

Briseis: The Woman as a Speaking Sign

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Abstract: Conflict over Briseis tangles both Agamemnon and Achilles in the complexities of rules governing award of booty. Achilles' consent to let the girl go turns out to be his tragic error, prematurely deciding for him the choice between his loyalty to his comrades and his personal happiness. This choice may be central to the age-old heroic story pattern, as far back as Gilgamesh.

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Claude Lévi-Strauss, in a frequently quoted phrase, called women in pre-modern societies “speaking signs”, meaning that while women in such societies serve as tokens they are also players; they are both objects and persons, vehicles of social relations between others and at the same time capable themselves of social relations with these others, signifiers of meaning and independent sources of meaning. (Somewhere Lévi-Strauss responds to a question about women exchanging men by saying: “Women could exchange men, but they don't.”) Women are thus from this structural point of view loci of social contradiction. I am one of those who think that narratives become interesting when they dramatize contradictions; my aim in this paper is to unpack some aspects of the contradictory function of women as they appear in the narrative of the *Iliad*, particularly in relation to Briseis.

Briseis is of course Achilles' *geras*, a token of accomplishment and a sign of status. As such she is interchangeable with Chryseis, who serves the same use for Agamemnon; having lost the one Agamemnon demands the other in recompense. Possibly it is significant that neither is known by a proper name, but only by a patronymic—in contrast to the independent female characters in Homer: Helen, Cassandra, Penelope, Nausicaa, and so forth. During the quarrel in the first book and the comments on it made later the issue of Briseis is solely the issue of Achilles' honor; the language would hardly be different if Agamemnon had deprived him of his horse, his spear, or the command of his troops. Furthermore she is replaceable and is replaced in her absence: Achilles now sleeps with a woman won on Lesbos who does have a proper name, “the daughter of Phorbos, fair-cheeked Diomedes” (9.665). Therefore it is startling, and also moving, when Achilles says in his first response to the embassy in 9:

Other prizes he has given to the princes and kings
And they have them securely; from me alone of the Achaeans,
He took it, and has my lovely wife. Let him sleep with her
And enjoy himself. Why did we have to go to war with the Trojans,
We Achaeans? Why did he bring the host here collecting us

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This son of Atreus? Wasn't it for fair-tressed Helen?
Do they alone love their wives among mortal men
These sons of Atreus? Since whoever is brave and steady in mind
Loves his own and cares for her, as I also cared for her
From the heart, spear-won though she was.
Now since he took my prize from my hands and cheated me
Let him not try me; I know him well. He'll not persuade me.

Iliad 9.334–345

This whole long tormented speech marks Achilles' greatest moment of confusion—or I would rather say, contradiction; its power is in the energy with which Achilles states his own bafflement. Elsewhere in the speech, for instance, he says that he has plenty of spoil, and that he never receives anything but trifles; the decision to go home which he makes in this speech is so indecisive that he unmakes it before the scene is over. It is therefore not surprising that his account of Briseis is also contradictory: he says he loves her as any worthwhile man loves his wife, at the same time saying he doesn't want her back. This is surely not our idea of married love, nor theirs either. Achilles' statement seems to be unintelligible—at least neither Phoenix nor Ajax responds to it. Ajax in fact, in the brief speech that has the greatest affect on Achilles, firmly replaces Briseis in the category of object:

The gods put spirit in your chest for the sake of a girl,
Just one. Here we are offering seven of the best
And much else besides.

9.637–639

Achilles seems to accept this recategorization; in 19 in the midst of the ritual which restores to him Briseis, Achilles says to Agamemnon that it would have been better if she had been killed in the battle where she was captured rather than have become a cause of strife between Agamemnon and himself (19.59–60). Agamemnon swears an elaborate oath that he has not touched her and confirms it with a sacrifice, but Achilles shows no interest in Briseis when she is restored to him. He disregards her as he disregards all the other gifts; the Myrmidons take her away home along with seven new women (19.280). From her first appearance to this point Briseis remains silent; there is only one brief flash of subjectivity in the first book when the heralds come to take her to Agamemnon and the poet says she went "unwillingly (1.348). In 19, however, when she enters Achilles' hut and sees the dead Patroclus she suddenly speaks:

Patroclus, you who gave me the greatest relief in my misery,
I left you alive when I went from this hut,
But as it is I find you dead, leader of the folk,
On my return. So my trouble ever succeeds trouble.

The husband my father and lady mother gave me
 I saw cut down before the city by the sharp bronze,
 Also my three brothers, and a single mother bore us,
 Lost ones, who met the day of destruction.
 Not even so did you let me, when swift Achilles killed
 My husband, and sacked the city of divine Mines,
 To weep; instead you kept telling me you would make me
 Wedded wife of divine Achilles, and would bring me in the ships
 To Phthia, and feast the marriage among the Myrmidons.
 Therefore I weep for you continually, ever the healer (*meilichos*).

19.287–300

Suddenly Briseis ceases altogether to be an object and becomes a person, albeit one who knows that her claims to personhood may well be disregarded. She has had her own kindred and social relations. She is “spear-won” not just because Achilles acquired her as his share of booty, but because he personally annihilated her husband and also the patrikin from whom Achilles could (in principle) have acquired her as a *alochos mneste*, a courted bride. In her captive status she then developed a new social relation; Patroclus pitied her and promised to restore her social position. She seems to imply that this hope died with Patroclus. We therefore learn that Achilles’ claim that he loved her as his *alochos* was characteristically exaggerated; if he had returned to his homeland with her, it seems, he *might* have granted her that status but now will not, either because Achilles after all does not care that much for her now she no longer has Patroclus as her advocate, or more probably because she knows that now Patroclus is dead Achilles will never return home.

In any case, Briseis’ speech in 19 echoes the quoted passage of Achilles’ speech in 9, in that both turn on the contrast between the spear-won woman and the courted bride, and at the same time blur that contrast by showing that women could move between the two categories in both directions. Let us explore this point further.

Women in Homer are objects of value that may be acquired in various ways. We have one instance of direct purchase: Laertes acquired Eurykleia in her first youth, and gave twenty oxen [worth?] for her; he valued her equally with his wife but did not sleep with her to avoid his wife Antikleia’s rage (*Od.* 1.429–435). (She became Telemachus’ nurse, and was presumably considerably younger than Antikleia.) A maidservant, presumably already a member of the household, could form part of a woman’s trousseau, as Penelope says of Aktoris “my father gave me her when I came here” (*Od.* 23.228). A woman can be a prize in a game; in the *Iliad* first prize in the horse race is a woman and a tripod—second prize is an unbroken mare already in foal with a mule (23.266–68). Most frequently in the Homeric narratives, however, women circulate in one of two ways: through marriage-exchange and through capture and distribution as booty. The first is a system of general reciprocity: men acquire wives and part with daughters or other women in their care, in both cases building links between patriline.

Such women can be properly acquired only by a transaction with their male guardians; the prospective bridegroom courts not the bride herself but her father or his surrogate. We learn from the case of Penelope that, should the first marriage terminate, the appropriate way for a woman to remarry is to return to her patrikin for reassignment. All this is more or less consistent with the classical marriage system.

The second type of circulation is specifically Homeric and is a redistributive system: the warriors collect booty, including women, then bring it to a central place where, under the supervision of the commander, they are passed out to qualified recipients, reinforcing the hierarchy within the warrior band. Such women can be acquired only through participation in violence. Patroclus evidently proposed a compromise; Briseis could never be the “courted” wife of Achilles, but she could be “wedded” (*kouridie*) if Achilles would celebrate for her the wedding feast, the family festival whereby the bride was, in Homer as in classical times, welcomed into her new home.

The implications for the status of the women are of course very different as between these two systems, all the difference between a wife and a handmaid. Agamemnon deletes this difference (and suggests that he altogether lacks Laertes’ delicacy) when he says that he wants to keep Chryseis because he prefers her to his wedded wife; this is a kind of crude materialism which considers only the value of the object and not the manner and meaning of her acquisition. Achilles conflates the two systems in a subtler way when he calls Briseis his wife “spear-won though she was.” The oddity of his conflation is linguistically represented by the very word for spear-won, *douriktete*; the word occurs nowhere else in Homer and was quite possibly coined for this place, modeled on *mneste* and *kouridie*.

Both systems are complex and the participants often get tangled in the complexities. In the case of marriage exchange these usually involve difficulties about transfers of property and relations with in-laws. The distribution of booty has its own complexities, and Briseis gets tangled up in them, as we shall see.

The wonderful thing about redistribution, as opposed to reciprocity, is that commodities change their meaning as they change direction. In reciprocity the gift is supposed to have the same meaning to giver and recipient; usually they agree that the giver is generous and the recipient grateful, and these feelings are exchanged when gift-giving changes direction. In redistribution, however, what comes in to the center—or, because the center is always higher, what comes up from the periphery—as a sign of deference then goes back down (minus a deduction for the maintenance of the center) as a sign of generosity. Eumaeus in the *Odyssey* speaks of the pleasure the bondman feels in coming to the master’s house and receiving from the mistress to carry back “to the fields such things as ever delight the heart of bondmen” (*Od.* 15.379). Such things are generally items of clothing, made from wool produced by the bondmen themselves, and then made up into fabrics by their sisters working in the great house; Eumaeus however received them as a sign of Antikleia’s affectionate care for him. Redistribution is ever in the service of hierarchy.

In Homeric society, however, personal hierarchy beyond the level of the great houses is relatively weak. The “agent of the community principle”, as M. I. Finley calls him, is the king; it is however significant that Homer has no word for him. We translate *basileus* by “king”, but *basileus* is the word for the heads of the great houses, those with subordinate small farmers, bondmen and dependent labor, *dmoes te thetes te*. Such men

constitute a peer group; among them one is *primus inter pares*, and he may also be called *basileus*. Thus Telemachus says: “it is no bad thing to be king (*basileuemen*)...but there are many other kings (*basilees*) in Ithaca...one of these can have it...but for my part I would be lord (*anax*) of our house and bondmen...” (*Od.* 1.392–398). Telemachus is struggling with the ambiguity of the word for king, which reflects an uncertainty in the role. It is not that the community principle is weak; rather the agent of that principle is weakly institutionally supported.

In the ad hoc society developed on the plain of Troy by the Achaean army Agamemnon is the king, the “scepter-bearing *basileus* to whom Zeus gave the glory (*kudos*)” (1.279). His position is however more glorious than powerful; his task is to hear and carry out the will of the group, whether of the folk gathered in the assembly (*agore*) or of his peers gathered in the council (*boule*), which generally meets over dinner in the king’s house. Agamemnon in the *Iliad* first gets into trouble when Chryseis’ father comes into the assembly to ask for her back, the people collectively approve the request, but Agamemnon rejects it anyway (1.21–25). Agamemnon spends the next nineteen books digging his way out of this procedural error. In 7 he is acting properly: the messenger comes from Troy to the Achaean assembly, Diomedes answers the message, the people assembled shout their approval of Diomedes’ response, and Agamemnon says:

Idaios, you yourself hear the word of the Achaeans,

The way they determine it. And so it pleases me.

7.406–407

As for the council, Nestor later states the principle:

Most glorious son of Atreus, lord of men Agamemnon,

In you I shall conclude, from you I shall begin, because of many

Folk you are lord, and Zeus entrusted you

With the scepter and judgments, that you be king by them.

Therefore you are most fit to speak a speech—and to hear one,

And to accomplish that of another, if his spirit moves him

To say something for the best. It will accrue to you, whatever he originates.

9. 96–102 (cf. *Od.* 11.344–346)

Because the king’s authority is understood to be representative, the magic of redistribution is not personally effective in the distributions of booty that he supervises. The warriors understand that these commodities are acquired by themselves and distributed to themselves. The king does play a role; he maintains a central social space where booty can temporarily be collectively possessed; however it never really becomes his property. In his rage Achilles can say that Agamemnon “stays back by the ships receiving goods, and generally passes out a few while keeping most of them” (9.332–333). Neither statement is true: Agamemnon fights among the foremost, and the gifts are distributed, as Achilles himself says elsewhere, by the Achaeans (1.369, 392, 16.56).

The language used by Achilles to his mother—Agamemnon sent his heralds to take away the girl “whom the sons of the Achaeans gave me”—(1.392) is close to that used by Nestor in the first book when he is telling Agamemnon not to take away the girl “since the sons of the Achaeans gave her as a *geras* in the first place” (1.276). Similarly Achilles’ language in 16 (“the girl whom the sons of the Achaeans picked out as my prize” 16.52) is echoed by Thetis almost verbatim in 18 (444).

The spoil distributed is therefore not a sign of the generosity of the king, nor does the recipient owe him gratitude. As the commodities pass from individual possession through collective possession and then back to individual possession, however, they change their meaning in a different way. They were acquired by acts of valor, clever opportunism, or simple good luck—robbery, looting, and salvage; they are redistributed according to status in the group. Therefore the king always gets the best share; even after a hunt on a desert island Odysseus gets the extra goat (*Od.* 9.160). This is the redistributive deduction that maintains the hierarchy. What is truly higher, however, is the community principle itself, the group as opposed to the individual. The community awards the king a special share as its agent, including his agency in the distribution process itself. The king thus appears both as the author of the distribution and a beneficiary of it. This represents the contradiction implicit in the formula: *primus inter pares*.

In the distribution of women this deduction is handled by giving the king first choice (1.368-369), and therefore the best woman. (It is, by the way, an aspect of the Greek objectification of women that women are assumed to form in an objective order from most to least desirable—there is no notion that “there is someone for everybody.” We can see this assumption in those rituals which require the selection of “the fairest”—as well as in Herodotus’ fantasy of a kind of free-market double auction in bride-gifts and dowries as a way of allocating brides.) Chryseis evidently was the best woman taken in the sack of Eetion; probably, since Achilles is the leading warrior, Briseis was the next best. When Agamemnon loses Chryseis he loses something of value to himself; he also loses the token of his central position, and this loss is a threat to the order of the group as a whole. Agamemnon somewhat incoherently makes both points when he hears that he must give Chryseis back to her father:

I want very much

To take her home. I actually prefer her to Clytemnestra,

My wedded wife, since she is in no way inferior to her

In figure and form, nor in her mind and her skills.

Even so I am willing to give her back, if that is for the best.

I wish the folk to be safe rather than to perish.

However make ready for me a *geras*, so that I may not alone

Of the Argives be without a *geras*, since it is not fitting.

This point you can all see, that my *geras* goes elsewhere.

We imagine what Nestor would have said if he had got the floor at this point: he would have thanked the king for his selflessness, acknowledged the justice of his claim, stressed that the first priority was to assuage the god, and then have proposed—what? A general whip-round of the leading warriors in which each would contribute according to his status to restore the king's share? We do have a model for this in the *Odyssey*, when Alcinoo is faced with the problem of providing Odysseus with a guest-gift adequate to the future fame of Phaeacia:

Come let us give him a guest-gift, as is fitting.
 There are twelve notable kings in this community,
 Rulers that make determinations, and I am the thirteenth.
 Each one of you bring him a well-washed cloak or a shirt
 And a talent of precious gold.
 Let us quickly put all these things together, so that our guest
 May have them in his hands and go rejoicing into dinner.

Od. 8.390–395

Later on, after Odysseus has told his wonderful story, Alcinoo decides to add something substantial to the guest-gift, and further specifies the procedure:

Reaching out to each man among you I have this to say,
 To all of you who ever drink the dark wine of the elders
 In my halls, and listen to the bard:
 Garments lie in a polished box for the stranger,
 His gifts, all that the members of the Phaeacian council brought here.
 But come, let us give him a great tripod, or a cauldron,
 Man-sized. We in our turn collecting all across the folk
 Shall get paid. It is hard for one person to give favors unrecompensed.

Od. 13.7–15

Women cannot be distributed in this way, partly because they are not divisible; there is no way for each leading warrior to contribute something to make up the king's share. If Chryseis is to be taken out of the pool and the king's right to first choice is to be restored he will choose the second-best woman, namely Briseis. Thus we can understand Achilles' immediate burst of anger; he sees immediately that he is the one targeted for loss. The king's *geras* would then be restored but the leading warrior would be without a *geras*; he also would be entitled to recompense and the whole distribution would have to be done over. With a cauldron or a tripod or even a horse this would not be as much of a problem, but because women (as we have seen) remain persons even then they are booty, other values do not readily substitute for them. Therefore the only real option is to promise Agamemnon recompense at a later date, and this is what (without any of Nestor's tact) Achilles proceeds to do:

Glorious son of Atreus, more greedy of goods than anyone,
 How can the great-spirited Achaeans give you a *geras*?
 We don't see quantities lying in common possession
 But all we sacked from the cities, that has all been distributed.
 It makes no sense for the people to gather them back together.
 So as for now, just let her go to the god. We Achaeans
 Shall pay you three-fold and four-fold, if ever Zeus
 Grants that we sack the well-walled Trojan city.

1.122–129

Agamemnon (of course) responds not the content of Achilles' speech but to its tone, and immediately the argument becomes personal, him-or-me:

Not that way, fine fellow though you are, godlike Achilles,
 Don't think to cheat me, since you'll not get by me nor persuade me.
 Is that what you want, that you have a *geras*, while I just sit here
 Without one, and that's why you tell me to give her back?

1.131–134

Achilles responds to this with further complaints, and says he's going home. Agamemnon says he's welcome to go, but without Briseis; Agamemnon will take her away "so that you may well know how much I am superior to you, and anyone else will shrink from speaking up equally with me and likening himself to me face-to-face" (1.186–187). This reduces the argument to the most primitive man-to-man level: which man gets the woman? Obviously the plain of Troy is not big enough for both of them, and Achilles decides to kill Agamemnon. As he is drawing his sword to do so Athena intervenes and tells him to hold his hand—he can go ahead and abuse Agamemnon verbally all he likes, in confidence that there will be three- and four-fold gifts in compensation for Agamemnon's hubris. Achilles complies, and opens his abusive speech with the line that so offended David Hume: "Heavy with wine, with the eye of a dog and the heart of a deer" (1.225). He goes on to take an oath that a longing for Achilles would some day come over all the Achaeans, and then Agamemnon will suffer. Nestor finally gets the floor, but too late. Agamemnon agrees with Nestor but says it's all Achilles' fault; he wants to be top person and in charge of everybody. Achilles responds that he will no longer take orders of any kind from Agamemnon; he will give up Briseis but nothing else; he will fight them if they try. That is the end of the assembly; Achilles withdraws to sulk in his hut. Thus originates the Wrath of Achilles.

And thus Briseis gets tangled up in the redistributive system. The tangle is the consequence of the fact that the king plays two roles in the system: both agent and prime beneficiary. That the king should be deprived of his *geras* is an unexpected problem for which there is no ready procedural solution. Because the only workable solution—that he should be recompensed later—is proposed not by the tactful Nestor but by the tactless Achilles, Agamemnon loses his cool and attempts to intervene as agent of the

distribution in order to restore his own position as prime beneficiary. Agamemnon understands that there is something wrong with this; he says:

Maybe the greatspirited Achaeans will give a *geras*
 Fitted to my spirit, so that it will be of equal value—
 But if they do not give it, I myself will take one...

1.135–137

This is one sentence too many, and the exact spot where the whole proceeding goes wrong. Agamemnon understands that he is prime beneficiary in virtue of his superior position in the collectivity, and that given the weakness of hierarchy in his society only the collectivity can confer recognition of this status. Then he loses this point and attempts to confer it on himself. In the process he loses the very status he is attempting to protect. He has shown himself a bad sort of king, and the people who cooperate with him show themselves a bad sort of people—as Achilles says:

People-devouring king, since you rule over nonentities,
 Or otherwise this would be the last time you commit injury.

1.231–232

Achilles' quarrel in a certain sense is with the collectivity, since it is about issues of status in which the collectivity has the highest authority; later I will suggest that Achilles' tragic error is his failure to recognize this point.

All this gives us one way to understand why Achilles refuses the gifts when in 9 they are finally offered: Agamemnon is attempting to redress a man-to-man offense, but in doing so he is still acting as king and in fact (finally) doing something to restore his standing as a pretty good king. Achilles however has no desire to cooperate in this enterprise. The whole quarrel has not been about property but about status, and the blow to Achilles' status could be compensated only by an equivalent blow to Agamemnon's status. This I think is what Achilles means when he says Agamemnon will not persuade him "until he gives me back the whole spirit-paining injury" (9.387). That, however, is exactly what Agamemnon cannot afford to do—and he actually says this at the end of the catalogue of gifts he is offering in recompense:

Let him submit—Hades is no healer (*ameilichos*) and unsubdued
 And therefore he is to mortals most hated of all gods—
 And let him yield, to the extent that I am more of a king
 And to the extent that I can claim to be born before him, his elder.

9.158–161

Tactful Odysseus omits these lines when he relays Agamemnon's message, but Achilles understands that they are implicit in the message. Therefore he refuses Briseis even while protesting his love for her; he cannot receive her from Agamemnon without acknowledging that Agamemnon is doing something right by returning her, and thus confirming Agamemnon's authority. Achilles says he is going home.

Actually, there is more to it than this, because Achilles (unlike anyone else we know of) has a choice of fates; by going home he would be choosing a long inglorious life as against a short life with death at Troy followed by immortal fame. This alternative fate—“what might have been, existing only in a realm of speculation” as the poet says—appears to Achilles as a vision of married life:

If the gods preserve me and I come safe home
 Peleus himself will then find me a wife.
 There are many Achaean women across Hellas and Phthia;
 It is from these that I would wish my bride to be,
 It is there that my restless spirit strongly moves me
 To marry a wedded wife, a comely bride
 And to enjoy the possessions which Peleus has acquired.

9.392–400

It is true that these words literally are a rejection of Agamemnon’s daughter in favor of a Phthian bride; I would suggest, however, that what Achilles really wants is to take Briseis home with him and marry her. Notice that Achilles had decided to go home before, in the first book (1.169–171); on that occasion Agamemnon tells him to go ahead, but first he will take away Briseis (1.173–187). Achilles then stops speaking of home. It seems that it is Briseis who keeps him there. When he loses her he weeps (1.349).

In 9 Agamemnon proposes and in 19 actually accepts a result that in the first book he declares unacceptable: he is without a *geras* while Achilles has one; furthermore Agamemnon pays damages for his offense against redistributive principles, and Achilles gets Briseis back untouched—if Agamemnon’s oath is to be trusted. However by accepting Briseis on these terms Achilles gives his bond to stay and fight at Troy, accepting the fate that he knows will deny him marriage. No wonder Achilles shows no pleasure in the return of Briseis; he gets the girl but at the price of the meaning she had to him.

But why does he turn over Briseis in the first place? He says he will fight Agamemnon for anything else he has; why does he not fight for Briseis? I have come to believe that giving up the girl is Achilles’ tragic error. From that moment he is entangled in contradiction. The clean solution would be to take her and go home, or failing that (what would he say to his father, after all?) to withdraw and hold on to her until Agamemnon apologized (which would have been soon). Furthermore the error is hard to motivate.

However it is worth noticing that at crucial moments in the poem Achilles gets into trouble by being too cooperative. To the gods he is immediately responsive. Hera moves him to call an assembly in the first book and he immediately does so, even though he is the most unsuitable person to call this particular assembly. Athena tells him not to kill Agamemnon, promising gifts, and he submits—even though gifts will not heal the situation. He is equally responsive to good advice. Iris tells him to shout from the trench, and he does so; Zeus sends Thetis to tell him to accept the ransom for Hector, and he

does this also. With mortals also he is sometimes responsive, even to bad advice: sending Patroclus into battle in Achilles' armor is Nestor's idea, adopted by Patroclus—and is of course disastrous. Patroclus had gone to see Nestor in the first place because Achilles, lingering by the ships, was unable to detach from the battle and wanted to know who was carried off wounded “and that was the beginning of trouble for him” (11.604). Ajax' appeal as representative of the *plethus Danaon*, the mass of the Greeks—and as one of the *kedistoi kai philatatoi*, most cared about and closest, among them—in 9 persuades Achilles not to go home.

In this context it is significant that when in the first book Achilles agrees to give up Briseis he explains by saying “since you (plural) take her who (plural) gave her” (1.299). For Achilles both Chryseis and Bryseis are gifts of from the collectivity (1.379 & 392). He speaks as if he were returning Briseis to the pool, even though he knows he is losing her by the arbitrary act of Agamemnon. Achilles says that Agamemnon by his arbitrary act has made him, Achilles, *outidanos*, good-for-nothing (1.293) just as Agamemnon by the same act has made the folk *outidanoi* (1.231). But Achilles neither holds this against the Achaeans (as he well might) nor does he experience solidarity with the others in terms of their common experience of this inadequate king. Instead he feels isolated—twice (9.644, 16.59) he says that Agamemnon has treated him like an *atimetos metanastes*, a resident alien with no rights. Achilles' response to Ajax in 9 shows that he longs to recover his connection to the collectivity; it is this, I would suggest, that in the first book leads him—he, who is so self-assertive—at that critical moment to fail to assert himself.

By 16, when his *cholos* is largely digested, he is hoping that Briseis—and Agamemnon's property—will come to him not from the king but from the collectivity itself, somehow bypassing the king and thereby dishonoring him. At least something like this seems to be in his mind (even though Nestor could tell him it will never happen) when he speaks in 16 of the prospect that “all of the Danaids should give back the beautiful girl, and provide lovely gifts as well” (16.85–86). Achilles is able to break with Agamemnon and abandon glory, but he is not able to break with his comrades in arms—and they tie him to his fated early death.

Tragic heroes entangle themselves in their own virtues. Why does Hamlet not go back to Wittenberg at the beginning of the play? Because his mother asks him not to. Why does Lear, once he has discovered the black hearts of his two elder daughters, not go to France (which is what he does in Shakespeare's source)? Because he is ashamed of his treatment of Cordelia. Filial piety and proper shame are good qualities; in the absence of wisdom good qualities can bring about destructive errors. Surely Achilles' loyalty to his *philo*i is something good about him. In the view of the collectivity Briseis is an item of booty, “just one girl” as Ajax says. Achilles adopts this view, even though there is something in his heart that tells him there is something wrong with it. As this feeling is suppressed in Achilles it is a repressed theme in the poem.

Briseis is typically a *koure*, a girl. This is the usual kinship term for “daughter”, far more frequent than the more technical *thugater*, and is also an affectionate—and slightly patronising—term and address-form for a young woman. In the *Odyssey* the typical *koure* is Nausicaa, and this is what Odysseus calls her in his heartbreaking speech of farewell to her: *su m'ebiose koure*. It is an affectionate term, but also asserts a difference

of age and status between the man and the woman. (I think of the Hemingway hero who calls his much younger Italian lover “daughter.”)

Briseis, however, can be called a *gune*, a woman (also the familiar kinship term for “wife”) and is so-called at exactly those moments when the subjectivity of her relation to Achilles comes to the surface: when she unwillingly leaves his hut (1.348), when Achilles is in torment at losing her (1.429), when she is mourning for Patroclus (19.286). If this is a point in the poem, why does the poet not make more of it? The controlling set of values for the characters (although not necessarily of the poet) are those of the warrior band, and by these values Briseis is merely a girl to be handed about. When Achilles gives her up saying: “I will not fight for the sake of a girl” (1.298) he adopts much the tone which Ajax adopts later. In the view of the warrior band to love a woman is not really respectable. However since this view leads to tragedy in the poem the poet evidently does not endorse it. Homer, I would suggest, stands with Patroclus—who is the moral center of the poem, even though he is overly responsive to Nestor—is seeing that Briseis is a person. Patroclus and Briseis are linked as both are linked to the softer side of Achilles, the side of him that longs for home and his alternative fate. This aspect of him gives his character its resonance and depth. Perhaps it has always been an aspect of the warrior ethos, as its shadow, the life whose rejection is the cost of heroism. At least we find it already so stated in our earliest surviving heroic narrative, the old-Babylonian Gilgamesh, in which the Alewife tells the hero (beautifully rendered by Steven Mitchell):

When the gods created mankind
They also created death, and they held back
Eternal life for themselves alone.
Humans are born, they live, then they die,
This is the order that the gods have decreed.
But until the end comes, enjoy your life,
Spend it in happiness, not despair.
Savor your food, make each of your days
A delight, bathe and anoint yourself,
Wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean,
Let music and dancing fill your house,
Love the child who holds you by the hand,
And give your wife pleasure in your embrace.

Gilgamesh tablet X

By his promise to make a marriage between Briseis and Achilles Patroclus had asserted the value of this alternative life. Patroclus is *meilichos*, a mediator, a healer; in 11 he forgets Achilles for a while and turns to healing Machaon. As Menelaus says of him in 17 “he knew how to be *meilichos* to everyone while he was alive” (17.672–673) When Achilles loses Patroclus he loses the *meilichos* side of himself, refuses supplication, kills

prisoners, defiles dead bodies. But he had already overridden his *meilichos* side when he gave away Briseis. At the end of the poem, when he compares himself with Niobe, Achilles seems to recover this side of himself, although by this time he has made final choice of his fate and has his own death in view. He ransoms Hector and reaches some kind of inner peace.

When his mother, carrying Zeus's instruction to ransom the body, recalls Achilles to life she says: "are you not to bethink you of food and sex? It is good to sleep with a woman" (24. 129–131). In the reconciliation with Priam food is the token of consent to the order of things: "Even Niobe bethought herself of food" (24.602)—but the last view we have of Achilles in the poem he sleeps beside Briseis of the fair skin (24.676).

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