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Suicide in ancient Greece

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The theme of suicide appears several times in ancient Greek literature. However, each such reference acquires special significance depending on the field from which it originates. Most of the information found in mythology, but the suicide in a mythological tale, although in terms of motivation and mental situation of heroes may be in imitation of similar incidents of real life, in fact is linked with the principles of the ancient Greek religion. In ancient drama and mainly in tragedies suicide conduces to the tragic hypostasis of the heroes and to the evolution of the plot and also is a tool in order to be presented the ideas of poets for the relations of the gods, the relation among gods and men and the relation among the men. In ancient Greek philosophy there were the deniers of suicide, who were more concerned about the impact of suicide on society and also these who accepted it, recognizing the right of the individual to put an end to his life, in order to avoid personal misfortunes. Real suicides will be found mostly from historical sources, but most of them concern leading figures of the ancient world. Closer to the problem of suicide in the everyday life of antiquity are ancient Greek medicines, who studied the phenomenon more general without references to specific incidents. Doctors did not approve in principal the suicide and dealt with it as insane behavior in the development of the mental diseases, of melancholia and mania. They considered that the discrepancy of humors in the organ of logic in the human body will cause malfunction, which will lead to the absurdity and consequently to suicide, either due to excessive concentration of black bile in melancholia or due to yellow bile in mania. They believed that greater risk to commit suicide had women, young people and the elderly. As therapy they used the drugs of their time with the intention to induce calm and repression in the ill person, therefore they mainly used mandragora. In general, we would say that there were many reasons to suicide someone in antiquity. Very important factor was to avoid captivity and the consequent overcrowding of indignity, especially for politicians and military leaders. Also intention in these circumstances was to avoid torture and the disgrace of rape. Strong grief is another reason, as in case of death of family members. The erotic disappointment had place in ancient suicides, which concerned both men and women, while there were also suicide for financial reasons. Especially for the elderly, the despair of the anility in conjunction with physical illness and cachexia, were important factors for these people to decide thee suicidal. Finally, the methods of suicide fitted their epoch, but bear resemblance to those of the modern time. Poisoning was very common to both men and women but equally popular in both sexes was also the hanging. It was not unusual to fall from a high in order to reach the death, while stabbing a sword in the body for self killing was widespread in men and soldiers.

Key words: Suicide, mythology, drama, philosophy, history, melancholia.

Introduction

Ancient Greek literature is rich in references about suicide. All these information derive from various areas of ancient Greek thought and life, such as mythology, drama, philosophy, public life and medicine. Different reasons and different significance can characterize each act of suicide. In this essay we will try to summarize and organize all the material, in order to understand this phenomenon in ancient Greek world.

Suicide in mythology

Due to the fact that ancient Greek society was fully depended by agriculture at least at the early beginning, therefore the fundamental principal of ancient Greek mythology lied on the rural life. That is, the continuous cycle of birth, auto-fertilization, death and so on of the plants, was the basic motive which formed the deeper meaning of ancient Greek myths.¹ In this context the suicide incidents are suitable as a type of death in the representation of the death, which is demanded in ancient Greek mythology, even if each such case is modulate and enriched by anthropomorphic characteristics in the motives and the sentiments of each hero or heroine, who committed suicide in the myths.

Very distinct example is the case of the three daughters of Cecrops, Aglauros, Pandrosos and Herse. When Erichthonios was born, Athena put him in a basket and told the three girls not to open it. But due to their curiosity Pandrosos and Herse opened it and went mad seeing Erichthonios having the characteristics of a snake, so they jumped of the Athenian Acropolis killing themselves. Reminding their story the Athenians performed the ritual of Arrephoria, where two little girls carried baskets from Acropolis to the shrine of Eros and Aphrodite in its north slope, putting them down in this shrine and took others, carrying them on Acropolis. This ritual symbolized the death and reborn of the earth and the agriculture, where the suicide of the two girls serves as the death and the first phase of the cycle of reborn.²

Similar in meaning are the scapegoat rituals performed in many ancient Greek cities, in which a person was in the most cases expelled from the community –only during the ritual and the end returning back– or executed –executions concerned persons, who caused problems in the community such as en-

emies or criminals convicted to death–, in order to act as a "sponge", which will clean the community of the problems and the misery taking them on their body far from the other citizens. The inner meaning of these rituals is based on the model of the reborn of the earth as it was described above but many explanatory myths which accompanied them, included acts of suicide, in order symbolize the death and justify the expel or the execution of the person during the ritual, which was performed as a reminiscence of the myth. This is the case of the myths of the two daughters of Scedasos, who after being raped by two Spartans suicide due to their disgrace, the myth of the suicide of Sappho falling from a rock due to the rejection of her love to Phaon by him and the selfless sacrifice of Iphigenia as it is pointed in some versions of her myth, when she is not rescued as the majority of the versions tells. The motive of self-sacrifice for the common good is also found in the female myths of Leontides, Coronides, Hyacinthides, Erechtheidae, who voluntary offered their lives, in order to obey the oracle, which demanded their death, in order their cities to be saved from a plague or war. Similar male sacrifice is found in the myths of Codrus, the mythical king of Athens, who followed the divination to be killed, in order Athens to win the war. Therefore, he entered the enemy camp, created a disturbance and was killed by the enemies. Same also is the myth of Menoeceus, a descendant of the Spartoi in Thebes, who suicide in order to come true the prediction that Thebes would survive only if one of the Spartoi will be sacrificed.²

Nevertheless, putting aside the fact that the principle of the suicide in ancient Greek myths is based on the reborn model, the plot of the myths containing a suicide, are formed in such a way so the characters and the acts of the heroes or heroines resemble to the characteristics of the real men and women and therefore their suicide is a result as sometimes the human passions and sentiments can lead to it.

Furor was a great motive for suicide. The most famous mythical suicide, this of Ajax of Salamis, derives from it. Ajax, when he did not received the armor of Achilles, when mad and slaughtered a herd of sheep taking revenge on the Greeks, but when he recovered from his madness, he realized what has he done and suicide as punishment. Analogous is the case of Hercules, who burned himself after the furor, which conquered him realizing that he had

worn a poisoned tunic. We also should remember that cases, where a mythical person is driven mad by a god and suicide. Butes and Lycurgus became mad by Dionysos and committed suicide, while the same fate had Broteas who failed to honor Artemis, therefore the deity let him believe to be immune to fire, finding the death, when he threw himself into it. The gods were frightened by Agdistis's self-castration and caused its son to perform the same self-mutilation and death. In addition, madness is told to be imposed in the myth of Acamas by his female lover, who gave him a box to open in case he decided to never return to her. The box accidentally opened and he went mad finding the death by falling on his sword.³

Grief is the most powerful sentiment leading to suicide, which also is an outcome in various instances. The loss of a lover, love without response, abandonment of the lover, loss of the husband and the loss of offspring or other members of the family mark the grief suicides. It is told that Kleitophon, believing that Leukippe is dead or slaughtered by pirates, brought himself in court under false accusations in order to reach the death penalty or jumped into the sea and also Thisbe stabbed herself finding Pyramus dead by suicide. Chaireas was in the steps of suicide, when Kallirhoe did not want to become his. Ameinias suicide, when Narcissus rejected his love, act which forced even Narcissus to suicide, because he could not afford the humiliation he had caused.³ Suicides in order to avoid grief and the criticism of the society are described in many myths, in which women were abandoned by their lovers, such as the abandonment of Alcinoe by visitor, of Ariadne by Theseus, of Calypso by Odysseus, of Callirhoe by Diomedes, of Dido by Aeneas and of Scylla by Minos.⁴ On the other hand, many mythical widows followed their husbands to death committing suicide as are the cases of Alcyone, Cleite, Cleopatra, Deianeira, Evadne, Hylonome, Laedameia, Marpessa, Oenone, Polydora and Polymede.⁴ Numerous references as before are found about women also had suicide in the myths after the death of their children. This is found in the myths of Aethra, mother of Theseus, Ahhaea, mother of Meleager, Antieleia, mother of Odysseus, Arethusa, mother of Corax, Eurydice, when she learned even the death of her last son, Haemon, while she had lost all the other elder children, Niobe, mother of Niobides, Perdix, mother of Talos and Themisto,

mother of ten children, who instead of provoking the death of her rival's children, Ino's, she provoked the death of her own children, therefore she committed suicide.⁴ In this subcategory we can include the suicide of Aegeus, falling from a rock into the sea (the Aegean Sea), when according to myth he saw the black sails instead of the white one's on the ship of his son, Theseus, as he had instructed him, in case he killed Minotauros, believing that his son was dead. In addition, the loss of other family members provokes the suicide. Erigone, the sister of Orestes suicide after the loss of her brother and Erigone the daughter of Icarus did the same after the loss of her father. Antigone, who lost all her family, is another example, who hanged herself due to similar reasons as above. Also we should not forget the myth of Althaemenes, who accidentally killed his father and prayed with success to be swallowed by the earth.⁴

Shame is another cause, which forced especially women in myths to commit suicide. Shame was found in several occasions, but with more interest in plots with sexual relationships. Many virgins were mentioned to kill themselves after being raped and losing their virginity. That is the example of the self-hanging of raped Arsippe and the similar self-hanging of raped Nicaea and also the self-hanging of virgins Aspalis and Side, in order to avoid rape. Unique is the myth of Caeneus, who was born as female (Caenis) and asked Poseidon to change sex, after being raped by him, in order to overcome the shame, but finally as man he could not afford the shame of rape and committed suicide. Shame is also present in the suicide of women who were involved in incestuous relationships, whether as a result of rape or not. That is seen in the myths of Euopis, Halia (raped), Harpallyke, Jocasta, Kanake, Kyane, Niobe, Pelopeia (raped) and Phaedra (raped).³ The same problem was faced also by men, having in mind the suicides of Cinyras, Clymenus and Valerius, who without knowing had incestuous relationships with their daughters and when they realized it, they killed themselves, while Oedipus is mentioned in different version that after self-blinding, he committed suicide, when he realized his relationship with his mother. From another point of view it is worth to mention the myth of Nycteus, who due to shame have forced her daughter to flee, because she became pregnant by Zeus and then suicide.⁴

Finally, we can complete our presentation of mythical suicides adding some more motives for suicide. Fear is found in the case of Hippodamia, who committed suicide fearing her husband's, Pelops, revenge, after her sons, Thyestes and Atreus, killed their illegitimate half-brother, Chrysippus, to please their mother. Frustration is resent in the mythical suicide of Sirens and Sphinx, after being gained by Odysseus and Oedipus respectively. Two mythical kings, Nisus, king of the Megarians and Agrius, king of the Calydonians committed suicide, when they lost their kingdoms. Anger pushed to suicide Haemon, who did not succeed to kill his father due to father's bad treatment toward Antigone and also Evenus, who pushed unfortunately his daughter Marpessa and Ida, her's abductor. At the end there is also the case of the forced suicide. This is referred in the myth of Aeson, who was forced to kill himself by Pelias.¹⁰

Suicide in drama

Close to the suicides in ancient Greek myths stay the suicides described in Greek drama and especially tragedy. Although the poets are inspired by the myths, they use the suicides as a mean in the development of the plot and in a theatrical way. Now the context of suicide should be seen according the ideology of the writer. In the 32 extant tragedies suicides (intentions or committed) exist in 13.⁵

Aeschylus dealt with the conflict among gods.⁶ In his plays suicide never happened, except from intentions and threats. Clytemnestra dreamed about it in the Agamemnon, and the Danaids threatened in the Supplices, but this is a poet's mean to attract the pity and the fear of the audience.^{5,7}

Sophocles, who promoted the conflict among men and gods, used a lot the suicides.⁶ His tragedy, *Ajax*, is based on this theme and the suicide of the hero is an act of reconciliation with the gods, symbolizing the conflict between the virtues of the previous archaic aristocratic society and these of the new world of the fifth century BC. In the play *Antigone*, where there are three suicides, heroine's suicide expresses the conflict among the unwritten (moral-divine) and written (human) law, while suicides of Haemon and Eurydice in the same play emphasize the tragedy of Antigone and exaggerate the grief for the loss of family persons. Furthermore, Sophocles in the *Trachiniae* presents the suicide of Deianeira, who

killed her husband. Her act is not only an act of desperation and guilt, but also a conflict among the well organized under the moral laws society and family, which express the divine harmony and the human passions. About the threats for suicide, we found them expressed by Philoctetes in the homonymous tragedy, signifying the antithesis among the world of the humans and the benevolent divine world. Suicide threats are told by *Elektra* in Sophocles' *Elektra*, which represent the tragedy of the person, who is desperate after the lost her father and the hypothetical lost of her brother and blaming as human her mother for her misery contra to the moral order.⁵⁻⁷

Euripides was interested in representing the human passions and the problems in the interpersonal relationships, therefore he is characterized as the most tragic ancient poet.⁶ Phaedra's suicide in the *Hippolytus* is an act for revenge because of her unfulfilled love to her step son, Hippolytus and also an outcome of her shame, when the others knew her inappropriate desire. Menoeceus' suicide in the *Phenissae* reflects the personal sacrifice for the common good as the hero suicide according to the oracle, in order to save his country.⁵

On the other hand, suicide was a subject of jocularity in the New Comedy. We can see it in the fragments of Philemon, who put in the mouth of a Euripides' admirer that if it was true, that a dead has eyesight, he would committed suicide to see Euripides.³

Suicide in philosophy

Ancient Greek philosophical thought was divided in the theme of suicide. As deniers of suicide we can count the Pythagorean philosophers, Plato and Aristotle and as supporters the Stoics and the Epicureans.⁸

Plato in his work *Phaedo* presents Socrates' guarded enthusiasm for the familiar to the Pythagorean dualistic thought opinion, that suicide is always wrongs, while is an act of freeing our souls from the body, which is its jail, where the gods have placed it (Plato *Phaedo* 61b–62c).⁹ In his other work, the *Laws*, disapproves suicide as a disgraceful act, believing that those, who committed suicide, should be buried in tombs without signaling. Nevertheless, he will recognize four exceptions, believing that in the following circumstances suicide is an act of cowardice by persons, who were not able to face

life's changes. That is, when someone's mind is morally corrupted and therefore his character can not be changed, when suicide is a judicial verdict, as in the case of Socrates, when suicide is imposed by great and unavoidable misery and when suicide comes out of shame after unjust acts (Plato *Laws* IX 854a3–5, 873c–d).¹⁰

Aristotle will express his opinion on the theme in the work *Nicomachean Ethics*. There he condemned suicide as an act of cowardice in front of difficulties and problems, such as poverty, erotic disappointments or other painful event. Even more he will assess suicide as mistake towards the state, without fully justifying this thought (Aristotle *Nicomachean Ethics* 1138a5–14).¹¹

On the other hand, the Stoics will justify suicide in five occasions, because in those circumstances man is unable to reach the felicity, which is constituted of virtuous proper to divine perfection. These occasions are, when it is absolute necessity, when there is tyranny, which forces the citizens to act beyond their will breaking the sacred rules, when there is a chronic illness, which does not allow the soul to use its body as a tool for its favor, when there is great hunger and privation and also when there is abnormal drunkenness, which lead to madness.⁸

The Epicureans believed that death is insignificant and the gods did not affect human life. Therefore they did not see suicide as something forbidden and in intolerable situations. But they underlined to their followers that they must not decide easily about the quality of their lives, finding the time to have a second thought about suicide.⁸

Antisthenes, the founder of the Cynics, is believed to have expressed the idea to lead oneself out of life and to have written a book to Ajax. Although they did not praised the death, their belief that there is not life after death and their indifference for the body and the material things, did not inhibit them from suicide.³

Finally, if we would like to compare the above different philosophical approaches to suicide, we could infer that the deniers are interested more about the effect of the suicide to the society and the defenders more about the effect on the individual.

Suicide in public life

Passing from the intellectual approach to the real incidences of suicide we realize that the informa-

tion restrict mainly restricted to the historic figures. Trying to describe the situation where these persons were led to the suicide, we will begin with the political and military leaders, who before being captured by the enemies and suffer the tortures and the humiliation, they preferred self-killing.³

The most famous is the case of Cleopatra VII, who before being captured by Octavian Augustus probably drunk a mixture of poisons, rather committed suicide by an asp's (egyptian cobra) bite. Diaios, the leader of the last Hellenic coalition against the Romans was defeated by Mummius and before capture committed suicide. General Philoumenos' body, who had organized Hannibal's conquest of Taranto, was never found after Fabius Maximus took back power. It is said that he thrown himself from his horse into a well. Perhaps, General Demosthenes, who participated in the Athenian expedition to Sicily, committed suicide after the defeat, although most sources say that he was captured and found a horrible death after torture. Orator Demosthenes drunk poison before being captured by the forces of Antipater in the island of Kalaureia.³

In similar situations analogous fate had also soldiers, women and children. The best illustrated paradigm is this in the monument of Attalus I in Pergamon in memory and in demonstration of his victory over the Gauls-Celts. In the center there was the Gaul, who had just stabbed his wife with his sword and was doing the same to his body. Earlier at the invasion of the Gauls-Celts, three Milesian girl committed suicide in order to avoid being raped by them, as we are informed by an epigram. In 200 BC when Phillip V occupied the city of Abydos, the men stabbed their wives, their children and then themselves. The soldiers of the slave's army in Sicily, which was organized by the slave Eunus, beheaded each other, when their uprising was reaching the defeat. Suicide, falling from the citadel, was again the result of the other slave revolution in Sicily in 104 BC, when they were surrounded.³

In times of war except from the voluntary suicide there was also the forced suicide. That is the case of Nikokles, the last king of Pafos, who was obligated to suicide by the soldiers of Ptolemeos. His wife, Axiothea, stabbed their daughters and forced her sisters in law to suicide with her. When Mithridate VI was expelled to the Kingdom of Armenia his second wife, Monime, was forced to suicide as was forced

his palakis, Bereniki too. Olympias, the mother of the Alexander the Great, forced Eurydike to suicide, the wife of the Alexander's half-brother during the struggle for the power after Alexander's death.³

Leaving the suicides, which were linked in one or another way to the war and the fear of the human before the captivity, torture and humiliation, we can examine the suicides of various philosophers. A lot of the famous ancient Greek philosophers committed suicide as Pythagoras, Anaxagoras, Speusippos, Diogenes, Epicurus, Zeno the Stoic, Dionysios, Kleanthes, Euphrates and Demonax. It is believed that Empedokles and Aristotle committed suicide too, but this information counts more as an anecdote rather than a true story. All these were at the age of nearly 70 to 80, with the exception of Demonax, who suicide 100 years old. Their suicide has the character of euthanasia, because they took this decision, when they were very old, according the standards of their epoch and most of them suffered from illnesses. Therefore, they wanted to put an end to their lives, in order to avoid suffering, as they had declared in their philosophical teaching.

Staying to the readiness of the elderly to the suicide, we should mention the case of the mother of Darius III, Sisygambris, who lived in respect in the captivity of Alexander the Great. After his death she committed suicide due to the death of her substitute son and her solitude or desperation, as we could say.³

In addition, there were some other motives for suicide except the above. Shame led Themestocles' mother to suicide, because she could not stand her son's recourse to the Persian King Artaxerxis, but Themistocles committed suicide (or according to Thucydides died from illness), in order to avoid to go against the interests of the Greeks, participating in the repress of the Egyptian revolution and also to be ungrateful to the Persian King. Shame is also found in homosexual relationships as in the case of Demokles. He refused the love of Demetrios Poliorcetes and did not accept the presents or his threats. He avoided Demetrios Poliorcetes, therefore he did not go to public baths or gymnasiums, but one day he found him in a private bath and jumped into the boiling water. Misery is the motive for suicide of Periandrus' mother, who committed suicide after the fall of her son, because she could not stand her miserable fate. Antigenes, a soldier of Alexander the Great, could not stand his financial problems

and committed suicide. Unusual for the Greek world was suicide as manifestation of devotion to the dead master. The only example is that of the two female slaves of Cleopatra VII, Charmion and Iras, probably it happened due to the acceptance of the anatolian customs by Cleopatra VII.³

Finally, we should not count for real the stories that an athlete who could not stretch the bow any more jumped into the fire, that Pantites the Spartan arrived later and did not participate in the battle of Thermopylae, therefore he hanged himself returning back to Sparta non standing the disgrace, that one Pythagorean student could not stand the reprehension of his master in front of others and suicide or even the dream interpretation of Artemidorus Daldianus, that people who saw in the dreams that suicide, committed suicide. These stories, even if there is an echo of real events in them (but with many alterations), seem to survive as anecdotes.

Suicide in medicine

Ancient Greek medicines faced the problems of suicides as part of the symptomatology of the two mental illnesses, mania¹² and melancholia¹³ and especially the second one. Having as principal that the discrepancy of the four humors (blood, phlegm, yellow and black bile) is the basic problem of all the diseases, they considered that this phenomenon in the organ of logic in the human body will cause its malfunction, which will lead to the absurdity and consequently to suicide, either due to excessive concentration of black bile in melancholia or due to yellow bile in mania.¹⁴ Believing in this idea about the causes and having little interest in the detailed description of the symptoms of the mental ill persons due to their diversity, they preferred to speak about paranoiac behaviors in these two mental illnesses, pointing that melancholia is characterized by fear, where suicide was included.

Few times we will found specific reference to suicide in ancient Greek medical literature. Aristotle will underline that young and elderly are in greater risk of suicide (Aristoteles Phil. et Co. *Problemata* 954b.28–955a.22).¹⁵ Rufus of Ephesus will point that melancholics kill themselves, believing that like this, they will be released from their misery or because they interpret death as pleasant (Aetius Med. *Iatricorum liber vi* 9.65–87).¹⁶ Galen, when he describes the characteristics of the melancholics, he notes that

they are full of fears, accuse their lives for their problems, hate other people, put death in high level and some of them want to suicide (Galenus Med. *De locis affectis libri vi* 8.189.19–8.190.19).¹⁷ Aretaeus of Cappadocia will highlight about melancholics that they face the danger of taking poison and they hate to live (Aretaeus Med. *De causis et signis acutorum morborum* 1.5.3.1–1.5.4.1).¹⁸ Even more he will write that they complain about their lives and want to die (Aretaeus Med. *De causis et signis acutorum morborum* 1.5.5.4–1.5.8.1).¹⁸ About suicide in mania we will choose only the reference of Aretaeus of Cappadocia, because his work comprises all the earlier knowledge about mania and is the only specific example, which links mania and suicide. Describing mania he will note that these patients have peculiar symptomatology, but when their disease is characterized by anger, they are dangerous for others, some of them have killed their servants and also for themselves letting us to think the suicide (Aretaeus Med. *De causis et signis acutorum morborum* 1.6.4.5–1.6.5.3).¹⁸ A special case of suicide is described in the Hippocratic corpus. The author of the work about the diseases of the virgins writes that women suicide more than men and some virgins suicide especially at the time of their period. He believes that responsible for this outcome is the lack of sexual intercourse, which provokes the discrepancy of the humors and especially the discrepancy of blood (Hippocrates Med et Corp. *De virginum morbis* 1.1–45).¹⁹

Finally, about the therapy these medicines used ancient drugs, which induced calm and repression and also euphoria, in order to change the mood of the patients. Mandragoras was their first choice as we see in the Hippocratic Corpus, where it is recommended for those who want to hang themselves (Hippocrates Med et Corp. *De locis in homine* 39.1–2).²⁰ But we could infer that they have used all the drugs for mental illnesses such as hellebore, hyosciamus, strychnos and dorycnium, since suicide was included in mental disturbance.¹⁴

Epilogue

We saw the different concepts of suicide in the various fields of ancient Greek thought and life. In order to have a thorough view of the phenomenon, we must add the methods for suicide in ancient Greek world.³ Poisoning was very common to both men and women but equally popular in both sexes was also the hanging. It was not unusual to fall from a high in order to reach the death, while stabbing a sword in the body for self killing was widespread in men and soldiers. Finally, it is important to remember that a special word for suicide appeared only in the late antiquity, signifying that with the exception of mental illnesses, suicide was not in the temperament of ancient Greeks and its appearance was more frequent during later times, in which there was great political instability, where the individual could not find security in order to face the personal problems as it was done during the existence of City-State.

Η αυτοκτονία στην αρχαία Ελλάδα

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Το θέμα των αυτοκτονιών εμφανίζεται αρκετά στην αρχαία ελληνική γραμματεία. Όμως, κάθε τέτοια αναφορά αποκτά ειδικό νόημα ανάλογα με το πεδίο από το οποίο προέρχεται. Οι περισσότερες πληροφορίες εντοπίζονται στη μυθολογία, όπου όμως η αυτοκτονία σε μια μυθολογική διήγηση, αν και ως προς τα κίνητρα και την ψυχική κατάσταση των ηρώων μπορεί να ομοιάζει με ανάλογα περιστατικά της αληθινής ζωής, στην πραγματικότητα συνδέεται με τις αρχές της αρχαίας ελληνικής θρησκείας. Στο αρχαίο δράμα και κυρίως στις τραγωδίες, οι αυτοκτονίες συντελούν στην τραγικότητα των ηρώων και στην εξέλιξη της υπόθεσης, γινόμενες ταυτόχρονα εργαλεία

στην παρουσίαση των αντιλήψεων των ποιητών για τις σχέσεων των θεών, των ανθρώπων με τους θεούς και των ανθρώπων μεταξύ τους. Στον χώρο της φιλοσοφίας υπήρξαν οι αρνητές της, οι οποίοι ενδιαφέρονταν περισσότερο για τον αντίκτυπο της αυτοκτονίας στο κοινωνικό σύνολο, όπως και εκείνοι που την αποδέχονταν, οι οποίοι αναγνώριζαν το δικαίωμα στο άτομο να βάλει τέλος στη ζωή του, ώστε να αντιμετωπίσει προσωπικές δυστυχίες. Πραγματικά περιστατικά αυτοκτονιών θα τα πληροφορηθούμε κυρίως από τις ιστορικές πηγές, οι οποίες όμως στην πλειονότητά τους αφορούν σε ηγετικές μορφές του αρχαίου κόσμου. Πιο κοντά στο πρόβλημα των αυτοκτονιών στον καθημερινό βίο της αρχαιότητας βρίσκονται οι απόψεις των αρχαίων Ελλήνων ιατρών, οι οποίες όμως έχουν γενικό χαρακτήρα και δεν επεκτείνονται σε συγκεκριμένα περιστατικά. Οι ιατροί δεν ενέκριναν την αυτοκτονία και την αντιμετώπισαν ως ψυχωσική συμπεριφορά κατά την εξέλιξη των δύο ψυχικών νόσων, της μελαγχολίας και της μανίας, θεωρώντας όμως ότι περισσότερο αφορά στη μελαγχολία. Θεωρούσαν ότι η δυσκρασία των χυμών στο όργανο της λογικής θα προκαλέσει τη μη ορθή λειτουργία του και θα οδηγήσει στον παραλογισμό, εξαιτίας του οποίου θα υπάρξει και το ενδεχόμενο της αυτοκτονίας, πράγμα που θα συνέβαινε, είτε σε υπερβολική συγκέντρωση της μέλαινας χολής στην περίπτωση της μελαγχολίας ή της ξανθής στη μανία. Αναγνώριζαν ότι κινδυνεύουν να αυτοκτονήσουν περισσότερο οι γυναίκες, οι νέοι και οι ηλικιωμένοι. Ως μέσο θεραπείας χρησιμοποιούσαν τα φάρμακα της εποχής τους, όπως έκαναν και στις ψυχικές νόσους γενικότερα, με στόχο να προκαλέσουν ηρεμία και καταστολή στον άρρωστο, άλλα και ευφορία, γι' αυτό κύριο φάρμακο σε αυτές τις περιπτώσεις ήταν ο μανδραγόρας. Γενικότερα, θα λέγαμε ότι ως αιτίες αυτοκτονιών ήταν η αποφυγή της αιχμαλωσίας και του εξευτελισμού, ειδικά για τους πολιτικούς και στρατιωτικούς ηγέτες, όπως και των βασανιστηρίων, αλλά και της ατίμωσης από τους βιασμούς που αυτή θα συνεπάγονταν. Σημαντική αιτία ήταν ακόμη η ισχυρή θλίψη, όπως σε περιπτώσεις θανάτου οικείων προσώπων. Η ερωτική απογοήτευση είχε ακόμη θέση στις αρχαίες αυτοκτονίες, τόσο σε άνδρες, όσο και σε γυναίκες, ενώ ακόμη παρατηρούνταν αυτοκτονίες για οικονομικούς λόγους. Ειδικά για τους ηλικιωμένους, η απόγνωση των γηρατειών σε συνδυασμό με τη σωματική ασθένεια και καχεξία ήταν σημαντικοί παράγοντες που μπορούσαν να ωθήσουν αυτά τα άτομα στην αυτοχειρία. Τέλος, οι μέθοδοι της αυτοκτονίας ήταν ανάλογοι των δυνατοτήτων της εποχής, που όμως έμοιαζαν με τους σύγχρονους. Δηλαδή, η λήψη δηλητηρίου είχε μεγάλη διάδοση, τόσο στους άνδρες, όσο και στις γυναίκες, όπως εξίσου διαδεδομένος ήταν και στα δύο φύλα ο απαγχονισμός. Δεν έλειπαν οι πτώσεις από ύψος, ενώ ο αυτοτραυματισμός με ξίφος αφορούσε περισσότερο στους άνδρες και στους στρατιωτικούς.

Λέξεις ευρετηρίου: Αυτοκτονία, μυθολογία, δράμα, φιλοσοφία, ιστορία, μελαγχολία.

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