

THE  
HISTORY OF  
SUICIDE  
IN ENGLAND  
1650-1850

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THE HISTORY OF SUICIDE IN ENGLAND,  
1650–1850

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Edited by  
Paul Seaver

With a General Introduction by Mark Robson



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## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

On the evening of 7 December 1811, in an area on the edges of Shadwell and Wapping in the East End of London, four murders took place in a home attached to a draper's shop on the busy Ratcliffe Highway (now known simply as The Highway).<sup>1</sup> The draper, Timothy Marr, his wife Celia and their three-month-old son, also called Timothy, were all killed, as was their shop boy, James Gowen. The brutality of the murders immediately provoked fear and outrage in the local and national press. The Marrs' bodies were buried in the local parish church, St George's-in-the-East, the striking Hawksmoor tower of which still physically dominates the local area. Attempts to find a culprit were unsuccessful, despite large rewards being offered for information. Twelve days later, on 19 December, at the King's Arms public house in New Gravel Lane (now Garnet Street), a second set of murders took place. The publican, John Williamson, his wife Elizabeth and one of their servants, Bridget Harrington, were killed in a manner reminiscent of the first set of murders. People sought a single perpetrator for both sets of killings, although there seemed to be evidence that more than one person was involved. The public imagination was fired by the attentions of the press, and the murders remained one of the lead stories in *The Times* for over a fortnight. The killings themselves inspired Thomas De Quincey, even decades after the murders, to write a postscript to one of his most celebrated essays, 'On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts'.<sup>2</sup>

The principal suspect quickly became John Williams, a seaman who lodged at the nearby Pear Tree public house. He had known Timothy Marr as a fellow shipmate and apparently bore him a grudge, but there was no obvious link in terms of motive between Williams and the second set of murders, although he readily admitted to having drunk in the King's Arms regularly and to having known the Williamsons well. Williams was arrested, questioned and taken to Coldbath Fields Prison in Clerkenwell to await further interrogation and formal charges being brought. Before he could be brought to trial on 27 December, however, he apparently committed suicide by hanging himself in his cell.

That might have been the end of the story of the Ratcliffe Highway murders, but it was decided by the Shadwell magistrates that a more public conclusion to

the case was necessary. It was proposed that Williams's corpse should be carried through the streets on a cart, the body flanked by the murder weapons, passing by and pausing at the scenes of the murders as well as passing the churchyard in which the Marrs were buried. In order for this to happen, the magistrates had to have the permission of the Home Secretary, which they quickly received, whatever concerns were expressed that such a display may provoke a riot. Despite a crowd of a reported 10,000 people lining the streets to view the procession, however, there was no disorder, and in fact the accounts of the ceremony remark on the unnatural calm and quiet of the crowd as the cart made its way towards the ultimate point in its journey. At the crossroads of Cable Street and Cannon Street, the body of Williams was taken from the cart and thrown into a hole in the ground that had already been dug at the very centre of the crossroads. The hole had been purposely dug too small for the body to be laid in it with any dignity. Having been pushed into the hole, a stake was driven through the heart of the corpse which was placed in the grave in a kneeling position, and then it was covered with lime before being quickly filled with earth and immediately paved over. Seemingly satisfied by this ritual humiliation of the criminal, the local people went seamlessly into their festivities; it was New Year's Eve.

How do we explain this extraordinary treatment of the body of John Williams? Following the influential work of Michel Foucault and others, it has become common to see treatment of the criminal body as part of a 'disciplinary' and punitive system that – in the absence of a standing army or recognizable police force – displayed its power through exemplary demonstrations including public acts of punishment and execution.<sup>3</sup> The logic behind such display goes back at least as far as Plato; execution is not carried out in order to punish the individual, who can hardly be reformed or deterred by his own death, but to deter others from following his example. In his essay 'On the art of conversation', Michel de Montaigne remarks upon the practice of punishing criminals, and he also draws upon notions of exemplarity:

It is a custom of our justice to punish some as a warning to others. For to punish them for having done wrong would, as Plato says, be stupid: what is done cannot be undone. The intention is to stop them from repeating the same mistake or to make others avoid their error. We do not improve the man we hang: we improve others by him.<sup>4</sup>

Montaigne's reference is to a passage in Plato's *Laws*: 'The purpose of the penalty is not to cancel the crime – what is once done can never be made undone – but to bring the criminal and all who witness his punishment in the future to complete renunciation of such criminality, or at least to recovery in great part from the dreadful state.'<sup>5</sup> Punishment is responsive, but this response works in two directions, reacting both to a prior transgression of the law and to any potential repetition of that offence in the future. What both Montaigne and Plato make

clear is the exemplary nature of punishment, and Plato's emphasis on witnessing marks the necessity for this example to be both communicated (made public and thus open to witnessing and interpretation) and remembered. The example is delivered to forestall the repetition of error, and is intended towards the future, yet it achieves this through a mobilization of memory, which we might think of as primarily intended towards the past. This dual focus on past and future marks exemplarity in its essence. Exemplarity will become a key term in discussion of suicide in the period covered by this collection.

As Clark Hulse has suggested in a discussion of the treatment of bodies of saints and martyrs, the body retains a social function even after death, such that the body may be used:

in ceremonies of lamentation that arouse and cast out grief, in ceremonies of remembrance that define and solidify communities, in ceremonies of embalming that cast out pollution, and in ceremonies of desecration that ward off the demons that affright us. The body is caught up in social economies and monetary exchanges ... Or rather, through the ceremonies of death, the body offers a new promise, to reveal at last all the hidden social and economic roles of the living person. It is like a chest opened to show the wealth or poverty inside.<sup>6</sup>

The treatment of the body in such ceremonial or ritual ways always reveals the wider economy within which the body circulates, revealing at the same time the values that govern that economy's operations. What should be done with the bodies of criminals and of suicides is a question that therefore exercises both individuals and institutions. The answers that they give to this question can tell us much about their underlying assumptions, beliefs and structures.

In this particular case, there was an overwhelming sense that, by taking his own life, Williams had confirmed his guilt, and that he had therefore evaded rightful punishment. The crucial step in the logic here involves seeing suicide as self-murder; someone capable of one murder, even that of himself, is clearly capable of the murder of others. This was certainly the line taken in the press coverage of Williams's death. A further reason for the public display of his dead body was to calm the fears of the local population, who naturally wanted reassurance that the sequence of murders that had seen the violent deaths of seven people in a matter of days had been definitively halted. The pausing of the procession outside the properties in which the murders had taken place revives an older tradition of confronting the murderer with the corpses of his victims (an idea that we find in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, for example). But what of the final act of this drama? Driving a stake through the heart of a corpse which is then buried at a crossroads is more usually associated with the bodies of suicides than with those of murderers. The combination of staking and crossroads or roadside burial feeds on superstitions surrounding the return of the murderer's spirit,

according with Hulse's sense that the desecration of the body might ward off demons. Staking was supposed to pin the restless ghost and if that did not work, then the situation at the crossroads would confuse it, making it more difficult for it to find its way back to trouble the living.

In 1811, such actions were relatively rare but not unknown. In fact, it was only the Burial of Suicide Act of 1823 (4 Geo. IV) that put an official end to the ritual humiliation of the corpses of suicides, and the last suicide to be buried at a crossroads in London seems to have been a man called Griffiths in 1823. While the Act still proposed that suicides should be buried between the hours of nine in the evening and midnight, without full Christian rites, burials of suicides were now allowed to take place on consecrated ground, and roadside burial at a crossroads was specifically prohibited, as was driving a stake through the heart. It has been suggested that this may in part have been a response to the death by suicide of the politician Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh on 12 August 1822.<sup>7</sup> Lord Byron certainly saw the fact that Castlereagh's body was not subjected to this treatment as a consequence of his aristocratic status and political influence, and had his own ideas about the appropriate treatment of Castlereagh's remains.<sup>8</sup> Certainly there were many who were uncomfortable with the idea of a suicide being buried at Westminster Abbey rather than quietly and privately, whatever the political achievements of his life.

But what also seems likely is that the passing of the Act was an attempt to bring legislation into line with practice; cases such as that of Williams were rare. This rarity is thought to have reflected a reluctance on the part of coroners and magistrates to give a verdict of suicide, particularly when the forfeiture of goods and property that went with a suicide verdict would have left the surviving family destitute. The tendency to arrive at a verdict of temporary insanity rather than *felo de se* (committing a crime against oneself) – as it was determined in the case of Castlereagh – marks a shift in the understanding of suicide that is itself the result of a gradual process. This process is what we might call the history of suicide in England, 1650–1850.

### Is a History of Suicide Possible?

If a history of suicide were possible, it would only be so within limits. Many such histories already exist, although most attempt only to tell part of the story.<sup>9</sup> As is the case with any history, this is perhaps first of all a matter of selecting dates. The publishers for this multi-volume collection have chosen 1650 and 1850. Like any dates, they serve a pragmatic purpose but do not, for all that, remain empty. Dates always invite questions and tempt us to make connections, to make them mean something beyond their status as markers of the passage of time.

Is there a particular significance, for example, to thinking about suicide in 1650? And what about 1850? And are these dates of singular significance in England? The title that this edition carries is delimited in both time and space. So we might want to consider whether there is a specific inflection of suicide during the English Civil Wars – a moment that carries a particular political and theological charge in thinking about liberty and obedience, resistance and sovereignty, a moment that leads to one of the most influential philosophical characterizations of the nature of human life in Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*, but a moment that equally inaugurates a republican mode of thought never fully extinguished in English politics – that makes it a decisive point in any history of suicide. At the other end of the span indicated, 1850 points towards another moment of conflict and revolt, asking us to position suicide in the immediate aftermath of that year of revolution across Europe, 1848.

These might be the kind of questions posed to and by a history of suicide 'from above', that is, thinking of history primarily in terms of great events and great figures. It is not obvious, however, in addressing individual cases, that there is a necessary connection between historical events and the decisions that people take in choosing to end their lives. Most suicides remain a matter of unhappiness, pain and despair, not responses to social and political forces. Taking this into account might call for a different kind of history.

A history of suicide 'from below' might lead us to look at suicide rates from the mid-seventeenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries, analysing trends and thinking in terms of populations rather than individuals. The available data for such studies is of course various both in terms of the accuracy of the recording and in the definitions of suicide used, and it is precisely in the 1850s in England that any serious attempt is first made to provide such data in a rigorous manner. From 1856, the Home Office started to produce suicide figures from their judicial statistics; from 1858 mortality statistics began to appear based on the annual reports of the Registrar-General of Births, Deaths and Marriages (but even then, reliable separate figures for suicides only start to appear in 1867).<sup>10</sup>

We could readily multiply such questions about the right way to approach suicide as a historical phenomenon. Why not begin a little earlier and include a remarkable text such as John Donne's *Biathanatos*, first published in 1644, although written around 1608, or go a little later and consider the rise of bovarism in the wake of Gustave Flaubert's novel, *Madame Bovary*, first published in 1856? In this introduction, I will try to offer a sense of context for thinking about the dates (1650–1850) and place (England) that have guided the selection of texts. Some of the most significant moments in the history of suicide in England occur in response to events and texts that are not English and that do not occur between 1650 and 1850. Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, for example, elicited fierce and compelling polemics in English texts and exerted a



strong influence on the arguments presented in, for example, Charles Moore's *Full Inquiry into the Subject of Suicide* (1790).<sup>11</sup> Examples for thinking about suicide throughout the period are much more frequently drawn from classical texts (Cato, Lucretia, Brutus, and so on) than from contemporary society. What is remarkable for modern readers, used to thinking of suicide primarily as an issue for medical and psychiatric professionals, or for sociological approaches influenced by Emile Durkheim's landmark study of 1897, is the prevalence of literary figures, texts and examples in the discussion of suicide in earlier periods.<sup>12</sup>

What the idea of a history of suicide suggests most strongly is that suicide is not a constant and unchanging phenomenon throughout human history, and indeed is perhaps not a single phenomenon at all. Certainly there is some evidence that human beings have chosen to end their own lives voluntarily for as long as the species has existed. Classical culture offers Greek and Roman examples in abundance, many of whom are still invoked in discussions of suicide in modernity. But what this most unfathomable of acts means – to the one who acts, to those who survive, to the society from which the individual removes herself, to the authority of those who seek to prohibit such actions, legally, morally, religiously, and so on – remains a matter of impassioned debate that draws on this intellectual inheritance as much as it holds it up to scrutiny. In this respect, a history of suicide must attend to the singularity of a given moment, a given life and a life given up, while trying to generalize from that singular example to make it make sense. But there is a risk here, at once ethical and political. To make someone's death make sense is always to impose that sense on it, and this risk is particularly acute in cases where the chosen death is motivated by a rejection of the 'sense of the world' with which the individual feels her- or himself to be confronted. Explaining suicide can potentially lead to explaining it away, which is another way of not explaining it at all. This is one of the many reasons why suicide notes are so often treated as either unbelievable or inadequate. Suicide is always placed in some kind of narrative, either as a predictable end point, or else as a surprising twist in a story that must then be reread or rewritten. In thinking and writing about suicide, it is always important to be aware of the forms of narrative being used.

### Suicide, Narrative and Exemplarity

Until the early seventeenth century in England suicide did not exist.<sup>13</sup> That is, the word 'suicide' does not appear in the English language until this period. Indeed the OED cites a 1651 text, Walter Charlton's translation of Petronius's *Satyricon*, as the first appearance of the word, although it does appear in Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, published in 1642. The years around 1650 do broadly represent a change in thinking about suicide, then, at least in terminology. (Par-

enthetically, it would be worth pursuing this fact of the word appearing as and in a translation in the context of a history of suicide in England.) Until this point, and persisting well beyond it, the words used to describe the act of suicide are revealingly judgemental: self-murder, self-killing or self-slaughter (as in *Hamlet*) tend to be favoured. When the word 'suicide' appeared, it was immediately attacked, not so much because it removed the tone of moral indignation present in the earlier formulations as because it showed a poor grasp of Latin in its formation: commentators objected that it should refer to the killing (-cide) of a pig (sus) rather than of the self (sui).

The early modern period in England saw two conflicting impulses meet in its consideration of suicide as in its consideration of so many of the other fundamental questions about the relation between an individual and her or his community. The notion of the English 'Renaissance', in which there was a rebirth of classical knowledge through a recovery of ancient texts driven by a humanist impulse towards the perfectibility of mankind, must always be linked to the frequently much more conservative forces of religious reformation and counter-reformation. In the case of suicide, this might be rather schematically broken down into a clash between certain strands within classical thought that were broadly tolerant of suicide (most obviously stoicism) and those within Christian thought that repeatedly characterized suicide as a sin. Those who condemned suicide tended to view it either as a form of murder – 'Thou shalt not kill' being extended to include killing oneself – or else as a manifestation of pride, the deadliest of the seven deadly sins. This Christian commentary drew as much on medieval thought as on classical texts, even if it often used classical examples to make its point.

One of the most famous instances of this reinscription of a classical figure was St Augustine's handling of the example of Lucretia.<sup>14</sup> Augustine's discussion in *The City of God* is decisive. His central argument is that the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill' applies to the self as well as to another. From this he suggests that we should endure rather than seek to avoid calamity and that we should not attempt to avoid one sin by committing another. The logical consequence otherwise is that we should kill ourselves immediately after baptism in order to remain totally pure. Crucially, Augustine objects not so much to what Lucretia does as to the idea that anyone might find her actions heroic. Augustine's hyper-rational reading of her case runs as follows: if Lucretia was raped by Tarquin, then she has nothing to be ashamed of and thus no reason to take her own life, and a suicide without justification cannot be heroic; if she is ashamed, then this implies that she was not *in stricto sensu* raped, and if it is her shame at this that motivates her suicide then again she cannot be thought of as heroic. The target for Augustine, as so often in Judeo-Christian discourses on suicide, is pride (and its subspecies, despair, in which despair is read as a loss of faith in God to relieve

suffering leading people to attempt to relieve their own suffering, indicating pride). It is ultimately Lucretia's concern for her own and her family's reputation that prompts her death, and in this she is simply proud. Augustine feels that Lucretia is worthy of discussion precisely because she is held up as an exemplary figure by others.

Unsurprisingly, it is Michel de Montaigne who is among the first prominent writers to cast a sceptical eye on suicide and the logic of its religious prohibition. Perhaps the most famous phrase in the various editions of Montaigne's *Essais* published in the 1580s and '90s is his suggestion that 'To philosophize is to learn how to die' (given as the title of essay 20 of book 1). But to philosophize, as Montaigne suggests at the opening of his essay 'A Custom of the Isle of Cea', is also to doubt. It is this doubting that he thinks characterizes his own work in the *Essais*. In taking up the question of suicide, he pursues a determinedly sceptical course through the existing arguments, offering a series of examples and analogies to unpick a series of presuppositions that he considers to be false, or at best unhelpful. Having cited some notable classical examples of famous suicides, Montaigne proposes:

The saying goes that a wise man lives not as long as he can but as long as he should, and that the greatest favour that Nature has bestowed on us, and the one which removes all grounds for lamenting over our human condition, is the one which gives us the key to the garden-gate [*la clef des champs*]; Nature has ordained only one entrance to life but a hundred thousand exits.<sup>15</sup>

John Donne will later pick up this metaphor of unlocking the garden gate to characterize suicide as a release from the prison of the world. Montaigne certainly sees suicide as a way of ending life's troubles, suggesting 'death is a prescription for all our ills'.<sup>16</sup> In part this is because he sees little to fear in death, not least because it is always coming in one form or other, and so he is more concerned with the relationship between life and dying than that between life and death. There is no space then for a simple opposition. But suicide is also a matter of will for Montaigne: 'It comes to the same thing if a man makes an end to himself or passively accepts it [death]; whether he runs to meet his last day or simply awaits it; wherever death comes from, it is always his death [*c'est toujours le sien*]'.<sup>17</sup> Montaigne's use of the medical image of a prescription for all our ills continues through the proposal that since much medical practice of the time (including bloodletting, amputation and cauterization) involves a certain violence to the body, then ending life is simply an extension of this practice, and is directed towards the same beneficial end. Montaigne is equally unimpressed by the legal arguments against suicide, suggesting that since a man is not guilty of theft if he steals his own property or of arson if he burns his own woods, then he cannot be guilty of murder if he takes his own life.<sup>18</sup>

Tackling the standard objection that it is not for us to determine the length of our life, Montaigne proposes that 'it is a sickness peculiar to Man to hate and despise himself; it is found in no other animate creature'.<sup>19</sup> This sickness might best be understood as melancholia, although it is not named as such in Montaigne's essay. Rather than accepting that suicide is always motivated by despair, Montaigne argues that in certain cases it stems from a hope for future pleasure in the world beyond, even from a certainty regarding the clemency of God's judgement. Yet the essay ends not with bold statements, but with a list of cases in which suicide has been seen as lawful and desirable. Retreating from the grand cases of noble suicide, however, Montaigne ends by accepting a much more prosaic, and much more human, that is, less heroic, motivation for suicide. His final comment in this essay is simply, 'Of all incitements unbearable pain and a worse death seem to me the most pardonable [*La douleur insupportable et une pire mort me semblent les plus excusables incitations*]'.<sup>20</sup> Here, Montaigne's thought opens onto a debate still being actively pursued in discussions of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

What Montaigne seems to recognize is the sheer variety of causes and circumstances that might lead someone to wish to end a life. In the English context, and almost certainly having read Montaigne, William Shakespeare offers a stupefying array of suicidal examples and images in his works. Few bodies of work are more persistently occupied with the issue of suicide than that of Shakespeare. Even taking into account only the major characters bound up with the issue, Shakespeare's texts offer Othello, Brutus, Antony and Cleopatra, Hamlet, Ophelia, Romeo and Juliet, Gloucester, Lucrece, and so on. Georges Minois suggests over fifty instances of suicide appear here. Shakespeare's texts, along with those of his contemporary poets and playwrights, offer ample evidence of the complexity that attends on any attempt to account for the ways in which suicide might be understood at a given moment in history.<sup>21</sup>

(More remarkable still is the persistence of certain ideas and texts in moments removed from that of their apparent origination. By one of those curious historical concatenations, in the days before and after the Ratcliffe Highway murders, across London in Fleet Street, Samuel Taylor Coleridge delivered a series of lectures on Shakespeare. What, then, did Coleridge make of all this? There is not the space to explore this at any length here, but one might begin from his commentary on Hamlet's meditative character, delivered in a lecture on 2 January 1812, the night after the burial of John Williams.<sup>22</sup>)

In 1637, John Sym published what he claimed to be the first proper 'tractate' on the subject of suicide.<sup>23</sup> The reasons for writing the book are given in the Epistle Dedicatory:

The discourse is of a mixt and various nature; and the theame of self-killing is the subject both of Divinity, and of humanity; of Religion and of Law: the full handling whereof may be serviceable to the Kings Majestie, for preservation of the lives of his people, against the blowes and mortall wounds of a self-killing hand: and may be usefull for the publick good of the Church and of the Common wealth; both for the safety of the soules and bodies of their members; and also, in point of Honour; that the government of so gracious a King, and the glory of so famous a Nation may not be ignominiously stayned, by self-murdring practises.<sup>24</sup>

Sym establishes the broader socio-political issues at stake in the question of suicide, and he also makes clear the Christian basis of his work in his insistence on the terms self-murder or self-killing. In his emphasis on forms of life, both physical and spiritual, and the ways in which they may be ended, Sym sees his work as a kind of prophylactic, hoping to preserve life (as his title suggests) through the power of his arguments. As he puts it:

For, self-murder being death, and death being onely a privation, it cannot be knowne what it is but by the knowledge of life, which is its contrarie: for, no privation can be defined (in regard of its want of entitie in it selfe) but by its opposite habit: as no man, that knows not in some measure what light is, can know what darknesse is.<sup>25</sup>

This leads Sym to assert that since self-murder is evil, then life is good, and thus the better life is seen to be, the greater the evil of suicide. The threat posed by suicide lies precisely in its capacity for the destruction of the good.

From this opening, Sym quickly comes – like Montaigne – to characterize suicide as a particularly human phenomenon. In defining life, Sym makes a distinction between vegetation (plant life), what he calls an irrational ‘life of sense’ (non-human animal life), and the rational or ‘natural’ life of human beings. Only the latter is prey to self-murder, since the former two are ‘by instinct’ always focused on their own preservation.<sup>26</sup> Sym specifies what is most horrible in the act of self-murder:

it is against that self-love, which is the rule of our love to others; and therefore what wee may not lawfully, in this case, doe to others, we can lesse lawfully doe it to our selves, against this generall law of love; in breaking whereof, specially towards our selves, we violate the whole law, the generall summe whereof is love.<sup>27</sup>

What Sym also adds to the discussion is a distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ forms of self-murder: the first encompasses violence against the self, whereas the second includes the pursuit of a course of action that might reasonably be expected to end in death, such as drunkenness or gluttony. This might be called in modern terms self-destructive or high-risk behaviour.

Sym follows the Augustinian line of argument in stressing the importance of reason. This allows him to identify some exceptions to his condemnation of suicide:

The first is, when a man, destitute of understanding, or of the use of reason, kills himselfe, as a child without discretion, a naturall foole, a mad man in his mad fits, one in his sleepe; or in such fits or sicknesse as is accompanied with a delirium or phrensey, as, in a calenture; the same is not in them properly self-murder.<sup>28</sup>

Sym's reasoning here is that such people are not in a position to rationally will their own deaths, and cannot thus be said to be agents of their own destruction. The second exception is also predicated on the notion of will and intention. Those who take poison by accident, like those who suddenly kill themselves in a fit of passion, that is, without premeditation, may also be exempted from blame. The third case involves those who die through misadventure, but who are attempting a lawful act such as rescuing someone from a fire or river. Fourth are those who die by doing their duty, especially to God. Fifth come 'phrentick persons' unaware of their actions and who in their lucid moments would abhor the act. The stress is placed on conscious action, in accord with reason, and Sym's tractate reinforces a tendency that is also present in Augustine and Montaigne, namely, to explore the logic of suicide and its relation to reason.

Like many of those we have seen, Sym is concerned with the exemplary potential of suicides, but he is not entirely sure how powerful an example may be. Thus, he comments: 'Here we are to observe, that those examples of self-murder, recorded within the Church, are not registred for imitation, but for caution.'<sup>29</sup> But only a little later, he will add: 'The lamentable spectacles of manifold executions, for murders, and robberies; we may thinke might affright all men from committing the like crimes, which we see it doth not.'<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, he again falls back on reason, and on Augustine:

Touching the use of the examples of self-murderers, Augustine sayes well, *Non quærimus utrum factum, sed utrum faciendum. Sanatario exemplis anteponenda est: We enquire not whether self-murder hath beene done, but whether it ought to have been done. Sound reason is to be preferred before examples.*<sup>31</sup>

Sym is quite clear that the greatest danger is posed by philosophers, historians and poets:

That also which in this case obtains the force of a law, is the judgement of the learned, & the practise of persons in esteem, commended by posterity for the same. As among the Philosophers, the Stoicks did in some cases both direct, commend, and practise self-murder; which historians and Poëts magnifie, in their high praises of Lucretia, Caro, and others for the same. The high esteeme of the persons of men of that opinion, and of the practisers of that act; and ambition of like praises, for the like thing;

hath forcibly driven many men, contrary to their owne minde, to cast themselves away, upon this infernall rock.<sup>32</sup>

Sym reserves a particular contempt for what he calls the ‘poyson’ of texts offering heroic examples, and especially for those ‘amorous discourses’ which praise suicide for love.<sup>33</sup>

In the face of such powerful discourses condemning suicide, any writer who wishes to offer a more sympathetic account has to present a strong justification for doing so. It is perhaps for this reason that John Donne’s posthumously published *Biathanatos* begins by making a strong assertion of its own authority.<sup>34</sup> The 1644 edition opens with a list of those cited within the text, and goes on to elaborate its contents in a detailed list that extends for twenty-four pages. Why would Donne work so hard to establish the validity of his text in this way? The answer is given at the outset. Donne’s real purpose in starting here is to assert a very personal investment in his subject, claiming that like Montaigne he is prone to melancholic thoughts: ‘I have often such a sickely inclination.’<sup>35</sup> He continues:

And, whether it be, because I had my first breeding and conversation with men of a suppressed and afflicted Religion [that is, Catholicism], accustomed to the despite of death, and hungry of an imagin’d Martyrdome; Or that the common Enemie find that doore worst locked against him in mee; Or that there bee a perplexitie and flexibility in the doctrine it selfe; Or because my Conscience ever assures me, that no rebellious grudging at Gods gifts, nor other sinfull concurrence accompanies these thoughts in me, or that a brave scorn, or that a faint cowardlinesse beget it, whensoever any affliction assailes me, mee thinks I have the keyes of my prison in mine owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine own sword.<sup>36</sup>

Donne thus is able to feel a certain sympathy for those driven to suicide, allowing him to come to a ‘charitable interpretation’ and avoid ‘peremptory judgements’. Thoughts of death, he claims, are common among a persecuted group such as English Catholics in the years of his childhood. His personal inclinations are related to that of a social group. Then he questions the soundness of the condemnations of suicide and the necessity of linking an inclination to suicide with religious faith. Donne comes to the memorable conclusion that ‘I have the keyes of my prison in mine owne hand, and no remedy presents it selfe so soone to my heart, as mine own sword’, reworking Montaigne’s sceptical metaphor about opening the garden gate.

Rhetorically, this is a more sophisticated phrase than it might at first appear to be. The figure of the world as a prison is a conventional one, used by many early modern writers, most notably perhaps by Thomas More. Donne was related to More, and More is also one of the authorities listed at the beginning of *Biathanatos*. More was widely seen in the period as a Catholic martyr (although not officially recognized as such until 1935), and Donne thus seems to be plac-

ing himself in a lineage that is both personal to him (through the family link), and also part of a tradition of Catholic writing. It is perhaps for this reason that he immediately recalls his early associations with Catholicism. Donne may also have had in mind a passage from his illustrious ancestor's most famous work, *Utopia*, in which among the customs of the Utopians is listed what now seems a very modern attitude to suicide:

Everything possible is done to mitigate the pain of those suffering from incurable diseases; and visitors do their best to console them by sitting and talking with them. But if the disease is not only incurable, but excruciatingly and unremittingly painful, then the priests and public officials come and urge the invalid not to endure further agony. They remind him that he is now unequal to any of life's duties, a burden to himself and others; he has really outlived his own death. They tell him he should not let the disease prey on him any longer, but now that life is simply torture and the world a mere prison cell, he should not hesitate to free himself, or let others free him, from the rack of living. This would be a wise act, they say, since for him death puts an end, not to pleasure, but to agony. In addition, he would be obeying the advice of priests, who are interpreters of God's will; thus it will be a pious and holy act.<sup>37</sup>

As with most of the ideas presented in *Utopia*, we should not leap to treat this as a serious statement of More's own position. What at first sight appears to be a rhetoric of authority, in which the advocacy of suicide is given to priests and public officials, is precisely what should give us pause. Both the religious and the political doctrine of this period unite in their refusal to accept the legitimacy of suicide. It is seen to be both a sin and a form of crime against the state. In his *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (1534), the 'wicked temptation' of suicide is discussed, and here there is no ambiguity in More's statements.<sup>38</sup> Donne is thus countering a religious prohibition of suicide in a way which calls up a series of religious associations in his support. In doing so, he hopes to avoid the censure of those who would condemn such a project from the outset. Donne's hope for tolerance is related to his desire to protect thought itself, and more particularly its possibility within the religious controversies of his period. He notes with disapproval the 'childish age' in which Aristotle's *Metaphysics* could be banned and it was possible in France for excommunication to be threatened for those found 'excribing, reading, or having that booke'.<sup>39</sup> His desire for tolerance leads Donne to assert that, since church doctrine has allowed for divergent opinions to be arrived at regarding the possibility of certain figures being either saved or condemned, any judgement should always choose the position most favourable to the dead person. The 'end' of the text, suggests Donne, is to remove scandal from the memory of those thought to have committed suicide.<sup>40</sup>

Donne's text did not, of course, pass unnoticed by those vigorously opposed to his attempts to offer a rationalization of justifiable suicide. Sir William Denny, in his *Pelecanicidium* of 1653, took a direct stance against Donne.<sup>41</sup> Respond-



ing, he claims, to the number of self-murders in London in recent months, he opposes his text to ‘some late-publisht Paradoxes’ which suggest ‘That self-homicide was Lawfull’.<sup>42</sup> He cites the examples of Saul and Achitophel: ‘Saul possest with a Devill in his Heart, Achitophel in his Head’.<sup>43</sup> The tone of the text may be discerned from the list of chapter headings, in which Denny first lists the kinds of people likely to commit suicide (lovers, melancholics, the jealous, the frightened child, the unfortunate merchant, and so on) and then moves on to address their motives and the best cures (more religion, in every case). Here, for example, is his verse on lovers:

Or is't some whining calm of Love, that's crost,  
That has your Hearts into the Hazard tost?  
Is there No Remedie for what you loose,  
But, Woodcock like to cure it with a Noose?  
Is Nature plunder'd that she's lost her Store?  
What canst not finde 'mongst all All to please, One more?  
Why sneak ye else alone? Why sigh? Why pine?  
Why set up Idols on each sainted Shrine?  
So tempt ye Heaven; And with your frantick Fits  
Endanger losse of Life, as well as Wits.<sup>44</sup>

Part of his concern is that the distressed lover will spend too much time alone, and Denny's profoundly unsympathetic response to the tribulations of ‘crost’ lovers is mirrored by his equally brutal advice to melancholics:

But, cloudie Natures, swallow'ing stupid Follie,  
Like Pills, wrapt up in pleasing Melancholie!  
Forbear your Dumps! And let in Reasons Light!  
Else you may hasten; or forestall your Night.  
Be sociable Creatures! as First made.  
Occasion shunn'd, does Sad Events evade.  
Be well imploy'd! For idleness has been  
Porter, and Executioner to sinne.<sup>45</sup>

Because he believes in satanic temptation as the true root of suicidal thoughts, Denny thinks that the solitary person is more susceptible to such temptation. Work, reason and religion would appear to be the solution. Suicide remains, for Denny, fundamentally irrational. Just as lovers lose their wits as well as their lives, the melancholy person swallows ‘folly’. The ‘Reason’ that Denny calls upon is one thoroughly informed by and inseparable from Christian doctrine, and he believes that all loss of reason may be attributed to a loss of faith. In this, he rejects wholly the sceptical but generous application of reason offered by thinkers such as Montaigne and Donne.

The patterns of thinking about suicide in the decades leading up to 1650 reflect the complexity of any historical moment, even if the period in which the