Textual Resurrection: Suicidal Women in Eighteenth-Century Media

By

Luke Vines

Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

Graduate School of Vanderbilt University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

as part of the fulfillment of the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

English

December 12, 2020

Nashville, TN

Approved:

Scott Juengel, Ph.D.

Anthony Reed, Ph.D.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Textual Resurrection: Suicidal Women in Eighteenth-Century Media..1

I. Narrative Limitations: Martyrdom and Profligacy……………………………………...6

II. Literary Implications: Published Suicide Notes and Suicidal Ideation in *Pamela*…...12

III. The Fragment and Reputational Risk………………………………………………..18

IV. In the Grave and in the Press………………………………………………………...23

Works Cited...26

Textual Resurrection: Suicidal Women in Eighteenth-Century Media

In the eighteenth century, a particular confluence of literary and sociopolitical trends contributed to a profusion of texts depicting, anticipating, exculpating, and condemning one of the most singularly human acts: suicide. The topic captured the public's attention, manifesting in texts that range from Joseph Addison's *Cato, a Tragedy* (1713) to Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748) and achieved a sort of aesthetic culmination in Goethe's *Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774, translated into English in 1779). While celebrated fictional and philosophical accounts of suicide may have dominated the public discourse in ways that strike the modern critic's attention, actual suicide notes functioned more immediately in the lives of eighteenth-century individuals. Though rarely considered a notable genre of composition, suicide notes offer a distillation of the methods employed by eighteenth-century European subjects to construct the self through epistolary narration—a mode of identity-formation central to Richardson's and Goethe's novels—and magnify the opportunities and trepidations that accompany literary self-construction. Thus, although the eighteenth century is already the victim of a plethora of unnecessary monikers, both the canonical and the noncanonical literature of the period demand one more. The eighteenth century was the century of suicide.

In contradistinction to the expected public documentations and discussions of suicide in the eighteenth century,[1] the texts that likely shock modern sensibilities the most are the suicide notes that were syndicated in contemporary media.[2] In "Suicide Notes and Popular Sensibility in

[1] These documents range from coroner's inquests to sermons—like George Gregory's "A Sermon on Suicide," delivered in 1797 to commemorate the founding of the Human Society—to accounts of or allusions to the suicides of the genteel, like the suicide of Frances Braddock in 1731 which was narrativized in newspapers throughout the century (usually to denounce gambling, as Braddock's suicide was speculated to be a response to enormous debts incurred through playing cards).

[2] For the purposes of this study, the term "media" will be employed mostly in line with the first part of the definition offered for "media, n.2" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*: "The main means of mass communication," with print media being the key sub-section ("Media, n.2"). The term "press" will serve when newspapers and periodicals are to

the Eighteenth-Century British Press," Eric Parisot asserts that, from the middle of the eighteenth century forward, suicide notes "can be found in all major press formats" (277). The syndication of actual suicide notes provokes an investigation into the ways in which eighteenth-century British culture offered a burgeoning space for post-mortem reflection and reputation control. Responding thoughtfully to such a provocative historical practice, Parisot's study employs the publication of suicide notes as an insightful lens through which to view eighteenth-century conceptions of the benefits and dangers of sensibility, but both he and MacDonald and Murphy, in their foundational *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (1990), spend much more space discussing the suicide notes of men.

To some extent, the dearth of published suicide notes written by eighteenth-century women investigated in modern scholarship (and available in the archives) may be the result of a combination of demographic realities and legal requirements. MacDonald and Murphy acknowledge that while the data on suicides in early-modern Britain appear to show that men were five times more likely to commit suicide than women, this likely has more to do with the fact that there was a greater incentive to investigate the suicides of men (247-8). When suicides occurred, the local coroner called an inquest that would determine whether the victim was *felo de se*, a "felon of himself," or *non compos mentis*, a legally declared "lunatic." Respectively, these judgments resulted in either the forfeiture of property or the standard passage of it to inheritors; wives did not legally own property and, consequently, when wives committed suicide, there was no estate to be considered by the jury at all.[3] With little or no incentive to legally determine

---

be evoked specifically. Notably, as a collection of minor "media events," to borrow William Beatty Warner's term from *Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain: 1684-1750* (University of California Press, 1998), the syndication of suicide notes is at least purportedly in response to "some prior [actual] historical event" as *Pamela* initially claimed to be as well (Warner 178).

[3] Consequently, although the authors of *Sleepless Souls* claim to have registered "over seventy eighteenth-century [suicide] notes," they do not offer the demographics of the notes' authors; from their general lack of reference to

suicide, many women's suicide notes likely eluded the press because the suicidal acts themselves remained undiscovered, unpublicized, ignored, or suppressed. Ephemeral from the moment they were composed, the vast majority of eighteenth-century women's suicide notes will remain permanently hidden in the folds of time, lost to the situational and sociopolitical shadows in which they were written.

Given that both MacDonald and Murphy's and Parisot's studies convincingly display that suicide increasingly found a place in media representations throughout the eighteenth-century, evolving scholarship must examine the conditions and spaces in which women's suicides and their suicide notes broke through the significant barriers that stood between them and an admission to public discourse. In other words: what, if anything, prompts a woman's suicide note to receive the attention of anyone beyond her immediate relations? If Parisot is correct that authors of suicide notes often "invoke contemporary conceptions of sensibility" to frame and control the reactions to their suicides (277), then one ought to question why it is that women's invocations are underrepresented in the contemporary press and in modern scholarship. To scrutinize the women's suicides that newspapers deemed worthy of attention illuminates the situationally necessitated narrative devices that those women employed and, in turn, magnifies their singular position at the painful intersection of legal, sociopolitical, and literary trajectories during the eighteenth century.

It is important to recognize from the outset of a study of this nature that all suicide notes exist under a formal double bind that shatters them into a fragment. One letter, after all, can hardly be seen as enough to justify the end of a life whose narrative—as the advent of the epistolary novel during this period makes clear—could take up volumes. However, the coupling

---

suicide notes by women in the newspaper, however, one infers that their archival investigations uncovered relatively few (327).

of the situational demands of suicide-note composition with the norms of periodical publication results in a reality in which a single suicide note carries the weight of an individual's entire experience and must, like a fragment, dramatically allude to a much greater whole. By narrativizing what leads a subject to the ultimate self-isolating act, the suicide note fills a singular role in literary ontology, and in their suicide notes, women textually realize their most individualized selves—traveling a greater symbolic distance than their male compatriots who were more frequently figured socially and literarily as radically individualized—just as they are on the cusp of permanently undoing their individuality with an act that is simultaneously the ultimate display of and the tragic relinquishment of autonomy.

To consider a disputable text a suicide note, of course, one ought to have a working definition of what a suicide note is and a method of reading them. At its most basic level, a suicide note is a text written expressly because one is on the threshold of ending one's own life and wishes to communicate particular information before one dies from self-inflicted causes. A remarkable characteristic of the suicide note is that they are almost universally epistolary; the assumption of epistolary form is so widespread that one should be conscious not to ignore the possibility that narrativizing one's suicide could take on other literary forms. In consequence of their epistolary form, suicide notes have at least an imagined audience but can be addressed to anyone in particular or everyone; they could also, conceivably, be addressed to non-human subjects, objects, or deities. As articulations of the final thoughts and wishes of an individual, suicide notes join last wills and testaments, written gallows confessions, and deathbed and battlefield letters as part of a select group of texts written with the understanding that death will seal them from future self-emendation. Suicide notes diverge, however, in their expression of the intent to die in contrast to an awareness of impending death, and they likewise often establish the

method by which the death will be brought about. Suicide notes bind intention and action, prediction and fulfillment. As such, they purport to establish cause of death indisputably but are likewise ripe for criminal interference; a forged suicide note or one written under duress presents a limitless set of interpretive and legal dilemmas. For the purposes of this study, a suicide note need not be ratified by the author's suicidal death; a note written before a failed or prevented serious suicide attempt would possess no formal differences from a note composed before a completed suicide.

As a very particular form of autobiography, suicide notes offer a compressed narrative of what leads an individual to the metaphorical (or literal) precipice. Their authors traffic heavily in clichés[4] and emotional language in an attempt to convey the impending, incomprehensible experience for which they can have no precedent. Often fragmented, compressed, and hackneyed, suicide notes are therefore fertile grounds for misinterpretation, and thus readers can easily, intentionally or not, extrapolate in cruel or obtuse directions that can have distinct biographical and legal implications. Further encapsulating their fragmentary nature and attesting to the interpretive difficulties they generate, suicide notes often contain palpably incomplete thoughts, allusions to vague persons, places, and objects, and whole sections whose narratological antecedents may elude the prying reader. Dense and frequently impenetrable, a suicide note can likely never be interpreted perfectly; they frown upon claims of authoritative readership with their spectral voices. The only suicide note that a reader can hope to interpret with a semblance of guidance is, paradoxically, the note with a living author. Accordingly, even if suicidal notes and actions appear to signal arch-autonomy, the women's suicide notes that appear in eighteenth-century newspapers signal the awareness that public readership and

[4] A practice Janet Todd believes deserves grace, considering the pressures under which a suicidal author writes (Todd 59).

interpretation can misconstrue or deny epistolary self-narrativization. The suicide note, then, serves as an attempt to determine the contours of the secular afterlife of an individual before she surrenders herself to post-mortem inspection and the evolving reputation economy.

The following investigation highlights the unique position of women's suicide notes in the eighteenth-century media both because modern scholarship tends to overlook them and because the doubly constricted field of narrative options to which eighteenth-century women had access heightens readers' awareness that suicide notes are a human being's final chance at literary self-construction. By first focusing on the catastrophic pressures and limitations women faced when they narrativized their suicides, one can then put the eighteenth century's preoccupation with the literary fragment into conversation with the rise of sentimental literature. Employing women's suicide notes as a locus of analysis will in turn illuminate how, reacting to these two historically important literary trends, the epistolary novel—emblematized herein by Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*—attempts to solve the dilemma made blatant by suicide note publication.

I. Narrative Limitations: Martyrdom and Profligacy

To understand why women's suicide notes are underrepresented in the eighteenth-century media, one must first acknowledge the complex web of narratives constructed around suicide during the century, and perhaps no text contributed more disproportionately to eighteenth-century conceptions and literary configurations of suicide than Addison's *Cato*. The drama, a generic anomaly in Addison's largely short-form writing career, portrayed its eponymous hero and his resistance to the tyranny of an increasingly powerful Julius Caesar c. 46 BC. As it becomes clear to Cato that the tenets of Roman, republican liberty to which he ascribes will fall

to Caesar's increasing power, he kills himself, declaiming—as he fades out of consciousness after having "fallen on his sword"—to the room of his faithful followers, "Caesar's arms have thrown down all distinction; / Whoe'er is brave and virtuous, is a Roman" and "O ye powers, that search / The heart of man, and weigh his inmost thoughts, / If I have done amiss, impute it not! / The best may err, but you are good" (76). In these separate sentiments, one can identify two of the trends that dominated eighteenth-century responses to and narratives of suicide. In the former, Cato contextualizes his death politically—lest his overtly political program becomes lost in his tumultuous final breaths—as a necessary consequence of Caesar's tyranny. Expecting that his individual freedom will be impeded if he surrenders to Caesar's forces, he makes clear that death is preferable to bondage, but his death also serves as a barrier between those loyal to the ideal republic and tyranny. When Cato's ally Lucius, a Roman senator, declares that "Cato, tho' dead, shall still protect his friends," he immediately places Cato's death in a history of political martyrdom (76). Addison's dramatization of Cato's suicide as political sacrifice makes clear that just as the audience's perception holds sway over post-mortem categorization, martyrdom is always at least figuratively self-inflicted if martyrs are conscious that their choices will lead to their deaths, whether they physically take their own life or not. With this in mind, a suicidal individual in the eighteenth century could easily recognize that legal courts and the court of public opinion could be swayed by artful self-depiction to recategorize an individual's manner of death.

Meanwhile, whereas men could, when faced with bondage, claim like Cato to see their options as a binary of "liberty, or death" (40), eighteenth-century conceptions of feminine virtue were founded largely on women's preservation of their domesticity and chastity. In *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion* (1999), Julie Ellison persuasively identifies the

ways in which the public performance of emotion and sentiment were masculinized through dramatic performances like Addison's *Cato*, but one could also identify a more specific phenomenon through the information Ellison presents: *Cato* and the literary tradition to which it belongs masculinize honorable *suicide* and lock women out of a specific vein of suicidal narrativization. Suicide, as the ultimate act of self-determination, can then signify as self-determination and autonomy more broadly, and thus one can identify the ways in which women were structurally blockaded from broad pathways in which men could narrativize their autonomy.

If women could no longer believably claim the mantle of martyrdom, they were left with little recourse but to accept a posthumous reputation of profligacy when they contemplated or narrativized their suicides. The subtitle of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) could only be *Virtue Rewarded* if the title character lived to see her rewards; if Pamela had committed suicide—which, as we shall see, she fully entertains the idea of doing so—she would have forfeited her virtue and her reward. In one of the few unearthed suicide notes by a woman that made it into the eighteenth-century press, this reality makes itself clear. In 1726, *The London Journal* gives a brief explanation that the letter it prints, which takes up almost an entire column, was written by a woman found "drown'd at sea" following her stay at Deal, where the man who had formerly been her lover had sent a man to tell her traveling companions to "beware of her, for that she was a common whore." After lamenting that her newborn will be undeniable proof of her affair (since her husband had been at sea for two years), she writes, "I wish my unhappy State may be a Warning to others, not to put too much Trust in faithless Man." Protesting that this was the first time in her life that she has felt shame, she asks her friends' "Pardon for the Scandal," requests that her friends treat her husband, mother, and infant kindly, once more

accuses her lover of treachery, and signs off with the ambiguous, "Let no one judge too rash, that does not know the Cause I had for it" ("London"). Much of the power of the woman's letter rests in its mystery and ambiguity, present until the very last sentence in which the antecedent of "it" remains unclear.

While the closing pronoun's antecedent could be identified as either the woman's adultery or her suicide, the founding structure of the letter is the fact that the author collapses her suicide *into* her adultery. From the beginning of the letter—in which she resolves to put "an End to my Life *and* melancholy Reflections"—to its closing lines, the overwhelming realization and public recognition of her adultery, made manifest and undeniable by the infant she will leave behind, symbolically end her life before she physically concludes it[5]. Profligacy was the woman at Deal's death knell; as her narrativization makes clear, suicide simply bypasses the living torture that inevitably occurs between the public loss of the veneer of virtue and the loss of one's life. The closing lines of the suicide note from the drowned woman at Deal also allude to an important trend that occurred as the eighteenth-century marched slowly toward modern conceptions of the individual. *Sleepless Souls* charts the evolving public response to suicide in the eighteenth century, demonstrating the influence of new philosophical and rational appraisals, the emerging classification of suicide as a symptom of severe mental illness, and the rise in sympathy and sentimental culture that palliated judgments for almost all suicides. As she narrates her final moments and charges them with emotion-heightening ambiguity, the woman at Deal's letter makes one thing unambiguous: the mind of an individual can never be fully known or literarily portrayed, much less definitively determined by a post-mortem inquiry.

---

[5] "[F]or is not the loss of reputation ruin?" Clarissa Harlowe to Anna Howe, Letter 80, p. 329.

Even Cato, towards whom an eighteenth-century reader was primed to respond with admiration, acknowledges that his actions may be judged unfavorably, simultaneously implying that purposeful logic led him to make the choice to kill himself and allowing the possibility that he reasoned incorrectly when he proclaims, "O ye powers, that search / The heart of man, and weigh his inmost thoughts, / If I have done amiss, impute it not! / The best may err, but you are good." Like the drowned woman at Deal, Cato's closing invocations possess a provoking ambiguity. For, if one feels implicated as a member of the "powers, that search"—a sentiment that a cursory reading suggests—one is reminded by rereading that it is primarily "The righteous gods, whom [he has] sought to please," not any particular human spectator (72). If the reader of these dying thoughts wishes to judge correctly, then the ambiguity invoked in Cato's speech makes clear that they must have the insight of the gods. If, as any self-aware reader would admit, one cannot obtain complete knowledge of the "inmost thoughts" of the person one judges, the most ethically sound judgment is a judgment of leniency, or, in eighteenth-century legal terms, a declaration that the suicide was *non compos mentis*.

Of course, the woman at Deal occupies a dramatically different space than the literary-historical Cato, despite their similar pleas. For one, even if, since she was married, she did not legally own any property and would not forfeit anything to the crown, she might reasonably hope to avoid the post-mortem ignominy of a *felo de se* judgment and the resultant, intentionally humiliating practice of crossroads burial.[6] The anonymous woman at Deal was more or less structurally forced to defend her suicide. Otherwise, her ex-lover would have the power to control the narrative that would define her reputation and the fate of her body. Thus, she takes advantage of her only option: to admit to her adultery and claim that her unfaithfulness was

[6] Which was enacted "to terrifie all passengers, by that so infamous and reproachfull a burial" to warn the living public "not to make such their final passage out of this present world" (Weever 22)

isolated to a single relationship. In a letter ostensibly to an “intimate friend,” she lays out everything necessary for a public defense with a methodical approach and literary construction so remarkable that MacDonald and Murphy assert that her letter anticipates Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) and declare that her letter’s “aim… is to place before the reader a vivid and perfectly convincing portrayal of a wronged and tormented woman whose death is a tragedy” (333). In the context of the narrative options available to the woman at Deal, however, while the comparison to *Clarissa* is understandable, this analysis of her aim overlooks her relationship to suicide narratives. In reality, she admits to what the majority of her eighteenth-century contemporaries would undeniably categorize as profligacy and unfaithfulness in an effort to define the parameters of the story before her ex-lover’s accusations could dominate the narrative. The *tragedy* would be if a coroner’s inquest and jury delivered the verdict of *felo de se* and brought further shame on her already disgraced family.

The narrative the woman at Deal constructs, however, does not exist as an exact foil to Cato’s patriotic martyrdom. For a better model of the narrative to which she reacts, one can look to what Brett Wilson eponymously identifies in *A Race of Female Patriots* (2012) where he advances a persuasive counterargument to the “many previous critics [who] have seen an absence or an eradication of women in British tragedy” as he highlights the various narratives in which “tragedians repeatedly [stage] the construction of publics around and through virtuous and emotional women” who react “to acts of oppression, cruelty, and callousness” (11). The woman at Deal hoists the narrative of the woman patriot with its own petard and tacitly asserts that women who fall victim to “oppression, cruelty, and callousness” will never be seen as the paragons of virtue seen in fiction; oppression, cruelty, and callousness will outlast its victims on the earth and ensure that their sins are known. Since the woman at Deal’s shortcomings will

inevitably be revealed after her death, she exploits the spectacle of her demise and displays sentiment boiling over to refocus public feeling onto the debauchery perpetrated by the man who has extended his sociopolitical power over her. The humanized foil to the pellucidly righteous women portrayed on the stage, the woman at Deal's is not a martyrdom that shores up the nation through shared affect; hers is a suicide that disconcerts normative displays of public feeling to uncover societal insidiousness and the fragility of British social institutions. As such, there is no publicly sanctioned narrative available by which she can narrate her distress and her imminent suicide.

II. Literary Implications: Published Suicide Notes and Suicidal Ideation in *Pamela*

In addition to the note written by the anonymous woman at Deal, a thorough search of the eighteenth-century newspapers preserved in the Burney Newspapers Collection has revealed only one other syndicated suicide note written by a woman. Composed by Eleanor Johnson and published September 28, 1789, in the *Oracle*, the note delivers an impressive and succinct account that offers a subject whose sociopolitical situation compliments Pamela Andrews's initial fictional reality.[7] The story in the *Oracle*, which takes up approximately two-thirds of a column, employs the title, "Suicide: Love and Madness" and relays the story of the "beautiful" seventeen-year-old Eleanor Johnson and her lover, Thomas Cato, a black man from the East Indies. After a purported but never excerpted letter from Cato accused the young Johnson of deceit, she poisoned herself and penned a letter explaining her reasoning. The *Oracle* claims that

[7] MacDonald and Murphy discuss the dramatic suicide note jointly written by Roger and Bridget Smith that made waves throughout the eighteenth century, but, while the Smiths' note is important in the history of suicide-note syndication, the extent of Bridget's participation in authorship or figuration cannot be determined based off of the reports available, and thus does not fit the criteria for this study. I must also acknowledge that while I discovered Elizabeth Johnson's suicide note during an independent search through the Burney collection, I only became aware of the woman at Deal's suicide note while reading *Sleepless Souls*, though both it and Johnson's note appear in MacDonald and Murphy's study.

it publishes the account of Johnson's suicide because "the circumstances attending the unhappy fate of this young woman [are] rather singular" and that the paper will "lay them before our Readers in the authentic manner they were reported by the Foreman of the Jury" ("Suicide: Love *and* Madness"). With its intervention into Johnson's narrative—categorizing it as both "singular" and "authentic"—the *Oracle*'s framing exposes the layer of editorial discretion that would otherwise remain implied and provokes an examination of how Eleanor Johnson's suicide entered the public discourse.

The story of Johnson's suicide and her letter appear just before the story of a murder in France and adjacent to three other pieces: an account of the size and contents of George Washington's plantation, the results of a cricket match, and an advertisement for women's skin toner. Nestled amongst facts and ephemera, the paper presents its account Eleanor Johnson's suicide as "authentic" because it comes from the mouth of "the Foreman of the Jury," not necessarily because the paper provides documentary evidence in the form of her note. Johnson's story is filtered first through her letter, then through the jury and coroner that deliberated on her suicide, then through the editorial processes that structured it both rhetorically and typographically in the *Oracle*, and arrives at the reader in a state wholly unlike the one in which it was delivered to Thomas Cato. After recognizing the many layers—narratological, textual, legal, and social—mediating between Eleanor Johnson's narrative and readers of the *Oracle*, one could hardly be blamed for disregarding the reports on her suicide altogether, but whether the story was factual or not is really beside the point.[8] Instead, given that *Bath Chronicle*, *Morning*

[8] The paper's story also contains a blatant logical inconsistency. Since the paper names Cato as the intended recipient of Johnson's letter and reveals that "an intimacy had subsisted sometime between" the two lovers, one must assume that Johnson would know Cato well enough to know whether or not he could read. This assumption finds support in the fact that Johnson's actions are in response to accusations of infidelity that Cato delivers in his own letter. Consequentially, one must doubt the racialized revelation that "When examined before the Jury, the Black appeared so ignorant and illiterate, that nothing could be collected from his evidence, nor the purport of the letter he had sent her be come at."

Star, *Whitehall Evening Post*, *Diary or Woodfall's Register*, *The World*, *Felix Farley's Bristol Journal*, and *General Evening Post* all ran almost identical accounts of Eleanor Johnson's suicide between the end of September and the beginning of October in 1789, Johnson's suicide functions as a marker of the public's interaction with suicide narratives. With an audience of this scale, Johnson's story impacted, at least briefly, public perception of women's suicides and displays the narrative characteristics necessary for a woman's suicide and suicide note to capture the eighteenth-century public's attention.

A characteristic of Eleanor Johnson's story and letter worth noting—and one that becomes more apparent in its contrast with the woman at Deal's—is the clear identification of Johnson as a fully-named individual. Since MacDonald and Murphy determine that "the most likely candidate for a *non compos mentis* verdict was… a man of some property and good reputation who was the head of a household," one must examine what happens when a suicide occupies none of the privileged social positions that *Sleepless Souls* identifies (129). If she could be construed as a gentlewoman at all, public accounts of Johnson's suicide would have doubtlessly remarked upon her pedigree to heighten the scandal of the narratives they proffered. Thus, assumedly a member of one of the lower classes, Johnson existed in the most perilous post-mortem position possible, given that "eighteenth-century *felones de se* were often marginal members of the community in which they died: criminal, people in disgrace, servants, apprentices, abject paupers, or strangers" (MacDonald and Murphy 129). Eleanor Johnson's suicide note serves to display the ways in which, with particular situational framing, those members of the lower class who were most likely to elude the attention of the law—and, consequentially, the attention of the press—could deploy a potent cocktail of the salacious and the pathetic to thrust their stories into popular consciousness and still avoid the felony judgment

that the system more frequently handed down when it deigned to attend to self-murderers from the lower classes.

Johnson's suicide note, then, marks a reality of the eighteenth-century British reputation economy. A woman's position as she attempted to narrativize her suicide placed her at a brutal crossroads, much like the crossroads at which she would be buried if her suicide were to be judged a *felo de se*. If a woman mastered the narrative dance upon the razor's edge of public respectability, she could capture the popular press's attention and take hold of a moment of infamy to permanently alter and establish the contours of her reputation. By exploiting a number of the eighteenth century's taboo subjects in a single letter—e.g. interracial relationships, implied premarital intimacy or sexual relationships, and the disturbing possibilities of heightened sentimentality—Eleanor Johnson overcomes the structural barriers that would have otherwise prevented her from finding a narrative outlet in the elevated maze of eighteenth-century self-construction. Available for such a wide audience, both the coroner's jury and subscribers to periodicals who carried the account became "readers" of Johnson's situation and used what is, in reality, a fragmented narrative to come to a legally required and drastically oversimplified understanding of Johnson's mental state when she decided to commit suicide. Amplifying her anguish through a precise narratological framework, Eleanor Johnson's suicide and note become a public affair.

In her epistolary narrativization of her suicide, Eleanor Johnson has much in common with a much more famous, lower-class, eighteenth-century scandal-mongering woman whose infamous relationship led her to narrativize her suicide and, in turn, captured the attention of the masses: Pamela Andrews, from Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). Though ostensibly a fictional creation and not an actual woman, the first readers of Richardson's novel believed they

were reading the actual, compiled manuscripts and letters of a persecuted servant.[9] In the novel, after Pamela has faced an onslaught of sexual advances and embarked on a failed escape from Mr. B's manor, what she had previously planned as a faked suicide—to distract her captors and give her more time to escape—becomes a serious, possible reality. She wonders to herself, and therefore to the reader, "What to do, but to throw myself into the Pond, and so put a Period to all my Griefs in this World!" (171) With this in mind and taking into account *Pamela*'s epistolary form and the history of the reception of the novel, this passage ought to be considered Pamela's pseudo-suicide note.

When Pamela begins her epistolary suicidal ideation, she expresses the vindictive hope that "these wicked Wretches, who now have no Remorse, no Pity on me… when they see the dead Corpse of the unhappy *Pamela* dragg'd out to these slopy Banks, and lying breathless at their Feet, they will find that Remorse to wring their obdurate Hearts, which now has no Place there!" (172) And herein, she expresses the reforming possibilities sentimental texts putatively offer.[10] The manner in which Pamela initially foresees the reformation of her tormentors as the result of the sentimental effects of her suicide clearly contrasts her figuration with Eleanor Johnson's. In fact, Johnson identifies the *impossibility* of sympathy to rise to certain occasions when she writes to Thomas Cato, "you could not make me recompense for the hurt you have done me… was you to die at my feet." Johnson imagines her note supplementing the gap between possible affective responses to death and desired affective responses. Sympathy, by her

---

[9] "[T]he claim to historicity in *Pamela* is inextricable from its epistolary form… At least in the first edition, Richardson appears only as the 'editor' of an authentic set of documents that constitute a true 'History'" (McKeon 357).

[10] A possibility central to the rise of sentimental literature later in the century but also identified, fittingly, in Alexander Pope's "Prologue" to *Cato*:

> "To wake the Soul by tender Strokes of Art,
> To raise the Genius, and to mend the Heart,
> To make Mankind in conscious Virtue bold,
> Live o'er each Scene, and Be what they behold:" (Pope 13)

figuration, can never propel one to match the strongest emotions through action; the suicide note becomes Johnson's textual embodiment and expresses more emotion than her suicide alone could. Eleanor Johnson heightens the possible effects of her letter because her death denies others the opportunity to communicate their sympathy with her, and her letter heightens the effect of her suicide because it provokes sentiment and speculation. Suicide and its literary counterpart unite in Eleanor Johnson's letter to form a singularly liberated realm of personal sentimental possibility that precludes equal sympathetic response from anyone who reads a suicide's body and its accompanying text.

The fact that Johnson's body is indeed lifeless informs the reading of her suicide note and her suicide note informs the reading of her body; note and corpse participate in an uncontrollable dialectic with those who read them, a dialectic that determines the secular afterlife of the suicide at hand. While Eleanor Johnson signals the linkage between her suicide note and her body with a phrase, Pamela manages to illuminate the relationship with a single word. As she writes about the sentimental possibilities of her suicide during her ideation, Pamela writes, "Then, thinks I, will [Mr. B], perhaps shed a few Tears over the poor *Corse* of his persecuted servant" (emphasis added, 172-3). Her use of the word "corse" (i.e. the poetic spelling of the word "corpse," which she spells with the standard spelling just moments before) points to her understanding of suicide's metaphorical functionality. Easily misread as the homophone, "course," the dead body becomes a symbol for the course of events that has led to the individual's act of self-destruction, the same course of events to which a suicide note alludes. In this way, both a suicide's body and the suicide note act like literary fragments; neither of them can give the full narrative of a life, but they hold within them the possibility of provoking sentiment in and reforming the lives of a suicide's erstwhile persecutors, whether individual or societal. The events that follow Pamela's

suicidal ideation buttress this reading of Pamela's pseudo-suicide note; the failed escape from Mr. B's manor that follows Pamela's ideation results in her stricter confinement and in Mr. B's subsequent attempt to rape her by disguising himself as the maidservant who was tasked with sleeping in her room at night. When attempted by her captor, Pamela faints and enters what she terms a "State of Death" (204), and Mr. B is moved to pity, retreats, and proposes to keep her as his mistress. She refuses, of course, but within the following days, he apprehends her letters and her written account of her contemplation of suicide which, in turn, lead neatly to his reformation and honest proposals of marriage. Thus, it is only after Mr. B encounters Pamela's body in a death-like state, reads of her suicidal ideation, and has her explain what she wrote that Pamela is able to reform her persecutor.

III. The Fragment and Reputational Risk

Meanwhile, it is important to emphasize that though Pamela composes what look like pieces of a suicide note, she ideates her suicide and its aftermath without ever actualizing her ideation. Pamela's decision to live can be attributed to more than one factor, the simplest being the already-mentioned fact that living serves as a confirmation of the subtitle of *Pamela*, i.e. *Virtue Rewarded*. As established, the narrative available for eighteenth-century women in their suicide notes requires at least a gesture towards culpability; British culture of the period was simply not prepared to accept that a blameless woman would kill herself. Thus, the only narrative constructions available permanently defined a woman's life by her shortcomings, a definition Pamela so strongly resists in her letters that it pushes her through complete suicidal ideation and reveals that, for women in eighteenth-century Britain, virtuous suicide was not only an oxymoron, it was a narratological impossibility. If a woman mastered the balance between

scandal and pity, the most she could hope for was the still-cruel, *non compos mentis*, a judgment that categorically invalidates any of the reasoning she may attempt to portray as legitimate in her letter.

Women's suicides, in fiction and the press, may parallel the eighteenth century's infatuation with both the literary fragment and sentimental literature, but close analysis reveals that they anticipate the anxiety and criticism that sentimental and fragmentary literature provoked as they came into and fell out of vogue. In an essay linking *Pamela* with the MeToo movement, Diana Rosenberger convincingly instantiates *Pamela* as an early attempt "to imagine a gendered interiority" and as a text that can "invite us to consider the ways in which [the] self is invariably read, not only by other subjects, but also by and through forms and platforms" (18, 26), but a reading of Pamela's suicide note actually shows the profound unease that those considerations provoke. If Pamela Andrews had committed suicide, one could agree with Rosenberger's reading, but when she ideates through her suicide, Pamela recoils at the possibility that her narrativized interiority could be misread or overlooked. In other words, Rosenberger is correct to highlight the fact that *Pamela* "demonstrates that even *incorrect* readings of subjectivity have the capacity to generate new narratives" (27), but the possibility that misreading will create new narratives remains, in the epistolary fiction of the period, the reader's delight and the narrator's horror. Pamela's suicidal ideation forces her to reckon with the fact that those who read her suicide note could extrapolate and invent an infinite number of embarrassing narratives, and in response, she obsessively documents her life in an attempt to tighten the reigns on possible interpretations. The idea of the suicide note collapsing body with text and the sentimental with the fragmentary allows a window into why epistolary novels compulsively (and often frustratingly) narrate even the blandest the minutiae of interiority.

Misinterpretation thrives the more context it is free to invent or infer, and for fragile identities and vague biographies, this invention can have, as we have seen, tragic consequences. When it comes to fashioning one's reputation through letters or journal entries, to write only one, which would amount to writing only a fragment of one's interiority, would be an act of epistolary suicide. There will always be the compulsion to write more, to write until the bitter end, as Richardson has his more tragic heroine do in *Clarissa*, and women's suicide notes from eighteenth-century Britain make this clear because their position in the reputation economy was much more precarious.

With their extremely limited catalogue of narrative options, Pamela Andrews and her Richardsonian successor, Clarissa Harlowe, do what they know best; they *keep* writing. Thus, although she never ideates her suicide or its aftermath as fully as Pamela, Clarissa explicitly threatens suicide (Letter 281, p. 950-951), wishes it were not a sin (Letter 276, p. 936), provokes worry in her admirers that she will commit suicide (Letter 22, p.710), and provokes Lovelace's direct linkage of Clarissa's death with Lucretia's famous suicide (Letter 263, p.900 and Letter 516, p. 1438), not to mention the fact that Clarissa spends the entire denouement of the novel consigned to the inevitability of impending death. The specter of suicide hangs over the novel like a cloud from the time of her clandestine meeting with Lovelace, when she suspects that he might threaten suicide to force her to escape with him, until the "Postscript" in which Richardson defends the absence of what his critics "call a *fortunate ending*" (1495).[11] Clarissa, for her part, constantly expresses the wish for the world to know her on her own terms, telling Lovelace, "I should be glad that all the world knew my heart. Let my enemies sit in judgement

[11] When Clarissa thinks Lovelace is about to threaten to kill himself, she writes, "Had he offered to draw his sword upon himself, I was prepared to have despised him for supposing me such a poor novice as to be intimidated by an artifice so common" (Letter 94, p. 377).

upon my actions: fairly scanned, I fear not the result. Let them even ask me my most secret thoughts, and whether they make for me or against me, I will reveal them" (Letter 243, p. 822). But more than a wish to be actually known, Richardson has his death-bound heroine compulsively compile exculpatory evidence for a trial that is figured sometimes separately and sometimes simultaneously as both social and legal. At last, Clarissa's self-conscious preparation for an undefined but inevitable evidentiary hearing is vindicated when the threat of poor readership becomes an actuality in the foolish Mr. Brand.

Mr. Brand, whom the Harlowe family has sent to inquire into and report back the reality of their daughter's situation, "is one of those puzzling, over-doing gentleman, who think they see farther into matters than anybody else, and are fond of discovering mysteries where there are none, in order to be thought a shrewd man" (Letter 381, p. 1167). After a brief and superficial inquiry, he gives credence to rumor and insinuation and reassures the Harlowes in their plan to encourage Clarissa to travel to the colonies to give her reputation time to heal. Brand, as the epitome of a misfiring close reader who forms an incorrect conclusion based on only fragmentary evidence, validates Clarissa's obsession with documenting her story as a whole and her delegation of judicious, post-mortem document harmonization. In insisting that her story be presented "*out of court*, and to a *private* and *serious* audience" (Letter 428, p. 1253), Clarissa arranges for sympathetic readership freed from the binary judgments of guilty and not guilty, *felo de se* and *non compos mentis*, suicide or a broken heart, spirit, and mind.[12]

A surfeit of (self-)documentation attempts to prevent the dangerous misreading that can bury or distort a single fragment, and at its core, the phenomenon of suicide- note syndication in eighteenth-century Britain serves as the ultimate example of public readership and public

---

[12] It is worth noting that the audience/jury of a "trial" in the press or the closet would include women and men, as opposed to the exclusively male juries of legal trials.

(mis)interpretation. The danger of sentimental reactions to fragments is made evident in the unabashedly biased and bindingly binary readings performed by juries in coroner's inquests and, modeled in extension, by the public who read suicide notes in periodicals. Pamela Andrews and Clarissa Harlowe would—because of the intertwined phenomena of coroner's inquests and suicide note publication—be painfully aware that their suicide notes would be categorically prohibited from preserving their post-mortem virtue and honor. To preserve their virtue, they must document it obsessively, and to document it, they must live long enough to arrange its holistic presentation. In addition to the numerous other reasons for the length of Richardson's novels, one must now recognize that their sheer tonnage can be explained as a revulsion to the possibility of the legal and social hermeneutics that could undoubtedly read suicide notes incorrectly or even maliciously. For a preferred narrative to prevail, it must overwhelm possible misreadings with a sea of evidence.

To see how far-reaching and life dominating Clarissa's fear of being misapprehended is, one only needs to see the complex account she maintained of her *time*. Clarissa's closest friend and confidant, the fiery Anna Howe, sends Belford, the executor of Clarissa's will and her letter-compiler, the strict schedule Clarissa set for herself to manage how she each minute of her day. Whether she fell short of her allotted three hours of study, conversed for too long at dinner, or took too much time balancing the household accounts and bills, or something prevented her from keeping Sunday "as it ought to be kept," Clarissa would "carry the debit forward" and make up for it by spending extra time on the task the next week (Letter 529, p. 1470-1). For she believed, and in the end was justified in her belief, that "Those who will not keep a *strict* account, seldom long keep *any*" (ibid. p. 1472). Clarissa's obsessively documented virtue serves as an answer to readers who may understandably doubt that *anyone* could be so homogenously virtuous. Her

account and her accounts were balanced; aware of the vagaries of the reputation economy, Clarissa purchased her insurance with her well-spent, well-documented time. Although it is no mystery that Richardson sought to have the letters in his novels attend to the moment in which they were composed, Clarissa's timekeeping shows the ways in which the specter of divine judgment in the afterlife blends so seamlessly with her anxiety over her place in the reputation economy. If ill-documented or ill-spent time is time that slips out of the purview of a given letter or volume of letters, then the knowledge of impending death means that narrative timekeeping must end soon, and, in Clarissa's mind and Richardson's figuration, judges both divine and secular are prone to dwell on the shadows where a subject spends her undocumented time.

IV. In the Grave and in the Press

Death has always, of course, served literally, figuratively, and spiritually as a settling of debts; when one reads the letters of the woman at Deal and Eleanor Johnson, one can see how suicide notes offer women *perceived* control over accounts legal, financial, ethical, sentimental, and reputational on an enticing and otherwise unattainable scale. This perception crumbles, however, precisely because the secular spirit of an individual survives beyond the physical grave. As soon as an audience reads a suicide note, what before was the apparent summit of self-actualization, or a frozen moment of impassioned self-narrativization, begins to melt under the light of readership that deconstructs it to determine culpability in all of the aforementioned accounts. As interiority violently exteriorized, published suicide notes demand speculation. By reading them, audiences practice literary necromancy and judge suicidal women from the epistolary fragments they leave behind. The publication of women's suicide notes in the media

resuscitates women's reputations, compels their post-mortem testimony, and creates for them a secular afterlife over which they can exert no lasting control.

Clarissa's desire for post-mortem narrative control through her epistolary authorship, then, serves as a proxy for the author's dilemma and for Richardson's in particular. Having experienced firsthand—after Fielding's *Shamela* (1741) and Eliza Haywood's *Anti-Pamela* shaded *Pamela*'s reception—what it was like for the intended narrative of an epistolary heroine to be distorted by readership, in *Clarissa*, Richardson endows his heroine with a keen eye for audience perception and the literary acumen to deftly craft an epistolary autobiography in which the fact that she starves herself can be read as virtuous asceticism instead of the obvious reading of the denouement as willful suicide, delirium, and an authorial state of *non compos mentis* that would obliterate the logic and virtue upon which the text is founded. Clarissa's obsession with controlling the afterlife of her letters is a testament to Richardson's professional experience with the many diffracting layers a narrative travels through before it arrives at its audience, and her obsessive effort to predetermine each hand that her narrative passes through serves as an effort to solidify her image and block off illicit interpretive pathways. The miracle of *Clarissa*, then, is that it succeeds. While Richardson's contemporary readers, as he expresses in the "Postscript," wished for a "*fortunate ending*," the extent of Clarissa's triumph and *Clarissa*'s narrative impermeability is proven in the fact that critics in Richardson's own time and in ours speak of the heroine's death, not her suicide (1495).

If Eleanor Johnson and the woman at Deal had to perform a delicate balancing act catered to the intricacies of the reputation economy to have their stories published, Clarissa Harlowe passes through the eye of the narrative needle and blatantly arranges for the reception of, and causes by self-starvation, her own death while avoiding a suicide trial. When one interprets

Pamela and *Clarissa* in the context of the eighteenth-century publication of women's suicide notes, it becomes clear that Richardson knew that a writer can never guarantee that a fragment or a single scene will provoke an ideal sentimental response in a reader. In response to the dilemma that arises when one recognizes that no one can prevent textual misinterpretation, the only answer is to keep documenting and, thus, to leave less room for speculation.

In the end, of course, all narratives must close, and all characters, real and actual, must pass away. If one finds it terrifying that even fictional letter writers recognize that they cannot control the fate of their post-mortem reputations in the imagined minds of their unaccountable future readers, one should not fail to acknowledge the beauty in the fact that even a literary fragment can hold a malleable, secular afterlife within it. In their suicide notes, eighteenth-century women write their final moments. In *Pamela*, Richardson writes "to the moment." In *Clarissa*, he writes to almost all moments, and the text's failure to place its eponymous character beyond doubt or above reproach is a testament to the unavoidable incompleteness and interpretability of all narratives, a testament to the permanent, living and dying mystery of the other, and a testament to the wonderful precociousness of readers who almost always look beyond the façade of the narratives offered for their consumption. The eighteenth century was indeed the century of suicide, but it was also a century whose textual productions—ranging from the ephemeral to the voluminous—proved the existence and flexibility of the secular afterlife.

Works Cited

Addison, Joseph. *Cato, a Tragedy*. 1713. Printed and Sold by Rob. and Foulis, 1765. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. Accessed 22 May 2020.

"London." *The London Journal*, Saturday, June 11, 1726. *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection*. Accessed 18 May 2020.

MacDonald, Michael and Terence R. Murphy. *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England.* Oxford University Press, 1990.

McKeon, Michael. *The Origins of the English Novel: 1600-1740*, Second Edition. Johns Hopkins UP, 2002.

"Media, n.2." OED Online, Oxford University Press, June 2020.

"News." *Oracle*, 28 Sept. 1789. *Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers*. Accessed 16 Feb. 2020.

Parisot, Eric. "Suicide Notes and Popular Sensibility in the Eighteenth-Century British Press." *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 47 no. 3, 2014, pp. 277-291. *Project MUSE.*

Pope, Alexander. "Prologue." *Cato, a Tragedy*. By Joseph Addison. 1713. Printed and Sold by Rob. and Foulis, 1765. *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online*. Accessed 22 May 2020.

Richardson, Samuel. *Clarissa*. 1747-8. Penguin Books, 2004.

Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela*. 1740. Oxford University Press, 2008.

Rosenberger, Diana. *"Virtue Rewarded*: What #MeToo Can Learn from Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*." *South Central Review*, Vol. 36, pp. 17-32, 2019. *JSTOR*.

Todd, Janet. "Suicide and Biography." *Comparative Criticism*, Vol. 25, pp. 57-66, 2004.

Warner, William B. Licensing Entertainment: *The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684–1750*. University of California Press, 1998.

Weever, John. *Ancient Funerall Monuments within the United Monarchie of Great Britaine, Ireland, and the Islands Adiacent with the Dissolued Monasteries Therein Contained*. London, Printed by Thomas Harper. 1631. *ProQuest.* Web. 22 May 2020.

Wilson, Brett. *A Race of Female Patriots: Women and Public Spirit on the British Stage, 1688-1745*. Bucknell University Press, 2012.