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Dominique Godineau, *S'abrégé les jours. Le suicide en France au XVIIIe siècle*. Paris: Armand Colin, 2012. 336 pp. Notes, tables, and bibliography. 24.00€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-200-24969-4.

Review by Clare Crowston, University of Illinois

From the spectacular collective suicide of the six “martyrs of Prairial” to a nineteen-year-old Breton villager who hanged himself after his father’s death, the act of suicide tells us as much about the society and culture in which it takes place as about the unique circumstances of the individual who undertakes it. This is the central argument of Dominique Godineau’s fascinating book, *S'abrégé les jours: Le suicide en France au XVIIIe siècle*. Godineau will be extremely familiar to readers of H-France from her pioneering work on the history of women and gender and in particular for her 1988 *Citoyennes tricoteuses. Les Femmes du peuple à Paris*. In *Citoyennes tricoteuses*, Godineau displayed her passionate interest in the history of ordinary women and men and her gift for evoking the mental and material world of working people with its monotonous toil and exuberant moments of leisure, its fears and hopes, hatreds and love, and its sometimes shocking violence in word and action. Publication of the book in English in 1998, as *The Women of Paris and their French Revolution*, was a godsend to students and instructors of the revolutionary period.[1]

Many of the thematic, methodological and, epistemological concerns at the heart of *Citoyennes tricoteuses* reappear in this volume. In *Citoyennes tricoteuses*, Godineau declared that interest in women in the Revolution could not be restricted to the heroic or tragic stories of individual actors; instead, she sought to understand how women’s activities—economic, political, intellectual, and sexual—illuminated “the specific contexts and gender relations of women during the revolutionary movement.” In turn, viewing the Revolution from the perspective of women would help to elucidate the “revolutionary phenomenon” by casting in “relief parts that up till now have rarely been taken into account.”[2] Moreover, by refusing to separate the practices of ordinary women from the ideas and writings of (mostly male) elites, she emphasized the role of poor, working women in making the history of ideas. The result was a path-breaking study of women’s revolutionary activities and militant engagement.

In *S'abrégé les jours*, Godineau reiterates her affiliation with great twentieth-century French works in the social history of culture. At stake in this book, she tells us, is a political history of the emotions as called for by Lucien Febvre and Robert Mandrou. Like other practices discussed by such historians—eating, working, dressing—Godineau insists on suicide as a meeting point of the individual and collective. One of the most personal and intimate human acts, suicide was also the result of the cultural habitus and social world in which suffering individuals forged their choices. Similarly, she posits a dialectical relationship between discourse and practice. Cultural representations reflect events in the world that produced them and tell us what contemporaries imagined as plausible explanations for suicide; in turn, such representations inspired the manner in which individuals and their entourage made sense of the act of self-destruction.

In this book, Godineau demonstrates the painstaking dedication to archival research and thoughtful integration of the broadest possible array of sources that is a hallmark of the French tradition and that formed such an impressive element of her work in women’s history. She provides the reader with a candid and probing assessment of the sources she combed for cases of suicide—both attempted and successful—and the limitations and selective perspectives inherent in each of them. These include a sampling of the copious archives of Parisian police commissaires (the famous Y series that has been such a fertile ground for eighteenth-century social and cultural history), judicial records of trials inflicted on

the corpses of suicides, mentions of suicidal acts in the decades-long journal of the Parisian bookseller Hardy, and philosophical texts debating the moral status of self-inflicted death. Godineau's scope extends from the early 1700s through the Revolution and the first years of the nineteenth century, and she has conducted substantial research in the judicial archives of Brittany to provide a counterpoint to her Parisian focus.

A considerable portion of the book is given over to careful quantitative analysis of the cases of suicide revealed in the primary sources. Godineau's methods here reprise French methods of approaching the history of cultural attitudes and social practices through the construction and interpretation of serial data. Like Michel Vovelle, who documented rising secularization through bequests in wills, or Daniel Roche, who tracked the rise of individualism and self-expression through Parisians' consumption of mirrors and dress styles, Godineau illuminates the conception and meaning of suicide in the eighteenth century through the shifting number of individuals who killed themselves in the street or in their homes, collectively or alone, and with reference to God and sin or to happiness and individual liberty.

Godineau prefaces and accompanies this quantitative work with repeated emphasis on the impossibility of generating exhaustive or wholly reliable statistics given the fragmentary nature of the data, the difficulty of seeing through the evasions of family members and friends to the "true" nature of the suicide, and the gaps, ambiguities, and outright contradictions that occur between different versions of the same events. With regard to the last point, she provides fascinating examples of cases where Hardy's explanations—culled from public rumor and, possibly, his personal ties to individual commissaries—tell a quite different story than the one noted in the commissaire's *procès-verbal*. Deliberate obfuscation on the part of a sympathetic commissaire? Exaggerated sensationalism from a public opinion increasingly fascinated by suicide? As Godineau points out, the indeterminacy of such accounts is an important reminder of the limitations of the evidence with which she must work.

With these caveats in place, Godineau divides her analysis of sources across five thematically differentiated chapters. Chapter one examines the legal status and treatment of suicides, tracking the frequency of prosecution for what remained an illegal act until 1791, the judgments and sentences imposed, and the forms of burial permitted. The following chapters turn to the suicides themselves, with chapter two analyzing the actors involved in the cases revealed by the sources, as well as the times of year and day, the location, and the techniques employed. Chapter three is devoted to the motivations for self-destruction, as directly stated in written notes or oral statements and as inferred by family, friends, police officials, or members of the Parisian public. Chapters four and five situate the question of suicide in the context of larger developments. Chapter four examines the extent to which the desperate acts of individuals reflect broad cultural and social changes, while Chapter five interrogates the relationship between suicide and public events, especially the tumultuous political events of the French Revolution. In each case, the author culls whatever quantitative data can be obtained from her sources, breaking down each question in terms of the gender, age, and social status of the actors and the chronology of their cases. She combines this evidence with a close reading of the language of her sources, ranging from suicide notes to Enlightenment texts.

Godineau's study produces a wealth of major and minor findings, too many to cover in detail even in the generous confines of an H-France review. She is quick to acknowledge that many of her conclusions confirm earlier work on suicide in France and elsewhere in this period. As other historians have shown, men outnumbered women among successful suicides while women were numerous amongst failures; it was more common in spring and summer than winter, during the day than by night, and divided by gender in terms of age, social status, and method, with (relatively older and wealthier) men tending toward firearms and steel while (proportionally younger and poorer) women opted for drowning and defenestration. She interprets gender distinctions in suicide, including women's relative lack of success, as owing as much to opportunity as to symbolism (it being much easier to survive attempted drowning in the Seine than a shot to the head). Tainted by its association with the scaffold, hanging remained the

preserve of poor peasants and laborers. Godineau does, however, disprove a common assumption about suicide drawn from studies on the early twentieth century. Eighteenth-century self-destruction was not, *pace* Emile Durkheim, the work of isolated victims of urban anomie; even those who lived alone belonged to vibrant communities, as testified by the familiarity with the victims evinced by witnesses interviewed by police.

The finding emphasized most heavily by Godineau herself is chronological in nature. Louis XIV's 1670 criminal ordinance reaffirmed pre-existing laws against suicide, placing it among the few crimes in which the dead body was subject to prosecution, trial, and public execution as well as state confiscation of all property. Corpses found guilty of the crime of suicide incurred the public shame (and symbolic inversion) of being dragged by the feet to the scaffold and hanged upside down. As Godineau shows, Parisian and Breton authorities could and did prosecute both successful and failed suicides. While legal pursuit of those who attempted suicide was always and remained rare (mostly restricted to prisoners), Godineau documents a chronological decline in show trials of the dead bodies of suicides. First perceptible in the 1730s, the decline in prosecutorial appetite for such spectacles was decisive by the 1770s. Catholic clergy moved in step with judicial authorities. By the end of the Old Regime, the bodies of suicides were regularly—if discreetly—buried in sanctified ground alongside their kin.

Godineau explains this judicial and religious shift as a result of a transition in broader cultural attitudes toward suicide, away from its association with sin and shame and toward acceptance of the private choices of individuals who experienced intolerable suffering and misery. Up to the seventeenth century, suicide was viewed primarily within a religious context in which motivation was ascribed to demonic temptation; across the eighteenth century religious associations largely disappeared in favor of either a medicalized notion of insanity or compassion for individuals now seen as overly sensitive or chronically depressive. These attitudes both reflected and were encouraged by Enlightenment discourses on individual liberty and happiness emerging in the same period. Growing acceptance of an individual's free choice to end intolerable suffering thus combined with a new valorization of the pursuit of happiness as a primary life goal. In Godineau's reading, these new attitudes explain why families, friends, and neighbors grew less reticent in the 1770s and 1780s to acknowledge the act of suicide and seem to have made fewer efforts to emphasize the insanity or inebriation of those who sought to end their lives. In the same period, emerging public opinion focused on a series of prominent suicides that took on the status of "*affaires*" alongside spectacular bankruptcies, scandalous sexual liaisons, and political crises.

Godineau's overall conclusion is that there is indeed a history of affect and that the second-half of the eighteenth century produced a sea-change in in both perceptions and experiences of emotion; the mental and emotional state that led to the act of suicide was not universal, but a product of history, not only for educated elites but among common people as well. This chronological arc is confirmed by the other themes addressed in her study. Hewing to her stated goal of using suicide as a window onto broader cultural and social themes, Godineau confronts her findings with the conclusions of decades of French and Anglo-American research on the eighteenth-century, not only on the Enlightenment and secularization, but also on well-studied issues such as the Consumer Revolution, the growth of private life and intimacy, economic culture, and gender ideologies. What she finds largely echoes and confirms existing studies of these phenomena. To give one example, the crucial importance of credit and reputation for economic exchange and social status (as noted by Daniel Roche, Laurence Fontaine, and Natacha Coquery, among others) meant that a substantial proportion of suicides, especially among men, stemmed from the shame of financial ruin. This is also why we see their letters stipulating not so much the distribution of their effects as the extent of their debts and leaving precise instructions for the repayment of accounts outstanding, loans, and unpaid rent or wages. Women, whose concerns with honor lay elsewhere, did not commit suicide to escape the stigma of bankruptcy. Female servants did kill themselves after being dismissed from their positions, sometimes as a result of the shame of illegitimate

pregnancy, which confirms what other historians have told us about the lack of economic opportunities for women and their vulnerability to sexual predation.

The most extraordinary chapter of the book is the final one, with its examination of the political suicides of the Revolution. Godineau is not the first to point out that the succession of political crises of the Revolution was accompanied by a wave of suicides among the losing factions, but she accords them important new attention. As she points out, they were particularly common as a response to sentences of death by revolutionary courts, with the most famous case being the six so-called martyrs of Prairial who killed themselves with the same knife in a shocking collective act of defiance at the public tribunal. As she emphasizes, suicide as a response to the certainty of execution belongs to an entirely distinct category, restricted to the years of the Revolution. She makes the intriguing point that indulgence toward suicide seems to have been associated in the public mind with other radical familial reforms such as authorization of divorce and equal inheritance rights for illegitimate children. Another type of suicide—from despair at hunger and unemployment—was also largely limited to the Revolution, with the spring of 1793 standing as the high (or rather low) point of this phenomenon.

S'abrégé les jours offers a remarkably thorough and rich account of practices and perceptions of suicide across the Old Regime and Revolution. Godineau demonstrates, once again, the methodological value of using serial data as a means of approaching the history of cultural attitudes, especially when combined with sensitive readings of printed and manuscript sources. Her book constitutes a tactfully implicit reproach to the decline of such extensive archival research among American historians of France, due to a combination of practical constraints and methodological dispositions. Although it is hard to quibble with the author's account of a fundamental shift beginning in the 1730s and with a significant turning point in the 1770s, I cannot help being slightly—perhaps perversely—disappointed that the results of such painstaking research are largely to confirm a rather familiar narrative of cultural and social change. Much of what Godineau concludes is a re-affirmation of scholarship on the new ideas, attitudes, and ways of life that emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century.

But where to look for startling new ideas or a counter-narrative? One possibility might be the many cases of suicide that escape the book's scrutiny or an expanded notion of self-destruction and self-harm. As the author states, the large majority of successful or attempted acts of suicide was not reported to police officials, and she has (understandably) only been able to examine a small percentage of the cases they did investigate. We hear little of the larger spectrum of self-destructive behavior (alcoholism, flight from home, etc.) or the treatment of failed suicides or more broadly cases of depression and mental illness. The cases in police files were inevitably the most public and obvious of "suicides" (and thus the least susceptible to dissembling). It is thus perhaps not surprising that these cases correspond so well to the notion of suicide found in printed sources. Moreover, the tantalizing glimpse Godineau offers of the gaps between Hardy's recounting of a suicidal *affaire* and the official version in police files seems to call for an analysis focused as much on the indeterminacy and ambiguity surrounding the act of suicide itself and on the construction of sources regarding it as on its relationship to overall narratives of cultural change. They also suggest that the largely top-down account of cultural change Godineau offers—with Enlightenment attitudes being diffused down the social scale—might be shifted toward a more open-ended and more multi-directional framework for the transmission of ideas and values.

Notes

[1] Dominique Godineau, *The Women of Paris and Their French Revolution*, trans. Katherine Streip (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[2] *Ibid.*, xvii.

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