Suicide in Eighteenth-Century France

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By

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In memory of Marian Williams and Polly Seely,
inspiring AP history teachers

For Bill Moore,
Penny Johnson,
Tip Ragan,
and Gabrielle Verdier,
friends for the long haul

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PREFACE

This preface is less confessional and less cantankerous in nature than the one in my companion volume on sodomy published in 2020. Let us just say that I regarded suicide as an option for myself long before I adopted it as a topic for research. I have lived with depression since adolescence. I am grateful for the support of my siblings, friends, and husband and for the medications I have taken for decades. I am not at all surprised that some humans take their own lives. As far as I am concerned, we all have the right to do so, as David Hume argued in a courageous and contentious essay written long before and published not long after his death from natural causes on 25 August 1776, some seven weeks after the American colonists invoked "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

My scholarly interest in suicide dates from several weeks I spent, sometime in the fall of 1989, in the Cabinet des Manuscrits in the Bibliothèque Nationale on rue de Richelieu, where one exchanged an orange plaque for a green plaque (or the other way around?) to secure a seat, where the wood floor creaked with every footstep, where they rarely opened the windows in summer or lighted the fixtures in winter. One day a loose bulb crashed from the ceiling onto the end of one of the tables. As the staff went wild, the unflustered gentleman seated across from me muttered, in French, "Research is dangerous."

During those weeks I worked my way through the eight folio volumes of Siméon Prosper Hardy's remarkable journal of life in the capital in the last decades of the Ancien Régime and collected 259 cases of Parisians who killed themselves or tried to do so. Hardy led me to explore suicide in police records and judicial proceedings that no one had consulted for this purpose. It turned out that this subject, like so many others discussed in prescriptive sources, has a documented and complicated history in descriptive sources.

In the following years I managed to convince students in my seminars on historical methods at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee that suicide is more intriguing than depressing by involving them in research on the topic. The UWM library holds the annual registers of phone calls to the West Allis police about crimes committed in that suburb from the 1930s to

the 1960s. Each volume includes a page for suicides, and each student collected data (place and time, sex and method, and much more) from one year. We aggregated the data in class, defined patterns, and discussed possible causes of changes over decades. To expand and enrich the exercise, students tracked down obituaries, and I, through freedom of information, secured copies of the reports of officers who investigated suicides in one sample year. Needless to say, witnesses and newspapers not only revealed but also concealed information.

For years I planned to develop an interdisciplinary course on the history of suicide, from antiquity to modernity, addressing moral, cultural, and political issues, including quantitative and qualitative evidence from the past as well as current media coverage of the self-inflicted deaths of veterans and teenagers, not to mention public figures. It would have been difficult to choose just a few classical characters, such as Dido and Cato or Lucretia and Seneca, to follow across the centuries and to select a sample of cases from Paris to quantify, but it would have been instructive to subject both narratives and statistics to critical scrutiny.

I also considered compiling a documentary volume for the course, including not only philosophical texts such as Hume's essay but also, and more importantly, less accessible manuscript materials about ordinary men and women who killed themselves. In the end I did not know enough languages to collect enough sources across centuries and cultures, from Portugal to Russia, not to mention from around the globe. This volume, focused on eighteenth-century France, constitutes some sort of approximation of a sourcebook that would allow students and general readers to understand this offense in one time and place, with implications, at least methodologically, for others, including the United States, where some 50,000 individuals committed suicide in 2022.[1]

At the start of my teaching career, I thought content matters most. By the end, and indeed well before the end, I knew process matters more. The point of the course I did not teach, like the ones I did teach, would have been: How do we know what we think we know about the past, and what difference does it make? With liberal education and elective democracy under attack in the United States, we need students to realize and voters to remember that knowledge begins with difficult questions rather than simplistic answers.

[1] *Provisional Suicide Deaths in the United States, 2022 | CDC Online Newsroom | CDC.*

I thank the interlibrary loan offices of the UWM library and the Lee County (Florida) library system for securing articles and books for this project. I also thank Eric Albrand and Tip Ragan for photographing documents in Paris. I could not have completed this volume sooner rather than later without their generous assistance over many years.

Last but not least, I am grateful to Adam Rummens and his colleagues at CSP for guiding this volume through the process of production. It has been a pleasure to work with them again.

INTRODUCTION

When I researched my first article on suicide, there were no shortcuts. In those days, the published evidence was scattered throughout the library, in under-indexed French editions in several Library of Congress classifications. ARTFL, Eighteenth-Century Collections Online, Gallica, Le Gazetier Universel, Google Books, Hathi Trust Digital Library, Internet Archive, and other digital resources have revolutionized our work. Thanks to versatile search functions, we can now collect dozens of relevant French passages, for example about suicide and England or suicide and women, from all sorts of authorized and clandestine texts in no time. It is easy, of course, to search the noun "suicide," but not so easy to search all the other phrases used in reports about people who killed themselves, caused their deaths, took their lives, jumped out a window, cut their throats, drowned, hanged, poisoned, shot, or stabbed themselves. Essential series of archival sources, furthermore, have not been digitized, so much work remains to be done on site.

Every dictionary of the Enlightenment and encyclopedia of the eighteenth century includes an article on suicide, most of which say more or less the same thing, based on more or less the same texts. An interdisciplinary team of dix-huitiemistes could compile an ample volume on self-destruction in France alone from 1700 to 1800. Theologians, jurists, doctors, lawyers, magistrates, moralists, philosophes, poets, playwrights, novelists, librettists, composers, painters, sculptors, *nouvellistes*, and *libellistes* addressed the topic, and so did the police, in unpublished manuscripts located in Parisian archives, described in the appendix.

In the last forty years I have spent many stimulating and satisfying days working in the Archives Nationales, my home away from home, especially in the Y series, especially in the papers of the forty-eight commissaires responsible for public order throughout the capital.[1] Leaving Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau on the shelves, I have researched suicide, as well as same-sex relations and marital dissension, not in order to apply or assess modern models and theories about human conduct but in order to recover

[1] I have used the French words commissaire and chez (at the residence or business of) without italics throughout.

and analyze the experience of ordinary men and women in and on their own terms.

What does this last book have to do with my first book and numerous articles on several topics published in between? I have argued for decades that the traditions of the Ancien Régime were more flexible and durable than the rhetoric of "absolutism" suggests. The family-state model of authority and obedience not only disparaged but also enabled resistance because the king was expected to respect divine, natural, and fundamental law and the privileges of his people.[2] Subjects, or at least those who claimed to speak for them, especially parlements and "patriots," denounced ministerial and administrative despotism in old before new language. French men as well as women had more independence in practice than they did in principle. Many disgruntled wives reported abusive husbands, and some secured separations of property or even persons.[3] Magistrates, meanwhile, enforced the laws against religious, moral, and sexual offenses selectively and sporadically. Sodomites frequented public spaces and suicides proliferated well before the decriminalization of such offenses in 1791.[4]

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[2] Jeffrey Merrick, *The Desacralization of the French Monarchy in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); "Gender in Pre–Revolutionary Political Culture," in *Deficit to Deluge: Essays on the Origins of the French Revolution*, ed. Thomas E. Kaiser and Dale K. Van Kley (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 198–219.

[3] Jeffrey Merrick, "Marital Conflict in Political Context: Langeac vs. Chambonas, 1775," in Suzanne Desan and Jeffrey Merrick, eds., *Family, Gender, Law, and State in Early Modern France* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009), 137–82; *Order and Disorder under the Ancien Régime* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), Chapter 9; "Domestic Violence in Paris, 1775," *Journal of Family History* 37.4 (2012): 417–27.

[4] On sodomy, Jeffrey Merrick, "Commissioner Foucault, Inspector Noël, and the 'Pederasts' of Paris, 1780–83," *Journal of Social History* 32.2 (1998): 287–307; "Patterns and Concepts in the Sodomitical Subculture of Eighteenth-Century Paris," *Journal of Social History* 50.2 (2016): 273–306; *Sodomy in Eighteenth-Century France* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020). On suicide, Jeffrey Merrick, "Patterns and Prosecution of Suicide in Eighteenth–Century Paris," *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 16.1 (1989): 1–53; "Suicide in Paris, 1775," in Jeffrey R. Watt, ed., *From Sin to Insanity: Suicide in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 158–74; "Death and Life in the Archives: Patterns of and Attitudes to Suicide in Eighteenth-Century Paris," in David Wright and John Weaver, eds., *Histories of Suicide: International Perspectives on Self-*

This volume does not summarize or synthesize my articles on suicide, but it does reflect my own trajectory from intellectual to social history over the last fifty years. Chapter One presents the most extensive and instructive conservative discussion of suicide published in France during the Enlightenment, in 1779. Chapter Two analyzes patterns in police records about Parisians who killed or attempted to kill themselves in the following year. Chapter Three recounts the suicidal stories of a foreigner, two noblemen, three men of color, four octogenarians, five sodomites, and six bathers. Chapter Four traces changes in the jurisprudence of the royal municipal and appeals courts, with specific attention to the last prosecutions in the 1770s. Chapters Five and Six explore suicide in 1789–92 and connections between suicide and politics from the Ancien Régime into the Revolution

I have differed with Dominique Godineau here and there, but her ambitious and instructive book, not available in English, obviously remains the major study of suicide in eighteenth-century France.[5] We have used many of the same sources but sampled police records in different ways. Over the years I have checked the papers of all the commissaires from 1725, 1750, 1770, 1775, 1780, and 1789–92 and explored suicides in 1779 and 1782 as well. I have sampled years, including all districts, whereas Godineau sampled four districts in 1720, 1735, 1750, and 1775.[6] Other sampling methods would undoubtedly produce other numbers. Until some energetic historian or rather a team of energetic historians checks all records from all districts throughout the century, quantitative and qualitative conclusions remain tentative.

As in my volume on sodomy, I have addressed specific issues in context, generalized cautiously with evidence in hand, translated illustrative material for Anglophone readers, and provided abundant references for students and scholars. In exploring and explaining how to research the subject, I have attempted, above all, to document agency in the lives of Parisians who killed themselves or at least attempted to do so and in the lives of those who invoked a variety of human motives to interpret the meanings of their deaths. Meanings, plural, because victims, witnesses, police, and contemporaries often provided somewhat different versions of these

Destruction in the Modern World (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 73–90.

[5] *S'abréger les jours: Le suicide en France au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Amand Colin, 2012). For reviews see H-France Forum 8.4 (2013).

[6] For results, compare DG, 323–27, with Chapter 2, Appendix. C, and Chapter. 5, Appendix B.

personal tragedies, which cannot be reduced to numbers alone. Averages and percentages facilitate comparison with other countries and centuries, but, in and of themselves, they do not tell us much about the heads, hearts, and hands of people in the past.

Appendix: Archival Sources in Paris

Archives de la Préfecture de Police

Series AA (sections of Paris)

AA 48–261 (1789–1811)
The extant records of the Revolutionary sections, some in registers but mostly loose pages, include reports of the elected commissaires installed in 1791 as well as some miscellaneous documents from the years 1789–90.

Archives Nationales

Series O^{1} (office of the minister of the Royal Household, whose portfolio included Paris)

O^{1} 44–128 (1700–86), 362–436 (1701–91), 437–86 (1741–89), 487–501 (1775–91)
The letters from the ministry, organized within year by categories of ecclesiastical, aristocratic, and administrative addressees, indexed in the same way, include some directives about suicides addressed to the magistrates of the Prévôté de l'hôtel (below). For examples from 1780, see O^{1} 421, f. 278, and O^{1} 491, f. 523. The voluminous but not comprehensive index on the shelves in the reading room (0^{1}/27–49) is less useful for subjects than for persons.

O^{1} 1589 (1777–91)
The weekly reports of Ferdinand Federici, commandant of the Swiss Guards who patrolled the Champs-Elysées, addressed to the superintendent of royal buildings and gardens, include four cases of suicide, in the documents dated 16 August 1777, 21–28 February 1785, 2–9 November 1789, and 18–25 January 1790.[7] All four of the men shot themselves in the head, and at least two of them survived.

O^{1} 3705–3706 (1780s)
These incomplete microfilmed records of the Prévôté de l'hôtel (below), both documents and registers, mention some suicides.

[7] Arlette Farge, ed., *Flagrants délits sur les Champs-Elysées: Les dossiers de police du gardien Federici (1777–91)* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2008), 48, 228, 331, 339; (Paris: Mercure de France, 2010), 53, 254, 366, 375.

Series T (émigrés)

T 161 (1724–93)
The papers of Horace Bénédict des Franches de Bossey, Genevan envoy to France, 1776–85, include desperate letters addressed to his family and friends in 1782, collected in a separate folder.

Series V^3 (Prévôté de l'hôtel, tribunal with jurisdiction over royal properties)

V^3 86 (1683–1776)
The extant records of judicial proceedings document two prosecutions for suicide: Pierre Preponnier in 1735 and Etienne Carbanne in 1745.

Series X (Parlement, royal appeals court with jurisdiction over more than a third of the kingdom)

A copy of the alphabetical inventory of criminal cases adjudicated by the Parlement in the eighteenth century (X^{2a} 906A) is available on the shelves in the reading room (X/60–66) and online at *FRAN_IR_056922 – Online catalogue (culture.gouv.fr).* It includes a column for offenses, so it is possible to extract incomplete information about dozens of cases: name, age, identity, decisions of the lower and appeals courts. This inventory omits some details and includes some mistakes. One can confirm sentences by searching names in the Salle des inventaires virtuelles at *Homepage – Online catalogue (culture.gouv.fr).* Without the correct name or at least date, it is difficult to collect additional information from the next series, onsite, or the following series, online.

X^{2a} 504–898 (1700–90)
These registers of criminal cases include the text of sentences, which sometimes include details about the cases.

X^{2b} 1064–1154 (1700–90)
These registers of criminal cases include final, summary interrogations of prisoners and curators. The records are accessible online not only on computers in the reading room but also through the Salle des inventaires virtuelle at the FRAN URL above.

Series Y (Châtelet, royal municipal court with jurisdiction over the capital and its environs)

The alphabetical/chronological index of names in Y 10616–19 covers 1706–10 and 1716–91.[8] It does not include offenses, so it is not possible to compile a list of cases as it is from the X series. It includes the names of suicides whose cases were forwarded to the Parlement but not all the names listed in the Parlement's inventory of criminal cases (above).

Y 10019–10502 (1702–91)
The dossiers of individuals prosecuted for attempted or completed suicide, filed in chronological order along with thousands of others, include the commissaire's report as well as interrogations of prisoners or curators and depositions of witnesses. The only way to compile a list of cases processed by the Châtelet is by browsing these 500 cartons.

Y 10511–10533 (1747–50 and 1758–90)
These registers of criminal cases include the curator's argument, prosecutor's recommendation, and names and votes of magistrates. Since the same individuals, most notably Elophe Loquier, served as curator in many cases, it is possible to scan for their names.

Y 10620–35 (1768–91)
The registers of the urban watch/guard provide basic details about many dozens of cases: identity, circumstances, name of the commissaire who investigated, and outcome, usually morgue, prison, or hospital. They do not include a column for offenses, so it is necessary to skim entries to locate suicides.[9]

Y 10719–16022 (1700–91)
The voluminous papers of the forty-eight commissaires document hundreds of suicides, sometimes but not always identified as such in the upper left corner of the first page. Look not only for *suicide* but also for *homicide de soi-même*, *mort volontaire*, *mort forcée*, *mort violente*, and more descriptive words. Some dossiers labeled *mort*, as well as *mort accidentelle*, *mort subite*, or *mort funeste*, involve suicide. Most but not all cases include the

[8] No one seems to know what has become of Y 10616.
[9] Cartons Y 13167, 13168, 13169, 13625-26, 13627, and 1370 may document some additional cases reported by the watch/gaurd. For the rural constabulary, see Julian Gomez Pardo, *La Maréchaussée et le crime en Ile-de-France sous Louis XIV et Louis XV* (Paris: Les Indes Savantes, 2012), 178–79.

initial report (*procès-verbal*) as well as the subsequent investigation (*information*), which contains the depositions of the surgeon, friends, neighbors, relatives, and more. With an address and date in hand from other sources, such as Hardy's journal (below), it is possible to locate the relevant documents by using the directory of commissaires, available on the shelves in the reading room (Y/2/1) and online at *Répertoire numérique des archives du Châtelet de Paris (culture.gouv.fr).* The series Y 9649A-10017 (1735-91) may contain copies of some investigations missing from the papers of the commissaires. Many of them compiled inventories of their reports, listed in the detailed inventory of their papers (Y/2/2), sometimes without indicating the subject of the reports, but one could check all the cases involving deaths.[10]

Series Z^{1H} (Bureau de la Ville, municipal tribunal)

Z^{1H} 656 (1779)
The records of the ten commissaires who had jurisdiction over the Seine and its banks document one intended, six attempted, and three completed suicides in one year and include interrogations of individuals rescued from the river.[11]

Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal

Archives de la Bastille (office of the lieutenant general of police)

AB 10155–70 (1724–41)
The notes of spies who recorded talk in public spaces, accessible in Gallica, include more than a few references to suicide: AB 10156, ff. 34, 145, 165v, 293, 380; 10157, ff. 36, 40v, 140 v; 10159, f. 96v; 10161, f. 228v; 10164, ff. 26, 172; 10165, ff. 17, 23v, 184v, 189v, 406, 507; 10166, f. 170; 10167, f. 204; 10168, ff. 75v, 194v. The last of these cases involves a man dressed as a woman who hanged himself in 1741.

[10] Y10936-37*, 10941, 10943, 11288, 11745-76, 12225-26*, 12494-97*, 12700-01, 13164-65*, 13296*, 13321*, 13630-31*, 13830-31*, 13996-97*, 14042-43*, 14126*, 14367-69*, 14590-92*, 14700-01bis, 14859, 15024-25, 15119, 15310, 15404, 15495, 15685-86, 16020, 16022. The cartons marked with an asterisk are available in the microfilm room.
[11] Jeffrey Merrick, "Rescued from the River: Attempted Suicide in Late Eighteenth-Century Paris," *Histoire sociale/Social History* 49.1 (2016): 27–47. The Z^2 series contains the records of many other jurisdictions, inside and outside Paris, that could be checked for suicides.

AB 10522–12471 (1700–89)
The dossiers of prisoners, organized alphabetically within year, contain scattered evidence about suicide, from reported threats to printed sentences. It is possible to search names but not subjects at *Recherche simple (bnf.fr)*, so the only way to locate relevant documents is by browsing cartons online, in Gallica, or onsite, on microfilm or in manuscript. The digitized cartons from 1728, for example, include material on the attempted suicides of two disturbed and disturbing men, Claude Rousseau, 23, and Nicolas Jobart, 54.[12]

Bibliothèque Nationale de France

Collection Joly de Fleury

JF 2432 includes a dossier on issues about suicide within the jurisdiction of the Parlement of Paris.

Fond Français

FF 6680–87 (1753–89)
Siméon Prosper Hardy (1729–1806) reported 281 attempted and completed suicides in "Mes loisirs, ou Journal des événements tels qu'ils parviennent à ma connaissance,"[13] The manuscript is accessible in Gallica, and the splendid Hermann edition includes nine volumes thus far.[14] The introductions include valuable information about Hardy and his world.

[12] AB 11027, ff. 10–14; 11014, ff. 126–42.
[13] Merrick, "Patterns and Prosecution;" Jeffrey Merrick, "Le Suicide à Paris en 1782 d'après Hardy et la police," *Histoire, Economie et Société* 37.2 (2018): 43–56.
[14] The website (*Journal de Hardy*) includes a search engine.

ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Archives de la Préfecture de Police, series AA
AN	Archives Nationales
arr.	arrondissement
BN	Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits
DAF	*Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 4th ed. (Paris, 1762), accessible online through the Academy's website at *Aide en ligne | Dictionnaire de l'Académie française (dictionnaire–academie.fr)*
DG	Dominique Godineau, *S'abréger les jours: Le suicide en France au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2012)
Hardy1	BN, Fonds Français 6680–6687
Hardy2	Siméon Prosper Hardy, *Mes loisirs, ou Journal d'événements tels qu'ils parviennent à ma connaissance*, ed. Daniel Roche et al., 9 vols. thus far (Paris: Hermann, 2012–)
NAF	BN, Nouvelles Acquisitions Françaises
Y	AN, series Y

CHAPTER 1

THE BATTLE OF THE BOOKS

Learned debate about suicide has a long history, before and after the eighteenth century, from antiquity to our own time. Advocates and opponents of Enlightenment did not define or resolve the complex issues. They caricatured each other, but we should not caricature them, as agents of progress and darkness with rigidly opposite agendas. Philosophes and reformers as well as clergymen and magistrates embraced and expressed a range of views on moral as well as legal questions.[1] Philosophes in the mainstream, as opposed to materialists on the margins, not only attempted to understand the external and internal causes of suicide but also insisted that it violated the instinct of self–preservation and obligations to fellow humans. They replaced religious injunctions with natural and social

[1] See for example Antoine Gaspard Boucher d'Argis, "Suicide," in Denis Diderot and Jean Lerond d'Alembert, eds., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts, et des métiers par une société de gens de lettres*, 17 vols. (Paris, 1751–65), 15: 639–4, available in English in The Encyclopedia of Diderot and d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project at *https://quod.lib. umich.edu /d/ did/*. This article was republished and expanded in *Encyclopédie méthodique: Logique, métaphysique, et morale*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1786–91), 4: 168–77. For other articles on suicide in the voluminous *Encyclopédie méthodique*, and a range of views on the subject, see *Encyclopédiana* (Paris, 1791), 878; *Jurisprudence*, 10 vols. (Paris, 1782–91), 7: 679 (translated in Chapter 6, Appendix D); *Philosophie ancienne et moderne*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1791–94), 2: 204 (Diderot), 744–48 (Hume); *Théologie*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1788–90), 3: 544–47. For other substantial articles from the last decades of the Ancien Régime, see Jean Baptiste Denisart, *Collection de décisions nouvelles et de notions relatives à la jurisprudence actuelle*, 7th ed., 4 vols. (Paris, 1771), 4: 627–29; Fortunato Bartolomeo de Felice, ed., *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné universel des connaissances humaines*, 42 vols. (Yverdon, 1770–75), 39: 510–15; Joseph Nicolas Guyot, ed., *Répertoire universel et raisonné de jurisprudence civile, criminal, canonique, et bénéficiale*, 64 vols. (Paris, 1775–83), 60: 224–26; Daniel Jousse, *Traité de la justice criminelle de France*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1771), 4: 130–41; Jean Baptiste René Robinet, ed., *Dictionnaire universel des sciences morale, économique, politique, et diplomatique, ou Bibliothèque de l'homme d'état et du citoyen*, 30 vols. (London, 1777–83), 23: 657–63.

imperatives that discouraged suicide and other actions traditionally categorized as sins and crimes.[2]

Readers may consult the secondary literature on the subject or study the works of Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau, if not their critics, in translation.[3] The following paragraphs have a more specific objective, to introduce the neglected treatise entitled *Means Suited to Protect Men from Suicide* and subtitled *Work in Which, after Attempting to Discover the Causes of Voluntary Self–Murder, One Also Attempts to Show the Means of Protecting Oneself from It, Preceded by a Discourse on the Origin, the Progress of Suicide among the English and the French, by L. P. L. D.*, published with royal approbation in 1779.[4] The initials stand for *le père Laliman, dominicain*, or Father Laliman, Dominican, from Bordeaux, but we know nothing more about him.[5] This text deserves translation because it provides the most extensive and instructive conservative discussion of suicide published in France during the Enlightenment. Its 157 pages include much more than the usual excerpts from and rebukes of the philosophes and remind us that Catholics and unbelievers occupied and contested some common ground, as R. R. Palmer argued many decades ago.[6]

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[2] Jeffrey Merrick, "Sodomy, Suicide, and the Limits of Legal Reform in Eighteenth-Century France," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 46 (2017): 183–203.

[3] In addition to DG, Robert Favre, *La Mort dans la littérature et la pensée françaises au siècle des lumières* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1978), ch. 11; John McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment: Changing Attitudes to Death in Eighteenth Century France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), ch. 12; Georges Minois, *Histoire du suicide: La société occidentale face à la mort volontaire* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), ch. 9. The last book is available in English under the title *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture*, transl. Lydia Cochrane (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

[4] *Moyens propres à garantir les hommes du suicide: Ouvrage dans lequel, après avoir tâché de découvrir les causes du meurtre volontaire de soi-même, on tâche aussi de montrer les moyens de s'en garantir, précédé d'un discours sur l'origine, les progrès du suicide chez les anglais et les français*, printed by Benoît Morin (1746–1817), printer (as of 1772) and bookseller (as of 1775) at the sign of Truth on rue Saint-Jacques. McManners, *Death and the Enlightenment*, 432–33, includes one paragraph about the book.

[5] For the author's identity, see the Jansenist *Nouvelles ecclésiastiques*, 26 June 1780, 104. Laliman mentions Bordeaux in the dedication to Philippe de Noailles (1715–94), marshal of France and lieutenant general of Guyenne.

[6] R. R. Palmer, *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939). See also Jeremy Caradonna, "Grub Street and

Laliman informs readers in the preface that his book is not a "theological dissertation" [7] and implies that he will explore the subject of suicide empirically rather than dogmatically, with practical objectives in mind. The preliminary discourse on England and France, which previews the treatise as a whole, raises questions about his evidence and conclusions. The Dominican argues that moral factors (especially excessive liberty) were more responsible than physical factors (climate and diet) for the abnormal incidence of suicide across the Channel. He denounces irreligion but includes nothing about the religious convictions of the few individuals he mentions, who had more specific reasons (poverty, infidelity, slander) for killing themselves. Laliman assumes not only that the example of Richard Smith and his wife (1732) opened the floodgates for suicide in England, its "natal country" [10], but also that France imported the sickness, poison, frenzy through enthusiastic and indiscriminate Anglomania.[7] He condemns the theatre, in particular plays that celebrate classical and exotic characters who killed themselves, but fixates on "bad books, bad talk, and bad examples" [37], especially bad books. And yet he has already suggested, in the preface, that if he were king, he would discourage suicide not only by silencing critics of conventional morality but also by improving the living conditions of his subjects [6].

Before discussing several categories of causes in the following chapters, the Dominican declares that "our unfortunate contemporaries renounce natural feelings with respect to existence," love of life and fear of death, "only because they are told or they have read, in works full of sophistry, that natural feelings are nothing" [37]. He lays his cards on the table in the following paragraph: "It is thus to the impious doctrine of the philosophers of our time that we owe the birth of suicide, a monster unknown to our fathers" [37], a foreign fashion without roots in French history and culture that promoted and portended decay, not progress. On the next page Laliman explains that religion would console humans for their misfortunes and reasons that suicide, in and of itself, demonstrates irreligion, imported from England and promoted by the philosophes. Without analyzing the real motives of real people who killed themselves in France, as opposed to

Suicide: A View from the Literary Press in Late Eighteenth-Century France," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33.1 (2010): 23–36.

[7] Eric Gidal, "Civic Melancholy: English Gloom and French Enlightenment," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 37.1 (2003): 23–45; Jeffrey Hopes, "'La Maladie anglaise' in French Eighteenth-Century Writing: From Stereotype to Individuation," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 44.2 (2011): 109–32.

classical characters, he implies that they all lacked faith because they were corrupted by alien ideas, whether or not they could or did read bad books.

The Dominican has an axe to grind, and he grinds it through more than a hundred more pages, peppered with the traditional physiological and psychological language of humors and faculties (reason, imagination, conscience, soul, heart, passion). In the first four chapters he dismisses physical explanations as excuses. He downplays the impact of climate but suggests, if you suffer from your native climate, that you move elsewhere. If you have a have a melancholy temperament, caused by bile or brain, there are multiple remedies for body and spirit, such as outdoor exercise and pleasant company. If you have afflictions, you need distractions, and, besides, there are always solutions to misfortunes (loss of work or wealth, treachery, infidelity). Some of these options, of course, require money, but note that peasants, who have no time to brood, rarely kill themselves [67]. If your passions (drinking, gambling, sexing) lead you into immorality (indolence, dishonesty, immodesty, fornication, adultery), you need to control them through reason, "which distinguishes us from beasts" [86]. Laliman has already admitted, of course, that illness, emotion, and imagination can overthrow that faculty and that reason itself can lead humans astray. He names several contemporaries and assures readers that he could name more "whose lives were not less frightful than their deaths" [85]. In Chapter 5 he describes suicidal Indians and Africans as cowards and strips Lucretia, Cato, and Brutus of courage. They exhibited selfishness rather than selflessness. In Chapter 6 he urges magistrates to impose the statutory penalties, for the sake of deterrence more than punishment.

In the final chapter the Dominican returns to his favorite theme, irreligion. Like the philosophes, he collects evidence from experience in his own place and time, as well as other countries and centuries, and formulates questionable conclusions. Like the philosophes, he expects humans to obey nature, which endowed them with the instinct for self-preservation, and instilled in them the duty to fulfill their obligations to others (family, friends, community, country, species) for the common welfare. Like the philosophes, he uses the slippery concept of nature to describe and prescribe conduct, without addressing the perennial tension between the two verbs. He maintains that it is natural, descriptively, for humans to seek pleasure and avoid pain but insists that it is not natural, prescriptively, for them indulge their passions without restraint. Like the philosophes, he exhorts his contemporaries to use reason to assess their circumstances, with natural and social imperatives in mind. He also admits that individuals tempted to end their lives suffer from sadness, melancholy, despair, in the vague language

of the time, and that "there is little despair without delirium" [64]. Unlike the philosophes, not to mention French jurists, Laliman does not recognize temporary insanity as an explanation, let alone excuse, because he does not want to diminish personal responsibility. He characterizes suicide as an unnatural, irrational, irreligious rejection of authority, assertion of independence, and abuse of human liberty.

In two dissonant passages the Dominican concedes that the emperor Otho had "the strength to make an attempt on his life" [91] and that suicides demonstrate "an extraordinary sort of strength" [104]. Throughout the treatise, however, he argues that it requires more physical, mental, moral, and, in the end, religious strength to bear "the weight of life" [3] than it does to abandon it. Like many others, Laliman assumes that men have more strength of body and spirit than women do, but he does not suggest that members of the less rational, more passionate sex are more likely to attempt to escape the burdens of worldly existence or more like men if they do so. On the contrary, he cites examples of women who kill themselves out of excessive anxiety about reputation or unthinking conformity to local customs. The natural sentiment of modesty arrested suicide among the girls of Miletus [114], and the natural fear of death persuaded the Gascon woman not to join her husband in his grave [70]. The fact that some women, like scoundrels, poltroons, and base souls, end their lives [89] suggests not that they are stronger than others of their sex but men as well as women who take their lives exhibit mental and moral weakness rather than courage. And yet the Dominican is willing, in another striking passage, to abandon "the words strength, weakness, courage, and cowardice" because "delirium or despair" reduces all humans to the same state of incapacity [101]. The treatise includes other inconsistencies.

Laliman appropriates the positive language of nature and reason for his own purposes and deflects the negative rhetoric of enthusiasm and fanaticism back upon the philosophes in extravagant rhetoric. Well before the final chapter, his treatise turns out to be more polemical than empirical in spirit, especially because he gives such short shrift to the lives and deaths of the modest number of individuals he mentions. All things considered, the Dominican is less concerned about despair, whatever its causes, than about beliefs that should allow men and women to manage despair. In the last pages he rebukes not victims themselves but wicked persons who drive others to suicide: creditors, bankrupts, misers, and, most importantly, philosophes, who, according to him, rejected the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. In reality Montesquieu, Voltaire, and Rousseau

were deists who embraced these tenets and not atheists. Laliman had more in common with them than he admitted.

A liberal *nouvelliste* observed that the Dominican's eloquence would not influence persons who could not think rationally.[8] A conservative journalist suggested that "this good citizen had not had enough practice in reasoning and writing."[9] More to the point, he noted that Laliman had insisted too much on "the madness that always accompanies suicide," in the first five chapters, to demand enforcement of the letter of the law in the sixth one. After all, "madmen are not responsible for their actions." Judging from the evidence analyzed in the following chapters, Parisians and magistrates agreed with the critics more than the author of this treatise.

[8] *Correspondance secrète, politique, et littéraire*, 18 vols. (London, 1787–90), 9:377 (16 May 1780). *Nouvellistes* collected and disseminated news and gossip.
[9] *Année littéraire*, 1780, 4: 108–24 (quotations from 124 and 120). It is worth noting that Laliman uses the critic's word for madness, *démence*, only once, in a sentence about the consequences of passions, not the causes of suicide.

Text

Means Suited to Protect Men from Suicide

Preface

[3] This word "suicide" is new, but what it means is not.[10] For a long time, men incapable of bearing the weight of life have unburdened themselves of it.[11]

If this malady wrought havoc only in the Indies or in Africa, we would be moved and touched in learning the details of it, but we would not be alarmed about it.[12] The immense lands and seas that separate us from these regions are barriers that reassure us, but it seems to threaten Europe [4] as a whole. We need not fear, to be sure, that it might become epidemic here. Nature has seen to that. The progress it makes here, however, rightly alarms those who take an interest in the preservation of the human race.[13] There are few months, few weeks, when public news does not mention some suicide.[14] Therefore no one would find fault with the efforts of those who seek to cure men of this unfortunate mania.

Several authors have set their works against it like a dike they believed suited to stop the torrent, but the torrent was too strong. It carried away the dike. People continue to kill themselves. Whose fault is it? Readers, no

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[10] I have not italicized words that Laliman did, e.g. "suicide" in this sentence.

[11] **The *Dictionary of Trévoux* attributes its invention to Abbé** Pierre François Guyot **Desfontaines** (1685–1745). **See the word Suicide.** Laliman's notes are reproduced in bold type. The last of several editions of the *Dictionnaire universel français et latin, vulgairement appelé Dictionnaire de Trévoux*, published from 1704 to 1771, defines suicide as "murder of oneself. Suicide is the system of cowards, who have neither the patience to suffer by themselves nor the courage to bear the weight of disgrace." Vol. 7, p. 888. Desfontaines used the word in *Observations sur les écrits modernes* 12 (1738): 310, after abbé Antoine François Prévost had already introduced it into French.

[12] Presumably the East Indies, on the other side of the globe, and Africa, largely unknown in Laliman's time except for its coasts.

[13] Like others, Laliman did not realize that France no longer needed to fear depopulation. Carol Blum, *Strength in Numbers: Population, Reproduction, and Power in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

[14] The word "suicide" does not appear in the first French daily paper, the *Journal de Paris*, 1777–89, but written and published collections of news and gossip, not to mention public chatter, publicized many cases.

doubt, and perhaps authors [5] as well. The former do not wish to give up their prejudices, even less to combat their passions.[15] The latter do not seem to direct their attacks well. There are some who have rendered themselves almost unintelligible. Others furnish arms to the monster they combat.[16] Still others have contented themselves with pleasing, instead of making efforts to convince, destroy, overwhelm. It is not surprising that the first group have achieved only few results, that the second group have multiplied suicides, and that the third group, finally, have not stayed the hand of any madman. Perhaps I will have the fate of some one of them, or perhaps of all. It does not matter. My intention is praiseworthy. I seek to preserve men.

If I were as powerful as [6] Ptolemy Philadelphus, it would not be through books that I would try to restrain the rage for suicide. I would imitate that great king. I would shut the mouths of apologists for this monster.[17] To this means I would add others at least equally effective. I would reestablish the empire of morals, I would prevent anyone from acting or writing against them, I would make the condition of men the best possible, etc., etc. But I am not a king. My only power is zeal for the [7] preservation of my fellows.

I am now going to provide an account of my work. It is neither a dissertation nor a treatise of theology. These are simple means that men of all ranks can use to guard themselves against suicide. To find them, these means, I had to analyze all the causes, of the physical as well as the moral kind, that act upon men who make an attempt on their lives. Once this process was completed, it was easy for me to suggest the obstacles that could be opposed to their activity. It is my research in this regard that I communicate to my fellow citizens.[18] If, in communicating these means to them, I succeed in curing a single man of the tendency to [8] suicide, I will have deserved well of religion and my country.

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[15] The philosophes routinely used the word "prejudice" to denounce attitudes and opinions not based on reason.

[16] As theists expounded the arguments of atheists in order to refute them? Alan Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650–1729*, vol. 1: *The Sources of Disbelief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[17] **In this king of Egypt's time a** Greek **philosopher named Hegesias spoke so strongly about the discomforts of life that several, after hearing him, took their lives. Ptolemy forbid him to speak in public on such subjects. The rage of killing oneself ended with the zeal of this orator of death.** Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.83–84. Ptolemy II, king of Egypt, 285–246 BCE.

[18] The word "citizens," as opposed to "subjects," suggests consciousness of and involvement in public affairs.

I believed I should place at the front of my work a discourse on the origin and progress of suicide among the English and the French because these two peoples pretty much set the tone for manners in Europe. It is also they who seem to contend for the fatal glory of providing the most examples of willful murder of oneself.

I do not insist on the utility of the subject I propose to address. It carries its commendation with itself. I ask pardon only for the energy and the style. The weakness of my talents has not allowed me to unite both with the merit of the subject.

[9] Preliminary Discourse on the Origin and Progress of Suicide among the English and the French

England and France are two rival kingdoms that fear and copy each other.[19] Between other peoples, one nation's hostility leads it to avoid the other's customs and habits. Here the rivalry produces imitation. It was not thus with Rome and Carthage. Those two states were always as opposed in manners as in interests.[20] If they resembled each other in something, it was only in ambition.[21] [10] So those who have compared France and England to Rome and Carthage have apparently considered antipathy only between nations and not manners.

In England suicide seemed to be as if in its native country. Why not leave it there forever and always? Should some nation be jealous to possess this monster? And should that nation be France, she, whose manners are so gentle, she, who has never been reproached for the barbarisms of the north?[22] What fruit could she gather from this bad tree?[23] That of destroying oneself with one's own hands, without having need for recourse to the weapons of her enemies. Fatal fruit, fatal benefit, which France should have ceded altogether to her rival! It must be agreed nonetheless that in this

[19] The rivalry dates as far back as the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) and includes French involvement in the war of American independence, as of 1778.

[20] The three Punic wars between republican Rome and imperial Carthage took place between 264 and 146 BCE.

[21] **What a difference there was, says M.** Charles **Rollin, between the manners of the Romans and Carthaginians! *Roman History*, bk. 23, p. 327.** *Histoire romaine depuis la foundation de Rome jusqu'à la bataille d'Actium* (1738–48), continued and completed after Rollin's death by Jean Baptiste Louis Crévier.

[22] Laliman associates his country with Mediterranean lands, home of the civilizations of antiquity and the Renaissance, which profoundly influenced French culture from the sixteenth century on.

[23] Matthew 7:17–18, 12:33; Luke 6:43.

shameful struggle England has [11] conserved its superiority over France by far.[24]

In considering these two kingdoms separately, we will find suicide has made more or less progress there according to the greater or lesser activity of the causes that have contributed to it.

The English

Suicide seems so suited to the English that they themselves agree that we are justified in reproaching them as a nation for it.[25] It would not be much if we had nothing but the influence of climate [environment] to reproach them for. They would find their excuse in the lack of freedom [from that influence], but we have to reproach them, with much more cause, for surrendering themselves to vices that [12] lead as if naturally to suicide.[26] That is to say that two types of causes converge to produce suicide in the English, physical causes and moral causes. Let us analyze both.[27]

The thick and unhealthy air they breathe in the British Isles can surely open the way to suicide. To preserve their natural suppleness, nerves need to be moistened by a salutary liquid. Once it does not flow freely, one must, as if necessarily, feel sluggishness, experience anguish, etc. These irregularities can produce distaste for life, make it seem to be of unbearable weight, and in the end dispose those in whom this distaste occurs to rid themselves of the burden that overwhelms them.

This physical cause acts so strongly on the English that it is a matter of public notoriety that they are the most serious [13] of men, which led someone to say drolly, "You should know, sir, that in England they

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[24] Laliman might have consulted the annual London bills of mortality, but there were no national statistics on suicide in either country at this time. Lieutenant general of police Lenoir reportedly counted 100 cases in the first four months of 1779. Hardy2, 6: 158 (7 May 1779).

[25] Tobias **Smoll[et]t, History of England, bk. 9, year 1732, reign of George II.** *A Complete History of England, from the Descent of Julius Caesar to the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle, 1748*, 7 vols. (London, 1753), 7: 204. Smollett wrote that others made this reproach, not that the English agreed it was justified. Laliman cites the French version (1759–64).

[26] Laliman uses the phrase "as if naturally," which is to say *not* naturally, seven times.

[27] In the following paragraphs, Laliman repeats stereotypical views of the unhealthy climate and diet on the other side of the Channel, based on conventional medical wisdom.