

## H-France Forum

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Dominique Godineau, *S'abréger 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 Alan Forrest, University of York

Suicide was widely discussed in eighteenth-century France, whether by enlightened philosophers eager to rid it of its sinful religious connotations, by conservatives and clerical pamphleteers of the Counter-Enlightenment who associated it with moral decadence, or by playwrights portraying in heroic suicide the epitome of classical virtue. The writers of operatic arias showed an unwavering fascination with the self-inflicted death of their heroes and heroines, while Goethe's masterpiece of 1774, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, filled a generation of young men with romantic dreams of self-inflicted death. There were real-life suicides, too, apparently a rising number of them if the official figures are to be believed, though it is clear that they fluctuated in accordance with the economic and political climate of the moment, and the higher numbers in the later years of the century may have reflected a greater willingness to declare deaths to the authorities. But suicide was a constant feature of eighteenth-century France—sufficiently constant for some writers to wonder whether a tendency to suicide might not be a specifically French character trait—and suicides were a regular source of rumor and gossip in local communities. This may have owed something to the novelty of the expression itself. The very notion of “suicide,” of a man consciously taking his own life, was new to a legal and judicial language that had previously seen it as a form of killing and talked of *meurtre* or *homicide de soi-même*. Suicide to early modern lawyers was not a symptom of despair but a form of murder, the denial of one's person to the king and of one's soul to God, and it had to be punished accordingly. It was not until 1791 and the French Revolution that suicide was finally decriminalized (though in comparative terms France was in no way out of line here, and, as this study rightly reminds us, the idea of self-destruction as a crime often clung on longer in Protestant countries; it was not until the 1960s, for instance, that suicide ceased to be a criminal offence in Britain). In France the reform was not reversed either by the Jacobins or in the new Code of 1795.

Dominique Godineau's new book is much more than an empirical overview of eighteenth-century suicide in France, though that in itself would have been quite novel. There is little published on a subject that was not listed systematically in the archives: if historians of popular culture like Arlette Farge have mentioned it in passing, suicide is almost entirely absent from the great theses on modern death, from Michel Vovelle to Pierre Chaunu and Philippe Ariès. The pioneering study of Parisian suicide, as the author acknowledges, was by Richard Cobb, but his was a relatively slight study of six years of the Paris morgue (between 1795 and 1801). Cobb is also highly impressionistic in his use of evidence: he stresses the poverty of the victims, the threadbare clothing in which they went to their deaths, the desperation shown in their last walk to the banks of the Seine or their headlong dive from a tenement roof or a fourth-story window. Godineau, from her broader source base, challenges something of Cobb's insistence on poverty (though she largely sustains it in the case of female suicides) and suggest that there were different sorts of suicide, different reasons why the young and old, the male and female, may have sought relief from their present sufferings in a self-inflicted death. But she shares his ability to write sympathetically about the victims, to search out clues as to their state of mind, their anxieties, and their sense of honor, their degree of alienation from society at large. If women were largely the victims of poverty, she suggests, it is because their activity was so much restricted to their families and to the private sphere. The range of motivations in the case of male suicides—who were by far the more numerous—was wider, including mental illness and depression, professional disappointment, bankruptcy, spiraling debt and the dishonor which these brought in their wake. It is interesting, indeed, to see the lengths to which suicides would go in the hours before they ended their lives to regularize their affairs and pay any

outstanding debts to their suppliers, their customers, and neighborhood shopkeepers, to clear their names and re-establish their reputations before they passed into another world.

Godineau is not content to tell individual stories of desperate lives, dramatic and harrowing as they often are, but seeks to throw light on the values of society as a whole. She writes about attitudes towards those driven to take their own lives and to the families they left behind, the degree to which French society showed a social conscience and shared a sense of collective responsibility. Across the eighteenth century she detects a significant softening of these attitudes, with even local prosecutors and public officials beginning to show more understanding and clemency. The act of taking one's own life began to be understood more as an act of desperation and less as an act of murder. It ceased to be castigated as a moral sin. And whereas the royal decrees of 1712 and 1736 spoke of fighting to stop suicide being carried out with impunity, by the end of the Old Regime repression had all but ceased. It was the least that the more humanist and secular attitude created by the spirit of the Enlightenment demanded.

Across previous centuries little compassion had been shown. Suicide had a grim heritage to live down, decried by the Church as a mortal sin against God and defined by the state as a crime against the monarch as God's representative on earth—a crime, in short, of the deepest gravity that took its place alongside treason and insurrection against royal authority. Those who committed suicide, or who, perhaps less happily, tried unsuccessfully to do so, were met with terrible retribution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from both Church and State, a public humiliation that left a deep stain of dishonor on widows and families. Suicide remained, even on the eighteenth-century statute book, a capital offence: those who failed in their attempt to kill themselves might face execution, while those who succeeded, who had by their deaths escaped any pain and suffering the state could bestow, risked having their corpses degraded at a place of public execution and were denied burial in consecrated ground. Those who sought to kill themselves were punished publicly, in front of the crowd, particularly in those cases where the suicide had been a public act or where rumor had already spread so widely that the crime could not be concealed. Two dragoons who in 1774 formed a suicide pact in Saint-Denis and left letters that explained their intentions before blowing their brains out in a local inn were among the last to be condemned to the traditional penalty of the suicide: their corpses were taken to the local gallows in a tumbril, where the public executioner hung their bodies in effigy from a gibbet, upside down, their heads swinging above the ground as they began their final miserable journey to Hell. In other cases relatives were refused permission to bury the body until an enquiry had been held, or the corpse of the victim was solemnly disinterred from its grave to be hanged from the gibbet and subjected to ritual humiliation. In the eyes of the state, and especially of the Church, the suicide was a murderer, and the price of the crime had to be paid, even by the dead. The body was to hang for twenty-four hours before being torn down and thrown into an unmarked pit; the suicide's property was to be confiscated; and, significantly, it was decreed that his memory should be effaced. His family was left bereaved and humiliated by their association with the crime. The suicide had become a non-person in the eyes of the law.

What interests Godineau here is the evidence of a changing attitude on the part of the state as the eighteenth century advanced, shown in an increasing reluctance to mount prosecutions and in the increased discretion that was shown towards families and the bereaved, the innocent families dishonored before the public gaze by their association with suicide, humiliated by gossip about bankruptcies and sexual deviance, dishonored by pointless penalties imposed on an inanimate corpse. Jurists increasingly saw the continued application of such penalties as distasteful and unnecessarily cruel, and they sought an end to a practice which, they felt, was bringing the law into disrepute in the eyes of the population. The police continued to check out suicide in as far as they had to confirm that there had not been a violent or suspicious death, but when they had satisfied themselves of this they generally authorized the victim's burial. In particular, the courts showed a more lenient attitude towards those who had attempted suicide but had failed. By the 1780s attempted suicide was no longer regarded as a dangerous offence by the judicial authorities.

It is impossible to offer any precise figures for the number of suicides each year in France. For Paris the best figures we have are between 50 and 150, a broad enough range by any standard. Of these, there were around three times as many men as women; and relatively few were beyond the age of 40. The majority, of course, was from the popular classes, and the percentage of *femmes du peuple* was especially high. A high proportion of the suicides took place in the domestic space, or in attics, huts, and outhouses attached to it, though here the women were slightly less preponderant, since many preferred to drown themselves in the Seine. The different means of ending one's life are analyzed, too: some were deemed to be more honorable and were therefore preferred by those of higher social rank (gunshot, dagger, or poison); others were seen as humiliating and dishonoring for the respectable classes (hanging especially, because of its close association with capital executions, though drowning was also considered a death for *roturiers*). The rich almost always chose pistols; hanging was the suicide of the poor, especially of those living in rural poverty. There were also more exceptional deaths—philosophers cutting their wrists in the public baths with volumes of Voltaire at their sides, and revolutionary suicides steeped in Classical Antiquity, in the tradition of Cato or Gracchus.

One senses that Richard Cobb would have approved of this book. It is in no sense a statistical study: there are no computers to crunch numbers, and Godineau's approach is humane and sensitive, far removed from the "historians in white coats" he so disliked. And Godineau, as a historian of gender, has also a particular feel for female suicides, the suicide of the lonely and vulnerable in an often confusing world. Cobb, building on the often scant evidence of the records of the *juges de paix* of the Seine, suggested that "physical loneliness on the part of women cannot have had much to do with such gestures of despair," adding that "moral loneliness, all the more acutely felt for having been suddenly imposed, whether by masculine inconstancy, or masculine absence on occupations connected with the war, may offer a better explanation." But it remains largely a question of surmise. The motives of those who chose to end their lives are seldom crystal-clear, despite the letters and scribbled excuses they often left behind. Godineau suggests an explanation where evidence is available, drawing as much on the press or on the partly fictionalized ruminations of the bookseller Hardy as on the official court transcript to construct her impressions. What emerges is far more than a social history of suicide; it is deftly linked to the evolving culture of the eighteenth century, the sense of self and of individual worth that emerged over the century. And by looking in depth at two contrasting regions—urban Paris and rural Brittany—she shows how the tragedy of individual deaths produces sensitivities among neighbors, concern, sympathy, even a degree of protection against the authorities. The picture she paints is of a tangled skein of moral values and individual ambitions, as well as a collage of unhappy and often unsatisfactory lives.

For the historian of the French Revolution the final section will be of especial interest, an attempt to link suicide to politics and to re-examine the conclusion of Maurice Halbwachs and Emile Durkheim that suicide rates rose at moments of economic crisis, but fell in times of war and political upheaval. The result is not as clear-cut as one might expect, perhaps because the decriminalization of the act of suicide changed public perceptions of it after 1791. The high point for revolutionary suicide was 1795, when the Seine froze for weeks on end and prices soared after the end of the Maximum: the poor were driven to desperation by both cold and hunger. But what of the suicide rate during crises of a more political character? It is clear that the war did nothing to drive people to suicide, and—if we exclude the political class at the centre of the Revolution—nor did the Terror. Suicide rates among the population at large did not, perhaps surprisingly, rise during Robespierre's period of rule; rather, it was the end of the Terror, and the shattering of egalitarian dreams, that seems to have unleashed a spate of deaths among the radicals of the capital. Similarly on the right, the event which more than any other led royalists to kill themselves was the execution of the King to whose return they had dedicated their lives. Godineau makes the point that many of these men—for they were men, on both left and right—committed suicide at moments when they were not themselves in any personal danger. They were unforced suicides, suggesting a degree of voluntarism and selflessness. In some cases, indeed, there was something heroic about the manner of their deaths, philosophic actions that recalled the self-sacrifice of classical heroes or the double suicides so highly praised by writers of the Enlightenment. In contrast, among the political factions in the Assembly and the

deputies and ministers of successive regimes, the Revolution's appetite for purges meant that suicide was seldom a matter for individual reflection, but rather an act of desperation following arrest of the passing of a death sentence. For many, from the Girondins in the autumn of 1793 to Robespierre and his closest followers after the Ninth of Thermidor or the Martyrs of Prairial Year III, suicide might have seemed a heroic gesture, a way of leaving one's mark on history. But if it was a way of dying nobly, in the manner of the Ancients, it was also a way that cheated the executioner and saved them from the ignominy of the guillotine.

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