A Suicide Crisis in Britain's Age of Reform, 1815-1830

an episode in the development of Victorian middle-class morality

Joseph Molto

Supervisor: Joost Augusteijn
Student Number: 1742078
Address: 42 Maine Ave, York, YO31 0RZ, UNITED KINGDOM

Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my appreciation to my supervisor Dr. Joost Augusteijn, Dr. Maartje Janse and Dr. Eric Storm, for their assistance and patient encouragement which helped me pick up where I had left off after a long break in research while I settled down in a new country. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Esther Buizer, the programme coordinator, whose fortuitous walk through the Plantsoen Park led to an encouraging chat that convinced me to carry on despite the challenges that had intervened. Leiden has offered me the chance to get to know many other up and coming academics who have helped me piece together aspects of the story I was less well acquainted with. In particular I would like to thank Myrte Wouterse and Lexi Cleveland as well as my housemates, all fellow students; Chiel Claassen, George Staicu, Akiko Hakuno, Timothy Burke and Grace van der Zee – I am indebted to them for providing me accommodation for my return visits and helping me to improve my Dutch – grote dank. Finally I would like to thank my sister Cecilia Molto and uncle Mark Sherlock for financial support, as well as my brother, Dr. Daniel Molto, at the University of Sussex, for looking over my script and making many useful suggestions –as ever, all mistakes remain my own. Written during the Covid Lockdown.

Joseph Molto

City of York, 23rd of June, 2020

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a Research MA dissertation in History (Political Culture and National Identities) at Leiden University

Table of Figures

Contents

Introduction

On the twelfth of August 1822, Robert Stewart Lord Castlereagh, the British Foreign Secretary, slit his throat with a razor while at his home in what is now south London. The death of the notoriously reactionary Castlereagh has come to represent the death of the *ancien regime*; the world of aristocratic honour and oppression which he had propped up during the long years of war against Napoleonic France and which he represented to the forces of radicalism at home.

Yet, there is another story of Castlereagh's death, one in which the supposed inhumanity of his politics is displaced by his own humanity. Castlereagh's death did not mark the *end* of an era so much as it encapsulated a distinct *period* of social anxiety in which the public mores of a new age were forged. For Castlereagh was not alone among his peers in putting period to his existence; many prominent members of society committed suicide between the end of the Napoleonic Wars and the fall of the war-time Tory government of which Castlereagh was a member, a time period roughly coterminous with the 'Regency Period'. During this period, a number of prominent members of Parliament, such as Samuel Whitbread, Samuel Romilly and Lord Graves, killed themselves in the same violent manner as Castlereagh, as did a significant number of clergymen, demobbed soldiers, numerous gentlemen and a series of suspected imitators further down the social scale. This apparent clustering of prominent and violent suicides sparked a period of relatively intense coverage and debate over the issue of suicide in the country's burgeoning journals and newspapers. All this attention contributed directly to at least one significant reform of the law in 1823; a reform of the law governing the burial of suicides, which was one of the first acts in the most significant period of English legal reform; the Age of Reform.[1]

The question is, then, what if anything linked the suicides of Castlereagh, Romilly *et al* in the Regency Period and what impact did these suicides have on English society?

[1] Robert Peel entered cabinet in 1822, sponsored his first major reform, the Gaols Act, in 1823, which laid the groundwork for the first significant attempt to consolidate British laws with the eponymous 'Peel's Acts' of 1827 just as the debates over Catholic Emancipation, the Abolition of Slavery, Parliamentary Reform, the Poor Law and child labour in factories were reaching their height.

Historiography

> "A CONSCIENTIOUS JURYMAN! - Some time ago, a man threw himself into a canal in Lincolnshire, and was drowned. An inquest was immediately summoned, and the Jury, with one exception only, were unanimous in their verdict of *Felo-de-se*. This "finding" will not suit him at all, and so he boldly expostulated with the Coroner, "How con ye foind that a mon fell i'th' Sea, when he was found i'th' Conol?""[2]

Suicide: *thèse sociologique* versus *thèse psychiatrique*

Although academic debates on suicide are generally traced back to the celebrated sociologist Émile Durkheim's 1897 *Le Suicide*, Durkheim was building on social research that found its genesis in the 1820s. The most notable influence on Durkheim was the work of Auguste Comte, the 'founder' of sociology. Comte sought to extend scientific methods into the study of human society, replacing older religious, romantic and rationalistic philosophical traditions with an empirical scientific approach which he christened 'Positivism'. Comte's new application of science grew out of his own experience of the social *malaise* of the post-revolutionary years; Comte himself experienced a personal crisis and attempted suicide in 1827[3] and would later attempt to address the social *malaise* by establishing a humanistic 'religion' to propagate his positivistic philosophy. The other tradition that the early sociologists built on was the statistical work undertaken by bureaucrats and doctors that came to prominence in the 1820s, in particular the study of suicide statistics undertaken by the early French psychiatrist Jean-Pierre Falret with a paper *'De l'hyponchonrie et du suicide'* in 1822 and then a book *Recherches statistiques sur les aliénés, les suicides et les morts subites* published in 1828. Falret was notable for introducing basic statistical methods to the study of suicide and using these to make observations on the demographics of suicide, for example arguing that suicide was higher among the wealthy and in urban populations.[4]

[2] *Manchester Mercury*, 30/08/1825, p 2
[3] M Gane, *Harmless Lovers?: gender, theory, and personal relationships*, London: Routledge, 1993, p 122
[4] A Giddens, 'Suicide Problem', pp 3/4

In *Suicide*, Durkheim drew together statistical studies of suicide from various countries to argue that different *social structures* could produce different *rates of suicide*. Durkheim argued that societies can function so as to prevent suicide by sustaining a high degree of social inclusion while societies that fail to do this will show higher suicide rates. Durkheim found that Protestant countries generally have higher suicide rates due to lower social inclusion, in particular as these societies underwent industrialisation, urbanisation and became more individualistic. To hammer home what he argued was the central role of social structures in suicide rate, Durkheim noted that while suicide rates tend to remain fairly constant over time *within* any given society, suicide rates *between* different societies – France versus England, Catholic versus Protestant, East versus West – can vary widely;[5] while he rejected accounts of shorter-term phenomena like imitative suicides as anecdotal and unscientific - along with accounts of animal suicide.[6] This is the classic *thèse sociologique*. In the mid twentieth century aspects of Durkheim's theory of suicide were critiqued, in particular the division of all suicides into four distinct models, however numerous neo-Durkheimian studies continue to promote the *thèse sociologique*, for example one 2005 Dutch study 'Denomination, Religious Context, and Suicide' finds that greater social cohesion helps to lower suicide rates.[7]

Psychiatrists in the early twentieth century began to challenge sociological models of suicide and the Durkheimian approach, beginning with studies that showed that 90% of all suicides suffer from a mental disorder at the time of death. The origin of this widely cited statistic is hotly debated as is the finding itself, however American research psychiatrist Gerald Jameison was instrumental in developing a psychological model of suicide that made such claims with his 1936 paper 'Suicide and Mental Disease'. The *thèse psychiatrique* that emerged from this work holds that suicide is fundamentally an individual act and thus a true explanation for any suicide must be sought in the psychological profile of the suicide, while sociological factors are treated as secondary or irrelevant. This approach posits a medicalised view of suicide, which has been used, for example, to explain suicide 'clusters'. Formal research into the phenomenon of clusters of imitative suicides began with the 1974 paper 'The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide' by

[5] S Pridmore, 'Predicament Suicide Model', p 13
[6] G Minois, *History of Suicide*, p 322
[7] F van Tubergen, M te Grotenhuis, W Ultee, 'Denomination, Religious Context, and Suicide: Neo-Durkheimian Multilevel Explanations Tested with Individual and Contextual Data', in *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol 111/No 3 (2005), pp 797-823

sociologist David Phillips.[8] Philips' findings have been developed in particular by psychiatrist Madelyn Gould into a medical 'contagion' model through which, she argues, exemplar suicides, transmitted through print or visual media reporting, trigger underlying susceptibilities to suicide in the imitators.[9] However, there have also been psychological studies, most notably research conducted in psychiatric wards, that found that susceptibility to suicidal contagion is not predicted by the presence of psychiatric disorders,[10] which has led to calls for researchers to abandoned medicalised concepts such as 'contagion' to describe imitative suicides in favour of non-medicalised social terms such as 'imitation'.[11]

Recent research by psychiatrists has tended to dampen the claims made by adherents of the *thèse psychiatrique.* For example this approach was challenged by the 1999 study 'Suicide and Social Change in China',[12] which found that suicidal behavioural in that country was poorly linked to psychiatric disease, leading to accusations of cultural bias in previous studies. The 2013 study "Suicide Clusters" also called into question the extent of imitative behaviour among suicides, finding that only 10% of suicides can be linked to the influence of previous suicides.[13]

Studies of 18th and 19th Century Suicide

Olive Anderson's 1987 *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* is *the* seminal work on the history of suicide in England. Using large data sets from coroners' inquests and newspaper reports Anderson teases out some of the socio-economic contours of suicide in the 1837-1910 period in what has been called a 'Durkheimian' study by her critics.[14] This charge is rather odd

[8] D Phillips, 'The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect', in *American Sociological Review*, Vol 39/No 3 (1974), pp 340-354
[9] M Gould *et al*., 'Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young', in *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol 46/No 9, (2003), pp 1269-1284
[10] C King *et al*, 'Suicide Contagion Among Adolescents During Acute Psychiatric Hospitalization', in *Psychiatric Services*, Vol 46/No 9 (1995), pp 915-918
[11] Q Cheng *et al*, 'Suicide Contagion: a systematic review of definitions and research utility', in *PLOS One*, Vol 9/No 9 (2014), https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0108724
[12] M Phillips, H Liu, Y Zhang, 'Suicide and Social Change in China', in *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry,* Vol 23 (1999), pp 25–50
[13] C Haw et al, 'Suicide Clusters: a review of risk factors and mechanisms', in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, Vol 43/No 1 (2013), p 102
[14] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 4

given that Anderson has also been criticised by neo-Durkheimians, for example the review of her book in *Annales* complained that: *"L'auteur semble cependent ignorer les commentaires de Durkheim sur la faiblesse des taux de suicide en Angleterre (faiblesse qu'il impute au role de l'Église)."*[15] Anderson's principal finding was that Durkheim was wrong to think that suicide was mainly associated with disconnected individualistic life in the growing cities of the Industrial Age – she finds on the contrary; suicide was most prevalent in the countryside among men who had few life opportunities. Anderson has also argued that the reaction to a perceived rise of suicide among the urban poor, in particular poor women, helped to motivate the enaction of various reformist measures, in particular improvements in "public health and safety".[16]

Three years after Anderson presented her work, Michael MacDonald finished his own big data analysis of suicide with sources from the Early Modern Era, *Sleepless Souls*. Despite assembling an impressive array of statistics, MacDonald was pessimistic about the capacity of statistical methods to uncover any definitive truth about the actual rate or demographics of suicide. MacDonald's work was more of a critique of the quantitative methods that had prevailed up to that point as he found that he was not even able to reproduce any of Anderson's earlier findings: "vulgar Dukheimianism produces lucid delusions".[17] Despite this, MacDonald does make one strong claim throughout his work: that relaxing attitudes towards suicide in the eighteenth century and thereafter were due to the rise of secularism – a significant application of the Secularization Thesis. MacDonald also called for the gap that was left in the history of suicide between his study and Anderson's to be addressed:

> "We are sure that in future other researchers will replace our ramshackle work with a stronger edifice traversing the void between the end of the early modern period and the Victorian age."[18]

Apart from studies of the individual suicides of Romilly and Castlereagh this gap in the history of suicide remains; it is the purpose of this short study to address it.

[15] J-C Chesnais, 'revue - Olive Anderson, Suicide Victorian and Edwardian England', in *Annales*, Vol 44/No 2 (1989), p 428
[16] O Anderson, 'Prevention of Suicide and Parasuicide: what can we learn from history?', in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, Vol 82 (1989), p 641
[17] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 69
[18] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 11

The next major contribution to the history of suicide in England was Ron Brown's 2001 *The Art of Suicide.* Eschewing a big data approach, Brown considers evidence from the fine arts in order to build a picture of how attitudes towards suicide changed over time. Brown finds that suicide shifted from an act associated with an *élite* culture of romanticised masculine honour by the end of the Early Modern Era to a Victorian association with femininity, destitution and madness.[19]

The most recent contributions to the history of suicide have been from Donna Andrew, in particular with her 2013 *Aristocratic Vice*. In this study Andrew emphasises the development of the honour culture of the aristocracy and generally emphasises the continuing importance of traditional values in guiding behaviour and attitudes well after 1800. Andrew has also written short articles on the suicides of Samuel Romilly and Lord Castlereagh in which she examines the reporting of these events and how these figures were variously lionized despite, or castigated because of, their self-destruction. Andrew's approach in emphasizing the continuity of culture, in particular the strength of religious feeling in the early nineteenth century has put her at odds with MacDonald's defence of the Secularization Thesis. In a review of MacDonald's article 'The Secularization of Suicide in England, 1660-1800' Anderson rejects his argument that the 1823 reform to the law on the burial of suicides was merely the disposal of a relic from the past, "Equally mistaken, I believe, is his assessment that critics of the new leniency "were met with disinterest and derision""[20] Andrew argues that there was genuine opposition to the 1823 reform and that the reform only succeeded because many devout politicians and church leaders saw in the act a possible vehicle for rationalizing and thus strengthening the law against suicide. In opposing the Secularization Thesis as it is applied to the legal changes during the Age of Reform, Andrew is only one of many recent historians to take this position, as for example have Linda Colley and Eric Evans.[21]

[19] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 182
[20] D Andrew, 'Debate', p 159
[21] see for example, in opposition to Catholic Emancipation, L Colley, *Britons*, p 279 & E Evans*, Forging of the Modern State*, p 258

The History of Emotions and Morals

An earlier exposition of moral thinking in the nineteenth century, William Madden's 1961 'Victorian Morality: Ethics Not Mysterious' argues that Victorian morality was formed starting in the 1820s: "This upset equilibrium of the 1820's, generated by an ideological confusion made critical by unprecedented social changes, called forth the great Victorian "ages" of the thirties."[22] Madden argues that Victorian morality was fundamentally a rational enterprise which he associates with the Utilitarians, a shift away from religious superstitions, "the Victorian encounter with mystery generally resulted in doubt and anxiety, not in wonder and awe."[23] However, Ian Bradley in his 1976 *The Call to Seriousness*, one of the few other contributions to the debate over the origins of Victorian morality, takes the opposite line, arguing that the significant influence on the development of Victorian morality was the evangelical movement at the beginning of the century:

> "Because it provided a useful and timely ethic for the emerging middle class, the model of behaviour which the Evangelicals sought to put across was widely taken up and followed in nineteenth-century England. Its adoption was very largely responsible for creating the cult of respectability and conformity which characterized the Victorian middle classes..."[24]

Bradley was also responding to work by Kitson Clark who, although he did not attempt to propose a cause or date for the development of the peculiar Victorian *bourgeois* morality, did argue that religion was a strong motivating factor. In particular, in his 1962 *Making of Victorian Britain*, Clark argued that Victorian reformism was in large part inspired by a positive 'humanitarian' drive to improve society as well as social morals. Clark's view has been frequently criticised as *naïf*, for example by Jennifer Hart who argues that Clark is enlarging on a more limited form of social conscientiousness: "The tendency to think of the nineteenth century as more humanitarian than it was may be partly explained by identifying a concern for morality with a concern for happiness."[25] However, delving into the hidden recesses of the Victorian mind to determine whether or not there is evidence of genuine altruistic intent is, like all such ventures, dubious and leads to more fundamental questions on intent that are philosophical in nature. What

[22] W Madden, 'Victorian Morality', p 466
[23] *ibid*, p 463
[24] I Bradley, *Call to Seriousness*, p 145
[25] J Hart, 'Nineteenth-Century Social Reform: a Tory interpretation of history', in *Past & Present*, Vol 31 (1965), p 53

did appear in the 1820s and continue through the Victorian period was a powerful language of moralising social improvement, and the practical impact this had was immense.

More recent work from the history of emotions has located the source of this shift in values at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the rise of new forms of language; expressing (and shaping) changed attitudes. Most notable in this school is Lynn Hunt, in particular her 2007 book *Inventing Human Rights*, in which she argues that a new and expanding literary culture, including the work of the Romantic Movement, introduced a new language of empathy. Hunt argues that a growing sphere of empathy marked this period, as people influenced by the new literary culture began to accept other people as equals, experiencing vicariously through literary and other arts the emotions of others.[26] In Hunt's usage this 'empathy' is a larger concept that mere sympathy, given its potentially universal applicability and the equal *value* placed on the other rather than mere sentiment felt *for* the other. Hunt argues that modern conceptions of human rights originated in this shift rather than in any intellectual shift, which is why human rights were conceived to be 'self-evident'. Joanna Innes has contributed to this tradition through her work on shifts in the use of words during this period, in particular 'reform' and 'happiness', and she finds that there is a general shift from purely religious usages to a proliferation of meanings, including political. However, Innes shies away from the bold claims that Hunt has proposed, and with good reason. While the rise of popular literature, especially with the Romantic Movement, likely helped to impart greater value to sympathetic language and may well have influenced a similar shift in emotions, words still carried forward a host of meanings from before, in particular the religious meanings that Innes has noted. Moreover, a shift in emotions towards full blown 'empathy' is a dubious proposition, given that, for example, the abolitionist reformers were able to draw on sympathetic portrayals and generate widespread support without truly acquainting most of even the literate population with an authentic experience of the humanity of the 'others' who were the object of sympathy.

[26] L Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, p 72

Thesis

What then, linked the suicides that were given such prominence in the press during the Regency Period? For the historian the question is best addressed as a *social* not a psychiatric one, just as the neo-Durkheimians argue, not only because of the lack of hard evidence for competing psychiatric explanations, but because most of the evidence that exists for the history of suicide, primarily in newspaper reports and coroners inquests, are *primary material* only for the social aspect of the question. Thus it should be no surprise to find that MacDonald was unable to construct reliable data for the actual prevalence of suicide and it would be fruitless to such make an attempt for the Regency 'gap' in this history. This does not, however, make a Durkheimian-inspired social inquiry impossible *if* Durkheim's own scepticism of short term developments in the social history of suicide and dependence on reliable social statistics is jettisoned. Without making claims about changes to suicide rates and suicide clustering it is evident that anxiety over these and changes in the discourse of suicide is a very *real* social phenomenon. Thus what can be shown is that, between roughly 1815-1830, there was a period of rising anxiety over the issue of suicide in England. This period in the history of suicide was *distinguished* by the very factors the fuelled it, the *unique prominence in the press* of the suicides themselves and their supposed imitators, and the unusual violence of the methods chosen. This was a distinct period in the history of suicide, a *'suicide crisis'*.

What, then, was the impact of this suicide crisis on London-based English literate society? Insofar as any answer has been offered this has traditionally been given as the passage of the 1823 Judgement of Death Act which moderated the forms of legal punishment for the suicide. However, in this case MacDonald is wrong to limit the impact to a belated recognition of softening attitudes which occurred in the earlier Early Modern Era that he has reviewed while Donna Anderson hits closer to the truth in emphasising the continuing strength of traditional moral thought. Moreover, the impact of the suicide crisis on English law and reform of the established Church at that time support Anderson, Innes, Bradley and Clark in their contention that the establishment was positively motivated to retrench traditional Christian morality. Suicide was *not* being removed from of the realm of religious condemnation under the influence of rising secularism, rather supporters of both state and church were motivated by the suicide crisis - as a

particularly salient aspect of larger anxieties over social stability and public morals – to forge a path of *moral retrenchment* between competing forms of radicalism. The reach of the romantic language of sympathy was limited by the rise of scientific thinking which proposed new often harsh cures to suicidal ideation. Similarly, the perceived danger from the rise of *élite* secular thought was limited by fears over the rise of popular evangelical religion, which prompted the development of a new moral line on suicide which eschewed both full decriminalisation as well as superstitious rites designed to exorcise the suicidal spirit. In light of these competing currents and stung by accusations of class-based hypocrisy in the exoneration of prominent suicides the establishment in church and state sought a new middle path of consistent, pragmatic, demystified *Christian (re)condemnation of suicide*, both moral and legal.

The 1815-1830 suicide crisis generated a moral and legal retrenchment of the Christian condemnation of suicide by the English establishment.

Werther-mania: suicide before 1815

> "Then I thought a Jury was setting on me,
> And brought in a verdict of *felo-de-se*;
> To the workus, then, I went to be own'd,
> When a body-snatcher my carcase bon'd."[27]

The Early Modern Era witnessed a series of shifts in attitude towards suicide which left several competing legacies by the close of the Revolutionary Period. A harsh 'Bloody Code' developed, which was opposed by the rise of a language of sympathy under the influence of the Romantic Movement. The result was a system of laws 'more honoured in the breach than the observance', while the seemingly sclerotic institutions of church and state were increasingly attacked for hypocrisy in their erratic application of the law. Although the rise of the romantic language of sympathy helped to legitimate calls for reform by the civil and religious establishments, this new

[27] *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle,* 04/11/1832, p 2

sympathy was limited by a continued adherence to traditional religious moral codes as well as by the embrace of a new language of empirical science.

Initially, the impact of the Reformation, largely through the concomitant centralisation of government, meant that there was a greater willingness on the part of the state to actively prosecute asocial, particularly irreligious, behaviour in the secular courts.[28] This included the prosecution of suicides which, according to mediævalist Barbara Hanawalt and Michael MacDonald, were generally covered up as 'accidents' before 1500.[29]

MacDonald has found that references to a rising suicide rate in England first appeared after the Civil War and rapidly increased into the eighteenth century,[30] by which time suicide was widely referred to in continental Europe as the *maladie anglaise*.[31] Ron Brown has confirmed this in his study of the *Art of Suicide*:

> "... as early as the 1720s, there was growing evidence in literature, at home and abroad, of a suspicion that England was the suicidal nation *par excellence*, the cause apparently being variously the gloominess of the English climate, its damp and fog, or even a strain of melancholy in the English national character."[32]

However, MacDonald has provided a rather more complex view. There appear to have been *several* notable peaks in the reported suicide rate during the Early Modern Era; the first circa 1570, again in 1650[33] and then just after 1720 (associated with the South Sea Bubble),[34] while the rate of suicide *verdicts* declined by more than a third between mid-century and 1800.[35] MacDonald has found at least one example of a clear divergence between popular opinion and the suicide rate: in 1755 "the number of such deaths reported in the bills was not, in fact, the highest recorded in the period, but a rash of suicides by men of rank and fashion created the impression that it was.[36]"

[28] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 243
[29] B Hanawalt, *Crime and Conflict in English Communities, 1300-1348*, Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 1979, p 101 & M MacDonald, 'Medicalization of Suicide in England', p 69
[30] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 239
[31] J White, *A Great and Monstrous Thing*, p 411
[32] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 125
[33] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 73
[34] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 267
[35] J White, *A Great and Monstrous Thing*, p 412
[36] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 310

One issue in parsing such discrepancies is the notoriously undiscoverable 'dark figure' of unreported crime – or in this case suicide. Yet some positive claims *can* reasonably be made. *Notoriety* played a large role in the perceived rise in the suicide rate in the latter half of the eighteenth century. This was in part due to a change in language; the word 'suicide' only gained general currency during the eighteenth century as it gradually replaced various euphemisms and legalisms.[37] The rise of the press after the Civil War also played no small part. According to Brown, "the rise of the popular press from the late seventeenth century meant violent deaths were reported widely and suicide became news."[38] This was explicitly noted by Voltaire at the time who argued that the purported *maladie anglaise* was in fact merely a product of English newspaper culture.[39] In any event, the image of the English as suicidal gained a notoriety in itself, which is evident in an 1814 French print entitled '*Amusements des Anglais à Londres*' showing one man guzzling down poison while another hangs himself from a tree.[40] By the early nineteenth century these tropes were deeply embedded in English literate culture, however this culture had changed significantly in the wake of the Revolutionary Period so that, by the time of the suicide crisis of the Regency Period, all the older tropes were being contested.

Romanticism and Honour Culture

The first major shift away from condemnatory Reformation Era attitudes toward suicide occurred in 1774 in response to Goethe's first major work *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers.* This fictional story of a suicidal tragi-hero was both based on the real suicide of Karl Wilhelm Jerusalem as well as being an autobiographical account of Goethe's own personal struggles. *Werther* launched the Romantic Movement and the romantic hero's name became a byword for suicide, in particular for cases of 'honourable' suicide, usually by élite men.[41] After numerous high-profile suicides followed its publication the term 'Werther Effect' was coined to describe all imitative

[37] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 53
[38] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 124
[39] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, pp 308/9
[40] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 125
[41] S Pridmore, 'Predicament Suicide Model', p 31

suicide which followed in the wake of any notorious exemplar, a term which is still used by researchers in the field.[42]

Although the *Werther* phenomenon was essentially a continental affair, the English experienced it second-hand as it followed closely on the, until then, little remarked suicide of the seventeen-year-old poet Thomas Chatterton in 1770. The two suicides (one fictional) were immediately linked and there was an explosion of literary work dedicated to romantic suicide, many exculpating Chatterton of any offence against God or man.[43] Brown goes so far as to claim that it was such romantic depictions that paved the way towards a more modern understanding of suicide as an unfortunate circumstance rather than a crime, arguing in particular that Chatterton's death acted "as an accusation against society"[44] for its harsh treatment of suicides.

The public certainly responded to the literary suicide fad with alacrity, leading to many accounts of imitators and the rise of a new language of romantic suicide. One case was of an Eleanor Johnson who killed herself in 1789 leaving behind a letter describing her love for an 'Othello' (a romanticism for a mulatto man) who had apparently suspected her of cheating on him. The whole scene as described in *The Times* is drowning in romantic Shakespearian imagery; when the coroner reads Johnson's suicide letter to the illiterate Othello he breaks down in tears and is joined by the jury - the papers applauded the finding of *non compos mentis*.[45] High profile suicides were also often related in the exculpatory romantic style, something one French newspaper noted with surprise in the English coverage of the final act of the 'Triple Obstetrical Tragedy', when Richard Croft, personal doctor to the heir apparent Princess Charlotte, committed suicide after a botched birthing which killed both the Princess and her child. Far from provoking universal condemnation - as the unfortunate Croft had feared - his sad end "*à faire déraisonner nos nouvelistes. Le Times dit qu'íl circule à ce sujet des contes tout à fait romanesques, et que la seule cause de cette catastrophe est le désespoir de M. Richard Croft*."[46] This romantic portrayal of suicide was also evident in the 1825 case of a suicide named Crawley,

[42] see https://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Werther+effect and "The Werther effect – About the handling of suicide in the media", at https://www.openaccessgovernment.org/the-werther-effect/42915/
[43] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 82
[44] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 129
[45] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, pp 194-6
[46] *Le Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires, 21/02/1818, p 1*

who stabbed himself in the heart as a result of unrequited love - his dying words were recorded in several papers: "It is of no use, I have done it effectually!"[47] This romantic tradition would live on for several decades, Minois, for instance, has found a case of a purported imitative suicide *à la Werther* in 1835[48] - a full sixty years after the original - and the renowned painting of Chatterton's death by Henry Wallis did not appear until 1856. However, the romantic suicide *á la Romeo* was not new in itself; the significant shift was in its tendency to reverse the condemnatory trend in the law which had influenced thinking on suicide since the Reformation. This was done within the context of a highly literary narrative structure which portrayed romantic suicides as highly individual acts of tragic heroism.

Despite the powerful influence of this literary movement it remained in the main just that, so much so that the concept of the *maladie anglaise* appears in hindsight to have been no more than a figment of the imagination. Brown has called the notion of the English predilection for suicide "a product of these poetic and other intellectual networks,"[49] while George Minois goes further:

> "in spite of a few notorious cases, however, suicide was committed more in words than in acts. People talked endlessly about voluntary death but killed themselves only rarely... True suicide continued to occur where it always had ... and always for the same simple reason, suffering."[50]

If true, this growing discrepancy between the *language* of suicide and its *practice* was not a progressive movement towards a genuine understanding of the phenomenon but a contrary movement, creating a new artificial understanding of suicide which was increasingly at variance with reality.

Although MacDonald in particular has argued that the rise of secularism weakened condemnatory language towards suicide while it was increasingly seen in medicalised terms, he does note the peculiar class difference associated with the romantic view of suicide, arguing that during the eighteenth century:

> "the most conspicuous changes were in aristocratic mores. Greater emphasis on emotional satisfactions exposed young people of gentle birth to the danger of

[47] *Inverness Courier*, 06/07/1825, p 4
[48] G Minois, *History of Suicide*, p 268
[49] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 124
[50] G Minois, *History of Suicide*, p 248

> romantic love. It may also have made the deaths of spouses and children harder to bear." [51]

This was the most significant contribution of the Romanic Movement to the history of suicide; a shift in *élite* values which found in romantic portrayals of suicide a cause for understanding and even exoneration. In *this* context previous historians of suicide are right to point to a significant shift in sentencing of suicides by coroners' court over the eighteenth century from the beginning of the century, when the vast majority of suicides were found *felo-de-se* (felony – of murder – against the self) to 1800 by which time 97% of suicides were being found *non compos mentis* (lacking mental control).[52] However, contained in this statistic is *not* evidence of a genuine coming-to-understanding of the anguish of suicide or its causes but rather the development of an *élite* language of romanticism which placed great value on expressions of sympathy for the suicide that served to exonerate his self-destruction as part of an *élite* narrative of honourable conduct.

Links made by historians such as Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy between the rise of romantic sympathy for suicides and other intellectual movements and trends, in particular rationalism and the Enlightenment,[53] are belied by the literary exceptionalism of the Romantic Movement. This was *not* a consistent intellectual movement, did *not* subject popular moral codes to any meaningful critique and emphatically was *not* part of a larger shift towards classless equality or secularism; it was an individualistic literary movement of the *élite* which found exculpatory excuses for individual acts of suicide in a romanticised Honour Code which was at variance with but could not replace Christian Europe's traditional Moral Code. The *Encyclopædia Britannica's* gloss on Goethe's motivation is apt: "[he] sought to overthrow the Enlightenment cult of Rationalism".[54]

In any case, the continental tradition of High Romanticism and the value it placed on romantic sentimentality never fully conquered the English *élite* imagination. William Madden has argued this point forcefully, drawing on the rise of popular British nationalism which arose out of the

[51] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 237
[52] *ibid*, p 133
[53] for a short historiography see R Healy, 'Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe', p 905
[54] 'Sturm and Drag' in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/event/Sturm-und-Drang, also see, for example, F Thilly, 'Romanticism and Rationalism', in *Philosophical Review*, Vol 22 (1913), pp 107-132

wars with revolutionary Europe. "[The English had a] suspicion ... that romantic mystery and transcendence (Carlyle's natural supernaturalism) led only to *Wertherism* among individuals, and, in the social and political order, to the Byronic hero par excellence, Napoleon."[55] In 1831 the *London Evening Standard* noted the lack of penetration of cultural romanticism in English society versus the continent where 'suicide clubs' proliferated, in particular in France and Germany, while there were none in England despite "the voluminous list of English clubs."[56] The English never fully embraced the Romantic Movement, however it did leave a significant impression on English culture, one that quickly propagated through England's uniquely open press where it led to new debates over suicide and charges of hypocrisy when romantic ideals ran directly contrary to traditional mores. In the first instance, however, this romantic influence was felt most keenly in the sphere of language.

The Language of Suicide

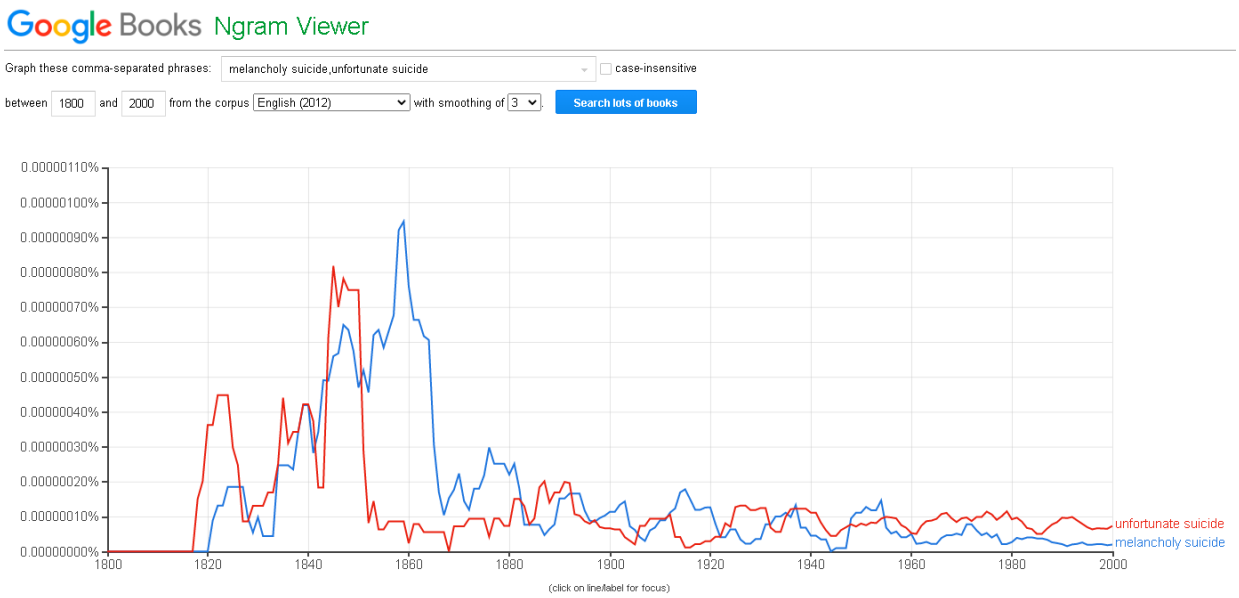
The major contribution of the Romantic Movement to the literate culture of the nineteenth century was the value it placed on a new language of *sympathy*. Whether or not this new culture of *language* cashed out as a new culture of *emotion* must remain in some sense 'hidden', just as the 'dark figure' of crime - or suicide - is not necessarily reflected in its reportage. Nonetheless, the value placed on emotive expressions of concern for others gave rise to new attitudes - at least in expression - of understanding, even towards those whose behaviour had crossed beyond accepted moral boundaries. Under the influence of the Romantic Movement behaviour that crossed such boundaries could be described sympathetically in a heroic or romantic mode. However, it would be wrong to assume that this shift in language reflected a general softening of attitudes against the moral codes which condemned such behaviour.

As evidence of these trends, Ngrams, the measure of the frequency of given terms as a percentage of the overall size of the corpus of published material in a given language, may be helpful in delineating potential shifts in language. As with the 'dark figure' of the suicide rate,

[55] W Madden, 'Victorian Morality', p 466
[56] *London Evening Standard*, 18/07/1831, p 3

actual shifts in emotion that may have accompanied these shifts in language will not be the focus, rather the shifts in laugnage should be seen as *primary evidence* for the fashions and social value put on different modes of reference in public discourse over time.

1 – Ngram: frequency of terms 'melancholy suicide' & 'unfortunate suicide', 1800-2000



The rise of sympathetic language can be clearly seen in the reporting of suicide, in particular the rise and fall of terms such as ‘melancholy suicide’ and ‘unfortunate suicide’ (Figure 1) - Ngrams). Both terms appeared suddenly around 1820 and rose in popularity thereafter until about the middle of the century when they fell out of popular use just as suddenly. The first ‘peaks’ that appear in Ngrams of the use of both these terms occurred during the 1820s, temporarily falling out of favour around 1830. Although the term ‘melancholy’ has a romantic ring to it, and the word appears repeatedly in the *Wertherian* tradition, it is notable that any such usage is not apparent until about 1820, when the explicit reporting of suicides becomes truly significant in the popular press. Clara Tuite specifically dates the rise of “public opinion” to the 1810s,[57] which roughly agrees with Patrick Brantlinger’s dating for the rise of the “cheap literature movement of the late 1820s and early 1830s.”[58] The ‘cheapness’ of this popularisation,

[57] C Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*, p 97
[58] P Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: the threat of mass literacy in nineteenth century British fiction*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, p 23

however, represented a barrier, passing through which the language of sympathy was bound to evolve, away from its roots in High Romantic literature. The Calcutta Gazette noted this disjunction in its critique of Lord Byron's attacks on Lord Castlereagh, questioning his efficacy when the register in which he wrote was not easily consumed by the average literate Englishman who was far more influenced by popular newspapermen such as William Cobbett.[59] The later novelist Edward Bulwer-Lytton also noted this, claiming that the language of the romantics had devolved into a *clichéd* parlance.

This sympathetic shift was indeed an important link with the literary *Werther* tradition, however there should be some caution in assigning to this shift in language too deep a shift in corresponding attitudes. One 1826 article in *The Atlas,* for example, noted the rise of sympathetic language with serious misgivings: "MORBID SYMPATHY. We have before observed on the disgusting newspaper practice of endeavouring to excite a sympathy for every rogue or ruffian under the gripe of the law."[60] Nevertheless, claims in favour of the new sympathy made particular progress in relation to the treatment of high profile suicides, whose single-minded dedication to their work, which supposedly drove them to their deaths, easily fit into the romantic *Wertherian* mode. Reporting on Samuel Romilly's death in particular prompted many panegyrics along these lines:

> "The evidence before the Coroner's Jury leaves no shadow of doubt that Sir Samuel's lamented fate was the consequence of disease – and of disease produced by an excess of feeling, from a cause which must excite the universal sympathy. With a comprehensive mind, enlarged by philosophy and enlightened by study, Sir Samuel possessed all the amiable qualities and warmest affections of our nature; - and that tenderness of heart which led him to embrace with love the whole of his fellow creatures..."[61]

In other words, the 'universal sympathy' generated by Romilly's death is an echo of that superabundance of emotion this romantic tragi-hero embodied and that trigged his suicide in the first place. A hint of underlying danger often accompanies the sympathetic language that was common in the 1820s. Another example from the outcry after Romilly's death encapsulates this dual message:

[59] *Bombay Gazette,* 28/01/1824, p 15
[60] *The Atlas*, 09/07/1826, p 10
[61] *Northampton Mercury*, 07/11/1818, p 2

> "the domestic intelligence of our own country is sufficient to interest the feeling mind, and even to cast a gloom over all the tender sympathies of the human soul. Sir Samuel Romilly, the once wise, great, generous and good, hath closed his earthly career by an act of violence, at which humanity shudders, and reason herself turns pale."[62]

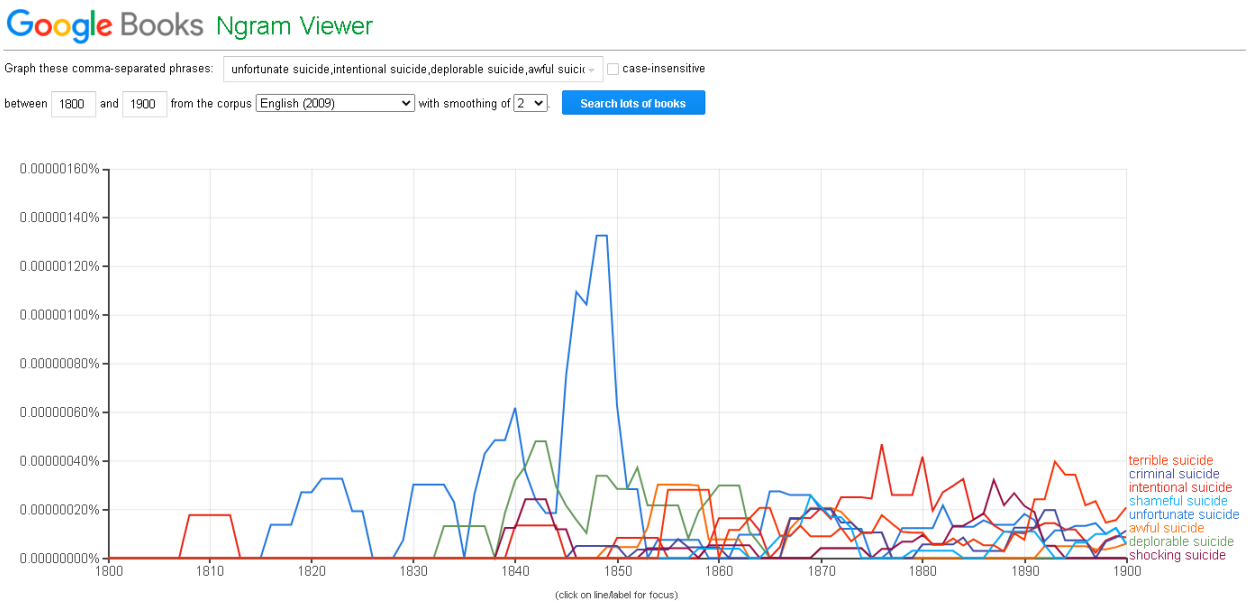
Thus had 'universal sympathy' turned to 'shudders'; the readership is a participatory audience who are expected to match their emotions to the scene being described in the newspaper. Even for the well-loved reformer Romilly the emotions 'excited' by his suicide are hardly described in terms of an exoneration of his final act, rather the 'horror' contains the intimation of future imitation; and this was not long in coming.

> "Already has a melancholy act of Sir Samuel Romilly had its imitator in a wine-merchant of Pater-noster-row. This man; unhappy; perhaps; from distress circumstances, or from a diseased state of his mind and feelings, no sooner read the account of Sir Samuel's unhappy act, - no sooner was he moved by the general sympathy which the knowledge of it excited throughout the metropolis, than he committed a similar act upon himself."[63]

The language of sympathy was taken to have the power to provoke sympathetic reactions in to the extent that accounts of suicidal despair might lead to suicidal despair in others. This was a classical social understanding of suicide and appears to have risen in step with the rise of the language of suicide. Thus the language of sympathy was perceived to contain a hidden danger, one that may in part explain how this shift in language was curbed and tamed.

[62] *York Herald*, 07/11/1818, p 2
[63] *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 05/12/1818, p 4

2 - Ngram: frequency of terms 'criminal suicide' & ‘shocking suicide’, 1800-1900



The latter nineteenth century not only saw the decline of terms of sympathy but the rise of a large suite of new, more condemnatory terms (see Figure 2) such as ‘deplorable suicide’ which was popular through the mid-century, ‘awful suicide’ which peaked in the 1850s, ‘criminal suicide’ which was most popular in the 1860s’, ‘shameful suicide’ which peaked in the late 1860s, and ‘shocking suicide’ which was popular in 1870 and peaked in the late 1880s. The term ‘intentional suicide’, while only one term in the enlarged vocabulary of suicide in the late nineteenth century, was nearly always in more common usage than the older ‘unfortunate suicide’ after about 1850, and had the longest run as the most popular of these terms; throughout the 1870s and early 1880s. R A Houston, in his review of the reporting of suicide in newspapers in the North of England finds a similar shift towards the use of condemnatory language, despite a period of sympathetic reporting earlier in the century:

> “Much newspaper reporting of suicide in the north of England was not a dispassionate, or even sympathetic, rendition of a human failing, but a calculated, didactic dissection of society’s perceived weaknesses.”[64]

By mid-century it would seem that the power of the language of sympathy, which had initially served to lionise romantic heroes who broke traditional religious codes of morality, had settled into Victorian sentimentality as morally censorious language made a comeback.

[64] R A Houston, *Punishing the Dead*, p 336

This didactic shift also paralleled and intersected with other shifts in language which had been influenced by the rise of sympathetic romanticism and which had also developed 'harder' moral and even political connotations. This was particularly true for developments in the use of the words 'happiness'[65] and 'reform'[66] and their variants, which have been studied by Joanna Innes and Alan Burns. In both cases, the terms, similar the terminology of suicide, had strong religious connotations at the time of the Reformation,[67] broadened in usage during the Romantic and Revolutionary Periods and took on (contested) partisan political significance by the early nineteenth century. Burns finds that these shifts in language were important to the history of reform as, in the case of the Church, actual reform was closely preceded by a period of 'discourse': "This took the form of the increasing ubiquity of the usage in relevant contexts of the terms 'reform' ... and 'reformation'."[68] Innes notes the same shift in the more general use of 'reform' and related terms, which she specifically dates to the 1820s: "In the 1820s, the picture became considerably more complex. There was much more general willingness to use the vocabulary of 'reform'."[69] While Innes finds a similar development with the use of the word 'happiness' which, in the same period, begins to appear regularly in broader contexts, such as 'public happiness' and 'national happiness', a trend that peaked in the 1820s.[70]

What is most significant is that in all these cases the language of sympathy, happiness and reform developed hard realist significance by the end of the 1820s, suggesting that the period of linguistic experimentation which preceded it had not represented a fundamental break with the past but rather was a period in which the old competed with the new and terminology was developed, building on the romantic language of sympathy, to reflect these new discourses. Innes has emphasised in all her work that the shift from religious connotations to varied and eventually political meaning did not mean that the older connotations disappeared,[71] on the contrary, the new language was often developed specifically to reaffirm old moral strictures. The Spectator

[65] J Innes, 'Happiness Contested', pp 103 & 108
[66] A Burns, 'English 'Church Reform' Revisited', p 144
[67] J Innes, ''Reform' in English Public Life', p 74
[68] A Burns, 'English 'Church Reform' Revisited', p 144
[69] J Innes, ''Reform' in English Public Life', p 92
[70] J Innes, 'Happiness Contested', pp 103 & 108
[71] J Innes, ''Reform' in English Public Life', p 92

noted the peculiar impact that the language of sympathy was having on practical social reform in an 1830 article:

> "IMMORAL SANCTION. WE have repeatedly observed, in this print, that the lesson continually taught by the public in the treatment of conduct is that patience is the worst policy. Poverty may starve and perish unheeded and unaided in meek endurance; but let the sufferer attempt suicide, or commit a petty robbery, and sympathy is excited and relief poured in from a hundred bounteous hands."[72]

The language of sympathy could indeed herald a new public concern for the suicide and might even give rise to long-needed reform, however it did not presage the wholesale abandonment of traditional social and religious morals. Sympathy could be extended to *some* suicides, however this merely raised the question of how society should best curtail suicide, not that it should in all cases be exculpated. Moreover, the popularisation of the language of sympathy we quickly followed by further developments in language which saw the reintroduction of censorious moralising, particularly towards the practice of suicide.

The Science of Suicide

A popularisation of empirical scientific thinking in the early nineteenth century, just as the practical impact of the Industrial Revolution first became evident, was as important as the rise of the language of sympathy in shaping attitudes to suicide. Evidence of this shift towards a new language of science has been noted as early as 1821 by Saxby Pridmore,[73] while Ron Brown points to a long but 'dramatic' shift away from romantic conceptions of suicide: "In the course of the nineteenth century there was a dramatic shift away from notions of the heroic to conceptualizations of suicide as irrational and medical."[74] This 'medicalization' of suicide should not be oversold, suicide remained a fundamentally social problem by the end of the nineteenth century, however the rise of popular optimism in the promises of science created a new influence on conflicts over the treatment of suicides between religious moralists and sympathetic romantics. The language of science - if not always scientific itself - promised

[72] *The Spectator*, 05/06/1830, p 11
[73] S Pridmore, 'Medicalisation of Suicide', p 78
[74] R Brown, *Art of Suicide*, p 147

empirical methods of testing and possibly treating suicide, however this new science was no more dedicated to the overthrow of traditional religious injunctions against the practice of suicide than the *élite* individualist honour code of the romantics was, and could just as easily be put in the service of a moralistic crusade against social degeneracy - and suicide.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Early Modern attitudes to medicine lingered on among some of the less scientifically-inclined literary *élite*. For example one 1814 pamphlet, on the emergency treatment of suicides, still proposed blood-letting for those who had attempted to hang themselves, however it is emphasised that this is an emergency treatment and that the first responding should seek professional medical advice and describe any emergency treatment given as soon as possible.[75] Such concepts of medicine lived on into the 1820s, with one writer commenting that Lord Castlereagh and Samuel Romilly were effectively self-medicating when they cut their throats; releasing the tension in their blood.[76] However, this was a period of intellectual experimentation and references to ancient practices such as blood-letting were rare. More common were proposed 'modern' solutions to medical and social ills, for example Lord Byron, in an uncharacteristically sympathetic comment on Lord Castlereagh's suicide, recounted to his biographer his first thoughts and armchair diagnosis on hearing the news:

> "When Lord Castlereagh killed himself, it was mentioned in the Papers that he had taken his usual tea and buttered toast for breakfast. I said there was no knowing how far even so little a thing as buttered toast might not have fatally assisted in exasperating that ill-state of stomach, which is found to accompany melancholy. As 'the last feather breaks the horse's back', so the last injury done to the organs of digestion may make a man kill himself. He agreed with me entirely in this; and said, the world were as much in the wrong, in nine cases out of ten, respecting the immediate causes of suicide, as they were in their notions about the harmlessness of this and that food, and the quantity of it."[77]

Byron's medical theorising was not mere whim; in the first few hours after Castlereagh's suicide his death had been attributed to "gout in the stomach".[78] What such medical ruminations demonstrate is a new openness to hitherto ignored avenues of medical knowledge. It was a period of optimism, often over-enthusiastic optimism, but an optimism which saw in the new

[75] N Bosworth, *The Accidents of Human Life*, New York: Samuel Wood, 1814, pp 141/2
[76] B Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p 15
[77] *Morning Chronicle*, 01/01/1828, p 2
[78] *Supplement to the Dublin Weekly Register*, 24/08/1822, p 1

empirical approaches to science and medicine the promise of a new age in which many social ills could be finally eradicated.

One case in which the new scientific method was applied as a direct test to a popular sympathetic notion of a form of suicide was the short-lived belief in animal suicide. This belief was popularised by Lord Byron when he used an example from the natural world to illustrate a romantic tale:

> "SUICIDE. – A scorpion, when he finds himself enclosed, and no way left him to escape, will bend his tail round and sting himself through the head. And it is remarkable, that this is the only animal in the creation, man excepted, can be made to commit *suicide*."[79]

Soon, romanticised tales of horses, sheep, pigs[80] and – especially - dogs, [81] who were supposed to be killing themselves over the loss of family, unrequited love or the prospect of a less honourable death, proliferated. This fad was at its height during the 1820s, despite criticism from some prominent journalists, in particular Thomas de Quincy, the Tory editor of the *Westmorland Gazette*, who dismissed one case of a suicidal horse "who could have no possible reason for making away with himself, unless it were the high price of oats at that time."[82] By the end of the decade it was conclusively determined that animals do *not* commit suicide after a scientific experiment was devised using scorpions - which failed to induce them to sting themselves in the head.[83]

The most notable example of the new optimism in the claims of science to solve the suicide problem was one particular fad in suicide treatment in the 1820s which closely shadowed the arc of the suicide crisis of the Regency Period. In an 1810 medical paper entitled *An Enquiry into the Number the Care and Management of Insane Persons*, Dr. William Hallaran argued that there were essentially only two forms of suicidal distress, one was mental, to which he believed women were most prone, and the other a result of external influences or behaviours, such as drunkenness, to which men were more likely to fall victim. These were not entirely new ideas

[79] *Cork Constitution*, 04/07/1829, p 4
[80] *Liverpool Mercury*, 19/02/1819, p 6
[81] *Nottingham Review and General Advertiser for the Midland Counties*, 25/07/1828, p 3
[82] T de Quincey, "On Suicide", 1827
[83] E Ramsden, 'Suicidal Animal', p 206

and versions of them appeared elsewhere, however Hallaran held that the sort of vices that led to the second form of suicidal distress – at the time considered to be the more prevalent and dangerous - was due to an alienation from the satisfaction of completing useful work, hence the many supposed cases of (usually male) suicide from *tedium vitae*.[84] The solution appeared to lie in some form of radical stimulation that would jolt the mind out of its *tedium*. This train of thought led to the development in 1818 of the 'circulation swing' by the inventor Erasmus Darwin: this consisted of a chair, suspended from a large mechanical swing which would rotate at a gut-wrenching 100 rpm, and if that were not sufficient, the recommended treatment included violently reversing the direction of rotation about every five minutes. This treatment primarily produced vomiting, bleeding and urination from the unfortunate patients, not all of whom survived. However, this being a scientific age, the treatment was rapidly taken up by many doctors and social reformers who recommended its use in all institutions of psychiatric asylum, most of which were cajoled into purchasing their own circulation swing; some of these machines were of such monstrous proportions that four patients could be accommodated at once. By 1826 cases of injured patients and a paucity of successes made it clear that the treatment was a failure and institutions began to rid themselves of the machines so that by 1828 it had 'fallen into disuse'.[85] In retrospect it was largely forgotten how successful Hallaran and Darwin had been in promoting their invention so that in recounting English successes in the treatment of psychiatric illnesses over the early nineteenth century *The Times* recalled Hallaran's treatment as a largely foreign venture "Our French friends took up the device with that admiring curiosity with which they refer to any novelty in practice."[86] Yet it was a signal aspect of the treatment of suicide during the Regency Period, which anyone who participated in it was unlikely to forget.

However, there had also been genuine advances in the treatment of suicidal patients at asylums, which did help to improve the understanding of how mental distress could contribute to suicidal behaviour. For example one pamphlet on treatments offered at the Bethlehem Royal Hospital (Bedlam), noted that shock treatments were being abandoned as they were often found to worsen mental distress:

[84] C Briathnach, 'Hallaran's circulation Swing', pp 79/80
[85] *ibid*, pp 82/3
[86] *The Times*, 16/10/1856, p 4

> "those are chiefly exposed to it, whose sensibility is most acute, and whose feelings are most susceptible of impression. It would therefore appear that this afflicting malady is to be assigned rather to moral than physical causes; and that its alleviation or removal is most to be expected from the influence which may obtained over the mental faculties... Among the improvements in the treatment of insane persons which have been introduced, the most important is the relinquishment of terror and coercion, which it has been clearly proved had no small tendency to irritate the disease." [87]

Despite noted failures and the continued promotion of injurious and quack cures, what *had* changed by the early nineteenth century was the optimism with which empirical science was viewed. This was not a rationalistic commitment to some form of intellectual secularist scientism but an empirical one, and thus traditional moral beliefs which had not been undermined by the primitive treatments that were being developed in this period continued to shape the empirical research; in particular the eradication of traditional social ills.

The power and limits of the spirit of scientific optimism can best be seen in the reception of repeated proposals that the cadavers of suicides be turned over for science. Such proposals were always met with strong popular opposition as dissection was still surrounded with a religious odium against the disturbance of a corpse. This ancient attitude was also held by the romantics, as cutting out the vital organs hardly fit with the heroic narrative; Goethe recounts that *Werther* was asked to give his body up for the sake of science but – appalled at the idea - refused.[88] By the nineteenth century the odium had, if anything, hardened just as calls to institute the practice increased. This was in part because of an association between gibbetting and dissection. When gibbetting was abandoned after 1801[89] as a barbarism unworthy of a modern society, it seemed that calls to substitute the practice of dissection were simply a means of perpetuating a like barbarism in its place. This attitude, however, was rarely described in terms of religious superstition, more commonly the language used against scientific dissection was a form of moral indignation against the 'barbarism' of the practice:

> "SIR, - To insult the dead has ever been considered an act of barbarism which wise men have condemned, and the ignorant have seldom approved. We no longer permit the stake to be driven through the body of the suicide, nor the four cross roads to be his eternal resting place;... It is likewise thought, when the objects which are now

[87] *British Critic*, Vol 22, p 354
[88] M Faubert, 'Fictional Suicides of Mary Wollstonecraft', in *Literature Compass*, Vol 12/No 12 (2015), p 658
[89] P King, *Punishing the Criminal Corpse*, pp 86/7

> swinging upon our gibbets are decomposed, and each particle has joined its native element, that no more sights of this kind will ever be suffered to frighten the superstitious and harden the guilty. Yet amidst all this improved humanity, we have some reliques of ancient barbarism left amongst us which ought to be done away with."[90]

The competing 'sides' in the debate over dissection did not, however, break down along religious versus secular lines. On the contrary, as the debate developed dissection was increasingly *embraced* by moral traditionalists as a potential deterrent to immoral behaviour, in particular to suicide:

> "...if the body were to be given up for dissection, much good would result from it – even to the insane; for most mad people may be deterred from violent acts, and the knowledge of the law, which subjects them to dissection, in case of committing suicide, might act favourably on their mental affliction. When suicide was an epidemic in Athens, the Chief Magistrate ordered the bodies to be dragged through the streets, attached to the tail of 'n cart; and this exposure had the intended effect of putting an end to it, altho' it was evidently the consequence of a maniacal affection of the brain."[91]

Dissection was beginning to play a positive role in the plans of government and opposition legislators and agitators, both taking advantage of popular disgust at the practice in order to use it as a legal sanction. The main debate was whether legislating the hand-over of cadavers would in effect only apply to the bodies of those who had belonged to the lower classes or whether some specific provision should be included in legislation so that the cadavers produced by the upper classes would be equally included. Cobbett was the most vociferous critique of the class-based intentions he saw behind the calls for legislated dissection, building on his criticism that the upper class generally exonerated suicides from their own background by finding them *non compos mentis*:

> "...it is the poor man's body that is to be given, for we believe it is only the *felo-de-se* suicides that are meant, and coroner's juries, we know, never bring in a verdict of *felo-de-se*, except where a man is friendless and poor"[92]

[90] *Sheffield Independent,* 02/02/1828,p 4
[91] *The Observer,* 20/01/1823, p 2
[92] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 09/09/1826, p 26

The dissection debate came to a head in 1828 after the notorious 'Burke and Hare Murders' in Edinburgh. The two eponymous gentlemen of the case were successful resurrectionists – men in the grizzly business of providing corpses to scientific research institutes. It transpired that the notable success of Burke and Hare was due to their procuring bodies directly off the street by dispatching the souls of their owners. Increasingly frantic calls were made for Parliament to release the cadavers of suicides for the sake of science. However the *Manchester Times* renewed Cobbett's attack on the establishment, asking rhetorically whether legislation would succeed if it were understood that it would entail the dissection of:

> "the bodies of the rich, who commit suicide, say, for instance, a prime minister, like Castlereagh, a few members of parliament, a few generals or admirals, or even some well-fed alderman[sic]".[93]

Ultimately legislation would not be passed until 1832. Nevertheless, by the end of the 1820s most literate Englishmen appeared to be open to scientific dissection, or at least wished to appear so, while the main opposition to the practice was perceived to come from the superstitious lower classes. Lower class superstitions were taken to be so deeply entrenched that one opponent to the proposal that the bodies of suicides be handed over for dissection worried that the association of the latter with the bodies of suicides would serve to further discredit dissection.

> "[Providing the cadavers of suicides has] the effect of encreasing the prejudice of the lower classes against dissection –a prejudice which must originate in the want of the reflection, of a thorough conviction of a separation of body and soul on death."[94]

It is the second concern that frames this debate over dissection; that the 'lower classes' hold their 'prejudice' not only as a distrust of science against religion, but a lack of true religion; associating animistic powers with the bodies of corpses, in particular those of suicides, in direct opposition to the Christian belief in an immaterial soul.

A language of empirical science emerged in the Regency Period which provided new ways to put old beliefs about suicide to the test and hence could serve to limit the widening net of public sympathy for the suicide. Indeed, the new science could just as easily be put in the service of policing the traditional moral line against suicide, and it often was.

[93] *Manchester Times*, 07/02/1829, p 6
[94] *The Observer,* 20/01/1823, p 2

A 'suicide crisis', 1815-1830

"Each Englishman now at his hope's end,
The national taste to denote,
Swing's out of the world at a rope's end,
Or cuts all his cares with his throat.
With thy fogs all so thick and so yellow,
The most approved tint for *ennui*,
Oh! when shall a man see thy fellow,
November, for *felo-de-se*?"[95]

The Statistics of Suicide

The British government began to seriously collect social statistics in and around the 1820s, a decade in which there was also an explosion in the number of books reporting on and analysing the statistics.[96] However, historians of suicide have disagreed on what statistical analysis may reveal for this period, if anything. Marzio Barbagli is optimistic, claiming that even good estimates of the 'dark figure' of the real suicide rate for this period may be estimated with some soundness.[97] Michael MacDonald, who has conducted the most thorough research on suicide in the Early Modern Era, is more pessimistic, arguing that statistical analysis on the sources available for this time is next to 'useless'.[98] A particular problem is the erratic approach taken to the preservation of files generated by coroner's inquests, which have not survived at all for some counties while in others large collections exist for particular years or individual sub-jurisdictions.[99] In reviewing Olive Anderson's seminal work *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, which presented the first major statistical research on historical suicide in Britain, MacDonald was unable to reproduce any of Anderson's findings from the coroners' records.

[95] *Leicester Herald,* 05/12/1827, p 4
[96] I Hacking, 'Grounding Probabilities from Below', in *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* , (1980), p 113
[97] M Barbagli*, Farewell to the World*, p 14
[98] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 221
[99] *ibid*, p 4

However, dispensing with any attempt to uncover the 'dark figure' does not mean that no statistical analysis is possible, as MacDonald has shown in his own work covering the Early Modern Era.

What made the early nineteenth century unique was the rapid post-war development of English newspaper culture, until by mid-century it had taken on roughly the dominant position it would enjoy in the High Victorian Period; routinely reporting on all manner of crimes, accidents and debates. Moreover, the surviving journals and newspapers of the time are not simply testament to events and opinions but played an active role in their shaping. MacDonald, despite his pessimism in the value of statistical analysis, sees an untapped resource in the archives of newspapers which have already played such an important role as one of the principal sources of information for that time:

> "the press influenced popular culture more profoundly than we have grasped. The newspaper was a hermeneutical stage on which professional writers mounted their words and ordinary people played their parts."[100]

This great 'hermeneutical stage' is, unlike the hidden statistics of actual human behaviour, an open book which has significance in itself. The great whig historian William Lecky, writing in the nineteenth century, noted the importance of the press in shaping minds: "the blaze of publicity, which in modern time encircles an act of suicide, [can act] to draw weak minds to its imitation."[101] Thus the press *may* reveal information suggestive of what actually happened after the reader put down the morning paper, what it *does* reveal is the dialectic culture which formed the minds of people before and in reaction to events, and this is often far more revealing.

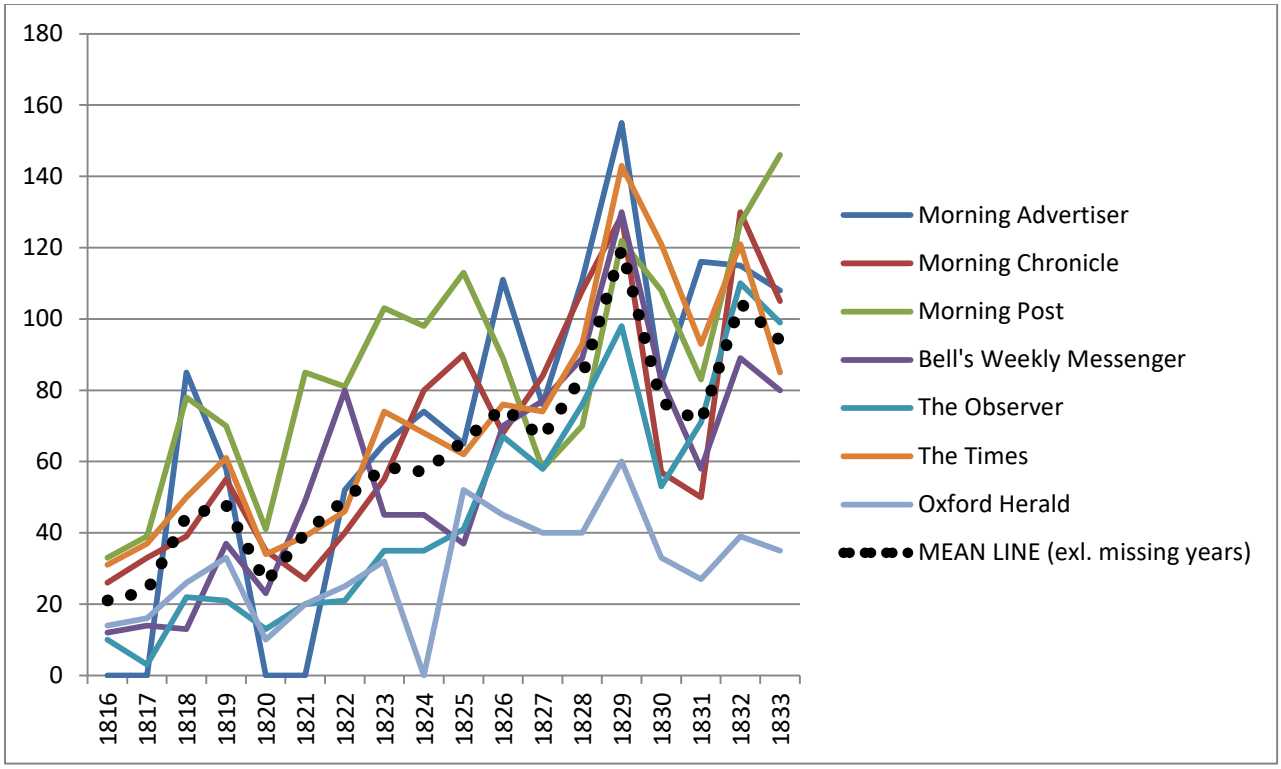
MacDonald notes that the most significant change in relation to suicide in the early nineteenth century was an increase in the unambiguous reporting on such cases which revealed it to be "a daily occurrence".[102] In contrast, Andrew finds that in many cases in the late eighteenth century the personal names of suicides were not used in reporting, while most cases of suicide were either covered up – usually as accidents – or not reported at all; suicide was only reported on

[100] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 335
[101] Lecky, *History of European Morals*, Vol II, p 60
[102] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 303

'fulsomely' by the time of the French Revolution.[103] Houston's study of regional newspapers in the north of England finds that they "hardly considered suicide until the very end of the eighteenth century".[104] It is evidence of precisely *this* type of experience that studies of contemporary newspapers can reveal, and thus it is in this sense that newspapers should be viewed as genuine *primary* sources to the discourse of the literate world they were creating. However, precisely because this newspaper culture was such a distinct phenomenon, its relationship with the 'real' drudgery of everyday life was not always close, and the gulf between the two could itself wax and wane due to the workings of fashion. In this spirit MacDonald's proviso on the use of newspapers is welcome:

> "No one should cite evidence from the papers in the belief that it might not be contradicted elsewhere. We have tried here to use newspapers to illustrate attitudes and conventions, rather than subjects that depend on the strict accuracy of their reporting."[105]

3 – Chart: use of terms 'suicide' & '*felo-de-se*' in selected newspapers, 1815-1833



[103] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, p 96
[104] R A Houston, *Punishing the Dead*, p 336
[105] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 334

Improvements in OCR (Optical Character Recognition) and the greater availability of indexed newspaper archives mean that some basic quantitative analysis is now practicable for this period. Figure 3 is built from searchable databases available for *The Times*,[106] *The Guardian/Observer*[107] and numerous titles available through the *British Newspaper Archive*.[108] The results show the raw number of 'hits' per year in newspaper headlines and articles for the terms 'suicide' (and related, eg. 'suicidal') and '*felo-de-se'* in seven newspapers, all London-based with a national readership (except the local Oxford Herald) that published continuously over this period and for which the archives are largely intact.[109]

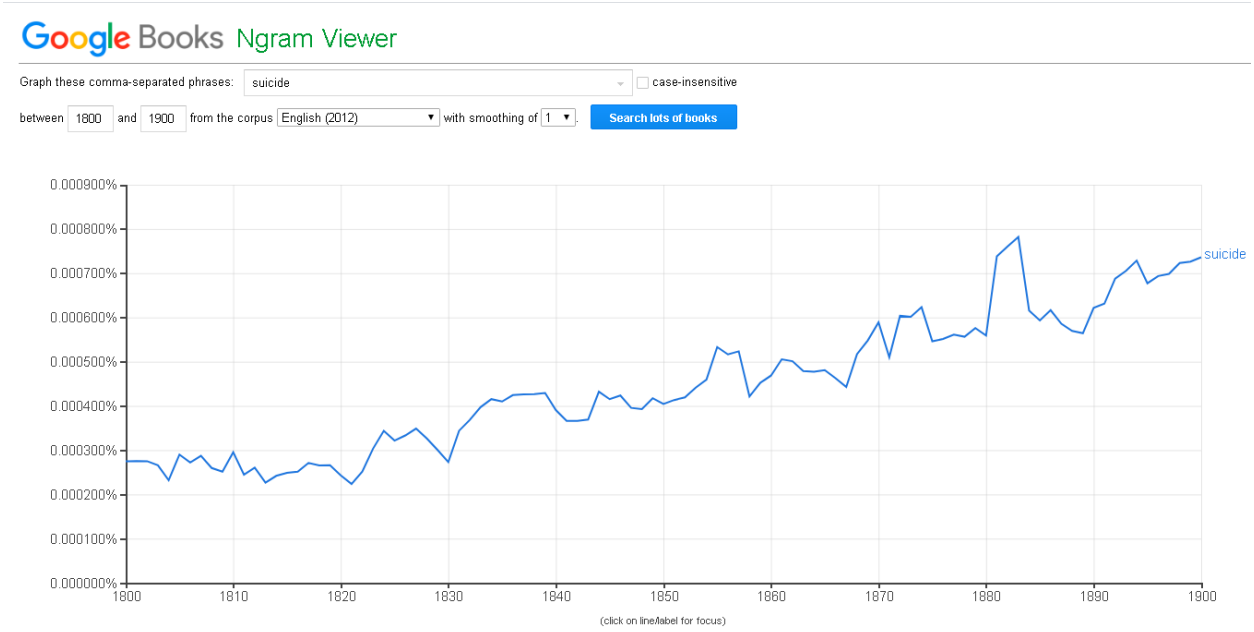
The data shows a rise in the explicit reporting of suicide in the 1820s, which later evolves into the larger more stable trend for routine reporting on suicide and other crimes in the nineteenth century. Due in part to archival gaps for the earlier years, a rapidly evolving newspaper industry with many new titles appearing while others go out of business, and the impact of post-war censorship introduced by Lord Castlereagh after the Peterloo Massacre, there is some confusion in the data. However there are several distinct trends that are evident in all the available papers, in particular the peak in 1829 and trough in 1830, the close correlation of which is itself a strong statistical indicator of significance. There is a distinct trough in suicide reporting in all papers for the years 1830/1 (possibly also in 1820 and 1827) following a steady rise from 1821 to 1824/5 and a significant peak in 1828.

While any link between specific events and these potential cycles in suicide reportage would be tenuous, the fact that a notable rise in reporting in the early 1820s corresponds to the period in which the most notable suicides in English history were reported, in particular that of Lord Castlereagh, suggests that the continued increase in the following few years would have been perceived in some sense as 'following on' from these cases. The results for years following Castlereagh's 1822 suicide would also be capturing the many reported cases of imitation that followed as well as mentions of 'suicide' and '*felo-de-se*' in the debates that his death triggered.

[106] www.thetimes.co.uk/archive
[107] www.theguardian.newspapers.com
[108] www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk
[109] several years are missing for the *Morning Advertiser*

On the opposite end, the trough in reporting around 1830 may be explained by the 'oxygen' being 'taken out of the air' by the first truly partisan general election in British history, held on the death of George IV in which the issue of reform, in particular parliamentary reform, dominated the headlines. It is not proposed that *positive* links can be made with this type of evidence but rather that such hypotheses can be presented in order to test potential explanations of other historical evidence and exclude unsupported explanations. This paper is proposing that the news cycle in reporting on suicide starting with the high profile suicides after the end of the Napoleonic Wars until the trough in reporting around 1830 marks the period of the 'suicide crisis', that continued more or less continuously in intensity, fed by repeated stories and debates in the English press, until 1830.

4 – Ngram: frequency of term 'suicide', 1800-1900



There is some similarity in the picture noted above of peak-and-trough cycles in reporting in an Ngram of the use of the word 'suicide' (Figure 4) over the Modern Era. This cyclical pattern also agrees with the trend MacDonald found in reporting of suicide during the eighteenth century, however the cycles in that earlier period appear to be much more extreme, including some years with a plethora of reported suicides followed by years in which almost none are mentioned.[110]

[110] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 305

Figure 4 shows one such cycle occurring over the 1820s, however equally notable in this chart is an underlying upward that has continued more-or-less uninterrupted until the present day, *beginning* around 1820. As the measure of a term's use relative to the overall corpus of published material (in England) for every year, the increase that is noted as a percentage of this overall corpus represents a social phenomenon in the use of language - an increased rate of reporting, use in debate, anxiety or even linguistic fashion in language - quite distinct from any actual rise in the population or underlying rate of suicide. While it would be too much, on the basis of this evidence, to suggest that Lord Castlereagh's death and the subsequent 'cycle' of high usage of the language of suicide in over that decade 'triggered' the longer term trend, what is evident is that the suicide crisis of the Regency Period occurred at a *seminal* moment in the history of the discourse on suicide.

The importance of this moment can also be seen in some specific cases, most notably in the publication history of the most renowned book on suicide in the English language, Robert Burton's 1621 *The Anatomy of Melancholy.* This book had been the go-to guide for suicide in the seventeenth century and been reprinted many times in the succeeding decades, however by the end of the century it had gone out of print and was soon castigated as promoting outdated Galenic treatments and plagiarised literary tropes (as it is again today). However, in 1821 a new print run of *The Anatomy* was ordered followed by further reprints in 1826 and 1827. The preface to the 1821 reprint announced what had occasioned the books sudden return to bookstands: "The book was again sought for and read, and again it became an applauded performance... the increased demand pointed out the necessity of a new edition."[111] This increased demand was only a sliver of the attention suicide was receiving in the 1820s, albeit a significant one; suicide was back in the news.

In later years the sheer amount of discussion on the issue of suicide may have served to 'swamp' the impact of individual instances, in which case the suicide of Lord Castlereagh and his peers Romilly and Whitbread may represent the end of an era *in the sense that* this was the last occasion in which the reporting on suicide was so completely dominated by a few individuals, as

[111] R Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, pp vii/viii

had been common in the Early Modern Era. However, the discourse that emerged at this time set the stage for the new debates and attitudes that followed.

A History of Statistical Analysis

The first analysis of suicide statistics occurred during the Regency Period and immediately challenged old conceptions. Dr. Jean Pierre Falret's 1822 *'De l'hyponchonrie et du suicide'* was *the* first systematic study, which was widely reported on the press with most English papers giving a prominent place to one finding in particular:

> "SUICIDE. A curious statement appeared lately in the papers, which tended to rescue the month of November from the imputation of being a promoter of suicides: - ... so far from November being the first in the bad pre-eminence of self-murder, it stands only seventh in the list of infamy. With as little truth, we suspect, are the people of this country accused of a disposition to commit the crime of suicide, above those of any other nation."[112]

In the same year nearly all the British papers carried stories on a study of suicides in Westminster which also found "there is no truth in the proverb which speaks of November as the month in which Englishmen hang or drown themselves."[113] A scientific attack on the tradition that such a dull month as November would experience a rise in the number of suicides was, by extension, an attack on the whole romantic concept of the *maladie anglaise*, and it represented a new chapter in the discourse on suicide in which old ideas were brought into question by science.

Yet old habits die hard and by the 1820s the French in particular had long been accustomed to associating *la maladie anglaise* with the dolorous British weather, a popular association that persisted for so long in part because of the sanction it had been given by such luminaries as Montesquieu.[114] This association had also been made with what were thought to be related medical problems, in particular of the skin and spleen, which kept the myth of the *maladie anglaise* alive through to the early 1830s, particularly in numerous medical and pseudo-medical articles which continued to make use of it as a form of explanatory device. One 1829 study on skin conditions, for example, stuck by the old myth seven years after Falret's study:

[112] *Westmorland Gazette*, 08/12/1821, p 4
[113] *The Guardian,* 27/08/1825, p 3
[114] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 312

> *"La lecture de cet ouvrage apprend que la mélancolie, maladie affreuse qui conduit trop souvent au suicide, et que les Anglais nomment spleen; n'a pour cause que le défaut de transpiration, et qu'il en est de meme des éruptions dartreuses, quelle qu'en soit l'espèce, éruptions qu'il ne faut jamais croire bien guéries que lorsque les fonctions de la peau ont été remplies avec exactitude pendant un certain temps."*[115]

Thus, while the rise of scientific methods and language may have led to a more contentious discourse on suicide which called into question such concepts as the *maladie anglaise*, this did not mean the immediate abandonment of such myths as a popular part of discourse on English suicide. On the contrary, the medical language of the time was still sufficiently inchoate that the *maladie anglaise* remained a 'live issue' for at least a decade. This meant that the trope of an English predilection for suicide soldiered on in the popular imagination during this period.

As late as 1833 a Dutch paper, the *Groninger Courant*, was asking the *cliché* question of why there were so many suicides in England: "*Waar geschieden zoo vele zelfmoorden als in Engeland?"*[116] While the major conservative French paper *Le Figaro* frequently dredged up the old story as a thin disguise for its attacks on English culture:

> *"On prétend que quand un certain vent du nord souffle à Londres et fait grincer les girouettes, il se trouve toujours une centaine de personnes qui se suicident. Quand ce vent fatal souffle, tout tourne mal; le meilleur cheval de course renacle comme un ane poussif, la meilleure bière est acide comme du vinaigre, le meilleur roast-beef est dur comme un caillou, le meilleur tory se suicide comme un franc républicain. ...ils chargent un pistolet et le déchargent avec la meme flegmatique bonhomie que s'ils se metaient à table, qu'ils monteraient à cheval, qu'ils joueraient une partie de whist. Tant mieux pour leurs héritiers!"*[117]

French papers in this period were more than willing to point out what they saw as the hypocrisy of the English establishment, in particular the *Figaro* which often pointed to the supposed tendency for the 'Protestant' English *élite* to kill themselves '*comme un franc républicain'*. And the French press often played a magnifying role for debates in the English press at a time when the English *élite* were still by and large expected to speak French and often engaged in after-dinner chatter in French as a mark of their own erudition.[118]

---

[115] *Le Constitutionnel*, 04/07/1829, p 4
[116] *Groninger Courant*, 26/12/1833, p 8
[117] *Le Figaro*, 12/09/1833, p 30
[118] Linda Colley notes Lord Castlereagh's table in making this point – one American diplomat was dismayed when he attended a dinner to find that he could not participate as he did not speak the language. L Colley, *Britons*, p 165

The peculiar interest that the French took in English suicide was well noted even in England's regional newspapers, although it was not always appreciated. A certain tetchiness on the subject is evident in an 1817 editorial that appeared in the *Durham County Advertiser*:

> "SUICIDE. The frequent instances of self-murder that have of late years happened in England, and which unhappily become every day more prevalent, have cast a stain upon our national character which will probably never be eradicated from the minds of our Gallic neighbours. These light-hearted gentry have contrived to produce a comedy at the *Theatre de L'Odeon*, founded upon what they are pleased to term our national feeling."[119]

Thus the concept of a *maladie anglaise* lived through the 1820s and continued to inform perceptions of suicide and the national character.

However, by the 1820s there was strong evidence that the *maladie anglaise* did *not* exist. The frequency with which *this* fact is reported is suggestive of the difficulty that was faced in challenged the most popular concepts around suicide. Thus, instead of quickly ending the dialectic on suicide inherited from the previous century, the new science merely became the antithesis to the *maladie* thesis and the issue remained 'up for discussion' through the 1820s. One of the first reports showing fewer suicides in England was greeted with great scepticism when it was reported in 1821:

> "*Un anonime a fait publier dans le gazettes anglaises un relevé des morts violentes en Europe. Son but est du prouver qu'il y a moins de suicides en Angleterre qu'ailleurs. Vous verrez que l'anonime entreprendra aussi de prouver que les anglais sont tous d'une qité folle.*"[120]

The oft repeated anonymity of the author, which was also well noted in the English press, is suggestive of a suspicion that the findings are not entirely above board – if this was not already suggested by the reference to a predetermined goal "*Son but est du prouver...*" Three years later *The Guardian*, in arguing the point against the *maladie* thesis, sounds almost shrill in its denunciation: "so false is the notion that we are, as compared with our neighbours, an eminently self-killing people. We are, in truth, not above a quarter part as suicidal as the people of Paris..."[121] Two years later this had still not sunk in, so much so that although it was common knowledge that the English were not uniquely suicidal, it was equally common knowledge that

[119] *Durham County Advertiser*, 26/07/1817, p 4
[120] *Le Miroir des spectacles, des lettres, des moeurs et des arts*, 18/11/1821, p 4
[121] *The Guardian,* 09/10/1824, p 4

most still though that they were: "*contrairement à l'opinion générale, le suicide est beaucoup moins commun dans la métropole de l'empire britannique que dans la capitale de la France*."[122]

By 1829 there had been a myriad of widely reported studies which had demonstrated the uniquely *low* suicide rate in England, *The Spectator* celebrated the fact, indulging in the usual national banter in comparing life on the continent to the Edenic life of the English:

> "It is now perfectly well ascertained, that suicide in London is much less frequent than in Paris though in Paris it is less frequent than in many other great cities of the Continent. ...Compared with Spain, at least, England is in this respect Utopia."[123]

However, within a year the same journal was bemoaning the return of the national scourge: "These four cases we observe recorded in a single number of the Morning Herald. We had thought the practice of suicide had been falling into disuse."[124] Thus, the dialectic over the prevalence of suicide in English society rattled on through the 1820s, continuing to add fuel to the ongoing debates and anxieties triggered by an increase in the reporting of suicides during the decade.

Brown has attributed the perpetuation of the stereotype of the suicidal English gentleman to the English press, although he mentions the important role played by foreign chatter on the subject: "The growing British press with its expansive readership may well have helped construct a view of suicide that was reinforced from within the country as well as without."[125] The 'reinforcement' that the English image of suicide was given by reporting on the phenomenon in foreign countries, however, was much more than dialectic - it was structural. The French culture around suicide in particular was entirely at odds with the English. On one hand French newspapers still routinely 'supressed' cases of suicide at home,[126] while all special provisions for the burial of suicides had been abolished decades before by the *ancien regime,*[127] however the primary difference was frequently noted explicitly in the French-language press, usually with surprise and incomprehension: "*En Angleterre, le suicide donne lieu à des poursuites judiciaires*

[122] *Revue Britannique*, 1826, p 371
[123] *The Spectator,* 05/12/1829, p 5
[124] *ibid,* 03/04/1830, p 6
[125] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 131
[126] *ibid,* p 160
[127] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 197

et à des déclarations de jury que la raison ne comprend pas toujours, mais que l'humanité explique..."[128] It was the English legal rituals following a suicide which most confounded foreigners and continued to fuel the notoriety of suicide in the country. George Minois finds that the two cultures produced something of a mirror to each other in the early nineteenth century when it seemed the two had drifted to extremes in the treatment of suicide:

> "The English attitude was diametrically opposed to the French one. Suicide was news in England. It was given full coverage in the newspapers, and it received abundant commentary, a habit that did much to secularize and normalize suicide. The extraordinary growth of the press helped to create more open, more liberal ways of thinking than were very different from the ones that predominated on the Continent. ... Nearly every issue carried a story about a suicide (thus reinforcing the notion of an "English Malady")."[129]

However, Minois is *wrong* to claim that the impact of the heavy reportage of suicide in England was pushing English culture in the direction of a normalisation, much less a secularisation, of suicide. The rise of the English press served to perpetuate myths, give fuel to existing anxieties over the prevalence of suicide and provided ample opportunity for the dialectic on suicide to evolve in reaction to the discoveries of science and the claims of romantic sympathy. However, traditional myths and dialectics continued to be perpetuated through the press into the 1830s while new ideas were most frequently accepted when they tapped into traditions of national superiority, religious morality or the social dangers posed by suicide.

Suicide Clusters

Although, following in Falret's footsteps, Durkheim built his sociological theories of suicide by analysing differences in suicide rates, he was principally concerned with *long- term* trends and viewed supposed clusters of imitative suicides as unscientific hysteria.[130] However, reports of such cases were thought eminently newsworthy in the early nineteenth century and so, again, popular opinion diverged strongly from the strands of 'scientific' thinking that would later become dominant.

[128] *Le Belge*, 16/06/1827, p 2
[129] G Minois, *History of Suicide*, p 293
[130] P Cresswell, Interpretations of Suicide, p 144

Many reported clusters were attributed to some form of family influence. For example, in reporting on one 'respectable gentleman' from Bethnal Green who poisoned himself, the *Morning Post* noted that suicide was "a complaint which was hereditary in the family, three of whom had put an end to their existence."[131] More shocking were cases of *community contagion* among the young, of which there were several well reported cases in the 1820s. The *Bath Chronicle* reported one suicide in 1821 which it related to a cluster of four previous cases:

> "A boy named Simeon Madge, hung himself at Woodbury, Devon, on Wednesday. The coroner's jury returned a verdict of *felo-de-se*, no evidence of mental derangement having been given. This is the fourth suicide which has taken place in that parish within a very short period, and three of them by boys under 18 years of age."[132]

As *felo-de-se* verdicts had become vanishingly rare in this period it is significant that a boy so young should have been found culpable for a supposedly imitative act, which suggests that the horror provoked by it was sufficient to overcome any sympathy. The same paper recorded a similar cluster eight years later:

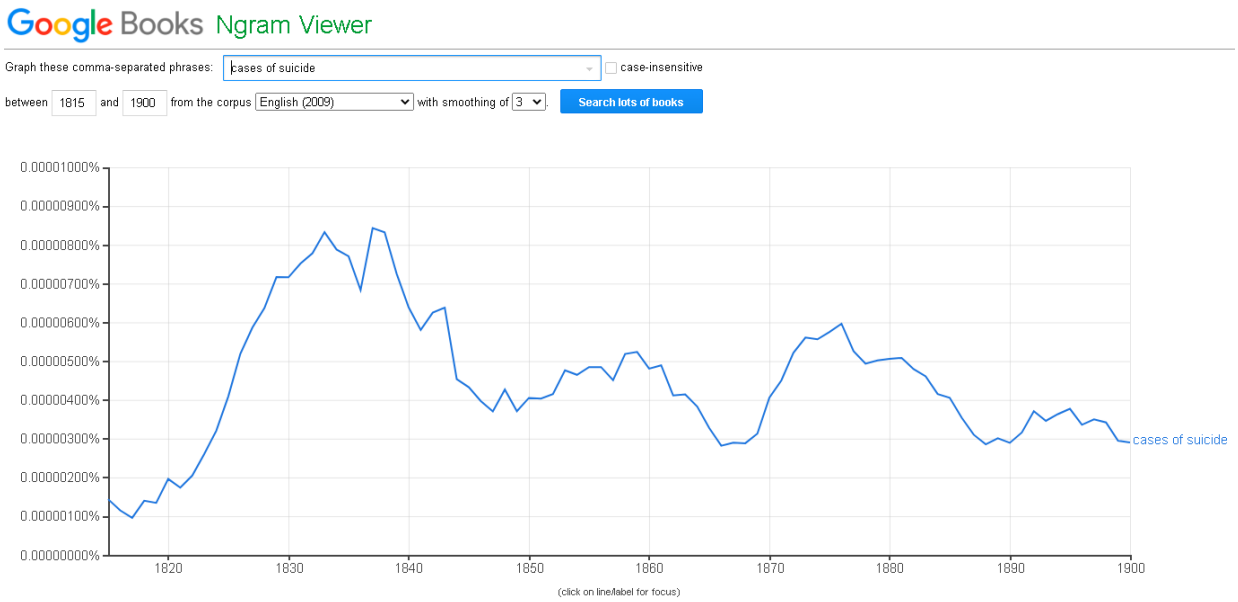
> "An inquest was held on Saturday on the body of John Clarke, a boy of nine years age, who hung himself at Hopton, Suffolk, in a saw-pit. About three months ago, a boy named Wheeler hung himself, and since that time four other boys have attempted to destroy themselves in a similar way."[133]

The *Chester Chronicle* also covered Clarke's suicide, claiming that "Four or five boys have attempted to destroy themselves in a similar way."[134] Again the boy was found *felo-de-se,* however on this occasion the *Chronicle* records a reason being explicitly given "the jury returned a verdict of *felo-de-se*," expressing a hope that it would tend to check this growing practice among the rising generation of Hopton." Evidently newsreaders in this period were disposed to accept the dangers of suicidal imitation and juries sentenced accordingly. In fact suicidal imitation became so much a feature of reporting on English suicides that the French were not above some wry humour at their expense: "*Huit suicides ont été commis dans le courant de la semaine dernière à Londres. La civilisation marche*."[135] These types of suicide clustering were

[131] *Morning Post*, 29/10/1817, p 2
[132] *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 05/07/1821, p 3
[133] *ibid*, 01/10/1829, p 1
[134] *Chester Chronicle*, 02/10/1829, p 4
[135] *Le Figaro*, 16/12/1827, p 9

generally limited to extended families and small villages, however they are evidence of the fear that existed around the possibility of suicidal contagion, which could take on a far greater significance when the exemplars were persons of higher station.

5 – Ngram: frequency of term 'cases of suicide', 1800-1900



By 1822 several such high profile cases had occurred including three of the most notorious suicides in English history; Whitbread, Romilly and Castlereagh. This might have been expected to generate some consternation and an Ngram (Figure 5) of the use of the plural term 'cases of suicide' does take off markedly through the 1820s and does not settle into a lower patter until mid-century. It is in the nature of suicide clustering to create a positive feedback so that later suicides are reported not only as incidents in themselves but also provide occasions for the particulars of previous cases to be rehashed and compared. This may well explain not only the rise of the use of the term 'cases of suicide' but also the rise in the use of terms such as 'suicide' in figures 3 and 4. In any case suicide was no longer an individual heroic act punching through the frequent silence on suicide as had happened periodically throughout the previous two centuries, suicide was being treated as a widespread *social* ill - and it was *contagious*.

Suicidal cut-throats

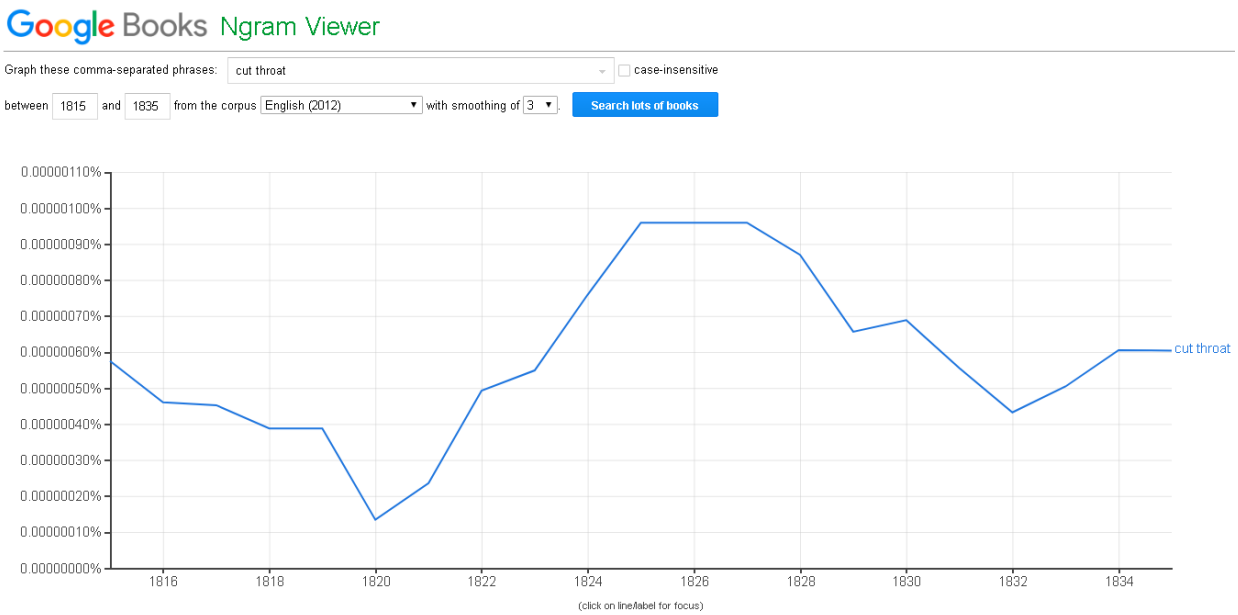
Typically, a link between multiple cases of suicide is made on the bases of similarity in the method chosen.[136] This is most significant for the suicide crisis of the Regency Period not only because of the peculiarly violent method that was used by the most high profile suicide cases and their imitators, but also because the method – throat-cutting – has otherwise been relatively rare among suicides. A century and a half earlier the Earl of Essex was posthumously exonerated from suicide because the medical expert at the inquest judged that it was not possible for a man to slit his own throat,[137] although Essex was hardly a likely candidate for a political exoneration given that he was already in prison for his role in the Rye House Plot. During the eighteenth century the most common method of suicide in England was hanging – mostly committed by men, followed by drowning – mostly by women.[138] Popular opprobrium, meanwhile, was reserved in particular for those rare cases of poison, which the press tended to report fulsomely and which were judged *felo-de-se* at a much higher rate than other forms of suicide.[139] Although coroners' inquests for London have not survived, a review of surviving coroner's inquests for North Yorkshire for the 1820s, however, shows that throat-slitting is only second to hanging in its frequency in this period and is more common than drowning, poisoning or shooting,[140] which is confirmed by some of MacDonald's findings for changes in the rate of various suicide methods, in particular drownings which were more frequently being recorded as accidental by the nineteenth century.[141]

An 1827 article on the prevalence of various suicide methods in the *London Evening Standard* also confirms that, not only was the perception that "Death by wounds is the almost exclusive prerogative of males" [142] but, in the article's particular treatment of this method, it seems that it was thought to be on the rise. However, it does not follow that while romanticised acts of 'death

[136] This remains the accepted view today, for example Public Health England's resource *Identifying and Responding to Suicide Clusters* (2019) warns: "Suicide contagion is more likely occur where: ... New or unusual methods of suicide are publicised..." p 17
[137] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 225
[138] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 66
[139] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 227
[140] Search made of sub fonds QSB - Quarter Sessions Bundles : North Riding Quarter Sessions, online at www.archivesunlocked.northyorks.gov.uk
[141] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 238
[142] *London Evening Standard*, 31/10/1827, p 2

by wounds' were thought to be on the rise other forms of romanticised suicide were assumed to be similarly common in association, on the contrary: "Love bears the smallest share in this destruction".[143] It appears that even as a romantic honour culture continued to inform the many acts of violent suicide by high ranking men in the 1820s, this had been decoupled from the equally romantic tradition of death *à la Romeo*.

6 - Ngram: frequency of term 'cut throat', 1815-1835



An Ngram for the use of the term 'cut throat' (Figure 6) reveals a marked rise in the use of this term from 1820 to 1826 when it begins to decline in popularity until the 1830s. This can be no more than suggestive of a shift in popular anxiety from poisoning and shooting to throat-cutting. However, it does lend credence to the theory that the term increased in popular usage, starting with a significant 'bump' in the 1820s due to its use in several high profile news events. The other notable case of throat-cutting from this period, the 1823 Radlett murder, which helped to popularise the term, would have played a part in raising public awareness and anxiety over such acts. In any event, throat-cutting was certainly 'in the news' at this time and the prospect of such a gory end would hardly have been greeted with greater equanimity than the prospect of poisoning had been in the previous century.

[143] *London Evening Standard*, 31/10/1827, p 2

Many individual cases of throat-cutting suicides occurred throughout the decade which, although not necessarily directly linked to the suicides of Romilly, Castlereagh *et al*, were nonetheless indicative of either indirect influence or at least a tendency for newspapers to highlight such examples; which would presumably have had the same effect on the reading public in either case. The other possible explanation for the rise in throat-cutting in this period, viz. that razors and penknives simply tended to be the most deadly implement within reach of most people, do not fit the circumstances of many of these cases. One that appeared in *The Guardian* in 1829 makes specific mention of the unlikelihood that a razor would be present except for the express purpose:

> "SHOCKING SUICIDE. – On Saturday afternoon last a desperate suicide was committed at the Mosley Arms Inn. The deceased, Mr. Henry Scot, tea-dealer, of Smithfield, London, was in this town as a traveller on his own account... On entering, they found the body of Mr. Scott lying immediately behind the door. His throat was cut in a frightful manner, the whole of the vein and arteries being divided, and the slash extending from ear to ear. He was quite dead, and his clothes as well as the carpet were completely saturated with blood. Under his right thigh was found a razor with which the brutal act had no doubt been committed; but as he was not in the habit of shaving himself, it is not known where the razor was procured."[144]

Many gentlemen of this time would not have been in the habit of shaving themselves, employing gentlemen's attendants for this purpose, the knowledge of which must have enhanced the shock at so many gentlemen cutting their own throats at this time. In the case of James Brennan, esq., aged 40, "an opulent merchant of Liverpool", the gentlemen succeeded in presenting quite a spectacle: "He had a wound in the throat, extending from one ear to the other, and the blood was flowing copiously. ...the wound was so deep that witness could pass three of his fingers through it into the mouth." Brennan recovered sufficiently for several hours that, although unable to speak, he wrote a note before dying in which he expressed his own shock at what he had accomplished:

> "I have not the smallest cause to cut my throat. How it happened I know not; but I must have done it, and on the easy chair. How I came to have an old razor in my hand to shave there, really looks suspicious; but to cut my throat, not likely."[145]

[144] *The Guardian,* 24/01/1829, p 3
[145] *Chester Courant,* 25/04/1826, p 3

It is not unreasonable to suggest that such gentlemen would *choose* a particularly violent method of killing themselves rather than simply grabbing at the most effective implement to hand. This was because such deaths – from a gunshot or knife – had long been considered 'honourable', while hanging and drowning were associated with the destitution;[146] in particular hanging, which was also associated with capital punishment, and thus crime.[147] However, hanging had remained far and away the most common method of male suicide even when the influence of the *élite* honour code and the Romantic Movement were highest in the eighteenth century,[148] Goethe himself had commented at that time that the English took hanging 'very lightly'.[149] Thus, whatever had produced the shift – at least in notoriety -towards suicidal throat-cutting in the early nineteenth century it *was* a significant shift which raised the apparent violence associated with suicide to a new level. The horror this provoked is evident in the many reports of throat-cutting suicides from this time, which tended to be written in more explicit language than other cases of suicide:

> "APPALLING SUICIDE. – On Thursday evening the 18th inst., Mr. Jas. Wood, of Huntingdon, nurseryman, after settling some accounts with a neighbour, went into the garden and fired a pistol, loaded with shot, against his side, which taking a slanting direction, wounded him in the face; he then, with a gardener's knife, cut at his throat, clambered over the wall, and got upon the Common, leaving a track of blood behind him; when there, he made two or three more gashes at his throat, in doing which he lacerated the jugular vein and instantly expired... Mr. Wood was 38 years of age, much respected, and one of the most scientific florists and horticulturists in the county."[150]

By the 1820s, throat-cutting seems to have thoroughly replaced the notoriety that the English had previously earned for hanging themselves.

One example that was widely reported back home was of an expatriate, James Butler, who was visiting New York in 1831 when, walking down a commercial street, suddenly reached out, broke the window pane of a shop to grab at a razor with which he cut himself, fell to the ground and promptly expired. The case became something of a local sensation, perhaps as a supposed exposition of the British 'national past time':

---

[146] G Minois, *History of Suicide*, pp 236/7
[147] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 130
[148] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 66
[149] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 130
[150] *The Suffolk Chronicle*, 27/11/1830, p 3

> "The person from whose window the razor was taken, being annoyed with inquiries, placed the razor in the window with the following label: - "This is the razor with which the man cut his throat. Please to ask no questions within, as I won't be troubled.""[151]

The sheer notoriety of throat-cutting in the nineteenth century over-shadowed the far more frequent incidents of hanging. This was a product of press reporting which built on its own notoriety and created the popular impression of large-scale social imitation. Although surviving sources may not permit any stronger claim regarding the *actual* practice of suicide in this period as distinct from its reporting, it is not unreasonable to suppose that the constant reporting of cut-throat suicides made this particularly gory method appear to be more accessible and even socially acceptable than would otherwise have been the case. Keith Hawton et al in 'Clustering of suicides in children and adolescents' (2019) have noted a tendency in the modern press for the level of reportage to increase when one suicide is linked with other examples,[152] creating a positive feedback which can result in imitative behaviour in those exposed to such reporting; there is no reason to suppose that English newsreaders of the 1820s were any different.

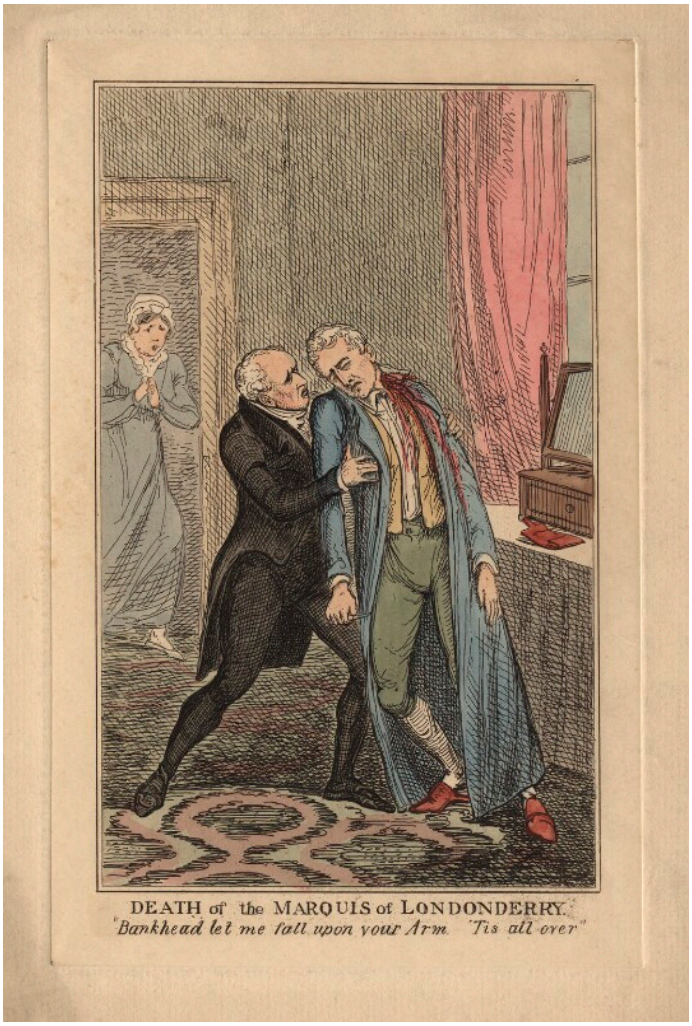
Art and Imitation

[151] *The Observer,* 30/01/1831, p 2

[152] K Hawton et al, 'Clustering of suicides in children and adolescents', in *Lancet*, Vol 4/No 1, p 60

The Werther Effect operates, if at all, through imitation, copying exemplars as communicated through the arts; literature, sculpture, music, painting. One might expect, then, that the supposedly suicidal society of the English would at least have produced a wealth of artistic representations of suicides, yet Ron Brown, in *The Art of Suicide,* finds that artistic portrayals were notably rare in English culture.[153] Among the very few examples were the *Death of Chatterton* by Henry Wallis, an otherwise unknown painter who presented his *chef d'oeuvre* 86 years after the event, and an anonymous etching of Castlereagh's suicide, *DEATH of the MARQUIS of LONDONDERRY.* The later at least dated to just after the event it depicted in 1822 and was frequently reproduced. Brown has described the etching as an important example of visual criticism:[154] Castlereagh is painted in a

7 – Image: etching of Lord Castlereagh's suicide, 1822



"Death of the Marquis of Londonderry (Charles Bankhead; Robert Stewart, 2nd Marquess of Londonderry (Lord Castlereagh))", by Unknown artist, licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 3.0, © National Portrait Gallery

posture reminiscent of the heroic stance so common in the art of the Romantic Period. But this was a matter of cartoonish political criticism, hardly a heroic example for others to imitate.

Moreover, the act itself does not appear to be the sole focus of the Castlereagh etching, as the penknife (or is it a razor? both implements having been variously attested to) is depicted as quite small and insignificant. What is notable in this representation is the situation of the scene - in the relative intimacy of the lord's dressing room, attested to by the presence of his cheval mirror. The mirror only plays a supporting role in representations of Castlereagh's suicide but there is

[153] C Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity,* p 116
[154] *ibid*

some evidence from reporting on subsequent suicides that it became a common reminiscent of Castlereagh's own death. The report on Lord Graves' suicide eight years later is the most prominent example of this parallel:

> "[the witness, James Spry] did not see his Lordship, but observed the looking-glass standing on the table covered with blood... Witness called for assistance, and his Lordship was found on the floor of the room, close under the dressing-table, with his throat cut from ear to ear, and two razors lying beside him."[155]

The frequency with which blood on the victim's clothes, furniture and the floor go unmentioned in such reports throws into relief the frequency with which blood on a mirror or looking glass was specifically noted in reports of throat-cutting suicides for up to a decade after Castlereagh set the example.

This was not only true of the reporting of notable cases of politicians such as Lord Grave who were already popularly linked to Castlereagh but can also be seen in many other reports of violent suicides. One such example from 1829 is found in the reporting on the suicide of a John Green, 36:

> "his throat was cut in a most dreadful manner. A razor was lying near him, & also a small looking glass, which was bespattered with blood; and it would seem that he held the glass opposite his face with one hand, while he perpetrated the act with the other."[156]

A similar scene was also reported in one of the rare throat-slashing suicides committed by a woman, Diana Baylis, 23: "On her toilet lay a razor covered with blood, the toilet and dressing-glass being also deluged"[157] and again in another rare case of female throat-cutting:

> "SUICIDE – On Tuesday last, the wife of a labouring man, at Warbness; in Essex, named Banks, committed suicide under circumstances the most extraordinary. ... her husband hearing something heavy fall, went to ascertain the cause, and found her with her throat cut, weltering in her blood, and lying close by her a razor, a knife, and a sickle, which, from the circumstances of their being all bloody, must have been used. ... deliberately cut her throat while looking at the glass."[158]

It need not be the case that *any* of these suicides were conscious imitators of Lord Castlereagh or his 'predecessors' Whitbread of Romilly. Presumably Lord Graves did not reach for his looking-

[155] *Morning Post*, 09/02/1830, p 3
[156] *The Observer*, 20/09/1829, p 3
[157] *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, 17/07/1830, p 4
[158] *The Suffolk Chronicle; or Weekly General Advertiser & County Express*, 28/02/1829, p 3

glass in order to create a *tableau vivant* (or *mortant*) of the Death of the Marquis of Londonderry, but the frequency with which this trope of the blood-spattered looking glass appeared in reports of violent suicide suggests precisely that: it had become a *trope*.

Brown has not noted this recurring imagery of the mirror, however he does assign a particular importance to the image of Lord Castlereagh's death as a signal example of how newspapers were beginning to create popular frenzies through the reporting of notorious events: "the image of Castlereagh's death anticipates the later preoccupation with graphic 'reportage and realism' ... and the fascination for morbidity in the burgeoning yellow press after the 1850s."[159] MacDonald has also emphasised the powerful impact that the tropes used in reporting had on wider culture at this time.

> "the press influenced popular culture more profoundly than we have grasped. The newspaper was a hermeneutical stage on which professional writers mounted their words and ordinary people played their parts."[160]

Given the graphic nature of the language used in such reports and its link with visual art and human behaviour, it might be more accurate to describe the impact of frequent reporting on violent suicide in this period as more than a trope: a *fashion*.

Understanding changes in the popular associations made with suicide as a matter of fashion has precedent in the language of the time. The concept of the *malaise anglaise*, which peaked in the late eighteenth century, was often described in terms of fashion, and this was often linked specifically to the particular aspects of a suicide. For example, MacDonald has found explicit associations being made in the eighteenth century between the suicides of prominent men and an honour culture which dictated that "the man of fashion almost always dies by a pistol."[161] Foreign papers in particular continued to note the supposed 'fashion' for suicide in England well into the nineteenth century, with which they associated particular methods, causes and classes of person, although these associations changed with time. Several French and Dutch papers, for example, began reporting a rise in romantic female suicides in the late 1820s: "*De zelfmood uit leifde en wanhoop schijnt tegenwoordig, onder de Fransche en Engelsche dames, in de mode te*

[159] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 188
[160] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 335
[161] quoted in *Sleepless Souls*, p 187, from *The Connoisseur*, 1755, p 297

geraken."[162] This report makes note of the frequency with which these female suicides took poison "*à la Castaing,*" referring to a French doctor who committed suicide earlier in the same year by taking morphine. *Le Figaro*, as was its wont, worked the rise to fashion of Italian opera into an article reminiscing about the recent English 'fashion' in suicide:

> *"LES SUICIDES. Il y a quelques années, le suicide était à la mode à Londres, comme aujourd'hui l'opéra-italien: les milords, les banquiers, les amans, les jeunes filles se suicidaient avec une effroyable rapidité."*

However the starring role in the article was, as always, reserved for Castlereagh who

> *"aima mieux se couper la gorge avec un rasoir... C'était un carnage, un massacre universel: on eut dit."*[163]

Although the English displayed a peculiar reluctance to turn suicide into an object of artistic exhibition, the notoriety of the scene of Castlereagh's death suggests that imitative behaviour was more than superficial; that the entire *scène* may be an object of emulation at least in press reports. However, as the original scène derived from what was in effect a political cartoon, the intent behind such portrayals is unlikely to have been to encourage imitation, quite the contrary. Castlereagh's suicide was portrayed as mock heroism and the subsequent portrayals that borrowed from this imagery may be interpreted along similar lines. The final act in Castlereagh's life was only superficially in the *Wertherian* mode, in reality it had prompted a new level of criticism against precisely this romantic tradition which all too often served to excuse the immoral behaviour of great men on the grounds of their romantic heroism.

Suicide *á la* Castlereagh

Lord Castlereagh's suicide was only the most high profile of several suicides by prominent statesmen in the Regency Period, including in particular the Whig reformers Samuel Whitbread in 1815 and Sir Samuel Romilly in 1818, and the Irish peer Lord Graves in 1830. All these men slit their throats while active members of parliament, all were reputed to have died from over-

[162] *Groninger Courant,* 23/12/1829, p 2
[163] *Le Figaro*, 12/09/1833, p 30

work[164] and all were posthumously found *non compos mentis*. While these men enjoyed a degree of public mourning at the time of their deaths, they were also living at a time when the English newspaper industry was going through its greatest period of growth and new journals fought to carve out a space and readership in the increasingly partisan climate of literate society. All these men were the focus of critical commentary and outright partisan attacks, even in death. Thus the last heroic suicides of the *Wertherian* mode were also the first to come in for sustained attack on charges of moral hypocrisy. The intersection of public notoriety, partisan politics and social (im)morality would reshape the discourse on suicide as it sparked a period of heightened anxiety over the prevalence of self-destruction in English society; a suicide crisis.

Links between the political suicides of the time were frequently made in the press amid calls to investigate the causes behind the phenomenon:

> "BRITISH STATESMEN.-It is a singular fact, that the inquest on Mr. Tierney is the fifth inquiry which has been held to investigate the sudden and melancholy deaths of British Statesmen! Need we call to mind the names of Percival, Whitbread, Romilly, and Castlereagh? Mr. Ponsonby, too, had barely escaped an inquest, for he survived a few hours the stroke of apoplexy which felled him from his seat in the House of Commons. There is no similar record of humiliating fate in an other country in the universe."[165]

The mentions of the assassinated Prime Minister Percival and Ponsonby who died of apoplexy suggest a link with accounts of political deaths during the Revolutionary Period. Falret's study made a particular note of the association between deaths from apoplexy and the political fervour of the Revolution as he showed that this form of 'suicide' quickly dwindled after 1815, asking: "Is this difference to be attributed to the moral effects produced by the political events which filled the former period?"[166] Clearly, the deaths of so many high profile politicians could not escape being linked with wider political and social concerns, principal among things in the post-Revolutionary Period, was the anxiety over Britain's social stability.

There were a small number of previous examples in which a number of high profile suicides had been linked, for example Horace Walpole associated the suicides of several MPs in the

[164] For Romilly see D Andrew, 'Suicide of Sir Samuel Romilly', p 182, for Castlereagh see, for example, C Oman, *A History of England*, Part III, London: Longmans, 1900
[165] *The Observer*, 01/02/1830, p 3
[166] *The Standard*, 22/06/1829, p 1

eighteenth century to the rise of a common vice among the *élite*; gambling.[167] Nearly all such links, however, were made between political suicides around the beginning of the nineteenth century. Lewis Namier noted that thirteen members of parliament had committed suicide in the late eighteenth century, and suggests a link with contemporary occurrences of madness, in particular of the King, George III.[168] Namies does mention that a number of notable suicides occurred after the turn-of-the century, however his suggestion that there was a link with madness placed his concern in the earlier period, although there is no suggestion that such a link was made at the time and, in any case, there are severe limitations to the psychiatric suicide model, particularly in explaining suicidal imitation which is at least at some level a social phenomenon by definition. Few historians have treated the early nineteenth century cut-throat suicides as a distinct phenomenon. Thus far, Donna Andrew is the only notable exception, and she has only proposed a fittingly vague explanation:

> "Papers of varied political views connected the suicide deaths of three notable public men, Whitbread, Romilly, and Londonderry, in less than a decade, and saw in their exits a reminder of the weaknesses of the strongest men."[169]

While it is possible that *the* link between these suicides was only a product of their reporting in the press, this hardly does justice to the extent of the perception that three unusually violent acts of throat-slashing had taken out one leader of the Tory Party in the Commons and two successive Commons leaders for the Whigs (Whitbread and Romilly), quite apart from the many reported cases of similar suicides attributed to the former as imitations.

Linda Colley has also commented on the crop of political suicides in the nineteenth century and emphasises that the political work these men were engaged in was given as cause of their deaths at the time:

> "Some less gritty spirits killed themselves before work could do it for them. The suicides of a leading Whig politician, Samuel Whitbread II, in 1815, of the prime spokesman in Parliament for penal reform, Samuel Romilly, three years later, and of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Castlereagh, in 1822, were all attributed at the time to the relentless demands of public life. All three of them exited by slashing their throats."[170]

[167] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 279
[168] L Namier, *House of Commons*, Vol I, p 176
[169] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, p 119
[170] L Colley, *Britons*, pp 151/2

Paul Johnson in *Birth of the Modern* has also noted the suicides as a potential cluster, without directly addressing similar claims made at the time:

> "[There was a] sudden crop among prominent MPs, beginning with the great liberal millionaire Samuel Whitbread in 1815; continuing with Sir Samuel Romilly, an outstanding lawyer and one of the Whig leaders, in 1818; and Castlereagh himself in 1822. Sixteen other members also committed suicide in the years 1790-1820."[171]

There is a high degree of overlap between these historians, however little agreement on even the specific phenomenon that is being considered, what the link between these deaths was and even who was involved. For example where Johnson counts sixteen political suicides between 1790 and 1820, Colley counts 19, while MacDonald counts 21 for a slightly earlier period that overlaps in the 1790s.[172]

A high rate of suicides among British politicians had indeed been remarked on occasionally in the eighteenth century, however there were a higher number of suicides in the early nineteenth century as well as a number of attempted suicides: George Campbell, who shot himself in the head in 1821, James Stanhope who hanged himself in 1825 after being attacked in the press for engaging in homosexual acts,[173] George Mills shot himself in 1828 while in Australia, and both Richard Wellesley and John Dent who died of natural causes a short time after attempting suicide.[174] For the shorter period of about a decade and a half this figure represents a new high in the rate of dead parliamentarians and came at a novel time in the history of suicide, as it intersected with shifts in the language and dialectic of suicide.

Thus the impact of the most notable suicides in this period should be of particular interest to the historian of suicide, as it would be of *more* surprise *if* such a death toll did *not* have any impact on the culture of the time than if it *did*. The one strong claim in relation to the impact of Castlereagh's suicide comes from Ron Brown, a historian of the art of suicide who considers Castlereagh in isolation from his peers as the romanticised tragi-hero (tragi-villain to his political enemies) of the episode:

---

[171] P Johnson, *Birth of the Modern*, p 751/2
[172] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 281
[173] C Upchurch, 'Consequences of Dating Don Leon', p 47
[174] L Namier, *House of Commons*, Vol I, p 176

> "The suicide of Chatterton helped polarize thought, and the suicide of Castlereagh helped change already existing discourses on the savagery and irrationality of punishment for the convicted felon. Both acted as important symbolic moments in the iconography of suicide"[175]

While Castlereagh's death in 1822 certainly 'helped to change' both the discourse on suicide as well as the law, it is important first to establish the true scale of the reaction to his death, the anxieties it stoked and the extent of the impact it was thought to have had at the time on the English public. This must begin with the accounts of supposed imitators that regularly appeared in the press during the 1820s.

Proof that an act of suicide is imitative generally consists of circumstantial evidence, such as personal knowledge of the exemplar, or a similar cause or – most frequently - *modus operandi*. Castlereagh was sufficiently prominent in his time, however, that imitative behaviour could occur at a distance. However, reports of imitative cut-throat suicides did *not* start with Castlereagh's death but with Romilly's four years earlier. One such case that occurred shortly after Romilly's death involved a politically active wine-merchant, a Mr. Elliot, who:

> "was taking his breakfast, at his lodgings in Paternoster-row, the newspaper was brought in, when after reading the melancholy fate of Sir S Romilly, he suddenly put a period to his own existence by cutting his throat with a razor."[176]

Elliot's extinction already contains features that would have been recognised after Castlereagh's death as potentially imitative, which is as much as to say that Castlereagh's suicide may just as easily have been imitative of Romilly's. With this in mind it is worth recalling that history should not be read backwards, in this case in light of Castlereagh's suicide. In the one article specifically dedicated to Romilly's suicide Donna Andrew claims that it was the coverage of *this* event that had set the bar of notoriety that Castlereagh's suicide had surpassed: "Seldom has the demise of a non-royal received so much public attention. ...It was, judging from press reactions to popular upset, as if a terrible national calamity had occurred."[177] If there was a trailblazer for the loose band of suicide imitators it was certainly not Castlereagh. And this applies equally to any wider significance these acts had in common. Unsurprisingly, Andrew has pinned her account of the significance the suicides had as a 'reminder of the weaknesses of the strongest

[175] R Brown, *Art of Suicide*, p 129
[176] *Morning Post*, 05/11/1818, p 2
[177] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, pp 109 & 110

men' on Romilly's suicide in particular: "the anxiety raised by the event suggests contemporaries saw in it the spectre not only of an individual but of a class of men flawed by the very attributes that made them admirable."[178] If true, the expectation of further acts of despair was already created by Romilly's suicide, which itself may have been imitative of his colleague Whitbread's, which had attracted somewhat less attention. Together these suicides had problematized England's political establishment as a class. And so Castlereagh's suicide fit well within the existing problematized context of a class who could not live up to their own high standards, which, in a time of social upheaval in the wake of the Revolutionary Period, many more ordinary literate men (and some women) might feel was true of them as well.

Predictably, given his prominence in life which meant that he outshone Romilly in death, Lord Castlereagh had his own imitators. One edition of *Saunders's News-Letter* in 1822 specifically noted the method of dispatch employed by a London suicide as providing a link with Castlereagh's:

> "[Mr. Thornton] apparently had pitched upon a similar mode of destruction as the late Marquis of Londonderry; the knife with which he committed the deed, according to her description, corresponded with that which his Lordship used on the late melancholy occasion"[179]

Unlike Romilly, however, Castlereagh had an international reputation and his death was frequently referenced in connection with even the most distant episodes; *"Le général Sanchez Salvador, qui avait par interim le minstère de la guerre; a terminé ses jours comme le marquis de Londonderry."*[180]

It was the link *between* the Romilly and Castlereagh suicides, however, that was particularly strong and many examples of would-be imitators among the lower classes noted *both* men as influences. For example a man named Sapwell, who was to be executed for the murder of a police officer was noted making ominous references:

> "Since his condemnation Sapwell has thought much upon suicide, and would often argue with his attendants upon the consequences, and refer to the cases of Lord

[178] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, p 117
[179] *Saunders's News-Letter*, 13/09/1822, p 1
[180] *Le Constitutionnel*, 12/07/1823, p 2

> CASTLEREAGH, Sir S. ROMILLY, &c. A strict watch has in consequence been kept upon him night and day..."[181]

Similarly, at the inquest of a 72 year-old 'respectable mercer' in Windsor, the suicide's doctor testified that he had shown some prior interest in self-destruction in the context of the recent high profile cases: "He brought forward the cases of Lord Castlereagh, Mr. Whitbread, and Sir Samuel Romilly, and asked which method of destruction was the best."[182] Both these cases occurred at the end of the decade, suggesting that the association that was being made between the notorious cluster of political suicides was not only strong but had been a popular topic of conversation among all classes of people for a sustained period of time.

Another imitator became one of the few persons charged with attempted suicide, which had only rarely been prosecuted until the nineteenth century but became a common charge in the Victorian Period; the method chosen was again the same as Castlereagh's:

> "WORSHIP-STREET On Saturday night, an elderly man, named James Holt, was charged with attempting to commit suicide at a public-house. He managed to make a slight incision in his throat. When remonstrated with by the Magistrate, he said he would not promise not to attempt suicide again. Castlereagh had committed suicide, and the Duke of Newcastle had said, "A man has a right to do what he likes with his own."[183]

This case occurred in 1832 – a full decade after Castlereagh's demise. The most notable mention in the last case, however, is not Castlereagh but the Duke of Newcastle; preaching a new morality distinctly at odds with the old Christian one which directly conflicted with the established moral code.

Indeed, this poor moral example was not only being set for the impressionable lower classes but could also be cited by equally impressionable persons in the most august stations. King George IV - never one to let himself be accused of setting a moral example - manipulated the hullabaloo surrounding Castlereagh's death in order to hang on to his mistress, Maria Fitzherbert. The Catholic Fitzherbert had apparently been deeply affected by Castlereagh's suicide – a man who

[181] *Morning Post*, 21/09/1830, p 4
[182] *Windsor and Eton Express*, 05/05/1827, p 4
[183] *Sun (London),* 10/07/1832, p 1

had notably remained loyal to the Queen[184] - which, it seems, had triggered the royal mistress to do some soul-searching such that she announced her intention of ending her relationship with the King.[185] It was only by resorting to repeated threats, that he would follow Castlereagh's example, accompanied by "unmanly exhibitions of despair"[186] that Fitzherbert was convinced to stay. By the end of the reign of George IV criticism of the dissolute life of the English *élite* had reached fevered pitch, against a background of anxiety over the nation's social stability, and an ongoing suicide crisis which appeared to originate with the *élite*.

The language of *élite* suicide *á la Castlereagh* continued even longer – well into the 1830s - as a popular trope, particularly in political discussions, which served to enlarge the notoriety of an *élite* that appeared to be losing control its own self-control. Numerous examples of the Castlereagh trope turn up in debates over Ireland, one typical example from 1832 is from a public speech:

> "Thus are they taking that elsewhere which was the food of the poor Irish people. (hear.) Was it agitation did this? No, it was the agitation of Castle corruption – it was Castlereagh suicide agitation. (hear and cheers.)"[187]

Not all references mentioned Castlereagh by name, but the notoriety of his suicide meant they did not have to for the point to be taken. The opposing political camps mentioned in this example from 1828 make the reference abundantly clear:

> "the Fox Club, is dead! It had been in a sad decline for some years... Its friends gathered together, and consulted in what manner it might die decently. ... They ... thought that it would be more respectable for the body to die by suicide, than to be exposed in is emaciated state to the public... The last act, therefore, of the Fox Club was to cut its own throat. ... They recommended the Pitt Club to cut its throat as the Fox Club had done. This was very conciliatory; but the invitation ... was civilly refused."[188]

However light-hearted the literary banter might appear, suicide remained a crime and a sin and Castlereagh had been a great luminary of his party so that even some late references to his suicide must have pushed the boundaries of acceptability. *The Calcutta Gazette*, writing for the English expatriate community in the city, was a particularly vociferous defender of Castlereagh's

[184] C Bartlett, *Castlereagh,* p 465
[185] A Leslie, *Mrs. Fitzherbert*, p 189
[186] W Hunt, *Political History of England*, Vol 10, p 308
[187] *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier,* 03/01/1832, p 2
[188] *London Courier and Evening Gazette*, 30/05/1828, p 2

memory and several times called for greater civility, in particular from the most notable scourges of his memory William Cobbett and Lord Byron, the tone was often one of passive-aggression: "We would not wound the feelings of others unnecessarily even to shame Lord Byron."[189]

However, some attacks were so personal they might not pass muster today:

> "LAMENTABLE FELO-DE-SE. On Wednesday last, an inquest was held by Mr. Stirling, the Coroner for the county of Middlesex, on the body of A*th*r D*e of W*ll*ngt*n, who committed suicide in the office at the Treasury on Monday last. The Jury, on viewing the body, found scarcely an appearance of head, so completely had the unfortunate Nobleman destroyed all signs of that organ of intelligence. ...the Foreman addressed the Coroner, telling him that they would spare him the trouble of summing up, as they were unanimously of opinion that the unhappy Duke of W-n had committed *felo-de-se* in a state of insanity..."[190]

Clearly the Prime Minster had *not* committed suicide, but the by that time *clichéd* references to *élite* suicide and taunts about supposed mental weakness had become the currency of political debate. This last represents a shrill degeneration of a language of political attack that had developed from the discourse around the suicides of Whitbread, Romilly and Castlereagh. The language could be as harsh as the events it referred back to and the attacks on political figures by the end of the 1820s were heavily enmeshed in the hyper partisanship of that time as debates of Catholic Emancipation and Parliamentary Reform came to a head. It was in this context that partisan attacks on the supposed lack of self-control among the *élite* were used as political barbs.

However, the memory of Lord Castlereagh's suicide was not only kept 'in the news' by political hacks. It remained a 'live' case that was periodically recalled in the press as several subsequent cases of suicide that surrounded his name occurred. In 1832 the suicide of one pub landlord received an unusual amount of attention in the national press – Joseph Harbour, who threw himself into the Serpentine, had been Lord Castlereagh's coachman and the notice of his death was accompanied with a reminder of the death of his previous master.[191] Castlereagh's nephew Robert FitzRoy, a ship's captain with a long history of depression which often triggered reminiscences of previous suicides including his uncle's,[192] also received significant press

[189] *Bombay Gazette,* 28/01/1824, p 15
[190] *Buckinghamshire Gazette*, 27/11/1830, p 3
[191] *The Observer,* 12/01/1833, p 4
[192] B Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p 79

attention in connection with suicides reminiscent of his uncle's, notably when FitzRoy became captain of a famed ship involved in the anti-slaver patrols as part of the West Africa Squadron when his ship's previous captain having committed suicide in 1828; FitzRoy soon turned the Beagle in the direction of the Galapagos on a trip that would help to keep his name in the news.[193] Castlereagh's name was a bitter reminder of an entire culture of memory around his suicide. This culture called to mind the peculiar failings that had been associated with English *élites* during the early years of the century; a weakness of the will and head often leading to suicide.

By the time of Lord Castlereagh's suicide in 1822 the crisis was well underway with a strong association between the *élite*, a weakness of the will, a particularly gory method of dispatch and a general belief that this was setting a bad example for the country in a time of social uncertainty. The table was already set when Romilly committed suicide in 1818, as according to Andrew, "...the enigma of Romilly's suicide seemed more troubling,for in his case it seemed his virtues which [*sic*] caused his demise..."[194] It was precisely these virtues of the *élite*, virtues by which they claimed the right to rule, that were being called into question by the suicide crisis.

Élite Hypocrisy and the new Professional Class

The Regency Period coincided with the rise of partisan politics, as issues such as Catholic Emancipation and Parliamentary Reform came to the fore. This social split has led many historians since to describe shifts in thinking during this period in terms of partisan class struggle. E P Thompson, for example, argued that there was a widening ideological gap between the *élite* and the common people,[195] with the common people seen as a mob to be controlled as they became increasingly organised and agitated for reform. This kind of interpretation does have roots in the journals of the time, for example William Cobbett, the renegade Tory who

[193] W Schiller, 'A Lonely Grave in Patagonia', in *The Geographical Journal*, Vol 71/No 1 (1928), pp 74-76, FitzRoy himself committed suicide in 1865 by "cutting his throat with a razor, a ghastly re-enactment of his uncle Lord Castlreagh's own suicide" (E J Brown, *Charles Darwin: the power of place*, Vol 2, New York: Knopf, 2002, p 264)
[194] D Andrew, 'Suicide of Sir Samuel Romilly', p 188
[195] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 344

turned scourge of the establishment, made a particular cause out of Castlereagh's suicide, claiming that the finding of *non compos mentis* and lavish funeral was a hypocritical cover up. However, there are several problems with appealing to a conflict of class interests as an explanatory device for the politics of this period. Not least among the problems with this thesis is that the 1823 reform of the law on suicidal burial served, in both principal and practice, to bring the sentencing of suicides from all classes into closer alignment with the law. And in this regard the reformist current set off by the suicide crisis seems more closely aligned with attempts by a rise professional class to bolster the state by actively dismantling elements of the *élite* Old Corruption.

At the beginning of the century the tradition of Romantic suicide, honourable self-murder and the explosion of journals which dedicated extensive coverage to high profile suicides had led to a strong association of suicide with the rich. Both Macdonald and Andrew are in agreement on this point, a shift that Macdonald traces back a century:

> "The number of aristocrats and gentlemen who slew themselves in the name of honour increased greatly after 1700. The sheer frequency of suicide among the aristocracy made it seem as though premeditated self-slaughter were customary in the highest ranks of English society."[196]

This popular association was apparently strong enough to suggest that there was a ready audience with money who might have use for a do-it-yourself guide to suicide, which explains the high prose of one 1811 pamphlet by William Withers, *Some Thoughts Concerning Suicide, of Self-Killing; with General Directions for the more Easy Dispatch of the Affair.*[197]

The hypocrisy that many outside the charmed circle of the aristocracy saw in such treatment of suicide had become a point of attack for many radical journals by the early nineteenth century. Thus, whereas news of the 1788 suicide by an intimate of the Prince of Wales was covered up by the press for several days,[198] this practice became more and more controversial, so that initial reluctance to report Castlereagh's death as a suicide lasted a matter of hours and was confined to papers sympathetic to his politics. This situation had shifted to such an extent by the late 1820s

[196] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 277
[197] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 126
[198] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, p 99

that the accidental drowning of George Canning's son William Pitt Canning in 1828 had to be accompanied by assurances in most of the papers that he had not committed suicide.[199] When Lord Graves cut his throat in 1830 newspapers of various political stripes complained that the inquest had been held too early and so had hindered their coverage of the story.[200] By 1830 suicide was considered to be of public interest and any attempt to limit coverage was seen as corrupt. But it was the handling of high profile suicides that most excited popular indignation. The legal reformer James MacKintosh, for example, descried the tendency for coroners' juries to find persons of 'higher station' *non compos mentis*.[201]

Suicidal acts could themselves become a form of social levelling when they spread from honourable exemplars in the élite to imitators among the aspiring class. The Radlett murder gave rise to a new term for such aspiring gentlemen, coined by Carlyle, 'gigmans', a portmanteau of the words 'gentleman' and 'gig'.[202] Carlyle reacted to the notorious throat cutter being called a 'gentleman' because he possessed a gig. The word had caught on by the end of the 1820s and soon became associated with men from many unlikely, sometimes seedy, backgrounds who had gentlemanly pretensions, leading to the related neologisms 'gigmanity' and 'gigmania'. And the phenomenon it described was a very real one in a time of increasing social mobility. In this context almost any form of imitation of *élite* exemplars might be thought to lead to inclusion in the widening class of respectable 'gentleman'. One case of suicide being used in this way is unaccountably touching to read:

> "Q. Did you hear him say any thing about suicide? A. He was talking once about a man who shot himself going into Regent's park; the newspapers called him a gentleman - he said he wondered, if he shot himself, whether they would call him a gentleman"[203]

The man in question, a Benjamin Burrup of London, represented both a new type of man and a new way of thinking. If not yet quite respectable, Burrup could imagine that respectability was

[199] *Le Courrier des Pay-Bas*, 02/11/1828, p 2
[200] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, p 228
[201] B Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p 7
[202] see J Flanders, *The Invention of Murder: how the Victorians revelled in death and destruction and created modern crime*, London: St. Martin's Griffin, 2011
[203] 'trial of BENJAMIN BURRUP' in *Old Bailey Proceedings Online* (www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 15/05/2018), 1829 (Reference: t18290115-195)

increasingly within reach for those ready to act the part. However, this new form of respectability was appearing within a context of growing criticism of the old *élite* class.

The particular issue which raised the ire of radical reformers was the forfeiture clause which meant that all property from *felonia-de-se* were surrendered to the state. However, this particular criticism, despite the frequency with which it has been repeated, is highly problematic. Forfeiture only effected those who had goods in the first place, however already by the start of the eighteenth century coroners' courts were routinely 'finding' that yoemen, gentlemen and other men of moderate means who had committed suicide had in fact left nothing[204] – when in fact what goods there were had been transferred to a widow, heir or other relative. MacKintosh introduced a (unsuccessful) reform of the law against suicide just before the successful 1823 Judgement of Death Act. MacKintosh aimed to abolish forfeiture for suicides but the 1823 act notably left forfeiture in effect, which Macdonald argues was retained in order that the reformed law continue "to deter suicide."[205] In fact, in 1825 Robert Peel reformed the system of jury selection in order to address concerns over the irregular application of justice to the different classes which was seen to weaken the force of the law.[206]

The interests of the 'establishment' in the law of forfeiture cannot be easily explained in terms of a class interest. The deeply establishment Royal Humane Society, for example, had a fund specifically for the purpose of alleviating the families of suicides and, for this reason, would send representatives to the inquest to determine what financial assistance the suicide's family might need.[207] Financial civil disputes in this period also often revolved around applications of the law as regarded suicides. One widely reported inquest, in the death of a Mr. Raynier, was prolonged for some time because of wrangling over the liabilities of his insurance policy which contained exemptions in the case of duelling or suicide; the jury found that Raynier had not in fact committed suicide although the family had already admitted that he had, and the inquest ordered that in any case the insurance had to be paid,[208] although the House of Lords later found that

[204] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 60
[205] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 347
[206] E Evans*, Forging of the Modern State*, p 244
[207] *Statesman (London),* 23/04/1823, p 4
[208] *The Observer,* 14/05/1826, p 4

insurance liabilities were voided by suicide.[209] Forfeiture was abolished *in toto* in 1870.[210] Any attempt to consider forfeiture along the lines of strict class interest would have to account for a situation in which there were so many conflicting interests, including the powerful demands of morality; including both charity towards the families of suicides and expiation of the crime. Moreover, any such interpretation would stand in direct opposition to the fiscal policies of the Tory Liverpool Ministry, led in the House of Commons by Castlereagh, which had fought hard to retain the war-time income tax (which *was* a drain on the resources of the wealthy). This measure failed mainly due to Whig opposition which left the government in deep financial straits[211] as it attempted to clear the massive war debt. Liverpool had defended the income tax with moral, even anti-class language, calling it 'just' and most '*equal'*.[212]

If anything the financial interests may have worked in the opposite direction. William Cobbett, the government's primary opponent over what he termed the 'Old Corruption' – sinecures, nepotism, rotten boroughs which were a holdover from the *ancien regime* – had his own financial interest which may have played no insignificant role in his press campaign over the handling of Castlereagh's suicide which left the latter's estate intact after he was found *non compos mentis*. Cobbett had only recently arrived back in England at the time from France where he had been hiding from his own creditors. Cobbett arrived back in England on the basis of an 'understanding' with his creditors that he could retain £600 per year from the profits of his rabblerousing news bulletin the *Political Register*, "provided he would publish his paper for their advantage, and allow them to receive the profits from it until their claims, amounting to £40000, are discharged."[213]

Accusations that the exoneration of the suicides of so many prominent men were examples of aristocratic hypocrisy stung an increasingly professional governing class who were set on rooting out the Old Corruption in order to bolster the established social order. What the notoriety of prominent suicides such as Castlereagh's had done was to set a problematic example for the rest of the country. This example could not be allowed to stand, however, as the interests of social

[209] *Le Courrier de la Meuse*, 21/07/1830, p 2
[210] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 347
[211] in 1816 two thirds of the budget commitments were unfunded by state revenue
[212] N Gash, 'Part One', *Conservatives*, p 41
[213] *Chester, Cheshire, and North Wales Advertiser*, 17/09/1819

stability demanded a strengthened moral code which prohibited suicide, even at the expense of class interests.

Suicide Condemned - again

At the start of the nineteenth century, with stories of honourable and passionate suicide on the rise, recounted using the new language of romantic sympathy, verdicts of *felo-de-se* had declined precipitously. This changed, however, during the 1820s. Although the most significant formal development was the 1823 abolition of the 'profane burial', by 1830 the general tendency, as has been shown above, was a hardening of the line on suicide, with a rise in findings of *felo-de-se*. However, the shift is most clearly seen in a longer-term trend in the association of suicide, from a highly individualistic romantic approach that associated self-destruction with *élite* men suffering from the tedium *vitæ*, towards a generic association of suicide with the alienated urban poor who were crowding into England's industrial towns, in particular with their dissolute women. This growing anxiety reached a head by the end of the 1820s because, not only had urbanisation reached unheard of levels under the impact of the Industrial Revolution, but the British population underwent its greatest natural increase in these years, reaching a high of +1.81% in the 1821 census.[214]

Thomas de Quincy, in his *On Suicide*, offered an extreme version of the sort of moral exceptionalism that romantics often accorded to acts of honour.

> "There is no man, who in his heart would not reverence a woman that chose to die rather than to be dishonored: and, if we do not say, that it is her duty to do so, that is because the moralist must condescend to the weakness and infirmities of human nature"[215]

Romantics, in placing a higher value on the rather inchoate notion of 'honour' had always presented a challenge to traditional religious moral teaching as well as modern legal rationalism which admitted of no such exceptions. However, honour was usually the preserve of men, and

[214] C Cook, *Britain in the Nineteenth Century*, p 103
[215] T de Quincey, "On Suicide", 1827

even where a woman's honour might be concerned, the violence of a final act of romantic passion was not generally associated with female suicide. Females usually drowned or poisoned themselves where a male would be more likely to shoot or stab himself. None of these associations changed significantly in the nineteenth century, however one of the most significant changes that did occur starting in the first half of the century was that suicide became far more associated with women than it had previously been. This began with statistics in the early 1820s, such as those from the Royal Humane Society which showed many more women than men attempting suicide.[216] In *Farewell to the World* Barbagli notes this shift in association of suicidal predilection from males to females[217] while Brown finds that there was an increase in moralistic literature which taught that suicide could not be routinely excused on the grounds of insanity, noting in particular one report in *The Courier* in 1817 relating to the suicide of a servant girl which spawned a number of cautionary tales that were widely circulated into the 1830s; "Moral stories like that abounded in religious pamphlets, particularly in the year after the death of Viscount Castlereagh when suicide became a topical issue..."[218]

This link with the notoriety of the Castlereagh case which had generated so much publicity is particularly important given that by the second half of the decade public concern over suicide had begun to shift away from the cases of prominent statesmen and clergymen towards incidents of female suicide. *The Durham County Advertiser* made mention of this gendered aspect of the suicide crisis in 1826:

> "SEDUCTION AND SUICIDE. The sympathies of the inhabitants of Hampstead, and its neighbourhood, have been powerfully excited by one of those melancholy cases of female self-destruction which so frequently occur to startle the public ear."[219]

The well reported case was of a seventeen-year-old Miss Hynde who took poison after her beau, a captain in the army, slipped a drug into her drink while attending a performance in the West End and then date-raped her. Hynde was found *non compos mentis* although she had remained conscious for sometime after ingesting the poison and admitted to having procured it explicitly for this purpose from a local chemist.

---

[216] *Morning Chronicle*, 20/03/1822, p 1
[217] M Barbagli, *Farewell to the World*, p 161
[218] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 147
[219] *Durham County Advertiser*, 30/09/1826, p 4

The public ear had already been accustomed to react with unusual vehemence to cases of female suicide, in particular when the method chosen was poison. [220] What was new by the late 1820s was the frequency with which such cases were appearing in the press. *The Observer* noted this phenomenon in 1829:

> "Every reader of the criminal proceedings which are recorded in the newspapers, must have observed the increase that has latterly taken place in the administration of poisons in this country, in cases of murder as well as of suicide. ... In the suicides, especially those of females, poison will be to a great extent found to prevail as the instrument of death. Surely these continually recurring facts ought to awaken the public to the necessity of the adoption of some measures by which these crimes and suicides may be in some degree prevented."[221]

Before the end of the year the issue of increased legal penalties for the use of poisons was being widely debated,[222] while some of the first legislation aimed at female social crime had already been passed earlier in the decade, most notably the 1824 Vagrancy Act which criminalised prostitution and made use of the new prison system to reform 'loose women' through hard labour.[223]

8 – Image: the English Dance of Death, 1816

"Death smiles & seems his dart to hide, When he beholds the Suicide", by Thomas Rowlandson, in [Combe, William], *The English Dance of Death: from the designs of Thomas Rowlandson with metrical illustrations by the author of 'Doctor Syntax'*, Vol II, London: R Ackermann's, 1816 ©

In the context of the ongoing high level of anxiety over suicide, fed by the ever increasing scale of reporting which had started at the time of the prominent suicides by statesmen in the early Regency Period, coroners' courts and public opinion at large appeared to be

[220] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 227
[221] *The Observer,* 04/10/1829, p 2
[222] *ibid,* 11/10/1829, p 3
[223] C Cook, *Britain in the Nineteenth Century*, p 125

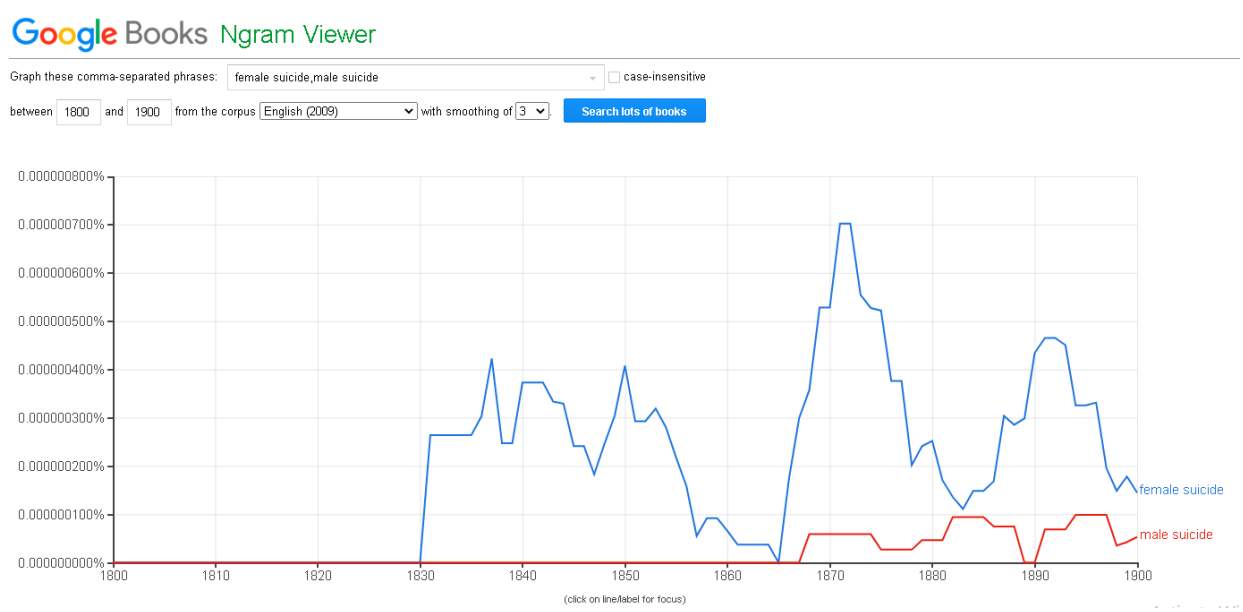
moving in the direction of greater severity. This seems to have been particularly true where female suicide was concerned. One discussion of the issue appeared to contemplate a return to Weslyian solutions:

> "In the history of ancient Greece, it is on record, in one city, that the mere exposing the bodies of a *Felo-de-se*, was sufficient to check the practice of self destruction, especially in females, then sadly common."[224]

The harsh verdict of *felo-de-se* did make something of a comeback in the 1820s, bolstered by cases involving women poisoning themselves which usually attracted the most popular odium. It is notable that many of these cases involved mothers also poisoning their children. One such case in 1825 involving a woman who fed arsenic to her child before taking it herself, was typical,[225] while a very similar case in 1830 of a young woman named Gardner who lived in Boston also involved arsenic which, Gardner gave to her new-born child.[226] Shortly after this case a 36 year old Gloucestershire woman, Sarah Belcher, killed herself and attempted (unsuccessfully) to take her four children with her – again with arsenic.[227] All these women were found *felo-de-se,* and it is perhaps reasonable to suggest that the link between female suicide and child murder engendered the severity with which these suicides were treated. This could even be the case some time after death. One Lincolnshire case in 1830 involved the body of an Elizabeth Featherby, who was supposed to have died a violent death. However, when village rumours began to question this verdict the coroner called an inquest and had the body exhumed. It transpired that Featherby had confided in her brother that she had taken arsenic in order to kill herself, her intention had been for her brother to inform another "young man to whom she had formerly been attached"[228] how she had taken her own life. Featherby was found *felo-de-se* and the body moved to the ground reserved for suicides.

[224] *Warwick and Warwickshire Advertiser*, 30/05/1829, p 3
[225] *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle*, 03/04/1825, p 4
[226] *Bury and Norwich Post,* 24/03/1830, p 1
[227] *Worcester Journal,* 12/05/1831, p 3
[228] *Samford Mercury*, 25/06/1830, p 2

9 – Ngram: frequency of terms ‘female suicide’ & ‘male suicide’, 1800-1900



The shift in focus by 1830 towards *female* suicide, just as verdicts of *felo-de-se* begin to increase, is evidenced in Figure 9. The term ‘female suicide’ comes into sudden use around 1830, and remains common throughout the Victorian Period. This is particularly striking when compared to the equivalent term ‘male suicide’ which never gains much traction. This is strong evidence that the shift towards the feminised Victorian concept of suicide that has been noted by Olive Anderson and Ron Brown makes its first appearance in the immediate wake of the Regency Period suicide crisis. Where those cases had been highly individualistic, employing romanticised tropes and the exceptionalism of an *élite* honour code, female suicide tended to be thought of more as a social phenomenon, of crazed destitute women in despair at their unalterable circumstances.[229] This was not the sort of issue that a sentimental literate society was well equipped to handle as the poor as yet played little part in literate culture. The very term ‘female suicide’ suggests a level of anonymity that bespeaks of a lack of comprehension or even sympathy. While this shift may have been in some part a product of a return to the traditional condemnation of suicide, it may well have helped to accelerate the trend.

[229] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 149

While it is true that throughout the nineteenth century most cases of suicide still ended in a verdict of *non compos mentis*, these too were often accompanied by strong moralistic language and an inquest that seemed primarily concerned with circumstantial questions of personal probity, especially in the victim's marital life. One sixty-nine year old woman, for example, was found *non compos mentis* after it was established that the morally culpable party was a faithless *husband*:

> "Several of the Jury were anxious to know whether the husband had slept at home the night previous to the death of the old lady, as that fact was of the most vital importance?
>
> The witnesses answered they were sure he was not in the house at all that night, nor had he been seen since he was bailed before Colonel Foreman, upon the peace warrant. His conduct had been so bad to the deceased that she would not allow him a key to let himself in.
>
> The Jury expressed their sorrow at the unhappy occurrence...
>
> The husband was a pink of fashion, and might be seen strutting in the Park, dressed as a sailor, in the present style of dandyism"[230]

In one case of attempted suicide that occurred in London, the profile of the woman did not seem to fit with the image of dissolute youth and so appears to have elicited more sympathy than condemnation:

> "A SENTIMENTAL SUICIDE. GUIDHALL. – A female, who stated her age at four-and-twenty, a fact beyond dispute, for she must have been making the same statement for the last twenty years, was brought up by a watchman on duty at Blackfriars Bridge, he having suspected her of meditating a trip to the other world by water, the victim of the greatest disappointment of this wearisome world – disappointed love."[231]

The unnamed woman, referred to only as "fat, fair, and forty" was given a shilling by the court and taken to the parish in order for them to arrange her to be taken back to her home village.

The only consistent strand that appears to link these and many other similar cases together was the jury's understanding of the personal morals of the suicide, and increasingly poor women were seen as population prone to this social ill. This was as much a shift away from the language of romantic heroism as it was from the superstitious religion of the past. The new morality took a

[230] *The Observer*, 20/06/1830, p 3
[231] *Windsor and Eton Express*, 06/06/1829, p 3

pragmatic approach to the law, which was made to serve the interests of public morals in cases which provoked both sympathy and outrage.

Religion: suicide still a sin?

> "There is a great talk of Revolution –
> And a great chance of despotism –
> Tumults – lotteries – rage – delusion –
> Gin – suicide – and methodism."[232]

The Secularization Thesis proposes that religious belief was undergoing a long-term retreat in the nineteenth century as a result of the spread of secularist strands of thought that came to prominence in the eighteenth century – whether philosophical traditions such as continental enlightenment rationalism or British empiricist freethought, or revolutionary radicalism in politics or the undermining of religious certainties by the rise of modern science. Established institutions were certainly *seen* to be under threat at the beginning of the century, a theme which critics of the government and other social institutions played upon with regular charges of incompetence and hypocrisy. Such attacks fed into anxieties over social stability in this period; and with a political establishment buoyed in some measure by military victory against revolutionary France, this anxiety was most keenly felt in the area of *religion*. The same point has been made by Norman Gash: "It is arguable, on the evidence of public agitation in the post-Napoleonic period, that by 1830 it was the Church rather than the Crown or the aristocracy which was in danger."[233] However, the power of religion was by no means spent. In fact, anxiety over the stability of the established Church in this period was in *equal part* generated by the rise of radical evangelical movements which originated during the Great Awakening at the end of the previous century. It was in this context that anxiety over the stability of the Church and reaction to charges of hypocrisy among its adherents finally began to prompt significant proactive measures to defend it.

[232] Shelley, P B, 'Peter Bell the Third', p 244
[233] N Gash, *Reaction and Reconstruction in English Politics*, p 60

A Suicidal Clergy

One of the most distinctive features of the reporting of suicide in the 1820s was the unprecedented frequency of and attention given to suicide among the clergy. The prominence of so many cases and similarities to the secular cluster of throat-slitting MPs begs the question: why has suicide among the clergy passed under the radar of all major studies of suicide thus far? In a more religious age even a single prominent case of a suicidal cleric may have been expected to have an outsized impact on his flock. Ministers of the church, published sermons and doctrinal debates were as much part of the social fabric of the country in this period as were political differences and likely had much broader appeal even allowing for a widespread disaffection with the established Church. This is something of a reversal of the case as it stands today which may partly explain why this phenomenon of clergy suicide has attracted so little attention from historians. The simplest explanation for this lacuna is that historiographic debates over the extent of secularization among the political and literary *élite* have overshadowed the problem of suicide *within* the church. The significance of any clustering of reported suicides among the clergy cannot be overemphasised for this period. Cases were generally picked up by papers across the country rather than localised, which could hardly have failed to feed into existing anxieties about the state of the church. Indeed, these suicide cases only formed the plurality of reported cases involving various forms of misconduct on the part of the clergy. Indeed, the most celebrated case to be linked to the suicide crisis was not a suicide at all but became closely associated with Castlereagh's death and with the overall attack on the personal probity of the clergy.

In July 1822, the Church of Ireland Bishop of Clougher, Percy Jocelyn, who was visiting London, was discovered in the backroom of a pub *in flagrante delicto* with a member of the Grenadier Guards.[234] Having been the subject of previous allegations of misconduct under the Buggery Act, the bishop's position was untenable and he became a notorious figure throughout the century as the personification of corruption in the church. Although Jocelyn did not commit

[234] J Derry, *Castlereagh*, p 227

suicide, his name has been forever linked with the highest ranking suicide from the secular world, Lord Castlereagh, as the King had noted that, among Castlereagh's many rambling obsessions and fears just before his death, he mentioned that he was being pursued for "the same crime as the Bishop of Clougher." This claim, treated with scepticism by modern biographers, was nonetheless widely known at the time and was thought serious enough to prompt the Duke of Wellington to investigate (Wellington cleared Castlereagh of any offence although in 1825 four more members of parliament were accused of homosexual acts, one of whom, James Stanhope, also committed suicide).[235]

But this celebrity case was only the tip of the iceberg. For example, several papers carried long stories about an accusation of indecency against a clergyman from Buckinghamshire. The *Sussex Advertiser*, in its commentary on the case, condemns the 'frequency' of such accusations, and notes that: "We have heard that more than one attempt has lately been made in Hyde-Park by soldiers to obtain money in this way from individuals walking by themselves. This is a subject well deserving of attention."[236] Clearly the issue of clerical inadequacy extended well beyond one 'black shepherd'. An atmosphere of suspicion directed at the clergy had developed and permeated through to the man-on-the-street. The Archbishop of Canterbury himself, in reminiscing on the social climate in the 1820s, claimed that: "it was not safe for a bishop to show himself in the streets of London".[237]

Whether because of this new atmosphere of suspicion, or the general neglect the church had suffered since the reign of Queen Anne, or else the suicidal examples of Romilly and Castlereagh, the number of clergy who killed themselves, most by the agency of a knife to the throat, became a distressingly common event in the 1820s. One case at least may be explained by sexual behaviour in a manner similar to that of the Bishop of Clougher. An Anglican priest who ran a 'respectable school' near Tonbridge was removed to London's Fleet Prison because he was "becoming embarrassed" – a euphemism for sexual misconduct most likely committed against his pupils. Most papers carried the story of his confinement, which was intended to protect him from mob justice, however while there the disgraced priest committed suicide by slashing his

[235] C Upchurch, 'Consequences of Dating Don Leon', p 47
[236] *Sussex Advertiser*, 09/06/1823, p 2
[237] J Bew, *Castlereagh*, p 542

throat with a razor.[238] Although most cases of clergy suicide did not involve such serious allegations against the victim, no case of clerical suicide could be totally free from the taint of misconduct given the church's admonitions against self-destruction.

Instances of clergy suicide-by-razor appear to have been distressingly common in the half dozen years after Castlereagh's suicide. Among such cases were: the suicide of Reverend Robert Bathurst, a member of the Bishop of Norwich's family - Bathurst killed himself by slashing his throat with a razor,[239] the 'melancholy' suicide of a Reverend Macklin of Cheltenham who cut his throat, possibly due to sorrow from the loss of his wife several years before,[240] and at least one other clergyman who was reported to have killed himself with a razor while in prison (for unpaid debts).[241] Although these men were all found *non compos mentis*, the graphic reporting does not so much give the impression of reverence as of anxious, even horrified sympathy. One case of a *non compos mentis* suicide was that of the Reverend Henry Bourdier, a young scion of a clerical family who killed himself while he was filling in for an ill clergyman at Doddington near Ely. The reportage in this case did not shy away from the grizzliness of the scene. Bourdier was found "lying in a stream of blood, with a razor by his side half open, and a cut in the right side of his throat about an inch and a half open, and four or five in length; his head on that side appeared to be almost severed from his body."[242] Although such scenes may have provoked horrified sympathy for the victim such that juries almost invariably found these suicides (as indeed with nearly all suicides) *non compos mentis*, the nature of these violent deaths, the frequent presence or suggestion of scandal and references to the clerical calling of these men can also be read as a form of censure. After all, these men were all ministers of a church that continued to preach the divine reprobation of suicides.

The proximity in time and method to the great political suicides, in particular that of Castlereagh, is strongly suggestive of some form of inspiration, even if none of these suicide can be positively identified as imitators. However, the lengthy reporting of one case which occurred within a

[238] *Bell's Weekly Messenger*, 12/04/1824, p 6
[239] *Sussex Advertiser*, 12/01/1829, p 4
[240] *Dublin Morning Register*, 04/10/1827, p 3
[241] *Evening Mail*, 25/06/1821, p 4
[242] *Leicester Chronicle*, 24/09/1825, p 4

month of Castlereagh's death strongly suggests some inspiration from the Foreign Secretary's demise.

> "SUICIDE. The family of the Earl of Craven has been thrown into considerable distress by an unfortunate occurrence which has recently taken place. On Friday, the 15th instant, his Lordship took his three sons to Eton, with their tutor, the Rev. E. Halhead, who had been six years in that situation, and was highly respected as a scholar and a gentleman. Mr. Wagner, the tutor to the sons of his Grace the Duke of Wellington, invited Mr. Halhead to dine with him on Sunday at six o'clock. He returned from Windsor, whither he had proceeded to St. George's Chapel, and went up to dress at five o'clock. Not coming down in time, a servant of his Lordship went up stairs to apprise him of the hour, when to his horror, he found the unfortunate Gentleman on the bed with his throat cut, and a razor firmly grasped in his hand. The corpse was quite cold. A Jury sat on the body, but neither from an examination of his papers, nor from any conversation with old brother Collegians, whom he had met at Eton, could they ground the slightest cause for this shocking catastrophe. The Jury returned their verdict – Insanity; and the unfortunate gentleman was buried at five o'clock on Friday morning at the College Church."[243]

Sharing many of the same high society contacts Castlereagh enjoyed, the Reverend Halhead is presented as a similarly dedicated, serious man whose death is presaged by a break in routine while the death scene itself is presented as a clear echo of Castlereagh's which had only occurred a month before, with Halhead expiring in his private apartments with the weapon still gripped 'firmly' in the victim's hand. The Reverend Edwin Halhead also enjoyed the posthumous support of the coroner, whose advice to the jury was widely reported as an example of the new socio-religious thinking that was being developed to justify the lax attitude that prevailed in sentencing: "It had been discovered that self-destruction was often the first overt act of insanity. We were warranted in this belief by the scriptural expression, "no one hateth his own flesh.""[244] The perceived link between these cases of clerical suicide-by-razor and reporting on similar suicides by politicians such as Romilly and Castlereagh is quite plain, if not always explicit. It may be gleaned from such reports that the suicide crisis among politicians was complemented by a similar crisis among the clergy.

The extent of reporting on clergy deaths was notable in the 1820s, regardless of whether or not this level of attention in any way reflects the 'dark figure' of the true suicide rate. In part this may have been a product of the importance of some of these men. For instance in 1817 one of

[243] *Belfast Commercial Chronicle*, 30/09/1822, p 4
[244] *Manchester Mercury*, 01/10/1822, p 3

the leading members of the Presbyterian church in Ireland, the Reverend Dr Black, drowned himself in Londonderry.[245] Black was a notorious figure in the Ulster establishment, popularly known as the 'Black Pope', and was rumoured to have gained his post due to the influence of an Irish peer, Lord Castlereagh. Black and Castlereagh both had many enemies in Ireland, some of whom provocatively predicted that they would both meet sorry ends:

> "Dr. Black was crossing the bridge at Londonderry, at high water, and he leaped head foremost over the battlement and was drowned. When the news reached London, Peter Finnerty, who was then on the *Morning Chronicle*, and who knew the facts of the case, exclaimed that the great God had heard Mrs. Porter's prayer, and that Castlereagh would hang himself. Peter's prediction, however, turned out to be wrong, for the Noble Lord cut his throat."[246]

Black's death was well reported, particularly in the Irish papers, but was by no means unique among his fellow clergymen. Many lesser suicides were given attention well beyond that of the average suicide. For example the Reverend James Blenkarne of London, who committed suicide by hanging himself[247] was very widely reported as was the death of the Reverend Hewitson, an older man of sixty-four, "said to have been a fine robust man, but appeared as though he was in the habit of drinking freely."[248] Cases of suicide among the clergy, which appear to have been rare or at least attracted little attention previously appeared with increasing frequency during the 1820s, often reported at unusual length and in gory detail, which can hardly have served to improve the reputation of the clergy at large.

Similar attention was given to the suicide of the Reverend Francis Lee whose self-destruction was explained by marital disharmony: "Early in life Mr. Lee married a sister of the Golden Ball [the celebrated dandy Edward Hughes], who soon after eloped from him with Major De Blaquiere."[249] Either the English clergy were facing a serious epidemic of mental anguish or the reporting of such suicides was, in this period, out of all proportion to the clergy's presence within the population. The rash of clergy suicides continued throughout the decade and it seemed that the suicidal clergy of the time had a proclivity for the same brutal method of extinction that was being exampled by so many of their secular peers in the government:

---

[245] *Le Journal des Débats politiques et littéraires*, 15/12/1817, p 1
[246] *Dublin Evening Post*, 11/09/1830, p 4
[247] *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 19/08/1826, p 4
[248] *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 22/09/1827, p 4
[249] *Dublin Morning Register*, 30/05/1826, p 3

> "A clergyman of the Established Church, in a watering-place on the coast, committed suicide on Monday night, in the most determined manner. It is said that, after inflicting a severe wound in his throat with a razor, he stabbed himself to the heart with a penknife."[250]

Whatever the cause of such behaviour it was certainly not becoming of clergymen that they kill themselves with such apparent 'determination'.

The frequency with which clergy were linked with suicidal intent in this period appears to have fed into an image of a clergy who were not committed to preaching the moral doctrines of their Church, and there were frequent calls in the press for the clergy to address the rise of suicide. In one diatribe against the apparent exoneration of Castlereagh's suicide and his lavish funeral the attack reported in several papers, the focus of the attack shifted to the clergy: ""J.N.C." appears to be warmed by the most philanthropic flame, and he calls on the clergy to preach against suicide, which he seriously fears will become *fashionable*!"[251] It was not the case that suicide had become taboo, however; in some *élite* it had become common to discuss suicide in an easy, almost flippant manner. For example, in one of the last defences of a thesis at Oxford given in Latin as part of a traditional disputation, the Classicist Richard Shilleto "had fun at the expense of his opponent when he stated the wellworn theme 'Is suicide justifiable?'. '*Quid est suicidium*', he asked, '*nisi suum cæsio*?' (What is suicide but the slaughter of pigs?)."[252]

Nevertheless, by the 1820s it appeared that men of the cloth were increasingly being associated in the popular with a morose disposition to self-murder. Thomas de Quincey provides an early example of this trope with his account of a boy in Keswick, desirous of pursuing a life in the church, who is driven to suicide when his parents frustrate his calling by apprenticing him to a local shopkeeper.[253] The fully developed trope of the disagreeably melancholic clergyman would soon emerge in characters such as Mr. Collins in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Markham Sutherland, the suicidal cleric-hero of James Froude's *The Nemesis of Faith*,[254] and in several

[250] *The Spectator*, 16/10/1830, p 11
[251] *Westmorland Gazette*, 28/09/1822, p 3
[252] C Stray, "From Oral to Written Examinations: Cambridge, Oxford and Dublin 1700–1914", in *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, Vol 8/No 1 (2001), p 96
[253] T de Quincey*, On Suicide*
[254] E Duffy, 'Introduction', in *The Reign of Mary Tudor*, p 4

Dickens novels, for example *Martin Chuzzelwit* in clerical garb is described as having "very much the appearance of two curates who had committed suicide by hanging themselves."[255]

By 1830, clergy had joined politicians in the popular imagination as the other major wing of the establishment who seemed to be prone to killing themselves, often in the same violent way as men like Romilly and Castlereagh. This could hardly have done anything to improve the social status of a Church which had been long criticised for its institutional ossification and the hypocrisy of its ministers. This was a particular concern for churchmen in a time when it faced new threats from popular movements outside its control. It seemed that, if nothing were done, the Church's claim to be the soul of the national was about to evaporate.

The Scourge of Secularism

There is nothing new about the Secularization Thesis. Insofar as a label can be applied to how most literate Englishmen of the early nineteenth century saw the development of their society it would be fair to say that there was a widespread belief that the forces of 'secularization' were on the march. For example, one writer in *The British Critic* in 1822 described the "progress of unbelief" which he traced back to Hume and Gibbon.[256] This is the intellectual current that MacDonald has picked up on when he argues that turn-of-the-nineteenth-century shifts in attitude towards suicide were as a result of "the emergence of a new set of values among the educated *élite*, a transformation from Reformation evangelism to Enlightenment rationalism."[257] This perception of a rising tide of secular attitudes around the start of the nineteenth century was popularised by journalists of the Regency Period who claimed that many of the prominent members of the establishment, in particular those who committed suicide, were unchurched hypocrites, calling on the public to support an established church they no long personally ascribed to. Such criticism played on the existing fears of the rise of secular thinking and the perceived weakness of the established Church, which generated particularly censorious treatment

[255] C Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*, Chapman and Hall, 1844, p 372
[256] *British Critic*, Vol 22, p 63
[257] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 342

of those suicides who were found to be guilty of immoral conduct as a result of their unbelief. However, the much wider anxiety over the immoral conduct of the unchurched masses and laxity in the application of the law against them, in particular in cases of suicide, is *not* evidence of the general spread of positive secularist principles.

The church itself was often singled out as the culprit in the decline of religiosity at the beginning of the nineteenth century and there may well have been a great deal of truth to this. After centuries of religious struggle following The Reformation and the Church's political entanglements in the Civil War and Hanoverian succession crisis, the Church had been all too ready to settle back into a more comfortable latitudinarian existence during the eighteenth century. One of the most significant attacks on this lackadaisical attitude in the Church came in 1820 with the publication of John Wade's *Black Book* – the title being a backhanded reference to notorious attacks on corruption within the Catholic Church. The book attacked the misuse of privileges and funds within the Church of England, accusing the majority of the clergy of hypocrisy and incompetence. The *Black Book* was well reported, including in the pages of Tory journals such as *The Edinburgh Review*, which, far from condemning the book *in toto*, reiterated Wade's call for reform.[258]

The political *élite* in particular came in for regular accusations of irreligion, particularly those who had committed suicide. At the time of the suicides of radical MPs Whitbread (1815) and Romilly (1818) there were intimations, mainly in the critical Tory press, that the men had killed themselves because of their deistical beliefs.[259] These were not necessarily mere partisan attacks, as a similar criticism was made of Castlereagh by a sympathetic Member of Parliament, Thomas Wood, who wrote to his son castigating the late Foreign Secretary for working on the Sabbath and implying that this lack of religious observance had led to Castlereagh's mental breakdown.[260]

[258] A Burns, 'English 'Church Reform' Revisited', p 142
[259] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, pp 114/5 & D Andrew, 'Suicide of Sir Samuel Romilly', p 186
[260] M Escott, *Wood, Thomas (1777-1860),* in *The History of Parliament: the House of Commons 1820-1832*, ed D R Fisher, Cambridge University Press, 2009

The handling of Castlereagh's suicide became something of a *cause célèbre* for those radical commentators searching out hypocrisy among the *élite* whose *own* commitment to the precepts of the established faith to which they ascribed was attacked, in particular by William Cobbett in the paged of his *Political Register*. One recurring attack that was occasionally quoted by other commentators was on those who had called for Napoleon, as the personification of the revolutionary threat to the established order, to do the 'honourable' thing and commit suicide in 1815. Cobbett called them out as: "the poor creatures in the daily papers, who are bawling out one minute about religion and social order, and at the next inviting people to kill themselves".[261] At Castlereagh's death several notable radicals and agitators, with Cobbett in the vanguard, wrote about what they saw as the hypocrisy with which the establishment had exonerated the foreign secretary from any crime or (apparently) sin. Lord Byron joined the chorus with a poetic anti-eulogy in which he accused the church of condoning suicide by burying the 'Werther of politics' (as he called Castlereagh)[262] in Westminster Abbey with full funeral rites.[263] The attack campaigns by Cobbett and Byron against Castlereagh's memory and the handling of his suicide were well organised and highly publicised, in particular within the pages of Cobbett's own journal the *Political Register*. The correspondent of the *London Morning Herald* reversed Cobbett's charge of hypocrisy two years later when the political and religious establishment refused to have Byron buried in the abbey:

> "...whether the present Dean of Westminster held that office when the remains of the late Lord Castlereagh were consigned to a vault in the Abbey; and if so, why is he so squeamish about Lord Byron? He questions whether the great Mr. Pitt of the great Mr. Fox were a whit better Christians than Lord Byron; but they did not sin in verse."[264]

Attacks on the hypocrisy of the church and state were received by a larger audience than the circle of the literate class that controlled the press. Princess von Lieven, wife of the Russian ambassador and one London society's premiere socialites, bemoaned the populist frenzy that accompanied attacks on the memory of her close friend Lord Castlereagh, noting that: "notices have been placarded everywhere urging the people not to allow the body of a suicide to defile the

[261] *The Examiner Sunday*, 13/08/1815, p 1
[262] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 127
[263] C Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*, p 109
[264] *Dublin Morning Register*, 19/09/1828, p 3

sanctuary of Westminster,"[265] while a French paper noted that numerous political cartoons casting aspersions on Lord Graves' family life had been posted to his address just before his suicide; *"Nous méprisons profondément toutes les caricatures de ce genre; depuis long-temps elles sont le fléau de la nation."*[266]

Cobbett was most notorious for continuing the agitation against what he saw as the exoneration of Castlereagh's suicide by the establishment, a subject he continued to harp on in his *Political Register* for nearly a decade after the event. However, Lord Byron also had pretensions as a leader of popular outrage against this hypocrisy. *The Calcutta Gazette* did not accept Byron's claims, commenting that Byron was himself being hypocritical:

> "...we cannot help again referring to the melancholy termination of the lives of Romilly and Whitbread, against whom we never heard Lord Byron utter one syllable of reproach. Upon what group an infidel attacks a suicide we cannot see..." [267]

The *Gazette* goes on to question the reach of Byron's influence, claiming that he wrongly imagined his work to be read by the common people when in fact his readership was limited to a small literary *élite*; the same can hardly be said for Cobbett's rabblerousing. However Byron, in death, played a greater role in keeping the accusation of moral hypocrisy rumbling on through the rest of the decade.

Byron died only two years after Castlereagh, whilst fighting alongside Greek revolutionaries, one of the radical causes Castlereagh was notorious as the 'reactionary' Foreign Secretary for opposing. Byron's death was not quickly forgotten, partly because of the ongoing controversy about Byron's irreligion and lurid stories of his private life which often alluded to the many suicides in his social circle. The entire affair was dredged up most notably in 1830 when the reminiscences of a Scottish military doctor, James Kennedy, who treated Byron in Greece just before his death, were published as *Conversations on Religion with Lord Byron and others*. Byron and Kennedy had apparently spoken of Castlereagh's suicide at length as Kennedy attempted (unsuccessful) to convert Byron from his 'deistical' thinking to true religion. However, Kennedy's account of Byron's radicalism suggests an unwillingness to believe that

[265] C Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*, p 118
[266] *Le Belge*, 16/02/1830, p 1
[267] *Bombay Gazette,* 28/01/1824, p 15

such a renowned member of the *élite* could be so deeply sunk in extremism rather than suffering from some sort of 'transient' 'forgetfulness' while his irreligion is instead assumed to be a mixture of romantic emotionalism and pomposity:

> "His abuse of individuals, his forgetfulness of what was due to loyalty, and his ridicule of the king, were the result of the prejudice and passion of the moment, and the subjects of after regret. His abuse of Lord Castlereagh I conceive to have been the effect of his really believing him to have been an enemy to the true interests of his country; and this feeling being carried to excess, he considered it was just to hold him up to the execration of posterity. His doubts of the inspiration of the Scriptures were not the actual convictions of his mind, but transient,—uttered in the feeling of the moment, and springing from a mixture of doubt and of bravado, that people might stare and wonder at his boldness."[268]

The charges of hypocrisy and irreligion made by the likes of Cobbett and Byron gained currency through attacks on figures like Castlereagh, however the *secularizing* influence of such writers appears to have been accepted more as a moral challenge from men who had lost their religion than as a serious alternative. Byron was seen as dissolute and disaffected from religion rather than the positive adherent of a rival metaphysics. Part of the issue was undoubtedly the taboo that still existed over words that might describe a positive agnostic or atheist (a linguistic issue that remains today – both words being negatives), even David Hume remained famously cagey on how far his lack of faith extended. Thus, charges of secularism from that time should be read in line with other similar terms of abuse that were nearly always abjured by the intended target, for example 'pagan' or 'infidel'. Moreover, the progress of secularisation was seen as an *élite* movement that had little impact on the lower classes. For example the captain on board whose ship Kennedy and Byron had begun their conversations over religion was dismayed by the open discussion of such ideas and refused them permission to return on the following Sunday: "No, no, my lord, you must not play these tricks with me: there shall be no such heathenish and outlandish doings on board my ship on a Sunday."[269]

MacDonald, in arguing for the Secularization Thesis, argues that the frequently muted charge of hypocrisy against the establishment had a deep impact on social mores which accelerated the retreat of traditional religious moral thinking. "A *non compos mentis* verdict was an implicit rejection of religious and folkloric interpretations of suicide that condemned it utterly, in favour

[268] J Kennedy, *Conversations on Religion*, p 335
[269] *The North American Review*, Vol 36/No 78 (1833), p 168

of medical explanations that excused it."[270] In taking this line, MacDonald is building on the Victorian whiggish interpretations that are the forerunners of the Secularization Thesis and which can be found, for example, in William Lecky's *History of European Morals*. Lecky points several times to growing secularism as the explanation for relaxing moral attitudes in the early nineteenth century: "The rapid decomposition of religious opinions weakened the popular sense of its enormity."[271] However, this interpretation goes too far. Many deeply religious figures were drawn into defending hard cases precisely *because* of their religion while the general moral condemnation of suicide remained far stronger than MacDonald suggests. One example in 1811, in which an imprisoned murderer committed suicide to protest his innocence in a botched trial, was taken up by the evangelical Prime Minister Spencer Perceval[272] - one of the 'Saints' (members of the parliamentary evangelical caucus) - who took up the cause of reform in the judicial system.

However, it was not true that all suicides were now found *non compos mentis*, and the significance attached to the few who were found *felo-de-se* must be correspondingly greater. One of the few *felonia-de-se* from 1826 was a Mr. J Stanley who, it was noted, had travelled to the continent and was a radical in politics, but it was his use of a quote by Rousseau in his suicide note that was particularly noted[273] – thus the posthumous sentence against him does not appear to be simply a condemnation of his politics but was a moral condemnation of a man who had accepted an immoral moral philosophy. In fact a large proportion of the reports on cases that ended in a sentence of *felo-de-se* employ some form of moral approbation in the report. For example one 1830 suicide named Clark was reported as having been found *felo-de-se* after the coroner declared that he "was a man of *Infidel* principles [capitalization in the original]."[274] On rare occasions religious devotion could also become an informal defence against the strict reading of the law. In the case of one older widow, a Mrs. Mary George, who stabbed herself while at her home in Boston, Lincolnshire, the victim remained alive long enough to be interrogated as to the cause of her act. While George only spoke of a broken heart while she kept hold of the knife, she was sufficiently moved by the immorality of her act that "she sent for her

[270] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 75
[271] W Lecky, *History of European Morals*, Vol II, p 57
[272] From L Worsley, *A Very British Murder*, BBC miniseries, 2013
[273] *Saunders's News-Letter*, 04/12/1826, p 1
[274] 'Revenge and Suicide', *The Spectator*, 11/12/1830, p 10

relatives, and told them to pray for her, and she also prayed fervently and distinctly for some time." The report notes that George remained "perfectly sensible"[275] until the last, yet she was found *non compos mentis*. Perhaps her moral conversion at the end, which in the eyes of the church would be sufficient to absolve the guilt of suicide, was considered sufficient reason to exonerate her in the eyes of the law, although she had the use of her mental faculties at the time and the law made no explicit exception for cases of last-minute absolution. There are no grounds on which to read the decline in *felo-de-se* verdicts as *ipso facto* evidence of secularization. At most such cases raised the issue of how religious precepts should inform public morals, while evangelicals like Perceval were just as likely to consider reforms to current practice as to demand greater rigour.

So was the country really secularizing *en masse*? There was a lot of comment in the English press of the time about the perceived rise of 'deistical' thinking and anxiety about the weakness of the Church in the face of the perceived progress of irreligion. Secular principles were seen as threatening and could lead to charges of hypocrisy when noted in the suicidal paragons of the establishment and a harsher sentencing when noted among the criminal classes. However, even the most dispirited attacks on the progress of irreligion were more concerned with the lack of public morality than any threat from an *alternate* system of principles. For example, Tory polemicist Robert Southey wrote in a typical vein of the population being "under little or no restraint from religious principle, and if not absolutely disaffected to the institutions of the country, certainly not attached to them..."[276] This was a case of disaffection, not mass apostasy; and moderations of the treatment of suicide were as much about shifts in the thinking of actively religious people as they were about any weakening of the acceptance of England's Christian moral code. Indeed, the very strength of the concern over irreligion and the particular focus placed supposed public irreligion demonstrates the popular hold that Christian ideals still had on the country, even if this had only anaemic support from an enfeebled established Church - a greater threat to which was simultaneously coming from within.

[275] *Morning Chronicle*, 08/10/1829, p 3
[276] from Sir Thomas More (1829) quoted in V Brendon, *Age of Reform*

A new *Via Media*

Anxiety over the state of religion in the early nineteenth century was *not* a unipolar response to the threat of secularist freethought. Far more significant a threat to the church establishment were the exuberant new religious movements that had been appearing ever since the evangelical 'Great Awakening', most prominent among these the Methodists founded by John Wesley. Wesley had threatened to shake the church establishment out of the slumber it had fallen into since the Reformation by appealing directly to the masses without regard for establishment niceties. Wesley preached frequently against the dangers of demons and witches[277] and was not above promoting grizzly remedies to curb the spread of sin. The *Morning Herald* noted this tendency with disapproval:

> "The pious John Wesley has proposed a remedy for suicide, by gibbeting the unhappy victim of despondency. Would not a total extirpation of the gloomy and absurd tenets of Methodism be much more conducive to that purpose?"[278]

Indeed, both Methodist Wesleys, John and his brother Charles, had a history of singling out suicide as a particularly pernicious social ill. When the evangelist George Whitefield wrote Charles Wesley about a case of attempted suicide Charles responded enthusiastically by sending out several books on true religion to help bring the lost soul back to God,[279] while John was so taken with his gibbeting solution for the suicide problem that he approached the Prime Minister, William Pitt, to advocate for the abolition of gibbeting as then practiced *while instituting* the measure for suicides as a deterrent.[280] With the possible exception of a handful of nightmarish tales from the Scotland,[281] suicides had never been gibbeted in Britain and *élite* opinion tended to view the Wesleyan approach to sin as barbaric and even a potential *cause* of suicide.

[277] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 90
[278] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, pp 202/3
[279] *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol 61, p 86
[280] W Lecky, *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, Vol II, p 347
[281] R A Houston, 'Corporal Punishment' in *Punishing the Dead*, p 14

This particular concern with the moral peril of suicide put early Methodists at odds with the sympathetic shift which was occurring in polite literate society and which served to link suicide with amoral natural causes, mainly insanity. According to MacDonald:

> "Once the equation of suicide and madness had become a ruling-class shibboleth, it was inevitable that religious zealots would be blamed for causing suicide as well as for spreading melancholy and lunacy. Methodists were the commonest target for such charges"[282]

While MacDonald's finding agrees with the general reception of Methodist fire and brimstone preaching by the 'ruling classes, his appeal to the Secularization Thesis to explain this widening gulf in attitudes is problematic. After all, religious zealots could hardly have been under suspicion *because* they continued to preach that suicide was an immoral act, as most of the establishment clergy continued to do. Rather it was the baroque gruesomeness with which preachers such as the Wesleys condemned suicide that shocked the new sympathies of literate society. One cultural warrior played on this fear of radicalism in all its forms by penning a false suicide note for Chatterton, blaming his act on some (non-existent) "enthusiastical methodist" poetry he had written in which his guilty soul was returned to earth as a spectre.[283] The gulf in sensibilities was not between those who approved and those who disapproved of suicide, but rather it was between those who wished to eliminate suicide through effective, reasonable and legal means and those who advocated a godly campaign of harsh deterrence.

The established Church had developed as a *via media* – a middle way between Catholicism and the Radical Reformation. By the eighteenth century new extremes had emerged, from the anti-Erastian Methodism of Wesley to the deistic revolutionary freethought of Paine. The opponents had changed but the common interest of the established Church and political class in pursuing a *via media* remained the same. At the centre of this critique is the notion that religion remained a dynamic force into the Modern Era and was never ossified into a superstitious foil for the forces of secularism. This was particularly true of the established Church which always sought to preserve social stability in church and state by forging a theological *via media* between whatever extreme currents of thought seemed to be threatening that stability.

[282] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 201
[283] *ibid*, p 326

This interpretation offers a more comprehensive explanation for the changes made in the 1823 Judgement of Death Act, most importantly the illegalisation of the ritual of 'profane burial' for suicides while retaining the statutory felony and its other associated punishments. The 'profane burial' of suicides was intended to be a reversal of all the normal funeral rites, just as a black mass is of a Eucharistic service. Suicides found *felo-de-se* and buried in the 'profane' manner were taken in the middle of the night, buried face down by the side of the road at a crossroads with a stake driven through the heart.[284] As the number of verdicts of *felo-de-se* declined the profane ceremony became rarer and the notoriety of the practice tended to attract large crowds to its rare 'celebration'. Yet the curious thing about profane burial is that it was never legally sanctioned.[285] Profane burials were carried out by secular and often religious officials as a matter of tradition. Those sentiments which had sustained the practice of the profane burial were social rather than legal, a social tradition which was sanctioned by popular religion. For example, profane burials were always held at cross roads because this was taken to provide a giant talisman to ward off the evil one; the sign of the cross.[286] Similarly, the corpse of a suicide was pinned in place by a stake through the heart to prevent the devil from taking possession of the body. Even if there had been no shift in sensibilities among the literate *élite* with regard to suicide, the mere fact that the profane burial had become a rare pseudo-religious spectacle which drew gawking crowds meant that any role it had once played in strengthening social order had been lost by the beginning of the nineteenth century, and an established Church which was confronted with the dual challenges of revolutionary scepticism and radical fire-and-brimstone Methodism had good reason to see the profane burial banned.

By the early nineteenth century religious enthusiasm was regularly blamed for all manner of social ills, most frequently suicide. While many of the high profile members of Parliament who committed suicide at this time were accused of some species of irreligion, in the case of John Calcroft, MP, the suicidal anxiety was attributed rather to an overdose of religion. Calcroft's doctor recounted at the inquest that, "few persons possessed stronger religious feelings, or a more confirmed belief in the Christian Religion; I also recollect that the deceased was

[284] M MacDonald, 'Secularization of Suicide in England', p 54
[285] R Houston, 'Medicalization of Suicide', p 91
[286] B Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p 6

suspicious... He also said that some person was sitting on the top of the house to watch him."[287] Calcroft's fetid imaginations were not new to Parliament, after Castlereagh's suicide several members recounted that the late Foreign Secretary had also been interrupted on occasion by strange visions as he was on his feet orating in the Commons.[288] While this may be put down to stage fright (Castlereagh was a notoriously bad public speaker and had resorted to the quack remedy of 'taking aether' – bottled air – before he spoke),[289] the real danger in such visions is when they were linked somehow to religious unorthodoxies, for example Sir Walter Scott joined in the morbid reminiscences by claiming that Castlereagh had once spoken to him in 1815 at a dinner party in Paris claiming that he had had an, "apparition of a naked boy, 'the Radiant Boy' as Castlereagh called it – an apparition which Irish folk-lore took to be an omen of violent death."[290] This type of spiritualism *was* a direct threat to the church, and there seemed to be a tendency for folk religion to cross the line into suicide-provoking superstitions. *The British Critic*'s reviewer of *Sketches in Bedlam* even noted this danger in reading such stories, claiming that the young may easily be pushed to their death by "superstitious tales of ghosts and goblins" or the fear of crossing a church yard at night; "A frightful mask, a strange noise, a pretended ghost, or even the sudden bouncing on a person, wholly unaware of the trick, have often caused the most deplorable consequences, not only in children but in adults, to the loss of reason, and even of life."[291]

However, most attributions of suicide to an excess of religious enthusiasm did not occur among the literate class but among the lower classes, who seemed to be particularly susceptible to the dangerous effects of overly enthusiastic religion. Many such cases found their way into the national press from local reports. One instance of this was reported in The Times:

> "The following horrible instance of religious madness is taken from the *Rockingham Gazette*: - A poor woman in the Groves, last Saturday, attempted to cut her throat under the painful conviction that she could not be saved. We have seldom heard of a more distressing case. Her character was altogether respectable, and she lived with her husband and family in great domestic comfort. Yet she had persuaded herself that she was an object of divine inexorable wrath... Still she might have been saved, but

[287] *The Guardian,* 30/09/1831, p 4
[288] A Hassall, *Viscount Castlereagh,* p 223
[289] C J Bartlett, *Castlereagh*, p 260 – this led Lord Byron to quip that Castlereagh was the first Foreign Secretary to be unable to speak English, see Byron, *Complete Works of Lord Byron*, Vol II, p 502
[290] J Derry, *Castlereagh*, p 226
[291] *British Critic*, Vol 22, p 355

> unfortunately the young man sent to examine her, on the very point of putting in the needle to sew up the wound, fainted away, oppressed by the distressing sight of the patient and the blood with which the room was deluged. Thus time was lost, and, before further assistance could be obtained she was a corpse."[292]

The language used in such reports was often sympathetic which appeared to shift the moral blame from the victim. A similar case involving another 'poor woman', Sarah Spinner, from a village near Taunton, who slit her throat was attributed to her being "occasionally disordered in her intellects from religious melancholy..."[293] However, some cases were far more censorious and brutal. One involving a much younger woman was presented unequivocally as a cautionary tale about the dangers of religious extremism:

> "FATAL EFFECTS OF FANATICISM. ... Emma George, a young woman, 19 years of age, was indicted for the murder of her brother, a child of seven years of age, by hanging him with a handkerchief. ... The unhappy young woman had been in the habit of attending the meetings of ignorant methodistical preachers, from whose fanatical precepts she conceived the notion that it behoved her to avoid the evils of this life by speedy death. Unwilling, however, to commit suicide, she determined upon the horrible expedient of murdering her mother, but afterwards changed her resolution into that of hanging her infant brother, under the double impression, that whilst she sent his soul to heaven, she should herself be put to death for the commission of that crime."[294]

The perverse train of thought in this case is linked directly to George's 'methodistical' religion, however there is no suggestion that the preachers were teaching any form of puritanical neo-Catharism, rather it was the inchoate radicalism of their preaching that, in the mind of a young woman, led to such horrors.

The evangelical practice of delivering fire and brimstone sermons and then handing out bibles was apparently becoming dangerous, so that by the 1821 there was a controversy over the Bible Society's programme when Church of Ireland theologians attacked the bible distribution programme, it being felt that mass bible reading without guidance from the established Church was dangerous.[295] Another widely reported inquest linked the act to private religious study:

[292] *The Times,* 20/09/1820, p 3
[293] *Bath Chronicle and Weekly Gazette*, 05/07/1821, p 3
[294] *Sun (London),* 07/04/1824, p 1
[295] I Whelan, 'Bible Gentry', p 52

> "Mr. Silver, the foreman of the Jury, asked the witness if he did not consider the deceased's mind to be affected in consequence of his close application to studying the Bible?
> Mr. Parkin – Probably so, but I should think his malady existed previously; he has read very extensively, both medical and theological works; and at the time Lord Castlereagh committed suicide, the unfortunate gentleman remarked that his Lordship must have been a clever anatomist to discover the carotid artery so cleverly, and I have heard him contend that a person was perfectly justified in destroying himself, and that there were passages in the Bible that would bear him out.
> Coroner – Was the deceased in good circumstances?
> Mr. Parkin – He was, but possessed a strong irritability of temper and excitation of mind."[296]

Again, the fault is with a form of religion which has escaped the control of an established Church teaching a reasonable, practical morality that serves to constrain the behaviour of the masses. It does *not* appear to have been considered any sort of attack on religion to note the dangers inherent in theological overexertion. In one sermon against suicide published in 1818 by a Rev. George Mathew two causes of suicide are noted: social 'shame' from some crime or personal circumstance, and another "which, of late days, we have seen very frequently operating to self-destruction, is religious melancholy."[297] For an established Church which prided itself on hewing closely to the middle path in all things for the sake of social stability, the rise of religious radicalism could hardly have been seen as anything other than a threat. Thus ministers of the Church of England were quite comfortable preaching against the dangers posed by an excess of religion, to the extent of linking it with crime.

Another example of how religious extremism could be singled out as a cause of suicide and specifically linked to denominations outside the control of the church can be found in reporting on the suicide of Thomas Platt of Warwick.

> "He had, for some time past exhibited much mental inquietude, expressed great horror of Popery and of priests, and signified his determination of living and dying a member of the Church of England; but he feared lest this resolution should be known to the Catholics, and he imagined that any itinerant Irishman would murder him, if requested to do so by a priest"[298]

[296] *Saunders's News-Letter*, 15/10/1829, p 1
[297] *Cambridge Chronicle and Journal*, 06/03/1818, p 4
[298] 'Suicide at Warwick', *Sussex Advertiser*, 23/07/1827, p 4

Platt cut his throat with a pen knife, leaving the epitaph "I die the victim of the Catholics and the saints". Although there was a long history in England to the idea of a 'Catholic threat', this was rarely the immediate concern of writers in the nineteenth century. More often it played a supporting role with the new threat which had emerged from radical evangelicalism. One story in *The Spectator* was particularly ecumenical:

> "RELIGIOUS MANIA.—TWO cases, one of completed, another of attempted suicide, took place this week, from religious mania. The first case was that of a female, of middle life, residing in Ireland Yard, Doctors' Commons, she had been first a Protestant, next a Catholic, and lastly had, been converted to Infidelity... [she] cut her throat on Saturday afternoon... The second case was that of a journeyman printer, named Brown, in Craven Buildings, Drury Lane. Brown is a particular Baptist, and had received on Saturday a long visit from his clergyman; whose admonitions had produced such an effect on his mind, that on Sunday morning he attempted to destroy himself, by the same means as the female we have mentioned. Happily, the wound was not so deep, and hopes are entertained of his recovery."[299]

The social threats from radical religion untethered from the legislated doctrines and strucutres of the established church could apparently come from any of the alternate religious movements, which would surely have increased any anxiety the threat of radical religious produced.

The threat of popular radical religion was perceived to be very real in the Regency Period, which is perhaps not now sufficiently appreciated in comparison with the perceived threat to traditional morality posed by secularist intellectual culture. That the threat from popular religion might equal or exceed that from *élite* indifference was certainly appreciated at them time; for example, in a letter published in *The British Critic* in 1822 by a Rev. Boone worried that the conflict between the forces of 'credulity', 'superstition' and 'bigotry' on one side and those of 'infidelity', 'irreligion' and 'scepticism' on the other might bring about the same disillusionment that was thought to have brought down the Roman Empire:

> "Gibbon, I believe, has said of the doctrines of Paganism, that 'the people thought them equally untrue: - the philosophers equally false: - and the magistrates equally useful.' The same, or worse, may be soon the case with Christianity in England."[300]

There is little reason to suppose that attacks on extreme religion reflect any diminution in loyalty to the established Church. Methodism in particular represented an apparent threat to the social

[299] *The Spectator*, 20/11/1830, p 8
[300] *British Critic*, Vol 22, p 96

stability that the established Church was committed to maintaining, and in this struggle folk rituals such as the profane burial of suicides were at best a distraction if not a direct threat to the *via media*.

Reform and Retrenchment

The generations living in 1820 were heirs to an apparently contradictory code of civic morality, which was an uncomfortable combination of the Reformation Period legislation of Christian doctrine by parliament and a romanticised *élite* honour code which often exonerated emotional outrages against the former. In practice, the legislation of moral conduct which began under the Tudors had devolved into an erratically enforced 'bloody code' in which rules were more 'honoured in the breach than the observance'. In the church these competing forces were represented by a statist Erastianism and a doctrinally ambiguous latitudinarianism. Clearly something had to give, and the reaction to apparent establishment hypocrisy in the judgement of suicides from different classes and to the dual threats of secularism and radical religion helped to prompt a retrenched moral positioning in Church and state against suicide.

None of this, however, would suggest that the raw power of religious feeling had become unimportant in society at large. On the contrary, by the 1820s keeping up the appearance of steady personal habits and morality while avoiding the perception of moral hypocrisy – traits that would go on to define later Victorian public morality – were becoming a foundation stone of social conduct. Linda Colley has noted this change in relation to the aura of peaceful domesticity that set men like Perceval, Liverpool, Castlereagh, Peel and Canning apart from early generations of office holders who had openly chased married women and kept mistresses: "Even less aggressively religious public men acknowledged the vital importance of practising regular church-going and conventional sexual morality,"[301] although one might question Coley's inclusion of Canning given his widely rumoured affair with the queen. The rest, it is true, are notable for how they "wallowed in domesticity" in comparison with their predecessors, the great

[301] L Colley, *Britons*, p 189

Whig grandees of the eighteenth century. Nor was the religious vernacular restricted to the establishment. Indeed, this shift in accepted mores among polite society developed against a backdrop of moral outrage by common folk, among whom religious language also dominated in questions of public morality. For example, at a commemoration meeting marking the first anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre, a radical speaker, Mr. Hunt, mentioned the spate of premature deaths among prominent politicians who had been responsible for public order during the massacre, making particular mention of Castlereagh, "God's will be done! said he, and the crowd uttered "Amen.""[302]

Even those on the frontlines of social work were more often than not deeply steeped in a Christian ethic that saw the improved practice of Christian beliefs as *the* direction of social progress. In the fight to combat suicide the preeminent organisation was the Humane Society. From an organisation founded in 1774 to rescue drowned persons it had evolved into a sort of proto St. John's Ambulance, ready to support persons in all forms of distress, with prominent backers, rescue manuals and a permanent watch station by the Serpentine[303] which saw frequent business, in particular rescuing attempted suicides. Undoubtedly many of the 'drownings' the Society tried to prevent were in fact suicides, however in a search of newspapers available for 1800-1835 on through the *Historic British Newspapers* resource, there are few or no hits for both 'Humane Society' and 'suicide' before 1818, after which the frequency of articles mentioning both as a proportion of those in which only the 'Humane Society' is mentioned increases to around 20% and remains at about this proportion into the 1830s. Even if this increasing use of explicit references to suicide in describing the work of the society merely reflected the declining use of euphemisms and the continual growth of the press in the period, the very fact of this explicit acknowledgement of the prevalence of suicide would have been experienced as a rise in the actual rate.

The Society publicised annual statistics of the number of interventions they had made, with emphasis usually placed on the number of suicides prevented. Suicides were not just turned out on the streets but were returned to their families by the Society or, where not possible, found a

[302] *Roscommon & Leitrim Gazette*, 18/09/1830, p 4
[303] *Waterford Mail*, 02/02/1831, p 2

place at an institution such as a workhouse. None of this, however, suggests a retreat from Christian teaching on the immorality of suicide, much less an embrace of secularist principles. In a 1797 sermon on suicide given to the Society at St. Botolph's Bishopsgate, the Society was praised for returning 500 suicides to their families (without punishment) and the success that the Society claimed in that none of the 500 had supposedly made a second attempt was attributed to the Society's ethos which was to "rescue the soul of the sinner".[304] In practice this meant religious instruction. The Society itself claimed that its success rate "probably resulted from the care exercised by the Society in conveying to those objects, not only religious counsel, but also presenting them with bibles and other appropriate books,"[305] and at the Society's anniversary celebration in 1823 a procession was organised of redeemed souls saved by the work of the Society, all carrying bibles.[306]

The Humane Society was not alone in holding the line on suicide. After the 1823 change to the law on suicide, public opinion appears to have remained closer to official church teaching and there was little sign of support for full decriminalisation. For example Blackstone's legal commentary based on the unreformed law continued to be the go-to source for interpreting the law. In welcoming the 1823 change to the law on the burial of suicides, the same editor quoted approvingly from Blackstone regarding the misuse of the law as an occasional salutary instrument while noting that the new law for suicides explicitly denied Christian burial in all such cases, ie. whether or not the suicide was *compos mentis*.[307] And as late as 1829, Andrew notes that the Lord Chief Justice quoted Blackstone's strictures on passing judgement in cases of suicide in a new set of instructions produced for coroners' courts.[308] Not only was there no discernible shift towards decriminalisation but, on the contrary, it appears that the change in law regarding suicides was conceived by many in authority to be an opportunity to realign the law against suicide with the actual practice of coroners' courts. This, in any case, had been one of Blackstone's aims, writing half a century before, when he condemned the misuse of the insanity defence for suicides. Blackstone's position on this was well known and his argument frequently reiterated by Cobbett in his attacks against the whitewashing of Castlereagh's suicide: the act of

[304] *Royal Humane Society*, Vol 12 (Jul-Dec 1798)
[305] *Salisbury and Winchester Journal*, 05/04/1819, p 3
[306] *Public Ledge and Daily Advertiser*, 01/05/1823, p 3
[307] *Gentleman's Magazine*, Vol 93/Part 2 (1823), pp 549-550
[308] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, p 103

suicide requires a certain presence of mind and thus even a 'lunatic' should not generally be excusable on the grounds of insanity.[309]

This call for a hardening in attitude was some ways from Lecky's account of the period just before his own birth: "The advance of religious scepticism, and the relaxation of religious discipline, have weakened and sometimes destroyed the horror of suicide..."[310] How far had this spirit of religious scepticism in fact gone; can it at least be linked to the softening of the law against suicide in 1823? While most contemporary reports on the 1823 bill were positive, many were accompanied by some assurance that suicides were not to be considered exonerated. One such reported that in the bill introduced by T B Lennard:

> "It was only in the case of *felo-de-se* that he wished to interfere, and there only to abolish the practice of the mere indignity of applying the stake to the body, for he meant to leave the burial to be performed in private any where it might be thought proper."[311]

While *The Times* emphasised what Lennard *only* wished to accomplish by his limited reform, a similar article from the *Norwich Post* the next month was clearer in stating that the burial of suicides would still be subject to statutory consequences:

> "The Bill now before Parliament for abolishing the practice of burying in the highways Suicides, against whom a verdict of *felo-de-se* is returned, enacts, that such persons shall in future have private burial in a Church-yard; but no Christian rites shall be permitted."[312]

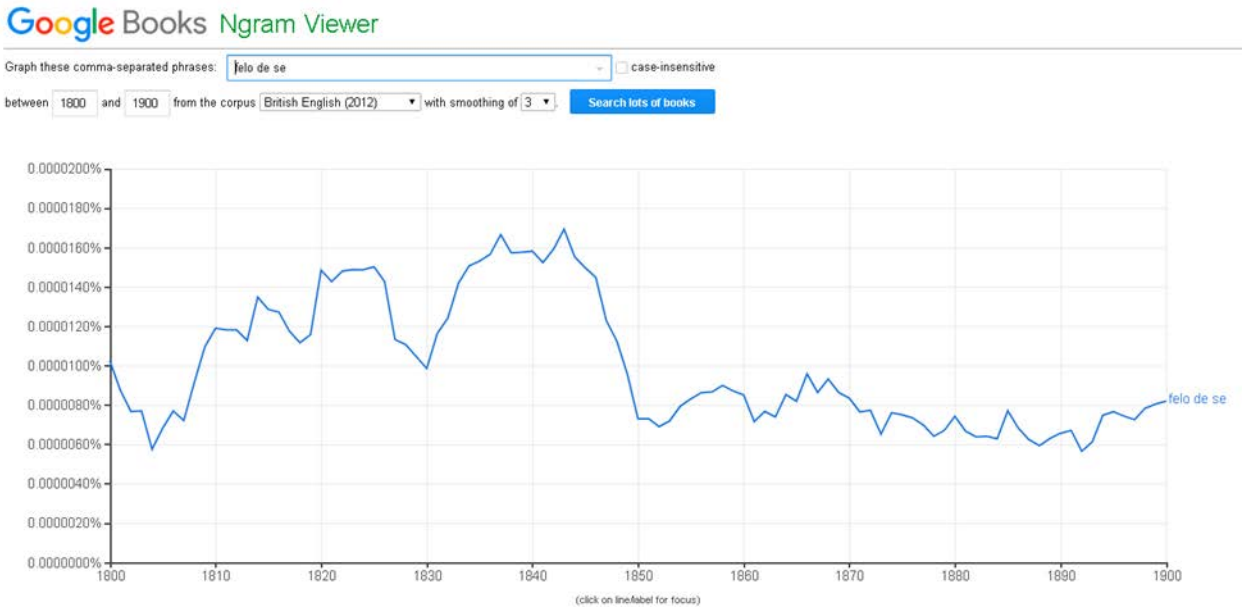
This last injunction was a meaningful one, and the church was scrupulous in the enforcement of it throughout the nineteenth century. In point of fact, after 1823 it became the custom for suicides to be buried in a relatively hidden location by the back wall of cemetery yards,[313] and there was strong opposition to the burial of other bodies anywhere near such a spot. Moreover, one indignity which the bodies of suicides were subjected to from the moment of the coroner's arrival continued, as an official seal was placed on bodies of suspected suicides as an official

[309] *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register*, 09/09/1826, Cobbett applies this to Castlereagh's suicide, asking rhetorically of his dying words "'tis all over" "was there ever any thing in the world more rational than this?".
[310] Lecky, *History of European Morals*, Vol II, p 61
[311] *The Times*, 28/05/1823, p 2
[312] *Bury and Norwich Post*, 11/06/1823, p 2
[313] B Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, p 9

notice that foul play was suspected and the body was not to be moved until the coroner had called an inquest.[314]

Had the abolition of 'profane burials' in 1823 been prompted by a growing sense of empathy among the public for suicides and a corresponding desire to remove the harshest penalties that the law imposed it would seem to follow that the shift in this direction which had brought down the proportion of suicides being found *felo-de-se* would continue. From a minority of suicide cases in the mid-seventeenth century, by 1800 97% of suicides were being found *non compos mentis,*[315] however after 1823 this trend reverses as the number of *felo-de-se* verdicts increases again.[316]

10 - Ngram: frequency of term *'felo-de-se'*, 1800-1900



A Google Books Ngram for the term '*felo-de-se*' in this period (Figure 10) also suggests a marked rise in the use of the term well into the nineteenth century, so that it is difficult to argue that by the 1830s it had largely fallen into abeyance – quite the contrary. The appearance of this term, mainly in reports of coroners' inquests and in debates on suicide, rose markedly in the

[314] G Minois, *History of Suicide*, p 202
[315] M MacDonald, *Sleepless Souls*, p 133
[316] D Andrew, *Aristocratic Vice*, p 226

early nineteenth century. As with reporting on suicide there is a significant drop around 1830 which may again relate to the debate over parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation overshadowing other debates – thus marking the end of any continuous Regency Period crisis around the issue of suicide. However, just as Andrew has found that the rate of *felo-de-se* verdicts picked up in the early nineteenth century, so the use of the term in literature, scientific journals and newspapers continues to rise until the mid-1840s.

The trend towards increasing the application of this verdict had started even before the law on suicide burial was changed in 1823. For example, one Coroner's commentary on the subject at an inquest in 1816 was already making the call for a more regular use of the verdict:

> "it is not every melancholy or hypochondriacal distemper that denominates a man *non compos*, for there are few who commit this offence but are under such infirmities; but that it must be such an alienation of mind that renders them to be mad men, or frantic, or destitute of the use of reason. A lunatic killing himself in a fit of lunacy is NOT *felo-de-se*, but if he kills himself in a lucid interval, he is a *felo-de-se*. The Jury were of opinion, that the deceased, both by her words and actions, was perfectly sane, at the time of her committing the act, and the frequency of such a heinous crime as self-murder, having become alarming, induced them to find a verdict of *felo-de-se*. The Coroner approved the verdict, and said, he hoped that future juries would, under the same circumstances, do the same thing, and immediately issued his warrant for the deceased to be buried in some public highway: which was accordingly done the next morning... We most sincerely hope that this example may have the effect of deterring others from the commission of the like disgraceful and wicked offence."[317]

Macdonald has dismissed such evidence leading up to the 1823 Judgement of Death Act as merely the "dying gasps of value-driven signs of suicide as symbols of either heroism or unholiness."[318] By and large, however, opposition to the profane burial for cases of *felo-de-se* seem to have been incidental to the calls for a more consistent approach to sentencing of suicides and there appears to have been little appetite to abolish *felo-de-se* altogether, which would in effect have decriminalised suicide.

[317] *Caledonian Mercury*, 07/10/1816, p 2
[318] R Brown, *Art of Suicide,* p 149

The *Cornwall Gazette* recorded some confusion over the new law on the burial of suicides. One coroner seemed willing to have the body of a suicide buried with rites and was opposed by an irate curate who harangued the coroner's court against:

> "The scandalous practice of them and their inquests, notwithstanding the strictness of their oath, is almost constantly returning every one they sit upon, to be *non compos mentis*, (though the very circumstances of their murdering themselves are frequently a proof of the soundness of their senses, sufficiently shew how much their verdict is to be depended on)"[319]

In this case the diligent clergyman appeared to know his Blackstone and to have kept up with changes to the law more assiduously than the local coroner.

Despite its latitudinarian tendencies at the start of the nineteenth century, the church could still draw some lines in the sand, in particular on suicide. One notorious case which occupied the press for a number of years in the 1820s was that of the heretical curate Robert Taylor, who was known for preaching and publishing 'deistical' diatribes, including one notorious 1818 advertisement in Latin announcing his heretical views and requesting employment after he had resigned from a previous parish. The bishops were under repeated pressure from some papers to discipline the rogue cleric but seemed reluctant, eventually settling for a partial retraction. Taylor was only hauled in front of the bishop when he broke his retraction yet again by publishing an article justifying suicide.[320]

Meanwhile, popular fear of the evil unleashed by suicide remained strong in the country throughout the 1820s and likely well beyond. This is vividly evidenced by the closure of a Lincolnshire church in 1829 after a poor man, Francis Coy, who had an ongoing dispute with the parochial officers over relief payments which they had stopped when he refused to take work, hanged himself in front of the church. There was a tradition that the evil provoked by suicide desecrated church precincts and therefore necessitated its closure for a year after such an event. This was apparently familiar to all involved in this incident, given that Coy threatened suicide for

[319] 'Burial service refused to a suicide' , *Royal Cornwall Gazette*, 07/06/1823, p 4
[320] *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol 55, p 461

just this purpose leading up to his death and the church officers had responded by bolting the gates at night – although they had not apparently counted on him climbing over the wall.[321]

In *Suicide and its Antidotes* by the Reverend Solomon Piggott, published two years after Castlereagh's suicide, the importance of religion as *the* antidote to suicide is emphasised:

> "With what astonishment has the late suicide of Lord Castlereagh ... filled the thinking part of the community! That a Senator with a head so cool ... should be reduced, by care and anxieties, or by vexation and opposition, to such mental imbecility,... Such instances should teach us the supereminent value of religious principles..."[322]

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the established Church was hardly in a strong position to counter the rise of suicide among its adherents and to promote the 'supereminent value' of its 'principles'. However, during the 1820s the impact of moral crises, notably stoked by a rash of suicides among prominent politicians, clergy and others, proved to be just the shock the Church needed to jolt it out of its own *malaise*.

From a quasi-catatonic state the Church of England began to revive in the 1820s just as the *malaise* of its clerical and civil leadership was brought to the fore with the well-publicised self-murders of so many among its ranks. Responding to this crisis, in the light of the dual threats of secularist and evangelical radicalism, the church establishment, backed by the state, set about actively *retrenching* its position. In the same period money was finally appropriated to create new parish churches through the country,[323] sinecures were abolished,[324] and political reforms were embraced and repurposed to support the practice of orthodox Christian evangelism. The retrenched line on suicide encapsulated this new morality: sympathy for the deserving, moral instruction for the fallen and an end to pseudo-religious superstitions. In short, the church that emerged from the crisis years of the 1820s had, in the words of Arthur Burns, "moved from Hanoverian horror to Victorian virtue."[325]

---

[321] *Stamford Mercury,* 12/06/1829, p 4
[322] S Piggott, *Suicide and its Antidotes*, p 10
[323] N Gash, *Aristocracy and the People*, p 69
[324] E Evans, *Forging of the Modern State*, p 240
[325] A Burns, 'English 'Church Reform' Revisited', p 162

Conclusion

> "EPITAPH
> *On a Coroner who committed Felo-de-se*
> He lived, and died,
> By Suicide."[326]

The shift in the perceptions of suicide by the English literate classes from a sympathetic romantic image, that Michael MacDonald, Ron Brown and others have linked to the appearance of Goethe's *Werther* and its association with individualistic masculine honour codes, to the Victorian associations with the social ills of the uneducated English poor crowded in the new industrial cities, in particular with the image of crazed and criminal women that Olive Anderson, Ron Brown and others have analysed, is a stark one. This shift is most notable in the Regency Period, the period which falls between MacDonald's and Anderson's comprehensive studies and which has only been significantly investigated in the cases of the two most notorious suicides in English history, Samuel Romilly and Lord Castlereagh. Yet, there are good reasons to think that the peculiar association of certain prominent suicides with this period was not mere happenstance; these and other suicides of the time were given a *unique* degree of attention in the press that highlighted links between them – at least in the popular imagination – which served to stoke fears of social instability and charges of class hypocrisy. This was a suicide 'crisis' which helped to generate a new image of suicide which *retrenched* traditional condemnations within a new system of consistent, pragmatic, demystified Christian public morality.

In what did this 'suicide crisis' consist, as a *distinct phenomenon*? Without making any claims as to the actual rate of suicide or shifts in emotional much less psychiatric responses to suicide, it is possible to delineate a unique period in the social history of suicide in England over the Regency Period. The burgeoning press, as it began to develop the characteristics of routine and increasingly partisan-political reportage, gave an unprecedented level of notoriety to the unusually bloody suicides of the leaders of both parties in the Commons: Samuel Romilly and

[326] *Essex Herald*, 20/01/1829, p 2

Lord Castlereagh. The imagery of romantic sympathy was employed yet it was increasingly used in a sense of mock honour (as Ron Brown has also argued), a form of attack against an establishment who were failing to live up to their own standards of moral conduct. The national press of all political stripes gave an unprecedented amount of attention to a wide range of suicides of politicians, supposed imitators and an apparently unusual glut of suicides among the clergy, dwelling on apparent similarities from the causes of suicide, class and thought of the victim to the manner of adjudication by the coroner's court and, most notably, the bloody methods employed, in particular the otherwise relatively rare slashing of the throat.[327] The suicides of Romilly and Castlereagh may have been the last and greatest exemplars of the honourable romantic tradition, but in the very notoriety they and their 'imitators' received by the press the process of deconstructing this attitude towards suicide was well underway.

What, then, was the impact of this crisis on English society? It was *not* a unidirectional embrace of secular values, as MacDonald proposes - serving to undermine old religious injunctions against suicide as the scope of public sympathy and an attachment to amoral scientific methods pushed back the reach of religious censoriousness. Quite the contrary, the reshaped attitudes towards suicide that emerged by the end of the Regency Period were actively promoted as a *retrenchment* of religious condemnation. Suicide remained a sin *and* a crime and the organs of both church and state were reinvigorated by legal and church reform in order to push this message of moral constraint; starting with the 1823 Judgement of Death Act which, as Peel's great legal reforms of 1827 would do more broadly, helped to bring the practice of the law more *in line* with its moral underpinnings. Donna Andrews, following in the footsteps of Kitson Clark's work on Victorian 'humanitarian' evangelicalism, is right to argue against MacDonald's application of the Secularisation Thesis in that religious sentiment *remained* a powerful motivating factor in the reform of the law of suicide, a factor which was gaining importance in the Regency Period, so much so, in fact, that the retrenched condemnatory position on suicide hewed a new moralistic line in social mores which was *equally* a response to perceived threats from secularism *and* from the rise of untethered radical religion – which itself was often associated with suicidal episodes. The superstitious 'profane burial' was banned in the context of

[327] which may have more affinity with the manner of coverage given to the garrotting crisis of the late nineteenth century than individual cases of romantic suicide from the late eighteenth century

a crackdown on the traditions of unreliable popular religion while forfeiture was retained and coroners' juries reformed to assuage accusations of the inconsistent application of the law by a hypocritical *élite* who were accused of a lack of attachment to the precepts of the established Church. Finally, there was a shift in the language of suicide, moderating the claims of romantic sympathy with the gradual reappearance of condemnatory language and a greater acceptance of scientific methods, with their sometimes brutal solutions to the problem of suicidal ideation.

Thus, the suicide crisis of the Regency Period, fed by a press which amplified incidents of violent suicide for a voracious news-reading public, provoked the drawing - by the religious and political establishment - of a new moral line by the 1830s. A new public morality which claimed a new consistency in its legal and moral application across classes, pragmatism in its use of the modern methods of science to respond to the claims of reformist sentiment, and which opposed the exuberance of traditional superstitions while remaining proudly Christian; in other words it was the emergence of a form of Victorian middle-class morality, and the retrenchment of the condemnation of suicide was an episode in its development.

Bibliography

Anderson, Olive. *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England,* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987

Andrew, Donna. 'Debate: the secularization of suicide in England, 1660-1800', in *Past & Present*, Vol 119/No 1 (1988), pp 158-70

Andrew, Donna. 'The Suicide of Sir Samuel Romilly', in *From Sin to Insanity: suicide in early modern Europe*, ed. Jeffrey Watt, Ithaca, US: Cornell University Press, 2004, pp 175-188

Andrew, Donna. *Aristocratic Vice,* New Haven, US: Yale University Press, 2013

Barbagli, Marzio. *Farewell to the World: a history of suicide,* trans. by Lucinda Byatt, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015

Bartlett, Christopher. *Castlereagh,* London: Macmillan, 1966

Bew, John. *Castlereagh: a life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012

Bradley, Ian. *The Call to Seriousness: the evangelical impact on the Victorians,* London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1976

Brendon, Vyvyen. *The Age of Reform, 1820-1850 (History at Source),* London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1994

Briathnach, Caoimhghin. 'Hallaran's circulation Swing', in *History of Psychiatry*, Vol 21/No 1 (2010), pp 79-84

Brock, William. *Lord Liverpool and Liberal Toryism, 1820 to 1827,* Hamden, US: Archon Books, 1967

Brown, Ron. *Art of Suicide,* London: Reaktion Books, 2001

Brown, Richard & Daniels, Christopher. *Nineteenth Century Britain (Documents and Debates),* London: Macmillan, 1980

Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy,* London: J. Cuthell, 1821

Burns, Arthur. 'English 'Church' Reform Revisited, 1780-1840', in *Rethinking the Age of Reform,* ed. A Burns, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp 136-162

Colley, Linda. *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837,* NewHaven, US: Yale University Press, 1992

Cook, Chris. *Britain in the Nineteenth Century, 1815-1914 (Routledge Companions to History),* London: Routledge, 2005

Cresswell, Peter. 'Interpretations of Suicide', in *British Journal of Sociology,* Vol 23/No 2 (1972), pp 133-145

de Quincey, Thomas. *On Suicide*, London, 1827

Derry, Jerry. *Castlereagh,* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976

Evans, Eric. *Britain Before the Reform Act: politics and society,1815-1832 (Seminar Studies in History),* London: Longman, 1989

Evans, Eric. *Forging of the Modern State: early industrial Britain, 1783-1870 (Foundations of Modern Britain),* 3rd ed., London: Pearson Education, 2001

Evans, Eric. *Political Parties in Britain, 1783-1867 (Lancaster Pamphlets),* London: Methuen, 1985

Gash, Norman. *Aristocracy and the People: Britain 1815-1865,* London: Edward Arnold, 1979

Gash, Norman. 'Part One', in *The Conservatives: a history from their origins to 1945*, ed. Lord Butler, London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1977

Gates, Barbara. *Victorian Suicide: mad crimes and sad histories,* Princeton, US: Princeton University Press, 1988

Giddens, Anthony. 'Suicide Problem in French Sociology', in *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol 16/No 1 (1965), pp 3-18

Hassall, Arthur. *Viscount Castlereagh,* London: Pitman & Sons, 1908

Healy, Roisin. 'Suicide in Early Modern and Modern Europe', in *The Historical Journal*, Vol 49 (2006), pp 903-919

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848,* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962

Houston, R A. *Punishing the Dead? suicide, lordship, and community in Britain, 1500-1830,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010

Houston, RR, 'The Medicalization of Suicide: medicine and the law in Scotland and England, c.1750-1850', in *Histories of Suicide : international perspectives on self-destruction in the modern world,* Eds J Weaver & D Wright, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009, pp 91-118

Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights*, New York: Norton & Co, 2007

Innes, Joanna. ‘Happiness Contested: happiness and politics in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries’ in *Suffering and Happiness in England 1550-1850: narratives and representations,* ed. Michael Braddick, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp 87-110

Innes, Joanna. ‘‘Reform’ in English Public Life: the fortunes of a word’, in *Rethinking the Age of Reform,* ed. A Burns, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp 71-97

Johnson, Paul. *The Birth of the Modern: world society, 1815-1830,* New York: Harper Collins, 1991

Kennedy, James. *Conservations on Religion with Lord Byron and Others, held in Cephalonia, a short time previous to his Lordship’s Death,* London: John Murray, 1830

King, Peter. *Punishing the Criminal Corpse, 1700-1840: aggravated forms of the death penalty in England*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017

Lecky, William. *History of European Morals,* Vol II, New York: D Appleton & Co, 1869

MacDonald, Michael. ‘The Secularization of Suicide in England, 1660-1800’, in *Past & Present,* Vol 111/No 1 (1986), pp 50-100

MacDonald, Michael. *Sleepless Souls: suicide in early modern England (Oxford Studies in Social History),* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990

Madden, William. ‘Victorian Morality: ethics not mysterious’, in *The Review of Politics,* Vol 23/No 4 (1961), pp 458-71

Minois, Georges. *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western Culture,* Baltimore, US: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999

Namier, Lewis. *The House of Commons, 1754-1790,* Vol I, London: Boydell & Brewer, 1985

O’Gorman, Frank. *Emergence of the Two-Party System, 1760-1832 (foundations of modern history),* London: Edward Arnold, 1982

Oman, Charles. *England in the Nineteenth Century, London: Longmans,* Green and Co, 1915

Piggott, Rev. Solomon. *Suicide and Its Antidotes: a series of anecdotes and actual narratives, with suggestions on mental distress*, London: J Robbins & Co., 1824

Plowright, John. *Regency England: the age of Lord Liverpool (Lancaster Pamphlets),* London: Routledge, 1996

Porter, Andrew. *The Oxford History of the British Empire: the nineteenth century,* Vol III, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999

Pridmore, Saxby. ‘Medicalisation of Suicide’, in *The Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences*, Vol 18/No 4 (2011), pp 78–83.

Pridmore, Saxby. ‘Predicament Suicide Model 2010’ in *Suicide and Predicament: life is a predicament*, Bentham Books (online), 2010, pp 11-18

Ramsden, Edmund. ‘The Suicidal Animal: science and the nature of self-destruction’, in *Past and Present*, Vol 224/No 1 (2014), pp 201-242

The British Critic: *new series for July, August, September, October, November, December*, Vol 22, London: C & J Rivington, 1823

Tuite, Clara. *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity (New Frontiers in History)*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014

Turner, Michael. *Age of Unease: government and reform in Britain, 1782-1832 (Sutton Modern History)*, Stroud: Sutton, 2000

Turner, Michael. *British Politics in an Age of Reform: government and reform in Britain, 1782-1832*, Midsomer Norton: Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2000

Wade, Jack. *The Extraordinary Black Book: An Exposition of Abuses in Church and State*, London: Effingham Wilson, 1835

Whelan, Irene. ‘The Bible Gentry: evangelical religion, aristocracy, and the new moral order in the early nineteenth century’, in *Protestant Millennialism, Evangelicalism, and Irish Society, 1790–2005*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp 52-82

Woodward, Sir Llewellyn. *Age of Reform, 1815-1870*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962