

III: Briseis to Achilles

The character of Briseis is derived by Ovid from the *Iliad*. In that source, however, the character of Briseis is scarcely developed and she is little more than a pivot around which the fabled wrath of Achilles is developed. While she may have been loved by Achilles in Homer's account, we should also note that for him the loss of Briseis must surely have been perceived as an insult of the gravest proportions. We know very little about Briseis and the charms she might have had in the eyes of Achilles; we only know that upon losing her Achilles retired from combat to his tent. In the *Heroides*, Briseis becomes a woman richly endowed with human feeling who grieves that she has not been reunited with the man she loves, who fears that she will be supplanted by another, and who must now find her future life with those who destroyed her homeland, her family and her heritage.

For Briseis the attraction identified as love is dangerously close to the fear of abandonment. She does not object so much to captivity as to the uncertainty and instability that it has brought into her life. In this, Briseis echoes a theme which permeates the *Heroides*: the lover and the beloved both seek to bring into their lives a degree of permanence and changelessness that in reality is nearly impossible of attainment.

But the situation of Briseis is still more tenuous. She is not only a pawn in a mysterious game being played out by characters superior to her in every way but she is also a barbarian. Achilles is a Greek and Briseis is not. Whatever difference there may be between the two, this is the single most important one. As a barbarian, as a captive, as a woman, Briseis finds her ability to bargain and to plead weakening with each turn of events. Not only is it a man's world, it is a Greek world, and she has no rights to assert. Her only salvation lies in her ability to be loved by Achilles and for her this can happen only in a passive fashion. The fact remains that for all Briseis' humanity,

which Ovid develops so well, her fate is that she remains no more than an item of exchange between two very powerful men. For Briseis to refer to the costly gifts sent by Agamemnon to appease Achilles as her dowry only heightens the cruel irony which has become the tone of her life. She enters the story as a chattel and that status is never altered. The only change is that she is now revealed as a person deeply injured and with little hope of relief.

The relationship as defined by Briseis is not simply that of two lovers made equal by the intensity of their affection. While Briseis certainly loves Achilles, his love is never defined, except tangentially: its lack seems to be reflected by the emissaries. Briseis constantly tempers her appeal to Achilles, begging his forbearance in a way that makes the reader suspect that Achilles might well have no desire for her. At the same time she never denies that Achilles has been, quite literally, her lord and master. His dominance did not arise out of her love for him – it is not something that she gave freely. Rather he is dominant because he was first her master and she was his slave. The bonds of love only followed the initial bonds of defeat and captivity. The irony of her situation is only heightened in the reader's mind by the fact that the ordinary language of erotic literature refers to the experience of love as a kind of slavery, a kind of captivity.

Indeed, Briseis lost her humanity in the destruction of Lyrnessus and the slaughter of her family, becoming at best only a body and at worst simply an object. In every sense of the word, she is now a chattel. It would seem that she interprets her position as fulfilling the erotic needs of either Achilles or Agamemnon, but she is virtually uncomprehending before the very real possibility that her situation is created by something that has to do with matters of rank and importance.

Finally the reader must realize that the overriding emotion in Briseis is not jealousy of the woman given to Achilles as wife or of the captive girls given as concubines, nor is it anger that she has been replaced by these others. Briseis has seen her world of comfort and security destroyed, and she now fears that something of the sort might happen again. It is the fear of desertion that colours and shapes her life and provides the context within which this letter is written.

The words you read come from stolen Briseis,
 an alien who has learned some Greek.
 A few of these lines are blurred by falling tears,
 tears which are as heavy as my words.
 If it is right to complain, my lover and
 lord, I complain. Not through your fault was
 I claimed by Agamemnon but you failed me
 by too easily giving me up
 when that angry king's harsh demand came to you.¹
 Eurybates and Talthibius came
 for me and you obeyed with no reluctance.²
 Each one glancing at the other's face
 wondered in silence if we were still lovers.
 You could not refuse, but you might have
 eased my pain with only a little delay.
 Without a kiss, you let me leave you.
 I could not stop my tears, I pulled at my hair,
 and I returned to captivity.
 I wish I could elude my guards after dark
 but someone would catch this timid girl;
 a Trojan patrol might find me and give me
 to a woman of Priam's family.
 Perhaps you did not resist Agamemnon
 because resistance could not succeed.
 Even so, many nights have passed and still you
 have not demanded that I return.
 Perhaps I left because you had no choice; still,
 all these nights I am away and you
 have not demanded that I return to you.
 Your delay and anger fade slowly.
 Menoetius' son whispered 'Why do you weep?
 In a little while you will be back.'³
 Not only have you failed to demand me back,
 you now oppose my return to you.
 Come now, Achilles, earn the name others have
 given you, be an anxious lover.
 The sons of Amyntor and Telamon came –
 one related by blood, the other
 a comrade – with Ulysses, Laertes' son.⁴

With them I was to return to you.
 Begging you to relent, they came to announce
 the apology of the great king.
 Many fine gifts magnified their little prayer:
 twenty bright vessels of hammered bronze
 with seven tripods equal in weight and craft,
 ten talents of gold and twelve horses
 that were quite accustomed to winning races.
 But you did not need his final gift:
 many young girls of stunning beauty taken
 when Lesbos fell. And in addition,
 you were offered a bride, though you have no need:
 one of the three daughters of Agamemnon.⁵
 All this you might well have paid for my return;
 but you refused both the gift and me.
 What act of mine has cheapened me in your eyes?
 Where is your careless love gone to now?
 Perhaps a dismal lot still crushes the sad
 and I will not find a sweeter time.
 Your brave men levelled the walls of Lyrnessus.
 I who was part of my father's land
 have seen my dearest relatives lying dead:
 the sons of my mother, three brothers,
 comrades in life, are today comrades in death;
 my husband writhed in the bloody dirt,
 his body heaving as he lay on the ground.
 Though I lost so many dear to me
 my loss was eased by loving you as brother,
 as my husband, and as my master.
 By your mother's divinity, you swore that
 I was better a captive than free.
 Now I come to you again with a dowry
 but you refuse both me and the wealth.
 Not only that, they tell me that when dawn breaks
 you will unfurl your sails and leave me.
 I fainted when I heard the awful story.
 To whom will I be left when you go?
 Who will comfort me when I am left alone?
 May lightning strike or the earth swallow

me before the sea foams with your oars leaving
 me farther and farther behind you.
 If you must go, I will not burden your ships,
 I follow as captive, not as wife.
 My fingers know the art of working with wool.
 You will take a beautiful bride, one
 like Thetis, worthy of Peleus, and so
 should you marry; I will be a slave
 spinning out my day's work until the distaff
 once full of new wool grows thin as threads
 are drawn out from it. But only one thing, please
 do not let your bride be harsh with me –
 for I fear that she will not be kind to me –
 do not let her tear at my hair while
 you watch and remember that once I was yours.
 I fear nothing so much as the fear
 that I will be left here behind when you sail.
 Agamemnon's anger has vanished
 and Greece is at your feet; at last all has been
 subdued by you except your anger.
 Why does Hector harass the Greek lines? Take up
 your bright armour – but take me back first
 and the god, Mars, will help you to victory.⁶
 I caused your wrath, I can easily end it.
 It would not be shameful to yield my prayer:
 Meleager's wife roused him to fight.
 The tale is one I have heard, you know it well:
 A mother cursed her son for killing
 her brothers, but then war came and he refused
 to fight in defence of his country.
 Only his wife could change his mind.⁷ I envy
 her: I have wasted my words on you,
 yet I am not angry. Though called to your bed,
 I have not presumed to be your wife.
 Some woman once called me 'mistress'. I replied,
 'That name adds to the shame of slavery.'
 I swear this oath. By the bones of my husband
 which, though scarcely buried, are sacred;
 by the souls of my three brothers, now my gods,

who bravely died when their country died;
 by your head and mine which we laid side by side
 and by your sword which my family knew:
 I swear that the Mycenaean king has shared
 no couch with me. If I lie, leave me.
 If I asked you to swear a similar oath –
 'Bravest one, swear that you have tasted
 no joys except the joy you have known with me' –
 you would refuse. The Greeks think you mourn,
 but you are making music and a gentle
 maiden holds you in her warm embrace.
 Why won't you fight? Because to fight is a risk
 while a lyre and Venus at night bring
 delight. It is safer to lie on your couch
 holding some girl close to you, plucking
 at the Thracian lyre, rather than taking
 into your hands the massive shield and
 the sharpened spear, and putting upon your hair
 the weight of a helmet made for war.⁸
 Once great deeds rather than safety pleased you most
 and the glory of battle was sweet.
 Was this merely a trick to win me captive
 when you won the glory of my land?
 By the gods, it cannot be. May the great spear
 from Pelion fly to Hector's side.⁹
 Send me, O Greeks: let me present your message
 to my lord. I will achieve more than
 Phoenix, more than Ulysses, more than Ajax;
 I will mingle your words with kisses.
 You will remember when my arms touch your neck;
 the sight of my breasts will stir your heart.
 Though cruel and more savage than your mother's
 waves,
 my tears and my silence will crush you.
 Be decent toward me, brave Achilles, do not
 torture poor Briseis with delay.
 With me in your tent you can take up arms and
 make your father in his old age proud.
 Take me back, return to the battlefield and

one day Pyrrhus will wish for your luck.¹⁰
 But if love has turned to weariness, kill me
 rather than make me live without you.
 But your deeds have already done this to me:
 my skin is old, my colour is gone;
 my trust in you is the one hope I retain.
 When that goes, I will join my family,
 my brothers and husband, and I will leave you
 with the shame that you left me to die.
 Why should I wait for you to tell me to die?
 Draw your sword, plunge it into my flesh,
 I have blood that will pour out of my pierced breast,
 let me be struck down by the weapon
 which should have killed the son of Atreus if
 the goddess had not prevented it.¹¹
 But save my life, it is the gift you gave me.
 What I received when you conquered me
 give me again, I ask you now, in friendship.
 Troy has many for you to slaughter,
 your sword is ready, its victims are waiting:
 destroy them, they are your enemy.
 But I beg you, whether you decide to remain
 or leave, be my lord, command that I go to you

NOTES

1. Agamemnon was a king of Mycenae, and leader of the Greek forces at Troy. He and his brother Menelaus were the sons of Atreus and hence were known as the Atreidae.

2. Eurybates and Talthybius were the two most prominent heralds in the Greek forces. Eurybates, a big man with curly hair and a dark complexion, was especially valued by Ulysses for his ready wit and mental acuity. Talthybius seems to have won the dubious distinction of always being the one called upon to carry some disagreeable message which was, invariably, against his own better judgement.

3. Patroclus, the close friend of Achilles, was the son of Menoetius.

4. Phoenix was the son of Amyntor, Ajax the son of Telamon. This delegation was deliberately chosen to include some of the most respected and

eminent men in the Greek army. Telamon was the brother of Peleus, the father of Achilles, so that Ajax and Achilles were cousins.

5. It is interesting to compare this passage with the corresponding text in the *Iliad*, IX.122-47. After offering material things of very great value, Agamemnon also pledges numerous women. In addition to the seven beautiful women taken at the fall of Lesbos, Agamemnon also promises that twenty of the most beautiful Trojan women will be given to Achilles after Troy has fallen. And finally, he pledges one of his daughters as wife to Achilles.

6. Mars was the Roman god of war and farming. He is usually associated with the Greek god, Ares. Mars was the father of Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome.

7. Meleager was the son of Oeneus and Althaea. At his birth the three Fates – Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos – appeared suddenly in the chamber where the birth had taken place. According to Clotho and Lachesis, the child would lead a life of nobility and bravery. Atropos, however, pointed to a blazing log in the fireplace and prophesied that the infant would die the instant the wood turned to ashes. The child's mother leapt out of her bed, took the wood from the fire, extinguished the blaze and put it in a safe hiding-place.

As the child grew, he exhibited the nobility and the bravery prophesied for him. The end of Meleager's life is told in two very different versions, one by Homer in the *Iliad*, Book IX, and the other by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, Book VIII. In this passage Briseis is referring to the Homeric version. According to this account, Meleager took part in the great Calydonian boar hunt, killed the boar and received the animal's hide as his trophy. A battle then broke out between the Calydonians and their neighbours, the Curetes. So long as Meleager fought with the Calydonians they were victorious. Unfortunately, he killed several of his mother's brothers, the sons of Thestius. In her anger Althaea cursed him. Enraged by this, Meleager refused to fight. The tide of battle then turned against the Calydonians. Meleager only relented when his wife, Cleopatra, urged him to return to the fight. There is also a reference to Meleager in *Heroides*, XX.

8. Orpheus, the great player of the lyre, was a Thracian by birth. The shield, the spear and the helmet are probably an oblique reference to an alternative tale of the early manhood of Achilles. In this account, it was prophesied that Troy would never be defeated without the help of Achilles. At his mother's insistence Achilles was dressed as a girl, renamed Pyrrha, and raised by Lycomedes with her daughters on the island of Scyros. However, Ulysses came in search of the boy because it was known that only he could ensure the conquest of Troy. Ulysses, always skilled at disguises, whether fabricating his own or piercing those of others, laid out various articles of feminine

charm along with a spear and a shield. While the girls – and Achilles disguised as Pyrrha – were looking through the collection, Ulysses had a trumpet blown as if to signal an imminent attack. At once, Achilles stripped himself, took up the spear and the shield, and made himself ready for battle. Upon being found out, Achilles then very willingly joined the Greek forces and went off on the great expedition to Troy.

9. A reference to the fact that Achilles was reared on Mount Pelion, along with several other Greek princes, by the centaur, Chiron. Hector, the son of King Priam of Troy, was the leader of the Trojan forces and the foremost of their warriors.

10. Pyrrhus, sometimes called Neoptolemus, was the son of Achilles by Deidamia.

11. Agamemnon could have been attacked by Achilles, but Thetis, the mother of Achilles, prevented any violence.

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Heroides

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