

HEROIDES III: BRISEIS TO ACHILLES

Briseis writes to Achilles after being seized by Agamemnon. She was captured and treated as a war prize during the Trojan War before getting caught up in a conflict between Achilles and Agamemnon.

The letter you are reading is from captured Briseis,
written in Greek by her barbarian hand.
The blots that you see were caused by her tears,
but tears can have the same weight as words.
If I may briefly complain about my master and lover,
here in brief are my complaints about him.

That I was handed over to the king so quickly
is not your fault, but at the same time it is.
No sooner had Eurybates and Talthybius come for me,
to Talthybius and Eurybates I was delivered. 10
Exchanging glances, they silently asked each other
what had happened to the love between us.
Even a slight delay would have eased my heart's pain,
but I had to go without even a kiss goodbye.
I cried endlessly, tore my hair out, and my misery
was like being abducted a second time.

I have often wanted to slip away and return,
but the guards would have captured a timid girl.
If I had gone out at night, I feared I would be taken
and passed on to one of Priam's sons' wives. 20
Maybe I had to be given up, but all these lonely nights
you are slow to anger, slow to demand my return.
Patroclus himself, when I was handed over, whispered,
"Don't cry. You'll be back here soon."

Heroides III: Briseis to Achilles

Not bringing me back is one thing, but you actually oppose
my being restored. Some lover you are!
Phoenix and Ajax both came to you, two great heroes,
one your relative, one your comrade in arms,
along with Ulysses. I was to be returned to you,
with a pile of presents to sweeten the deal: 30
twenty heavy mixing bowls wrought of tawny bronze
with seven three-legged stands to match,
and with ten, count them, ten talents of gold thrown in
and a dozen champion thoroughbreds.
And—as a bonus—a bevy of lovely girls from Lesbos,
taken captive when their city was sacked.
And on top of all this, though you hardly need a bride,
one of Agamemnon's three daughters to wed.
What you would have had to given him to buy me back
you refuse to accept as an outright gift! 40
Why do I deserve to be held so cheap, Achilles?
Where has your love for me flitted away?

Or is it just that fortune never changes for the wretched
and things never get better once they turn bad?
I have seen your army tear down the walls of Lyrnesus—
and I was no small part of my father's estate.
I have seen three cut down who lived and died together,
three who had the same mother as I.
I have seen my great husband laid low on the field of battle,
witnessed the heaving of his blood-soaked chest. 50
You were my all, made up for all my lost companions.
You were my husband, my brother, my lord.
You swore to me by Thetis, your divine, sea-born mother,
swore that my capture was all to the good,
that if I came to you with a dowry you could reject me,
spurning my wealth as well as myself.
And people are saying that when dawn breaks tomorrow
you will spread your sails to the misty south wind.

I was terrified when this disastrous news reached me,
 my heart drained of blood, my senses numb. 60
 You are going, and to whom, cruel heart, will you leave me?
 Who will console me in my misery?
 May the earth crack open and swallow me whole,
 may a thunderbolt consume me with fire
 before your Phthian oars beat the sea white without me,
 and I'm left stranded to see your ships sail off.
 If it is your pleasure to return to your ancestral home now,
 I am not much baggage to load on board.
 Let me follow you not as my husband but as my captor;
 my hands are adept at carding wool. 70
 The most beautiful by far of all Achaea's women
 will come to you as bride—and well may she come—
 a bride worthy of the grandson of Jove and Aegina,
 one whom your grandfather Nereus would choose.
 I will be one of your humble slaves, spinning wool daily,
 pulling out threads from a full distaff.
 Only don't let your lady be mean to me, I beg you,
 for somehow I fear she will not be fair.
 Please don't let her pull out my hair right in your presence
 and you just shrug, "O she was one of mine too." 80
 Or let her, if only I am not despised and abandoned:
 This is the fear that shakes me to the core.
 What are you waiting for? Agamemnon now regrets his anger,
 and Greece is groveling at your feet.
 Conquer your own temper, as you conquer everything else.
 Why is Hector still tearing the Greeks apart?
 Take up your weapons—but take me back first—Achilles,
 and with Ares's help turn back their troops!
 It was for me your anger arose, for me now allay it.
 Let me be your wrath's beginning and end. 90
 And don't think it beneath you to yield to my prayer:
 Meleager's wife once roused him to fight.
 You know the story I mean. Bereft of her brothers,
 a mother roundly disavowed her son.

When war began, he laid down his arms, withdrew in a fury
 and refused to come to his country's aid.
 Only his wife was able to persuade her husband.
 Good for her, but my words have no weight.
 I am not angry, however, and though often summoned
 to my master's bed, haven't posed as a wife. 100
 I replied once to some captive woman calling me mistress,
 "You add a burden when you use that term."
 Be that as it may. But, by the poorly buried bones of my husband,
 bones that will always be sacred to me;
 and by the souls of my three brothers, now sacred spirits,
 who died for their country and lie with it in death;
 and by your head and mine, which we have lain together,
 and by your sword, which my kin know well—
 I swear I have never made love with Agamemnon.
 If I am lying, please desert me at once. 110
 But if I were to ask you, great hero, "Do you also swear
 you have not enjoyed another?" you would refuse.
 Yes, the Greeks think you miss me, but you are playing your lyre,
 wrapped in your mistress's tender embrace!
 And why do you refuse to fight? War puts you in danger,
 while music and sex bring you delight.
 Safer to lie on a couch, to embrace your darling,
 to strum a tune on a Thracian lyre
 than to heft your shield and your spear, to feel your helmet
 pressing down your hair with its weight. 120
 But you used to prefer valorous deeds over safety;
 glory won in battle was sweet to you.
 Or did you only like warfare until you made me a captive,
 your glory finished along with my homeland?
 Heaven forbid! And may Pelion's spear go quivering into
 Hector's side, launched by your strong arm!
 Send me as your legate to my lord, O Danaans!
 I will deliver your message with many a kiss.

I will achieve more than Phoenix, more than fluent Ulysses,
more than Teucer's brother Ajax, you can be sure. 130

It will mean something that I've touched his neck as a lover,
and for him to see me in person again.

You may be more violent than the waves of your mother,
but my silence alone will wear you down.

But still—so may Peleus, your father, live to a ripe old age,
and your son Pyrrhus match you in arms—
show some pity, Achilles, for your anxious Briseis,
and don't torment me with drawn-out delay.
Or, if your passion for me has turned into tedium,
force her death whom you force to live without you. 140

That is what you are doing. My body and complexion are fading,
my spirit sustained only by hope in you.

If I lose that I will rejoin my brothers and husband,
and bidding a woman die will be your great deed.

But why bid me die? Why not just set steel to my body?

Breast pierced, I have blood to let flow.

Strike me with the same sword that if Athena had let it
would have gone into the chest of Atreus's son!

No, spare my life. What you gave to your foe as victor,
I now request from you as your friend. 150

Neptunian Troy can provide you with better victims.

Look to your enemy for someone to kill.

Only, whether you decide to set sail or remain here,
by your right as my lord, bid me to come!

HEROIDES IV: PHAEDRA TO HIPPOLYTUS

Phaedra is in love with her stepson, Hippolytus, who has pledged his chastity to the virgin goddess Diana. While her husband, Theseus, is away, Phaedra writes to Hippolytus to confess her love.

A Cretan girl wishes you well, O Amazonian man,
although her own wellness lies in your hands.

Read closely—what harm is there in letters being read?

You might even find a word or two you like.

Carried over land and sea, these notes contain my secrets.

An enemy welcomes his enemy's every word . . .

Now, three attempts my tongue has made, and three times it clings useless.

Three times the sound gets caught at the edge of my lip.

Shame must be mixed with love wherever it is permitted.

What shame forbids me to speak, Love demands I write, 10
and those who spurn Love's commands find no asylum—

he is king, and every god beholden to his law.

As I was wavering unsure, he told me, "Write!" He told me,

"Write! That iron man will lift conquered hands."

Let Love now be close at hand, light his flames within my marrow

and hammer my prayers deep into your thoughts.

I will not break my wedding vows for mere frivolity.

My reputation? Free of flaws, immaculate.

But Love comes just as fierce as he comes late. I am burning,
burning, my chest is riddled with blind wounds. 20

As colts first taken from the herd can scarce endure the bit,
as calves' first yoke will chafe the tender flesh,

a callow heart will only submit to its first love bucking.

My soul squirms beneath the awkward weight.

Love becomes an art when from a tender age it is studied.

And she loves all the worse, whom Love finds late.