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## Four Perceptions of Suicide in Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century England

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FOUR PERCEPTIONS OF SUICIDE IN  
SIXTEENTH- AND EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

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A Thesis

Presented to the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Alexandra Mary Lord

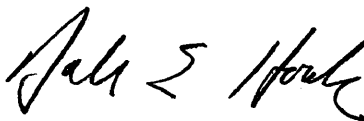
1990

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Author

Approved August, 1990



\_\_\_\_\_  
Dale Hoak



\_\_\_\_\_  
Maryann Brink

  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Anthony Esler

## DEDICATION

### TO MY FATHER

Confronted with a terminal illness, my father chose to end his life on May 5, 1987. While his decision was accepted and understood by both family and friends, it led me to realize that suicide is not and never has been accepted by the vast majority of people. This paper was written in an attempt to understand some of the origins behind the stigma which is attached to suicide today.

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## ABSTRACT

### FOUR PERCEPTIONS OF SUICIDE IN SIXTEENTH- AND EARLY SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND

Alarmed by what they viewed as an increase in suicide, sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English men and women wrote extensively on the topic of "selfe-murder" as they termed it. For the vast majority of these writers, suicide was regarded as an abomination on both theological and legal grounds. But while nearly all Tudor English men and women unequivocally denounced "this desperate, devilish and damnable practice", their condemnations of suicide varied. From the impassioned writings of the seventeenth-century theologian John Syme to the classically inspired defense of suicide written by John Donne, a wide range of attitudes and beliefs about suicide developed during the Tudor period. This paper attempts to trace the development and influences behind four of these attitudes.



That of their goods and bodies we can dispose; but what shall become of their souls, God alone can tell; His mercy may come betwixt the bridge and the brook, the knife and the throat. What happens to one may happen to any. Who knows how he may be tempted? It is his case; it may be thine. That which is his lot this day, tomorrow may be thine. We should ought not to be so rash and rigorous in our censures as some are, charity will judge and hope the best; God be merciful unto us all!

---Robert Burton  
*The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 1628

## CHAPTER I

## SUICIDE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

At the trial of Sir James Hales, a sixteenth-century suicide, Lord Chief Justice Dyer asserted that "the forfeiture of the goods and chattels, real and personal, of Sir James shall have relation to the act done in his lifetime".<sup>1</sup> Dyer's insistence upon a posthumous punishment of a *felo-de-se* was a result of the deeply ingrained sixteenth-century abhorrence of suicide<sup>2</sup>, an abhorrence which colored most Tudor attitudes and beliefs about suicide. In the wake of these condemnations, Robert Burton's plea that "we ought not to be so rash and rigorous in our censures [against suicides] as some are"<sup>3</sup> was virtually ignored. Despite the growing fascination with death among the more leisured classes, suicide at its most fundamental level never ceased to be regarded with horror and dismay in early modern England.

While the word *suicide* itself did not come into use

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<sup>1</sup>Lord Chief Justice Dyer quoted at the trial of Sir James Hales in Guernsey, *Ecclesiastical Law and the Burial of Ophelia*, (New York: AMS Press, 1971), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> MacDonald, Michael. "The Secularization of Suicide in England: 1600-1800", *Past and Present*, No. 111, p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Burton, Ed. Flood Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1955), Originally published 1628, p. 373.

until the late seventeenth century<sup>4</sup>, the concept of self-murder had a much older history in England. Defined at its most basic level as "the voluntary *destroying* of a man's own life by himself or his own means and procurement ...self-murder [was deemed to be]...in itself evil".<sup>5</sup> On a more complex level, it was argued that suicide was not simply an attack on oneself but rather a direct assault upon God and the fellowship and communion of mankind--all of which the suicide was a part. In rejecting life, the early modern suicide directly denied the gift of God.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons alone, suicide was to be condemned.

On a secular level, suicide proved to be equally frightening. Believed to be the final result of three basic steps, suicide occurred when the *imagination* first conceived of death; the mind then *resolved* to act upon this thought and last, the mind *perfected* or acted upon this resolution.<sup>7</sup> In other words, self-murder was regarded as the logical result of a highly rational thought process. Yet sixteenth-

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<sup>4</sup>The *Oxford English Dictionary*, Second Edition, Vol. XVII, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 144. The word was first used in 1651.

<sup>5</sup>John Syme, *Life's Preservative Against Self-Killing or An Useful Treatise Concerning Life and Self-Murder*, (London: R. Dawlman and L. Fawne, 1637), Short Title Catalogue 291, p.2-3. My italics.

<sup>6</sup>King's interpretation of Aquinas (1594), in S.E. Sprottt, *The English Debate on Suicide: From Donne to Hume*, (La Salle, Illinois: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1961), p. 3-4.

<sup>7</sup>Serjaent Walsh quoted at the trial of Sir James Hales in Guernsey, *Ecclesiastical Law and the Burial of Ophelia*, p. 10.

century Englishmen and women could not and did not openly recognize this logical conclusion to their definition of suicide. For them, suicides of any type were to be *formally* condemned.

This horror of voluntary death was a direct legacy of the Middle Ages. Suicide which was defined in legal terms as a form of murder had become a crime in England in as early as 976. By the fourteenth century, a period of soaring death rates, it had become customary for the act of the *felo-de-se* to be punished by a complete confiscation of the deceased's property, sometimes to the extent of pauperizing the suicide's entire family. Because it was maintained that with every suicide "the king hath lost a subject...[and had] his peace...broken"<sup>8</sup>, this kind of excessive punishment was believed necessary--especially in a period of such instability.

In ecclesiastical circles, the practice of self murder had been consistently and unequivocally condemned since the sixth century.<sup>9</sup> Arguing that "he that stabs another can kill his body but he that stabs himself kills his own

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<sup>8</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, Ed. Ernest W. Sullivan, (Newark, Delaware: University of Delaware Press, 1984), Originally Published 1647, p.72. For a full discussion of Donne's beliefs and ideas about suicide, see Chapter Six.

<sup>9</sup>At the Second Council of Orleans in 533, the Church agreed to deny funeral rites to suicides accused of a crime; in 563, at the Council of Barga, the Church insisted that suicides were not to receive Christian burial under any circumstances and in 590 at the Council of Antisidor, the Church stipulated that no offerings were to be made for the souls of suicides.

soul"<sup>10</sup>, theologians and physicians had consistently urged that suicides be completely expelled from the Christian community. As a result, canon law, throughout Europe, denied Christian burial for all suicides.

While not all Englishmen would have agreed with the sixteenth-century minister Samuel Bird who believed that dragging suicides face down through the streets would serve as a successful deterrent for future suicides<sup>11</sup>, burial practices were often used to discourage further occurrences of self-murder as well as punish the *felo-de-se* and his or her family---who were regarded as responsible for the suicide's behavior. Customarily, suicides were interred at cross-roads, a practice which may have resulted either from the Teutonic practice of performing human sacrifices at crossroads<sup>12</sup> or more simply, from a desire to publicize both the crime and the punishment. Often but not always, a stake was driven through the heart of the suicide in an attempt to ensure that the restless body remained pinned to the earth. Usually buried in north-south positions, suicides faced away from the direction in which the Last Judgement would appear.

With the rediscovery of Europe's classical heritage in

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 373.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Bird quoted in Richard Greaves' *Society and Religion in Elizabethan England*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981), p. 535.

<sup>12</sup> Richard L. Greaves, *Society and Religion in Elizabethan England*, p. 535.

the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a new view of suicide, one which contrasted sharply with Christian medieval beliefs, emerged. Catholics and Protestants from Thomas More to John Donne not only became familiar with but also often cited examples of Roman tolerance of suicide<sup>13</sup>. Despite this awareness of Roman mores, however, few sixteenth-century Englishmen made any direct links between their suicidal contemporaries and those suicides which had occurred under either the Roman Republic and Empire. In part, this rejection of Roman attitudes toward suicide was a result of the more encompassing rejection of *pagan* philosophies and practices<sup>14</sup>, an attitude seen throughout Thomas More's work. In *Utopia*, More's fictional account of a pagan civilization, suicide was not only accepted but actually encouraged. However, in *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* and More's other religious essays, he urged Christian men and women to not hasten towards death.

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<sup>13</sup>Both Stoics and Epicureans "held that a man who, because of illness or persecution, found it impossible to lead a humane life in his body or his city could reasonably resort to suicide; indeed, suicide was the recommended remedy in such situations." Even when disassociated with the philosophers, suicide was believed by many sixteenth century writers as having been widely accepted in Roman society. Phillipe Aries and Georges Duby, gen. ed. *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, Paul Veyne, ed., Arthur Goldhammer, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1987), p. 224-229.

<sup>14</sup>In writing about classical suicides, Robert Burton stated that "there are false and Pagan positions, profane Stoical Paradoxes, wicked examples, it boots not what Heathen Philosophers determine in this kind, they are impious, abominable and...wrong". Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 373.

For More and most of his contemporaries, *suicide was acceptable only when it was performed by non-Christians*. While there were those who disputed this widespread condemnation of Roman beliefs<sup>15</sup>, most writers, whether clerics or laymen, chose to draw upon Christian traditions rather than the more tolerant Roman customs when discussing suicides.

Yet aspects of this Roman tolerance and veneration of heroic suicides were still visible in much sixteenth-century literature and art. Even when depicting biblical suicides such as Samson and Saul, artists justified the suicide's actions with Roman beliefs. As a result, Saul's anguish was glorified in terms appropriate to a Roman hero in Bloemart's 1600 engraving.<sup>16</sup> And dramas such as Marlowe's *Timburlaine* extolled the virtues of numerous heroic pagan suicides. Clearly, fictional or feigned suicides could sometimes be acceptable but *real* defenses of suicide as well as actual cases were to be condemned. As a result, John Donne's *Biathanatos* remained unpublished for nearly forty years after its completion and suicides such as Sir James Hales were heavily censured. On the opposite end of the spectrum, fictional or affected suicides provided for the participant

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<sup>15</sup>In *Biathanatos*, John Donne drew heavily upon Roman examples to justify suicide. While not accepting suicide to the degree which Donne did, Robert Burton also cited Roman suicides to support his belief that suicide should not have been so harshly condemned.

<sup>16</sup>See Illustration # 1, Appendix B.

a flirtation with danger while the reality of suicide remained too frightening for any but the truly desperate to embrace.

The rapid growth of Protestantism in England had brought with it a third view of death and suicide, one which was characterized by an increasing alienation from death. However tenuous the roots of the Reformation were in the early sixteenth century, its impact upon the interval between death and burial was immediately felt. At the most basic level, "the number of services [performed at the deathbed] was reduced and the obsequies were concentrated in a shorter period [while]... funeral rites were...restricted to the day of burial".<sup>17</sup> The role of the clergy lessened in sixteenth-century England as men and women became increasingly responsible for their own salvation.

The abrupt change in religious dogma which the Reformation initiated brought about changes of a deeper sort as well. Most importantly, the custom through which the living had gained forgiveness for the dead through prayers, offerings and chantries was first condemned and then formally prohibited in 1552.<sup>18</sup> With the abolition of

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<sup>17</sup>Ralph Houlbrooke, "Death, Church and Family in England Between the Late Fifteenth and the Early Sixteenth Centuries" in *Death, Ritual, and Bereavement*, ed. Ralph Houlbrooke (Routledge: London, 1989), p.34.

<sup>18</sup>Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial, and The Individual in Early Modern England*, (London: Croom Helm, 1984), p.39-40. Ralph Houlbrooke, *English Family Life 1376-1716*, (London: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988), p. 204.-----"Death, Church and Family in England



purgatory, death and the sins of the dead became absolute. Superficially, it can be argued that attitudes towards self-murder should have been unaffected by this change as intercessory offerings made for *felos-de-se* had been forbidden since the sixth century. However, actual practice usually deviated from official Church doctrine; undoubtedly, it had been customary in the more remote areas of England to pray for the souls of suicides. Since suicides rarely had an opportunity to repent and ask God's pardon, the voluntary act of the *felo-de-se* became with the Reformation even more unforgivable. Increasingly, it was viewed as leading to an absolute and eternal damnation.

But if "the desperate, devilish, and damnable practice"<sup>19</sup> of suicide was to be avoided at all costs, death itself was often glorified. The practice of embalming which was in vogue among the upper classes<sup>20</sup> allowed bodies to be laid out in state, thereby prolonging the "interval between death and burial [which]...forced the bereaved to confront the finality of death and mourning".<sup>21</sup> The new practice of

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Between the Late Fifteenth and the Early Eighteenth Centuries", p.36.

<sup>19</sup>John Syme, *Life's Preservative Against Self-Killing or An Useful Treatise Concerning Life and Self-Murder*, Introduction.

<sup>20</sup>Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver, (New York: Vintage Press, 1981), p. 361.

<sup>21</sup>Ralph Houlbrooke, *The English Family 1376-1717*, p. 203.

wearing mourning clothes<sup>22</sup> further extended this period of bereavement, at least among those wealthy enough to own mourning clothes. The idea of death had become by the early seventeenth century so omnipresent that even the healthy were often forced to confront its presence. Philip Massinger's advice to his son, to "sell some of your clothing and buy a death's head and wear it on your middle finger",<sup>23</sup> was neither atypical nor uncommon.

Yet all this interest in death seemed to alleviate few of the fears of sixteenth century Englishmen and women. As Francis Bacon noted, "men [still] feare Death, as children feare to go in the dark".<sup>24</sup> Even the knowledge that death was always heralded by warning signs<sup>25</sup> proved to be of little comfort. Suicide which abruptly brought death must have often seemed to occur without warning. To Tudor

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<sup>22</sup>It became customary for the upper classes to adopt mourning clothes during this period. The wealthiest as well as the better connected families customarily placed their entire households into mourning whereas the lesser gentry limited their mourning to family members only. Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial, and The Individual in Early Modern England*, p.119.

<sup>23</sup>Philip Massinger quoted in Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p.330.

<sup>24</sup>Francis Bacon, "Of Death" in *The Essayes or Counsels, Civil and Morall*, ed. Michael Kiernan, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press Reprint, 1985), p. 9.

<sup>25</sup>Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 298-299. While Aries maintains that belief in advance warnings of death began to decline in the mid-seventh century, this was still a widely held conviction in the fifteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Also seen in Edmund Spenser, *The Faire Queen*, p.58: "The wakefull dogs never cease to bay, as giving warning...the messenger of death, the ghastly owl".

Englishmen, self-murder indicated not only a rejection of life but a lack of respect for death and its practices as well.

This widespread distaste for suicide was, no doubt, also a reflection of the rapidly rising suicide rates in England.<sup>26</sup> While improved and more consistent methods of record-taking<sup>27</sup> may have led, in part, to this rise in statistics, many Englishmen and women believed that they were facing a suicide crisis of no mean proportions. John Syme's claim in 1637 that "scarce an age since the beginning of the world hath afforded more examples of this desparate inhumanity than this our present age"<sup>28</sup> was echoed by several of his contemporaries. And the almost constant social and religious upheaval<sup>29</sup> as well as a series of cyclical famines<sup>30</sup>, all of which could be viewed as reasons for suicide, merely served to reinforce this belief that

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<sup>26</sup> S.J. Stevenson. "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England, 1530-1590: The Legal Process", *Continuity and Change* 2, Vol. 1, 1987, p. 39.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup>John Syme, *Life's Preservative Against Self-Killing*, Introduction.

<sup>29</sup> In the ten years between 1555 and 1565, England experienced several abrupt changes in official religious policy. Under Edward VI, Englishmen were expected to conform to the teachings of the Protestant Reformation--a policy which was reversed under Edward's Catholic half-sister, Mary I. Mary's attempt to re-impose Catholicism on the English was in turn reversed by her Protestant half-sister, Elizabeth I.

<sup>30</sup> W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: The England of Henry VIII 1500-1547*, (London: The Longman Group, 1976), p. 47.

self-murder was on the rise.

The problems which are inherent in any determination of suicide or accidental death make it impossible to ascertain whether this belief in soaring suicide rates was justified or not. Forensic knowledge was scanty and suicides by drowning, poison and self-inflicted wounds could easily be dismissed as accidental deaths. The widely publicized death of Richard Hunne was revealed, as a result of medical evidence presented at the coroner's inquest, to have been murder but cases like this were extremely rare<sup>31</sup>. More often than not, courts of inquest were unattended by anyone with a medical background. As a result, Tudor juries must have made at least as many incorrect judgments as correct judgments.

Further upsetting the already skewed legal process was the law which stipulated that royal officials who found suicide were to be offered a percentage of the confiscated spoils.<sup>32</sup> Because it was to a coroner's advantage to have a case judged as suicide, numerous "accidents" were probably erroneously characterized as self-murder.

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<sup>31</sup>Accused of heresy, Richard Hunne had been imprisoned and then murdered. His death was made to appear as a suicidal hanging. Widely publicized at the time, Hunne's death also received considerable attention in later years. In his *Book of Martyrs*, John Foxe included a depiction of Hunne's murder (see Illustration # 2, Appendix 2).

<sup>32</sup> Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p.132. S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England, 1530-1590", p. 38.

Conversely, it is also more than likely that many suicides were incorrectly classified as accidents or murders. Because communities were usually tightly knit and because the punishments for suicide were so harsh "juries did not return verdicts of *felo-de-se* lightly... [instead] sympathy for the damage done to the reputations and fortunes of the survivors compelled them to find means to avoid such verdicts".<sup>33</sup> In short, it is almost impossible to make any categorically definitive statements about the overall incidence of suicide during this period.

If the problems of determining suicide are numerous, they are multiplied when one recognizes the fluidity of sixteenth-century definitions of suicide. Even Tudor lawyers and justices were in disagreement about exactly what constituted a suicide, a problem which was best illustrated by the suicide of Sir James Hales. Hales' death which had been motivated by religious reasons was regarded by many Protestants as martyrdom despite the insistence of many Catholics who maintained that his death was suicide. Even in writing about biblical heroes and continental reformers, philosophers and theologians were forced to devise their own definitions of suicide. This difficulty is perhaps best illustrated by the deaths of St. Paul and John Calvin--both of whom expressed a fierce desire for death which would allow them to join Christ. Could this desire have indicated

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<sup>33</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 132-133.

a propensity toward suicide? Opinions were divided.<sup>34</sup> It was possible to address this question by Burton's emphatic statement that "No evil may be done that good may be come of it"<sup>35</sup> but many writers expressed a hesitancy to condemn, even indirectly, either St. Paul or Calvin.

Even self-imposed deaths which resulted from good intentions could and often did cause problems in defining the limits of suicide. While the Albigensian practice of the *endura* was foreign to England,<sup>36</sup> Luther's insistence that Christians court despair as a method for gaining an understanding of God was widely practiced.<sup>37</sup> In succumbing to "despair,...the special temptation of God's elect"<sup>38</sup>, were Protestants to be unequivocally condemned as suicides? The trial of Sir James Hales evidenced, as did many others, this difficulty. Clearly, definitions and categorizations of suicides remained flexible throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

But if definitions of suicide varied, so too did

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<sup>34</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 90.

<sup>35</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 373.

<sup>36</sup>"The *endura* was really tantamount to a peculiar form of suicide. It was regarded as a purely religious act, designed to ensure salvation." Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, trans. Barbara Bray, *Mountaillou: The Promised Land of Error*, (New York: George Brazillier, Inc., 1978) p. 225.

<sup>37</sup>Susan Snyder, "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition", *Studies in the Renaissance*, Vol. XII, 1965, p. 25.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid*, p. 26.

attitudes towards self-imposed death vary. Few Englishmen believed, as John Donne did, that suicide could ever be justified but even fewer demanded that suicide be punished as harshly as Samuel Bird did. While the disparity between sixteenth-century beliefs about suicide is best evidenced by the split between Donne and Bird, it should be noted that most attitudes were negative. Although "the full-blown medieval horror of suicide seems to have evaporated"<sup>39</sup> by this period, suicide was still considered to be an extremely serious crime. As a result, nearly all sixteenth century works about suicide, no matter how approving, carried some taint of this condemnation.

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<sup>39</sup>P.E.H. Hair, "A Note On the Incidence of Tudor Suicide", *Local Population Studies*, 1970, p. 41.

## CHAPTER II

## THE RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF DEATH

In a series of woodcuts executed between 1524 to 1526, Hans Holbein the Younger depicted Death assaulting men and women engaged in their daily work<sup>40</sup>. While *The Dance of Death* had been a common theme among Northern European artists since the late Middle Ages, Holbein's work was a radical departure from its predecessors. "Rather than [simply] depicting Death and his victims...as a series of dancing couples"<sup>41</sup>, Holbein strictly categorized his figures by status and occupation. Death, as these woodcuts so clearly emphasized, was the great social equalizer. But was it really? An examination of sixteenth-century funerary and burial practices seems to indicate that even death was largely determined by one's social status.

These differing attitudes toward the dead were in large part a product of the rigid hierarchy of Tudor England. Robert Burton might exclaim somewhat magnanimously "[What is] Birth...[but] a nonentity, a mere flash, a ceremony, a toy, a thing of nought"<sup>42</sup> but the truth was that

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<sup>40</sup>See Illustration # 3, Appendix B.

<sup>41</sup>Clifton C. Olds and Ralph G. Williams, *Images of Love and Death in late Medieval and Renaissance Art*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 1976), p. 52.

<sup>42</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 500-501.



Tudor life was determined by an almost "obsessive anxiety about rank and status".<sup>43</sup> By the sixteenth century, the medieval tripartite division of society--those who prayed, those who fought, and those who worked--no longer adequately defined society.<sup>44</sup> Replacing this was a pyramid structure consisting of not three but several divisions.

At the summit of this pyramid was the monarch, under whom were about 70 peers and 500 knights.<sup>45</sup> For these men, especially the peers who usually possessed incomes in the range of 1,000 pounds,<sup>46</sup> death was a grandiose ceremony. It was in reference to the funerals of these men that Mervyn James stated "there can be no doubt that the principal emphasis in the funerary ritual was on the greatness of the dead man".<sup>47</sup> The elaborate funeral services conducted for the death of a member of the peerage was, in essence, a medieval pageant. Consisting of a "sombre and impressive procession of mourners, officers, and followers...[as well as a] chariot and hearse draped in black velvet, all

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<sup>43</sup>Lawrence Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540-1880*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), p.7.

<sup>44</sup>Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1988), p. 151.

<sup>45</sup>W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: The England of Henry VIII*, p.53-54.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup>Mervyn James, *Society, Politics and Culture: Studies in Early Modern England*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 177.

contrasting with the colorful brilliance of heraldic banners and estucheons"<sup>48</sup> these funerals often lasted several days. Further prolonging the pageantry and grieving were two newly developed customs, the wearing of mourning clothes and the practice of embalming. Practiced only among the very wealthy, embalming and the highly personalized tomb art of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries created a lifelike appearance long after death. In an age of instability and feuding, this appearance of life allowed a powerful peer to be viewed by the multitude "with all the attributes of power he had wielded in his lifetime".<sup>49</sup> Thus, power was never seen to visibly decay or pass away. And at a more superficial level, these new funerary customs forced all of those within the vicinity of a death to acknowledge and participate, however indirectly, in the deaths of their social superiors.

This cavalier treatment of the corpses of the upper class elite resulted in an indirect and perhaps unintentional glorification of death. While death had been a common theme in art and literature since the onslaught of the Black Death in 1348, it was not until the sixteenth century that a cult of melancholy fully developed among the courtiers of the Tudor monarchs. "Melancholy [which] became the badge of fashion during the late sixteenth and

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid, p. 177.

<sup>49</sup>Phillipe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 361.

seventeenth centuries"<sup>50</sup> was, as Robert Burton pointed out in 1628, usually directly linked to a desire for death. Certainly, it was this aspect of melancholy which courtiers like George Boleyn, Viscount Rochford, and fictional aristocrats like Prince Hamlet most emphasized. The poetry of these men and women in which they entreated "Oh, get my grave in readiness, Fain would I die to end this stress"<sup>51</sup> seemed to indicate an almost suicidal longing for death. Whether this desire was completely unfeigned, however, is somewhat questionable.

Sixteenth-century peers and nobility were not, despite their wealth and status, completely immune from the more brutal effects of death. In fact, the severe influenza epidemic which occurred in the 1550's<sup>52</sup> and other outbreaks of disease may well have had a greater impact on those who were prone to extensive travelling than on those who remained within the more immediate confines of their neighborhoods and villages. Among those who made these frequent migrations were the upper echelon courtiers and what Lawrence Stone termed the "country gentry"<sup>53</sup> both of

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<sup>50</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 132.

<sup>51</sup>Thomas Howell "Of Misery" in *Tudor Poetry and Prose*, William Hebel, Ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), p. 80.

<sup>52</sup>Leslie Clarkson, *Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-Industrial England*, (New York: Gill and MacMillan, 1975), p. 12-13.

<sup>53</sup>"men of greater wealth, power and sophistication who automatically laid claim to local political leadership including membership of parliament...and whose intellectual and political

whom moved not only with the Court but also made periodic visits to their own estates. Henry VIII's flight from the "sweating sickness" which had attacked Anne Boleyn and one of her attendants<sup>54</sup> proved successful; but how many people fled one area of contagion only to enter another? The upper class elite who continuously moved from one area to another were more likely to be the victims or carriers of any one of the numerous sixteenth-century epidemics. And since so many of these diseases proved fatal, it is impossible to say that the upper class were really isolated in any way from death and its accompanying horrors.

Farther down the social scale were the "parish gentry"<sup>55</sup> and urban bourgeois. These men, especially the bourgeois city dwellers who often had puritan or reformist leanings<sup>56</sup>, were most attracted to the idea of a "Good Death". Numerous texts, most notably the early seventeenth century treatise, *A Direction to Die Well*, expounded upon

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horizons began with the country but spread out to include...London" Lawrence Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540-1880*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984) p. 6.

<sup>54</sup>Retha Warnicke, *Anne Boleyn*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.79.

<sup>55</sup>Stone defines these as "men whose interest and powers were limited to the boundaries of one or at most two villages". Lawrence Stone, *An Open Elite? England 1540-1880*, p. 6.

<sup>56</sup>Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 121-140.

the importance of this "blessed change"<sup>57</sup>. The obverse of suicide, a good death was "one of patience in the face of trial, [an] arduous but ultimately successful struggle with fleshly pains and spiritual temptations... [followed] by final quiet sleep in the Lord".<sup>58</sup> While death, or the desire for death, was not glorified among this group of people, it is clear that death remained a focal point of attention for them.

It was among these men also that death practices were undergoing some of the more substantial changes which occurred in the sixteenth century. Although death and the accompanying funeral were not as grandiose affairs for the bourgeois and lesser gentry as they were for their social betters, they had become rites which "instruct[ed] and edified the survivors ...remind[ing] them of the inevitability of death, of the need to prepare for it, and of resurrection, judgment, and eternal life"<sup>59</sup>. The absence of priests at the deathbeds of these men and their families presented an additional opportunity for the dying to take both their own lives and their own salvation into their hands. By allowing, albeit indirectly, these men to address

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<sup>57</sup>John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 7.

<sup>58</sup>Ralph Houlbrooke, "Death, Church and Family in England Between the Late Fifteenth and the Early Sixteenth Centuries" in *Death, Ritual and Bereavement*, p. 27.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid, p. 33.

and determine the most important theological questions--- those of life and death--the Anglican Church gave this class much of the responsibility for the control and well-being of the Church. It was this power which was to encourage much of the sectionalism in the seventeenth-century Church.

More importantly, this class regulated the lives and deaths of their social inferiors. The urban bourgeois usually manipulated and controlled the limited food resources which were available during periods of famine and crisis.<sup>60</sup> In the country, their rural counterparts, the lesser gentry, often served as coroners<sup>61</sup>, thereby having a disproportionate influence on judgments of violent death and suicide. And because these men often subscribed to the belief that wealth, social status, and moral worth were all inter-connected, "correction and discipline [as administered by these men] were most often directed not at erring fellow governors, but at the humbler inhabitants of villages".<sup>62</sup> Like most groups still engaged in the process of ascending

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<sup>60</sup>Leslie Clarkson, *Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-Industrial England*, p. 18.

<sup>61</sup>Michael MacDonald, "The Secularization of Suicide in England: 1660-1800", p. 65.

<sup>62</sup>Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*, p. 165. The fact that 60% of all suicides were found to be destitute in S.J. Stevenson's study of suicide in south-east England would seem to indicate that this was true.

the social ladder<sup>63</sup>, the "parish gentry" and the urban bourgeois used their power to quell their social inferiors.

Simultaneously, this group as well as those directly beneath them (wealthier villagers and minor merchants) was engaged in imitating their social betters---even to the extent of assuming the melancholic poses of the upper class. Theoretically, this group still remained a separate and distinct class from that of their superiors. The reality, however, indicates that there was some blurring of divisions during this period. As Amussen points out, "in the hierarchy emerging...social position was based on a theoretically fixed status hierarchy but status in turn largely depended on wealth"; increasingly, villagers were coming to rely on wealth as a an indication of social position.<sup>64</sup> This new elasticity between the upper and middle classes was probably what motivated many people with social aspirations to indulge in the suicidal affectations so popular with their social superiors. In fact, many members of the middle class who harbored social aspirations chose to use this upper class fashion as a method of social climbing. When a member of the minor gentry attempted to lay claim to melancholy emotions, his social superior John

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid, p. 138. Amussen points out that "many of the minor gentry...acquired their status on the basis of their wealth, not because they owned a manor."

<sup>64</sup>Ibid, p. 151.

Earle complained "He has reasons enough to do his business and not enough to be idle or melancholy".<sup>65</sup>

At the very bottom of the social scale, the lowest and most marginal classes probably suffered the greatest when facing death. For migrant laborers, servants, and those whom Hoskins termed "the agricultural proletariat"<sup>66</sup> destitution must have been a common occurrence during a period of soaring inflation, tightening restrictions on land usage, and the numerous poor harvests of the sixteenth century. And since about one in every four or five harvests was poor<sup>67</sup>, death must have been uppermost in the minds of many of these men and women. City and village councils often did distribute food during times of great need<sup>68</sup> but distributions appear to have occurred sporadically and at the whim of those in power. Death by hunger as well as by unattended disease was probably an unpleasant reality for most of the propertyless poor. Even the few "masterless" indigents<sup>69</sup> who managed to obtain positions as servants had

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<sup>65</sup>John Earle quoted in Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 151.

<sup>66</sup>Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: The England of Henry VIII 1500-1547*, p. 59.

<sup>67</sup>Leslie Clarkson, *Death, Disease and Famine in Pre-Industrial England*, p. 29.

<sup>68</sup>Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: The England of Henry VIII, 1500-1547*, p. 85.

<sup>69</sup>David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in Early Modern England 1603-1660*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 36.



little escape from the overshadowing presence of death. As the victims of neglect and abuse<sup>70</sup>, their deaths or simply the likelihood of their deaths must have been even more omnipresent than it was for their social superiors.

It was, no doubt, this constant proximity of death which led so many of these poverty-stricken men and women to take their fate into their own hands. Sixty percent of those discovered to have committed suicide in south-eastern England from 1530-1590 were destitute.<sup>71</sup> As Robert Burton noted, want "enforceth them [the poor], through anguish and wearisomeness of their lives, to make away with themselves. They had rather be hanged, drowned etc. than live without means".<sup>72</sup>

There was, however, one group in Tudor England who underwent a unique and different experience with death--- one which transcended nearly all social barriers. All women, even those who remained within a tightly circumscribed radius from their birthplace, suffered equally

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<sup>70</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England: 1530-1590", *Continuity and Change* 2, Vol. 2, 1987, p. 229

<sup>71</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England, 1530-1590", p. 250. Stevenson's high figure may be somewhat misleading; because a suicide's property was confiscated by the Crown, there were undoubtedly attempts to hide as much or at least some of the property of a suicide. However, even when one accounts for some distortion of his figures, it is still clear that suicide occurred predominantly among the poor.

<sup>72</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 302-303.

from the high mortality rates. Whether the wife of a courtier, "parish gentry", urban merchant or villager, all Tudor women were at risk when giving birth.<sup>73</sup> The high birth rates of this period were inevitably accompanied by higher death rates among both mothers and children. Even after a successful birth, children---whether wealthy or poor---remained at risk during their first few years. While Stone claims that a "belief in the immortality of the soul and the prospect of salvation was a powerful factor in damping down such grief as might be aroused by the loss of a child"<sup>74</sup>, the actual reality must have been very different. If Margaret Lancton's "discontent and fretting by the death of her husband"<sup>75</sup> was sufficient to cause her to attempt suicide, the grief of parents over the loss of a child must have been similar. Further exacerbating parental grief was the common practice of condemning unbaptized children to be buried in unconsecrated ground, an indication that the Church considered them eternally damned. While Protestant reformers insisted that "papists are...wicked in teaching people that one place is more holy than another to be buried in"<sup>76</sup>, burial beliefs remained basically untouched

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<sup>73</sup>Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 64.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid, p. 88.

<sup>75</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 104.

<sup>76</sup>James Pilkington quoted in Richard L. Greaves, *Society and Religion in Elizabethan England*, p. 697.

throughout the course of the English Reformation<sup>77</sup>.

Even more directly, Protestantism influenced English ideas on death itself as well as suicide. The most marked difference obviously stemmed from the Protestant rejection of Purgatory. However, the importance of the reformers' objections to wakes can not be understated.<sup>78</sup> In demanding the abolition of this custom, the reformers ensured that the living were properly distanced from the dead. Whereas it had not been uncommon in the Middle Ages for sexual games to be played around a corpse<sup>79</sup>, sixteenth-century Protestants were beginning to experience the modern horror of any interaction between the dead and the living. The outcome of this increased distaste for death was probably what led to a corresponding rise in condemnations of suicide, an act which was believed to be openly welcoming death.<sup>80</sup>

There were then three distinct attitudes towards death and suicide which were emerging in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The first of these, the Protestant or Anglican approach to death and suicide, was directly tied to the growth of the Protestant Reformation in England. The

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid, p. 696.

<sup>78</sup>Clare Gittings, *Death, Burial and The Individual in Early Modern England*, p. 106-107.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid, p. 106.

<sup>80</sup>Suicide became the main topic of various sermons by Protestant preachers during this period. Michael MacDonald, "The Secularization of Suicide 1660-1880", p. 54-55.

second attitude, the affectation of melancholy by the upper-echelon of Tudor society, was closely linked to the increasing social mobility in sixteenth-century England. But the reality behind these academic responses to suicide and death, however, appeared to be a dramatic rise in suicide rates among the poor and laboring classes. As a result, the growth of a cult of despair and melancholy coincided with an increasing concern over rising suicide rates.

## CHAPTER III

## "NO HOPE OF GOD'S MERCIE": RELIGIOUS DESPAIR AND SUICIDE

With the Edwardian Reformation came an influx of Protestant tracts and theologians from the Continent. The emphasis and focus of most of these writers, whether Lutheran or Calvinist, was a dramatic shift from those of previous Christian theologians; Protestant belief maintained that man played a much more active role in his own salvation than had been previously supposed. But despite the absence of intercessory priests, man's control over the basic issues of his own life and death still remained severely limited. As John Donne was to write, "All authority of life and death is [believed to be] from God and [there is] none in ourselves".<sup>81</sup> Consequently, suicide which indirectly usurped much of this authority from God became a sin of even greater magnitude for Protestants than it had been for Christians before the Reformation.

Catholics, however, did not recognize many of these new and controversial Protestant ideas. For them, the reformers who preached and exhorted their followers to give in to religious despair were flirting dangerously with death and suicide. In their view, the Christian who succumbed to despair and committed suicide was doubly damned; first,

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<sup>81</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 112.

because suicide itself was a sin and second, because "death in a state of despair leads to damnation".<sup>82</sup> Arguing that "he be blessed that suffereth temptation"<sup>83</sup>, reformist theologians countered this charge by maintaining that despair was necessary if one was to fully appreciate and understand the gifts of God. True, the Anglican preacher Hugh Latimer admitted, "there be some that be so weary [because of despair] that they rid themselves out of this life; but this is not well-done".<sup>84</sup> Nor was this behavior typical or to be expected of God's elect.

This religious despair which so many English men and women courted during the sixteenth century was, in the words of the physician Timothy Bright, the most wretched misery to descend upon man. It "sezeth upon the seate of wisdom itselfe, and chargeth upon all the excellencie of understanding and grindeth into powder all that standeth firme and melteth like the dew before the Sunne".<sup>85</sup> Matching most of the phraseology and word choices of *The Book of Job*, Bright's description probably encouraged rather than discouraged those who sought despair as a means of

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<sup>82</sup>Susan Snyder, "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition", p. 59.

<sup>83</sup>Hugh Latimer, *Sermons by Hugh Latimer Vol. 1*, ed. George Elwes Corrie, (Cambridge: The University Press, 1866) p. 435.

<sup>84</sup>Ibid, p. 435.

<sup>85</sup>Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, (London: Thos. Vautrollier, 1586), Short Title Catalogue 3474, p. 184.

achieving salvation. After all, many Protestant clergyman encouraged their parishioners to emulate the life and endurance of Job.<sup>86</sup>

Yet it was Job who had "strayed thus far toward killing himselfe as to wish his Death and curse his birth; for his whole third chapter is a bitter and malignant invective against it and a violent wishing of his owne death".<sup>87</sup> Emphasizing his patience as well as the fact that he did not completely surrender to despair,<sup>88</sup> Protestant theologians preferred to focus upon Job's ultimate reward at the hands of God. And as the sixteenth-century reader or listener well knew, Job's problems had been instigated not by God but by Satan. The task of the pious Christian was to navigate a way between the despair imposed by God and the despair and temptations set by Satan who intended to trap man into suicide.

Countless real and fictional characters experienced this "malice of Satan and our own wretchedness"<sup>89</sup>. Particularly susceptible were those who read God's word only to misunderstand it, a belief which may have been stimulated by the remnants of the Catholic conviction that only

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<sup>86</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and The Decline of Magic*, (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1971), p. 496.

<sup>87</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 114.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid, p. 113.

<sup>89</sup>John Syme, *Life's Preservative Against Self-Killing*, p. 54.

educated clerics should read and were capable of understanding the Bible. These people who failed to comprehend the Word of God, Bright maintained, "being melancholicke may easily fall into distrust of God's mercy and [thereby] perish in dispaire"<sup>90</sup>. Certainly this was the case with a sixteenth-century law student whose demons were exorcised by John Foxe. Hearing a lecturer speak about the sins against the Holy Ghost, the student had become convinced that he was damned and that suicide was his only alternative. While Foxe managed to both console and counsel this student, not all of those who were in this type of predicament were as fortunate.<sup>91</sup>

Religious despair came in many guises. Sir Walter Raleigh imprisoned in the Tower of London gave into a despair which appears at first glance to have been instigated by his own vanity. Complaining that "I cannot live to thincke howe I am deryded, to thincke of the expectation of my enemies, the scorns I shall receive...the infamous tauntes and dispightes"<sup>92</sup>, he called upon God for aid. With its repeated imagery of a man besieged by enemies, Raleigh's written invocation was clearly biblically inspired. In fact, it echoes much of the sentiment if not

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<sup>90</sup>Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie*, p. 203.

<sup>91</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and The Decline of Magic*, p. 481-2.

<sup>92</sup>Sir Walter Raleigh quoted in S.E. Sprott, *The English Debate on Suicide: From Donne to Hume*, p. 18.



the exact wording of Psalm 79 which reads "We have become a taunt to our neighbors, mocked and derided by those round about us".<sup>93</sup> Although the modern reader might infer that Raleigh's despair was motivated mainly by his pride, Raleigh himself believed that he had succumbed to a religious despair.

Fictional and biblical characters were believed to be especially vulnerable to this kind of hopelessness. Judas, the only suicide mentioned in the New Testament, was often cited by theologians eager to expound upon the dangers of religious despair. Typically depicted in the process of hanging himself<sup>94</sup>, Judas was damned not simply because he had betrayed Christ. In choosing to commit suicide, *he had committed the ultimate sin and despaired of God's forgiveness*. The countless representations of Satan receiving Judas' damned soul as he is hanging<sup>95</sup> served as a lesson to those who were tempted either to turn away from God and His mercies or even simply to despair of God.

For the Red Crosse Knight in Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, despair proved almost as fatal. But with the aid of Una and his own gradual realization that his suicide

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<sup>93</sup>Bible, King James Version, Psalm 79. For further parallels, see Psalms 17, 56, and 109.

<sup>94</sup>Judas' attribute which made him easily recognizable in most medieval and Renaissance art was the rope by which he had hanged himself. Gertrude Grace Still, *A Handbook of Symbols in Christian Art*, (New York: Collier Books, 1975), p. 12.

<sup>95</sup>See Illustration # 4, Appendix B.

would have been as misguided as Judas', the Red Crosse Knight managed to avoid damnation. When receiving the knife, "his hand did quake and tremble like a leafe of Aspin greene, and troubled blood through his pale face was seene".<sup>96</sup> That he recognized his wrong in attempting suicide is obvious for when "he lifted up his hand, [it] back again did start"<sup>97</sup>. With these actions, he answered the fairy's earlier question "Is not better to doe willinglie [to die] then linger, till the glasse be all out runne?"<sup>98</sup>. In this heavily moralistic tale, both he and Una served to caution the "many [who] despair...because of their own unworthiness, as though there were no hope of God's mercie".<sup>99</sup>

While despair was often accompanied by demonic possession, most sixteenth-century Englishmen and women maintained that demonic possession could and often did appear independently. Possession occurred in various forms and was believed to be predominant in nearly every aspect of life; even emotional misery was often regarded as the machinations of the Devil and his demons.<sup>100</sup> This fear of

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<sup>96</sup>Edmund Spenser. Hugh Maclean, Ed. *The Faire Queene*, (New York: Norton Co., 1982), p. 109.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid, p. 109.

<sup>98</sup>Ibid, p. 108.

<sup>99</sup>Richard Greenham, *Grave Counsels and Godly Observations*, (London: 1599), Short Title Catalogue 12312, p. 15.

<sup>100</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 132.

and belief in diabolical illusions was a direct legacy from the Middle Ages and as such was the subject of heated debate. Officially, many Protestant theologians maintained that "the age of miracles was past and the Devil rarely if ever swayed the minds and inhabited the bodies of people in modern times".<sup>101</sup> Popular opinion, however, was divided.

The fluid definition of the word possession further added to the controversy. In his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Robert Burton linked papist beliefs with diabolical illusions and possession.<sup>102</sup> And he continued, "the last kind of madness or melancholy is that demonical obsession or possession of devils...[which results in] gestures, contortions, fasting, prophesying, [and] speaking in tongues".<sup>103</sup> For Donne, the indistinct division between diabolic possession and divine inspiration made it difficult to adequately explain just what was an "illusion of the Devill to make him destroy himself"<sup>104</sup> and what was not. Declaring that suicide was inspired by "the malice of Satan", the preacher John Syme made an irrevocable link between possession and self-murder.<sup>105</sup> But despite these superficial similarities fundamental disagreements on the

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<sup>101</sup>Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>102</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 386-388.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid, p. 124.

<sup>104</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 103.

<sup>105</sup>John Syme, *Life's Preservative Against Self-Killing*, p. 54.

exact nature of suicidal possession remained. In his *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Burton summed up many of these difficulties which were and still are inherent in any discussion of the sixteenth century belief in possession.<sup>106</sup> In the interests of simplicity, demonic possession will be defined here as the belief that Satan or any of his demonic helpers had played a direct role in a suicide.

More than a third of the astrologer-physician Richard Napier's suicidal patients believed themselves to be "tempted by Satan".<sup>107</sup> Some of these visions of temptation may well have been caused by what Piero Camposresi termed "the most effective and upsetting drug... hunger, creator of unfathomable disturbances of mind and imagination".<sup>108</sup> If Camporesi's belief in "lifelike and convincing dreams [which] grew out of this forced hallucination, compensating for the everyday poverty"<sup>109</sup> is accepted, it seems likely that possession would have been on the rise in famine-ridden Tudor England. While it is impossible to accurately document such an increase, some indication of the widespread acceptance of this idea can be gained by examining the

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<sup>106</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 124.

<sup>107</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 155. Sixty-six out of a hundred and fifty eight patients believed themselves to be so afflicted.

<sup>108</sup>Piero Camporesi, *The Bread of Dreams*, trans. David Gentilcore, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 125.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid, p.125.

accompanying belief in witchcraft. The very slow but steady rise of witchcraft<sup>110</sup>, commonly associated with some sort of communion with Satan, would seem to demonstrate that belief in diabolical possession was escalating during this period.

The high percentage of Napier's patients who were demonically possessed as well as this increasing acceptance of witchcraft reveal that a direct link between suicide and the Devil was being made more and more frequently. In making this connection, sixteenth-century Englishmen were reverting to an earlier Christian belief; "the parent of both despair and suicide is the devil".<sup>111</sup> More importantly, they were creating a scapegoat or excuse for the suicide's irrational behavior. Cases of suicide brought before the Star Chamber during Elizabeth's reign regularly began by addressing the question of the suicide's relationship with God.<sup>112</sup> And when a servant of a Kent man stabbed himself in 1588, his master called in a cleric to perform an exorcism

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<sup>110</sup>D.P. Walker maintains that in England "cases of possession ...were fairly rare"---especially when compared with cases of witchcraft or more directly, with cases of possession on the Continent. However, Walker does see a connection between the rise in witchcraft and the accompanying rise in the belief of possession. D.P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: Possession and Exorcism in France and England in the late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), p. 3.

<sup>111</sup>Susan Snyder, "The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition", p. 51.

<sup>112</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England, 1530-1590", p. 231.

rather than a doctor to aid the slowly dying man.<sup>113</sup> At its most basic level, suicide was being visualized as a struggle between God and Satan.

If suicide and death had their dark sides, they also offered men and women a chance to prove their love of God--and their desire to be with Him as soon as possible. As previously noted, both St. Paul and John Calvin had expressed a wish to hasten their lives so that they might join Christ all the sooner.<sup>114</sup> And Saint Thomas More asserted "I would much rather come to Thee by a most painful death than be kept too long away from Thee by the most pleasant of earthly lives".<sup>115</sup> Was this, sixteenth-century theologians asked, to be condemned as a form of suicide? By stressing both Calvin's and St. Paul's yearning to be with Christ over their desire for death, most Anglican theologians managed to sidestep the question successfully. Some carried this argument a step further by emphasizing and warning Christians to differentiate between a "willingness to die and a wish to die".<sup>116</sup> The first of these was, as Spinard notes, an acceptance of God's will and was not to be confused with suicide.

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<sup>113</sup>Ibid, p. 233.

<sup>114</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 48-49.

<sup>115</sup>Thomas More, *Utopia*, p. 128.

<sup>116</sup>Phoebe Spinard, *The Summons of Death on the Medieval and Early Renaissance Stage*, (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. 194.

But the basic question still remained: when did martyrdom or overzealous Christianity become suicide? In affirming that martyrdom was often motivated by suicidal impulses, John Donne took a unique stance for a sixteenth-century Englishman. This novel approach, however, probably stemmed from a rampant anti-Catholicism rather than a strong belief in the falsity of martyrdom.<sup>117</sup> Popular opinion distinctly differed from Donne's view. Connections between suicide and martyrdom were rarely made by most people as is evidenced by the widespread popularity of John Foxe's *The Book of Martyrs*. This work's numerous illustrations<sup>118</sup> had ensured that nearly all Englishmen whether literate or illiterate were familiar with the concept of martyrdom as well as the more specific agonies endured by past martyrs. And because the book was to be found in all English cathedrals and in most parish churches, even the poorest laborer must have been familiar with the tenor of Foxe's martyrology.<sup>119</sup> The number of English men and women who would have agreed with Donne must have been extremely limited.

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<sup>117</sup>In *Biathanatos*, Donne attempts to dismiss many Catholic saints who had achieved their renown through an agonizing death (i.e. Saint Apollinia).

<sup>118</sup>For examples of illustrations which were to be found in a sixteenth century edition of Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*, please see Illustration # 5, Appendix B.

<sup>119</sup>Warren Wooden, *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance*, (Lexington, Ky.: The University of Kentucky Press, 1986), p. 10-11 and p.73.

William Vaughin's assertion that "if a man laying before his eyes the glory of God onely do kill himselfe because he forseeth that those things which he shal suffer shal rebound to the dishonour of God, he sinneth not"<sup>120</sup> carried popular opinion a step further. According to Vaughin and many of his contemporaries, certain suicides could be classified and honored as martyrs. The most obvious example of this was, of course, the suicide of Sir James Hales. Imprisoned and tortured by Queen Mary's inquisitors, Hales who recanted his Protestantism, succumbed to grief, and then committed suicide shortly after his release. But even with the support of numerous writers and theologians, the exact nature of Hales' death was hotly disputed. Edmund Copinger's death was no less open to as many interpretations; the self-proclaimed religious prophet had starved himself to death while imprisoned for religious reasons.<sup>121</sup> Was this suicide or martyrdom?

Officially, only deaths which were obviously self-inflicted were condemned. If anyone provoked or actively sought martyrdom at the hands of another, it was usually too difficult to prove that the martyr's intent had been suicide. Furthermore, it is doubtful that many Tudor

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<sup>120</sup>William Vaughin quoted in Spratt, *The English Debate on Suicide: From Donne to Hume*, p. 14-15.

<sup>121</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and The Decline of Magic*, p. 134.



Englishman would seek to make this connection.<sup>122</sup>

In fact, martyrdom would probably have been associated with the "Good Death" which so many sixteenth-century Englishmen sought. Regarding his flight from persecution, the Catholic Edmund Campion echoed this sentiment when he maintained that "we knew we were not lords of our own lives and therefore...would not be guilty of our own deaths".<sup>123</sup> Clearly, many Tudor Englishmen believed that a point existed after which the would-be-martyr was no longer responsible for his or her death. While Protestant and Catholic theologians would have disputed when this point actually occurred, Campion's statement probably best conformed with the beliefs of English Christians during this period. For these men and women, suicides such as Samson's which were motivated by a desire to submit to God's will rather than a desire for death were not only justifiable but to be honored. As a result, Samson and Saul were lauded in numerous engravings and paintings executed during the sixteenth century.

No clear cut division existed then between suicide and martyrdom. Syme's assertion that God used suicide to punish

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<sup>122</sup>For further discussion of martyrdom and suicide, please see Appendix A, Chapter Eight.

<sup>123</sup>Edmund Campion quoted in Leonard Ashley, *Popular Elizabethan Culture*, (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1988), p. 209.

mankind<sup>124</sup> would seem to damn many types of martyrdom as would Donne's *Biathanatos*. Yet the popularity of writers such as John Foxe as well as the widespread interest in the 1572 Saint Bartholomew's Day massacre in Paris betray a fascination with and acceptance of the concept of martyrdom.

The Protestant Reformation stimulated new ways of thinking about death and suicide in England. At the most basic level, discussions of suicide became more commonplace as a result of the attention which Anglican preachers lavished upon it<sup>125</sup>. The sense of despair which was stimulated by the Lutheran idea of predestination was closely linked to the constant reality of death. Additionally, the Protestant focus on the family as a religious center may well have probably created tighter knit families<sup>126</sup> which made the death of any family member more difficult to bear. Gone too was the comforting idea of Purgatory. Death and suicide had become for the sixteenth-century English man and woman even more irreversible and frightening than it had ever been for their medieval ancestors.

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<sup>124</sup>Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, p. 51.

<sup>125</sup>Michael MacDonald, "The Secularization of Suicide in England: 1660-1800", p. 54-55. It should be noted that although pre-Reformation clergymen did preach about suicide, they did not do so as often as their later counterparts.

<sup>126</sup>Ibid, p. 111 and 149.

## CHAPTER IV

## "THE GREATEST MISERY": POVERTY AND SUICIDE

Writing in 1628, Robert Burton stated "One of the greatest miseries that can befall a man is poverty or want which makes man...murder and rebell...and causeth death itself".<sup>127</sup> Certainly this must have been the case in the suicide of the London merchant Lancelot Johnson. "Having been a man of great means and of a very plentiful estate but of late somewhat declining therein and falling into debt", Johnson had "resolved to destroy and kill himself".<sup>128</sup> In a society which equated financial wealth with moral worth<sup>129</sup>, this decision was not surprising. Whether of a recent nature or not, poverty was a major cause of sixteenth-century English suicides.

As already noted, between 1530 and 1590, sixty percent of all those who committed suicide in south-eastern England were discovered to have been destitute.<sup>130</sup> In the much more impoverished areas of England, specifically in the north-

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<sup>127</sup>Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 508.

<sup>128</sup>Record of Star Chamber quoted in Michael MacDonald, "The Inner Side of Wisdom: Suicide in Early Modern England", *Psychological Medicine*, 1977, 7, p.569.

<sup>129</sup>Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*, p. 145.

<sup>130</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-Eastern England 153-1590: The Legal Process", p. 38.

west, this figure must have been even higher, and during the almost cyclical periods of famine and poor harvests, this figure must have risen accordingly.

A close examination of these numbers reveals that a large percentage of Tudor suicides were children under the age of twenty-one.<sup>131</sup> Because they usually "left home between ten and seventeen to begin work as domestic servants, labourers or apprentices... living in their masters' houses rather than at home"<sup>132</sup> logic would necessitate that most children be identified as laborers. Furthermore, the helplessness of this group who were routinely "exposed to almost limitless sadism from their masters"<sup>133</sup> would also link them with the poor.

Within the numerous villages of Tudor England, society was strictly controlled by its more powerful members. The relatively infrequent visits of the coroners who could well

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<sup>131</sup>Terence Murphy, "Woful Childe of Parents Rage: Suicide of Children and Adolescents in Early Modern England 1507-1710", *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3, Fall 1986, p. 262.

<sup>132</sup>Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*, p. 84. Also seen in Terence Murphy, "Woful Childe of Parents Rage: Suicide of Children and Adolescents in Early Modern England", p. 268. Children of the propertyless poor appear to have frequently left home at earlier ages, between the ages of seven and fourteen.

<sup>133</sup>Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*, p. 120. Susan Amussen corroborates this by stating that "standards for the proper treatment of servants were difficult to enforce...the double power of masters (masters and patriarchal family head) made their abuse of it simultaneously more possible and more dangerous". Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Gender and Class in Early Modern England*, p. 159-160.

have come a great distance<sup>134</sup> often required villagers to exercise their own initiative. This usually meant insuring that the body not "bee cast into the sea or so secretly buried, that the Coroner cannot have the sight of his [the *felo-de-se's*] body".<sup>135</sup> Obviously, this authority allowed wealthier villagers to wield even greater control over their social inferiors.

However, an escape from ignoble burial and condemnation as a suicide did exist for the lower classes. Insanity had long been acknowledged as an excuse for suicide. In *The Country Justice*, Michael Dalton maintained that "if one that wanteth discretion, killeth himselfe (as...a man *non compos mentis*) he shall not forfeit his goods etc."<sup>136</sup> Coroners were also required to inform the jury before they listened to the evidence that "there are...homicides which are no felony, and that is where a madman...kils himselfe...when he is mad".<sup>137</sup> Since the definition of insanity partly entailed that the lunatic "repudiate...the hierarchical order of his society"<sup>138</sup>, it can be reasonably assumed that most so-called

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<sup>134</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England, 1530-1590, p. 45.

<sup>135</sup>Michael Dalton, *The Country Justice*, (London: 1626), Short Title Catalogue 6208, p. 208.

<sup>136</sup>Ibid, p. 208.

<sup>137</sup>Court document quoted in S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England 1530-1590", p. 63.

<sup>138</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 131.

lunatics of this order were lower class. Further strengthening this theory was the sixteenth-century belief that a failure to recognize one's social superiors was an indication of lunacy.<sup>139</sup>

But despite the odds being tipped in their favor, very few lower class Englishmen must have succeeded in having the suicide of a family member dismissed on these grounds. Verdicts of insanity were so desirable<sup>140</sup> that they must have been meted out with a great deal of discretion.<sup>141</sup> Added to this was the fact that there were no hard and fast rules about making a judgment of insanity; instead "juries relied on a mixture of medical psychology and popular wisdom to identify lunatics".<sup>142</sup> This process, no doubt, allowed those in power to manipulate the system as they wished. And the poor must have often been the target of this manipulation because "correction and discipline were most often directed not at erring fellow governors but at the humbler

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<sup>139</sup>Ibid, p. 125-126.

<sup>140</sup>After a judgment of insanity had been passed, the suicide's family was not subject to a complete confiscation of their property. Furthermore, the suicide was not buried in such a public fashion; instead he or she was quietly interred in unconsecrated ground usually bordering a churchyard.

<sup>141</sup>This is best illustrated by Michael MacDonald's study of Nottinghamshire and Essex. Out of a total of 170 suicides, only two were judged to have been instigated by insanity. Michael MacDonald, "The Secularization of Suicide in England: 1660-1880", p. 57.

<sup>142</sup>Michael MacDonald, "The Inner Side of Wisdom: Suicide in Early Modern England" p. 572.

inhabitants of villages".<sup>143</sup> Decisions of insanity must then have been heavily dependent on the social status of the suicide.

Additionally, the stipulation that a suicide's behavior be accounted for up to the moment of death further discriminated against the poor. In 1564, Joan Hill was an unlucky victim of this practice. An acknowledged imbecile, Hill was still condemned as a suicide because it was alleged that she had drowned herself specifically to escape the agonies of an unknown illness.<sup>144</sup> Although Hill's state of mind at the time of her death was known, this was probably an uncommon occurrence among most suicides of the lower class. While it was true that "virtually all mad people remained in the charge of their families"<sup>145</sup>, it is doubtful that the laboring poor had either the time or resources to maintain a tight watch over "the mentally disturbed who were either subnormal, senile, or in a constant state of unpredictable activity".<sup>146</sup>

Further adding to the high statistics of suicide among the poorer classes were the chronic famines of sixteenth-

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<sup>143</sup>Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Class and Gender in Early Modern England*, p. 165.

<sup>144</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts: The Legal Process 1530-1590", p. 63.

<sup>145</sup>Michael MacDonald, "The Inner Side of Wisdom: Suicide in Early Modern England" p. 565-566.

<sup>146</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England: The Legal Process 1530-1590", p. 63.

and early seventeenth-century England. In as early as 1628, Burton had maintained that certain diets often caused melancholy and ultimately suicide. As the chronic hunger and epidemics of sixteenth-century Europe<sup>147</sup> had the greatest impact upon the poorest members of society, it is logical to assume that it was the poor who were most susceptible to their own suicidal inclinations. Even in rural areas where food supplies must have been slightly more accessible than they were in the city, the agricultural proletariat "were the class...whose heads went under in an economic storm".<sup>148</sup>

Although it is probably true that "a crisis of dearth and disease produced a psychological situation for ordinary people analogous to a modern society in wartime"<sup>149</sup>, it is doubtful that either the wage-earning class or migratory vagrants were affected in this manner. Even during times of relative prosperity, this group was barely able to maintain a subsistence level income. During the almost chronic periods of poor harvests and spiraling inflations, many of these otherwise law-abiding men and women were driven to

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<sup>147</sup>Piero Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams*, p. 32-33. John Walter and Keith Wrightson, "Dearth and The Social Order in Early Modern England", *Past and Present*, Number 71, p. 22.

<sup>148</sup>W.G. Hoskins, *The Age of Plunder: The England of Henry VIII 1500-1547*, p. 59.

<sup>149</sup>Michael Zell, "Suicide in Pre-Industrial England", *The Journal of Social History*, Vol. 11, No. 3, October 1986, p. 308.



theft<sup>150</sup> as well as infanticide and child murder.<sup>151</sup> Famines must have been more than enough to push this already marginal group into suicide. The increases in food prices and the accompanying increases in suicide<sup>152</sup> would further indicate that these marginal people were the ones most at risk for suicide. For these people, the most damaging penalty imposed on *felos-de-se* was not applicable. Being near starvation, the poor of Tudor England rarely had any property to be confiscated. And indirectly, they might actually increase their families' chances for survival during a crisis by lessening the number of mouths which needed to be fed. This desire must have been behind the surprisingly high number of suicides among the elderly.<sup>153</sup> Because "it was usual for children to maintain their parents in old age and infirmity"<sup>154</sup> many older people must have felt that they were a burden on already strained resources during any sort of economic crisis.

A large number of servants were also included in this

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<sup>150</sup>John Walter and Keith Wrightson, "Dearth and The Social Order in Early Modern England", p. 24-25.

<sup>151</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Incidence of Suicide in South-East England 1530-1590", p. 239.

<sup>152</sup>Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age*, (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1971), p. 145.

<sup>153</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economics Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England, 1530-1590", p. 231.

<sup>154</sup>Richard Gough, edited by David Hey, *The History of Myddle*, orig. written 1700, p. 188.

high figure of suicide among the poor. Stevenson's study of suicide in south-eastern England reveals that "nearly half of the inquests [between 1530 and 1590] probably involved servants".<sup>155</sup> In part, this high statistic may have resulted from "the almost limitless sadism [of]...their [servants'] masters".<sup>156</sup> Servants were especially susceptible to two kinds of abuse: either sexual or more simply, abuse from neglect. Either way, "standards for the proper treatment of servants were difficult to enforce".<sup>157</sup> The power of the master or even mistress was enough to induce Burton to exclaim "How worse than death is bondage!".<sup>158</sup>

Often servitude was so unbearable that apprentices and servants chose to escape. Unfortunately, the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century countryside sometimes proved as inhospitable as the masters from whom these runaways were fleeing. Some unlucky fugitives succumbed to the rigors of bad weather, starvation, or even assault by their fellow homeless. Their deaths, however, were often recorded as suicides for in choosing to run away, the servant was

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<sup>155</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England 1530-1590", p. 231.

<sup>156</sup>Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage: 1500-1800*, p. 120. Also seen in Terence Murphy, "Woful Childe of Parents Rage: Suicide of Children and Adolescents in Early Modern England", p. 266 and S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England", p. 229.

<sup>157</sup>Susan Amussen, *An Ordered Society: Class and Gender in Early Modern England*, p. 159-160.

<sup>158</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 293.

believed to be fleeing his or her natural place in God's society, a description which also agreed with sixteenth-century ideas of suicide. Thus, nine-year-old Katherine Cok who ran away from her master in 1520 and was found dead in a hedgerow was judged a *felo-de-se*.<sup>159</sup> While this decision may not have tallied with other verdicts which were passed on the similar deaths of some of her contemporaries,<sup>160</sup> Cok's death and condemnation as a suicide were by no means unusual during this period.

Generally, however, servants who chose suicide made a much more active choice. Servants who were usually the targets of their master's aggression appear to have often used suicide as a form of escape. In 1519, William Smyth who disobeyed his absent master committed suicide rather than face his master's wrath upon his return. And Daniel Rose who was unhappy with his employment hanged himself in his master's garden rather than continue working under him.<sup>161</sup> For these two young servants, death was immanently preferable to the lives which they were enduring.

Even for those servants who attempted a more practical

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<sup>159</sup>Terence Murphy, "Woful Childe of Parents Rage: Suicide of Children and Adolescents in Early Modern England", p. 267. As all children over the age of seven were believed to be fully responsible for their suicidal actions, Cok who was nine was condemned in terms similar to an adult suicide.

<sup>160</sup>Regional differences ensured that even judicial practices varied from county to county.

<sup>161</sup>Terence Murphy, "Woful Childe of Parents Rage: Suicide of Children and Adolescents in Early Modern England", p. 265-266.

form of escape, suicide was often unavoidable. Because "the impossibility of returning home was an inevitable truth that confronted many a runaway [servant] nearing the end of their journey"<sup>162</sup>, many fugitives must have behaved in a manner similar to Samuel Gore's. Gore, who had fled from the service of a cooper, "unlawfully returned to the garden/yard at the house of Joan Gore, widow, Samuel's mother".<sup>163</sup> There he was ultimately discovered, hanging from one of the trees on the property.

If the tensions between servants and masters were sometimes unbearable, they were often even more difficult between deviants and their more conformist fellow-villagers. Since the Middle Ages, the popular custom of the charivari had attempted to force the more unruly members of society to comply with a dictated mode of behavior.<sup>164</sup> In disciplining deviants, entire villages could sometimes "become involved in the derision which could reach spectacular heights"<sup>165</sup>. Held up for ridicule and shut out of the tightly knit

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<sup>162</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to The Pattern of Suicide in South-East England 1530-1590", p. 231.

<sup>163</sup>Inquest record quoted in S.J. Stevenson, "The Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of Suicide in South-East England 1530-1590", p. 229.

<sup>164</sup>David Underdown, *Revel, Riot, and Rebellion: Popular Politics and Culture in England 1603-1660*, p. 39.

<sup>165</sup>Phillipe Aries and Georges Duby, Ed., *A History of Private Life: Passions of the Renaissance*, Trans. Arthur Goldhammer, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1989), p. 535.

community, these helpless victims must have experienced an overwhelming sense of disgrace and shame, emotions which MacDonald maintains were a leading cause of suicide<sup>166</sup>. This was the case with Elizabeth Goare. In 1614, Goare "a little before her death, being unmarried, was delivered of a bastard girl and thereupon as this defendant verily believeth, drowned herself"<sup>167</sup>. Communities appear to have been understanding of moral lapses and weaknesses such as these only after the death of the transgressor. Goare's experience must, no doubt, have been typical treatment for the poor and helpless in sixteenth-century England.

Absolute poverty as well as an uncertainty of the future must have been then a powerful factor in the decision to commit suicide. Certainly this was the case with Anne Lockwood. Her husband had committed suicide in 1622, an act which led to a complete confiscation of his property. Lockwood who was left destitute committed suicide some eleven days after the seizure of her husband's property. At her death, "the only property remaining to [be] forfeit[ed] were the clothes she was wearing" at the time of her suicide.<sup>168</sup> Among the lower classes, Lockwood's choice of suicide was not uncommon. As stated previously, the

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<sup>166</sup>Michael MacDonald, "The Inner Side of Wisdom: Suicide in Early Modern England", p. 37.

<sup>167</sup>Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>168</sup>Michael MacDonald, "The Inner Side of Wisdom: Suicide in Early Modern England", p. 568.

overwhelming number of suicides, some sixty percent, were destitute at the time of their deaths.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>169</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England", p. 38.

## CHAPTER V

"DEATH SO SWEET": THE AFFECTATION OF MELANCHOLY BY  
THE ARISTOCRACY AND THE GENTRY

Among the upper class elite of sixteenth-century England, especially the aristocratic courtiers, suicide was often perceived as a dramatic act motivated by honor or more simply, by an overwrought sensitivity. For courtiers, aristocrats and the more socially mobile gentry, it really was nobler "to take arms against a sea of troubles" rather than "suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"<sup>170</sup>. In part, this conviction that death could serve as an honorable escape from life's difficulties was bolstered by the common proverb: "an honorable death is better than a shameful life"<sup>171</sup>. But the main impetus behind this newly developed belief which contradicted most traditional attitudes was more direct. For the upper echelon of Tudor England, death was visualized as "the occasion when man was most able to reach an awareness of himself"<sup>172</sup>. As a result, the more privileged classes openly courted death and its

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<sup>170</sup>William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene I.

<sup>171</sup>Tilley, Morris Palmer, *Elizabethan Proverb Lore in Lyly's Euphues and in Pettie's Petite Pallace With Parallels From Shakespeare*, (London: Macmillan Co., 1926), p. 118.

<sup>172</sup>Phillipe Aries, *Western Attitudes Toward Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. Patricia M. Ranum, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), p. 46.

companion, suicide.

By the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the adoption of suicidal or melancholic poses had become the fashion at most European courts<sup>173</sup>. In following this trend, English courtiers believed that they were exhibiting evidence of not only sensitivity but also aristocratic breeding, a belief which was further bolstered by their assumption that most members of the lower classes were too coarse to experience the finer sentiments associated with melancholy and suicide. In a period of rampant social climbing, the upper classes appear to have used their suicidal affectations (among other attitudes) to differentiate themselves from the lower classes.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* underscored the assumption that suicide and passion were psychologically the property of the elite. When selling poison to Romeo, the apothecary was asked "Art thou so bare and full of wretchedness and fearest to die?"<sup>174</sup>. Clearly, this commoner was too dull and insensitive to feel and behave as the more sensitive Romeo did. To further emphasize this point, Shakespeare used his play within a play, "The most lamentable comedy and cruel death of Pyramus and Thisby" in *A Midsummer Nights Dream*, to satirize the coarseness of the

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<sup>173</sup>Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, (New York: Basic Books, 1964).

<sup>174</sup>William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act V, Scene 1.



lower classes. When the tragedy of star-crossed lovers was enacted by a carpenter, a joiner, a weaver, a bellows-maker, a tinker and a tailor, it became an absurdity.

The all-encompassing connection between suicide and honor further assured the exclusion of the lower classes from this fascination with death. Although Sprott maintains that "morally, suicide was deemed cowardly and unheroic"<sup>175</sup>, an examination of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature seems to indicate the opposite. In Marlowe's *Timburlaine*, Agydas soliloquized that "More honor and less pain it may procure to die by this resolved hand of thine then stay the torments...heaven ha[s] sworn"<sup>176</sup>. The "thrice nobler...valiant Eros"<sup>177</sup> chose suicide when his master, Marc Antony, was faced with defeat. And Francis Bacon noted approvingly that "after Otho the Emperour had slaine himselfe, Pitty...provoked many to die out of mere compassion to their Sovereigne and as the truest sort of followers"<sup>178</sup>. Even noblewomen were expected to follow this code of honor; after her husband's death, Marlowe's Olympia attempted suicide rather than submit to her enemy. In stating that it was "foule and dishonourable to dy by the

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<sup>175</sup>Sprott, *The English Debate on Suicide: From Donne to Hume*, p. 6.

<sup>176</sup>Christopher Marlowe, *Timburlaine Part I*, p. 33.

<sup>177</sup>William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act IV, Scene 14. My italics.

<sup>178</sup>Francis Bacon, *Of Death*, p. 10.

hand of an Enemy"<sup>179</sup>, Donne summarized the beliefs of many of his contemporaries.

Suicide not only provided an escape from dishonor and worldly ruin, it also presented an enticing view of another world. The numerous depictions of Death escorting an unwilling individual from the merriments of this world had a contradictory aspect as well. The open flirtation with death visible in the works of Albrecht Durer and the many *Dances Macabres* of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries<sup>180</sup> imply that death was welcome as often as not. References to "death, so sweet, so happy and desired"<sup>181</sup> "immortal longings for death"<sup>182</sup>, and death's "gentle rest"<sup>183</sup> all further indicate the overwhelming attractions which death must have held for so many sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Englishmen.

To a large extent, this fascination with death may have been connected to the high mortality rates of this period. If most Englishmen believed, as Olympia did, that death would "carry...our souls to where his [her dead husband's]

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<sup>179</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 130.

<sup>180</sup>See Illustration # 6, Appendix B.

<sup>181</sup>*English Madrigals 1588-1632*, Ed. E.H. Fellowes, Revised and Enlarged Frederick W. Sternfield and David Green, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), p. 323.

<sup>182</sup>William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act V, Scene 2, My italics.

<sup>183</sup>George Boleyn, Viscount Rochford, (?), "Oh Death, Rock Me Asleep" in *Tudor Poetry and Prose*, William Hebel, Ed., p. 43.

remains"<sup>184</sup>, then this love of death is somewhat understandable. Grief, as Michael MacDonald points out, "when sudden can cause death"<sup>185</sup> or even more simply the desire for death. And because the upper classes had the time and resources to indulge in mourning, it is not surprising that they believed that "grief flieth to" death<sup>186</sup>. While the double suicide of Shakespeare's most famous lovers, Romeo and Juliet, was probably atypical of the sixteenth century, the documented case of Sir James Whitlock must not have been very unusual. Whitlock whose death can be seen as an indirect suicide had assured his servants that he would die within a year of his wife's death (which he did)<sup>187</sup>.

But while grief and honor played a distinct role in the development of suicidal affectations of the Tudor elite, they were not its leading causes. The most common complaint among the gentry and nobility who visited the astrologer-doctor, Richard Napier, was melancholy<sup>188</sup>. "Like wine in its effects, stupefying and debilitating in excess but

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<sup>184</sup>Christopher Marlowe, *Timburlaine Part II*, p. 91.

<sup>185</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 72.

<sup>186</sup>Francis Bacon *Of Death*, p.10.

<sup>187</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 104.

<sup>188</sup>*Ibid*, p. 150. The percentage of lower class patients who were discovered to be melancholic was significantly lower.

exhilarating in small amounts"<sup>189</sup>, melancholy was believed to be the second most common cause of suicide. As such, it was "classified as a disease, condemned as a vice, or *exalted as the condition of genius*"<sup>190</sup>. It was in this last guise that melancholy was widely admired by myriad sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Englishmen. For many of these writers, artists and courtiers, melancholy became first an affectation and then an inescapable reality which often led to deep depression and ultimately suicide.

Although nearly all Tudor Englishmen acknowledged the link between melancholy and suicide, few physicians or clerics were in agreement as to the exact nature of melancholy. Burton's belief that melancholy was sometimes caused by excessive grief<sup>191</sup> would seem to indicate that melancholy, at its most basic level, was similar to the modern definition of depression. Additionally, the physical symptoms which he believed characterized melancholy---an inability to sleep, dullness, apathy, continual fears and vexations<sup>192</sup>---are all symptoms of modern depression. And

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<sup>189</sup>Bridget Gellert Lyons, *Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatments of Melancholy in Renaissance England*, (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), p. 3. This is a paraphrase of what was believed, in the sixteenth century, to have been a Greek view.

<sup>190</sup>Ibid, p. 1. My italics.

<sup>191</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 287. Especially over a bad marriage.

<sup>192</sup>Ibid, p. 326-327.

Bright's comment that the "melancholick sheweth itself [as]...leane and spare of flesh: which causeth hollownesse of eye"<sup>193</sup> indicates that melancholics must have often experienced significant weight loss, another symptom of modern depression. Further corroborating this link between melancholy and modern depression is Timothy Bright's belief that melancholics not only underwent numerous physical alterations but experienced horrific nightmares as well<sup>194</sup>, symptoms commonly experienced by modern depressives.

When discussing the causes of melancholy, English writers continued to disagree. Burton whose monumental tome *The Anatomy of Melancholy* so decisively defined the nature of melancholy maintained that its roots often lay in childhood. And he instructed new parents accordingly, advising them to "make a choice of a sound woman [for a wetnurse]...free from...all passions and perturbations of the mind as sorrow, fear, grief, folly, melancholy [because]...such passions corrupt the milk and alter the temperature of the child"<sup>195</sup>. In educating a child, parents were further cautioned against upsetting the internal balance of the body thereby unintentionally releasing a melancholic humor.

Melancholy was not always believed to originate in

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<sup>193</sup>Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy*, p. 122-123.

<sup>194</sup>Ibid, p. 123.

<sup>195</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 282-283.

childhood. Heading Burton's list of those especially prone to melancholy were childless women<sup>196</sup>. In mentioning childless women, Burton appears to have been motivated more by the dictates of his own society rather than a real desire to advance medical knowledge. He over-emphasized the many childless nuns who were melancholic, a belief which must have been instigated by his distaste for Catholicism. Also stressed was the relationship between pregnancy and the termination of melancholy. In a period of aspiring social ambitions, it must have been crucial that women, particularly those of the upper class, conform to society's dictates by becoming pregnant. While Burton may have realized this only subconsciously, his directive to women and more fundamentally, his beliefs about melancholy must have been motivated by this imperative.

The historian recognizes a wider range of causes for the epidemic of melancholy which was rampant in Tudor England. Traumatic events which "crept unprovoked upon the sufferer's affections or stormed into the void created by the death of a child, a spouse or a parent"<sup>197</sup> must have been one of the principal causes of melancholia. Literary examples of this type from *Romeo and Juliet* to Marlowe's *Olympia* in *Timburlyne* abound. And among Napier's patients, there were a significant number of melancholics who suffered

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<sup>196</sup>Ibid p. 338.

<sup>197</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 160.

as a result of the death or loss of a loved one.

The exclusive nature of melancholy which had become "the badge of fashion during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries"<sup>198</sup> assured its limitation to literate and leisured people. In both the fictional and non-fictional worlds, it was the nobility and gentry who flirted with melancholy. Napier's upper class patients most commonly complained of melancholy<sup>199</sup>. The courtier George Boleyn spoke longingly of death's "gentle rest"<sup>200</sup>. Marlowe's fictional Queen Dido entreated "Come let us think upon some pleasing sport/To rid me of these melancholy thoughts"<sup>201</sup>. And it was Shakespeare's *Prince Hamlet* who despaired "that the Everlasting had...fix'd his canon 'gainst self-slaughter!"<sup>202</sup>.

If it is true that it was the upper class who most often succumbed to melancholy, then Burton's assumption that melancholy's origins lay in childhood was probably correct.

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<sup>198</sup>Ibid, p. 132.

<sup>199</sup>Ibid, p. 150.

<sup>200</sup>George Boleyn, Viscount Rochford, (?), in *Tudor Poetry*,

<sup>201</sup>Christopher Marlowe, "Dido Queen of Carthage, in *Complete Plays and Poems*, ed. by E.D. Pendry (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1976), p. 107.

<sup>202</sup>William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act I, Scene 2.

The overly strict treatment of upper class children<sup>203</sup> may well have led to the development of melancholic adults<sup>204</sup>. More importantly, the practice of encouraging young children to think constantly about death and its consequences<sup>205</sup> must have indirectly encouraged melancholy and suicidal affectations. Children's literature further exacerbated this fascination with death. Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* as well as numerous prayerbooks which were replete with gruesome illustrations<sup>206</sup> were standard fare for children<sup>207</sup>. And poets such as John Skelton sought to teach children the horrors of death<sup>208</sup>. Through this educational process, death became idealized---and disassociated from the agonies which usually preceded it in Tudor England.

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<sup>203</sup>Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*, p. 118-120. Especially as seen in the childhood of Lady Jane Gray and other examples cited by Stone.

<sup>204</sup>Seymour Byman, "Child Raising and Melancholia in Tudor England", *The Journal of Psychohistory*, Vol. 6., No. 1, Summer 1978 p. 67-92.

<sup>205</sup>Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*, p. 124. "It was standard advice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to tell them [children] to think about death and since it was so likely a prospect for a child, it was reasonable that they should be well prepared". Also seen throughout Warren Wooden's *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance*.

<sup>206</sup>See Illustration # 6, Appendix B.

<sup>207</sup>Warren Wooden, *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance*, p. 79.

<sup>208</sup>Skelton's poem *Philip Sparrow* dealt with the death of a child's pet. Written in the early sixteenth century, it opened with excerpts from the Office of the Dead.



Even as adults, upper-echelon English men and women were unable to escape the countless reminders of death. Songs advised "Lie down and die and then thou shalt do well"<sup>209</sup> or entreated "Death...now come do thy duty and martyr him"<sup>210</sup>. Poetry boasted that "I have little mind that I must die"<sup>211</sup>. And the countless depictions of the 1348 Black Death, a subject which was still extremely popular with sixteenth-century artists, must have been highly visible to the more mobile upper class. Furthermore, the inclusion of Death and *momenti mori* in art such as Hans Holbein's portrait of Sir Brian Tuke<sup>212</sup> assured that death remained both unavoidable and unforgettable<sup>213</sup>.

But despite these continual reminders, death was probably never as omnipresent for the upper classes as it was for their social inferiors. The death which confronted the elite was both romanticized and removed from reality. As a consequence, it was extremely attractive. By focusing on the intellectual aspects of death, sixteenth-century

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<sup>209</sup>Robert Jones "The First Booke of Songes and Ayres" in *English Madrigals*, p. 550.

<sup>210</sup>William Corkine, "The Second Booke of Ayres" in *English Madrigals*, p. 442.

<sup>211</sup>Robert Southwell, *Tudor Poetry and Prose*, William Hebel, Ed., p. 235.

<sup>212</sup>See Illustration # 7, Appendix B.

<sup>213</sup>See Appendix (Chapter Eight), for information regarding the visibility of paintings such as Hans Holbein the Younger's portrait of Sir Brian Tuke.

Englishmen were able to address the more important aspects of its counterpart, life. In writing "I will go die for pure love"<sup>214</sup>, lyricists and poets were able to stress what they viewed as the all-encompassing importance of love.

Death may also have been used as a form of escapism. The many religious and political upheavals of the Tudor and early Stuart dynasties must have made life extremely difficult for both courtiers and country gentry. This turmoil would account for what Aries sees as a dramatic shift in attitudes toward death. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century vision of a world which was "rotten and precarious" becomes understandable when seen in conjunction with the brutal reality of English life during this period. Death, to those close to the court, must have seemed "the blessed haven".<sup>215</sup>

But despite this glorification of death and melancholy, depression was never fully recognized as an acceptable motive for suicide. Burton's attempt to link insanity with melancholy probably met with disapproval from the few coroners who were acquainted with his *Anatomy of Melancholy*<sup>216</sup>. Most of Burton's contemporaries would have argued that unlike insanity, melancholy did not destroy

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<sup>214</sup>Nicholas Yonge, "Musica Transalpina" in *English Madrigals*, p. 329.

<sup>215</sup>Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 332.

<sup>216</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 373.

one's reason. Those who surrendered to suicidal thoughts did so with a complete understanding of the implications of their actions---or so sixteenth-century men believed<sup>217</sup>. Melancholic suicides, unlike insane ones, should have been able to successfully "fight against the ill motions which rise up in our hearts"<sup>218</sup>. Their failure to do so was a cause for condemnation.

Because death was so intellectualized, few of those who adopted the suicidal affectations which were fashionable appear to have actually committed or even attempted suicide. As S.J. Stevenson discovered in his work on suicide patterns in southeastern England during the mid-sixteenth century, the overwhelming majority of people who opted for suicide were destitute<sup>219</sup>. Hidden behind this high figure, however, there may well have been a fair number of wealthy suicides. The Shakespearean gravedigger who protested that "more's the pity that great folks should have more authorization to hang or drown themselves, more than other people"<sup>220</sup> was undoubtedly more than justified in his complaint. Attempts by the wealthy to conceal suicides or even bribe coroners

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<sup>217</sup>Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam*, p. 135.

<sup>218</sup>Hugh Latimer, *Sermons by High Latimer*, p. 435.

<sup>219</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England: 1530-1590", p. 38.

<sup>220</sup>1607 version of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* quoted in Guernsey, *Ecclesiastical Law and the Burial of Ophelia*, p. 13.

were probably both frequent and successful<sup>221</sup>.

While court poets entreated "Come death, and let me die"<sup>222</sup>, neither they nor their readers had any real intention to embrace death. In fact, many of those who spoke most longingly of death were also among the first to criticize its real life practitioners<sup>223</sup>. In being "brought to death's door...bound in misery and iron"<sup>224</sup> but refusing to succumb to temptation, sixteenth-century melancholics were engaging in a highly ritualized and complex intellectual exercise. Thus, those who feigned suicide did so because they discovered a titillation in their experimentation with the forbidden---without incurring the wrath of either the secular or religious authorities.

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<sup>221</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of Suicide in South-Western England: 1530-1590", p. 58.

<sup>222</sup>Anonymous, "Upon Consideration of the State of this Life, He Wisheth Death" in *Tudor Poetry and Prose*, William Hebel, Ed., p. 45.

<sup>223</sup>Thomas More who implied in *Utopia* that he approved of suicide and who often wrote about death's attractions (see Chapter Three) was highly critical of what he believed to have been the suicide of Richard Hunne in *A Dialogue Against Tribulation*.

<sup>224</sup>Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 368.

## CHAPTER VI

## BIATHANATOS: JOHN DONNE'S DEFENSE OF SUICIDE

In 1637, John Syme remarked that "when a man who by nature is bound to preserve himselfe...destroys himselfe, the horribleness whereof is monstrous"<sup>225</sup>. This conviction that suicide was morally repugnant appears to have been shared by almost all of Syme's contemporaries. In fact, condemnation of suicide was so absolute in Tudor and early Stuart England that those who chose to disagree with Syme were probably often silent. Typical of this reticence were the writings of the Anglican cleric, John Donne. Although Donne's defense of the "sickly inclination"<sup>226</sup> toward suicide was written no later than 1608, it was not released for publication until sixteen years after Donne's death in 1631<sup>227</sup>. Clearly, Donne or his patrons believed that the subject of this book was too controversial for publication during Donne's lifetime.

But despite its controversial subject, *Biathanatos* probably reflected a widespread but often concealed

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<sup>225</sup>John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, p. 53.

<sup>226</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 29.

<sup>227</sup>Ernest W. Sullivan, Ed. of John Donne's *Biathanatos*, Preface, p. xxxviii. A copy of the manuscript had, however, been shown privately to at least one of Donne's friends in 1631.

compassion for suicides and perhaps a hidden desire for suicide as well. Donne's candid assertion that "whensoever my affliction assayles me, methinks I have the keys of my prison in myne owne hand"<sup>228</sup> would probably have met with a great deal of sympathy if early seventeenth century English men and women had been allowed to read it. The tensions typical of any period had been further exacerbated in the sixteenth century by both religious instability, numerous famines and several severe epidemics. Official changes in religious beliefs as well as inquisitions and persecutions directed at non-conformists were common. More importantly, the many epidemics and poor harvests of Tudor and Stuart England had led to what Leslie Clarkson called "a mortality crisis"<sup>229</sup>. The "easy and gentle death, that euthanasia which Augustus Caesar was wont so earnestly to pray for"<sup>230</sup> must have been extremely appealing to all those who "suffer[ed] the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"<sup>231</sup>.

This secret yearning for death, or more simply the fear of its existence, was undoubtedly behind the suppression of *Biathanatos*. In a society which inflicted punishments on

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<sup>228</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 29.

<sup>229</sup>Leslie Clarkson, *Death, Disease, and Famine in Pre-Industrial England*, p. 12-13.

<sup>230</sup>Camden speaking of Queen Elizabeth's death in Arnold Stein, *The House of Death: Messages From the English Renaissance*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), p. 22.

<sup>231</sup>William Shakespeare, *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, Act III, Scene I.

the corpses of suicides "for terror of the living, that they may not attempt the like"<sup>232</sup>, any insinuation that suicide was acceptable was immediately quelled. In fact, Donne himself recognized this tactic when he spoke of punishments inflicted solely to avert any imitation of the suicide's "evill Example"<sup>233</sup>.

In addressing thoroughly all of the traditional arguments against suicide, Donne greatly added to his book's powerful impact. In fact, his refutation of the traditional arguments against suicide was so complete that even books published long after he had completed *Biathanatos* did not raise new arguments. John Syme's sweeping work, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, was published nearly thirty years after *Biathanatos* had been completed yet its arguments had already been more than adequately answered by Donne's earlier work.

Further reinforcing these arguments was Donne's reliance on the works of the Church Fathers as well as the Bible, a reliance which made Donne's arguments nearly as impregnable as those of his most pious colleagues. In a society which believed that it was combatting a rapidly

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<sup>232</sup>John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, p. 278. Also seen in John Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 373.

<sup>233</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 72. It should be noted that Donne thought that this was an extremely poor reason for posthumous punishments of suicides.

spiralling suicide rate<sup>234</sup>, *Biathanatos* was a dangerously heretical work.

Questioning why suicide "should be so resoltely condemn'd and why there should be this praecipitation in our judgment to pronounce this above all other sinnes irremissable"<sup>235</sup>, Donne's work opposed most of the fundamental beliefs held by sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English men and women, a fact which he recognized. By categorizing the detractors of suicide into "three persuasions", Donne divided this opposition into those "misaffirme that this Act [of suicide] allwayes proceeds from desperation...[those who entertayne that dangerous opinion that there is in this Life an impenitableness and impossibility of returning to God...[and those] who build upon [the] foundation that this Acte [is]...presum'd to be Sinne"<sup>236</sup>. Once divided into these categories, it was easy for Donne to address and, in turn, dismiss the arguments made by writers of one of these "three persuasions".

Foremost among these arguments was the conviction that suicide "cannot be an act of faith and obedience...because... it proceeds from desperation which is

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<sup>234</sup>John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, Introduction.

<sup>235</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 34.

<sup>236</sup>Ibid, p. 34-35.



contrary to faith and holy obedience"<sup>237</sup>. It was also commonly maintained that "despaire breedes not...where faith is staid"<sup>238</sup>. While Donne did not fully refute this belief that suicide was irrevocably linked to the sin of despair, he did argue that "all desperation is not Sin=full [*sic*]"<sup>239</sup>. To prove his point, he cited two examples, Christ's despair on the cross and Job's despair, both of which must have had an especially strong impact upon his contemporary readers. As noted previously, Job was one of the most well-known biblical figures in Tudor England; in fact Protestant reformers customarily encouraged their readers to emulate Job<sup>240</sup>. And in an increasingly reform-minded England, the use of Christ as an example gave Donne's arguments a strength which they would have lacked had he merely supported them with an example of a saint or a martyr.

The greatest opposition confronting Donne and those who agreed with him, however, was the belief that "self-murder is the grossest and most odious sort of murder that can be and therefore most to be shunned"<sup>241</sup>. Syme and his supporters repeatedly stressed this conviction by insisting

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<sup>237</sup>John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, p. 274.

<sup>238</sup>Edmund Spenser, *The Faire Queene*, p. 84.

<sup>239</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 35.

<sup>240</sup>Keith Thomas, *Religion and The Decline of Magic*, p. 496.

<sup>241</sup>John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, p. 280.

that suicide entailed all of "the damnable defects of murder in general"<sup>242</sup>. This link between suicide and the heinous sin of murder led to the belief that in committing suicide, the *felo-de-se* was also flaunting the Sixth Commandment, a sin which even Donne was prepared to admit was grievous<sup>243</sup>. In addressing the argument made by opponents of suicide, Donne used a tactic which had been common to many Protestant reformers before him. Insisting upon an absolutely literal interpretation of the commandment, *Thou Shalt Not Kill*, Donne presented several cases in a which a direct interpretation of the commandment was impossible. Because "we many kill beastes, Magistrates may kill Men; and a private Man in a just warre may ...kill"<sup>244</sup>, self-murder which damages only the participant must not be an especially sinful act. At its worst, suicide was as evil as Donne's other examples of justifiable murder.

Not only did Donne not believe that suicide could be classified as murder, he also maintained that suicide could sometimes be extremely laudable<sup>245</sup>. While few of Donne's

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<sup>242</sup>Ibid, p. 47. In fact, Syme believed that suicide was even more damning than murder because the *felo-de-se*, unlike the murderer, had no opportunity to repent of his sins before his death.

<sup>243</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 40.

<sup>244</sup>Ibid, p. 116

<sup>245</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 48-49. "And if that which I affect by Death be truly a greater Good, wherein is the other stricter Law of Nature...violated?"

contemporaries would have agreed with his sweeping assertion that in "any exterior act whatsoever [including suicide], proceeding from a sincere and pure intention of the minde is an act of true Religion"<sup>246</sup>, some did share his belief that not all suicides should be unequivocally condemned. Writing in the same year as Donne, William Vaughan maintained that "many of our moderne Divines hold opinion that if a man laying before his eyes the glory of God onely do kill himselfe, because he forseeth, that those things which he shal suffer shal rebound to the dishonour of God, he sinneth not"<sup>247</sup>. Suicides such as that of the much persecuted and widely admired Sir James Hales were undoubtedly behind this slight lessening in the absolute condemnations which had been so common in the Middle Ages.

To a large extent, suicide had always been regarded in such negative terms because it was viewed as a form of protest against the social order. Syme who was one of the most widely read writers on suicide in the seventeenth century firmly maintained that "wee have no power but from God"<sup>248</sup>, a belief which negated man's ability to make any choices regarding his own life and death. Thus, according to Syme, nine-year-old Katherine Cok who fled from her

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<sup>246</sup>Ibid, p. 104.

<sup>247</sup>William Vaughan's *Golden Grove* quoted in Spratt, *The English Debate on Suicide: From Donne to Hume*, p. 14-15.

<sup>248</sup>John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, p. 267.

master was not only flaunting her master's wishes but also rebelling against her master's and her own divinely ordained place in the social order of Tudor England<sup>249</sup>. Donne refuted this belief by emphasizing man's free will as well as the authority he already exerted during the course of his lifetime. If "Fathers, Husbands, and Masters had jurisdiction over Children, Wives and Servant's Lives"<sup>250</sup> then why did these same men not have jurisdiction over their own lives?

In questioning divine jurisdiction over men, Donne was also treading dangerously close to treason, an act which may well have been behind the long suppression of *Biathanatos*. In the early seventeenth century, English men and women were still regarded as the chattels of the English monarch; in taking his or her own life, the suicide was depriving the Crown of one of its subjects. The confiscation of a suicide's property by the Crown which had been common practice in England since the fourteenth century served to further reinforce this belief. The posthumous condemnation of a suicide was not simply a punishment for self-murder; rather, it was a punishment which had been imposed with the intention of rendering to the Crown some form of financial recompense for the loss of one of its subjects. The debate

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<sup>249</sup>Terence Murphy, "Woful Childe of Parents Rage: Suicide of Children and Adolescents in Early Modern England, 1605-1710", p. 267.

<sup>250</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 112.

over suicide had become, at its most basic level, a debate over the extent of man's authority over himself.

Donne's refutation of suicide had not, however, been written with that intention. In fact, Donne firmly believed that "God, in his judgement hath *almost* made us his *assistants, and counsellors*"<sup>251</sup>. To Donne, man only *appeared* to have free will and to act independently of God; in actuality, man was still answerable to God. Thus, Donne insisted that the sole reason Job did not commit suicide was because "God had chosen him for another use and [as] an example of extreame Patience"<sup>252</sup>. In other words, suicide or any act which had been preordained by God had also been sanctioned by God. In condemning suicide, theologians and physicians were questioning predestination and ultimately, the authority of God Himself.

More importantly, Donne believed that his opponents were questioning the power and limits of death and life. Throughout the conclusion of *Biathanatos*, Donne made references to those who "incline...to a Love of this Life, and a horror of death", emotions which he believed were usually behind any condemnation of suicide. But by clinging so fiercely to life, Donne noted, one rejected "the Benefits of Death"<sup>253</sup>, benefits which had been bestowed upon mankind

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<sup>251</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 33. My italics.

<sup>252</sup>Ibid, p. 113.

<sup>253</sup>Ibid, p. 144.

by Christ's own death. At its most basic level, *Biathanatos* may well have been written as a theological exercise, rather than a straight forward defense of suicide.

## CHAPTER VII

## CONCLUSION

For John Syme and many of his contemporaries, suicide was a punishment inflicted upon mankind by an angry God after Adam and Eve's temptation in the Garden of Eden<sup>254</sup>. In making man "his own executioner, a wolf, a Devil to himself and others"<sup>255</sup>, God was punishing mankind--and more directly, the *felo-de-se*--in the most severe fashion possible. Most theologians would have affirmed that in denying suicides proper burial and punishing their families by a complete confiscation of their property, they were acting in accordance with divine law. Few Tudor English men or women were prepared to dispute the pre-conceived notion that suicide was an act instigated by God as a punishment. Consequently, almost all discussions of suicide rested on this principle---in other words, debates on the topic frequently began with the supposition that suicide was morally and indefensibly wrong.

This conviction that suicide was inexorably wrong must have been influenced by Tudor attitudes toward death itself. For sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English men and

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<sup>254</sup>John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, p. 51.

<sup>255</sup>Robert Burton, *Anatomy of Melancholy*, p. 117.

women, death never ceased to be terrifying. In part, this fear had been stimulated, if not directly caused, by the growth of Anglicanism. The official rejection of Purgatory in 1552 had made early modern death more absolute than its medieval counterpart had ever been. Further adding to this new terror were the strict Calvinistic interpretations which made the prospect of salvation seem remote. Stories such as Foxe's account of the twelve-year-old boy who committed blasphemy and died shortly afterwards were common. And with the widespread dispersal of printed matter, few Englishmen must have been able to ignore Foxe's rhetorical question: "For what else do they [sinners] deserve but to be taken away by death?"<sup>256</sup>. Spenser's comment that "death was due to him that provoked God's ire"<sup>257</sup> was undoubtedly equally memorable. Clearly, death was to be visualized as a punishment; more indirectly, it was a means of controlling society. If this attitude towards death was to persist, the condemnation of those who voluntarily fashioned their own deaths was necessary.

Donne's *Biathanatos* was the obvious exception to these attitudes. Donne, an ordained Anglican cleric, questioned why suicide "should be so resolutely condemn'd and why there should be this praecipitation in our judgment to pronounce

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<sup>256</sup>John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* quoted in Wooden, *Children's Literature of the English Renaissance*, p. 79.

<sup>257</sup>Edmund Spenser, *The Faire Queene*, p. 109.



this above all other Sinnes irremissable"<sup>258</sup>. The radical aspect of Donne's work lies not only in his defense of suicide but also in his attempt to dispel some of the fears of death. Donne firmly believed that the "Benefits of Death"<sup>259</sup> could be and often were outweighed by any possible sin which might occur during the course of suicide. Donne even went so far as to refute the connection between suicide and sin: "If then a man after requisite and convenient diligence, despoild of all humane affections and selfe interest...do in his Conscyence beleeve that he is invited by the Spirit of God to do such an act as Jonas, Abraham and perchance Samson, who canne, by these Rules condemne this to be a Sinne?"<sup>260</sup>.

The few English men and women who agreed to some extent with Donne did so tentatively. The Reverend Greenham appeared to criticize suicide unequivocally in his *Grave Counsels and Godly Observations*. But when speaking of the powers of death, he stated "wee shall not be judged according to our particular instance of death, but according to our general course of life"<sup>261</sup>. The ambiguous wording of this when combined with his insistence that "we are not to

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<sup>258</sup>John Donne, *Biathanatos*, p. 34.

<sup>259</sup>Ibid, p. 144.

<sup>260</sup>Ibid, p. 103.

<sup>261</sup>Richard Greenham, *Grave Counsels and Godly Observations*, p. 16. My italics.

mistrust Gods mercie in death"<sup>262</sup> reveal a more sympathetic attitude towards death and judgment than his writings on suicide would seem to indicate. Greenham, however, was just one of many Tudor writers who equivocated on this subject. The writings of two of his more famous contemporaries, Robert Burton and Thomas More, were also extremely ambiguous on the topic of suicide.

To some extent, this equivocation may have resulted from the rapid changes which were occurring as a result of the English Reformation. As previously noted, the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century witnessed numerous changes in both deathbed practices and beliefs. With these changes, there occurred, no doubt, some confusion as to the exact stance maintained by the Church of England on the subject of suicide. Further adding to this confusion were the writings of reformers such as John Calvin who expressed an earnest desire for death and Hugh Latimer who emphasized the importance of an almost suicidal despair.

The most vocal adherents of death, the aristocratic elite, were surprisingly silent when it came to discussions of actual suicide cases. The desire of the Elizabethan age's most famous courtier, Sir Walter Raleigh, to act upon his suicidal impulses appears to have been the exception rather than the rule. Among the upper echelon of Tudor society, overly dramatic expressions of a false intent to

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<sup>262</sup>Ibid, p. 16.

end one's life were far more common than actual attempts at suicide. The vivid and almost ubiquitous art which depicted Death attacking members of the upper class<sup>263</sup> was meant to be taken literally not figuratively. Death had become, for these people, the ultimate contrast<sup>264</sup>. Through their almost suicidal desires, court poets and their followers were really indicating a love of life's most important moments such as the commencement of a love affair. Among this class, self-induced death was not a moral issue; rather, it was an opportunity to heighten one's awareness of life. Immune from both the continuous famines and diseases which accompany malnutrition, the aristocratic elite were thus able to intellectualize and fantasize about death.

For the vast majority of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, however, death was an omnipresent and almost always terrifying specter. Among subsistence families, the death of one family member could mean the difference between survival and starvation. And for the families of suicides, the act of the *felo-de-se* could and usually did result in complete and utter ruin. Obviously, communities often united to hide certain suicides from royal officials<sup>265</sup>. But suicides which were committed

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<sup>263</sup>See Illustration # 3, Appendix B.

<sup>264</sup>As demonstrated by Illustration # 8, Appendix B.

<sup>265</sup>This depended in large part on the method of suicide chosen. Hangings, even those committed by the more elite members of Tudor society, were extremely difficult to conceal.

among the lowest level of sixteenth-century village life must have been seized upon by the governing classes as examples of how *not* to behave. Among this class, the punishment and humiliation of the *felo-de-se* were commonly used both as a means of disciplining the unruly and as a method of ensuring that the rigidly defined social order remained intact. To a great extent, attitudes towards suicide were colored by one's social status as well as one's geographic location.

There were then at least four distinct attitudes towards suicide during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England. While two of these attitudes were essentially products of the Middle Ages, the melancholic affectations assumed by the Tudor elite and John Donne's fervent defense of suicide were just two of the new attitudes which evolved during this period. These less critical views of suicide, however, were not sufficient in and of themselves to completely eradicate what P.E.H. Hair termed "the full-blown medieval horror of suicide"<sup>266</sup>. It was not until 1823 that the last English suicide was formally buried at a crossroad and that coroners were legally prevented from issuing warrants for burials at a crossroads<sup>267</sup>. Socially, however, much of the stigma

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<sup>266</sup>P.E.H. Hair, "A Note On the Incidence of Tudor Suicide", *Local Population Studies*, 1970, p. 41.

<sup>267</sup>Barbara Gates, *Victorian Suicide*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 5-6.

attached to suicide has remained.

## APPENDIX A

## A CRITIQUE OF SOURCES USED

The sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were marked by a dramatic although uneven rise in better administration of court records as well as more uniform coroner's reports. As a result, the Tudor and early Stuart periods were perhaps "the first period[s] in which the numbers [of suicides] become apparent"<sup>268</sup>. But despite this advent of better record keeping, studies of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century suicides are still hampered by a variety of factors. To begin with, early modern English men and women often hid or distorted the facts behind suicidal behavior in an attempt to avoid both the confiscations of property as well as the social stigma attached to suicide. Coroners who received financial incentives to determine suicide probably further distorted records as did the extremely poor means of communication between rural and urban officials. As a result, the historian who attempts an examination of early modern suicide statistics is often forced to do so with incomplete and often inaccurate information.

To combat this problem, I have attempted to examine not

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<sup>268</sup>S.J. Stevenson, "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England: 1530-1590", p. 52 and 38.

the statistics behind the rise in suicide during the sixteenth century<sup>269</sup> but rather the attitudes which resulted from this increase. In tracking four of these attitudes, I have relied heavily on not only sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century writings on suicide and death but also on the artwork, lyrics and literature created during this period. To what extent this information was available to the general public is, I realize, extremely debateable. But even if knowledge of these specific arts was extremely limited in early modern England, the fact remains that the lyricists, playwrights and artists who created these works were no less a product of their times than theologians like John Syme who wrote the highly cautionary tract, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*.

Additionally, much of this information was more widely available than it may first appear. While it is true that a great deal of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century literature was unavailable to the illiterate, many of the plays discussed here were not only performed in both rural and urban areas but were also easily accessible to the poor. Books such as John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* which included numerous depictions of violent deaths were easily

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<sup>269</sup>While it is true that the increase in suicide during this period may have been a result of improved record taking, early modern English men and women firmly believed that suicide was on the rise and acted accordingly. John Syme, *A Life's Preservative Against Selfe-Killing*, Introduction.

obtainable<sup>270</sup>. Access to artworks such as Hans Holbein the Younger's portrait of Sir Brian Tuke was probably so limited as to be non-existent but "the power that visual evidence possesses to define what a society considers both normal and eccentric is an asset that no scholar could ignore"<sup>271</sup>.

Secondary sources presented almost as many difficulties as primary sources. Only five attempts at a statistical study of suicide have been made: S.J. Stevenson's two 1987 articles on suicide in south-east England, "Social and Economic Contributions to the Pattern of 'Suicide' in South-East England, 1530-1590" and "The Rise of Suicide Verdicts in South-East England, 1530-1590: The Legal Process", Terence Murphy's 1986 article "Woful Childe of Parents Rage: Suicide of Children and Adolescents in Early Modern England", Matthew Zell's 1986 article on "Suicide in Pre-Industrial England", Michael MacDonald's two articles, "The Inner Side of Wisdom: Suicide in Early Modern England" and "The Secularization of Suicide in England: 1600-1800" and P.E.H. Hair's 1970 "A Note On the Incidence of Tudor Suicides". Although all of these articles presented only a limited amount of information on actual suicide cases, I was forced to draw nearly all of my references to actual

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<sup>270</sup>As previously noted, copies of Foxe's martyrology were to be found in almost all cathedral and parish churches during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

<sup>271</sup>Robert Rottberg and Theodore K. Rabb, *Art and History: Images and their Meaning*, Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 2.



suicides from them as well as from MacDonald's *Mystical Bedlam*, a study of seventeenth-century insanity. Because many of the references culled from these sources may not be overly representative of the pattern of early modern suicides, I have attempted to use these examples as sparingly as possible and to contrast them with fictional depictions of suicides whenever possible.

When discussing Tudor and early Stuart attitudes towards life and death, I have attempted to use as many primary sources as possible. Obviously, however, these sources have been almost completely limited to those written by educated early modern English men. To gain some understanding of the attitudes of women and the rural and urban poor, I have been forced to rely on numerous secondary sources, predominant among them Lawrence Stone's *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800*. Recognizing that much of the criticism leveled at Stone by Alan MacFarlane, Keith Thomas and John Demos was well-founded, I have attempted to use Stone only when he can be supported by the research of other scholars or by the endless examples he himself cited. I have tried to use other secondary sources in conjunction with either additional secondary or primary sources as well.

My greatest difficulty has not, however, been in obtaining sources. The fluidity of early modern definitions of suicide make it almost impossible for the historian to

adequately determine exactly what constituted suicide during this period. I have tried to determine and use definitions of suicide which would have been acceptable to the vast majority of Tudor English men and women. As a result, I have been forced to reject the claim that suicide and martyrdom were related which was made by Seymour Byman in his article, "Suicide and Alienation: Martyrdom in Tudor England". While Byman's thesis may have tallied with opinions held by John Donne, most sixteenth and early seventeenth century English men and women would not have made a connection between these two types of violent death<sup>272</sup>.

Although I have attempted to make my definition of the term *suicide* agree with the definition which would have been made by most Tudor English men and women, I have been guilty of an anachronism. As noted previously, the word *suicide* was not in existence during this period. Sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English men and women habitually referred to suicide as the act of self-murder or self-killing and the suicide himself was termed a *felo-de-se*, literally a felon of oneself. All of these terms do as much if not more to explain the Tudor conception of suicide than the four attitudes I have discussed in this paper.

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<sup>272</sup>See Chapter Three.

ILLUSTRATION #1:

SAUL, A. BLOEMART, CA. 1600



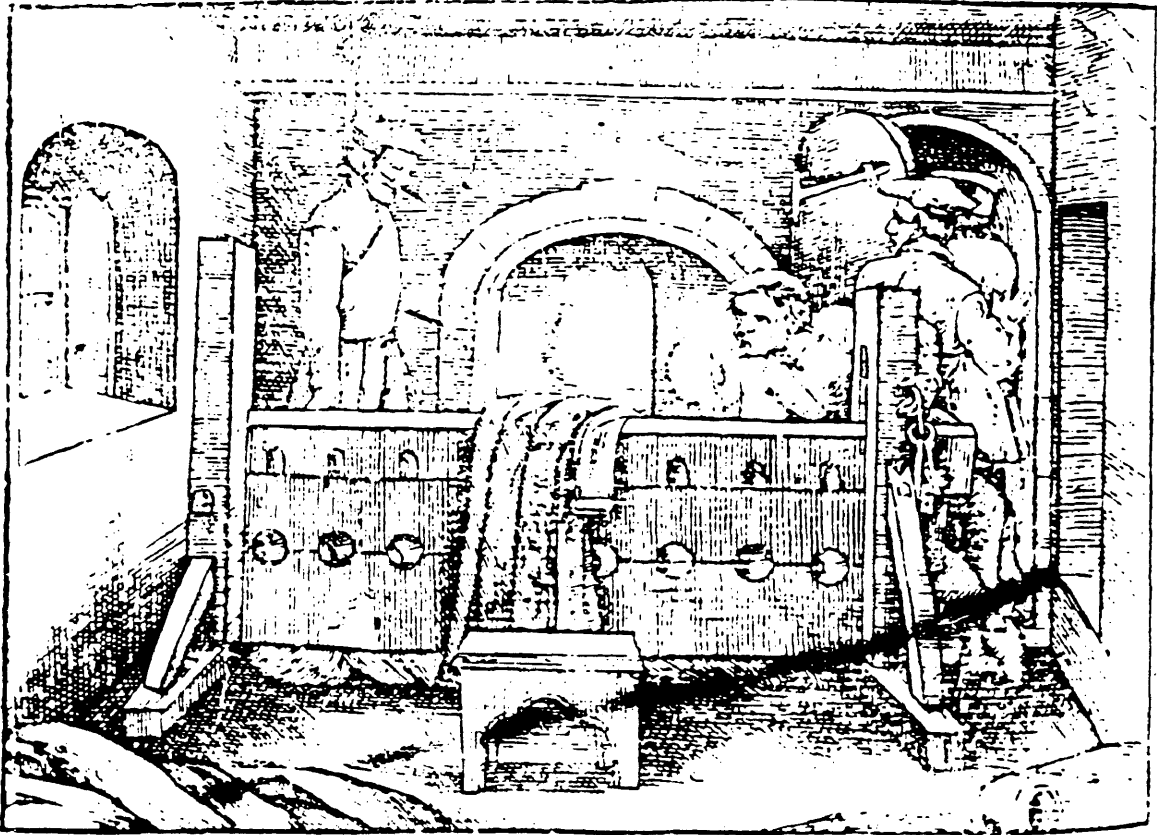
*FROM ART AND THE WISH TO DIE*

## ILLUSTRATION #2:

## THE MARTYRDOM OF RICHARD HUNNE, MID-1500'S

**A** full declaration and history of the whole discourse and lamentable handling of Richard Hunne, within lollardes tower in London.

**A** description of the lollardes tower, where in master Richard Hunne was actually murdered, and after by the said parties hanged.



Richard Hunne committed to the lollard tower and murdered.



In the month of December, in the year of our Lord 1517, there was one Richard Hunne a merchant taylor of London in Lollards tower by the commandment of the bishop of London, called Richard

Fytnames and doctor Joseph his Chaunceler, whiche was a man more of wit to prefer the bishops jurisdiction and the cleargye, then the truthe of the Gospell: but so it was that the said Hunne was found deade hanginge by the neck in a girde of silke, within the said tower.

FROM JOHN FOXE'S BOOK OF MARTYRS

ILLUSTRATION #3:

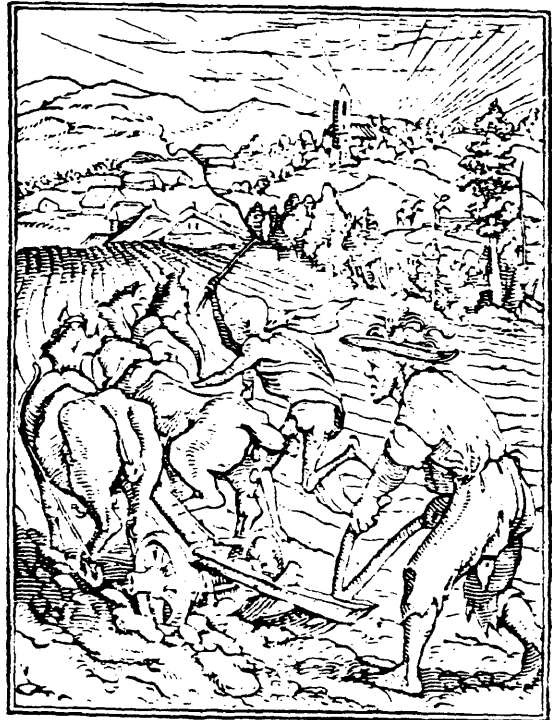
*IMAGINES MORTIS*, HANS HOLBEIN THE YOUNGER, 1547FROM *DEVILS, DEMONS, DEATH AND DAMNATION*

ILLUSTRATION #4:

*JUDAS HANGED, ANONYMOUS, 1481*



*FROM ART AND THE WISH TO DIE*

ILLUSTRATION #5:

*DEATH OF KING JOHN, MID-1500'S*



FROM JOHN FOXE'S *BOOK OF MARTYRS*

ILLUSTRATION #5:

THE BURNING OF WYCLIFFE'S BONES, MID-1500'S



FROM JOHN FOXE'S BOOK OF MARTYRS



ILLUSTRATION #6:

*COAT OF ARMS OF DEATH, ALBRECHT DURER, 1503*



*FROM DEVILS, DEMONS, DEATH AND DAMNATION*

## ILLUSTRATION #6:

## THE DAUNCE OF MACHABREE, EARLY 1500'S

## The daunce of Machabree.



Death fyrst speaketh vnto the Pope, and after to euery degree as foloweth.

On this daunce with other folow to trace,  
For which al honor, who prudently can see,  
is litle worth that doth so soone passe.

Death speaketh to the Emperour.

**Y**e been set most in high <sup>(dignitie,</sup>  
Of al estates in earth  
spirituall,  
And like as Peter hath  
the soueraintee,  
ouer the church and  
states temporall,  
by on this daunce ye first begin Mall,  
As most worthy lord and gouernour,  
For al the worship of your estate papall,  
And of Lordshipp to god is the honour,

The Pope maketh aunswere.

First me behoueth this daunce for to lede  
which sat in earth highest in my see,  
the state full periculus whoso taketh hede,  
To occupie Peters dignitie,  
But for al that, death I may not flee,

**Y**e Emperour lord of al the grounde  
ouer the prynces a highest of noblesse,  
ye not forsake of gold your apple round  
scepter and swordes & al your high prowesse  
behind liden your treasour and your riches  
And with other to my daunce obey,  
Against my might is worth none hardines,  
Adams children al they must dye.

The Emperour maketh aunswere.

I Note to whom that I may appeale,  
touching death which both me so cōdorein  
there is no gin to helpe my querel,  
but spade and pickaors my graue to atteyne  
I simple here there is no moxe to seyn,  
to wrappen in my body and bisage,  
wherupon soxe I me compleyne,  
That Lobes great haue litle auantage.  
Death

FROM DEVILS, DEMONS, DEATH AND DAMNATION

ILLUSTRATION #7:

*PORTRAIT OF SIR BRIAN TUKE, HANS HOLBEIN THE  
YOUNGER, EARLY 1500'S*



*FROM IMAGES OF LOVE AND DEATH IN LATE  
MEDIEVAL AND EARLY RENAISSANCE ART*

ILLUSTRATION #8:

*DEATH AND THE YOUNG MAN (FROM A DANSE MACABRE), 1490*



*FROM DEVILS, DEMONS, DEATH AND DAMNATION*

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