

CHAPTER TEN

Briseis in Homer, Ovid, and *Troy*

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Briseis, the captive slave girl of Homer's *Iliad* and the cause of Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon, becomes the principal heroine of Petersen's *Troy*. Her romance with Achilles eclipses even that of Paris and Helen, the legendary cause of the Trojan war. Briseis and Andromache, the wife of Hector, are the first female characters we see in the royal palace of Troy after Hector and Paris return from Sparta; they greet Briseis as their "beloved cousin." Her visual prominence and narrative importance as a member of the Trojan royal family give Briseis the ability to speak with power and authority throughout the film. As Trojan royalty, she is a far more formidable prize than the Briseis of the *Iliad*, whom Achilles captured while raiding an outlying town in the Troad. Moreover, in the film she is a priestess of Apollo. She wears white to signal her virginity, and Priam notes in her first scene that she is a source of disappointment to all the noble bachelors in Troy.

As shocking as the Briseis of *Troy* may seem to anyone familiar with classical mythology, this is far from the first time that her character has been expanded. A provocative literary change already occurred in the first century B.C. In his *Heroides*, a series of fictional love letters written by heroic women of myth, the Roman poet Ovid composed a letter that he imagines Briseis wrote to Achilles while a captive in Agamemnon's camp. She reinterprets the anger of Achilles and the entire Trojan War from her personal point of view.

Along with her prominence as Trojan royalty and her centrality in the film as Achilles' love object, *Troy* combines the character of Briseis with other female characters from the Greek tradition. Through her presentation as a priestess, the film fuses Briseis with Cassandra, the prophetess and daughter of Queen Hecuba and King Priam. After she is captured by Achilles' men in the temple of Apollo, the film's Briseis confronts Achilles with such fearless demeanor that he falls in love with her. Seeing Achilles caught by romantic love evokes the memory of yet another Trojan princess, Polyxena, whom Achilles desired and who was later sacrificed on his tomb. But the most unexpected turn comes at the conclusion of the film. Briseis stabs and kills Agamemnon, thus assuming the role of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's vengeful wife. Although Briseis hardly appears in the *Iliad*, her significance is evident. Her seizure by Agamemnon begins his quarrel with Achilles and propels the entire plot. The prominence of Briseis implicit in the *Iliad* becomes explicit in the *Heroides* when Briseis tells her own story. She becomes even more prominent in *Troy* because she propels the plot through her words and deeds.

1. *Briseis in the Iliad*

The few appearances of Briseis in the *Iliad* are expanded by her associations with other female characters. During her speech over the dead body of Patroclus in Book 19, her only words in the epic, Briseis restates words spoken by Andromache to Hector in Book 6 and anticipates the laments that Hecuba, Helen, and Andromache will speak over the body of Hector in Book 24. Such verbal echoes make Briseis part of the larger story of women's losses and sorrows as consequences of war. This technique of verbal echoes enhances Briseis' presence in the *Iliad* despite her few appearances:

the traditional nature of Homeric poetry allows this figure of Briseis to evoke such other figures as Helen and Andromache, thereby bringing additional richness to the scenes in which she appears . . . Briseis actually evokes multiple paradigms – prize, girl, wife, widow, and captive – because of a multiformity of traditions associated with her.¹

In the *Iliad*, Briseis speaks only once and appears only two other times. In Book 1, she is mentioned as Achilles' prize, the counterpart of Aga-

¹ Casey Dué, *Homeric Variations on a Lament by Briseis* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 22.

memnon's prize Chryseis. When Achilles urges Agamemnon to return Chryseis to her father in order to end Apollo's plague, Agamemnon angrily tells him: "But I shall take the fair-cheeked Briseis, your prize, I myself going to your shelter, that you may learn well how much greater I am than you" (184–186). Briseis and Chryseis are linked throughout Book 1 by being described as "fair-cheeked" (143, 184, 323, 369), "girls" (98, 111, 275, 298, 336), and "prizes" (118, 185). Briseis first appears in person when Agamemnon's heralds come to lead her away. She leaves Achilles "all unwilling" (348). Achilles then withdraws from his companions and, weeping, goes to sit by the sea.

Briseis does not come to our attention again until Agamemnon's ambassadors come to Achilles in Book 9. At this point the Trojans have beaten the Greeks back to their ships because Achilles has refused to fight. Achilles is still furious with Agamemnon and rejects all apologies and ransom gifts, even the return of Briseis despite Agamemnon's oath that he never entered her bed. Achilles explains how important Briseis is to him:

All the other prizes of honour he gave the great men and the princes
are held fast by them, but from me alone of all the Achaians
he has taken and keeps the bride of my heart. Let him lie beside her
and be happy. Yet why must the Argives fight with the Trojans?
And why was it the son of Atreus assembled and led here
these people? Was it not for the sake of lovely-haired Helen?
Are the sons of Atreus alone among mortal men the ones
who love their wives? Since any who is a good man, and careful,
loves her who is his own and cares for her, even as I now
loved this one from my heart, though it was my spear that won her.²

Achilles makes it clear that he loves Briseis, that he regards her as a wife, and that his relationship with her is as important as that of Menelaus with Helen. By connecting Briseis with Helen, the cause of the Trojan War, Achilles elevates Briseis and the importance of their relationship. This link between Briseis and Helen is further strengthened by her own speech in Book 19. Agamemnon has returned Briseis to Achilles' camp, along with many gifts. Briseis now appears for the first time since Book 1. Now she speaks her only direct words in the *Iliad*, a lament over the dead body of Patroclus. She echoes what

2 *Iliad* 9.334–343; quoted from the translation by Richmond Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951; several rpts.), 207.

Andromache said earlier in Book 6, but her words also foreshadow those that Andromache, Helen, and Hecuba will speak over the body of Hector in Book 24. As she stands over the body of Patroclus, she exclaims:

Patroklos, far most pleasing to my heart in its sorrows,
I left you here alive when I went away from the shelter,
but now I come back, lord of the people, to find you have fallen.
So evil in my life takes over from evil forever.
The husband on whom my father and honoured mother bestowed me
I saw before my city lying torn with the sharp bronze,
and my three brothers, whom a single mother bore with me
and who were close to me, all went on one day to destruction.
And yet you would not let me, when swift Achilleus had cut down
my husband, and sacked the city of godlike Mynes, you would not
let me sorrow, but said you would make me godlike Achilleus'
wedded lawful wife, that you would take me back in the ships
to Phthia, and formalize my marriage among the Myrmidons.
Therefore I weep your death without ceasing. You were kind always.³

Briseis displays the formulaic characteristics of other female laments in Homer. She reveals that she had had a husband and three brothers whom Achilles killed. All her memories of dead loved ones and of her city come back to her. It is no wonder that she refers to endless evil in her life. Her hopes for a new life, married to Achilles and back in Phthia with him and Patroclus, are now shattered. When Briseis speaks about her family killed by Achilles, she echoes the words spoken by Andromache to Hector:

I have no father, no honoured mother.
It was brilliant Achilleus who slew my father . . .
And they who were my seven brothers in the great house all went
upon a single day down into the house of the death god,
for swift-footed brilliant Achilleus slaughtered all of them . . .⁴

Through the echo of their words, Homer emphasizes the losses of both women and the plight of all women who suffer the consequences of war even on opposite sides. He connects Briseis to the most stable and loving couple in the *Iliad*, Hector and Andromache.

3 *Iliad* 19.287–300; Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 399–400.

4 *Iliad* 6.413–414 and 421–423; Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 164.

The lament of Briseis over Patroclus also foreshadows the laments of Hecuba, Helen, and Andromache over the body of Hector in Book 24. Just as Briseis, a captive in a foreign camp, had looked on Patroclus as a protector, so Helen says to dead Hector: "I mourn for you in sorrow of heart and mourn myself also / and my ill luck. There was no other in all the wide Troad / who was kind to me, and my friend; all others shrank when they saw me."⁵ Each woman – Helen, too – thanks the man she had turned to for protection in a foreign camp.

The formulaic words of Briseis, Helen, Andromache, and Hecuba over the dead join them, as do their similar life stories. These women are "objects of love and singers of lament." They are also linked by their past and future life experiences: "Each has survived or will survive the loss of a husband in battle; each has been, is, or will be a captive woman."⁶ In this way Homer expands Briseis' presence in and importance for the *Iliad*.

2. Briseis in Ovid's *Heroides*

Centuries after the Homeric epics, laments came to be expressed in the elegiac verses of Roman love poetry. Propertius and Ovid turn to Homeric heroines such as Andromache and Briseis as examples of lamenting lovers. Propertius repeatedly uses Homeric heroes and heroines as models for himself and his beloved Cynthia. In his evocation of Homeric characters, he elevates the importance of his own love affair. Propertius likens himself to Achilles and Hector and equates Cynthia with Briseis and Andromache. As he evokes these Homeric figures in the context of love elegy, Propertius moves his vision of the *Iliad* from war story to love story and presents himself as a warrior in the battles of love:

Think of Achilles when he left Briseis' arms –
Did Phrygians stop running from his spear?
Or when fierce Hector rose from Andromache's bed
Didn't Mycenae's ships fear battle?
Those heroes could demolish barriers and fleets;
In my field I'm fierce Hector and Achilles.⁷

5 *Iliad* 24.772–775; Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 495.

6 Both quotations are from Dué, *Homeric Variations on a Lament by Briseis*, 5.

7 Propertius, *Elegies* 2.22A.29–34; quoted from Propertius, *The Poems*, tr. Guy Lee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994; rpt. 1999), 52.

By contrast, Ovid has Briseis speak for herself. In the *Heroides*, Ovid creates fictional letters that famous heroines from earlier literature could have sent to their lovers. In the third of these letters, Briseis writes to Achilles while a captive in Agamemnon's camp. Ovid portrays her longing for Achilles but at the same time angry with him for giving her up. Ovid gives Briseis a chance to present her side of the story: "The writer of each letter receives the long deferred chance to occupy center stage, possessing, as every letter writer does, the opportunity to narrate her own story from her own subjective perspective."⁸ Ovid uses verbal techniques similar to Homer's in order to link his Briseis to the one familiar to his readers from the *Iliad*. Ovid's Briseis quotes directly from Homer when she lists the ransom gifts Agamemnon offered to Achilles. Several times in her letter she also echoes words spoken in the *Iliad* by Briseis and Andromache, and she refers to specific scenes of the *Iliad*.

Ovid's Briseis begins her letter with an apology for her bad Greek and refers to herself as writing in a "barbarian hand" (2).⁹ Ironically, it is clear that she has no lack of education because she composes her letter in elegant elegiac couplets – in Latin, not Greek, of course. Then she turns to her main concern: "If a small complaint about you, my lord and master, is not wrong, then I lodge, respecting my lord and master, a small complaint" (5–6). After this tentative and rather tortured beginning, in which she sounds none too certain about her status relative to Achilles, she goes on to ask him why he let Agamemnon's men take her away so quickly and without any resistance. This question leads her to a literal translation of the list of ransom gifts that Agamemnon had promised Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*. Ovid's Briseis continues with further complaints and pleads with Achilles to take her back. She also restates words from Briseis' lament in Homer (43–50):

Or can it be that grim fate presses upon wretched men,
and that once our misfortunes begin no gentler hour comes?
I saw the city walls of Lyrnessus ravaged by your army,
my father's land, and I its ornament.
I saw three men share death, as they shared their birth,
three whose mother was equally theirs, and mine.
I saw my husband lavish upon the bloody earth his magnificent ruin,
his chest heaving, livid with his life's blood.

8 Sara H. Lindheim, *Mail and Female: Epistolary Narrative and Desire in Ovid's Heroides* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 31.

9 Translations of Ovid's *Heroides* are taken from Florence Verducci, *Ovid's Toyshop of the Heart: Epistulae Heroidum* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 88–97.

Ovid, with his vivid Roman sensibilities, adds more blood to Briseis' description. But he extends her lament to include words spoken in the *Iliad* by Andromache. Briseis goes on to write: "For so many lost to me I still had only you in recompense; you were my master, you my husband, you my brother" (51–52). These words are almost a direct quotation of Andromache in her plea to Hector in Book 6. Ovid has Briseis refashion her own words from the *Iliad* as well as those of Andromache's.

Having based his Briseis on Homer's, Ovid goes on to remake her thoroughly. The new Briseis is acutely aware of her status as a prize of war and thus a slave. After her first tentative complaint to Achilles she brings up another regarding his rejection of the ransom and her return to him: "How have I deserved to be held so cheap, Achilles? Where has your love sped so quickly and lightly away?" (41–42). These words echo nothing in Homer. Briseis' is now the voice of a frustrated Roman elegiac lover.

When she has finished complaining, Briseis shifts to a call for action. She asks Achilles why he is delaying and urges him to take up his weapons and to return to the battle, but to take her back first! She contrasts the Achilles she imagines loitering around his ships with the martial Achilles she once knew. Before his quarrel with Agamemnon, she writes, Achilles respected the savagery of battle and the fame won in warfare: "Once it was not security, but brilliant deeds that pleased you, and the renown won in warfare was something you found sweet" (121–122). Briseis is upholding the epic warrior's code of conduct, which values strength, valor, killing, and action on the battlefield. Now she imagines that Achilles has changed and finds that war is dangerous and staying in bed is safer. She envisions him lounging around his camp even as she writes (115–122):

And if someone should ask why you refuse to fight?
 Battle is fatiguing: you prefer the recreation of the zither, the night
 and love.
 War is dangerous, too. It is safer to lie in bed, clasping a girl,
 strumming the Thracian lyre with your finger tips,
 than to take up the shield and the sharp-edged sword
 and endure the weight of the helmet that flattens your curls.
 Once it was not security, but brilliant deeds that pleased you,
 and the renown won in warfare was something you found sweet.

Briseis' description of Achilles recalls the *Iliad*, when the ambassadors from Agamemnon come to his camp and find him playing a lyre with

Patroclus beside him (9.186 and 190). In addition, Ovid evokes Homer's image of Paris.¹⁰ There we see Paris strutting out onto the battlefield wearing a leopard skin over his shoulders and rattling his javelins. Once he sees Menelaus, however, he shrinks back among his companions. His brother Hector, disgusted at his cowardice, chides him (3.52–55):

And now you would not stand up against warlike Menelaos?
 Thus you would learn of the man whose blossoming wife you
 have taken.
 The lyre would not help you then, nor the favours of Aphrodite,
 nor your locks, when you rolled in the dust, nor all your beauty.

Briseis also imagines Achilles in bed with a girl. This is exactly what Paris does in the *Iliad* after Aphrodite whisks him off the battlefield and puts him in his bedroom with Helen. Paris brushes off all thoughts of war and becomes possessed by love. He tells Helen (3.441–446):

Come, then, rather let us go to bed and turn to love-making.
 Never before as now has passion enmeshed my senses,
 not when I took you the first time from Lakedaimon the lovely
 and caught you up and carried you away in seafaring vessels,
 and lay with you in the bed of love on the island Kranae,
 not even then, as now, did I love you and sweet desire seize me.¹¹

Paris is something of a failure in warfare. He freely admits to Helen that Menelaus subdued him in battle. He redirects his energy from the battlefield to the bedroom. In the erotic arena he demonstrates that he is a man of action. The sheer power of Paris' passion overcomes Helen's resistance. It is just such a passion that Ovid's Briseis longs to elicit from Achilles. Briseis remembers his lust for battle and his lust for her, but his former desire is gone. Now he is withdrawn, lingering, sulking beside his ships. Throughout her letter, Briseis contrasts the Achilles he once was with the Achilles she now imagines. He is a man of action neither on the field of battle nor on the field of love; he is no longer swift-footed, but demonstrates "slow delay" (183).

From the personal perspective of Ovid's Briseis, the Trojan War is really all about love, primarily her own love affair with Achilles but also

10 P. Ovidii Nasonis *Epistulae Heroidum* 1–5, ed. Alessandro Barchiesi (Florence: Le Monnier, 1992), 237, notes but does not explain the comparison between Achilles in *Heroides* 3 and Paris in Book 3 of the *Iliad*.

11 *Iliad* 3.441–446; Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 112.

the love affair between Paris and Helen, which she implicitly compares with her own. Ovid sets these two relationships alongside each other and so elevates the importance of Briseis. Ovid uses Propertius' tactic, equating his relationship with Cynthia to those of Briseis with Achilles and Andromache with Hector.

3. Briseis in *Troy*

In Petersen's film, three pairs of lovers are prominent: Hector and Andromache, Paris and Helen, Achilles and Briseis. But as the film progresses, Petersen puts Briseis and her love affair with Achilles at center stage.

The centrality of Briseis becomes visually explicit as she appears in some thirteen scenes in contrast to her three in the *Iliad*, and she speaks far more lines than her counterpart in the *Heroides*. In the film, her character also echoes more heroines from classical literature than her counterparts in Homer and Ovid. The cinematic Briseis resonates with Cassandra, Polyxena, Clytemnestra, and even the goddess Athena, besides showing certain analogies to Helen and Andromache. As *Troy* progresses, Briseis becomes tightly linked with Achilles, the hero, and their love relationship turns into the most prominent one in the story.

In her first scene Briseis appears as a member of the Trojan royal family and in the white, virginal robes and veil of a priestess of Apollo. Although she had been neither in classical texts, her appearance here evokes memories of the virgins Cassandra and Polyxena, daughters of Priam and Hecuba. Polyxena is not mentioned in the *Iliad*, but Cassandra is mentioned twice. She is the most beautiful of Priam's daughters (13.365) and "a girl like Aphrodite the golden."¹² In her first scene in *Troy*, Briseis exhibits a youthful radiance and royal grace reminiscent of Cassandra.

Although Cassandra is not specifically portrayed as a priestess or prophetess in the *Iliad*, the Greek literary tradition does describe her as such, most memorably in Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon*. This play tells the story of Agamemnon's return to Argos after his victory in the Trojan War. He arrives with Cassandra, whom he took as his prize after Troy fell. After Agamemnon goes into the palace, where his wife Clytemnestra will kill him, Cassandra has a vision from Apollo, god of prophecy, in which she sees her own and Agamemnon's blood

being spilled in the palace. She explains to the chorus that Apollo gave her the power of divination but cursed her by making no one believe her prophecies when she rejected his advances. Her prophecies prove to be correct when Clytemnestra stands proudly over the dead bodies of both Agamemnon and Cassandra. The other Trojan princess whom Briseis recalls in *Troy* is Polyxena, Cassandra's younger sister. In his play *Hecuba*, Euripides shows the former queen of Troy, her daughters Polyxena and Cassandra, and the other Trojan women as captives of the Greeks after the fall of Troy. The Greek army has resolved to sacrifice Polyxena on the tomb of Achilles. When Polyxena agrees to go to her death without resistance, the chorus of Trojan women prisoners observe: "Nobility – how deep and terrible its stamp / on those wellborn. And when actions enhance / a good name, it wins still greater dignity."¹³ In *Troy*, the royal priestess Briseis demonstrates Polyxena's kind of bravery. Achilles, judging her by her bearing when he first encounters her, comments that she must be royalty. Briseis' regal and priestly status, her courage under attack, and her beauty all evoke Cassandra and Polyxena. When we see her veiled in the temple of Apollo in the act of making offerings to the god, Briseis becomes firmly identified as his priestess. Because the god she worships is Apollo, Briseis also suggests Chryseis, the daughter of Apollo's priest in the *Iliad*.

Briseis' next scene takes place in the hut of Achilles on the beach. Eudorus, Achilles' chief lieutenant, informs him that she is being presented to him as his prize for taking Apollo's temple and the beach. This story is consistent with the epic tradition. In the *Iliad*, Briseis says in her lament over Patroclus that she was seized by the Greeks when her city fell and that Patroclus comforted her at that time. In several scenes in the film, Achilles himself attempts to comfort her. In contrast to the Briseis of Homer and Ovid, the film's Briseis is defiant. She speaks with the authority of a princess in language reflecting her elite education. She commands Achilles' attention. She meets him as an equal, even if, at the moment, she is his captive.

This first encounter sets the tone for the developing relationship between Briseis and Achilles, a tone very different from that of the mourning Briseis in the *Iliad* or the complaining Briseis of Ovid. Immediately Briseis questions Achilles' actions, dismisses him as a killer, and tells him that Apollo, her god, will take his vengeance. Achilles, who struck

12 *Iliad* 24.699; Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 493.

13 *Hecuba* 379–381; quoted from *Euripides: Hecuba*, tr. Janet Lembke and Kenneth J. Reckford (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 41 (translators' lines 406–409).

the head off the statue of Apollo, responds that he thinks Apollo is afraid of him and that he, Achilles, knows more about the gods than priests. Briseis goes on to ask him what he wants in Troy, stating correctly that she does not think he came for the Spartan queen. He answers: "I want what all men want. I just want it more." This could sound like a threat to a captive woman, but Briseis does not display any fear. She expresses self-confidence and courage by daring to question her captor. When Eudorus tells Achilles that Agamemnon requests his presence, Achilles reassures Briseis: "You don't need to fear me, girl. You are the only Trojan who can say that."

Achilles and Agamemnon argue about who deserves credit for taking the Trojan beach that day. The scene reminds viewers of Book 1 of the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon and Achilles quarrel over the return of Chryseis to her father. In compensation for his loss of Chryseis, Agamemnon takes Briseis away from Achilles. In *Troy*, as the argument between Agamemnon and Achilles is heating up, Agamemnon has his men bring in Briseis, whom they have seized from Achilles' tent. When Achilles, enraged by Agamemnon's insult, reaches for his sword, Briseis calls out: "Stop! Too many men have died today. If killing is your only talent, that is your curse. I don't want anyone dying for me." In the *Iliad*, Achilles draws his sword to kill Agamemnon but is stopped by the goddess Athena. Briseis takes over her function in *Troy*. By assuming the role of a goddess who can control a hero like Achilles, Briseis is empowered even further. Agamemnon recognizes this when he comments, sarcastically: "Mighty Achilles silenced by a slave girl." But as Athena is the goddess of wisdom, Briseis demonstrates in her conversations with Achilles that she possesses wisdom beyond her years.

As in the *Iliad*, after his loss of Briseis Achilles withdraws from fighting and will have nothing to do with Agamemnon. The Greeks are pushed back to their ships within a day after his withdrawal, and, in contrast to the epic tradition, Hector kills Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother. Agamemnon realizes that he cannot take Troy without Achilles and agrees to return Briseis, whom he swears he has not touched. But he has already handed her over to his soldiers: "They deserve some amusement after today." In the following scene Briseis is resisting Agamemnon's men, who are about to torture her; their shouts of "Trojan whore" suggest that they also intend to rape her. But Achilles charges in unexpectedly and vanquishes all who have their hands upon Briseis. He sweeps her up into his arms and carries her off. Although nothing like this happens in the *Iliad*, it was just such an Achilles for

whom Ovid's Briseis yearned, a heroic lover who would come to her defense and take her back triumphantly for himself.

After Achilles carries Briseis back to his hut, he attempts to comfort her by cleansing her wounds and offering her food, but she initially pushes him away. They engage in a dialogue in which each challenges the other's values and life choices. Questioning and listening, Briseis encourages Achilles to reflect about the gods and their relationship to mankind. Achilles tells Briseis: "The gods envy us. They envy us because we're mortal; because any moment might be our last. Everything is more beautiful because we're doomed. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again." Briseis realizes that Achilles is not merely a killing machine. This thoughtful Achilles recalls the Achilles in Book 9 of the *Iliad*, who gives Odysseus, Agamemnon's ambassador, several reasons for not returning to battle and talks about fate: "Fate is the same for the man who holds back, the same if he fights hard. / We are all held in a single honour, the brave with the weaklings."¹⁴ He refers to Briseis as being like his wife (341–343) and intends to return home the next morning (357–363). In the film, Briseis understands how intelligent and articulate Achilles is: "I thought you were a dumb brute. I could have forgiven a dumb brute." What she does not yet realize is that, although she cannot forgive him for his killings, she can fall in love with him.

In the *Iliad*, Briseis and Achilles are never shown together in love. Achilles states that he loves her from his heart and that she is dear to him (9.341–343). Ovid's Briseis dreams about the kind of man she wants Achilles to be but does not reveal the emotional quality of their relationship. In both texts Briseis wishes to marry Achilles and return with him to Phthia, but in neither text does she disclose her feelings about their relationship beyond stating that she wants it to continue. *Troy* makes the intensity of the emotional bond between Briseis and Achilles visually explicit. Briseis and Achilles modify their life choices as a result of their growing love affair.

Later that night, Briseis puts a knife to Achilles' throat while he is asleep. The vengeful priestess in her has decided to put an end to his life before he slays more men. He awakens and tells her to go ahead and kill him. But she hesitates, and erotic passion overcomes them both. This is what Ovid's Briseis had been dreaming of during her long confinement in Agamemnon's camp. That night in bed, Achilles and

¹⁴ *Iliad* 9.318–319; Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 206.

Briseis discuss leaving Troy together. Briseis acts as the catalyst for Achilles' change of heart. He ceases to talk about immortality gained through glory in warfare. The next morning Achilles decides to go home, presumably taking Briseis with him and living out a happy but unremembered life with her. This is the wish of both Homer's and Ovid's Briseis. Achilles tells his men to prepare their ships.

Unfortunately the Trojans attack at dawn, the ships begin to burn. Patroclus is killed, and any thoughts of home are finished. When Eudorus returns with Patroclus' body, Achilles in his fury attacks him. Briseis attempts to restrain Achilles, but he seizes her by the throat and throws her to the ground. The violence of his response shows us that his anger now turns Achilles into the killer he was before. Consumed with wrath, he tosses Briseis aside like a slave.

Before Achilles goes out to meet Hector the next day, Briseis pleads with him not to fight her cousin. When he returns dragging Hector's body behind his chariot, she sits in his hut sobbing; later she asks him: "You've lost your cousin, now you've taken mine. When does it end?" Achilles replies: "It never ends." That night Priam comes to retrieve Hector's body, and Achilles tells Briseis that she is free to go, too. She hesitates. Achilles gives her the necklace which his mother Thetis gave him before he sailed to Troy. Thetis told him of his choice: a long happy life at home or a short glorious life of war. Achilles later gave the necklace to his beloved cousin Patroclus. Now he gives it to Briseis. The necklace becomes a visual symbol of the equality between Briseis and Patroclus in Achilles' affection and a sign of his love. As Briseis leaves with Priam, she looks back at Achilles as if she were none too certain that she wants to go. This scene of Briseis leaving Achilles' camp is reminiscent of the scene in the *Iliad* of Briseis leaving Achilles "all unwilling" for Agamemnon.¹⁵

Back in Troy, Briseis appears at the funeral of Hector, sitting with Andromache and Helen. Contrary to the funeral scene in the *Iliad*, none of the women in the film speak. We last see Briseis during the fall of the city. With Troy in flames, Briseis, wearing Achilles' necklace, runs through the citadel calling out for Andromache and Paris. Finally, she kneels in prayer before a statue of Apollo. This image strongly reconnects her with Cassandra. In the Epic Cycle, Agamemnon takes Cassandra as his prize after the fall of Troy. In the film, Agamemnon appears and seizes Briseis, threatening her with just such a future. But at this point Briseis assumes her final role change. She stabs

Agamemnon. With this act she anticipates Clytemnestra's killing of Agamemnon. She also fulfills Achilles' threat to Agamemnon earlier in the film that he would see Agamemnon dead. As she strikes Agamemnon, Briseis uses Achilles's sweeping arm motion when he killed Boagrius and Hector. Achilles, who has been searching all over Troy for Briseis to save her yet again, rushes in and watches her kill Agamemnon. He kills the two soldiers holding on to her and picks her up in his arms as he did before. Then he desired her for himself. But by now he knows that he is doomed. (He has already sent his men home.) This time he is saving Briseis for herself so that she may survive without him. Achilles was not able to save Patroclus, but he saves Briseis.

At this moment Paris appears and kills Achilles with his arrows. In no ancient version of the story is Briseis present at Achilles' death. In the *Iliad*, the last mention of Achilles and Briseis is when they go to sleep together in Achilles' hut (24.675–676). In *Troy*, Achilles and Briseis have the opportunity to bid each other farewell before Achilles dies and Briseis flees from Troy with Paris. Achilles tells her: "You gave me peace in a lifetime of war," and then he tells her to go. There is no information in the classical tradition that reveals what happens to Briseis after Achilles' death. *Troy* implies that she will be among the few survivors whom Aeneas leads to a new home.

The final scene contains all the elements of Briseis' character expansion present throughout *Troy*. A princess, she runs through the burning city looking for her royal cousins. A priestess, she takes refuge at an altar before the statue of Apollo. There she assumes the role of Agamemnon's vengeful wife. Most importantly, she resumes her central role as a romantic heroine when she and Achilles reaffirm their love before he dies. *Troy* presents the character of Briseis in a ring composition. In her first three scenes she is seen as princess, priestess, and prize, in particular evoking Cassandra. In the middle of the film she is a romantic heroine in her love affair with Achilles, fulfilling the convention of films set in the ancient world whose heroine redeems the hero with her love.¹⁶ She is not able to save Achilles from being a killer, but she is able to make him understand love. The ring of images closes in the final scene when Briseis is seized by Agamemnon. Here she is again princess, priestess, and prize, once more recalling Cassandra.

By killing Agamemnon Briseis achieves the equivalent of an *aristeia*, the Homeric hero's ideal of proving himself the best in battle. At the

15 *Iliad* 1.348; Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer*, 68.

16 Cf. Derek Elley, *The Epic Film: Myth and History* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 88–89.

same time she asserts herself as a romantic Ovidian heroine. When she is reunited with a dying Achilles for a brief romantic moment, Achilles comforts her one last time. He cradles her face, wipes away her tears, and tells her: "It's all right." Time seems to stop during their last kiss. Their final moment in each other's arms recalls to us his words to her on their first night together: "Any moment may be our last. You will never be lovelier than you are now. We will never be here again." As Briseis flees the burning city, Achilles' words have become true.¹⁷

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Troy and Memorials of War

Frederick Ahl

"How huge a hurricane rolled out of savage Mycenae all over
 Ida's plains, what forces of destiny drove into conflict
 Europe and Asia, two distinct spheres: there's a tale that the whole world's
 Heard, even someone in some remote land where the waves of the Ocean's
 Far side crash, or who lives in a southern zone, beyond sunlight's
 Central and hottest of sky's five zones, in complete isolation."

So speaks Ilioneus, spokesman for a huge delegation that the Trojan prince Aeneas sends to the Latins when he puts ashore in Italy.¹ His claim is an outrageous exaggeration at the dramatic date of its utterance, some seven years after the fall of Troy. It was an exaggeration at the time Virgil wrote the lines, well over a millennium after the traditional date of Troy's fall in the late twelfth century B.C. And it continued to be an exaggeration for the millennium and a half following Virgil's death. Finally, however, time has leveled the arc of Ilioneus' hyperbole. Now, in the European tradition, the Trojan War is indeed the universally known (insofar as anything is universally known) archetypal clash of different cultures (or barbarisms) set within the overlapping boundaries of myth and history.²

¹ Virgil, *Aeneid* 7.222–227; my translation.

² Gilbert Achcar, *The Clash of Barbarisms: September 11 and the Making of the New World Disorder*, tr. Peter Drucker (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2002), marks a useful counterpoise to the traditional (and age-old) tendency to view conflicts in terms of civilization vs. barbarism, familiar vs. foreign, good vs. evil.

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Troy
From Homer's *Iliad* to
Hollywood Epic

Edited by
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