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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 David Troyansky, Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, CUNY

Dominique Godineau is well known as the author of a study of Parisian women and the French Revolution.^[1] In her new book on suicide, she again opts for deep archival research in Paris but complements it with investigations in Brittany and a keen eye on matters both social and cultural. The seminal French works on death by Michel Vovelle and Philippe Ariès dealt little with suicide.^[2] John McManners (uncited here) devoted a chapter to it, relying on a few of the same sources as Godineau, but he emphasized philosophical debates and described only those acts that would become topics of broad discussion.^[3] A few historians have devoted articles and theses to the French eighteenth century—especially Jeffrey Merrick, with five articles cited by Godineau, but also Gaston Barreau and Patrice Higonnet—and there is the richly descriptive but curious little volume on the morgue by Richard Cobb.^[4] Expanding the geographic and chronological scope reveals a major study on England, a survey from the Middle Ages to the French Revolution by Georges Minois, and a diverse collection of articles, edited by Jeffrey Watt, covering the early modern period,^[5] but Godineau's book fills an obvious lacuna, offering a sensitive reading of archival material and placing the study in a long-term context from the sin and criminality of the early eighteenth century to a decriminalized act that had taken on important cultural and political meaning by century's end. Watt tells a European-wide version of that story in introducing his early modern volume, but Godineau immerses us in a French (and particularly Parisian and Breton) context. Reading it leads one to ask what set France apart; the answer would seem to have to do with secularization, the importance of classical models, and the French Revolution.

Godineau traces a clear evolution while also allowing the voices of the past to emerge. The criminal nature of suicide yielded legal paper. We know it cannot be representative, as people hid the fact of suicide. Elites were particularly successful in this regard—except when it came to individuals jumping out a window into public spaces. Working against secrecy, on the other hand, was a public desire to know.

The sources are of three sorts. First there are the police and judicial investigations into individual acts as well as appeals which permit modest quantification of circumstances and methods over time. Godineau's sample includes about 500 suicides and attempted suicides between 1720 and 1812. A second derives from the curiosity of Siméon-Prosper Hardy, who left in *Mes Loisirs* a record of his own research into Parisian suicides from the 1760s to 1780s. Hardy's discussion of almost 300 cases provides a window on Parisian practices and on public fascination with suicide. Finally, there are literary sources, including classic Enlightenment texts that spell out elite and popular opinion. Such texts, reflecting but also shaping ways of understanding suicide, served as the basis of McManners' chapter and Minois' treatment of the period. Godineau's original contribution comes less from that literature than from archival investigations and Hardy. To put it another way, she is most successful in juxtaposing familiar debates and notable individuals with "ordinary" suicides.

The book describes the arc of the century, but it is organized topically. In the first chapter, "Le cadavre devant ses juges," we learn of the process of investigation, trial, and appeal as well as eventual decriminalization in 1791. We learn that the crime attracted less official interest over the course of time. In Paris, despite beliefs in a suicide wave later in the century, legal cases were growing fewer after

the 1720s. The archives yield ten times as many male as female suicides, but perhaps neighbors and authorities were more successful at hiding female deaths. Punishment for suicide, which officially included dragging the body and hanging it from the feet, expunging persons' memories, and seizing property, became less common. In other words, the decriminalization that the Revolution accomplished really accentuated a process already under way. And, contrary to a widespread misconception, compassion for the suicide was found as much in the popular classes as among elites.

Chapter two, "Vues(s) d'ensemble," offers a group portrait, explorations of time and space, and the menu of methods. Godineau estimates about 50 to 150 cases in Paris per year in the last third of the century. Most suicides were men, but women killed themselves at younger ages while men did so in more advanced age. While, contrary to contemporary opinion, there is no reason to believe that numbers increased, suicide attempts were increasingly visible. We learn that daytime, particularly morning, was the time to commit the act and that most occurred at home. Women went out the window or into a river or well (although drowning could be seen as accidental), while men used firearms. Knives were also more common among men, but women opted for them more than for guns. This chapter and the appendices report the statistical data Godineau has assembled, but she wisely warns against taking numbers on faith.

The third chapter, "Les chemins du désespoir," looks at the wide range of reasons people attempted suicide, thus telling us about life as much as death. Tales of love and of family tension coexist with stories of financial difficulty and of dishonor resulting from having committed a crime, having been arrested, or being threatened with arrest. Suicide stemming from unattainable love, despite the literary fame of Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther*, was relatively rare. But it existed. And Rousseau was more of an influence than Goethe. There were love affairs gone wrong, pregnant servants relieved of their positions, and lonely widowed spouses. After 1792, some individuals reacted badly to divorce. Godineau follows Merrick in speaking of the importance of the couple in the second half of the century, when one might threaten suicide in private life. Godineau mentions suicides of children in conflict with parents, and she finds a gender difference in the mention of illness. Men refer to a much wider variety of ailments. In part it might be a function of medical knowledge, but simple reference to pain is also much more common among men than women. And both begin to refer to abandonment or solitude. Thus, ennui is evoked in Enlightenment opinion, and disgust with life spreads beyond the cultural elite by the late 1770s. Psychological concerns are blended with political ones in the Revolution, as disappointment about achieving happiness blends private and public matters. Paranoid dementia becomes noticeable in Paris, but it was, after all, a society under greater surveillance. Over the long run she describes a shift from medieval suicides seeing demons to eighteenth-century Parisians fearing assassins and *mouchards*.

The fourth chapter, "Individus et société," narrates a large number of cases, including preparation, staging (especially in examples of double suicides), letters, and entourage. She describes the clothing of suicides (something that Cobb had described in detail) as well as the desire to pay debts. The double suicides included the well-known *dragons* of Saint-Denis (1773) (mentioned by McManners and treated at length by Merrick) and the lovers of Lyon (1770). They created theatrical situations for themselves, *mises en scène* that would be described in the broader culture. And the philosophical suicide that borrowed from classical ideas gave way to sentimental suicide with the Revolution slipping in political content. She discusses letters, comparing them to testaments in the selection of final words. She bases her analysis on 115 letters written by 85 authors, of whom 17 were women, between 1700 and 1812. The lack of religious content contrasts with what is found in English suicide letters expressing repentance for sin, but they sometimes refer to victimhood and concern for families. Poorer people and women write shorter notes than the more privileged and male authors of suicide notes. The fact that most suicides end up receiving proper burials indicates the turn away from punishment and the importance of compassion and solidarity. Godineau summarizes the chapter by saying it has been

concerned with identity, rapport with family and community, the self-image constructed by the suicide, and the message addressed to others.

Chapter five, "Suicide et événement," offers suicidal acts against the backdrop of the late Old Regime and the Revolution. Those who attempted to kill themselves were quite aware of surrounding events and circumstances. The crisis of the Old Regime is evident, as, for Hardy and others, suicide moves from *fait divers* to *sujet de société*. Godineau relies in part on Merrick's work on the politicization of particular suicides. With the Revolution, the politicization is even more obvious, and suicide is seen as an act of liberty, saving honor, expiating error, and expressing love of the good and country. She describes classical models and contemporary acts of heroic suicide. They cluster in the period 1789-1795, and especially 1793-95, but then there is a return to domestic and sentimental causes with the Directory. Nonetheless, with economic crisis in the year III, a significant share of suicides is related to poverty and lack of bread. But the total number does not go up. The important thing is that suicide becomes an event lived collectively. Godineau goes into detail with the martyrs of Prairial sharing the same knife and creating an image of collective action. There is the case of Goujon, who had written about suicide in a novel of 1790. Godineau departs from Higonnet's interpretation of a political transposition of an existing tendency. She insists on the importance of political context and the history of events. Like some of her fellow scholars, she refers to the well-known political figures who attempted suicide, but she does more than anyone to look at ordinary Parisians (about 20), and she describes the defeat of Prairial and recognition of the failure of popular insurrection as causing anxiety and despair. It was the end of hope for the *sans-culottes*, some of whom opted for suicide. She agrees with Higonnet that there was something particularly French in the attraction for political suicide; it was not found in America, for example. What we have in France is the emergence of the political self and a certain density of political life, involving events, affect, passion, and hope. Living intensely in the present and thinking of the future could lead to defeat, disappointment, and despair. But she ties the Revolution back to the 1770s and philosophical suicide.

The conclusion offers final comments on the longer chronological context. At the start of the century, the word "suicide" was unknown in French (it came via Prévost from England), and the act was punished by the justice system. A century later, it was a common word and not a crime. The evolution occurred slowly, with a clear break in categorization in the 1770s. Suicide was more public and less hidden and shameful. It was certainly no longer linked to demons but was medicalized and psychologized. It was no longer about sin, although the Church would go back on the offensive in the early nineteenth century. But stoicism and unhappiness were on the agenda. In the conclusion, Godineau leaps across the centuries to Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian suicide who sparked the Arab Spring. I am not sure what to make of that except that we still take note of political suicides as emblematic acts in revolution. Godineau's book culminates in the French Revolution; this sets France apart even if the bigger story is not so different from what we have heard from others studying other places, from sin and crime to social fact.

Godineau has pushed beyond the article-length studies that were already available to readers, but she remains in debt to Merrick and others. Her use of police archives brings to mind the work of Arlette Farge, and her understanding of urban life owes something to David Garrioch. The rich testimony she has exploited complicates the picture of a simple change from religious to secular and medicalized worldviews. The quantitative material is limited, and she knows it. The richness of the book, which aims for a general readership, is in the juxtaposition of literary and philosophical language with everyday speech and action recounted by the authorities and those contemplating suicide themselves. The book is really a contribution to the scholarship on the self, on sentiment, and on emotion. Perhaps, in its use of suicide notes, it represents a trend in reading personal writing for an understanding of emotion before, during, and after the French Revolution, one important example of which is the recent study of letter-writing by Anne Verjus and Denise Davidson.[6]

Notes

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

[2] Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of our Death* (NY: Knopf, 1981); and Michel Vovelle, *La mort et l'Occident: De 1300 à nos jours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

[3] John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death among Christians and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

[4] Richard Cobb, *Death in Paris: The records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine, October 1795-September 1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[5] Michael MacDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); and Jeffrey R. Watt, ed., *From Sin to Insanity: Suicide in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004). The Merrick and Higonnet articles are readily available, but for Brittany see Gaston Barreau, "Les suicides en Bretagne au XVIIIe siècle," (Maîtrise, Université Rennes 2, 1971). Comparisons may also be made with the articles by Michel Porret on Geneva.

[6] Anne Verjus and Denise Davidson, *Le roman conjugal: chroniques de la vie familiale à l'époque de la Révolution et de l'Empire* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon, 2011).

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