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# Rosetta

Léger, R. (2013) 'Review of E. Brown (2013) 'Doom and Sorrow: Achilles' Physical Expression of Mourning in the *Iliad*', *Rosetta* 13: 111-121'

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<http://www.rosetta.bham.ac.uk/issue14/leger.pdf>

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## **Review of E. Brown (2013) 'Doom and Sorrow: Achilles' Physical Expression of Mourning in the *Iliad*', Rosetta 13: 111-121.**

Ruth Léger

In this article Brown presents two sections relating to Achilles' expression of mourning in the *Iliad*. The first is the historical approach towards funerary ritual practices in Greece, the performance of grief and the concept of death-related pollution. The second is a close reading of Achilles' performance of grief after the death of his beloved friend Patroklos in the *Iliad*. With a close reading of the passages in the *Iliad* where Achilles' mourning is described, Brown tries to connect Achilles' grief over his friend with his own looming death to such an extent that the two are practically interchangeable.

Explaining the funerary ritual practices in ancient Greece as a tripartite whole, it seems straightforward enough to test Achilles' strong reaction to the news of Patroklos' death according to this example. The stages are the laying out of the body (prothesis), the conveyance to the place of interment and the deposition of the cremated or inhumed remains. As the most important part, not mentioned in the initial three stages, Brown mentions the ritual cleansing of the house and the body as part of the prothesis.<sup>1</sup>

Where in normal life these three or rather four stages of funerary rituals would be easily performed,<sup>2</sup> in times of war, the setting of the *Iliad*, one would expect a slightly different approach. Especially bearing in mind that Patroklos was not simply one of Achilles' Myrmidons, he was Achilles' close friend. In times of war, it was no longer the closest relatives who performed the rituals,<sup>3</sup> they could be far away (in other countries even). No, rather it was the men of the military group the warrior belonged to. No female relative would follow her man, son or father to the battlefield, just in case he died. Patroklos was 'lucky' enough to have his close friend so close, for which reason Achilles had to take care of the funerary rites following Patroklos' death.

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<sup>1</sup> Brown page 112.

<sup>2</sup> Brown page 111.

<sup>3</sup> Brown page 112-113.

Up to this point, the tasks that lay ahead of Achilles are clear. However, the comparison of the 'black cloud of grief' upon hearing the news to Achilles' own entrance to the world of the death seems a step too far, and if not too far, too fast. The examples to illustrate this, in fact illustrate the direct opposite of Brown's argument. The passages in the *Iliad* (8.124, 8.316, 17.83) and the *Odyssey* (24.315-317) reflect the grief that befalls family and friends when they hear of their relatives' death.

Another step too far is when Achilles eats for the first time as part of the funerary ritual. He eats because it is part of the funerary rituals, as described by Brown.<sup>4</sup> Consumption of a ritual meal was supposed to take place in order to send the deceased's spirit to the underworld. Brown suggests that Achilles consumes the food in the role of the deceased host of this funerary banquet, in my view, incorrectly. It was one of the traditional elements of a funeral and therefore it is, in my opinion, not happening because of the identification of Achilles with Patroklos. Brown goes too far in the alignment of Achilles with Patroklos. Everything which Achilles does for his friend or at his friend's funeral is part of the ritual, rather than part of this alignment. As part of his grief, Achilles might seem to want his own death to be imminent, but that is not necessarily an attempt to identify himself with his dead friend.

An interesting point, that was supposed to come through, was that Patroklos' death foreshadowed that of Achilles. It is true that his death starts a chain of actions and reactions that will eventually lead to Achilles' death, or rather the implication of his death. There are references to Achilles' 'brief span of life' (*Iliad* 1.352) and 'speedy death' (*Iliad* 1.505), but nothing is written about his death in the *Iliad*. It is known that Achilles' death is tied to Hektor's death, but it is all part of the twofold fates (*Iliad* 9.410-416) where it is up to Achilles to make a decision. In my opinion that has little or nothing to do with the fact that Achilles needs new armour.<sup>5</sup> Hektor has stolen his old set, because Patroklos was wearing it when he was killed.

In conclusion the article touches on a lot of interesting ways to explain Achilles' death-related pollution. His devotion is indeed, as Brown mentions, extraordinary

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<sup>4</sup> On page 117 Brown describes in addition to the procedure of death a set of traditional elements of funerary rituals: feasting, ritualised lament and the separation of the world of the living.

<sup>5</sup> See Brown page 116 and footnote 23.

and a dedicated manifestation of the grief Achilles feels for Patroklos. However, it is, in my opinion, nothing more than an outward expression of this grief. Patroklos' death and Achilles' pollution is an illustration of mourning that was common amongst the Greeks and not the performance of the death Achilles does not have in the *Iliad*.