

# The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Literature, Translation, and Violence in Early Modern Ireland by Patricia Palmer.

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## **The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Literature, Translation, and Violence in Early Modern Ireland by Patricia Palmer (review)**

Guy Beiner

Common Knowledge

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

*Reviewed by*

*Guy Beiner (bio)*

The Elizabethan subjugation of Ireland was achieved through a series of ruthless campaigns, which, in today's terms, amounted to state terror and ethnic cleansing. Patricia Palmer, who specializes in literary representations of these wars, focuses here on the most shocking of images—severed heads. Although English soldiers claimed to be appalled by the barbaric savagery of the native Irish, they showed no qualms in decapitating vast numbers of prisoners and demanding from those whose lives were spared that they prove their loyalty by bringing in the heads of their comrades. Trophy heads, as shown in the woodcuts of John Derricke, gruesomely adorned the walls of Dublin Castle and were triumphantly displayed throughout the country.

Palmer adroitly examines reflections of these atrocities in renditions of epic poetry by refined writers who were involved in the conquest: Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen*, Sir John Harrington's translation from Italian of Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, and Sir George Carew's translation from Spanish of Alonso de Ercilla y Zúñiga's *La Araucana*, as well as the translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* by the Hiberno-English émigré Richard Stanihurst. This book's title—*The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue*—is taken from poetic meditations on the violence of language shift in John Montague's *Rough Field* (1972). Just as Palmer attentively listened to “the clamorous silence” of Gaelic poetry in a previous book, so she fittingly chooses to leave the last words of this book to Irish vernacular voices found in elegies and laments that express the shock and grief of those who witnessed the horrific executions.

One would have thought that such abhorrent early modern horrors would appear incomprehensively remote. Yet, at a time when videos of beheadings are circulated online by ISIS, and the HBO television adaptation of George R. R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* enralls millions of viewers, aestheticized depictions of extreme brutality seem all too

**Guy Beiner**

**Guy Beiner** is a senior lecturer in modern European history at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. His books include *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory*, which received the Ratcliff Prize for British and Irish Folk Life and the Wayland D. Hand Prize of the American Folklore Society. His forthcoming book *Rites of Oblivion* examines social forgetting and vernacular historiography in Ulster.

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Patricia Palmer, *The Severed Head and the Grafted Tongue: Literature, Translation, and Violence in Early Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 196 pp.

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—Gay Beiner

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