

“Suicide Is Painless”? Suicidal Impulse as Theme in Sophocles and Euripides

In three of Sophocles’ seven surviving tragedies self-slaying occurs (by Ajax in *Ajax*, Deianeira in *Trachiniae*, in *Antigone* by three: by title character, Haemon, and Eurydice); and in a fourth play, is intended, almost completed (by Philoctetes in *Philoctetes*) and barely prevented. Euripides’ sixteen surviving tragedies diversify the theme considerably. Wish to “end it all” coincides with voluntary human sacrifice in *Hecuba* whereas in three other instances willing self-sacrifice effects desired good (Mecaria in *Heraclidae*, Menoeceus in *Phoenissae*, and *IA*’s Iphigenia. That Iphigenia expects and *Hecuba*’s Polyxena gains glory by their bravery. In *IT*, two friends are willing each to be sacrificed so the other may live, but neither actually will have to. In *Orestes* Orestes, Pylades, and Electra are condemned. Only suicide will save them from stoning. The aim of Evadne’ exotic suttee in *Suppliants* is to join her spouse in death. Andromache in *Andromache* consents to be unritually murdered to save her endangered little boy, but as in *IT* both lives are melodramatically spared. (In *Andromache*, murderously envious Hermione attempts to hang herself out of acute shame—and fear.) Alcestis in her backstory agreed to die and today does die, so that her husband Admetus may live. In *Trojan Women* Hecuba says Helen *should have* hanged herself for shame. Phaedra in *Hippolytus* does so, not from shame, but to prevent it and to serve both a vindictive purpose (like shamed Ajax in Sophocles) *and* a maternal one.

Ajax and *Hippolytus* are two of six plays on which the proposed paper will elaborate. The others are *Antigone*, *Alcestis*, *Troades*, and *Orestes*.

Before this, however, three more plays complete the suicidal census, totaling thirteen of Euripides’ sixteen plays. In *Medea* her mistress’ potentially suicidal anguish frightens the

Colchian Nurse; indeed Medea contemplates a suicidal attack on Jason and his bride. (Similarly Sophoclean Electra, believing Orestes dead, takes it on herself to avenge their father, though surely dying in the attempt.) “Mad” Heracles toward the end of *HF* contemplates suicide out of unique shame, saving sons and wife only himself to slay them, subconsciously to avenge them upon their killer—himself.

In *Ajax* Sophocles presents Telamonian Ajax humiliated by two events: award of Cousin Achilles’ armor to (in his view) contemptible Odysseus and madness that embarrassingly mocked his intended murderous attack on those he blamed. Dying he escapes shame and existence in a world where friends turn enemies and vice versa. In fact, he offers himself as a sacrifice. Enemy Hector’s sword becomes his sacrificial *sphageus* to compel hostile gods to hurt his ex-comrades in ways that he could not effect.

Three suicides in *Antigone*, though differently occasioned, converge to grant Antigone’s prayer that Creon suffer “no worse than she.” She kills herself by hanging so that she, not Creon, controls the means of her death and that so much the sooner hers may join the ghosts of beloved *philoï*. In frustration like Ajax’, Haemon kills himself, in his case failure of wrathful patricide. His mother kills herself also like Ajax, by sword, as a sacrifice, cursing Creon to avenge both her sons *and* Haemon’ beloved fiancée.

Alcestis’ title character dies by a different *quid pro quo*, not victim slain in exchange for divine action (Euripides elsewhere dramatizes several instances) but volunteered surrogate, a heroic wife dying so her husband Admetus may live. She dies not by noose, blade, or poison but from the kind of death that Apollo manages. She also dies for glory *and* so that her *children* have better life-chances with a living royal *father*. (Admetus in a burst of remorse is restrained from jumping into her grave. Seriously to join her in death—Liebestod?)

In *Hippolytus* Phaedra hangs herself to defend her chastity against Aphrodite's assault, dying as a shamed woman was expected to do (detected adulteress or, as Phaedra alleges in writing and seems to corroborate by suicide, rape victim); she had further motivation: to punish Hippolytus *and* to deny him possible succession to Theseus' kingship but to guarantee it to her husband's and her little sons.

Deaths of two *Troades* figure here, one past, reported (sacrificial Polyxena's, which *Hecuba* had dramatized, which Andromache here envies as ending *Polyxena's* troubles), the other future, prophesied (Cassandra's death, ending *her* troubles and tied to hated Agamemnon murder). Those welcomed deaths, as Sartre proposed, prompt Hecuba's own in the Exodos. Like Sophocles' Antigone Hecuba has nothing to live for, much to die for. She dashes into flames of burning Ilium in *horizontal* suttee.

For atrocious matricide Argos condemns *Orestes'* Orestes and Electra to death. To escape stoning they may kill themselves. They plan to—by arson, combusted with the architectural House of Atreus that unhelpful Uncle Menelaus must never possess.

Life, therefore, is not painless for many characters; for others it's a price worth paying for something desired more.