

To what extent can 'The Tale of the Heike' and 'The Iliad' be considered similar poems?

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Throughout classical times epic poems played a crucial role in forming what we now recognise as the tradition of ancient literature. This genre was not however limited to Ancient Greece and Rome; in Japan *The Tale of the Heike* (or *Heike Monogatari*), a military tale composed before 1221¹, perhaps around 1218², recounts the rise and fall of the Taira Clan, led by Kiyomori, and the subsequent Minamoto dominance after the Genpei War (1180-85). This is often compared with Homer's *Iliad*, a tale of the Trojan War.³

Heike Monogatari is not well-known outside of Japan, and there is a lack of English and literature-based research, therefore such a comparison is more a task of knitting together separate research. I will do this by examining the themes the *Iliad* and *Heike Monogatari* discuss, the emotive language used to put across such themes, and finally the tradition that surrounds these works, given an epic is not only characterised by its substance but also the way this content interacts with the audience and the wider world. Ultimately, despite dealing with similar themes, due to their divergent traditions the *Iliad* and *Heike Monogatari* are similar poems, but reflecting different cultures.

A key theme in both the *Heike* and *Iliad*⁴ is impermanence and the fated passing of events. The opening lines⁵ of the *Heike* use language steeped in Buddhist doctrine around impermanence: the 'Jetvana Temple bells' ring when a warrior from the temple has died;⁶ the 'sal trees' are not only associated with the passing of Buddha but also only show their white flowers briefly. This sets the tone for the major focus of the *Heike*: the fall of the Taira clan from imperial power at the hands of the Minamoto. In much the same way, the *Iliad* shows the beginning of the downfall of the great city of Ilium to the Greeks. However, both the *Heike* and *Iliad* go further than showing impermanence in the major conflict of the story, since this theme is additionally dealt with through the individual heroes of each piece. Here the concept of fate and destiny also enters the narrative: as the *Heike* puts it 'the bold and brave perish in the end', as well as the 'arrogant'⁷ - characteristics exhibited by many a warrior in both epics. Both epics, being filled to the brim with conflict, show the passing of many heroes: Achilles, Patroclus, Hector, Atsumori, Yoshitsune.

This shared idea of impermanence is also reflected in the language used in both texts. A common language technique used to suggest impermanence is equally transient nature.⁸ Impermanence in both texts is often at its most acute after the death of a young soldier. The language using nature brings this out: in *Iliad* Euphorbus, a young Trojan warrior, having been graphically slain by

¹ (Tadashi 1967)

² (J. T. Rimer 1978)

³ (Hoffman 2018)

⁴ All translations for the *Heike* will be taken from Royall Tyler's 2012 translation, for the *Iliad* E. V. Rieu's 1950 translation

⁵ *Heike* 1.1.1-3

⁶ (J. T. Rimer n.d.)

⁷ *Heike* 1.1.5-7

⁸ *Heike* has already employed this when using the sal trees for its opening

Menelaus, is compared to an 'olive-tree' that is 'healthy' and 'bursts into white blossoms', but is then uprooted by a 'great gust of wind'⁹ – the unstoppable force of Menelaus. In a slightly different scenario in *Heike*, still a battle but not one that our focus, the young Emperor Antoku (who was 'even before his tenth year')¹⁰ was partaking in, the same style of language is used to lament his early death: 'The spring winds of transience' sweep away 'beauty of this lovely blossom [Antoku and his youth]'.¹¹ By tying the beauty of youth to blossoms that get inevitably swept away by the winds (representing "fate" for the Greek audience, "karma" for the Japanese one), the writer brings out the impermanence of all things, young and old, through the tragedy of an unexpected, young death. It is also worth pointing out for the *Heike* passage Emperor Antoku's death signals the end of the Taira imperial dominance: this is illustrated by the Taira falling into the sea around him, before he drowns as well (See Figure 1). Therefore in many ways the blowing away of that particular blossom symbolises multiple passings,¹² of both the human Antoku but also of the Taira hegemony, bringing in many ways the story of the Taira full circle, back to the sal trees declaring everyone's impermanence.



Figure 1: The Battle of Dan-no-ura, the final decisive battle (Adolphson, Commons 2015) between the Taira and the Heike, in which the young Emperor Antoku drowns (in the illustration seen top left with Lady Nii, ready to leap into the sea). By Teisai Hokuba (1770-1884), originally in 'Heike Monogatari Zue' (text by Takai Ranzan), published in two parts in 1829 and 1849, reproduced in Royall Tyler's 'The Tale of the Heike', 2012.

⁹ *Iliad* 17.53-59

¹⁰ *Heike* 11.9.62

¹¹ *Heike* 11.9.55

¹² This also brings out the difference between *Iliad* and *Heike* concerning the individual and the collective. *Iliad* focuses on Euphorbus alone, whereas *Heike* looks at Antoku and the collective (the Taira) he symbolises

A potential difference between the *Iliad* and *Heike*, is the use of the divine. Whereas Homer uses his Olympian gods for everything from battling with the armies to bickering amongst each other,¹³ their supernatural powers meaning if his heroes don't get picked off by their colleagues the divine will be there to finish them off,¹⁴ *Heike* exists within a Buddhist framework which lacks any personified gods to intervene. However, the concept of 'karma' in the *Heike* comes to serve the same purpose. When the Japanese listener heard the opening line 'the arrogant do not endure', and then being told of the notorious scene where Kiyomori conceitedly dismisses the dancer Gio in favour of another, Hotoke, they would understand that Kiyomori's arrogant ways (and so bad state of karma) mean he will be defeated. Although they do it by very different means, the supernatural frameworks of both texts serve to reinforce the feeling of impermanence.

Another shared theme is the desire for what Achilles terms 'κλέος ἄφθιτον'¹⁵ or 'glory imperishable'. 'Imperishable' is just the word, as the driving factor behind this desire for glory is that the heroes mentioned above know their impermanence.¹⁶ The two are intertwined: crucial to Achilles' κλέος is the fact he rejects 'home-coming' ('νόστος') in favour of a shorter physical life, but one that lives on in legend. This is further illustrated by a conversation between Sarpedon and Glaucus, two Lycian allies of Troy: although he does not have the same motivation as the Trojans since his home is not under attack,¹⁷ Sarpedon still goes out to battle, because he understands that one of the 'thousand demons of death' will get him soon enough, and wishes to win his κλέος before it does. The crucial essence of κλέος that both Sarpedon and Achilles acknowledge is that it is the forgoing of safety and the looming threat of impermanence in the form of death at the hands of another that gives it its value.¹⁸

Similarly the *Heike* narrator authoritatively tells us that '吾身の榮花を極るのみならず' ('one man scaled the heights of glory').¹⁹ Interestingly the writer uses an older character for 'glory' (榮花), even when '榮' alone would suffice. The additional '花' is quite flexible, usually having a meaning of 'flower' or 'blossom' (once again reinforcing the themes of the first few lines and hinting at how Kiyomori's "blossom" will pass) but also comes to give an extra sense of 'splendour' or 'ostentatiousness'. This both reinforces the ideas of impermanence and of Kiyomori's self-centred nature, but also aligns the *Heike* with the *Iliad*. There is the same sense that it is precisely Kiyomori's search for glory and attaining of it that gives him, from the listener's point of view, such an obvious target on his back. The phrase 'を極る' (which conveys a sense of 'taking something to the extreme', hence the translation of 'the heights') emphasises the danger: the idea that Kiyomori's glory being precarious, just as with κλέος, is what generates the legacy from it, and is entirely what gives it its value.

¹³ (Jones 2003)

¹⁴ An example of the Olympian gods delivering such judgement is the 'deadly' plague from Apollo Homer starts with in Book 1

¹⁵ *Iliad* 9.441

¹⁶ (Smith 2016)

¹⁷ Sarpedon even makes the point to Hector that despite being allies they seem to be doing all the fighting in *Iliad* 5.472-7

¹⁸ (Jenkyns 2018)

¹⁹ *Heike* 1.5.1

However, one key thematic difference between the *Iliad* and *Heike* is the way they approach the idea of glory and its prizes, both acknowledging a desire for it, but approaching it from different angles. The *Iliad* focuses on individual heroes carving out a part of history for themselves, and consequently dwells on their egos and pride. In the opening episode, Achilles and Agamemnon, squabble over the slave girl Briseis, partly because of her personal value to them, but also because neither can afford to be seen to be the one who stands down in the face of the other. So powerful is this motivation that it pushes Achilles to a point where he considers ‘ἐνάρξιον’ (literally meaning ‘stripping the slain Agamemnon of his arms’ – pointing out his desire to humiliate him even in death)²⁰, and Athene is required to intervene.

This simply would not have happened in *Heike*, since there is much more of a moral standard, provided by the ominous system of karma hanging overhead. There is far more of an imperative on the Japanese samurai to obey standards of loyalty and respect (thus keeping your karma in good check). Interestingly this even comes out in the differences between the narrating styles of the two texts: The *Iliad* uses a “eyes in the sky” narrator who makes very little comment on the legitimacy of actions, giving a sense that in the pride-filled pandemonium that goes on below anything goes for the likes of Achilles. By contrast the narrator in *Heike* is much more “on the street”, and includes little comments and mutterings to show controversy, such as *Heike* 4.1.49 when we hear mutterings of civilians about how early the abdication of the emperor was to make way for the Taira Antoku, still only 3 years old. For the *Iliad* the heroes rise through their daring feats to gain κλέος, whereas in *Heike* they attempt not to fall down the moral ladder, and only then can hope in their death they generate a legacy.²¹

This all stems out of the difference in where each text puts its emphasis: in the *Iliad* the big characters of Agamemnon and Achilles, who have their arguments over who is ‘φερτερος’ (“the more powerful”, in a political sense)²² as well as central heroes such as Hector mean the poem looks on characters much more as individuals,²³ whereas in *Heike* the emphasis is on the collective identity of the two warring families. An illustration of this is how each text introduces characters: in the *Iliad* each main character, even the gods, has their own epithet which symbolises an eminence that separates them from everyone else, such as ‘πόδας ὠκύς’ (“swift-footed”)²⁴ Achilles. This partly serves to separate each character for the reader, giving each their own, almost “superhero”-esque tag. In *Heike*, introductions to warriors come from themselves and are lists of their family lineage,²⁵ for example *Heike* 4.3.6-8 and 4.3.41 onwards. This is, in effect, announcing “this is where I come from [hence here is my collective’s credibility], and now I shall add my own story here”. The expectations and structure of the world the warriors in *Heike* live in mean they are very much

²⁰ This is also an interesting hark to the way this would usually be done to shame a defeated enemy, further emphasising Achilles’ hostile intentions

²¹ (Smith 2016) slightly disagrees here and suggests that in the *Iliad* there is also a ‘shame culture’, however when compared to the *Iliad* the one in the *Heike* is far more extreme – in the *Iliad* there is a sense of what he calls ‘social hierarchy’, but on the battlefield the hungering desire of glory does seem to overpower this, unlike in the *Heike*

²² *Iliad* 1.186, (Adkins 1982)

²³ This also explains the earlier slight difference from *Heike* in the way the *Iliad*’s divine judgement mechanism is personified and also comprised of individuals

²⁴ For example in *Iliad* 19.295 – variants of these exact Greek words appear elsewhere

²⁵ (J. T. Rimer n.d.)

anchored to their families as a collective, and when they attempt to earn some glory, they are trying to carve out some individual significance within that.

Finally, when assessing how similar two works of literature are, it is crucial to look at the cultures they were created and maintained in, and what their subsequent effect was. Initially *Heike* and *Iliad* appear similar: they both seem carefully refined over many spoken recitations,²⁶ are epics centring around action based in warrior cultures,²⁷ and mark astonishing literary progress in their separate worlds. Finally, both provided huge inspiration for other works: for example, Homer to Tolstoy,²⁸ *Heike* to later Japanese plays, films and comics.²⁹

However, this is where the paths of *Heike* and *Iliad* diverge: the above is true for both, however the *Iliad* stops there. As a consequence of the Bronze Age world and its associated social structures passing after its composition, the *Iliad* is now a window into a lost world, and so stands just a work of literature. By the 5th Century BC, Greece itself had moved on culturally to tragic plays³⁰, which still retained epic components, but were notably different.

In contrast, the historical events of *Heike* are the advent of hundreds of years of samurai rule of Japan, the beginning of their end only coming with the Meiji Restoration in 1868, which brought reforms to the country's political structure.³¹ Consequently, for hundreds of years *Heike* not only 'provided a model for the attitudes and standards of conduct... until the nineteenth, and even into the twentieth, centuries'³² for the country's dominant military force, but represented the point in history for the samurai where events pivoted towards them.³³ By 1297 *Heike* had become a 'staple in any professional entertainer's repertoire'.³⁴ Even when the cultural doors of Japan were opened in later years, this only solidified the *Heike*'s reputation, since it became viewed as a part of "traditional" Japan.

This perception of it was helped by the way, through its use as a code, it became mixed into Japanese culture itself. Two of the most influential cultural publications concerning the samurai code, the *Hagakure*³⁵ and *Bushido: The Soul of Japan*³⁶, clearly use it as source material. *Hagakure*, whilst not explicitly mentioning *Heike* contains phrases which could practically have come from *Heike* itself.³⁷ *Bushido: The Soul of Japan* was written Nitobe Inazo, who, thinking that Western Powers had a "national identity", wished Japan to have the same, and so landed on 'Bushido', which only after *Bushido*'s publication actually came into common usage. To back his points, Inazo

²⁶ (Jones 2003), (Tyler 2012)

²⁷ D. J. Snider's concept that the Trojan War was fought between oppositely-minded Hellenes could even suggest they are both epics depicting civil wars, since the Minamoto and Taira were also close, but ideologically apart. (Snider 1883)

²⁸ (Friedrich 2004)

²⁹ (Adolpshon, Commons 2015)

³⁰ (Michelakis 2010)

³¹ (Clements 2010)

³² (Butler 1969), (J. T. Rimer 1978) calls it a 'sourcebook for Japanese culture'

³³ (Beauchamp 2019)

³⁴ (Al-Saleh 2012)

³⁵ Compiled 1709-1716, first published 1979

³⁶ Published 1899

³⁷ Such as 'good and bad fortune are matters of fate' and 'compassion is like a mother who nurtures one's fate'

effectively “name-drops” both Yoritomo and Yoshitsune³⁸ in separate parts of the text. Crucially, Inazo is more referencing the *Heike* characters than their actual, historical figures, and this gives us an insight into the true importance of the *Heike*.

To identify the reason why it resonated with the ruling samurai, it is helpful to bring in another classical epic, *The Aeneid*, one that again achieved a much different cultural legacy than the *Iliad*. Virgil wrote the *The Aeneid* as a distinctly Roman epic, embodying “Roman” values, such as pietas, devotion to family, and other morals, to such an extent that Aeneas’ shield in Book 8 actually contains mention of Augustus’ triumph at Actium – surely a fabrication of events, if the narrative in *The Aeneid* even happened at all.

However, the fact that Virgil willingly bent events is the crucial point: he was writing Roman values and culture into history, and in similarly *Heike* carried importance for the samurai because it contained values and concepts they identified with. Having remained not only an astonishing work of literature but an integral piece of Japanese culture for so long, the *Heike* ensured that even now it remains a crucial part of understanding Japanese culture. Whereas the *Iliad* remains a stationary work of literature, the *Heike* is also a dynamic piece of Japanese culture.

To conclude, *Heike Monogatari* and the *Iliad* are poems that deal with similar themes, such as impermanence and glory, using comparable language techniques, however they approach these themes from different angles, such as whether they view characters as individuals, or as part of a collective. This provides a hint to the way the different cultures behind the two works separate them, an idea which is more openly seen when comparing their traditions and impacts. Whereas the *Iliad* remains an epic poem that deals with the above themes, the *Heike* goes further to become an integral part of Japanese culture, demonstrating that although in terms of content they are similar poems, they exist in very different cultures.

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³⁸ Who, thanks to the *Heike* also is ‘one of the most important cultural heroes in Japanese history’ (J. T. Rimer 1978), due to his portrayal as a dashing young warrior, and a tactical mastermind

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