

Just a pale shadow? The characterization of Briseis in Homer's *Iliad*

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ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Received: May 8, 2020 • Accepted: November 1, 2021

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at analysing the character of Briseis, Achilles' slave in the *Iliad*, through the lenses of narratology, in order to highlight her importance in the poem. Far from being a pale shadow, Briseis has a privileged position among captive women in the Greek camp not only because she is the cause of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, but also because she is endowed with the privilege of direct speech; at the same time, she is also linked to important women on the Trojan side, like Helen and Andromache. Through scattered bits of information about her past, through epithets and periphrases, Homer creates an *in fieri* portrait of the character which culminates in the lament Briseis performs on the corpse of Patroclus in *Il.* XIX 282–302: in remarkable lines containing her first and unique speech in the *Iliad*, Briseis mourns for the death of her beloved friend, while lamenting her unlucky fate. As this paper will hopefully make clear, a refined and accurate characterization provides Briseis with a rich profile, which challenges the possibility of labelling her as a minor Iliadic character.

KEYWORDS

Briseis, *Iliad*, characterization, narratology, gender studies

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The character of Briseis, Achilles' concubine in the *Iliad*, has often been overlooked and considered a shadow with no defined personality.¹ In quantitative terms, her limited presence in the poem cannot be denied, since she appears in less than one hundred hexameters; from a qualitative perspective, however, not only does Briseis play a fundamental role within the Iliadic plot, but she also receives a quite detailed characterization, adequate to her relevance in the poem.

By adopting a narratological approach, my paper aims at investigating the character and narrative function of Briseis in the *Iliad*: in the first part, I will focus on the characterization of Briseis from both narratorial and actorial points of view, while, in the second part, I will deal with Briseis' self-presentation during the γόος she performs on the dead body of Patroclus in XIX 287–300. A recollection of numerous yet scattered tiles will allow a reconstruction of Briseis' detailed and rich profile within the *Iliad*.

According to the Homeric art of characterization, epic characters can be divided into five groups:²

1. *Main characters*: they rarely receive an explicit characterization;
2. *Minor characters*: they are either not characterized at all or provided with short introductions, like Euryclea (narratorial characterization in *Od.* I 429–433) and Eumaeus (actorial characterization in *Od.* XV 403–448);
3. *Groups of anonymous characters*: soldiers in the *Iliad*; the suitors in the *Odyssey*;
4. *Silent characters*: Chryseis or Asytanax in the *Iliad*;
5. *Character doublets*: two characters of the same type instead of one, like Euryclea and Eurynome (good servants doublet); Melantho and Melantheus (bad servants doublet).

On closer inspection, Briseis challenges the classification above, because she does not fit into any category: her profile is obviously paler than that of the protagonists of the *Iliad*, but, at the same time, she cannot be mentioned among minor characters, since she is the ἀρχή κακῶν of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, and, leaving her aside, the Iliadic plot would not exist;³ besides, she stands out from the group of anonymous female slaves in the Greek camp, and her profile is far more complex than that of Chryseis, an evanescent silent figure who is cited only in the first book of the poem, often referred to with deictics, but never granted the privilege of direct speech.⁴ Also Irene De Jong's attempt to define Briseis a "semi-silent" character is somehow unsatisfactory.⁵

¹Many labels have been used for Briseis, who has been defined as "a shadow, a figment of the poet" (MURRAY, G.: *The Rise of Greek Epic*. Oxford 1907, 181), and "a pale figure created by poetry" (JOHANSEN, F.: *The Iliad in Early Greek Art*. Copenhagen 1967, 153), to contrast her to Helen's and others' royal family history in mythology.

²DE JONG, I. J. F.: Homer. In DE TEMMERMAN, K. – VAN EMDE BOAS, E.: *Characterization in Ancient Greek Literature. Studies in Ancient Greek Narrative*. Vol. IV. Leiden 2017, 28–30.

³As Felson and Slatkin notice: "The catastrophic conflict that initiates and propels the *Iliad*'s narrative until the point at which Patroclus dies is not the Trojan War but the strife between two allies, Agamemnon and Achilles, both of whom lay claim – on different grounds – to the same woman, Briseis." (FELSON, N. – SLATKIN, L. M.: *Gender in Homeric Epic*. In FOWLER, R.: *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*. Cambridge 2004, 91–115.

⁴Chryseis is mentioned in I 20 (παῖδα ... φίλην), 95 (θύγατρα), 98 (ἐλκώπιδα κούρην), 443 (παῖδα).

⁵DE JONG, I. J. F.: Silent characters in the *Iliad*. In BREMER, J. M. – DE JONG, I. J. F. – KALFF, J.: *Homer: Beyond Oral Poetry*. Amsterdam 1987, 113.



Starting from these premises, in the present paper I will try to move a step forward by arguing that the difficulty in classifying the character of Briseis derives from the importance Homer gives to her *persona*, despite her limited presence in the *Iliad*: by exceeding the boundaries of her social position as slave, Briseis stands out from the group of female Greek captives not only because she speaks in the first person, but also because she gives voice to female values, emotions and feelings in the same way as major royal characters like Helen and Andromache do.

In the *Iliad*, Briseis repeatedly appears – both directly and indirectly, evoked in the speeches of other characters – in the books that specifically deal with the theme of Achilles' anger (particularly in *Iliad* I, IX, XIX): this comes as no surprise, since Agamemnon's abduction of Briseis is the actual cause of Achilles' *μῆνις οὐλομένη*, which results in his withdrawal from the battlefield. Moreover, Briseis is physically present both in the first and in the last book of the poem and, in her function of keeping company to Achilles, she contributes to the ring-structure of the *Iliad*.⁶

In her first mention in the poem, immediately presented as *καλλιπάρηος*, Briseis is cited in Agamemnon's speech to Achilles, when the leader of the Greeks threatens his addressee to take away his slave in order to compensate the loss of Chryseis, whom Apollo wants to be returned to her father: Agamemnon identifies Briseis with Achilles' gift of honour (I 185: *τὸ σὸν γέρας*), thus echoing Achilles' earlier words at I 167, where he had spoken of his *γέρας* as *ὀλίγον τε φίλον τε*, probably alluding to his affection towards Briseis. Shortly after, Nestor tries to persuade Agamemnon not to take away *τόνδ'...* *κούρην* (I 275) from Achilles: in his words, Briseis is presented as a *κούρη*, a *status* to which she will often be linked throughout the poem,⁷ as well as with a deictic, which may hint at her physical presence in the Greek assembly. Within a few lines, Achilles too speaks of Briseis as *κούρη*, claiming that he will not fight with Agamemnon for a girl: that said, he leaves the assembly.

Meanwhile, the messengers Talthylbius and Eurybatus are commanded to go and take *Βρισηΐς καλλιπάρηος* from Achilles' tent (I 322–323): with a change of scene, the narratees now follow them in their journey towards Achilles' quarter. Remarkably, Talthylbius and Eurybatus are said to be going against their will (I 327: *τῷ δ' ἄέκοντε βάτην*): the adjective *ἄέκοντε*, in particular, works here as a seed, which foreshadows Briseis' constrained departure within a few lines (I 348).

As soon as Achilles sees the messengers, he immediately orders Patroclus to summon Briseis (I 337–338).⁸ We witness here Briseis' first appearance in person, an appearance which is relevant from several perspectives: first of all, because it marks the very first entrance of a female character in the *Iliad*;⁹ secondly, in theatrical terms, because it consists of an exit, since Briseis is removed from Achilles' tent (I 346: *ἐκ δ' ἄγαγε κλισίης Βρισηΐδα καλλιπάρηον*¹⁰); thirdly,

⁶On long-distance correspondences and parallelisms in the *Iliad*, see DI BENEDETTO, V.: *Nel laboratorio di Omero*. Torino 1994, 177–238.

⁷See I 275, 298, 336, 392; II 377, 689; IX 106, 132, 274, 637; XIX 246, 261.

⁸Patroclus is directly named here for the first time in the *Iliad* (KIRK, G. S.: *The Iliad. A Commentary*. Vol. I. Cambridge 1985, 86).

⁹KARANIK, A.: *Voices at Work: Women, Performance, and Labor in Ancient Greece*. Baltimore 2014, 24.

¹⁰Ancient scholars considered the epithet particularly convenient, as a proof of Achilles' love towards Briseis (*Schol. bT. ad. Il. I 346*, Vol. I, 103 Erbse: *εὐκαιρον τὸ ἐπίθετον, τὴν τοῦ ἐρώντος διάθεσιν ἐμφαίνειν τῷ δηλοῦν οἷας ἐράται*).



because she is said to follow the heralds ἀέκονσ' (α), i.e. unwillingly,¹¹ with an expression which, as ancient scholars already noted, betrays Briseis' feelings towards Achilles;¹² finally, because both in her departure from Achilles' quarter and in her return there in XIX 277–282, Briseis is associated with Patroclus.¹³

After Briseis' abduction from his tent, Achilles sits by the sea and weeps in distress (I 349–350: cf. *Od.* V 82–84). Not even Thetis' promise to beseech Zeus to avenge his outrage is sufficient to soothe his pain: in his last appearance in the book I (429–430), Achilles is still depicted in anger (χωόμενος κατὰ θυμόν) because of the removal of his εὔζωνος γυνή, an event which happened against his will (βίη ἀέκοντος). The latter expression contains another occurrence of the adjective ἀέκων, which was earlier used for both the messengers (I 327) and Briseis (I 348), thus tightly linking the feelings of the characters. In my view, such a representation of Achilles supports the interpretation of his tears as tears of love.¹⁴

After a swift yet crucial personal appearance in *Iliad* I, Briseis is offstage until *Iliad* XIX, when she will finally return to Achilles tent and take the floor to give voice to her emotions. In the meantime, she is often evoked by other characters, thus becoming “object” – rather than subject – “of focalization”.¹⁵

In *Iliad* II, further tiles for the characterization of Briseis can be collected: within the *Catalogue of Ships*, after citing the Myrmidons (II 681–687), the narrator turns to their leader Achilles and mentions his χόλος, which he links to Briseis' abduction (II 688–689). Next to praising Briseis for her beauty through the use of the epithet ἡῦκμος (II 689), Homer provides the narratees with the background for her capture, by resorting to a four line external completing analepsis (II 690–693): he describes the sack of Lyrnessus and the killing of Mynes and Epistrophus, sons of Evenor, the local king, two events which will be later mentioned by

¹¹A visual representation of this Iliadic passage in a papyrus is object of analysis in FRANGINI, G. – MARTINELLI, M. C.: Una scena della storia di Briseide: il papiro Monacense 128 e la tradizione iconografica. *Prospettiva* 25 (1981) 4–13.

¹²Schol. bT. ad. Il. I. 346, Vol. I, 103 Erbse: εὐκαιρον τὸ ἐπιθετον, τὴν τοῦ ἐρῶντος διάθεσιν ἐμφαίνον τῷ δηλοῦν οἶας ἐρᾷται.

¹³The two characters are “second selves of each-other” (FANTUZZI, M.: *Achilles in Love. Intertextual Studies*. Oxford – New York 2012, 198) not only as far as their affection towards Achilles is concerned, but also in their consolatory role for the hero. This scene is the only occasion in which Briseis and Patroclus are together (NAPPI, M.: Briseis et la plainte funèbre de l'épouse dans l'épopée homérique. *Cahiers 'Mondes anciens'* (revue électronique du centre AnHiMa) n° 3 (2012).

¹⁴As FANTUZZI (n. 13) 102–109 argues, the interpretation of Achilles' tears in I 350–351 – an issue tightly linked to both his characterization in the poem and his relationship with Briseis – has puzzled scholars since antiquity. If Achilles' tears are an emotional response to distress and anger (linked to rage, according to FÖLLINGER T.: *Tears and Crying in Archaic Greek Poetry* (especially Homer), in FÖGEN, T.: *Tears in the Graeco-Roman World*. Berlin – New York 2009, 21; see also MONSACRÉ, H.: *Les larmes d'Achille: le héros, la femme et la souffrance dans la poésie d'Homère*. Paris 1984, 173), then Briseis is nothing more than the human counterpart of Achilles' γέρας, and the hero cries because he is angry for his condition of ἀτιμία. This reading may be supported by Achilles' reference to τιμή (I 353), ἀτιμία (I 356), and γέρας (I 356) in his speech to Thetis in I 353–356; PULLEYN, S.: *Iliad. Book One*. Oxford 2000, 214, maintains that “Achilles' weeps is probably nothing to do with love for Briseis. He does not mention her once in his prayer; it is the loss of τιμή that is at the front of his mind.” Conversely, if Achilles weeps because of Briseis' loss, as I maintain, then the slave occupies an important place in Achilles' heart: FANTUZZI (n. 13.) 103. A group of *scholia* from antiquity argued for this interpretation, too: cf. Schol. bT. ad. Il. I. 349: καὶ φιλότιμος ὦν ἀνιάται τῇ ὕβρει παλαιᾶς τε συνθηθείας στέρεται, ἴσως δὲ καὶ τὸ γύναιον ἀκονσίως ἀπαλλαττόμενον ἐλεεῖ. ἀκρῶς δὲ ἐρῶντα χαρακτηρίζει· οὗτοι γὰρ ταῖς ἐρημίαις ἥδονται, ἢ οὕτω τῷ πάθει σχολάζουσιν.

¹⁵DE JONG: *Silent characters* (n. 5) 111.



Briseis herself in XIX 291–296. Unlike the narrator, however, she will only cite Mynes by personal name (XIX 296: *πόλιν θείου Μύνητος*), whereas she will use generic names for her father (XIX 291: *πατήρ*) and brothers (XIX. 293: *τρεις ... κασιγνήτους*).

Further occurrences of Briseis in character-text can be found in *Iliad* IX, where she is mentioned several times. The first reference to this character occurs in the catalogue of gifts Agamemnon promises to endow Achilles with, if he ceases his anger (IX 121–135):¹⁶ here Briseis is placed in a key-position, at the *climax* of the catalogue, after seven Lesbian women of splendid beauty (IX 128–130: *ἑπτὰ γυναικάς ἀμύμονα ἔργα ἰδνίας / Λεσβίδας (...) / αἱ κάλλει ἐνίκων φύλα γυναικῶν*).

Briseis is then cited in Achilles' long speech, when he answers Odysseus' report about Agamemnon's offer (IX 308–429): resolute not to give up his *μήνις*, Achilles supports his decision with several arguments. Like earlier in I 162, 165–166, 168, here, too, Achilles laments the fact that others, *i.e.* Agamemnon, profit from his great efforts in battle, and evokes the injustice he suffered because of the abduction of Briseis (IX 335–337), who is here presented as *ἄλοχος θυμαρής* (IX 334):¹⁷ through such periphrasis, the hero raises Briseis to the rank of wife, both to increase Agamemnon's outrage,¹⁸ and to explicitly state the parallelism, so far implicit, between Briseis and Helen as *ἀρχὴ κακῶν* of a male quarrel.¹⁹ With a series of rhetorical questions (IX 337–343), Achilles then calls upon Helen as the cause of the Trojan war and claims that not only the Atreids but every man of common sense (IX 341: *ἀνὴρ ἀγαθὸς καὶ ἐχέφρων*) loves his own wife in the same way as he himself deeply loves Briseis, notwithstanding her *status* of slave (IX 343: *ἐκ θυμοῦ φίλεον δουρικτητὴν περ εὔσαν*):²⁰ now that Agamemnon has grabbed his *γέρας* away, Achilles will not easily give up his *χόλος* (IX 344–345). Thus, by presenting Briseis as a “second Helen”,²¹ he puts himself in a position which Agamemnon could never condemn, given that the Trojan war has been fought to revenge Helen's *ἀρπαγὴ*.²²

As far as the characterization of Briseis is concerned, in IX 343 she is explicitly said to be a slave while, so far, her *status* had been implicit: also in XVI 57, speaking to Patroclus, Achilles will recall the conquest of Briseis with his own spear (*δουρὶ δ' ἐμῷ κτεάτισσα*), *via* an external analepsis echoing *δουρικτητὴν* at IX 343. Together with the depiction of Briseis as *ἄλοχος θυμαρής* (IX 334), the expression *ἐκ θυμοῦ φίλεον* in IX 343 is also relevant, since it occurs in character-text elsewhere only in IX 486, where Phoenix uses it to describe his affection towards

¹⁶The same catalogue is repeated in Odysseus' speech to Achilles in XI 260–277.

¹⁷In *Od.* XXIII 232, the narrator uses the same formula to refer to the wife *par excellence*, Penelope, while she is crying in Odysseus' arms, after his recognition. Interestingly, in IX 387 Achilles defines Agamemnon's outrage as *θυμαλγής λώβη*, using an adjective, which, based on the root *θυμ-*, echoes the present *θυμαρής*.

¹⁸*Schol. bT. ad. Il.* IX 336b, Vol. II, 468 Erbse: *ἡῤῥησε τὴν ὕβριν <ἄλοχον> αὐτὴν εἰπὼν καὶ <θυμαρέα>*.

¹⁹The reasons behind Achilles' choice to explicitly mention Helen were already clear to ancient scholars: cf. *schol. bT. ad. Il.* IX. 339, Vol. II, 469 Erbse (*ἀνζητικῶς τῇ Διὸς εἵκασε τὴν Βρισηίδα*). On Briseis and Helen see also RECKFORD, K. J.: Helen in the *Iliad*. *GRBS* 5 (1964) 10–11; FELSON-SLATKIN: Gender in Homeric Epic (n. 3) 95–96; FOLEY, H. P.: Women in Ancient Epic. In FOLEY, J. M.: *A Companion to Ancient Epic*. Oxford 2005, 110.

²⁰On the expressions used in Homeric epic to define slaves, see WILSON, E.: Slaves and Sex in the Odyssey. In KAMEN, D. – MARSHALL, C. W.: *Slavery and Sexuality in Classical Antiquity*. Wisconsin 2011, 16–18.

²¹SUZUKI, M.: *Metamorphoses of Helen: Authority, Difference, and the Epic*. Ithaca 1989.

²²*Schol. ad. Il.* IX 337–339, Vol. II, 468–469 Erbse; HAINSWORTH, B.: *The Iliad. A Commentary*. Vol. III. Cambridge 1993, 107.



young Achilles (ἐκ θυμοῦ φιλέων). This latter occurrence confirms the meaning of authentic declaration of fondness of Achilles' statement, which aligns with his earlier tears for Briseis in I 349–350 in betraying his sincere affection towards her.

Therefore, it can be argued that, at least until Patroclus' death, Briseis is the *focus* of Achilles' attention and affection: only the deep sorrow caused by the killing of his beloved friend will overshadow his feelings for Briseis, leading him to wish she had died during the sack of Lyrnessus, as he will state in XIX 59–60.²³ Even on that occasion, however, after wishing for the death of Briseis – which would have spared much sufferance – the hero will claim that the Greeks will remember his ἔρις with Agamemnon for a long time (XIX 63–64: αὐτὰρ Ἀχαιοὺς / δηρὸν ἐμῆς καὶ σῆς ἔριδος μνήσεσθαι ὄϊω): in an instance of metalepsis,²⁴ Homer puts into Achilles' mouth an implicit yet strong assertion of the immortalizing power of poetry to guarantee remembrance. Thus, Achilles counterbalances his earlier malediction of Briseis by presenting her simultaneously as the cause of and tool for memory.

So far, we have highlighted the characterization of Briseis in both narratorial and actorial passages; in the following part of the paper, I will focus on Briseis' own presentation in her first and unique speech within the *Iliad* (XIX 282–300).

At the end of the assembly that ratifies Achilles' reconciliation with Agamemnon in XIX, Briseis returns to her master's tent: after her removal in I 348, she is now back on stage. In an instance of narrative retardation,²⁵ Briseis now takes the floor for the first time to utter a γόος on the corpse of Patroclus: thus, she gives voice to her feelings and tells her point of view on the story which has so far been told only from other points of view. The narrator honours Briseis' entrance not only by placing her personal name at the beginning of the hexameter (which represents the only case within the *Iliad*), but also by comparing her to golden Aphrodite with the formula *ικέλη χρυσῇ Ἀφροδίτῃ* (XIX 282), which, in its rare occurrences in ancient Greek epic, is always used for noble women, either princesses like Cassandra (XXIV 699)²⁶ and Tyro (Hes. fr. 30. 25 M-W.), or queens like Penelope (*Od.* XVII 37; *Od.* XIX 54).²⁷ Briseis' beauty is further stressed in XIX 285, through the mention of her ἀπαλή δειρή and καλὰ πρόσωπα – two elements which are linked to καλλιπάρηος, an epithet used 14 times in the *Iliad*, 5 times

²³CORAY, M.: *Homer's Iliad. Book XIX*. Berlin–Boston 2016, 39. According to FELSON–SLATKIN (n. 3) 102: "His repudiation of her is equally and at the same time a repudiation of that quarrel, and marks his relinquishing of the wrath that created the poem's primary subject."

²⁴On metalepsis in ancient Greek literature, see DE JONG, I. J. F.: *Metalepsis in Ancient Greek Literature*. In GRETHLEIN, J. – RENGAKOS, A.: *Narratology and Interpretation. The Content of Narrative Form in Ancient Literature*. Berlin – New York 2009, 87–115.

²⁵DE JONG, I. J. F.: *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*. Cambridge 2001, xvi–xvii.

²⁶The formula preludes to both Briseis' and Cassandra's unique speech in the *Iliad*: DE JONG: *Silent characters* (n. 5) 120 n. 15.

²⁷DUE, C.: *Homeric Variations on a Lament by Briseis*. Maryland 2002, 74, argues that Briseis is compared to Aphrodite because in the passage she performs the function of a wife: analogously in the *Odyssey*, Penelope, "the quintessential epic wife", is twice compared to Aphrodite. On praising female beauty through the comparison to Aphrodite, see KANELLOU, M.: *Ερμύονην, ἡ εἶδος ἔχε χρυσῆς Ἀφροδίτης* (*Od.* IV 14). Praising a Female through Aphrodite. From Homer into Hellenistic Epigram. In EFSTATHIOU, A. – KARAMANOU, I.: *Homeric Receptions Across Generic and Cultural Contexts*. Berlin–Boston 2016, 189–204.



precisely for Briseis – and in the expression γυνή ἐίκυῖα θεῇσι in XIX 286.²⁸ Both Briseis’ likeness to Aphrodite (XIX 282) and her comparison with goddesses (XIX 286) are hints of the process of ennoblement the character undergoes throughout the sequence, which shines through both her behaviour and words, and by means of the importance she is attributed at this point of the plot.²⁹

In *Iliad* XIX the characterization of Briseis reaches its ἀκμή, since she is endowed with the privilege of direct speech, a narratological feature which makes her the only speaking female character within the Greek camp:³⁰ standing out from the anonymous silent slaves, she thus becomes “the mouthpiece of a whole group of characters”.³¹

In the opening lines of her speech,³² Briseis addresses Patroclus as her dearest friend and recalls both her departure and her return to the Greek camp (XIX 288: ἐγὼ κλισίηθεν ἰοῦσα; XIX 290: ἄψ ἀνιοῦσα) in order to highlight the shift in his condition, from life (XIX 288: ζῶδον μὲν σε) to death (XIX 289: νῦν δέ σε τεθνηῶτα). Patroclus’ change of destiny is counterbalanced by the stability of Briseis’ own fate, which consists of permanent pain: as she explicitly states, her life has been nothing but a chain of sufferance (XIX 290: ὥς μοι δέχεται κακὸν ἐκ κακοῦ αἰεὶ).³³ Such a claim triggers two external completing analepses, in which the slave gives voice to her memories and feelings: in the first one (XIX 291–294), Briseis recalls the killing of her husband and of her three brothers, while in the second (XIX 295–299), she depicts Patroclus’ tender attempt to console her after such losses.

With regard to its content, Briseis’ γόος allows the narratees to fill some gaps with regard to her characterization: first of all, they now come to know that, before being taken to Troy, she was married and witnessed not only her the death of her brothers and the killing of her husband at

²⁸The appropriateness of the comparison between the slave Briseis and goddess Aphrodite is at the centre of debate in Lucian’s *Pro Imaginibus* (§§ 24–28). Within the Iliadic text, a reference to Briseis’ outstanding beauty earlier occurred in Achilles’ speech to Patroclus in XVI 85, where she was called περικαλλής κόρη. In her analysis of Briseis’ lament on Patroclus’ corpse, DUE (n. 27) 6, recalls Achilles’ prediction of the destiny of the Trojan women in XVIII 121–125, whom he described while wiping their tears from their cheeks and lamenting the death of their dears caused by his return to battle. As Due points out: “The substitution of Briseis for the lamenting widow of Achilles’ prediction just one book later is full of irony.” An image identical to that of Briseis in XIX 284 can be found in *Od.* VIII 527, where Odysseus’ tears at hearing Demodocus’ song is compared to the despair of a woman after the death of her husband and the fall of her city (ἀμφ’ αὐτῷ χυμένη λίγα κωκύει).

²⁹Ancient scholars were the first to shed light on the importance of the character of Briseis in the *Iliad*, as the terms they use to depict her prove: in the *scholia*, Briseis is said both to be a ἐνδοξον πρόσωπον (*Schol. bT. ad. Il.* XIX 282–302, Vol. IV, 627 Erbse), and to have a ὀλόκληρον (...) ἥθος (*Schol. bT. ad. Il.* I 348, Vol. I, 103 Erbse); moreover, she is also twice attributed the epithet φιλανδρός (*Schol. bT. ad. Il.* I 348, Vol. I, 103 Erbse; *Schol. bT. ad. Il.* XIX 282–302, Vol. IV, 627 Erbse), which, as FANTUZZI (n. 13) 116, notices, is elsewhere applied only to Andromache (cf. *Schol. bT. ad. Il.* VI 383, 394, 411, 433, Vol. II, Erbse): thus, Achilles’ concubine is likened to the wife *par excellence* in the *Iliad*.

³⁰Goddesses apart, all speaking women in the *Iliad* (Helen, Hecuba, Andromache, Cassandra, Andromache’s nurse) are related to the Trojans.

³¹DE JONG: Silent characters (n. 5) 113.

³²For a detailed analysis of Briseis’ lament on the corpse of Patroclus, see LOHMANN, D.: *Die Komposition der Reden in der Ilias*. Berlin 1970, 102–105; PETERSMANN, P.: Die Monologische Totenklage Der Ilias. *RhM* 116.1 (1973) 3–16; PUCCI, P.: Antiphonal Lament Between Achilles and Briseis. *ColbyQ* 29 (1993) 253–272; TSAGALIS, C.: *Epic Grief. Personal Laments in Homer’s Iliad*. Berlin – New York 2004, 139–143; NAPPI (n. 13); CORAY (n. 23) 131–139.

³³TSAGALIS (n. 32) 141: “Briseis’ γόος offers her personal look at the tragedy of her life, a life filled with loss”; CORAY (n. 23) 134.



the hands of Achilles, but also the sack of her hometown;³⁴ secondly, thanks to her quotation of Patroclus' reported speech (XIX 297–299), they learn that he had promised to make Briseis Achilles' *κουριδίη ἄλοχος*,³⁵ despite her *status* of slave, and to take her to Phthia.³⁶ After Patroclus' death, however, all Briseis' wishes have collapsed: the loss of a friend always sweet towards her (XIX 300: *μειλιχος αἰεῖ*),³⁷ as well as the memories triggered by such a trauma, cause Briseis' *ἄμωτον κλαίειν* (XIX. 300).³⁸

The *pathos* imbuing Briseis' lament reminds the narratees of Andromache's address to Hector in VI 413–428 and preludes to her *γόος* on his dead body in XXIV 723–745, thus making Briseis' story a miniature of Andromache's.³⁹ Briseis' speech also likens her to Helen, a character whom, until *Iliad* XIX, she resembles only with respect to her characterization of *ἀρχὴ κακῶν*. Briseis' lament, however, points out further similarities between the two characters.⁴⁰ First of all, Briseis and Helen share the *status* of *ἄλοχοι*: they were married before going to Troy, and are both presented as a hero's *κουριδίη ἄλοχος* (Briseis is Achilles' *κουριδίη ἄλοχος* in XIX 298; Helen is Menelaus' *κουριδίη ἄλοχος* in VII 392, and XIII 626); secondly, they both utter a *γόος* on the dead body of a hero closely related to them. This latter parallelism is worth exploring, because it confirms the importance Homer bestows on the character of Briseis.

Briseis and Helen respectively open and close the Iliadic section devoted to female laments (XIX–XXIV),⁴¹ in a pregnant *chiasmus*: while in XIX 287–300 Briseis, a slave related to the

³⁴Unlike in II 690–693, here the name of Briseis' hometown is omitted.

³⁵On the equation between slave and wife see WILSON, E.: Slaves and Sex (n. 20) 20.

³⁶The reference to Achilles' return to Phthia is also an instance of dramatic irony since, unlike Briseis, the narratees know that, after Patroclus' death, the hero has given up his intention to go back home and that he will face his destiny of death in Troy (cf. XIX 328–333, 420–423): according to CORAY (n. 23) 137, this statement underlines “the different levels of knowledge the two characters possess”, but she does not mention dramatic irony.

³⁷Patroclus is the only hero depicted with the adjective *μειλιχος* (here and in XVII 671: EDWARDS, M.: *The Iliad. A Commentary*. Vol. IV. Cambridge 1991, 270).

³⁸Interestingly, this is the only association of the adverb *ἄμωτον* with the act of crying in Greek literature.

³⁹DUE (n. 27) 67–81 compares Briseis and Andromache with respect to their role of wife. Briseis' *γόος* in *Iliad* XIX and Andromache's speech in *Iliad* VI, in particular, are worth comparing: both characters mention their brothers (Andromache has seven: VI 421–424; Briseis only three: XIX 293–294); both refer to their parents but, while Andromache focuses of their death (the killing of her father in VI 414–420; the death of her mother in VI 425–428), Briseis cites them while mentioning her marriage (XIX 291); as far as her mother is concerned, moreover, Briseis mentions her *en passant*, while acknowledging her kinship with her brothers (XIX 293). Moreover, even if they both present their family relationships, Andromache focuses on her *status* of daughter and sister, while Briseis concentrates on her *status* of wife and sister. As TSAGALIS (n. 32) 140–143, notices, the two women are also related by the affection they feel towards a male protector – respectively Hector for Andromache and Patroclus for Briseis – who has always taken care of them: cf. also NAPPI (n. 13).

⁴⁰Ancient scholars were the first to shed light on the connections between the two characters: *Schol. bT ad. Il.* XIX 282–302, Vol. IV, 627 Erbse, for instance, compares their beauty (*καὶ οἱ μὲν δημογέροντες περὶ Ἑλένης φασὶν “αἰνῶς ἀθανάτησι θεῆς”* (Γ 158), *ὁ δὲ ποιητὴς τῇ καλλιστενύσει τῶν θεῶν αὐτὴν εἰκάζει*); cf. also Eusth. *Il.* 1184. 25–32 [IV 329, 9–14 V.].

⁴¹DI BENEDETTO (n. 6) 288–297, highlights many correspondences between Patroclus' and Hector's funeral rites. On female laments, see EASTERLING, P. E.: Men's *κλέος* and Women's *γόος*: Female Voices in the *Iliad*. *Jour. Mod. Greek Stud* 9 (1991) 145–151.



Trojans, laments the death of the Greek Patroclus, in XXIV 761–776 Helen, a Greek woman, mourns the death of the Trojan hero Hector.⁴² Such an intentional long-distance correspondence explicitly attributes a key-function to the character of Briseis: the fact that, notwithstanding her *status* of slave, in her role of “weeping widow”,⁴³ she is associated with the main female characters of the royal Trojan family, *i.e.* Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen, prevent us from considering Briseis a minor character.

Briseis’ relevance within the *Iliad* is also confirmed by her last appearance in the poem: in XXIV 675–676, Homer represents *Βρισηΐς ... καλλιπάρηος* as she lays down with Achilles after his encounter with Priam.⁴⁴ The choice to associate the last mention of the hero with a reference to his concubine further supports the centrality of the character of Briseis in the narrative plot, thus definitely leading the narratees to interpret Briseis’ story as a *compendium* of the universal fate of women in the *Iliad*.⁴⁵

In conclusion, in this paper I have tried to underline the narrative strategies behind the characterization of Briseis from both narratorial and actorial points of view, in order to challenge the traditional depiction of Briseis as an evanescent Iliadic figure. As I hope to have made clear, in the *Iliad* Briseis is far from a pale shadow: next to playing a fundamental role with respect to Achilles’ *μῆνις οὐλομένη* – which makes her stand out from the group of anonymous silent Trojan female captives, with whom she shares the *status* of slave – she is also object of a refined characterization and, in her role of *ἄλοχος*, she resembles both Andromache and Helen. Briseis’ analogies with both the royal women of Troy and the Greek slaves, as well as the complexity of her profile, challenge the possibility of labelling her as a minor character, rather making her a crucial figure within the *Iliad*.

⁴²DE SANCTIS, D.: *Il canto e la tela. Le voci di Elena in Omero*. Pisa 2018, 178. Cf. also NAPPI (n. 13) 7: “Briséis et Hélène, toutes deux exilées en terre étrangère, marginalisées, exclues de la société, pleurent la mort du seul homme qui leur avait démontré une amabilité et une gentillesse désintéressées.”

⁴³DUE (n. 27) 67.

⁴⁴WRIGHT, I.: The Wife of Achilles. *Mnemosyne* 69 (2016) 117: “Lying together here in bed is the only time Achilles and Briseis are together and is the closest they come to their promised marriage. Briseis laments Patroklos’ death since he could no longer marry her to Achilles, and his absence emphasizes that they will not ever be married.” According to Wright, the choice to depict Achilles for the last time in the *Iliad* as he lies down with Briseis stresses the “tragic isolation” of the hero, rather than emphasizing his glory.

⁴⁵On the representation of female characters in the *Iliad*, see FARRON, S.: The Portrayal of Women in the *Iliad*. *AClass* 22 (1979) 15–32; FRANCO, C.: Women in Homer. In JAMES, S. H. – DILLON, S.: *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World*. Oxford 2012, 54–65.

