I then took a course at Yale studying the invention of the classic, and I read Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, and I thought, why has no-one done this for the *Iliad*? Briseis and Chryseis are so important at the beginning of the *Iliad*, and then they disappear – but they set up the whole action of the plot, and I thought that their perspective could be a really important one on the story, on the war, not only because they are so important in the *Iliad* but also because as captive prisoners their tale sheds a light on Achilles' story, and the tale of the Greeks at Troy, in a way that we don't see if we don't look from their perspective.

EB. As you said, we don't get a lot of information about them and yet they're vital to the action, so how did you go about finding a voice for those characters?

EH. It was a difficult task. Just before the Catalogue of Ships in Book 2 of the *Iliad* there's a brief mention of Briseis and her background. The poet mentions that her husband Mynes (prince of Lyrnessus, near Troy), her father and her three brothers were all killed by Achilles, and that she was subsequently taken captive by Achilles. That gave me a structure on which to build her character – to think about how it would feel as a woman to see your husband killed by your captor, and then become a sex slave in the Greek camp… For Chryseis we have in the *Iliad* that one moment in the Greek camp where her father Chryses ransoms her and sends her back home to Chryse, but we don't have much more. So I actually supplemented it with the subsequent Shakespearian tradition of Troilus and Cressida (where Cressida is the post-classical name for Chryseis), to add a backstory to her capture by the Greeks.

EB. So this isn't just a reception of the ancient text, but it's also a reception of the medieval and Shakespearean versions of the ancient story?

EH. Exactly. One of the things I was fascinated by was that these two women were often confused in the medieval tradition – Briseis and Chryseis, because their names are similar, were seen as the same woman. So part of *For the Most Beautiful* is the idea that these are actually two facets of one woman who are experiencing the Trojan War from different perspectives. I was working with both Chaucer's and Shakespeare's versions.

EB. In some ways is it easier to find the women's voices because Homer tells us so little, or is that a hindrance?

EH. In my doctoral dissertation I look at contemporary women writers and how they look back to the women of the past. One of the interesting things which has come out of that project is that it is precisely the gaps, the absences of women's voices, which allow us to say something interesting about them. There is also a concomitant problem with that in that we tend to put a lot of ourselves into them. One of the things that I was very aware of was trying as hard as I could not to be anachronistic – to make the women feel relevant, so that they would appeal especially to female readers, but at the same time not to give them concerns that they wouldn't have had in Bronze Age Troy. It was a balancing act – the fact that you have that opening onto women's voices is both a gift, and something you have to deal with carefully and sensitively.

EB. Do you think that by looking at the story of the *Iliad* from the point of view of characters whose perspective we don't see in the Homeric text this enhances our understanding of the ancient text as well?

EH. Absolutely. I don't want to claim too much for my book, but in relation to my research project as a whole I see a lot of female writers now who are looking back to the classical world and trying to see it from a different perspective. In the *Iliad* there is an ambition to lay out what it is to be Greek, what it means to be a hero, to explore the nature of war. It's not an unambivalent project in Homer. With *For the Most Beautiful* I've tried to say that by taking on the female perspective we can see that from a different point of view, we can look through a different lens. We can also project into it our own concerns about thinking about women and their experience, and understand the *Iliad* and the Trojan War on a different level. To me it was very important that we don't just focus on Achilles, on the wrath of Achilles, and the male story, because that comes at a cost. If we don't understand that we don't understand the price that is being paid by the Greeks when Achilles leaves the war and so on.

EB. I found when reading it that I started to rethink some of the views I'd had about Achilles and Agamemnon. Did you find that when you were writing about these men from the point of view of the female characters that your views on the male characters changed as well?

EH. Yes. When I was studying the *Iliad* as an undergraduate there was plenty of literature on the development of Achilles as a hero, the nature of his μῆνις (wrath), and whether he was capable of empathy, whether that came through at the end of the *Iliad*. I tried to imagine myself into the mind of someone who had seen her husband, and then her father and brothers, being killed by Achilles. You see him as a brutal killer and as a slayer of hopes and dreams, not just a hero who is dealing with his own emotional problems. In Book 21 [of the *Iliad*] you see his savagery, but to imagine being on the receiving end of that – not just to see it but also then having to be with him physically, to lie with him every night – that completely changed how I thought about the physicality of the act of killing and the act of sleeping with the

woman you have captured. It became very visceral. The thing that I found interesting was that I didn't really like Achilles to start with, but by the end I did; going through Briseis' journey – understanding why she had been taken by him, why he had acted in the way he had, and the nature of war – I also began to accept what Achilles had done.

EB. Do you think when writing a modern version of that story you have to tread a fine line between what a modern reader might think of as heroism, and ancient, Homeric notions of heroism? How do you reconcile those two things?

EH. It's something that was particularly difficult because ancient notions of heroism are also tied up with notions of masculinity - ἥρως is a masculine noun, even. That presented an interesting problem: with Briseis' character I wanted to explore the nature of heroism and sacrifice, but there isn't really a language for that in the culture and society of the Bronze Age. So I tried to debunk the apparent heroism of people like Achilles and Agamemnon. It was important to me to explore why heroism comes at a cost. It's easy to see Achilles as the archetypal hero, but there are actions and consequences behind that. With Briseis I wanted her to act as a hero for a city but not in a typical 'blazing in glory' way. There had to be a cost to it, and emotions and difficulty along the way.

EB. What about Agamemnon's character? He comes across in your novel as particularly unattractive.

EH. That was a conscious decision. I was thinking perhaps particularly of Agamemnon's speech in *Iliad* 1 where he's comparing Chryseis to Clytemnestra and saying that he prefers [Chryseis] to his own wife. That is a particularly odious thing to do so I cast him as my villain, as the antithesis to Achilles, who is more nuanced. It was easy to see Agamemnon as the overweening king who doesn't reflect on the costs of war in the same way that Achilles does.

EB. One thing which I was really struck by was your representation of the relationship which develops between Briseis and Achilles, where she actually becomes attracted to him sexually, and they develop an emotional bond. I thought that might be quite uncomfortable for some readers – it's a form of Stockholm syndrome – and I wondered whether that was based on research into psychological relationships between captives and their captors.

EH. It was based more on my own personal sense of where Briseis had to go. Initially I actually had Briseis acting and responding very differently – she was planning revenge on Achilles in a Medea-like way, and I had a lot of Medea in her. But the interesting thing was that the character led me to realise that that wasn't right for her. As someone who had loved very deeply she was capable of that kind of love and she still had that to give. She mentions [in the novel] several times that Achilles is the only one left to her in the world, and I felt instinctively that she would cling to him, even in spite of all he'd done. That was more what the character needed me to do for her, which was fascinating because I really wanted her to have revenge on Achilles, but I in the end I had to back down and let her have her way!

EB. I've often heard writers cited as saying that the characters developed in ways that they didn't initially imagine. I suppose in this case it could be related to the fact that there wasn't a lot of background material for this character, so you had that blank canvas to work with.

EH. Yes. Having a classical background, I found that there were many exempla of female characters I had in the back of my mind as I was writing, and I thought that I would draw Medea into the story but it just wasn't what this character needed.

EB. One of the things which strikes me with a lot of reversionings of ancient myths is that – as in the case of your story – there are certain things which have to happen. So despite any interventions which Briseis and Chryseis try to make, there are some things which are inevitable: Troy has to fall; Hector has to die; Achilles' heel has to be vulnerable. But the flip side is that myth is by its very nature pliable. How did those two aspects of myth influence the way in which you chose to recast it?

EH. One of the main reasons I write is that, as a classicist, I want to make the myths and literature of antiquity accessible to a modern audience. So to me fidelity to the ancient texts is really important. It's one of the things which was at the forefront of my ambition in writing the book. It was important to me that readers would come away not only with a sense of a good story, but also that they would have a sense of the structure of the *Iliad*, and other stories of the epic cycle, and the larger myth of the Trojan War. That approach does have its constraints, yet as a classicist you can work from the inside out; you know the myths and the literature, and you have certain fixed points. You can say, 'I know that this has to happen; how can I get from this point to the next?' It allows you to be creative in an unusual way within a fixed framework.

EB. We've touched a little on the kinds of audience you'd like to reach; you mentioned accessibility, and earlier you talked about a female readership. Did you set out with a typical reader in mind?

EH. The aim was absolutely for someone who hasn't had any previous encounters with the classical world to read it, that this could be a way in to the *Iliad*. I was talking to a friend last night and she said that one of the things which is difficult about the *Iliad* is that it feels very strange, very foreign – there are so many things like ritual practices, funeral games and so on, that can make it feel very distant. The hope with this book is that it will provide a way in to the *Iliad* and the Bronze Age, both of which can often seem unfamiliar, somehow 'other'. I'd hope that people who already familiar with Classics and with the *Iliad* will also find that this brings a different perspective, and that it will prove of interest. There are a couple of classical reworkings in there – Virgil's description of the fall of Troy in the *Aeneid*, for example, features strongly in my description of the sack of Lyrnessus – so hopefully for classicists it will also be fun, but the primary audience I was thinking about were non-classicists who wanted to dive into the past and explore something that they didn't already know about.

EB. Was there anything that you felt you had to compromise on in order to appeal to a modern audience?

EH. I wanted to bring in as much of Mycenaean Greek culture as I could, to incorporate details from the dig at Troy, and the anthropology of the society there, and how it related as a Bronze Age city, at the edge of the Hittite kingdom and Anatolia as well as Greece. I added as many details as I could to bring the period and setting alive to readers, but it was important to me to make sure I did so with a light touch – I wanted to make sure I wrote a fast-paced retelling of two women's lived experiences, and not a catalogue of Mycenaean grave goods!

EB. I noticed that there were certain things which you did in order to create what we might call an 'authentic' feel. For example, you maintained the divisions of the Bronze Age calendar and your chapter headings had the names of each narrator in Greek script. Were those things there from the start for you?

EH. The calendar names were there from the start – that was fun to research. As a classicist I love the resonances of words and the histories that they bring with them, and the idea that in Mycenaean Greek there is a month called *wodewijo* – the 'rose-month' – suggested a way of thinking about the calendar that was lost to the reader if I just named the month 'June'. So it was a way of trying to introduce people to a way of thinking about the suppleness and colour of language when you try to translate it. The Greek headings were actually different – that was an editorial decision from the publishers. I had an idea about giving the two girls each a visual symbol to denote the changes between the narrators, because I was concerned about their names being very similar, and that's what also drove the change in the spelling from Chryseis to Krisayis. That happened at the very last moment – I felt that otherwise they could be easily confused with one another. The publishers suggested having the Greek characters because they would be to many readers a symbol of the difference between the two characters.

EB. So in a sense you did maintain a sense of that foreignness, that strangeness which you mentioned earlier.

EH. Yes – it's a subtle but visible representation that we're talking about something that is part of a different culture and a different language. Many readers have said to me that the book felt so vivid and so modern to them, that it felt alive because they could relate to the characters, which is wonderful. Having that little bit of Greek in there – for example I also retained ΤΗΙ ΚΑΛΛΙΣΤΗΙ for the inscription on the golden apple – gives it a sense of mystique, of being rooted in a place and time.

EB. Is the fact that to some readers it feels contemporary despite the ancient setting to do with the universality of the theme of war, and what happens to people whose lives are destroyed by war? Every generation has some experience of that. Do you think that this is why the *Iliad* is a text that speaks across the generations?

EH. Yes. It's a sad truth that there is always going to be some experience of war, if not directly then war going on somewhere in the world at any one time. For me the Syrian crisis was particularly strong in my mind, when I was thinking about the Trojans leaving Troy and then coming back to resettle the city. The aftermath of the story which I didn't go into in detail – Aeneas, and the migration over the sea to Italy – was there too. It's not simply the experience of war, but also other themes, such as how love grows in difficult circumstances, or the desire to fight for your country and how far that can take you, and how that conflicts with duty towards family and so on. One of the things which draws me to Classics is that there is both a similarity and a difference there. We can look back and say that these are humans like us, they experience emotions like us, and yet that simultaneous difference in culture and cultural practices is there – the simple fact that Achilles wears greaves, for example, as he goes into battle, and carries a bronze shield. It jolts you into the past and forces you to see your similarity to each other through a prism and reflect on it in a way that you can't if you're just thinking about contemporary society. There's that really interesting conjunction of both similarity and difference, and that human connection. So for example we

can read the *Iliad*, see Hector meeting with Andromache in Book 6 and feel a deep empathy when he holds up Astyanax. You could see that on the streets of London and you would recognise that same love, that same emotion. At the same time there are moments when, for example, Achilles is going to his battle frenzy and you read the list of the dead, and that notion of the *aristeia* and the hero created in that way feels very foreign, and very old, in the same way that the notion of slavery, or of praying to a pantheon of anthropomorphic gods, seems very strange to us in the modern west today.

EB. One crucial thing in relation to how you present the world of your story is what you do with the gods. What are the challenges involved in writing the gods for a modern audience, and how did you tackle those?

EH. The first draft of *For the Most Beautiful*, the very first few chapters I wrote, didn't include the gods. Yet as I continued to write, I realised in a way that I hadn't realised before how crucial the gods are to the *Iliad* in changing the perspective on the epic, and in providing a little bit of comic relief to the tragedies of the mortals below. But it's not only about comic relief, it's about throwing their tragedies into perspective. You only understand the costs of mortal deaths when you see how flippant the immortals are and how little life means to them. So in a way that almost deepens the tragedy of the characters. As a writer it gave me a bit of breathing space to step back and look at the war from a distance, from a bird's eye view, through writing the gods. It's interesting: one of the reasons I decided to incorporate the gods was, I think, because many writers tend to shy away from them. I think that it probably would have been an easier novel to write if I had discarded the gods, because historical fiction – at least as it's written today – tends to focus on people and their occupations. To talk about gods you almost enter the realms of fantasy. At the same time I felt that, especially for readers who haven't experienced the *Iliad*, if I only gave them the mortals I was really only giving them half the picture. So it became essential to think about how I could get the gods in there in a way that preserved my sense of the gods as ironic and wry in Homer, and to try to infuse that into the book whilst also enabling the audience to connect to them. One of the difficult things in speaking to an audience without a direct experience of polytheism is to introduce people to how it would feel as a mortal to deeply believe that the gods inhabited every single aspect of the world, and then to show how that would play out Olympus – that was a challenge, but one I enjoyed.

EB. You decided to write the gods from the perspective of an omniscient narrator, which is of course what Homer does, and it contrasts with what you do for Briseis and Chryseis who talk in the first person. Was that quite a natural thing to do?

EH. Yes, it was very natural. When for a mortal person you say 'I' you know what that 'I' is rooted in. It's an 'I' that was born in a certain place, who has grown up with certain experiences, and is going to die. The 'I' of the gods is an all-consuming, never-starting, never-ending 'I'. For me, by stepping back you can observe the gods – but to go into their mindset would be almost impossible, because they're abstractions more than they are personalities. They don't have the same concerns as humans do. It was interesting to be limited by the fact that they don't really suffer, that they couldn't really have fear, and so even describing them in the third person is a very different experience from describing mortals.

EB. I got the sense when reading it that you had quite a lot of fun with the gods and thinking about their anthropomorphic nature – I particularly enjoyed Athena as a sulky teenager, for example! I wondered if you had a favourite?

EH. Probably Hermes is my favourite. Throughout *For the Most Beautiful* he is ever present, observing the scenes, almost standing in for the omniscient narrator at some points. In my second book, *For the Winner*, on the other hand, I introduce Iris, Hera's messenger and a counterpart to Hermes. I really enjoyed Iris; she was a very different god. I liked Hermes for his sense of mischief combined with his desire to tell stories. That interweaving of the gods really just playing around with humans, not caring whether they live or die, with Hermes' interest in where the story was going to go, was interesting. I have him and Apollo as sort of metaliterary figures; and of course both of them are connected to the lyre.

EB. You also gave the gods both their Greek and their Trojan identities, so Apollo has his Trojan name Apulunas, and Aphrodite is Arinniti. What led to that?

EH. I read an article about the origins of the names of the Greek gods, and Apulunas in particular as originally a Hittite, or Anatolian, god. There is evidence that he actually came from the east to Greece, and that his name, originally Apulunas in Anatolia, was subsequently transmuted to Apollo. That got me thinking: if everyone believed in the same gods and yet called them different names, how would that play out on Olympus? So the name Apulunas was a Hittite name, as was Arinniti. I tried to find names – either Hittite gods or Hittite personal names – that sounded phonologically similar to the Greek gods so that it wouldn't be too disorientating for the reader.

EB. Your characters are surprised when they realise that they worship the same gods but call them different names. That relates to the notion that although people might be on different sides, they can have more in common than they might realise, doesn't it?

EH. Absolutely. One of the things I'm sort of playing with there is that often-noted discrepancy in *Iliad* 6 where Hector goes back to Troy and sends Hecuba up to pray to Athena, who is one of the most vociferous gods in her defence of the Greeks. I was trying to think about how to make the Trojans a separate culture, which they undoubtedly were, but at the same time to emphasise that similarity which in Homer is so poignant, where you have the Trojans praying to Greek gods like Athena who we know will not defend them.

EB. In Homer there's also the simple fact that the Trojans speak Greek too, isn't there? And we get those deeper moments of shared humanity, like between Achilles and Priam.

EH. Absolutely – they are the times when the barriers break down.

EB. I'd like to know a little bit more about the relationship between your academic work and the writing of a novel. Your doctoral thesis is on the roles of women in ancient literature and their reception in the works of contemporary authors. How do those two things relate to and compare with one another?

EH. I found that, while the two complemented each other in many ways, there were different types of work I needed to do for both. The main area of research I needed to do for *For the Most Beautiful* was about the artefacts and the archaeology of the world in which the characters live. I was already very familiar with Homer but I needed to understand the

minutiae of their lives to bring them alive. So that was almost a historical project – I was looking at books on the Bronze Age, and reading inscriptions and cuneiform tablets. For the doctoral dissertation I'm dealing with literature, with representations of women – not how they 'really' were, but how they were perceived and how they talked about themselves. So when I'm looking at ancient literature I'm looking at Helen and Penelope, Sappho and Lavinia. I'm thinking very much in the cases of Helen, Penelope and Lavinia about how men are writing about women. When I'm thinking about Sappho I'm thinking about how a woman's voice is trying to articulate her identity as an author. Similarly, looking at contemporary female authors you're really mining the words of the text in order to understand how they're engaging with their own canonicity as female writers, and engaging with a very masculine classical tradition. So that's a more literary project. In *For the Most Beautiful* my main concern – even as it was deeply engaged with the project of recovering women's voices – was to make the world feel alive, to emphasise the historical material aspects of the world and then to make the women believable characters.

EB. It's quite a different matter, isn't it, to write a novel, than to write a chapter of a doctorate or a conference paper? Did you find it difficult to switch between those two modes of working?

EH. Not at all, actually. I was writing the book at the same time as I was writing the dissertation and I would essentially write the book in the morning and the dissertation in the afternoon. For me, being able to indulge my imagination in the morning and inhabit the Bronze Age world, and then go into scholarly critical mode and delve deep into texts in the afternoon complemented and enriched the process. To me the two things feed into each other. I found that analysing how Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia*, for example, rehabilitates Lavinia's voice in the *Aeneid* helped me in the way that I was thinking about my writing and how I could make my characters accessible, vocal, real. And the process of writing the novel made me understand some of the choices made by the women writers I was studying, so they fed into each other.

EB. How far do you feel that your own work was influenced by the work of other women you were reading?

EH. I did avoid reading other receptions of the *Iliad* as I was writing because I wanted to make sure that I didn't lose my voice and my own approach to the work. Yet works like Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, Elizabeth Cook's *Achilles* and Ursula Le Guin's *Lavinia* are all self-consciously literary. I think they would say that of themselves, and that's what makes them such interesting sites for study. They are self-consciously reflecting on the literary process and on who the authors are, as writers engaging with the classical canon. Mine is, I think, a largely different project in that it's aiming to be a way in to classical myth and an introduction to the rich literature and mythology of the ancient world. I think also the process of analysing a text like *The Penelopiad* is so different from the process of creating something and writing in your own voice that they weren't influencing each other in that way. With Margaret Atwood in particular, her work is almost a dissection of the *Odyssey* as it is so meditated and involved. What I was trying to do was to create something that is fast-paced and vivid, and which draws you in to the world in a different way.

EB. *For the Most Beautiful* is the first novel of a trilogy, and earlier you briefly mentioned the next book. Before you go could you tell us a little more about that second novel?

EH. *For the Winner* is coming out in 2017 and it tells the story of Atalanta, the only woman to travel with Jason and the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece. The myth of Jason and the Argonauts is possibly an even older myth than that of the Trojan War and has that sense of antiquity – it's a journey to the very end of the world for a mythical treasure of gold. I felt that I wanted to bring that story alive to people but again from a female perspective. Atalanta immediately sprang to mind not only because in one version she is the only woman who travels on board with Jason and the Argonauts – and it's just fascinating to imagine how that could have happened – but also because the idea for the trilogy is to unify the books through the myths of the golden apples. So the first book opens with the Judgement of Paris and the gifting of the golden apple to Aphrodite. The second ends with the famous race which Atalanta runs against Hippomenes, and the decision she makes to stop for the golden apple he drops for her – and thus to allow Hippomenes to win the race and her hand in marriage. When I thought about it, it seemed to me to be a typically misogynistic twist to the myth: a woman who is by all accounts the fastest of all runners, who knows she will win the race for her hand (which is why she sets it), but then gets distracted by a shiny gold object. I thought there must be something else; so the impetus behind the book was to try to explore why Atalanta would have made that decision in the final race, why she would have wanted the golden apple in the first place – and why she would have been driven to become a woman warrior and a fighter, to accompany Jason and the Argonauts on their epic voyage for the Golden Fleece.

EB. Good luck with it all, and thank you very much for talking to me today.

EH. Thank you – I've really enjoyed talking to you.