

Ovid *Heroides* 3 (loeb)

From stolen Briseis is the writing you read, scarce characterized in Greek by her barbarian hand.^a Whatever blots you shall see, her tears have made; but tears, too, have none the less the weight of words.

If 'tis right for me to utter brief complaint of you, my master and my beloved, of you, my master and my beloved, will I utter brief complaint. That I was all too quickly delivered over to the king at his demand is not your fault—yet this, too, is your fault; for as soon as Eurybates and Talthybius came to ask for me, to Eurybates was I given over, and to Talthybius, to go with them.^b Each, casting eyes into the face of other, inquired in silence where now was the love between us. My going might have been deferred; a stay of my pain would have eased my heart. Ah me! I had to go, and with no farewell kiss; but tears without end I shed, and rent my hair—miserable me, I seemed a second time to suffer the captive's fate!

Oft have I wished to elude my guards and return to you; but the enemy was there, to seize upon a timid girl. Should I have gone out by night, I feared I should be taken, and delivered over a gift to some one of the ladies of Priam's sons.

But grant I was given up because I must be given—yet all these nights I am absent from your side, and not demanded back; you delay, and your anger is slow. Menoetius' son himself,^a at the time I was delivered up, whispered into my ear: "Why do you weep? But a short time," he said, "will you be here."

And not to have claimed me back is but a slight thing; you even oppose my being restored, Achilles. Go now, deserve the name of an eager lover! There came to you the sons of Amyntor and Telamon—the one near in degree of blood, the other a comrade—and Laertes' son; with these I was to return bringing (for rich presents lent weight to their wheedling prayers) twenty ruddy vessels of wrought bronze, and tripods seven, equal in weight and workmanship; added to these, of gold twice five talents, twice six coursers ever wont to win, and—what there was no need of!—Lesbian girls surpassing fair, maids taken when their home was overthrown; and with all these—though of a bride you have no need—as bride, one of the daughters three of Agamemnon. What you must have given had you had to buy me back from Atrides with a price, that you refuse as a gift! What have I done that I am held thus cheap by you, Achilles? Whither has fled your light love so quickly from me?

Or can it be that a gloomy fortune still weighs the wretched down, and a gentler hour comes not when woes have once begun? The walls of Lyrnesus I have seen laid in ruin by your soldier band—I, who myself had been great part of my father's land; I have seen fall three who were partners alike in birth and in death—and the three had the mother who was mine; I have seen my wedded lord stretched all his length upon the gory ground, heaving in agony his bloody breast. For so many lost to me I still had only you in recompense; you were my master, you my husband, you my brother. You swore to me by the godhead of your seaborne mother, and yourself said that my captive's lot was gain—yes, that though I come to you with dowry, you may thrust me back, scorning' the wealth that with me is tendered you! Nay, 'tis even said that when tomorrow's dawn shall have shone forth, you mean to unfurl your linen sails to the cloud-bringing winds of the south.

When the monstrous tale fell on my wretched and terror-stricken ears, the blood went from my breast, and with it my senses fled. You are going—ah me, wretched!—and to whom do you leave me, O hardened of heart? Who shall afford me gentle solace, left behind? May I be swallowed up, I pray, in sudden yawning of the earth, or consumed by the ruddy fire of careering thunderbolt, e'er that, without me, the seas foam white with Phthian oars, and I am left behind to see your ships fare forth! If it please you now to return to the hearth of your fathers, I am no great burden to your fleet. As captive let me follow my captor, not as wife my wedded lord; I have a hand well skilled to dress the wool. The most beauteous by far among the women of Achaea will come to the marriage-chamber as your bride—and may she come!—a bride worthy of her lord's father, the grandchild of Jove and Aegina, and one whom ancient Nereus would welcome as his grandson's bride. As for me, I shall be a lowly slave of yours and spin off the given task, and the full distaff shall grow slender at

the drawing of my threads. Only let not your lady be harsh with me, I pray—for in some way I feel she will not be kind—and suffer her not to tear my hair before your eyes, while you lightly say of me: “She, too, once was mine.” Or, suffer it even so, if only I am not despised and left behind—this is the fear, ah woe is wretched me, that shakes my very bones!

What do you still await? Agamemnon repents him of his wrath, and Greece lies prostrate in affliction at your feet. Subdue your own angry spirit, you who subdue all else! Why does eager Hector still harry the Danaan lines? Seize up your armour, O child of Aeacus—yet take me back first—and with the favour of Mars rout and overwhelm their ranks. For me your anger was stirred, through me let it be allayed; and let me be both the cause and the measure of your gloomy wrath. Nor think it unseemly for you to yield to prayer of mine; by the prayer of his wedded wife was the son of Oeneus roused to arms. ’Tis only a tale to me, but to you well known. Reft of her brothers, a mother cursed the hope and head of her son. There was war; in fierce mood he laid down his arms and stood apart, and with unbending purpose refused his country aid. Only the wife availed to bend her husband. The happier she!—for my words have no weight, and fall for naught. And yet I am not angered, nor have I borne myself as wife because oft summoned, a slave, to share my master’s bed. Some captive woman once, I mind me, called me mistress. “To slavery,” I replied, “you add a burden in that name.”

None the less, by the bones of my wedded lord, ill covered in hasty sepulture bones ever to be held sacred in my eyes; and by the brave souls of my three brothers, to me now spirits divine, who died well for their country, and lie well with it in death; and by your head and mine, which we have laid each to each; and by your sword, weapon well known to my kin—I swear that the Mycenaean has shared no couch with me; if I prove false, wish never to see me more! If now I should say to you, most valiant one: “Do you swear also that you have indulged in no joys apart from me!” you would refuse. Yes, the Danai think you are, mourning for me—but you are wielding the plectrum, and a tender mistress holds you in her warm embrace! And does anyone ask wherefore do you refuse to fight? Because the fight brings danger; while the zither, and song, and Venus, bring delight. Safer is it to lie on the couch, to clasp a sweetheart in your arms, to tinkle with your fingers the Thracian lyre, than to take in hand the shield, and the spear with sharpened point, and to sustain upon your locks the helmet’s weight.

Once the deed of renown, rather than safety, was your pleasure, and glory won in warring was sweet to you. Or can it be that you favoured fierce war only till you could make me captive, and that your praise lies dead, o’ercome together with my native land? Ye gods forbend! and may the spear of Pelion go quivering from your strong arm to pierce the side of Hector! Send me, O Danai! I will be ambassadress and supplicate my lord, and carry many kisses mingled with my message. I shall achieve more than Phoenix, believe me, more than eloquent Ulysses, more than Teucer’s brother! It avails something to have touched a lover’s neck with the accustomed arms, and to have reminded his eyes of one’s existence in person. Though you be cruel, though more savage than your mother’s waves, even should I keep silence you will be broken by my tears.

Even now—so may Peleus your father fill out his tale of years, so may Pyrrhus take up arms with fortune as good as yours!—have regard for anxious Briseis, brave Achilles, and do not hardheartedly torment a wretched maid with long drawn out delay! Or, if your love for me has turned to weariness, compel the death of her whom you compel to live without you! And, as you now are doing, you will compel it. Gone is my flesh, and gone my colour; what spirit I still have is but sustained by hope in you. If I am left by that, I shall go to rejoin my brothers and my husband—and ’twill be no boast for you to have bid a woman die. And more, why should you bid me die? Draw the steel and plunge it in my body; I have blood to flow when once my breast is pierced. Let me be stricken with that sword of yours, which, had the goddess not said nay, would have made its way into the heart of Atreus’ son!

Ah, rather save my life, the gift you gave me! What you gave, when victor, to me your foe, I ask now from you as your friend. Those whom ’twere better you destroyed, Neptunian Pergamum affords; for matter for your sword, go seek the foe. Only, whether you make ready to speed on with the oar your ships, or whether you remain, O, by your right as master, bid me come!