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Suicide in Homer and the *Tale of the Heike*

Naoko Yamagata

Abstract

Comparison of suicides and suicidal wishes in Homer and the *Tale of the Heike* reveals significant similarities. In both worlds, shame, loyalty, and grief are the main causes of suicidal wishes. However, *Heike* characters are more prone to suicide, while Homeric characters never actually commit suicide. *Heike* suicides can be seen to derive from the desire to be with one's community and loved ones, enhanced by the Buddhist belief in an afterlife. Homeric characters display much stronger attachment to life, based on the belief that there is no existence or fame after death worth dying for.

Keywords

Homer, *Tale of the Heike*, suicide, shame culture, comparative literature

Introduction

A number of comparative studies since the mid-1970's have revealed some striking similarities between Homer and the *Tale of the Heike* ("*Heike*" hereafter), a thirteenth-century CE Japanese tale of warriors that is based on historical events in the second half of the twelfth century.¹ Both Homer and *Heike* depict the fall of a once mighty dynasty and the

¹ Kubo's pioneering comparative study on Homer and the *Tale of the Heike* first published in 1976 explored the possibility that they had similar modes of development of oral and written texts. Cf. Kubo 1992: 3–35. For the debate over the origin of the *Tale of the Heike* in light of the oral theory proposed for Homeric epic, see Tokita 2015: 60. Miyagawa explored

impermanence of human fortune which affects the victors as well as the vanquished. Homer and *Heike* also seem to share similar warrior ethics based on honor and shame that require warriors to fight valiantly without fearing death.

Such observations seem to be further enhanced by Dodds (1951: 17) who described the world of the *Iliad* as a “shame culture,” adopting the terminology that Benedict (1947) had used to describe Japanese society.² Given Homer’s profound influence on Western civilisation and *Heike*’s influence on Japanese culture as one of the most popular classics of Japan, they can be seen as suitable representatives in making comparisons between Greek and Japanese cultures and to a certain degree between western and eastern cultures, too.

However, when we examine the warrior ethics of both worlds more closely, we begin to see marked differences in how individuals behave in specific contexts. One of the most striking differences is that although warriors are expected to fight bravely, fearing disgrace more than death in both epic worlds, in *Heike* warriors sometimes go further in preserving their honor by choosing to kill themselves rather than to live in shame, while in Homer there are very few actual cases of suicide.³

It may be pertinent to mention here that suicide has been a huge social issue in many countries in recent years, not least in Japan. The number of suicide peaked in Japan between

similarities in themes and literary techniques in Miyagawa 1980, Miyagawa 1982, and Miyagawa 1985. For further comparative studies on various themes, see Kawashima 1997, Yamagata 1993, and Yamagata 2011.

² For a salutary analysis of how the terms “shame culture” and “guilt culture” have been used or misused in comparative contexts, see Cairns 1993: 27–47.

³ This contrast has been pointed out in Kawashima 1997, esp. 25.

1998 and 2011 when it exceeded 30,000 a year, prompting the government to introduce special measures. It has steadily declined since, down to 20,840 in 2018 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare 2019: 2). As of 2002 Japan ranked fifth in number of suicides and eleventh in suicide rate in the world, according to Bertolote and Fleischmann (2009: 95). Suicide is a complex social issue that cannot be pinned down to a single cause, but the difference in attitude to suicide between Homer and *Heike* might help us understand some of the reasons why the Japanese appear to have a greater propensity to suicide compared with many other cultures around the world. We must of course duly heed the warning of Di Marco against the tendency to mythologise Japan as “Suicide Nation,” a frame that regards suicide as a national/cultural characteristic. Di Marco rightly emphasizes the multidimensional background of suicide, including psychological and biological aspects (2016: 180), and argues that “Japanese suicide as a peculiar feature of the Japanese people is a modern creation, and that the glorification of the values of honor and self-sacrifice in the discourse on suicide in the twentieth century were actually a modern integration of tradition rather than its direct and straightforward expression” (181). Nevertheless, as social and cultural factors are also at play, it will still be useful to discuss cultural influences, including the paradigms found in *Heike*. This article examines some examples of suicide in Homer and *Heike* in the hope of obtaining a deeper understanding of the texts concerned and also some insight into the phenomenon of suicide.

Causes of Suicide (*causae moriendi*)

There are many causes of suicide and suicidal wishes. As van Hooff's classification (1990: 85–130) seems most comprehensive, I am adopting it as the “checklist” of data in this study:⁴

- 1) despair (*desperata salus*)
- 2) compulsion (*necessitas*)
- 3) madness (*furor*)
- 4) grief (*dolor*)
- 5) curse (*exsecratio*)
- 6) shame (*pudor*)
- 7) guilt (*mala conscientia*)
- 8) tired of life (*taedium vitae*)
- 9) unbearable suffering (*impatientia*)
- 10) loyalty (*devotio & fides*)
- 11) showing off (*iactatio*)

Of these, the types that occur most frequently in Homer and *Heike* seem to be shame, guilt, grief, loyalty, and despair, as we will see. *Heike* also contains a rare case of suicide for the purpose of a curse (category 5). In the episode of “Raigō” (Book 3, Chapter 6, 149–150), the monk Raigō helps the emperor have a son with his power of prayer, but when he is refused

⁴ See also Durkheim's classification of suicide into egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic suicides (1951). Durkheim's theory emphasized “suicidal behavior as an outcome of external, social factors rather than focusing primarily on individual psychopathology” and postulated that “too much and too little social integration conferred the greatest risk of suicide.” Cf. Heilbron et al. 2014: 207. Such tendencies can also be observed in the behavior of some characters in Homer and *Heike*. See Garrison 1991: 2–4 and 31 for an application of Durkheim's theory to attitudes towards suicide in ancient Greece.

the promised reward by the emperor, he starves himself to death in order to curse the newly born prince to death. We will see a Homeric case of suicide with a possible element of curse, in the story of Epicaste (*Odyssey* 11. 277–280).

However, the most fundamental human feeling in both Homer and *Heike* is that one would rather not die, if it can be helped. This is very clearly stated in both texts. In the famous passage in the *Odyssey*, Achilles says that he would rather live as a slave of a poor man than be a king among the dead and appears to be more interested in the glory of his living son than his own posthumous fame (*Odyssey* 11.488–494):

ὦς ἐφάμην, ὁ δέ μ' αὐτίκ' ἀμειβόμενος προσέειπε·
“μὴ δὴ μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ.
βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητευέμεν ἄλλω,
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρῳ, ᾧ μὴ βίωτος πολὺς εἶη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκέεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.
ἀλλ' ἄγε μοι τοῦ παιδὸς ἀγαθοῦ μῦθον ἐνίσπες,
ἢ ἔπειτ' ἐς πόλεμον πρόμος ἔμμεναι, ἦε καὶ οὐκί.
εἰπέ δέ μοι Πηληϊὸς ἀμύμονος, εἴ τι πέπυσσαι.

So I spoke, and he responding straightaway addressed me:

“O shining Odysseus, never try to console me for dying.

I would rather follow the plow as thrall to another man, one with no land allotted him and not much to live on, than be a king over all the perished dead. But come now, tell me anything you have heard of my proud son, whether or not he went along to war to fight as a champion;

and tell me anything you have heard about stately Peleus.”⁵

Similarly, one of the principal members of the Heike, Yorimori, was incapable of facing exile and warfare by following the rest of the Heike clan and stayed behind in the capital Kyoto and was captured by the enemy after the war. For his pathetic confession of his attachment to life, his captor takes pity on him (*Heike* Book 10, Chapter 13 The Three-Day Heike, 569):⁶

Munekiyo sat up perfectly straight and answered with due respect,

“Anyone, whether high or low,
values his life above all things.

Who gives up the world, they say,
still cannot give up himself.

I do not mean that you were wrong
back then not to flee the city.

The only reason Yoritomo
now enjoys such great fortune
is that he had his own life saved.”

Life, after all, is the most precious thing. Munekiyo reminds Yorimori that his own overlord, the now victorious leader of the Genji, Yoritomo, is enjoying his current good fortune, because his life was once spared by the Heike. This passage also shows that in this society there is an easier alternative to suicide, which is to “give up the world”—to become a Buddhist monk or nun. This was a more common reaction to misfortune by both men and

⁵ All translations of the *Odyssey* in this article are quoted from Lattimore 1965.

⁶ All translations of the *Tale of the Heike* in this article are quoted from Tyler 2012.

women in that period than suicide. It seems that in this passage at any rate survival in disgrace is not viewed as an entirely negative choice.

Suicide in the *Tale of the Heike*

Let us now look at some actual examples of suicide in *Heike*. There are twenty-one scenes of actual suicide in *Heike*, six cases of unsuccessful suicide attempts, and ten cases of unfulfilled suicidal wishes.⁷ In the interest of space, I shall mostly limit the discussion below to examples of actual suicide, with a few exceptions such as the failed suicide attempt of Kenreimonin, who tries to join her son Emperor Antoku in death, and the famous episode of Nasu no Yoichi, the Genji's best archer, who vows to kill himself if he does not succeed in the seemingly impossible task of shooting a moving target from afar, which I have counted as an unfulfilled suicidal wish.

The most common pattern of suicide with ten examples is the one in which a warrior kills himself in order to avoid the disgrace of being captured and executed by the enemy, either during a battle or before attack by a superior force. The most famous examples are those of the group suicide of the members of the Heike and their followers who throw themselves into the sea at the battle of Dan no Ura.

When the defeat has become apparent, the leading Heike warriors jump into the sea, hand in hand, such as Norimori with his brother Tsunemori and Sukemori with his brother Arimori and cousin Yukimori (Book 11, Chapter 10 The Death of Noritsune, 614). The “*aristeia*” of the Heike's champion Noritsune, who has so far been invincible in the battle,

⁷ My data and interpretation of the *Tale of the Heike* is based on the Kakuichi Version of the text in Kajihara and Yamashita 1999.

also comes to an end, as he too jumps into the sea, after challenging his enemy to a duel, kicking one challenger into the sea, and grabbing hold of two Genji warriors under his arms and taking them down with him (Book 11, Chapter 10 The Death of Noritsune, 616–617). In the former two examples, the solidarity of the family is more poignantly emphasized than the sense of despair and the desire to avoid shame and humiliation. Noritsune’s case, by contrast, is more fitting for his role as the champion of his clan. The author gives him one last scene to show off his valour, to preserve his honour and reputation, rather than to present him despairing and following his family members in death. There is almost an element of “showing off” in his last moment.

Seeing such scenes of mass suicide, another Heike member Tomomori and his men follow (Book 11, Chapter 11 The Mirror’s Return to the Capital, 617):

“I have seen enough,” said Lord Tomomori. “It is time to die.”

He summoned his foster brother, Iga no Heinaizaemon Ienaga.

“Does the old pact between us still stand?”

“Need you ask?” Ienaga replied.

He helped his lord into a second layer of armor and donned one himself.

Arm in arm, the two plunged into the sea.

Twenty or more of Tomomori’s men refused to lag behind;

they, too, arm in arm, sank from sight together.

Here, too, the bond between family members and between the master and his followers is emphasized as in the scenes we have seen earlier. What is particularly interesting to note in this passage is the indication that Tomomori and Ienaga have long promised to die together. The focus appears to be more on loyalty in life and death than on despair or avoidance of shame.

What Tomomori has “seen” is the end of his family, especially the double suicide of Emperor Antoku and his grandmother and the matriarch of the Heike, Lady Nii, which is what triggered the other warriors’ suicide. Antoku was only eight years old, born to Empress Kenreimon-in from the Heike family. Here is the beginning of the scene of their double suicide (Book 11, Chapter 9 The Drowning of Emperor Antoku, 610):

For some time Lady Nii had expected what she now saw.

She threw her two gray nun’s robes over her head,

lifted high her beaten silk trouser-skirts,

clasped the sacred jewel to her side,

thrust the treasure sword into her sash,

and lifted the emperor in her arms.

“I may be a woman,” she said, “but I will not let the enemy take me.

No, Your Majesty, I shall accompany you.

All those loyal to our sovereign, follow me!”

She stepped to the side of the boat.

The sacred jewel and the sword are two of the three items of imperial regalia that symbolize the sovereignty of the emperor. She is almost acting like his Regent in taking them up along with the person of the emperor himself. This passage is followed by a most poignant scene in which the young emperor asks his grandmother where they are going, without comprehending the situation, and after hearing her explanation that they are going to “Pure Land of Bliss” and therefore he must pray to the Sun Goddess, his ancestor, and Amida Buddha, he prays with tears streaming down his cheeks. Then as Lady Nii falls into the sea with the boy emperor, she utters the comforting words that there is another capital beneath

the waves. His mother, Empress Kenreimon-in, also follows, but she is rescued by enemy warriors.

Broadly speaking both the warriors' group suicide that we have seen above and Lady Nii's suicide (and Kenreimon-in's suicide attempt) can be seen as cases of suicide due to loyalty to one's master and solidarity with one's family. Lady Nii's words of encouragement to others to follow also indicate this. As Saeki observes, to die with those whom one loves was the best that one can hope for in the cases of defeat (2008: 67).

For the warriors such cases of suicide may be regarded as a variant of honourable death in battle.⁸ To be captured alive and be executed by the enemy is the worst disgrace, and there are many cases of suicide in order to avoid it when one is wounded and becomes unable to fight effectively.⁹ Another notable case of suicide to preserve one's honour and that of

⁸ There are six cases in *Heike* of warriors who fight to death to preserve their honour. There is also a famous passage of the “*aristeia*” of the fighting monk Meishū, who rages around in battle with no fear of danger or death, though when all his weapons are broken, he in fact throws away his armour and runs away (Book 4, Chapter 11 Battle on the Bridge, 228–229). Otsu 2013: 153–160 reports that several episodes from *Heike* including Meishū's “*aristeia*” (without his flight at the end, needless to say) were cited as examples of death-defying samurai spirit for military propaganda purposes during the Second World War. Homer, too, was used for military propaganda in modern warfare. Cf. Vandiver 2010, especially 228–280. For problematical aspects of reading war literature in classrooms, cf. Takagi 2009 and Yamagata 2015.

⁹ Cf. Book 4, Chapter 11 Battle on the Bridge, 229: “... others, wounded, slit their bellies and jumped into the river”; Book 9, Chapter 6 Six Clashes, 473: “Yoshihisa wounded/so grievously that he took his own life”; Book 12, Chapter 9 The Execution of Rokudai, 682.

one's master is Iemitsu's. He kills himself to spur his master Yoshinaka into action when the latter's behavior (lingering at his mistress's side even as the enemy approach) is deemed disgraceful (Book 9, Chapter 3 Battle Besides the River, 461).

There are also suicides in less pressing situations than battle, when one anticipates inevitable misfortune. The monk Shunkan starves himself to death out of despair after he was left alone on a remote island (Book 3, Chapter 9 The Death of Shunkan, 160–161). Shigemori prays to the god at Kumano to end his life if his father Kiyomori's despotic behavior continues and the good fortune of his family cannot endure beyond his generation (Book 3, Chapter 11 To Consult of Not the Chinese Physician, 163–164). Shigemori's two sons, Kiyotsune (Book 8, Chapter 4 The Flight from Dazeifu, 424) and Koremori (Book 10, Chapter 12 Koremori Drowns, 562–566), drown themselves out of despair when they see no escape from the eventual defeat by the Genji.

Some of these cases reveal religious influences on people's minds at the time.¹⁰ Shigemori's "suicide by prayer" reflects his faith in a deity of Shinto, while Koremori's behaviour leading up to his suicide shows strong influence of the Buddhist doctrine of salvation in afterlife.¹¹ He first becomes a monk with the help of the monk Takiguchi (Book 10, Chapter 10 Koremori Renounces the World, 555–559) and tries to clear his mind of

¹⁰ For the complex of religious influences on Japanese behavior leading to suicide, see Blum 2008: 140, which discusses the influences of Indian Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism of China and Japan, and the Confucian values of *junshi* (suicide due to loyalty, to die with one's master) as well as "ancient cultural patterns of corporate identity mixed with medieval traditions of warrior suicide."

¹¹ For the importance of the belief in rebirth in understanding suicide from the Buddhist perspective, see Promta and Thomyangkoon 2009: 33.

worldly thoughts in order to secure his salvation, only to find himself unable to forget the faces of his wife and children whom he has left behind in the capital. Thanks to Takiguchi's words that if Koremori becomes a buddha, he will be able to save his family, too,¹² Koremori is finally able to pray without distraction and die with a calm mind (Chapter 10, 12 Koremori Drowns, 563–566).¹³ Even so the reader senses his lasting sorrow that cannot be overcome by the doctrine of Buddhist salvation (cf. Kawashima 1997: 29). Similarly, the hope of going to the “Pure Land” (Paradise) does little to console the young emperor when he is told to pray to the Sun Goddess to bid farewell to this world and to Amida Buddha for his salvation in the next world.¹⁴

As we have seen, there are many male suicides especially in military situations, but there are female suicides, too, though much smaller in number. One is the aforementioned example of Lady Nii, who dies with the Emperor, an act that she herself deems exceptional behavior for a woman (“I may be a woman,” she said, “but I will not let the enemy take me.” Book 11, Chapter 9 The Drowning of Emperor Antoku, 610). Also prompted by Lady Nii's words to follow her example, both the Emperor's mother, Kenreimon-in, and his nurse try to kill themselves, though without success. The cause of the suicide (and suicide attempts) of these three women can be interpreted as the combination of love, loyalty, and avoidance of shame.

¹² This turns Koremori's suicide into something more altruistic than purely egoistic or fatalistic.

¹³ For the significance of the state of mind at the time of suicide in Buddhist belief, see Promta and Thomyangkoon 2009: 30.

¹⁴ Cf. Pinguet 1984: 98 who notes: “Ce double suicide ... est resté dans la mémoire des Japonais comme l'une des scènes les plus pathétiques de leur histoire.”

There are few more examples of female suicide in order to follow a loved one. A Heike lady called Kozaishō commits suicide on receiving the news of her husband's execution (Book 9, Chapter 19 Kozaishō Drowns, 513–514):

... very low, one hundred times,
she called the Name of Amida,
and, weeping, begged him from afar,
“Hail, in your Western Paradise,
World Savior, O Buddha Amida,
O honor your Original Vow,
lead me hence to your Pure Land,
restore to me the love I lost,
seat us both on one lotus throne!”
Then with a last cry of “Hail!”
she sank beneath the ocean waves.

Noticeable in this passage are the Buddhist belief of salvation by Amida Buddha and the hope of being reborn with the loved one in the other world, both of which mitigate the finality of death to some extent. This episode ends with the author's approving comment that most women only forsake the world when widowed, highlighting the exceptional loyalty of this wife (cf. Pinguet 1984: 96–98). In another episode the double suicide of a nurse and her servant following the execution of their young charge, Fukushō, is also praised by the author as a mark of their exceptional loyalty (Book 11, Chapter 16 The Beheading of Fukushō, 635).

As can be seen from these examples, in *Heike* the majority of suicides are motivated by avoidance of disgrace or loyalty to and solidarity with one's master or family members. Grief for losing loved ones is also a factor, especially in the cases of women's suicide. It is

also noticeable that the Buddhist belief in afterlife and reincarnation can be a motivating factor in dying together in the hope of being born together again.

Suicide in Homer

Now we turn to the cases of suicide and suicidal wishes in Homer. In what sort of situations do Homeric heroes and heroines consider suicide, and how do they behave in similar situations to those which drive *Heike* characters to suicide?

The first thing to note above all is the lack of actual suicide, and for this very reason not much has been written about suicide in Homer (cf. Hirzel 1908: 76–78; Loraux 1987: 15; Garrison 1995: 78). Neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* has any case of actual suicide within the main plot. Only two past cases are mentioned in the *Odyssey*, namely those of Epicaste and of Ajax.

The depiction of the death of Epicaste, Oedipus’s mother, occurs at *Odyssey* 11. 277–280 when Odysseus visits the underworld:

ἡ δ’ ἔβη εἰς Αἴδαο πυλάρταο κρατεροῖο,
ἀψαμένη βρόχον αἰπὸν ἀφ’ ὑψηλοῖο μελάθρου,
ᾧ ἄχεϊ σχομένη· τῷ δ’ ἄλγεα κάλλιπ’ ὀπίσσω
πολλὰ μάλ’, ὅσσα τε μητρὸς Ἐρινύες ἐκτελέουσι.

While she went down to Hades of the gates, the strong one,
knotting a noose and hanging sheer from the high ceiling,
in the constraint of her sorrow, but left to him who survived her
all the sorrows that are brought to pass by a mother’s furies.

It is clear enough that this is a suicide, because of the mention of the noose and hanging, though the cause of her “sorrow” (ἄχεϊ 279) that led to it is not made very clear. It is

reasonable to assume that her distress was caused by the sense of shame as well as guilt due to the discovery of the incest with her son (“him” τῷ 279), possibly also with an element of curse, whether knowingly or unknowingly, as her death sets Erinyes upon Oedipus for becoming the cause of her death.¹⁵

Homer’s depiction of Ajax’s case is even less clear (*Odyssey* 11. 543–551):

οἷη δ’ Αἴαντος ψυχὴ Τελαμωνιάδαο
νόσφιν ἀφεστήκει, κεχολωμένη εἵνεκα νίκης,
τὴν μιν ἐγὼ νίκησα δικαζόμενος παρὰ νηυσὶ
τεύχεσιν ἀμφ’ Ἀχιλλῆος· ἔθηκε δὲ πότνια μήτηρ.
παῖδες δὲ Τρώων δίκασαν καὶ Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.
ὥς δὴ μὴ ὄφελον νικᾶν τοιῶδ’ ἐπ’ ἀέθλω·
τοίην γὰρ κεφαλὴν ἔνεκ’ αὐτῶν γαῖα κατέσχευεν,
Αἴανθ’, ὃς περὶ μὲν εἶδος, περὶ δ’ ἔργα τέτυκτο
τῶν ἄλλων Δαναῶν μετ’ ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα.

Only the soul of Telemonian Aias stood off
at a distance from me, angry still over that decision
I won against him, when beside the ships we disputed
our cases for the arms of Achilleus. His queenly mother
set them as prize, and the sons of the Trojans, with Pallas Athene,

¹⁵ For the curse implied in this passage, see Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989: 94 at 11.279–280.

Loraux 1987: 15 observes the difference in the mode of suicide between two versions of Jocasta/Epicaste’s suicide—by the rope or by the sword—and argues that hanging is associated with marriage and the suicide that sheds blood is associated with maternity.

judged; and I wish I had never won in a contest like this,
so high a head has gone under the ground for the sake of that armor,
Aias, who for beauty and for achievement surpassed
all the Danaans next to the stately son of Peleus.

“Gone under the ground” (549) is the only hint of his death, and there is no hint of his suicide. Heubeck and Hoekstra (1989: 110 at 548–551) comment that the phrase is “a clear reference to the hero’s suicide,” and I concede that the passage is a clear reference to the contest for Achilles’s arms and Ajax’s death. But, unless the readers already know the story of his suicide as recounted in the *Aethiopsis* or the *Little Iliad*, they will not guess the cause of his death from this passage alone. The motive is suggested by the dispute and the fact that Odysseus won the contest against Ajax, but Odysseus does not mention what we find in, for instance, Sophocles’s *Ajax*—namely, the sense of shame that led to his suicide.

Both the above examples are brief and do not explain the motives, though we can guess that the causes must have been primarily the sense of shame and alienation from family and community resulting from that shame. The *Odyssey* also mentions other characters known through later sources to have been suicides, such as Ino (5.333)¹⁶, Heracles (11.601–602)¹⁷, and the Sirens (12.39–54)¹⁸, but the poet does not refer to their suicides. We may be able to read his attitude towards suicide in his silence itself. This starkly contrasts with Greek tragedy in which suicide becomes a frequent motif. Four out of seven of Aeschylus’s, nine

¹⁶ For Ino’s suicide, see Heubeck, West and Hainsworth 1988: 282 at 333–334.

¹⁷ As in Sophocles’s *Trachiniae*, though he only seeks assisted suicide on the pyre because he is already dying in agony due to poison.

¹⁸ See Heubeck and Hoekstra 1989: 119 at 39–54 for the Sirens’ suicide depicted on vase paintings from the sixth century onwards, though they think it is a later invention.

out of nineteen of Euripides's, and all seven of Sophocles's extant plays utilize the suicide motif (Katsouris 1976: 5–6).¹⁹

Suicidal Wishes and Acts in Homer

However, if we look for the cases of suicidal wishes which do not lead to actual suicide, they are unexpectedly frequent: ten cases in the *Iliad* and eleven in the *Odyssey*, totalling twenty-one, the same number as of actual suicides in *Heike*. Homer also has a similar heroic code to *Heike*'s in that flight from battle is a disgrace and warriors should stand firm and fight without fearing death, which could prove “suicidal.” In Homer this code is expressed by such characters as Hector (*Iliad* 6.441–446) and Sarpedon (*Iliad* 12.310–328, 16.422). Kawashima (1997: 24) observes a close parallel between Sarpedon's words at *Iliad* 12.310–328 and those of Tomomori in Book 11, Chapter 7 The Cockfights and the Battle at Dan-no-ura, 605 in *Heike*, both of whom urge comrades to recognise one's fate of mortality and to avoid shame and win glory.

This code of conduct is also visible when Odysseus wonders for a moment whether he should run or stay after he becomes isolated in the middle of the battlefield (*Iliad* 11.401–410):²⁰

οἰώθη δ' Ὀδυσσεὺς δουρικλυτός, οὐδέ τις αὐτῷ
Ἀργείων παρέμεινεν, ἐπεὶ φόβος ἔλλαβε πάντας·
ὀχθήσας δ' ἄρα εἶπε πρὸς ὄν μεγαλήτορα θυμόν·
“ὦ μοι ἐγὼ, τί πάθω; μέγα μὲν κακὸν αἶ κε φέβωμαι
πληθὺν ταρβήσας· τὸ δὲ ῥίγιον αἶ κεν ἀλώω

¹⁹ For suicide in Greek tragedy see also Garrison 1995, Yoshitake 1994, and Yoshitake 2018.

²⁰ All translations of *Iliad* passages in this article are quoted from Lattimore 1951.

μοῦνος· τοὺς δ' ἄλλους Δαναοὺς ἐφόβησε Κρονίων.

ἀλλὰ τίη μοι ταῦτα φίλος διελέξατο θυμός;

οἶδα γὰρ ὅττι κακοὶ μὲν ἀποίχονται πολέμοιο,

ὅς δέ κ' ἀριστεύησι μάχῃ ἔνι τὸν δὲ μάλα χρεῶ

ἑστάμεναι κρατερῶς, ἢ τ' ἔβλητ' ἢ τ' ἔβαλ' ἄλλον.”

Now Odysseus the spear-famed was left alone, nor did any
of the Argives stay beside him, since fear had taken all of them.

And troubled, he spoke then to his own great-hearted spirit:

“Ah me, what will become of me? It will be a great evil

if I run, fearing their multitude, yet deadlier if I am caught

alone; and Kronos' son drove to flight the rest of the Danaans.

Yet still, why does the heart within me debate on these things?

Since I know that it is the cowards who walk out of the fighting,

but if one is to win honour in battle, he must by all means

stand his ground strongly, whether he be struck or strike down another.”

In the course of this passage it becomes apparent that he does feel fear as the others have done, and yet he chooses to act according to the heroic code, that one must win honor (“excel” ἀριστεύησι) in battle and avoid disgrace (not to become a coward), whether one dies or survives. This almost amounts to self-sacrifice for the sake of his community.

Hector's death is also verging on suicide for the sake of his honor and his people. He knows that fighting against Achilles, who is a superior warrior to him, is suicidal, but he nevertheless decides to do so (*Iliad* 22.99–110):

ὦ μοι ἐγών, εἰ μὲν κε πύλας καὶ τείχεα δῶ,

Πουλυδάμας μοι πρῶτος ἐλεγχείην ἀναθήσει,

ὄς μ' ἐκέλευε Τρωσὶ ποτὶ πτόλιν ἠγήσασθαι
νύχθ' ὑπο τήνδ' ὀλοήν, ὅτε τ' ὤρετο δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.
ἀλλ' ἐγὼ οὐ πιθόμην· ἦ τ' ἂν πολὺ κέρδιον ἦεν.
νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ ὄλεσα λαὸν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ἐμῆσιν,
αἰδέομαι Τρῶας καὶ Τρωάδας ἐλκεσιπέπλους,
μή ποτέ τις εἴπησι κακώτερος ἄλλος ἐμεῖο·
“Ἐκτωρ ἦφι βίηφι πιθήσας ὄλεσε λαόν.”
ὣς ἐρέουσιν· ἐμοὶ δὲ τότε ἂν πολὺ κέρδιον εἴη
ἄντην ἢ Ἀχιλῆα κατακτείναντα νέεσθαι,
ἢέ κεν αὐτῷ ὀλέσθαι εὐκλειῶς πρὸ πόλης.

Ah me! If I go now inside the wall and the gateway,
Poulydamas will be first to put a reproach upon me,
since he tried to make me lead the Trojans inside the city
on that accursed night when brilliant Achilles rose up,
and I would not obey him, but that would have been far better.
Now, since by my own recklessness I have ruined my people,
I feel shame before the Trojans and the Trojan women with trailing
robes, that someone who is less of a man than I will say of me:
“Hector believed in his own strength and ruined his people.”
Thus they will speak; and as for me, it would be much better
at that time, to go against Achilles, and slay him, and come back,
or else be killed by him in glory in front of the city.

The motive for this virtual suicide is clearly shame, as can be seen in the keyword “I feel shame” (αἰδέομαι 105), as well as no doubt a sense of guilt for letting many of his men die

due to his error. It is much better to die gloriously (ἐὐκλειῶς 110) than fleeing to face the criticism of his people.

Achilles's wish to avenge Patroclus's death even at the cost of his own life can also be considered suicidal in a similar way (*Iliad* 18.94–104):

τὸν δ' αὖτε προσέειπε Θέτις κατὰ δάκρυ χέουσα·
“ὠκύμορος δὴ μοι, τέκος, ἔσσειαι, οἷ' ἀγορεύεις·
αὐτίκα γάρ τοι ἔπειτα μεθ' Ἴκτορα πότμος ἐτοῖμος.”
τὴν δὲ μέγ' ὀχθήσας προσέφη πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς·
“αὐτίκα τεθναίην, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἄρ' ἔμελλον ἐταίρω
κτεινομένῳ ἐπαμῦναι· ὁ μὲν μάλα τηλόθι πάτρης
ἔφθιτ', ἐμεῖο δὲ δῆσεν ἀρῆς ἀλκτῆρα γενέσθαι.
νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ οὐ νέομαί γε φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν,
οὐδέ τι Πατρόκλῳ γενόμεν φάος οὐδ' ἐτάροισι
τοῖς ἄλλοις, οἷ δὴ πολέες δάμεν Ἴκτορι δίῳ,
ἄλλ' ἦμαι παρὰ νηυσὶν ἐτώσιον ἄχθος ἀρούρης.

Then in turn Thetis spoke to him, letting the tears fall:

“Then I must lose you soon, my child, by what you are saying,
since it is decreed your death must come soon after Hektor's.”

Then deeply disturbed Achilles of the swift feet answered her:

“I must die soon, then; since I was not to stand by my companion
when he was killed. And now, far away from the land of his fathers,
he has perished, and lacked my fighting strength to defend him.
Now, since I am not going back to the beloved land of my fathers,
since I was no light of safety to Patroklos, nor to my other

companions, who in their numbers went down before glorious Hektor,
but sit here beside my ships, a useless weight on the good land.”

Here his sense of guilt seems to be stronger than shame. Previously he wished for the death of many Achaeans in order to regain his honor (*Iliad* 1.409–412), but now he regrets not only Patroclus’s death but also the death of many other comrades. His self-deprecating expression “a useless weight on the good land” perhaps also reflects a hint of shame for his failure. His sense of shame and guilt in the eye of the community, combined with his love for Patroclus, seems to be a strong driving force for his suicidal behavior.

However, Menelaus reasons rather differently in a situation very similar to what Odysseus faced at *Iliad* 11.401–410 (*Iliad* 17.91–101):

ὦ μοι ἐγὼν, εἰ μὲν κε λίπω κάτα τεύχεα καλὰ
Πάτροκλόν θ', ὅς κεῖται ἐμῆς ἔνεκ' ἐνθάδε τιμῆς,
μή τίς μοι Δαναῶν νεμεσῆσεται, ὅς κεν ἴδῃται.
εἰ δέ κεν Ἔκτορι μοῦνος ἐὼν καὶ Τρωσὶ μάχωμαι
αἰδεσθεῖς, μή πῶς με περιστήωσ' ἓνα πολλοί·
Τρῶας δ' ἐνθάδε πάντας ἄγει κορυθαίολος Ἔκτωρ.
ἀλλὰ τίη μοι ταῦτα φίλος διελέξατο θυμός;
ὀππότε' ἀνήρ ἐθέλη πρὸς δαίμονα φωτὶ μάχεσθαι
ὄν κε θεὸς τιμᾶ, τάχα οἱ μέγα πῆμα κυλίσθη.
τῷ μ' οὔ τις Δαναῶν νεμεσῆσεται ὅς κεν ἴδῃται
Ἔκτορι χωρήσαντ', ἐπεὶ ἐκ θεόφιν πολεμίζει.

Ah me; if I abandon here the magnificent armour,
and Patroklos, who has fallen here for the sake of my honour,
shall not some one of the Danaans, seeing it, hold it against me?

Yet if I fight, alone as I am, the Trojans and Hektor
for shame, shall they not close in, many against one, about me?
Hektor of the shining helm leads all of the Trojans
here. Then why does my own heart within me debate this?
When a man, in the face of divinity, would fight with another
whom some god honours, the big disaster rolls sudden upon him.
Therefore, let no Danaan seeing it hold it against me
if I gave way before Hektor, who fights from God.

Here is a logic absent from *Heike*'s narrative: one should not dare fight against a superior enemy who obviously has divine support, and Menelaus reckons that that will not incur his comrades' reproach nor his disgrace. However, if we apply this logic, Hector did not have to face Achilles when the latter was backed by a deity. What appears to be at work in both these cases is the combination of human instinct to choose life over honorable death and the fatalism that human action follows what is fated for them. Therefore Menelaus, who is destined to survive the Trojan War, will make a decision that will not lead him to death, whereas Hector who is destined to be killed by Achilles, will choose the path that will lead to his death.

Perhaps the best example of wavering between the natural instinct to stay alive and to gain honor by glorious death is that of Achilles. Although he has chosen the short and glorious life instead of a long and ordinary one (*Iliad* 1.416), once he is angry at Agamemnon for dishonoring him, he says that it is better to go home and live out an ordinary life (*Iliad* 9.410–418). But then once Patroclus is killed by Hector, Achilles is filled with guilt and a desire for revenge and wishes for instant death (*Iliad* 18.98). However, as we have seen, his shade in Hades in the *Odyssey* tells Odysseus that he would rather be alive as a slave of a poor man than a ruler among the dead (*Odyssey* 11.488–491). The latter sentiment is in

keeping with the overall theme of the *Odyssey* in which its hero Odysseus aims to get home and be reunited with his family again, despite all the hardships and humiliation that he suffers on the way.

Another character who shows similar wavering is Odysseus himself. As we saw, he would stand firm in battle even when facing grave danger alone (*Iliad* 11.401–410) in a situation similar to that from which Menelaus decides to run away (*Iliad* 17. 91–101), and in the *Odyssey* when he fears drowning at sea, he laments that he would rather have died in battle in Troy and received funerary honors (*Odyssey* 5.308–310). He also expresses his indignation at the behavior of the suitors at his home, saying that he would rather die than watch their outrage (*Odyssey* 16.99–111).²¹ These episodes make him look like a typical hero, but there are interesting cases of his suicidal wishes in the *Odyssey*. When he has fallen asleep on his way home after being kindly sent off by Aeolus, Odysseus’s greedy companions open the bag of winds, thinking that it contains some gold and silver (*Odyssey* 10.31–47). The evil winds which have been carefully packed away for Odysseus in the bag escape, causing his ship to be blown back whence they came from, Aeolus’s island. The despair nearly drives Odysseus to suicide (*Odyssey* 10.47–55):

ἄσκον μὲν λῦσαν, ἄνεμοι δ’ ἐκ πάντες ὄρουσαν,
τοὺς δ’ αἴψ’ ἀρπάξασα φέρειν πόντονδε θύελλα
κλαίοντας, γαίης ἄπο πατρίδος· αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ γε
ἐγρόμενος κατὰ θυμὸν ἀμύμονα μερμήριζα
ἠὲ πεσῶν ἐκ νηὸς ἀποφθίμην ἐνὶ πόντῳ,
ἧ ἄκεων τλαίην καὶ ἔτι ζωοῖσι μετείην.

²¹ Telemachus also expresses the same wish at *Odyssey* 20.314–319, showing his maturation as a hero conscious of honor and shame.

ἀλλ' ἔτλην καὶ ἔμεινα, καλυψάμενος δ' ἐνὶ νηὶ
κείμην· αἱ δ' ἐφέροντο κακῆ ἀνέμοιο θυέλλῃ
αὖτις ἐπ' Αἰολίην νῆσον, στενάχοντο δ' ἑταῖροι.

and they opened the bag and the winds all burst out. Suddenly
the storm caught them away and swept them over the water
weeping, away from their own country. Then I waking
pondered deeply in my own blameless spirit, whether
to throw myself over the side and die in the open water,
or wait it out in silence and still be one of the living;
and I endured it and waited, and hiding my face I lay down
in the ship, while all were carried on the evil blast of the stormwind
back to the Aiolian island, with my friends grieving.

Another suicidal wish of Odysseus is recounted later in the same book when he learns from Circe that he has to visit the underworld before he can get back home (*Odyssey* 10.496–498):

ὣς ἔφατ', αὐτὰρ ἐμοί γε κατεκλάσθη φίλον ἦτορ·
κλαῖον δ' ἐν λεχέεσσι καθήμενος, οὐδέ νύ μοι κῆρ
ἦθελ' ἔτι ζῶειν καὶ ὄρᾶν φάος ἠελίοιο.

So she spoke, and the inward heart in me was broken,
and I sat down on the bed and cried, nor did the heart in me
wish to go on living any longer, nor to look on the sunlight.

His reaction here is almost comical: he would rather die and go to hell permanently than visit it alive and come back again? These examples bring out Odysseus's all too human feelings of

despair and fear of death and his overriding desire to live and get home despite all the hardships. Because of this desire to survive, he does overcome those negative feelings and refrain from killing himself. One can also note that he rejects the offers of immortality by marriage to a goddess (*Odyssey* 9.29–33 Calypso and Circe; 23.333–337 Calypso) and chooses to go home, grow old with his mortal wife, and die. In a way his choice is a “suicide,” in not accepting the eternal stretch of life which he could have added to his original lifespan. On the other hand, accepting the life as a god would have meant another sort of suicide, the killing of his true self, as king of Ithaca and Penelope’s husband. In this sense, that, too, can be regarded as his positive choice of life.

There are two cases of suicidal wishes due to shame and disappointment in Homer that happen to involve a bow, reminding us of the case of Nasu no Yoichi in *Heike*. One is that of Pandarus, who, when angered by the uselessness of his bow and arrow against Diomedes who is supported by a deity, declares that he would break his bow and burn it in fire when he returns home and that, if he fails to do so, he would not mind being beheaded (*Iliad* 5.212–216). The other is that of Leodes who, having failed to string Odysseus’s bow, says that it would be better to die than live without what he desires (*Odyssey* 21.153–156). Nasu no Yoichi prays to a Bodhisattva for his success in shooting the target by pledging, “should the arrow miss its mark, / I shall break my bow and die, / nor ever again face any man” (*Heike*, Book 11, Chapter 4 Nasu no Yoichi, 596), but he survives because he succeeds in his task. His resolve to kill himself, no doubt to avoid shame, seems more serious than Pandarus’s and Leodes’s cases, though Pandarus’s words superficially resemble Yoichi’s in terms of threatening to break the bow in his anger.

Another apparent case of a suicidal wish due to shame and guilt is that of Helen who often wishes for her own death. She is evidently feeling shame and guilt for having been the cause of the war, as she tells Priam (*Iliad* 3.172–175):

αἰδοῖός τέ μοι ἔσσι φίλε ἔκυρέ, δεινός τε·
ὥς ὄφελεν θάνατός μοι ἄδειν κακὸς ὀππότε δεῦρο
υἱέϊ σῶ ἐπόμην θάλαμον γνωτούς τε λιποῦσα
παῖδά τε τηλυγέτην καὶ ὀμηλικίην ἐρατεινήν.

Always to me, beloved father, you are feared and respected;
and I wish bitter death had been what I wanted, when I came hither
following your son, forsaking my chamber, my kinsmen,
my grown child, and the loveliness of girls my own age.

However, as Euripides mockingly observes of her in his *Trojan Women* (1012–1014), she never attempts suicide. This is a mysterious aspect of Helen but understandable: she is fated to be taken back to Sparta and to live a blessed existence after death as Zeus’s daughter (*Odyssey* 4.563–569). In this sense she is already a goddess-like character and perhaps because of this she is incapable of embodying true human tragedy. The same can be said about Menelaus, who is destined to survive the war and so makes his decisions accordingly, not at all like the tragic Achilles and Hector whose decisions lead to their early deaths.

The second most important cause for suicidal wishes in Homer after shame is that of grief resulting from losing loved ones. We have already seen Achilles’s grief for Patroclus and his effective “suicide” through the revenge for his friend. Priam, too, says that he wants to be killed by Achilles if that is his destiny, when he is about to venture out to ransom Hector’s body from Achilles (*Iliad* 24.224–227). There are also the rather unexpected cases of Agamemnon and Menelaus who express mutual affection through their death wishes. When Agamemnon fears that Menelaus might die after being hit by Pandarus’s arrow, he says that it is better to die than to be accused of letting his brother die (*Iliad* 4.182). Menelaus in his turn finds his life hateful when he hears the news of his brother’s piteous death (*Odyssey* 4.538–540). Penelope, too, wishes to die when Odysseus is presumed dead and she

is compelled to remarry (*Odyssey* 18.201–205, 20.61–65). This can be seen as a suicidal wish due to love, grief, and fidelity.

The *Iliad* also has a case of a devoted couple who each prefers death to being left behind by their spouse, namely Hector and Andromache. She would rather die before she loses her husband (*Iliad* 6.407–413):

δαιμόνιε, φθίσει σε τὸ σὸν μένος, οὐδ' ἐλεαίρεις
παῖδά τε νηπίαχον καὶ ἔμ' ἄμμορον, ἢ τάχα χήρη
σεῦ ἔσομαι· τάχα γάρ σε κατακτανέουσιν Ἀχαιοὶ
πάντες ἐφορμηθέντες· ἐμοὶ δέ κε κέρδιον εἶη
σεῦ ἀφαμαρτούση χθόνα δύμεναι· οὐ γὰρ ἔτ' ἄλλη
ἔσται θαλπωρή, ἐπεὶ ἂν σύ γε πότμον ἐπίσπης,
ἀλλ' ἄχε'· οὐδέ μοι ἔστι πατὴρ καὶ πότνια μήτηρ.

Dearest, your own great strength will be your death, and you have no pity
on your little son, nor on me, ill-starred, who soon must be your widow;
for presently the Achaians, gathering together,
will set upon you and kill you; and for me it would be far better
to sink into the earth when I have lost you, for there is no other
consolation for me after you have gone to your destiny –
only grief; since I have no father, no honoured mother.

Hector too would rather die than see Andromache dragged away by the enemy (*Iliad* 6.464–465). And when he does die in book 22 she almost dies: she faints and loses the head gear she has worn since she got married, thereby symbolically “dying” as his wife (*Iliad* 22.462–474). However, this is as far as she goes: she does not actually commit suicide.

However, there are cases of those who “follow” the deceased out of love and grief in Homer, too. Odysseus’s mother Anticlea dies of grief for her missing son (*Odyssey* 11.202–203), while Laertes wishes for death due to his longing for Odysseus (*Odyssey* 15.353–354), and when Telemachus goes missing, Laertes stops taking food and drink (*Odyssey* 16.143). The latter certainly comes close to a suicide attempt due to love, grief, and despair.

Conclusion

The patterns of suicide and suicidal wishes in Homer and *Heike* are similar, at least superficially, to the extent that one wishes to avoid shame and to end grief most of all. When we investigate the details, we see the differences in their attitudes to suicide. The basic human instinct of wanting to live rather than die is acknowledged as natural in both Homer and *Heike*, but in the latter those who fail to die honorably due to fear of death are never portrayed in a positive light. In *Heike*, suicide to avoid shame or to stay loyal to one’s master or family is praised. It is taken for granted for males, and, while it is rare for females to commit suicide, their suicides attract even more praise. In Homer, there are no actual cases of suicide apart from two brief reports from the past and the poet may have deliberately avoided mentioning known cases of suicide of other characters who do appear in the *Odyssey*. Despite the fair number of suicidal wishes, no character actually commits suicide within the plot of the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*.

The most common factors in suicide or suicidal wishes in both Homer and *Heike* are shame and love, which can be rationalized as a desire to belong to one’s community. However, the pressure from that community is strongly applied towards suicide in the case of *Heike* and is further promoted by the Buddhist belief of rebirth and reunion of family in the other world. In Homer’s culture, to fight against a superior enemy backed by the gods or to

commit suicide against fate is seen to be unnecessary and even inappropriate. If you have the support of the gods, as Helen does, it does not seem to matter even if you live in disgrace.

In Japan, *Heike* is likely to have influenced the “aestheticization of death,” as Tagagi (2009) puts it, for which the group suicide of the Heike members at Dan no Ura provided a most memorable paradigm. By contrast, Homer almost appears to avoid promoting suicide. In his world, even if you earn posthumous glory and your shade lingers in the underworld, such existence is meaningless, and life, however miserable or humble, is a good thing in itself. This is the clearest message delivered especially in the *Odyssey* by both Odysseus, who overcomes all troubles on his journey, including the temptation to become an immortal god, in order to get home, and by Achilles, whose shade laments his death in Hades, dismissing the eternal glory that he obtained at the price of a peaceful long life. Even within the *Iliad*, Achilles is seen to be oscillating between an uneventful long life and a glorious early death, questioning the foundation of the heroic code of honor. Homer’s world appears to be uniquely life affirming, different not only from that of *Heike* but also from that of Greek tragedy.

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