

# Heroic Narratives from Homer to Medieval Japan and France : Cross-Cultural Perspectives

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Coeval with the era of transition from stagnating aristocracy to enterprising military rule, the Japanese literary genre known as *Gunki Monogatari*, war tales, is manifested in accounts loosely based on the Gempei battles, 1180-1185 (Butler 1996). Reflecting, albeit indirectly, the warrior spirit of late Heian and Kamakura times (ca. 1100-1333), these various martial stories boast at least one crown jewel, namely, the “Heke-monogatari” (Tales of the Heike, or of the House of Taira). In thirteenth-century versions both written and transmitted orally—whether following the poetic tradition of Yukinaga, Kamakura, or Kakuichi (Butler 1966)—this traditional heroic narrative describes the rise of the Taira warrior clan and its final and total annihilation by a rival, the Minamoto or Genji family.

Titanic and bloody battle scenes outside the old capital of Kyoto, and exquisitely intimate love episodes at court at once paint a broad picture of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan, and portray the personal and political destiny of families and individuals in virtually all social classes. Even though Butler (1969) has shown how uncertain and complex such assertions may be, this is the time of the emergence of the renowned Bushido code—for one’s lord, unconditional, personal loyalty, even if it meant suicide to save face or one’s good name (an historically institutionalized last resort); warrior fearlessness and perseverance in the face of either a superior foe or death; contempt for material wealth; and defense of personal and family honor.

In imitation of the “emaki” or artistic and picturesque painted scrolls of the period, which exploit parallel perspectives, this paper aims first to bring into sharper focus the contrasting lifestyles of the elegant medieval Japanese courtier—the so-called *kuge*—and the unsophisticated feudal samurai warrior—also referred to as countrified *buke* or *bushi*. While a cliché and a difficult distinction for some scholars, the divergence yet bears further study. Inspired by the pioneering research by Sasaki along these lines, this brief survey will deal with a few relevant themes related to courtly topoi mindful of Old French romance. It will also highlight some of the varieties of tragic and frustrated love in the *Heike monogatari*, manifested, in my opinion, as artistic devices to delay the inescapable dénouement, i.e., the fall of the house of the Heike—so reminiscent of the fall of Troy. Further, a special explication of a stereotypical sequence in the oral style—the hero’s departure for battle—as recounted by Homer and two of his distant imitators, will provide a foil to similar events in the Japanese narrative. I will then take up some illustrations of the ways of the Bushido warrior, focusing mostly on Kiyomori’s actions. Occasionally, and merely for reference, parallels from contemporary Japan will be drawn. So that by inference, contrast and comparison, I hope both to highlight the resemblances between Western “courtly” notions and their counterparts

or analogues is Japanese traditions. This effort should thereupon shed light on the courtly tradition in medieval Western Europe.

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In the Heike story's backdrop lie the complex relationships of the aristocratic Fujiwara clan, the latter's long-time control over the Imperial court principally through intermarriages and scheming exploitation of a delicate balance of power between the two leading military families employed as Court bodyguards or militia, and the Fujiwara's twenty-year dependence on the victorious Heike in the aftermath of the *Heiji* Disturbance of 1160, in which the Taira emerged victorious. To further complicate matters, Genji defectors join the Taira leaders to defeat their enemies in the Hogen war, but the Heike cut these very allies down in the Heiji conflict; moreover, interlacing the plot's prolix fluctuations are at least two religious sects of warrior monks known for shifting loyalties and differing Buddhist tendencies.

After 1160, now eliminated, most of the Minamoto were slain; but some descendants were banished to the wilds of the Kanto or Eastern provinces, a single act of *bushi* clemency that the new Prime Minister, Taira Kiyomori, would live to regret ("sentiment before rationality," in March's words, 42-44). For the story represents this merciless tyrant—not unlike the Greek Agamemnon—as a proud and mighty man, given over to "freakish caprices," contumacy and selfishness, that is, a prime candidate for the law of karmic retribution.

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### I. *Courtly topoi and the Varieties of Love:*

Let us enter the heart of the story in Book 4, the "beginning of the end" so to speak, a courtly interlude packed with political implications. It is 1180, and Yorimasa, a distant Genji relative and military leader, tempts Prince Takakura, the 30 year-old future emperor, to stir up sentiment against the Heike. The Prince is gifted, enjoys spring flower games, poetry, fall moonlight banquets, and his own musical compositions for the flute. He is an "old-style" aristocrat whose courtly manners mark him off from upstart *buke* or samurai warriors. Yorimasa arrives at the palace in secret to incite the Prince:

As things stand now, people seem to be going along without a murmur, but there is no living soul who does not secretly resent the Heike. You ought to raise a revolt, crush the Heike, end the distress of the Retired Emperor Go-Shirakawa, who is shut up in the Toba Mansion for nobody knows how long, and assume the imperial dignity. That would be filial dignity of the highest order [... Two pages follow listing the disaffected Genji warriors lying in wait to rally for the cause....] The Heike and the Genji once played equal roles in subduing court enemies and realizing aspirations for worldly success, but now they are as far apart as clouds and mud: the Genji are isolated, their status even lower than that of vassals... (McCullough 136, 138; Sieffert 170, 171).

Just give the word, he pleads, and thousands will come to serve. Later on, this same Prince (Takakura) dies from a broken heart (Book 6; McCullough 206; Sieffert 257).

Not unlike songs in relation to plot in musical comedy, "The Tale of the Heike"

features a number of compelling episodes that delay the story's inevitable progress. These are often tender love tales which reveal also the ruthless and despotic behaviour of Kiyomori—at its highest, or lowest levels. They also depict an array of human emotions and varieties of love—extramarital and adulterous and passionate, tender and conjugal, filial, divine and spiritual.

One intense example relates that when a certain Lady Aoi—the beloved mistress of the Emperor—learns of scandalous rumors about them, and her princely lover fears a row with his Imperial Spouse, he ceases seeing her. They are separated. He writes a profoundly touching poem, “Despite concealment, it has appeared in my face—/this longing for you, /so poignant that others ask, /‘What is preying on your mind?’” (McCullough 201; Sieffert 251)—which he sends to Aoi; who consequently withdraws to her family's home and a few days later dies from love (cf. *messhi hoko*, “destroying the self to serve others,” March 55).

Now the Emperor falls into profound remorse: to amuse him, the beautiful zither-playing Kogo, directly from the Imperial Spouse's apartments is sent to dally with him. But it is the Captain of the Guard who loves *her*, pursues her, writes her heartfelt love poetry, which Kogo, now an Imperial mistress, refuses to read. Kiyomori finds out about this whole circumstance (both men in love with Kogo are his sons-in-law) and threatens to put an end to her. Kogo escapes to the country, plunging the Emperor into an even deeper state of uncontrollable weeping from love's torments (one of some 111 textual occurrences!—not surprising actually in the context of *kanashii*, “grief, sadness;” March 66). A fortuitous servant finds her, and eventually Kogo returns briefly and secretly to the Palace, meets with the Emperor, and becomes pregnant. Kiyomori finds out and banishes the 23 year-old to a convent, whereupon the Emperor falls sick and dies from love (McCullough 201-206; Sieffert 251-257).

It will be recalled that jealousy, a lust for unlimited control, and a sense of inadequacy also motivate King Mark in the *Tristan* legend—as Iseut and Tristan himself learn to their great sorrow (Beroul, vv. 554-555, 778-782, 1051-1052, 1126-1128, 1181-1189, etc.; cf. Sasaki, “La *Fin'Amor*”).

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In another sketch of love in the midst of war (McCullough 320-324; Sieffert 396-401), a tragic tale of marital love interrupts the battle accounts. It is the story of Lady Kozaisho who drowned herself. She is the pregnant wife of the now slain Michimori, a Heike warrior, who will throw herself into the river upon learning of his death in battle. At night her *interior monologue*—like some inward-looking French romance heroine—goes over his parting words, her painful regret over not swearing to meet with him in the after life... (McCullough 321; Sieffert 397): “[...] I had kept still about being pregnant, but I mentioned it then so he would not think I was making a secret of it. He acted so happy (...).” With tears streaming down her cheeks, her maidservant tries in vain to convince her otherwise, but Kozaisho is resolved, prays and then leaps into the river. Her nurse grieves, then shaves her head, and her attempt to follow her mistress is thwarted by others on board (McCullough 322; Sieffert 399).

A romantic retrospective anecdote closes the chapter (McCullough 323-324; Sieffert 400-401)—about how Michimori fell in love with Kozaisho at first sight: she a Palace lady of honor, he an assistant Majordomo... He sends love letters and poems. Kozaisho refuses to read them, but the Empress finds one and replies to it with a tender, echoing poem on behalf of Kozaisho! And this brings them together, only to be separated in the end by death.

These examples of dramatic self-sacrifice because of love will serve perhaps to illustrate a Japanese version of a type of courtly love, episodes that could easily be adapted, *mutatis mutandis*, to a 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century European vernacular tradition—certainly unexpected in an epic context. However, it is interesting that medieval French romance seems to conclude rather with an uplifting, almost obligatory “happy ending”—a marriage ceremony of love tested and renewed—whereby a defect is corrected or a lack eliminated (Kelly 121-130). The tragic vision of marital love as “noble failure” (Morris 67-105, “Victory through Defeat”) seems uniquely Japanese. In this way, the “Tale of the Heike” implies or suggests the “pathos of things” (*Mono no aware*), apparently a basic aesthetic and emotional building-block of the Japanese mentality (Morris).

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Mention of noble failure arising from overweening pride, retribution and pathos recalls one powerful scene from Homer’s *Iliad* that finds its analogue in this episode involving Kozaisho and her beloved Michimori in the “Tale of the Heike.” I refer to the tearful farewell when the audience knows the hero will not return home alive (*Iliad* VI.237 ss.)—fraught with gestures of human touching.

Hector returns briefly from the raging battle and tells Hecuba to pray and sacrifice fervently to the “great grim goddess” Athena for intercession (the Trojan is the “city-protector” and the goddess’s divine counterpart, *par excellence*, according to Nagy 114-115). Hector then visits Paris to call him back to arms.

Touching, terrible and tragic spring to mind as one witnesses, Andromache pressing close to Hector, “Weeping freely” and clinging to his hand. She urges him to remain, calls him reckless and pitiless, and appeals to his honor as a husband. For she, Andromache, has lost mother, father, and seven brothers by the hand of enemy “godlike” Achilles (415-428).

You, Hector—you are my father now, my noble mother/a brother, too.  
and you are my husband, young and warm and strong!! Pity me, please!  
(429-300).

Hector recalls to her his *raison d’être*—glory and honour, personal and familial—and also especially the desire to preserve Andromache’s freedom and spare her from the bonds of slavery (440-461). He refuses to skulk from war. Then Hector goes to raise his son up—however frightened and cringing Astyanax may be from feat of the father’s bronze helmet—kisses him and “tossed him in his arms” (478), praying to Zeus to insure the boy a life of strength, bravery and fame. Hector places the boy in his wife’s arms and, “filled with pity now,” he “stroked her gently” (485), boasting of his own bravery, reminding her both of the inescapability of destiny and of her spousal and womanly duties. Whereupon he leaps back into the fray.

Several centuries later, Dares the Phrygian (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> c. A.D.), whose work, "The Trojan War", or "History of the Destruction of Troy," belongs to what scholars refer to as the epigonal Homeric Cycle, describes this same scene in dry but swift and dynamic terms: Andromache is haunted by a prophetic dream that Hector should not go to fight. She takes action by alerting Priam, who restrains Hector. But the Trojan hero reproaches her bitterly for this and demands she bring forth his armor. In a state of mourning, holding the baby Astyanax, she begs Hector to remain, who only becomes more frustrated as Priam holds him back—but only very briefly (Fry 268-269).

In the midst of the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century in Western Europe, one Benoit de Sainte-Maure composed his *Roman de Troie*, based on both Dares and Dictys as authentic sources for this innovative romancer. For this particular scene (vv. 15263-16316), Benoit takes those few comments from his "eye-witness" Dares and amplifies them considerably, turning it into a major section surrounding the "Tenth Battle" (out of a total of twenty three). Characterization and verbal expansion allow him to depict an irrational Andromache, an unreasonable and stubborn Hector, and an exasperated Priam.

For Benoit, when Andromache attempts to hide the hero's arms, Hector curses her: "Andhromacha het e manace" (v. 15454), and she hurries to place the child at his feet with an imprecation, 'Cruels de cuer, lous enragiez' (15477 :Cruel-hearted, enraged wolf). Once importuned by her, Priam literally stops Hector in the street, who dares not to disobey his father (15579). But fate's wheels churn and the terrible Trojan losses beckon Hector back to the battlefield, and ultimately to his death.

The farewell episode of Kozaiشو and Michimoriis intended to illustrate—yet again—the unjustness of Kiyomori's unscrupulous policies. But for Homer and his adapters, the lesson to be drawn is rather how fate affects human affairs and forces us to act according to its whims.

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## II. *The Warrior's New Ways-Practical and Disciplined*

As a supposedly ideal example of the Bushido code in action (at least perhaps in his own mind), Kiyomori the Heike disdains opulent aristocratic ways. His own father Tadamori was a model of secular courtesy and elegance (McCullough 24-25; Sieffert 34-35), but Kiyomori had other interests: he actually took religious vows in hopes of finding intercession for his poor health. In the following (interpolated) passage, he reflects on the hypocritical religious character of his eldest son and successor, Shigemori, which leads to thoughts of how the aristocratic lifestyle is corrupting the boy:

His brothers and children were beginning to ape the aristocrats: they had grown to love luxurious living, were immersed in all manner of elegant refinement; made an ornamental pastime of their religion, kneeling at their prayers with painted faces and eyebrows, and their teeth dyed black.[...] Kiyomori had no objections to elegance and refinement. They were thoroughly desirable. Life was richer for them. As for religion—even he

had taken the vows. Not by any means did he approve of the disbeliever, but this aping of the aristocrats and this travesty of religion—he would have none of it. [...] (Yoshikawa 557).

The above quotation implies that Kiyomori only half-enjoyed his new-found authority and his preponderant influence on the throne. But yet, it had been observed that during the previous era,

[...] a warrior occupying Kiyomori's post at Court would have scandalized the nobles and created hostility. Kiyomori's confident bearing, too, reflected the change. He was the new era; no decision could be made without him, or regarded as final without his consent. The warrior class, in short, had come into power, and Kiyomori's word was absolute in the conduct of state affairs (Yoshikawa 409).

Nevertheless, as the saying goes, "the proud and arrogant endure for only a short while" (Morris 72).

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Not unexpectedly in "The Tale of the Heike" battle scenes are endless often repetitive. Trading rough insults and mockeries face-to-face, warriors typically seek heroic glory. Of a certain Sato, a wounded warrior, his leader asks:

[...] How do you feel...?' 'This will be all for me.' 'Is there anything that makes you feel reluctant to go?' 'There is nothing. I regret only that I must die without seeing my lord rise to prominence. For the rest, he who wields bow and arrow must expect to perish by an enemy shaft...'"[...] (McCullough 365; Siellert 457-459).

Recalling Butler's happy phrase for oral formulaic themes "a special aura of authenticity" (1969:106),—how appropriate this fatalistic, half-reluctant "coping strategy" (March 50-54) is to the warrior mentality—demonstrated as well by appeal to Roland's similar petitions in the *Chanson de Roland*—

We must make a stand here for our king:/One must suffer hardships for one's lord/And endure great heat and great cold, / One must also lose hide and hair./Now let each see to it that he employ great blows./So that bad songs not be sung about us!' (*Roland* 1009-1014 : 'Ben devuns ci ester pur nostre rei:/Pur son seignor deit hom susfirir destreiz/E endurer e granz chalz e granz freiz. /Sin deit hom perdre e del quir et del peil./Or quart chascuns que granz colps i empleit/Que malveise cancon de nus chantet ne seit !')

Yet, endless contradictions reveal human weakness in living up to the Bushido code to the fullest. Examples of clearly non-heroic behavior include: hiding in a crevice so to be able to shoot at a mounted horse's belly and unhorse the enemy (McCullough 370);

Sieffert 463); telling a falsehood to convince a Heike chieftain to surrender (McCullough 371; Sieffert 464-465); brutally slaughtering an eight-year old son of a warrior in the presence of his nurse (McCullough 390-392; Sieffert 485-487); and butchery of the innocents (i.e., Heike children and youths) drowned or buried; while the older ones were stabbed or choked to death (McCullough 409-410; Sieffert 511).

### III. *Conclusions*

Perhaps the most heart-rending of all is the final act just alluded to, relating the end of twelve-year-old Lord Rokudai (McCullough 409-425; Sieffert 511-529). This is Kiyomori's great-grandson, who is suspect because of Genji connections...

First the boy's grief-stricken and anguished widowed mother laments— (McCullough 410-411; Sieffert 512-513):

Now a days, the authorities are assembling Heike children and putting them to death in different ways—drowning, burying, squeezing, and stabbing. I wonder what method they will use to kill my son. He is rather grown up, so they will probably behead him.[...] Rokudai has never left my side from the moment of his birth. His father and I reared him together morning and evening, happy to possess so rare a treasure; and after I suffered the grievous loss of the one on whom I relied, it was my two children who became my consolation. Now only one remains to me; the other has gone. What shall I do after today? During these past three years, night and day, I lived in terror of what has just happened, yet I never expected it so very soon as today. [I prayed to the gods of mercy...] to protect the boy, but now, alas, he has been taken. He is probably dead already'. So she ran on, shedding endless tears.

Soon, Rokudai enjoys a momentary reprieve.... A holy monk intercedes and his life is spared for a time, but the boy, having withdrawn to become a monk himself, is nevertheless executed in the end—because it was believed that while “his head was shaven, his heart was not” (*il a beau avoir rasé sa tete, il n'aura point rasé son coeur!*—Sieffert 528; McCullough 425: “Although he may have a shaven head, he is no monk at heart”).

This was the last barbaric act for final revenge by the Genji. All living evidence of the Heike line has now been exterminated.

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The contrasts we have observed between aristocratic *kuge* and unsophisticated *bushi* provide a convincing matrix for the short narratives studied—assorted love stories that delay the plot and tell of fornication, adultery, procuring, devoted marital love and love's self-sacrifice. The lifestyles limned show the tragic consequences of being a relative or a subject of Kiyomori and expecting to lead a normal life without interference or capricious prohibitions. Even though some possibility of anachronism exists by reading later Tokugawa values into an essentially high medieval text, the Bushido warrior code is operating in the Heike narrative—to a degree. Yet it is also contradicted, too.

As suggested, redolent of elevated Homeric style (i.e., large doses of stereotypical scenes, contrasting and formulaic themes and motifs), the lyrical prose narrative of these pages, gilded with flamboyant but graceful descriptions and with elegant *haiku*-like pauses, nonetheless seem in effect to portray history, or at least the irresistible *recyclage* of human events, as the real protagonist, even while savoring the cosmic finale of grisly revenge for the innumerable and unpardonable Heike abuses of authority.

In spite of the often excruciating, often uninhibited content, lilting Japanese poetic rhythms infuse this saga's aesthetic beauty and hasten the vigorous action and dazzling adventures. It is no wonder that Kubuki theater, contemporary popular culture and film in Japan continue to preserve these diverse narratives and swash-buckling characters.

In the end, the profound story ends elegiacally as a sort of apology for that Imperial favorite, Kiyomori himself, depicted nevertheless as an unrefined, vicious, and defiant brute, into whose calamitous life are woven moralistic threads of Buddhist hues, emphasizing the vanity and futility of human endeavor, regret for the brevity of the old warrior rule, but still stressing unequivocally that in these ceaseless convulsive conflicts, those who had become weak and soft must step down, and that history ultimately would belong to the strong.

Indeed, banishment to the rural provinces actually provided an opportunity for Kiyomori's enemies, the Genji clan, to gather their still-loyal forces and mount a massive and humiliating counter-attack, which doubtless led to their success in a decisive naval battle in 1185 (recounted in Chapter 11), in which many warriors, courtiers and nobles died, including Kiyomori's own wife, and also the eight-year old emperor, Antoku, Kiyomori's grandson, who drowned in his grandmother's arms.

Thus does war degrade human beings and overweening lust for power becomes fatuous. Yet, the hero Kiyomori, perhaps meant to be viewed as a victim of the times, rose to glorious vigor just as the newer elements of Confucianism and Zen Buddhism were emphasizing practical experience and discipline—as opposed to earlier Heian excesses, though not, one supposes, in garish atrocities (Spae 29-31). The same trend may be seen in the *emaki* painted scrolls. The Kamakura Period witnessed a diversity of style, combining traditional and new warrior values, as the purely decorative gave way to the descriptive, romantic themes became more realistic, and one notes a greater stress on “individuality and objectivity” (Okudaira 100-101).

Though Kiyomori dies much earlier (actually in Chapter Six!), the towering figure of heroic passions (or at least his tyrannical policies)—occasional Confucian benevolence notwithstanding—finally meets his terribly ironic come-uppance on the sea at Dan-no-Ura, scene of death for thousands of souls. Kiyomori's harsh and inhuman methods lead to extinction of all hopes and dreams for the Heike clan. The “strange bedfellow” is ousted by the Genji, who themselves, in less than a century, would be dislodged from power. And so it goes, as the eternal struggle—*la lutte éternelle*—continues its course...

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