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Briseis Speaks: Akhilleus, Patroklos, and the Impossible Weddings of the *Iliad*

At *Iliad* 19.282-300, Briseis speaks; one who was, formerly, a *gêras*, a mute sign denominated, exchanged, and contested between men, becomes—in mourning—articulate. While Briseis' voice belies her status as sign (for voice reveals subjectivity; sign becomes value), her words trace an often violent history of exchange amongst men (from her father in Lurnessos to her first husband, from that husband to Akhilleus, from Akhilleus to Agamemnon, and now back) that culminates in her memory of Patroklos' promise that he would arrange for her a wedding to Akhilleus. A cruel history culminates in fantasy, but a fantasy that, I would argue, announces the exhaustion of the history that has preceded. For while Patroklos' promise to Briseis—much repeated (by the iteratives of 19.295 and 297), if only here announced—was motivated by compassion, compassion has, amongst the escalations of retributive violence upon the Trojan plain, increasingly little prospect of fulfillment. The wedding and its suasions exist only in aspiration—which the *Iliad* systematically negates. In her speech, Briseis speaks of marriages past, present, and future, each of which is mourned: she recalls her first husband, killed by Akhilleus (19.291-94), while her present ritual gestures (as well as her *gôos*) over the body of Patroklos are those of a mourning wife (and note the verbal association in death of Patroklos with her first husband [19.283 and 292]), even as her words recall the insistent promise of a future marriage—now, as always, impossible. Briseis' wedding is marked as fantasy; but, as such, it is, I argue, a synecdoche for every marriage depicted in the *Iliad*, each of which is variously unfulfilled, sundered, and mourned.

I argue that Briseis' fantasy of marriage to Akhilleus and the cognate impossibility of the wedding itself is indicative of the *Iliad*'s programmatic negation of the social bonds created by any exchange, whether of things (the realm of economy), of women (kinship), or of words (politics and poetry); as well, I will suggest that Briseis' speech provides a point of entry for renewed discussion of the *philôt's* of Akhilleus and Patroklos. For if the impossibility, the dramatized impermanence, of the wedding in the *Iliad* (whether Briseis' or Helen's or Andromakhe's) marks a failure of community, we must also see that the *Iliad* does not, then, simply look to the wedding's reconstitution as a resurrection of community (that is, the *Iliad* does not, implicitly or explicitly, valorize conjugality for the sake of the community). In Akhilleus' assertion (in his antiphonal response to Briseis) that the death of Patroklos is more grievous for him than the (imagined) deaths of his father or his son (19.321-27), he bespeaks a desire that transcends the languages and structures of kinship and conjugality—that is, a *philôt's* in the service of no communal end. The love of Akhilleus for Patroklos—as impossible of fulfillment in the *Iliad* as marriage itself—is, thus, a founding topos of the poem's tragic reflection upon the insufficiency of the social to the full range of consciousness and desire. But, if negation under the sign of *philôt's* is a part of the tragic work of the *Iliad*, we might also look to the *Iliad* for a more explicitly historical point: for by focusing upon the content of the *Iliad*'s negations, we might also recover a moment when the "solution" of the wedding (that is, the historical work of the *Odyssey*) was in no way apparent, "natural," or inevitable.