

Nikolas Dillery
JPTR 3400
Professor Gustav Heldt
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Familial Pressures and Koremori as a Representation of the Heike at Large

Torn between love and his desire to escape from the cyclical and mortal world, Koremori exclaims in Book Ten of *The Tale of the Heike* that “[no] man should have a wife and children” (Tyler 2014, 563), since “they are a constant worry... and hinder enlightenment in the next [life]” (Ibid., 564). Importantly, he gives this declaration a few moments before he will have “righted his error” (Ibid., 566) of maintaining earthly attachments and committed suicide. Moreover, the quote encapsulates the nuanced relationship between Koremori and his family also observed in the consequences of Kiyomori’s tyranny, the burden of being well-respected Shigemori’s son, and his decision to leave his wife and children behind in the capital as he fled first to Fukuhara and then, further, into the sea. Throughout the *The Tale of the Heike*, Koremori is portrayed as a painfully tragic figure who loves so deeply that separation from those that receive his love is a continual source of suffering. Yet, as alluded to above, this tragedy was not just based on that separation, but also on his own self-imposed restrictions that prevented him from reuniting with his family, despite his wishes to do so. Thus, Koremori presents himself as an example of the burden placed on Kiyomori’s descendants ever since Kiyomori began breaking long-established precedents and the stresses that continued to mount within the Heike family as it gradually declined.

The first aspect of Koremori’s “burdens” is of a rather simple nature. Namely, not only was Koremori a Taira, but he was the eldest son of Kiyomori’s eldest son, the devout and precedent-following Shigemori. Thus, he was one of many who dealt with Kiyomori’s evils and

karma after Kiyomori's own death in the sixth book. "The Initiates' Book" indeed states that "[it] was now clear beyond a doubt: The fathers' sins fall upon the sons" (Ibid., 708). Moreover, direct evidence of Kiyomori's influence on Koremori lies in, for example, his position in "the fourth rank as a lieutenant" (Ibid., 13) and Sanesda's concern that "[next] come his third son, Tomomori, and Koremori, his first grandson" (Ibid., 110) to take positions within the imperial court and prevent him from having his own. Clearly, Koremori was implicated in Kiyomori's unprecedented control over titles that included "the banishment of a regent" for "the first time" (Ibid., 176) and, consequently, would face wrath down the line for his implications from hopeful plotters such as Narichika and, later, the successful Yoritomo.

However, not only was Koremori burdened by Kiyomori, but he was also under the heavy weight of his father Shigemori's respectability and reputation. Koremori is frequently seen alongside Shigemori in his first appearances within *The Tale of the Heike*, such as when "Shigemori arrived only much later, with his eldest son, Koremori" (Ibid., 82) and convinced Kiyomori to spare Narichika from execution in the second book. Thus, the tale sets up an eventual opposition between Shigemori's remarkable willingness to die when he declares, "[If] our glory cannot outlast [Kiyomori] and shame awaits those who follow, O then put an end to my life" (Ibid., 164), and Koremori's hesitation to die without consideration of the material world when he "longed to send a message home" (Ibid., 563). Furthermore, Shigemori also becomes a familial burden for Koremori through his calm acceptance of death that leaves Koremori "[choked] with tears" (Ibid., 169) after Shigemori gives him a funerary blade.

In addition, it appears as though Koremori specifically received military responsibilities from Kiyomori and Shigemori, which placed an added strain on his family and himself, since evidence would largely suggest that he was ineffectual as a commander. Most importantly, *The*

Tale of the Heike writes that “[overall] command lay in the hands of... Koremori” (Ibid., 284) during the incident at the Fuji River. However, Book Five also notes that “Tadakiyo sought to discourage [a] rash idea” (Ibid., 288) that Koremori had proposed. Moreover, the tale relates “three indispensable principles” held in high regard by the leaders of days past, one of which was “to forget [one’s] wife and children” (Ibid., 286), a principle that Koremori was not able to uphold though the book claims otherwise. Such a contradiction only seems to emphasize the weakness of Koremori displayed in his inability to remove himself from thoughts about the physical world. Furthermore, this weakness is developed further when Sanemori remarks that “[the] way war is fought in the provinces of the west... [a warrior’s] grief removes him from combat”(Ibid., 290) when it involves the death of his son. Thus, Book Five already provides plenty of evidence of Koremori’s ineptitude even without any consideration of the mishap at the Fuji River. Yet, nothing compares to the disaster at Fuji River, where horses and equipment were lost because people were frightened by “waterbirds that in colossal flocks frequented the Fuji marshes” (Ibid., 290-291) and “cooking fires lit by peasants” (Ibid., 290). Such, indeed, was the disaster of the Fuji River that Kiyomori considered banishment as a punishment for Koremori. Finally, one ought to recall that, though Koremori was moderately successful at Hiuchi after having received aid from a certain Saimei, his forces were later demolished by Yoshinaka when “many Heike... fled, deaf to any reproach or appeal, headlong down Kurikara Ravine” and “the dead lay in mounds” (Ibid., 364). In fact, Koremori himself almost died as a result of his lack of foresight as to the notion of “a flanking force getting behind [him]” (Ibid., 364).

However, what is most peculiar about Koremori comes not from his times as a commander in battle, but after practically all hope had been lost for a Heike revival. Indeed, Book Seven states that “[all] the senior Heike present... were... with their wives and children”

(Ibid., 401) at Fukuhara once they had made their escape from the capital, except for Koremori. Instead, Koremori had left the capital without his wife and children, whom he had left behind for fear ““that the enemy will be lying in wait for [them] on the way”” (Ibid., 384). Therefore, Koremori made the difficult choice to separate himself from his loved ones out of love in a perfect demonstration of one way in which the Heike clan had been torn apart by conflict, decline, and Kiyomori’s unprecedented behavior. Yet the separation that he offered to his wife was more than physical, for he also told her, ““I want you instead to marry again, never mind whom”” (Ibid., 384).

Interestingly and perhaps unsurprisingly, Koremori’s decision to leave behind his wife and children was not well received, despite his good intentions. In particular, his wife even exclaimed in response to his plan that she ““could almost hate”” (Ibid., 385) him for having suggested that she marry again. Furthermore, she also felt betrayed given that the two of them had ““promised always to stay together... like flotsam sunk to the same ocean floor”” (Ibid., 385). Such a simile is eerie in its resemblance to Koremori’s fate in the tenth book and reflects the willingness of Koremori’s wife to go down with him. Hence, it does seem to be the case that Koremori acted erroneously here and should have brought along his family to Fukuhara, as did the other surviving Heike lords. What Koremori has, instead, established is a situation in which his loving gestures are being interpreted and applied in the real world as ““cruel”” (Ibid., 385) statements of thoughtlessness and inconsideration. Moreover, his efforts to demonstrate his love have only served to damage the Taira family.

On the other hand, Koremori’s reflections after hearing the pleas of his children reveal the inherent contradictions in his strategy of separation and hint at their continued existence throughout the rest of his life. Namely, Book Nine writes how ““Koremori lamented to himself”

while saying, “Ah, such are the ties... that bind us to this world of sorrow!” (Ibid., 386). Yet, he was simultaneously manifesting sorrow by creating separation. Furthermore, the quote already suggests Koremori’s later difficulty with attachment to the physical world and, consequently, also contributes to the concept of Koremori as a representation of the last living tendrils of the Heike, holding on for dear life.

Nonetheless, not only are Koremori’s reactions to his decision to leave his wife and children behind noteworthy, but so are the reactions of others outside of his immediate family to Koremori’s tardiness. Indeed, Koremori tells his brothers that “[he] forgot for a time how late [he] was leaving” (Ibid., 386) because he had been focused on consoling his children. In response to Koremori’s subsequent absence, Tomomori perceives Koremori as an example of “how cruelly men’s hearts change” (Ibid., 397), fearing that he and his brothers, the other sons of Shigemori, had abandoned the cause of the Heike. As such, Koremori is also representative of internal divisions, disagreements and strife within the Heike. However, Koremori does eventually arrive, and Munemori almost immediately asks him, “Why did you so unkindly leave Rokudai behind?” (Ibid., 397). This question both reinforces the previously mentioned sentiment that Koremori had acted erroneously in leaving behind his wife and children and raises a question in and of itself as to why Munemori only mentioned Rokudai and not Koremori’s wife and daughter. Moreover, it would appear that the answer to that question lies in Rokudai’s later importance as the final member of the Heike and last member of the Heike to die. Although, Munemori’s focus also clearly reflects his comparative disregard for the female members of his family.

Furthermore, Koremori’s melancholy concerning his wife and children does not end with Book Seven. Book Nine declares that “[all] this time Lord Koremori mourned more intensely,

day by day, being torn from... wife and children” and “thought of having [his wife] join him” (Ibid., 477). Hence, it appears as though Koremori regrets his decision to a substantial extent and must deal with that regret, since “he hated to inflict all this on her” (Ibid., 478) if she were to come to him. However, Koremori’s circumstances soon shall change, and he will consider once more seeing his wife and children.

Book Ten of *The Tale of the Heike* begins with the statement that “[the] heads of the Heike slain on the seventh at Ichi-no-tani reached the capital on the twelfth,” whereupon “[those] with a tie to these men wondered in anguish what fate might await them” and mourned the dead and missing (Ibid., 521). As such, Koremori’s wife feared for her husband and the possibility that his head was among those that had entered the capital in an event that demonstrated fully the consequences of Kiyomori’s evils that were now the burden of all his descendants, both those whose heads were presented and those whose heads may have been presented. Moreover, the book writes that Koremori’s children shared a “concern [that] was sad and sweet” and that “[they] felt about Lord Koremori exactly as he felt about them” (Ibid., 523). Therefore, despite the opposition that existed between Koremori’s desire to be see his family and his desire to keep his children (and wife) away from the dangers that followed him, he was still emotionally aligned with and connected to his offspring in a way that heightens the tragedy that Koremori shall never see them again and yet also confirms a maintained family structure, despite long-distance separation and fear.

Indeed, Book Ten later states that “[although] in the flesh at Yashima, in spirit Lord Koremori wandered off time and again to the capital” to see his family that remained “ever present to him” (Ibid., 547). Furthermore, “because Lord Munemori and Lady Nii suspected [Koremori] of divided loyalty” (Ibid., 553) on account of his clearly distracted mind and because

his desire to see his family only ever grew, Koremori finally set out from Yashima. Yet, fear concerning what happened to Shigehira turned him away from the city and motivated him to, instead, seek out Saitō Takiguchi Tokiyori, a monk known as the “Takiguchi Novice” (Ibid., 549). This turn of events reflects a tipping point in Koremori’s mind, no doubt related to the internal pressure of Lord Munemori and Lady Nii’s suspicions, which serve to further symbolize the decline of the Heike through its own inner strife. Yet, they simultaneously still reflect Koremori’s hesitancy, for he chose to visit a monk instead of his family.

Finally upon Mount Kōya and with the Takiguchi Novice in the ninth chapter of the tenth book, Koremori professed his desire to “renounce the world [there] and extinguish [his] life in fire or water” (Ibid., 553). However, he also revealed to the Takiguchi Novice his long standing “problem” of attachment in which he desperately desired to “follow the mountains back to the city and be together again with those I love” (Ibid., 553). Thus, this ninth chapter exhibits not only a development on Koremori’s part, but also the continuity of a substantial flaw that shall in the end challenge his work towards enlightenment. Even when he finally renounced the world Koremori “said, all too sinfully, ‘I would have no regrets now if only my dear family could have seen me one last time’” (Ibid., 558), for Koremori felt a deep, loving connection with his family despite his physical separation from them. Such a statement goes against the Takiguchi Novice’s assurance that ““this illusion that is life does not matter”” (Ibid., 553).

Moreover, also crucial to Koremori’s renunciation is the presence of his two retainers, Shigekage and Ishidōmaru. Namely, Koremori urges the two men to ““stay by [him] to the end”” and ““then hurry on up to the city”” without renouncing the world themselves (Ibid., 556). Thus, in this manner he treats them similarly to the way he treats his family members in that he wishes for them to not be so affected by that which he shall undertake. Nonetheless, Shigekage and

Ishidōmaru both decide to follow him in renunciation anyways in a way that is reminiscent of Koremori's wife and children who wish to see him, though he will not let that occur. Shigekage, in particular, feels as though he must serve and follow Koremori, since his father had served Shigemori and Shigemori had asked Shigekage to “never part ways with Lord Koremori” (Ibid., 557). It follows that the two retainers almost serve as ways to further develop the tragedy of the diminished and broken Taira family while also providing information on how the decline of the Taira also brought harm to lord-retainer relationships within their ranks. As such, Koremori also serves as a representation of the decline of lord-retainer relationships and “families” for the Taira, as lords and retainers alike were killed or compelled to become monks.

Finally, it is, at last, necessary to discuss Koremori's suicide, a tragic back-and-forth between readiness and sorrow. To begin, Koremori “had made up his mind” about drowning himself, “but now that the time had come to act, he felt sorrow and apprehension” (Ibid., 563). Yet, he soon recognized how “[profane] attachment must rule over [him] still” and corrected himself by calling the Name, only to fall back into sorrow when considering how “everyone will know in the end” about his fate, including his family, and how “how deeply [everyone] will despair” (Ibid., 563). Thus, without any help from the Takiguchi Novice, Koremori could not pull himself out of his constant concerns for his wife, children, and fellow members of the Heike. In effect, his physical separation from them and mental association to them through love were acting as opposing forces that brought him to a tragic standstill that represented the plight of the family of the Heike. Nonetheless, the Takiguchi Novice in the end was able to guide Koremori towards a detachment from his emotions by emphasizing to Koremori that “All who meet must part” (Ibid., 564), with the result that his death by drowning would be of no greater concern than any other death of himself or his wife. In addition, he specifically told Koremori that “the

Buddha emphatically discourages love for any wife or child” (Ibid., 564) given that it keeps people “bound... to the wheel of transmigration” (Ibid., 564) and, through the example of Yoriyoshi, that “a faith so pure” (Ibid., 565) will save Koremori despite any former attachments he may have had. Thus, Koremori eventually focused once more on the faith of calling the Name and then “plunged into the sea” (Ibid., 566).

Interestingly, Koremori is not the only Heike to consult a monk, become more engaged religiously, and die in Book Ten of *The Tale of the Heike*. Namely, Shigehira also faces the same fate, but with certain key differences and some similarities. For example, Shigehira speaks with the monk Hōnen who emphasizes that “there are many paths to release, but... the best of all is calling the Name” (Ibid., 535) and, in so doing, also advocates for a focus on “a faith so pure” (Ibid., 565) based on reaching out to Amida Buddha. Moreover, Hōnen tells Shigehira, “Let your sins be ever so grave, never, never condemn yourself” (Ibid., 535), in a manner that resembles the Takiguchi Novice’s reassurance to Koremori that “Yoriyoshi... beheaded sixteen thousand men and more” (Ibid., 565), but still “attained his cherished goal: rebirth in Amida’s paradise” (Ibid., 565). However, the two Heike nobles differed in how they approached religious salvation. On the one hand, Shigehira did not become a monk, but “received [the ten precepts] with tears of joy” and “felt a surge of joy” upon hearing of a future in Amida’s paradise. On the other hand, as mentioned above, Koremori struggled with sorrow as he attempted to call the Name, but did become a monk after having officially renounced the world. Finally, while Koremori was given the opportunity to choose his own fate in killing himself, Shigehira was eventually executed by monks at Nara, where Shigehira had accidentally burned down the Great Buddha of Tōdaiji. A brief analysis of these similarities and differences first suggests that the fates of both Shigehira and Koremori reflect the consequences of Kiyomori’s unprecedented

actions that will be felt throughout every single one of Kiyomori's descendants. In addition, the differences highlight a well respected, put-together man in Shigehira who, nonetheless, must face a punishment for his karmic crime of destroying the Great Buddha and a "weaker," more emotionally attached man in Koremori who, ultimately, conquers his attachments and may choose his fate given that "he "[has] done nothing especially sinful" (Ibid., 565). By having these two distinct Heike figures, *The Tale of the Heike* emphasizes both the particular and accidental tragedy of a respectable figure who must fall thanks to orders from their father and the tragedy of a more "typical" Heike lord of the main line of descendance from Kiyomori.

Finally, it is worth noting that Koremori has one more familial "burden" that has yet to be mentioned in full. In particular, Koremori's son, Rokudai, carries on Koremori's previous burdens as "[the] scion of the senior Heike line" (Ibid., 664) and, in so doing, contributes to Koremori's own character through comparisons of virtue while Koremori may then be, conversely, utilized to understand Rokudai's character. As opposed to Koremori's struggle to detach himself from emotions, "Rokudai said to his mother, 'There is no escape, you know. Let me go out there right away.'" (Ibid., 665) when Tokimasa came to collect him, demonstrating a great deal of calm. Moreover, he also expressed concern for her in a very mature fashion when he warned her that "[if] warriors come bursting in[,]... they will find you in a most unfortunate state" (Ibid., 665). Of course, he is just a child, and "when alone he presses his sleeves to his eyes and sobs" while detained by Tokimasa's men, but "he [is] grown up at heart" (Ibid., 670) who faces his potential execution with a dignity that one does not see in Koremori's panic that ensued before his suicide. As such, Rokudai reflects back on Koremori by putting more pressure on him as a lesser noble sandwiched between the virtuous Shigemori and Rokudai. Furthermore,

Rokudai's death coinciding with the end of the Heike implicates, by extension, Koremori with the near-end of the Heike.

Therefore, it must be the case that Koremori is an (imperfect) representation of the downfall of the Heike in *The Tale of the Heike*, being directly related to Kiyomori, Shigemori, and the last Heike, Rokudai, and being the victim of much familial tragedy and many karmic consequences. Moreover, there may be some people who find Koremori to be a shallow character on account of his weakness and almost contradictory nature, but it seems clear that, rather, those traits only emphasize the tragic figure who is Koremori, a man so deeply in love that he cannot act on his love.