

Ovid *Heroides* 3.1-38

Within this elegiac work, which encapsulates a letter which Briseis intends for Achilles, Ovid gives Briseis a voice where she had been mostly silent within the epic *Iliad*¹. Within this letter, Ovid draws much from Homer's *Iliad* to craft a picture of what could have occurred in the background of the main story². This would have worked well for Homer's works would have been entrenched in the education of any Roman, especially those who had any interest in the study of literature, and instances such as when Briseis references the gifts offered to and then rejected by Achilles, would help place the time in which this letter was meant to have occurred³. Furthermore, Ovid writing this moment as a letter reinforces the distance between Briseis and Achilles at this moment. The format of a letter allows for no back and forth of dialogue, and even truly limits the number of inner thoughts of Briseis herself⁴. As such, the feeling of Briseis being trapped and desperate for saving would have been heightened alongside helping the imagery of her isolation from everyone who could help in such a way.

In fact, as a slave woman whom was captured by Agamemnon and wishes to return to Achilles, Briseis makes her standing clear immediately when she states "from stolen Briseis" and therefore emphasises her lack of power in every instance⁵. Despite being the main voice within this narrative, she remains very passive and the only real act of agency she shows is making sure her preference and love for Achilles is repeatedly made clear⁶. This devotion is notable, as despite him taking her as a slave first, which is compounded by the fact that she refers to him as "my master and beloved" and in later section as "my master, you my husband, you my brother", it makes the contrast between Agamemnon (her current captor) and Achilles clear⁷. This devotion to Achilles marks the main characterisation of her within the letter, as the purpose of it was for Briseis to encourage Achilles to fight for her back and to care for her in whichever form Achilles would allow⁸. It is in this regard specifically, that she makes her displeasure known, stating that Achilles' "delay[s]" and that his "anger is slow", which not only demonstrates the disparity between how far each felt the other was important, but also shows how desperate she was and how much she despised being trapped with Agamemnon⁹.

This anger and longing to be reunited with Achilles is not something which is visible in the *Iliad*¹⁰. Indeed, Briseis has little to no speaking role, other than lamenting Patroclus' death within the *Iliad* and whilst some scholars argue that this is due to compression of her role over time, it stands to reason that her role was simply one which was not considered much thought in the original text¹¹. So, to give her a voice in this manner, Ovid is evoking smaller details within the *Iliad* which should be recognisable to the reader and exploring a character in a manner which the *Iliad* did not have place for¹². These references would allow readers to place this event within context and get a potentially different interpretation of the relationship between Briseis and Achilles. For example, within the

¹ Due, 2002, p.9; Boyd, 2018

² Boyd, 2018

³ Jacobson, 1971, p.332; *Ov. Her.* 3.30

⁴ Farrell, 1998, p.310

⁵ *Ov. Her.* 3.1; Boyd, 2018

⁶ *Ov. Her.* 3.1-38

⁷ *Ov. Her.* 3.6; *Ov. Her.* 3.52

⁸ *Ov. Her.* 3

⁹ *Ov. Her.* 3.23; Boyd, 2018

¹⁰ Due, 2002, p.9

¹¹ Due, 2002, p.9; Boyd, 2018

¹² Jacobson, 1971, p.331

Iliad, she mentions that he was “ever kind” which Ovid compounds upon within this piece by having her reference words of comfort from “Menoetius’ son”, or Patroclus¹³. The kindness shown toward her by Patroclus would also serve as a prompt for the reader to remember the time in which she was given a voice in the Iliad- her lament toward his death- as it would serve as a reference for why she was so upset at his passing¹⁴.

These words by Patroclus, promising her that it would be “but a short time” also serve as reference to her anger¹⁵. She feels betrayed by Achilles for not living up to Patroclus’ promise and, in her belief, going so far as to be “oppose[d]” to her restoration¹⁶. This belief also fits with what the reader may believe of their relationship going into reading the *Heroides*, as within the Iliad Achilles’ admits that he wished she had died on the ship, and that “Artemis had killed her”, demonstrating a clear lack of care that stands in stark contrast to the devotion that Briseis displays for him within this letter¹⁷. Furthermore, whilst Achilles may have admitted his love for her at some points within the Iliad, stating that “I too loved this girl from my heart, even though I won her by my spear”, it does not seem genuine as he was speaking to Agamemnon at the time and reinforcing his anger at the way in which Agamemnon stole his possessions¹⁸. Meaning, that whilst it is certainly possible that he did have some feelings for her, it also seems much more likely that he at least did not care for her as much as she is depicted to have cared for him. This therefore adds quite a few layers to the disparate feelings between the two, that are referenced quite clearly within this letter and may not be solely the words of a woman trapped and seeking aid. Their relationship is not a balanced one, and neither are pretending it to be, though it is clear that Briseis does still feel entitled to be angry with Achilles’ non-action¹⁹.

The manner in which Briseis addresses the people she is speaking of is also worthy of note. This is because not only is it significant that she repeatedly assigns Achilles the role of both master and lover, the way that she mentions other significant characters signify a certain level of Homeric competence on her part²⁰. As mentioned by Boyd, this is most clearly shown when she mentions “the sons of Amyntor and Telamon”, as whilst most readers would be able to easily identify and track the genealogy of Telamon to Ajax, assigning Phoenix to Amyntor could require a bit more of a thought²¹. This therefore makes the decision a deliberate one on the part of Ovid, and was placed as such to deliberately reveal more about Briseis’ character. Boyd argues that this was done to demonstrate that Briseis had eavesdropped on the embassy and Briseis’ reason for namedropping them in such a manner within the letter was to further imply that she wished for a relationship with no such strife as could be found within the life of Phoenix²². This seems likely as it aligns with the main theme running throughout- which was to attempt to convince Achilles in any way possible to move to rescue her, and for her to remain by his side in the future²³.

Also, as evidenced by later within the letter, with her attempting to guilt trip Achilles by asking him “why should you bid me die?”, there is a progression to her letter in which her emotion gets

¹³ Il. 19.300; Ov. *Her.* 3.23-24

¹⁴ Boyd, 2018

¹⁵ Ov. *Her.* 3.24

¹⁶ Ov. *Her.* 3.26

¹⁷ Il.19.59-60; Ov. *Her.*3

¹⁸ Il. 9.341-3

¹⁹ Ov. *Her.* 3.26

²⁰ Boyd, 2018

²¹ Boyd, 2018; Ov. *Her.* 3.27-28

²² Boyd, 2018

²³ Ov. *Her.*3

heightened as it continues²⁴. Whilst it is true that the letter is never not emotional, with the opening lines containing her explaining that any blots upon the page are her own tears, the progression seems to be one of increasing desperation²⁵. Within this section, she remains quite firmly within boundaries of both lover and slave coinciding, with her self-referential lines not opening up the thought of much else²⁶. Whilst, as the letter progresses, soon it is clear that she would welcome simply being a captive and “not as a wife” as long as she was able to stay with him²⁷. This progression of bartering could mimic her feeling of being a captive of Agamemnon and her increasing feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness as more time went on and Achilles still did not come to retrieve her. Furthermore, having her so clearly wish for more conflict, as that would be the expected result of Achilles coming to rescue her, is an inversion of the “*militia amoris*” trope which perpetuates most Roman elegy, and therefore makes this characterisation much more interesting²⁸. The trope is one in which obeying warfare is weighed against obeying love, with love winning out as the desired path- in order for Briseis to get the ending she wants, however, warfare is inevitable and is therefore perhaps further proof of Briseis’ desire to get out of the hands of Agamemnon and return to Achilles²⁹. Furthermore, masculinity is tightly woven within the military in the Roman world, and for Achilles to be the one hesitating where conflict is involved, the Briseis’ character remains distinctive³⁰. The path would go against a trope well-expected, and it would therefore portray how extreme she found her situation.

In all, it is clear that this work is one in which Ovid wished to explore how Briseis may have reacted to the events happening around her where she had no choice but to be a passive observer. The form of a love letter gives clear view into how Briseis wished to not be parted from Achilles, and saved from the grasp of Agamemnon, whilst also demonstrating her intelligence and knowledge of the events surrounding her- Achilles refusing the embassy from Agamemnon being one such instance³¹. Her insistence of him coming to retrieve her and him inciting conflict as a result lends further to her extreme devotion toward him, but also of Ovid flipping typical tropes of the partner wishing for more time for love and less for conflict. The conflict in wants between them are clear despite the one-sided mode of story-telling, and it is within these wants that Ovid presents many references which would be familiar for the reader.

²⁴ *Ov. Her.* 3.144

²⁵ *Ov. Her.* 3. 2-3

²⁶ *Ov. Her.* 3. 6

²⁷ *Ov. Her.* 3. 68

²⁸ Boyd, 2018

²⁹ Boyd, 2018; Drinkwater, 2013, p.194

³⁰ Drinkwater, 2013, p.194

³¹ *Ov. Her.* 3.30

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