



Briseis in the Potters' Quarter

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Briseis, the captive woman given to Achilles as a γέρας (“war prize”), has no name of her own in the *Iliad*.¹ We know her only by her patronymic (“Daughter of Brises”), and her father has no role in Homeric poetry.² Is Briseis also a character with no history, a character invented for the purposes of the *Iliad* only? Or did her character originally inhabit

¹ In the version I presented at the conference, this paper was titled “Temporary Like Achilles,” an allusion to Bob Dylan’s post-*Iliadic* Achilles. Images of the paintings I discuss here can be accessed via hyperlinks within the notes of this essay to the [Beazley Archive](#) at the Classical Art Research Centre, the [British Museum](#), [Google Books](#), and [Perseus](#). Please note that I have not obtained permission to publish the images themselves. Readers who wish to use the images elsewhere must consult directly with the copyright holders. Because some of the URLs may not be stable, I also provide Beazley Archive numbers and museum inventory numbers when possible. Note that the hyperlinks to the Beazley Archive are to the database search page. Insert the Vase Number in the “Simple Searching” function to find the images.

I owe thanks not only to the participants of the conference for their helpful comments, but also to my colleague Stan Lombardo for letting me use his translation of the *Iliad*, and for responding to a draft of this paper. My student Cara Polsley was of great technical assistance.

² On the name “Briseis” see Dué 2002: 3, note 10.

a wider mythological terrain, only to be compressed into her isolated, *Iliadic* role?³ Could the *Iliad's* multiple roles for Briseis (prize, captive, daughter, wife) stem from extra-Homeric variations in her story? She is one of only four women with a speaking role in the *Iliad*. Perhaps that would suggest that she had an earlier, richer life in traditional poetry along with the other three: Helen, Andromache, and Hecuba. These questions have been explored in depth by Casey Dué (2002), who has uncovered glimmers of a pre-*Iliadic* Briseis in Homeric and other archaic texts, and in Greek art.

This paper brings similar questions about Briseis' past to bear on her afterlife. How did Briseis live on in the post-Homeric imaginations of the Greeks? Was she a one-dimensional "war prize," or did she play a broader role? Would a Greek reader (or listener, recipient, or performer) of the story have been satisfied with the terse description in the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*: "Briseis, in mythology, daughter of Briseus of Lyrnessus and widow of Mynes; Achilles' slave-concubine, taken from him by Agamemnon and afterwards restored" (Rose 2005)? If so, this would mean that Briseis survived the *Iliad* not only in a compressed form that—over time—had shed its former resonances, but as a diminished character. Or—for scholars who have described Briseis only as "a shadow, a figment of the poet," (Murray 1911: 221) or "a pale figure created by poetry" (Friis Johansen 1967: 153), with no connection to a broader repertoire—this would mean that Briseis remained the minor shadow she always was.⁴

My focus is on Greek vase-painting, where Briseis makes several reappearances during the late 6th and early to mid-5th century. I examine three types of representations of Briseis, and suggest that the diversity of these images attests to fluid relationships between the *Iliad* and the artisans.⁵ This is not to say, necessarily, that the variations were created by painters—the reworking of tradition may have had a broader currency beyond the visual arts. Although I do not argue against the possibility that 5th-century paintings of Briseis engage richer traditional tales about Briseis that existed before and perhaps alongside the *Iliad*, I hope to

³ For "compression" as a term in Homeric scholarship, see Lord 1960: 25-27.

⁴ For Griffin, Briseis "had no real setting, and clearly she is not a real mythological figure" (Griffin 1995: 88).

⁵ *LIMC* (Kossatz-Deissmann 1986) lists 54 ancient representations of Briseis (some certain, some possible), including several vase-paintings that I do not discuss here. Some of them may depict Briseis (unnamed) at the ransoming of Hector and at the tomb of Patroclus.

articulate my sense that the late 6th- and early to mid 5th-century depictions of Briseis are consistent with what may be called a Homer-centric reading.⁶ My position is complicated by the fact that the *Iliad* took multiform shapes in antiquity.⁷ But although the exact contours of this multiformity cannot be mapped, I see a distinction between Briseis' role in the *Iliad* (as she may have been represented—variously—in papyri, ancient quotation, and the medieval manuscripts) and any roles she may have had in broader, pre-*Iliadic* or extra-*Iliadic* traditions. In my view, the most significant images of Briseis represent creative responses to her story essentially as it exists in the text of our *Iliad*.

1. The Other Side of the Vase

A monumental Attic red-figure belly amphora from an Etruscan tomb, now in the Vatican museum, depicts an unhelmeted and relaxed Achilles.⁸ The hero is clearly labeled in Greek letters, and he stands alone, unframed, as though he were a statue against the black field of the vase. The Achilles Painter (so named from this vase) produced this work around 450 BCE, many generations after the composition of the *Iliad*. Does this painting on the name vase of the Achilles Painter have a direct connection with Homer, or with extra-Homeric traditions? Is it simply a generic depiction of the hero? Anthony Snodgrass has written: “A viewer, ancient or modern, looking at a mid-fifth century portrayal of

⁶ See Lowenstam (1997: 21) who identifies “[t]he essential question” as “whether the painters were depicting, with characteristic artistic license, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in the form in which we have inherited them.”

⁷ Variations in the text of the *Iliad* as it survives in ancient quotations, papyri, and the medieval manuscripts demonstrate incontrovertibly that the text was not static in antiquity. On divergent forms of the text, see the ongoing [Homeric Multitext Project](#). But despite the variations, it seems that readers, rhapsodes, and scholars in late archaic, classical, and post-classical antiquity conceived of the *Iliad* as a single text. For the Alexandrian scholars, the diverse texts as they received them were replete with errors and accretions that had developed in the centuries that intervened between their lives and Homer's. Gregory Nagy (2001: 110-111) describes five stages “of progressively less fluidity,” with a definitive era when a “transcript” was produced in Athens under the Peisistradids, a “standardizing” period beginning in the late 4th century, and the period that starts in the middle of 2nd century BCE, when the texts become “scripture.” Nagy describes “ever less multiformity, not absolute uniformity” (2001: 114).

⁸ The [Name Vase of the Achilles Painter](#); Musei Vaticani 16571. Beazley Vase Number: 213821. This vase is over two feet tall (62 centimeters).

Achilles like this one will experience no problems whatever in reconciling the picture with his or her own vision of Homer's Achilles" (1998: 165). Snodgrass uses this vase as an example of a departure from earlier vase-paintings that focused on particular moments and stories. In his view, this vase lacks "the distractions arising from the addition of supporting figures and supplementary detail" that might suggest that the painter is adhering to (or contesting) a particular literary source. But for Steven Lowenstam, the vase seems likely to have a closer connection to our Homeric texts. Lowenstam observes that this Achilles looks more manly than the hero as he is painted by Makron and other earlier artists: "We do not doubt that the Achilles Painter's hero can effortlessly wield the long spear he grasps." He adds: "This portrait of Achilleus may be influenced by performances of something like our *Iliad* at the Panathenaic Festival; the image definitely furnishes a model for Athenian youths to emulate" (2008: 71).⁹

Having benefited from the insightful work of these and other scholars, I would like to suggest that not all viewers—in antiquity or today—would focus their reading of the painting on the same issues mentioned by Snodgrass or Lowenstam. First, the pose of the hero on this pot seems disengaged from the Wrath of Achilles, the theme that unites the forty days of *Iliad*. With his weight shifted to one leg, the hand on the hip, and the apparently fashionable hairdo, this Achilles is not particularly *Iliadic*.¹⁰ At what point in the *Iliad* could he have taken such a relaxed pose? Surely not while Briseis is with Agamemnon, or at any point after the death of Patroclus.

And there is more. On the reverse of the amphora we see a carefully-dressed woman who stands equally at ease, holding a wine jug in one hand, and a phiale (a shallow bowl used for offerings to the gods) in the other. This scheme of a lone Achilles on one side and an untroubled, elegant woman on the reverse appears on two other vases. On one of them the woman is carefully labeled "Briseis," which makes it nearly certain that all three paintings represent her. On a much earlier vase in the British Museum, a helmeted Achilles (named) appears similarly on

⁹ Lowenstam 2008 was not available at the time I presented the oral version of this paper in September 2008.

¹⁰ The way this Achilles places his weight on one foot echoes the pose of Polyclitus' Doryphoros, a statue that dates to the same era. To demonstrate this, de Cesare 1997 prints photographs of the vase and a Roman copy of the statue side by side ([page 204](#); [Plates 138/ 139](#)).

one side, while Briseis (also named) holds a flower on the other.¹¹ On an analogous Panathenaic Amphora painted by the Kleophrades Painter, now in Basel, an armed Achilles drinks from a wine cup, while a beautiful Briseis holds a wine jug and a flower.¹²

None of these pots presents Briseis in the way she first appears in the *Iliad*: a *geras* or captive woman. Rather than presenting a heroic warrior and his “slave-concubine,” the paintings’ simple schema elevates Achilles and Briseis to a spousal pair, as Patroclus does in his unfulfilled promise in the *Iliad*, and as Briseis does in Ovid’s *Heroides*. At one point in the *Iliad*, Achilles does this too. To quote from Stan Lombardo’s translation:

“Every decent, sane man
Loves his woman and cares for her, as I did,
Loved her from my heart. It doesn’t matter
That I won her with my spear.” (9. 349-352)¹³

ἐπεὶ ὅς τις ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς καὶ ἐχέφρων
τὴν αὐτοῦ φιλεῖ καὶ κήδεται, ὡς καὶ ἐγὼ τὴν
ἐκ θυμοῦ φίλεον δουρικτητὴν περ ἑοῦσαν. (9. 341-343)

What Lombardo translates as “woman” is the phrase “his own... [feminine pronoun]” and might justifiably be translated as “wife.” It is significant that two of the painters present Briseis holding a flower, a gesture that often connotes courtship in a widespread iconography.¹⁴ Achilles looks more like a warrior on the vase in the British Museum, but in all three vases the balance between the portrait of Achilles and the portrait of Briseis is remarkable. Tranquil marriages are rare in Greek

¹¹ [British Museum E 258](#); Beazley Vase Number 200436. This amphora dates to the late 6th or early 5th century. It is signed by Euxitheos, and the painting was attributed to Oltos by Beazley.

¹² Antikenmuseum und Sammlung Ludwig Ka424, [Beazley Vase Number 201661](#). This vase may be roughly contemporary with the name vase of the Achilles Painter. Although neither figure is named, the named figures as painted by Oltos (in the British Museum) provide a clear parallel.

¹³ All translations are by Stanley Lombardo (1997); line numbers given with the translations are the line numbers in Lombardo’s edition.

¹⁴ Ferrari (2002: 29, 30-31) draws connections between “courtship scenes” and various types of scenes in which young girls grasp blossoms. The flowers, along with the girls’ wool baskets, mirrors, and jewelry boxes connote their attractiveness to suitors.

myth, and few balanced pairs appear as a regular motif in iconography. Hector and Andromache may be the most memorable, but perhaps Poseidon and Amphitrite offer the clearest example.¹⁵ Images of Tecmessa standing over the body of Ajax might also offer a distant parallel. One might expect to see Penelope standing by Odysseus, but when he appears with a woman he most often stands instead before Circe. The rarity of images in which a woman is presented as a counterpart or partner to a male mythological figure makes the static representations of Achilles and Briseis all the more striking.

We cannot entirely rule out the possibility that the painters were inspired by some other poem, and Casey Dué (2002) may be right to suggest that Briseis always (even in the vase-paintings) brings with her a trace of a more regional, Aeolic phase of transmission of the *Iliad*. In Dué's scenario, Briseis' rich life in traditional poetry before the *Iliad* began in Lesbos, as is suggested by Homer's reference to the city where other women (perhaps along with Briseis) were captured by the Greeks. In Homer, her character is compressed, but her past incarnations remain as allusions that Homer's audiences may well have caught. But my own sense is that what Gregory Nagy (2001) has called the "Panathenaic bottleneck" cut her off from this tradition, and stripped Briseis of some of her particularity. For later readers and audiences of the *Iliad*, her character is less developed, and to some would seem more generic. And yet I do read the paintings as a response to the *Iliad*. Their inspiration would be Achilles' words at book 9. 341ff. (quoted above), and Briseis' own reference to a promise made by Patroclus: "You told me you'd make me Achilles' bride, told me you'd take me on a ship to Phthia, for a wedding among the Myrmidons." (19. 316-318) ἀλλά μ' ἔφασκες Ἀχιλλῆος θείοιο κουριδίην ἄλοχον θήσειν, ἄξειν τ' ἐνὶ νηυσὶν ἐς Φθίην, δαίσειν δὲ γάμον μετὰ Μυρμιδόνεσσι. These words appear in Briseis' lament over the body of Patroclus (*Iliad* 19. 297-299), which is in turn an *Iliadic* substitute for a traditional lament over the body of her (promised) husband Achilles— in advance of his own death.

¹⁵ Good examples of Amphitrite with Poseidon include a black figure painting attributed to the Painter of Berlin 1686 at the University Museum, [University of Pennsylvania \(MS3441\)](#) and a red figure painting attributed to the Syleus Painter on a [stamnos at the Toledo Museum of Art](#).

For Hector with Andromache, see the much earlier Chalcidian Black Figure krater attributed to the Inscription Painter at the Martin von Wagner Museum, University of Würzburg (L 160), on which [Hector and Andromache](#) face each other while [Helen turns away from Paris](#).

These paintings have no logical, precise mythological time. Are we to imagine that these tranquil images of Achilles and Briseis belong to the years before the events of the *Iliad* took place, or are we to imagine them as portraits from an interlude between the death of Patroclus and the death of Achilles himself? More likely, chronology is of no interest to painter or viewer. When we look at these three amphorae, we also need to forget Achilles' cruel claim in *Iliad* 19 that he wishes that Briseis had been killed long ago:

Well, son of Atreus, are either of us better off
For this anger that has eaten our hearts away
Like acid, this bitter quarrel over a girl?
Artemis should have shot her aboard my ship
The day I pillaged Lyrnessus and took her. (19. 68-72)

Ἀτρεΐδη ἧ ἄρ τι τόδ' ἀμφοτέροισιν ἄρειον
ἔπλετο σοὶ καὶ ἐμοί, ὃ τε νῶϊ περ ἀχτυμένω κῆρ
θυμοβόρῳ ἔριδι μενεήναμεν εἵνεκα κούρης;
τὴν ὄφελ' ἐν νήεσσι κατακτάμεν Ἄρτεμις ἰϙῶ
ἧματι τῶ ὄτ' ἐγὼν ἐλόμην Λυρνησσὸν ὀλέσσας. (19. 56-60)

Perhaps the painters (or the artisans who designed their pattern books; and the clients who may have ordered these pots) knew these lines, but also pushed them out of their memories in favor of a harmonious vision of Achilles and Briseis as a bridal pair. Similar interpretive strategies often operate in more literal terms in modern scholarship, where one line is selected to outweigh another, for the sake of consistency in the narrative or in character portrayal. For example: In his commentary on the *Iliad*, G. S. Kirk doubts “[w]hether Akhilleus would really have taken her back to Phthie as his wife.” In considering this question, Kirk notes Achilles' tears at *Iliad* 1. 349, but adds “that is surely because of the affront to his honour more than through losing Briseis; later... he is to wish that she had somehow died in the sack of Lurnessos.”¹⁶ Within the *Iliad*, Ajax also downplays the importance of Briseis, and protests to Achilles that seven women are better than one.

The static images on the name vase of the Achilles Painter and the other vases that present a similar motif (Achilles on one side; Briseis on the other) occlude Homeric presentations of Briseis as a captive war

¹⁶ Kirk 1985: 88.

prize, and engage instead an interpretation that privileges the promise made by Patroclus. They refer not to a particular moment in mythological time, but to a general and permanent pairing of Achilles with Briseis. Though they may also have had currency elsewhere, in an earlier era, in texts or traditions now lost, the seeds of that union are still there in our texts of the *Iliad*. Thus I view the vase-paintings as painterly extrapolations from, and interpretations of one strand in the *Iliad*. On the amphorae Briseis is no longer the “war prize” of book one, but the bride and wife of books 9 and 19, with whom Achilles lies down in our last glimpse of him in the *Iliad* as we know it today.

2. Contested Narratives

A second category of paintings of Briseis entails a different sort of representation that involves a transparent narrative. Here the paintings may reflect particular texts or stories, though they do not faithfully “illustrate” any scene that survives in our text of the *Iliad*. Compared to the representation of Briseis on the name vase of the Achilles Painter, they may serve as more likely evidence for Homeric multiforms that coexisted with and survived into the 6th and 5th centuries alongside the text(s) as we now have it. But, rather than taking them as illustrations of scenes that belong to non-*Iliadic* traditions, I read them as responses to an *Iliad* that was close to the one that survived into the medieval manuscripts.

These are depictions of the “Removal of Briseis” from Achilles’ tent. First, let us consider a cup by the Briseis Painter (so named from this vase), which was acquired by the British Museum in the 1840’s.¹⁷ This monumental cup was likely produced in the early- or mid-5th century, and had also been imported to Etruria in antiquity to equip a tomb. At 38 centimeters or 15 inches in diameter it is clearly not meant for drinking. Its paintings are detailed and readily legible. On one side of the cup, we see Achilles at the right, sitting in a tent under a marvelous striped awning. Slightly slumped on an ornate stool, he is swaddled in clothing from head to foot, with hand on head, only part of his face visible. This iconographic pose and the expression of grief are familiar from many other images of Achilles. It plays a triple role in the well-attested iconography, being used not only in scenes where Briseis is taken from Achilles (as might fit a scene in *Iliad* 1), but when Achilles is approached

¹⁷ [British Museum E 76](#); Beazley Vase Number 204400.

by ambassadors (as—very roughly—in *Iliad* 9), and also after the death of Patroclus, when Thetis brings the new arms to Achilles (as might fit a scene in *Iliad* 19).

Facing Achilles in this first painting, a man leans on a staff, apparently addressing him. His pose may be consistent with the iconography of Odysseus, but it is hard to say who he is, as no similar character can be placed in the comparable scene in the *Iliad*. With staff in hand, he seems to have traveled to the tent, and should not be Patroclus. Achilles had instructed Patroclus to turn Briseis over to messengers sent by Agamemnon:

Patroclus obeyed his beloved friend
 And brought Briseis, cheeks flushed, out of the tent
 And gave her to the heralds, who led her away.
 She went unwillingly. (1. 357-361)

Πάτροκλος δὲ φίλῳ ἐπεπείθεθ' ἑταίρῳ,
 ἐκ δ' ἄγαγε κλισίης Βρισηίδα καλλιπάρηον,
 δῶκε δ' ἄγειν• τῷ δ' αὖτις ἴτην παρὰ νῆας Ἀχαιῶν•
 ἧ δ' ἀέκουσ' ἅμα τοῖσι γυνὴ κίεν. (1. 345-347)

Exiting left, the two heralds in the painting remove Briseis, precisely as they take her in the *Iliad*. The herald at the far left escorts her away with a hard grip on her wrist. This grasping of the right wrist is a well-known gesture of dominance and possession and—in other contexts—of marriage. Behind Briseis we have the other herald. Neither herald is labeled as Talthibius or Eurybates (as they are called in the *Iliad*), but a reader in search of an illustration could reasonably add their names here. On the other side of the cup, the next moment appears, as though it were the following frame in a filmstrip.¹⁸ The two handles of the cup establish clear division between the two scenes, and in the second one we have Briseis arriving at Agamemnon's camp.¹⁹

Another version of the “Removal of Briseis” theme appears on Onesimos' “Sack of Troy” cup, which until recently was on display at

¹⁸ As Mark Stansbury O'Donnell (1999: 4) writes, “the pictures depict the story by showing multiple moments like a filmstrip.”

¹⁹ Some scholars understand the picture as a scene where Briseis is being led back to Achilles, but the painter has not presented the structure as the same tent. Here columns (instead of the posts and awning) represent Agamemnon's more palatial living space.

the Getty Museum, but has now been returned to Rome.²⁰ This oversized cup (46.5 centimeters in diameter) was mended in antiquity, which suggests that it was a valuable possession that was used or displayed before it was consigned to the tomb whence it was apparently looted in the 20th century. On one side of the cup, a man leads Briseis off to the left, his hand grasping her right wrist. The man is labeled clearly as Patroclus, which might suggest faithfulness to the *Iliad*, where Achilles tells Patroclus to hand her over. But in the *Iliad*, Achilles tells him to hand her over to the heralds. In contrast, this painting presents the herald trailing Briseis. Whom is she being handed over to? He is not labeled, but despite the poor condition of the vase, his feet—crossed at the ankles—can be made out at the far left of the painting. Dyfri Williams suggests that this “arrogantly nonchalant” figure is Agamemnon (Williams 1983: 58). Thus far, it appears that the painter has telescoped three moments into one revolving scene: Patroclus hands Briseis over, the heralds take her, Agamemnon receives her. Further telescoping results in more striking divergences from Homer: at the far right, we have Achilles being restrained by a goddess. In the well-known scene in the *Iliad*, when Agamemnon first asserts his intention to take Briseis, Achilles’ rage almost drives him to kill Agamemnon on the spot. But Athena grabs him by the hair and he pushes his sword back into its sheath. In the *Iliad*, Achilles’ rage is no longer apparent at the heralds’ arrival at his tent, when he acknowledges to them that they are not to blame. After the heralds leave with Briseis, Achilles withdraws to the seashore, and prays to Thetis, who then “rose up from the white-capped sea like a mist.” (1. 373) In the vase-painting, the goddess who restrains Achilles while Briseis is being taken away is not Athena, but Thetis (named). Thus, three *Iliadic* scenes come together: the moment of Achilles’ first rage (suppressed by Athena), the removal of Briseis, and Achilles’ subsequent grief (consoled by Thetis). This painter creatively melds together distinct epic (but non-Homeric) moments, as he does in the interior of this cup, when we have Astyanax and Priam (whose deaths are usually separated in mythological time) dying at the same time. The result in the case of the Briseis scene is a new narrative: Agamemnon or another Achaean warrior is present at the moment when Briseis is taken from Achilles, who flies into a murderous rage, which is checked by the epiphany of his mother.

²⁰ [Mus. Naz. Etrusco Di Villa Giulia 121110](#); Beazley Vase Number 13363.

The third and last version of the “Removal” to consider appears on another monumental cup, now in Paris.²¹ Here too, we have Briseis being led away in the presence of a herald. Again, we have the iconographical language for the capture of a woman: a man grips her firmly by her right wrist, pulling her behind him. In a gesture that connotes modesty, fear, or her status as a bride, Briseis holds her veil in front of her face. But this time, the man with the tight grip on her wrist is clearly labeled not as a herald, but as Agamemnon. If we were illustrating the *Iliad*, we would see two heralds retrieving her while Agamemnon waits back at his own camp. Does the painter know a non-*Iliadic* version of this scene? Or could the painting represent a hypothetical narrative based on the threat made by Agamemnon when he orders the herald to fetch Briseis:

Go to the hut of Achilles, son of Peleus;
Bring back the girl, fair-checked Briseis.
If he won't give her up, I'll come myself
With my men and take her—and freeze his heart cold. (335-
338)

ἔρχεσθον κλισίην Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος·
χειρὸς ἐλόντ' ἀγέμεν Βρισηΐδα καλλιπάρηον·
εἰ δέ κε μὴ δώησιν ἐγὼ δέ κεν αὐτὸς ἔλωμαι
ἐλθῶν σὺν πλεόνεσσι· τό οἱ καὶ ῥίγιον ἔσται. (1. 322-325)

In this case, we would have a painting that fits not the description of a particular scene in the *Iliad*, but a painting of an alternative: Agamemnon will come get her himself if Achilles does not release her to the heralds. Perhaps we should recognize a performance tradition in which it is Agamemnon and not the heralds who take her away.²² These diverse depictions may be evidence for a multiformity that persisted into the 5th century (untouched, perhaps, by Athenian transcripts of the *Iliad*). But I think that it is equally likely that Briseis has come to life among the post-Homeric story-tellers (including the vase-painters in their role as visual story-tellers), and because they now approach her story as though she were real, the details become contested. The painters deliver

²¹ [Louvre G 146](#); Beazley Vase Number 204682. For thorough discussion and bibliography, see Lowenstam 1997: 39-45.

²² See Dué (2002: 28-32) for discussion of scholarship and a list of five passages in which other characters seem to assert that Agamemnon took her himself.

competitive answers to the questions: Who removed Briseis, who handed her over, and how did Achilles react at that moment?

Although he is not named, Odysseus may be present in some of these paintings. This possibility becomes especially interesting when we bring one more image into consideration. This is the tondo of a cup by the Brygos Painter in the British Museum.²³ Here too, we have a trace of Odyssean iconography: the petasos, or brimmed hat. The wearer of the hat is a man who has a veiled woman in tow, his hand grasped tightly around her wrist. The author of the online catalog of the British Museum's collection suggests that this may be a depiction of Briseis being led off by Odysseus, and identification made more attractive by the fact that another theme from the Trojan War appears on the outside of the cup: the vote over the arms of Achilles.²⁴ If the tondo does indeed depict Odysseus with Briseis, any connection with our *Iliad* must be much looser than the connections I see in all of the other images I discuss here.

3. A Trace of a Lost Narrative

A third type of representation of Briseis has survived on two early 5th-century kylikes (cups) by the same painter; one in Tarquinia, the other in Paris.²⁵ The painter is now known as "the Brygos painter," because—while he does not sign his own work—his painting style can be recognized on several (but not all) pots that were signed by the potter or other artisans in the potter's shop: "Brygos made this." On both vases, the paintings are on the tondo the hypothetical drinkers would see as they peer at the bottom of the empty cup. ("Hypothetical" because the cups, being over a foot in diameter, cannot have been produced as actual drinkware.) The outsides of these cups are decorated with violent Trojan War scenes that have no close connections with the *Iliad*, but inside we have a tranquil scene: a young woman with a wine jug faces an old man who holds out a phiale. A shield and sword hanging on the wall suggest that we are to imagine this as a scene in a warrior's home or hut, and in

²³ [British Museum Vase E69, by the Brygos Painter](#); Beazley Vase Number 203901.

²⁴ <[British Museum Collection Database](#)>, <"1843,1103.11">, www.britishmuseum.org/collection, British Museum, <Last modified 02 October 2010>. Online. <Accessed 09/10/2010>.

²⁵ In Tarquinia: [Museo Nazionale Tarquiniese RC 6846](#); [Beazley Vase Number 203903](#). In Paris: [Louvre 152](#); Beazley Archive Vase Number: 203900.

one of the paintings, an architectural column suggests a degree of elegance or substance. In one of the cups, the woman is clearly identified in Greek as “Briseis,” and the man as “Phoenix.” Despite minor differences, the paintings are close in appearance.

If we read this representation of Briseis with Phoenix as an imagined scene that expanded only slightly upon the *Iliad* as we know it, it has no definite place in the forty days of the Wrath of Achilles. And yet it does not contradict the narrative of our *Iliad*, and encompassing it would not require too great an expansion. In the ninth book of the *Iliad*, Phoenix is one of three Greeks (along with Ajax and Odysseus) sent by Agamemnon to Achilles. As Phoenix relates in his speech to Achilles, he had been sent to Troy by Achilles’ father Peleus, to teach Achilles to be “a speaker of words and a doer of deeds.” Are we to imagine both Phoenix and Briseis living with Achilles after Phoenix arrives in book 9, followed by Briseis in book 19?

What is clear is that the Brygos painter associates Briseis with Achilles’ wise counselor Phoenix. A conversation between Phoenix and Briseis is not an obvious development of any particular scene in the *Iliad*, and an *Iliadic* multiform that presents the two together in Achilles’ tent would not require a lengthy departure from the text as we know it. It may be more likely that the paintings respond to an extra-Homeric tradition, and some viewers will see this as a representation of some other, pre-*Iliadic* story about Briseis rather than a scene that takes the *Iliad* as its springboard. But my impression is that a story that featured Briseis and Phoenix together is least likely to belong to an early, pre-*Iliadic* oral tradition because—as many readers have surmised—in our *Iliad* Phoenix looks like a textual interloper (or, an intrusion into a pre-existing “transcript”) who did not have a role in pre-*Iliadic* tellings of the tale. The fact that the ambassadors are described at moments not with plural verbs, but with duals, has suggests that Odysseus and Ajax are treated grammatically as a pair in the traditional language of *Iliad* 9; and that Phoenix is a late addition.²⁶

In Ovid’s *Heroides*, Briseis identifies with the ambassadors and aligns herself closely with Phoenix, even telling the story of Meleager, the very story Phoenix tells to Achilles in the *Iliad*. That detail suggests

²⁶ For summaries of various explanations of the dual forms, see Griffin 1995: 51-53. See also Janko 1998. Nagy (2003: 49-71) reads the alternation between duals and plurals as coherent aspects of the poet’s description of the interactions between the three ambassadors and presents an eloquent argument against the idea that Phoenix is a new arrival in the tradition.

that the paintings have to do with a tradition that Ovid knows well, but for us the links are obscure. At least a generation after Brygos made this kylix in the first half of the fifth century, Sophocles wrote a *Phoenix*, as did Euripides. Given Ovid's frequent intertextual engagements with Greek tragedy, it would be reasonable to posit a connection with either or both of those plays. If that is the case, it would also be reasonable to posit that the Brygos Painter had in mind an extrapolation from Homer that survived long enough for the tragedians to pick it up again. But all we can know for certain is that this imagining of Briseis' story takes place beyond the confines of the traditional story of the *Iliad* as we know it. The quiet scene between Phoenix and Briseis in a warrior's tent may belong to some other, now lost narrative. But that narrative is consistent with the *Iliad*'s integration of Phoenix into the embassy scene.

Conclusion: Briseis among the Vase-Painters

This third type of representation of Briseis as we know it from the hand of the Brygos Painter may lend the weakest support to my claim that late 6th- and early 5th-century vase-paintings are responses to the *Iliad*. But another possibility emerges if we divide the types of scenes into two groups instead of three. The scenes of Briseis' removal from Achilles' tent are tightly connected to particular narratives: "this is how it happened," "this is who took Briseis." The Achilles/ Briseis and Phoenix/ Briseis scenes belong to a different category, one that is not tied to particular moments in a story. The static images that present only the two figures (whether Briseis appears with Achilles or with Phoenix) also make strong assertions. The name vase of the Achilles Painter interprets Briseis as Achilles' rightful partner, and the Brygos Painter's depiction of Phoenix with Briseis arises from a similar impulse. An image in which she is paired with Phoenix likewise elevates her stature from captive woman to that of intimate family member. Phoenix had come to Troy as Achilles' surrogate father, and pairing Briseis with Phoenix puts her not just in Achilles' tent, but in his home. Like the paintings that balance the image of Achilles on one side of the vase with the image of Briseis on the other, the scene takes place beyond the confines of any particular narrative. Its very detachment from a narrative draws attention to the significance of Briseis. Ajax might protest that Achilles is perverse to value Briseis more highly than seven women put together (9. 637-638), but Phoenix is in accord with Achilles.

The vases are evidence of painterly traditions that involved serious engagement with the *Iliad* (or something like our *Iliad*) and with the story of Achilles and Briseis. Although Friis Johansen (1967) overstated the case when he asserted that “[w]hen we meet [Briseis] in art, the source is undoubtedly Homer,” I am in general agreement—provided that our conception of “Homer” acknowledges the multiformity of the *Iliad*—and, further, provided that we take the images not as illustrations of a text, but as responses to and interpretations of the *Iliad* as it was known to its ancient recipients. The painters’ interpretations are likely to have circulated also in song and other media, but I take the painters as valid participants who may have been as adept at expansion and compression as any bard. There is no scholarly consensus about the ancient value of Greek vases. For some, the pots are merely cheap grave goods manufactured in bulk for the export market, but their status as grave goods or their position in the Etruscan market would not diminish the significance of the paintings. The monumentality of the vases reinforces the impression that we are not to take the images as mere decoration. High art or low, they provide glimpses of Athenian responses to Homeric stories. Briseis lived on in potters’ quarter, where the diversity of images attested to disagreements about the particulars of her removal from Achilles’ tent, and where she appeared in the company of Achilles’ wise counselor, or with Achilles himself, as his permanent companion.

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