

SEVEN SHILLINGS AND A PENNY: FEMALE SUICIDE IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

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In 1961, the United Kingdom eradicated all penalties for attempted suicide with Parliament's passage of the Suicide Act.¹ Although previous legal provisos had already restricted certain penalties, such as the loss of property, the Suicide Act marked comprehensive change towards the treatment of English suicides. For the past 800 years, those who had engaged in self-killings lost the right to Christian burials and proper graves. Their corpses were hung, burned, dragged through the streets, dumped into rivers, or buried at crossroads with stakes driven through their hearts. Related survivors who begged for royal or political intercession did so at the expense of the suicide's reputation—labeling him or her as insane or ill—so that they might escape the legal and social marks of shame. The property and chattels of a suicide were denied to his or her descendants and instead seized by the court or the church.

A society that, over hundreds of years, maintains a particular official position towards a specific act will eventually find that position manifested in the beliefs and values of its citizens. As George Colt points out, even though Parliament passed the Suicide Act in 1961, "moral outrage [still] found legal approval. In 1969 an Isle of Man court ordered a teenager who had attempted suicide to be flogged."² Given this relatively recent penalty, is it any wonder that English citizens tolerated and maintained a hostile attitude towards suicide for so long? Suicide violated legal and ecclesiastical rules and mores. It threatened to jeopardize economic stability—although this rarely proved to be the case—and perhaps more importantly, cast doubt on one's descendants. Indeed, as Alexander Murray notes in his seminal study of medieval suicide, "shame, not economic loss, was the issue on which families laid most emphasis when appealing to judges not to condemn their dead kinsmen for killing themselves."³ The concept of suicide as a source of shame for survivors illuminates a culture in which disgrace could destroy an individual's position within the social community (e.g. non-familial

relationships), and position within the church community (which was sometimes indistinguishable from the social community). As a result, shame helps explain why suicide was and still can be a taboo, and possibly why records of it did not often exist. But it also causes one to wonder about other sources of shame, and about how those sources were confronted. And one such source that dovetails with suicide in the society of medieval England is a human target of shame: women.

Try to sketch a description of the average medieval English woman and at best what emerges is a paragraph of impressions and hypotheses. Without generalizing, we do not know if she wanted or enjoyed having children, if she hoped to farm or to write, if she found cities oppressive or exciting. She probably went to church and knew how to cook, could treat many illnesses and wounds, and was familiar with weaving, stitching and darning. But we do not know what sort of interior life she had, and that lack of knowledge alone makes it difficult to know what angered or pleased her, filled her with joy, or drove her to despair. We do not know why she would have killed herself.

The very first record of a medieval suicide—from any judicial process, anywhere—is of an English woman who hung herself sometime between the Decembers of 1171 and 1172. Her worldly goods were seven shillings and a penny.⁴ Although we know this anonymous woman for the distinction of her being the first recorded suicide, our knowledge of her death appears to be an aberration. The statistics for female suicides across medieval Europe leave little room for drawing conclusions. The male to female ratio of suicide is three to one, or seventy-four to twenty-six percent, which Alexander Murray derives from the 546 reported suicide cases between 1000 and 1500 CE.⁵ However, this statistic conceals two fundamental problems confronting the scholar of medieval suicide. The first is that there were probably more than 546 suicides, but we do not know of them because they were either not reported as suicides or they were not reported at all. Most medieval death records exist as a result of coroners—inquiries into violent or suspicious deaths or as the result of a chronicler's desire to mention a particular legal penalty that a suicide necessitated.⁶ For example, the death of a

Nuremberg woman was noted in a chronicle because her body was burned after she hung herself.⁷ Typically, deaths were embedded in chronicles, legal, and religious records, making them difficult to trace. The second fundamental problem is that female deaths are underrepresented in all of these sources. As a result, even if female suicides did not occur as frequently as male suicides, it is likely that they still occurred more often than the medieval record reveals.

Modern scholarship shows some of the difficulties involved in establishing both male and female suicide rates. In the conclusion to his first volume, Alexander Murray states, “in recent decades, the achievement of female equality in civil life has cast a sinister shadow on suicide rates: in respect of suicide, too, the sexes have moved towards equality in advanced western countries.”⁸ Only a few years before Murray, George Colt wrote that in the United States recent federal statistics reported “three times as many males as females commit suicide,” but added that “many experts believe the true suicide rate [of both sexes] may be two or three times the reported rate.”⁹ Murray and Colt, writing within ten years of one another, cite two obstacles to calculating suicide rates. First, that the emergence of gender equality has led to more equal male and female suicide rates suggests either that “female equality” has induced a greater number of female suicides or that when male and female suicides are accurately reported then the rates are more parallel. Second, Colt’s admission that “experts” doubt the American federally reported suicide rate implies that because the statistics themselves are inaccurate, then the gender ratio of “three times as many females” could be as well. Furthermore, as Brant Wenegrat notes, “although women attempt suicide, or make suicide gestures, more frequently than do men, completed suicides are much more common in men than in women,” partly as a result of the different means that the two sexes prefer.¹⁰ The one conclusion that can be drawn from these various statistical pictures, then, is that the systematic underreporting of female deaths, and the identification of some suicides as accidents or other fatal incidents, complicates the actual rate of female suicide. In addition, it is highly unlikely that this general inaccuracy is limited to Western countries in the last sixty years; on the contrary, it speaks to a trend

of misrepresentation, or a lack of representation, of female deaths throughout Western history.

Through an examination of the coroners' inquests of medieval Oxford, I intend to show the possible inaccuracy of the accepted statistics of medieval male to female suicide rates. Furthermore, by viewing these findings in light of contemporaneous medieval historical, religious, and literary depictions of female suicide—specifically Symeon of Durham's *Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham*, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the tale of Canace in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, and the Legend of Dido in Chaucer's *The Legend of Good Women*—I aim to reveal the societal attitudes towards and treatment of women, including their targeting as a source of shame, that made female suicide possible.

The surviving coroners' inquests of medieval Oxford examined in this paper date from December 22, 1296 to September 13, 1389. They can be found in H. E. Salter's *Records of Mediaeval Oxford: Coroners' Inquests, the Walls of Oxford, etc.*, an early twentieth-century text that raises more questions than it answers as to the preservation and existence of the medieval Oxford coroners' rolls. Salter's text is a modern English translation and edition of a few different Latin sources. He notes in his brief introduction that surviving inquests can be found in "Brian Twyne's notebooks," "from a roll in the Bodleian," a volume from the Selden Society, and the "Record Office in London"; Salter adds that the purpose of *Records of Mediaeval Oxford* is to publish "all the remaining inquests that are known."¹¹ J. E. Thorold Rogers, in his text *Oxford City Documents*, outlines the possible diversity of these inquest sources as well as their haphazard preservation in the preface to his inclusion of some of the same inquests that Salter publishes. He writes as follows:

Most of the inquests [. . .] are extracted from [Brian] Twyne's Collections, an immense repertory of Oxford antiquities, and to all appearance the principal source of Anthony Wood's notes. Twyne copied from the Records in the [Oxford] Tower, and the City Archives. Not a few of the documents which he handled in the National Collection have perished or become illegible, and many of the documents which were, near three centuries ago, in the possession of the city, have inevitably disappeared.

[Some] were copied from a portion of the coroner's (John de Osney's) roll, which is still preserved in the Bodleian Library. Another portion of the roll was in the city Archives, and was copied by Twyne [. . .] A third portion of the original roll is said to be preserved in the Archives of the Bridgewater.¹²

Thorold Rogers' selections remain in their original Latin, and while he does not include all of the inquests that Salter does, his text serves as a good check against the translations of those that are in *Records of Mediaeval Oxford*. Along these same lines, the uncertainty surrounding Salter's source material cannot be ignored, as it further complicates the search for ascertainable facts regarding medieval female suicide. Yet this does not necessarily preclude an examination of Salter's text, nor is it an insurmountable obstacle to understanding better how female suicides may have been treated. First, the way in which female deaths are reported in these inquests alludes to the manner in which violent or unexpected female deaths may have been handled in medieval Oxford. Second, the low number of female deaths in the inquests suggests their systematic underreporting, and as a result, alludes to other medieval sources with similar low female death rates. Yet the large holes in this written record must be conceded.

As stated earlier, coroners' inquests were required if a violent or unexpected death occurred. The coroner examined the corpse, and then assembled a jury of individuals from parishes closest to where the body had been found. Together the coroner and the jury established a verdict on the cause of death, culling their decision from testimonies by those who knew the deceased. Furthermore, if a death was determined to be a suicide, then "the coroner had to order the body to be buried in unhallowed ground."¹³ Although not paid officials, coroners did exercise considerable authority. Medieval Oxford had two coroners, who recorded their findings on rolls in Latin. Usually coroners' rolls were tossed away once all pertinent judicial proceedings ceased, but these, as Salter explains, were stored in the Oxford town archives, and thus were preserved.¹⁴ They catalogue a total of 186 deaths: 169 men and seventeen women. Based on the 1377 poll tax, the ratio of men to women in medieval

Oxford was close to fifty-fifty.¹⁵ As a result, it seems unlikely that only seventeen women, or nine percent of reported violent or sudden deaths, warranted a coroner's attention between 1296 and 1389.

A closer examination of both the male and female deaths in these rolls reveals some interesting discrepancies. Of the 169 male deaths, one is labeled a *felo de se*, or suicide, by the coroner, and fourteen others strike the reader as possible suicides. These possible male suicides in disguise concern solitary drownings and falls onto knives. Of the seventeen female deaths, one is an infanticide and five are possible suicides, the latter of which are all drownings. Again, if we could prove that each of these five deaths were a suicide, then the percentage of self-killings within the total of female violent deaths would be twenty-nine. Of course, considerable obstacles still prevent one from definitively claiming that the ratio of male to female suicides is flawed, including the fact that the number of female violent deaths itself seems implausible, and any further calculations are contingent upon that central one.

But one should consider the suicide that the coroners do identify in these rolls; it is reproduced as follows:

It came to pass on Monday after the feast of St. Gregory that Henry de Bordesle died in the house of Ric. le Coke in the parish of St. Thomas-the-Martyr in the suburb of Oxford [. . .] the said Henry had long been sick with diverse diseases, and on the Saturday before the said Monday he took a knife and smote himself in the belly, for he was as were mad; and afterwards he lived until the Sunday and then died of his wound; and the knife is priced at one penny. And they say that he had his church rights [*Felo de se*, in the margin].¹⁶

Several things about this report catch the reader's attention. First, it is an account of a man who others claim "had long been sick with diverse diseases," an allegation that explains the "mad" state in which he slays himself. Second, the death occurred in the house of another person, Richard le Coke, a circumstance that could implicate a homicide if not proved otherwise. Third, Henry had "his church rights" before dying. This detail shows that someone in a position of legal authority accepted the "mad" alibi,

and furthermore, that the coroner found this important enough to record. But more importantly for our purposes, Henry's death by a knife-blow could only be explained by three possibilities: homicide, suicide, or accident. Given the other circumstances cited in this report, suicide really does seem to be the most viable cause of Henry's demise. Four other male knife deaths exist in the rolls, but in each of these the deceased is noted as having been alone and either sleepy or drunk, a hypothesis that allows the coroner to conclude the deaths as accidents.¹⁷

Murray notes a couple cases of female suicide by knife or blade in medieval Europe, but for the most part, if they did not hang themselves, women seem to have chosen methods that could easily have been disguised as something else, such as drowning or jumping from high places.¹⁸ Considering the number of female self-hangings throughout medieval Europe, it is unusual that none are in the Oxford rolls—although there are no male self-hangings recorded either.¹⁹ Instead, drowning emerges in these coroners' reports as the most likely means by which women as well as men may have killed themselves.²⁰ The male and female drowning deaths are reproduced as follows, and I have included the two Latin originals available from Rogers' text:

Male Deaths

[Willelmus de Bangor, August, 2, 1300] Willelmus de Bangor ivit balneare in riparia Thamisiae inter Mideley et exclusas supradictas et per infortunium se submersit, et dicunt super sacramentum suum quod non est aliquis culpabilis de morte eius.²¹

[William de Bangor, August 2, 1300] He was a clerk from Ireland, and was drowned near Medley, bathing.²²

[Johannes de Neushom, Dec. 7, 1301] Isabella uxor eius primo invenit ipsum mortuum et statim levavit hutesium [. . .] Johannes de Neushom ivit post prandium ad querendum virgas pro pueris quos docebat castigandis, et ascendit super quondam salicem ad scindendum virgas juxta stagnum molendinae quod vocatur *Temple Mile*, et per infortunium cecidit in aquam et se submersit. Et dicunt predicti juratores super sacramentum suum quod non est aliquis culpabilis de morte eius.²³

[John de Neushom, December 7, 1301] One afternoon he climbed into a willow tree on the banks of the Charwell, near Magdalen Bridge, collecting twigs for a birch to chastise the boys, and fell into the mill-pool of Temple Mill and was drowned. His wife [Isabella] came to look for him and found his body.²⁴

[Edmund de London, June 14, 1305] Edmund de London, clerk, was found dead in the water of the Thames [. . .]²⁵ all the said jurors say upon their oath that on Friday last after dinner the said Edmund bathed in that water by himself, and thus he was drowned there by misfortune; and no one else is to be blamed for his death.²⁶

[John de Wycumbe, December 7, 1306] John de Wyncumbe was found dead in the fishery below the Castle of Oxford.²⁷

[John le Coc, July 4, 1343] John le Coc of Somerset, servant of the Abbey of Rewley, dead in the Thames by the Abbey [. . .] John le Coc bathed in the Thames on Thursday without a companion and so was drowned.²⁸

[John Funke, July 10, 1346] John Funke on the Sunday before that Monday was lying sick in bed, and about midnight he rose, for he was as it were mad, and for want of guarding he went forth from the house and fell in that cesspit and was drowned.²⁹

[John de Salesbury, July 13, 1346] John de Salesbury on Wednesday bathed in the Thames and was drowned.³⁰

[Henry Fryeis, July 5, 1383] Brother Henry on Sunday last after dinner went to bathe in the Charewelle, and in bathing fell into a pool and so was drowned, and certain clerks unknown drew him from the water by night.³¹

[Robert Hocham, May 26, 1393] Robert bathed in Charwell and so came to Irischemanespylle [*sic*] and there was drowned.³²

[John Tragschyr, November 1, 1393] John Tragschyr, canon of Oseney, was found dead in the water near Castle Mill within the liberty of Oxford. The jury say that he

slipped on a bridge called Quaking Bridge and fell in the water and was drowned. [Salter's note: "Quaking Bridge still retains its name. Evidently in those days it had no railing." Salter notes a rail-less bridge only once more, in the case of a man who was knocked off Little Bridge three years later].³³

Female Deaths

[Mariota of Wolvercote, December 31, 1342] Mariota, of Wolvercote, was found dead in the Thames by Portmeadow
[. . .] the said Mariota, wishing to fill a jug with water at Godstow Mill, at the third hour fell into the water and was drowned, and was carried by the stream to the said spot.³⁴

[Matilda de Gareford, June 5, 1344] Matilda de Gareford died in the street and parish of St. Edward [. . .] Matilda wished to draw water from a well within the abode of John de Swanebourne, and by misfortune slipped and fell in the well, and afterwards arose from the well and ascended from it by a ladder; and she said that she would go home, and in going she fell down in the street and died there. Asked what was the cause of her death they³⁵ say that she fell in the well; and they say that none other is to be blamed for her death, and that she had her church rights.³⁶

[Isabella Cobbus, October 23, 1391; listed under "Nicholas Cobbus," her husband] Isabella, wife of Nicholas Cobbus, was found dead in a hole [*puteo*] at Bolstake in Northgate Hundred
[. . .] the said Isabella fell from a bridge at Bolstake into the water and was so drowned.³⁷

[Juliana Schrider, December 12, 1392] Juliana, a daughter of John Schrider, was found dead in a brook in the parish of St. Thomas in Northgate hundred [. . .] Juliana slipped from a bridge outside her father's gate, and fell into the water and so died.³⁸

[Magota de la Chaunber, January 5, 1393] Magota de la Chaunber was found dead at Grantepoonnte in water called Charwelle within the liberty of Oxford. The jury say that on that day she slipped on a bridge called Trelmylne

“powe” and fell into the water on a stake that was in the water, and she was injured by the stake and also drowned.³⁹

Each of these deaths suggests the possibility of suicide, yet none were reported as such. The term “by misfortune” appears twice, once each in the male and female accounts, and in every case exists the statement or the implication that the deceased was alone. The absence of witnesses in particular raises some interesting questions about reading these deaths as suicides, and in some cases these deaths could even be read as possible homicides. For example, did John le Coq die while bathing alone, or did someone drown the servant and then vanish without raising a hue and cry? Likewise, did Isabella de Neushom push her husband John into the mill-pool and then claim she found his body? Why did no one see or try to save Isabella Cobbus after she “fell from a bridge at Blostake?” In addition, medieval English knowledge of swimming is difficult to ascertain from these rolls. On the one hand, within the entirety of the rolls there are not that many water deaths, and with regard to the men, bathing alone must have been a normal activity if it could serve as a believable alibi. On the other hand, none of these individuals, particularly the women, seem to be able to swim and thus save themselves once they end up in the river, mill-pond, or cesspit. The euphemistic nature of each of these drownings, and the many unanswerable questions they raise, suggest that each could be considered a suicide.

However, a couple of important details distinguish the female accounts from those of the male. For example, as was just noted, many of these men drown while bathing, a solitary practice that seems to have been common, and therefore would further expose men than women to the dangers of drowning. In contrast, women appear to gather water for their households more often than men, but the majority of female drowning cases concern falling off of bridges, not drowning while collecting water. Granted it looks like splitting hairs to parse five inquests when the issue is the general lack of female cases to examine, but it does not seem irrational

to expect more reports of female well-drownings, not less, if well drowning was a common accident and not a possible suicide. In terms of framing suicides as accidents, either a well-drowning or a bridge death could function as a useful alibi for women who were concerned that family or children would be marked by society as the relatives of a suicide. Furthermore, both well-drownings and bridge deaths evoke Wenegrat's female "suicide gestures" comment, in that neither act is as definitive as a self-stabbing or self-hanging. In other words, Juliana Schrider could feasibly have been saved by a passer-by when she fell into the water "outside her father's gate."

The fact that Salter notes the absence of a bridge railing in the death of John Tragschyr might say more about his research interests than about suicide, but Little Bridge appears to be unique in this regard, and none of the women fall from it. If there were railings on the ones from which they did slip, then the act of falling from a bridge might have involved more energy on the part of the deceased. Unfortunately, medieval records on this topic are as muddy as the Thames. Murray cites one example of a female suicide that involves a bridge: "At some date in the 1290s Gillian [Newton] was drowned in a ditch near the house where she and her husband lived, at Witchford near Ely [Cambridgeshire]. About a week later, the coroner recorded that she had fallen accidentally while trying to cross the ditch by a 'beam.'"⁴⁰ The interesting thing about this inquest is that the coroner had actually made an earlier one only hours after Gillian's death, in which he concluded that she had intentionally drowned herself. However, her husband Reginald "clearly had local friends,"⁴¹ and so the subsequent inquest was made. Given the consequences faced by the relatives of a suicide, perhaps it is not unreasonable to imagine that a coroner could be pressured to label what looks like a suicide as an accidental death instead. But in the case of these five Oxford women, drowning suffices as a possible euphemism for suicide. Any woman can slip off a bridge or into a well if she tries hard enough.

From our perspective, an important aspect of viewing these female deaths is that female suicide in medieval England needs to be re-evaluated. As stated earlier, it seems unusual that only

nine percent of the total of violent or sudden deaths in medieval Oxford were women, particularly as they would have been subject to phenomena like domestic violence and to events like sudden illness, fire, and accidents as frequently as men. This small percentage raises a host of questions, including whether or not coroners always pursued investigations into female deaths, or whether or not female deaths were masked as the result of other supposedly non-violent or non-sudden acts, such as childbirth, long illness, or old age. But more pertinent to this essay, the fact that twenty-nine percent of those seventeen reported women could be read as suicide suggests that if women in medieval England were to die violent or unexpected deaths, then at most twenty-nine percent of the time those deaths could be suicides. This is perhaps not so unusual if we accept that women did not engage in warfare, duels, feuds, or violent crimes as often as men in medieval Europe. But in order to examine this possibility, we must look at the ways in which women were treated and perceived in medieval England. An assessment of religious, historical, and literary texts of the time period reveals the manner in which medieval English women, like the act of suicide, were regarded as sources of shame, and how this attitude might have shaped their own conceptions of themselves. I will begin this investigation with the Venerable Bede.

Bede states in his eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History* that around the year 680, the Coldingham nunnery “was burned down through carelessness. However, all who knew the facts could readily perceive that it happened because of the wickedness of its members.”⁴² The destruction of Coldingham was perceived at the time as well deserved because its female members drank, wore pretty clothes, and enticed the male monks with whom they lived.⁴³ As a result, the Anglo-Saxon monk Cuthbert, at that time the Bishop of Lindisfarne, forbade all male religious personnel from interaction with the opposite sex, and furthermore, as Symeon of Durham notes, “he completely removed women from the right of entry into his church.”⁴⁴ Many later texts of Northern medieval England reiterated a negative connection between Cuthbert and Anglo-Saxon women. Symeon’s treatise, the *Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham*, was written in the

early twelfth century. Symeon recounts the story of Cuthbert's command forbidding women from his church and then elaborates on it, stating "this custom is meticulously observed today, to such an extent that women are not even given permission to enter the cemeteries of those churches where [Cuthbert's] body rested for a time."⁴⁵ He then cites some examples of women—although he alludes to many others—who "with rash daring" defied this custom. One of these was a nun, formerly the wife of a rich man, who "heard many people tell of the varied beauty of the ornaments of the church [of Durham] and was fired with womanly eagerness to see new things." In order to reach the church, she walked through the cemetery path, but, as Symeon quickly points out, "not with impunity! For after this she went out of her mind and bit out her own tongue; and the madness did not leave her before she had lost her life by cutting her own throat. For, as it was not easy to keep her in the house, she wandered about without a fixed home, and one day she was found dead under a tree, her throat bleeding and the knife with which she ended her own life in her hand."⁴⁶ The monk then adds, "many other divine signs against similar audacity in other women could be related here,"⁴⁷ but that in the interest of his narrative this example should suffice.

It is difficult to justify speculating on the attitude of an entire populace towards the female sex based on one text. However, there are a couple of reasons why Symeon's commentary on these two women could be representative of medieval English belief as a whole. First, the cult of St. Cuthbert remained strong for centuries after his death, particularly in Northern England and so stories regarding him and his decrees would have received a wide audience. Second, ten manuscripts of Symeon's *Tract* exist today, which suggests that his narrative circulated with some popularity among the religious and literate communities of medieval England.⁴⁸ The tale of an audacious woman defying Cuthbert and God and paying for this defiance with the "divine sign" of her own death marks a disturbing perception of women and punishment to which many people would have had access. Her fatal descent into madness is contingent upon an innate self-absorption, foolishness, and "womanly eagerness" that distinguishes her from the male sex and

invites a form of death abhorrent to the Christian community. If Symeon's text did receive attention in different areas of England, then can we argue that this misogynist portrayal had no effect on, or correlation to, the beliefs about women of its readers? Or similarly, that it had no effect on the perception women had of themselves and their actions? The fact that suicide is a significant consequence of this female defiance implies that this type of death among women may have been extreme, but that it was not esoteric.

Three hundred years after Symeon and contemporaneous with the medieval Oxford coroners' inquests, Margery Kempe wrote the narrative of her religious awakening. In this text, Kempe affords us a precious view of mental and spiritual interiority, particularly with regard to the topic of female suicide. After the birth of her first child, Kempe "dyspered of her lyfe."⁴⁹ This "dysper" led Kempe to ask for her priest, in the hopes that the confession of a previous sinful deed would alleviate her pain and allow her to live. But as she points out, without waiting for her full confession, the priest begins to reprimand her.⁵⁰ The hasty, dismissive attitude of this priest has near-fatal consequences for Margery. As a result of his intemperate treatment, Kempe "went out of her mind."⁵¹ The narrative continues with an account of her madness and self-mutilation; she bites herself, rips at her skin and her hair, using her nails, "for she had no other instruments." She is bound to keep herself from further harming her own body.⁵²

Kempe's straightforward articulation is a dramatic portrayal of desperation. The only reason this portrayal is accessible to readers, however, is because of its pertinence to the real root of the story, Kempe's salvation by Christ. Instead of mimicking the paradigm of Symeon's nun, Kempe does not slit her throat, or slip off of a bridge, or jump into a well. Christ appears to Margery and gives her a new perception of herself, one that underscores those attributes of hers that the priest and that Symeon did and would have ignored. There is no shame in Margery's life after her vision of Christ; she lives.

One way to view Kempe's account of near self-destruction is to see it in light of the accounts *not* written. The "dysper" from

which she suffered would have afflicted more women than just one in Norfolk, and those women might not have had household members around to bind them to their beds or to hold back their hands when they tried to tear off their own skin. Not only might their suicide attempts have been successful, as a result, but they also would probably not have had the later access to literate people that Kempe's piety afforded her if they did survive, thus preventing the opportunity for their stories to be recorded and preserved. Furthermore, if they had successfully committed suicide, would their deaths have been labeled as such? Or, would these deaths have been labeled something else, such as "died from complications of childbirth?" If they did not fit the category of violent or sudden deaths, and thus did not necessitate a coroner's inquest, then a death record might not exist at all.

An alternative window into the treatment of female suicide, however, is the literary texts of late medieval England, specifically those of John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer. Both authors draw upon classical accounts of famous female suicides and rework them in a way reflective of their society. In Book III of his *Confessio Amantis*, Gower recounts the incestuous love story of Canace and her brother, Machaire. When Canace discovers that she is pregnant, Machaire abandons her, and at that point he vanishes from the story. Fearing her father's anger, Canace begs him for mercy, but he is not to be sated by pleading alone. Instead, he bids a knight to give Canace a sword.⁵³ Receiving the weapon, she knows her fate,⁵⁴ but before she dies, Canace writes a letter to Machaire. "For thee mot I be ded algate," she writes, "Thilke ende may I noght asterte, / And yit with al myn hole herte, / Whil that lasteth eny breth, / I wol the love into my deth,"⁵⁵ or "For thee always may I be dead / So that I may not escape that end, / And yet with all my whole heart, / While I [still have] any lasting breath, / I will love thee until my death." When Canace's father walks in, her new infant is "bathende in hire blod,"⁵⁶ and still filled with wrath, the king has the baby exposed in the wilderness.

In spite of its classical origin, Gower's tale of Canace and Machaire reveals specific medieval English attitudes towards women and punishment. The fact that Machaire disappears from the story

physically unscathed underscores Gower's disinterest in penalizing him, which is significant since the lesson of the tale regards the sinfulness of incest, and two participants exist here. But it is not so much the crime of incest on which Gower focuses as the crimes of punishment, the suicide and infanticide, that strike the reader as particularly damning. In addition, her letter reveals no sense of injustice; indeed, her only concern is Machaire's love and regard for her child. Canace's death is an exaggeration of the type of suicide that an English woman would have committed; the princess kills herself with a sword in front of her happy baby, she does not steal off to the river and drown herself alone. Not only would a woman feel shame on behalf of Canace in hearing the story but also shame at the thought of committing such sins herself. There is no record that attests to whether or not Mariota of Wolvercote or Magota de la Chaunber had lovers or children, but if they did then their drowning deaths saved both their names and their descendants in a way that Canace's does not.

Chaucer also reworks a classical suicide through the narrative of Dido in *The Legend of Good Women*. Dido pleads with Aeneas to marry her, stating that she is with child and that he must do both of them justice. But Chaucer's Aeneas remains unfeeling, and "as a traytour" he deserts her.⁵⁷ When Dido awakes to this abandonment—and to his sword, which he also left—she writes a letter to her lover, like Canace, and then kills herself with the sword. As Dido writes to Aeneas, "Not that I trowe to geten yow ageyn, / For wel I wot that it is al in veyn" or "not because I believe I will get you again, / For I well know that it is all in vein," but rather "syn my mane is lost thourgh yow [. . .] I may wel lese on yow a word or letter, / Al be it that I shal ben nevere the better / For thilke wynd that blew youre ship away, / The same wynd hath blowe away youre fey,"⁵⁸ or "because my name is lost through you [. . .] I may as well loose on you a word or letter, / All be it that I shall never be the better / For that wind that blew your ship away, / Is the same wind that has blown away your faith." Dido may die, but her words end the poem, and her letter gives the reader a glimpse of her thoughts right before death, which is a privilege that the inquests do not allow. In

addition, Dido's letter provides a contrast to Canace's; where hers is assertive, Canace's is pleading, and where Dido's names Aeneas as fickle—"For thilke wynd that blew youre ship away, / The same wynd hath blowe away youre fey,"—Canace's remains silent on her lover's weaknesses. Yet the resonance these two literary suicides have with one another is hyperbolic of those historical ones of Margery Kempe and the Oxford coroners' inquests. The noble lover's sword invites a glamour absent from well drowning and hanging; the despondent letters give a voice to women whose real-life counterparts were silent participants in their own death records.

Many of the methods employed by female suicides throughout Europe made it difficult or impossible to recover bodies or evidence; others made it easy to disguise the suicide as death by a different cause. Most significantly however, they often simply were not reported at all. If consistent and accurate reporting of female suicide is limited to the past sixty years, then our entire modern perspective on medieval female deaths is problematized. As Murray comments, "medieval inequalities between the two sexes extended to their access to record,"⁵⁹ and this inequality resonates in documents such as the Oxford coroners' rolls, where the representation of all female deaths is a mere nine percent. In addition, examining these reported deaths and hunting for the absent deaths through the lens of shame reveals some of the reasons why medieval English women might have killed themselves. They were regarded as selfish and wicked, their pleas ignored by priests and fathers, their self-destruction—when it occurred—as well deserved.

Texts including coroners' rolls, religious treatises, poetry, and even modern commentary on the phenomena of both medieval and modern suicide all ultimately offer only snippets of evidence and insight into what is an imperceptible, extreme act. The one thing that does remain clear is that female deaths were systematically underreported and inaccurately recorded in medieval England, and that this one supposition calls all data on female suicide at that time and place into question. The invisible nature of this subject suggests that this might always be the case.

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1. George How Colt, *The Enigma of Suicide* (New York: Summit, 1991), p. 131.
2. Colt, *Enigma*, p. 131.
3. Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages: The Violent Against Themselves*, Vol. I (Oxford: OUP, 1998), p. 29.
4. Murray, *Suicide*, I, p. 132.
5. Murray, *Suicide*, I, p. vii. Murray cites these dates as his bookends for medieval Europe, and geographically identifies this entity as “the four monarchies of England, France, Germany, and Italy.”
6. H. E. Salter, ed., *Records of Mediaeval Oxford: Coroners’ Inquests, the Walls of Oxford, etc.* (Oxford: Chronicle Company, 1912), p. 1.
7. Murray, *Suicide*, I, p. 101.
8. Murray, *Suicide*, I, p. 379. His initial quote in this paragraph is also from that page.
9. Colt, *Enigma*, p. 38.
10. Brant Wenegrat, *Illness and Power: Women’s Mental Disorders and the Battle Between the Sexes* (New York: New York UP, 1995), p. 164, n. 4. This comment refers to suicidal means such as weapons, as well as less quantifiable means such as mental disorders and alcoholism.
11. Salter, *Records*, p. 2. With regard to the Seldon Society volume, Salter writes, “the Seldon Society has printed a few more [inquests],” p. 2.
12. J. E. Thorold Rogers, *Oxford City Documents: Financial and Judicial, 1268-1665* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1891), p. 145.
13. R. F. Hunnisett, *The Medieval Coroner* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1961), p. 34.
14. Salter, *Records*, pp. 1-2.
15. Josiah Cox Russell, *British Medieval Population* (Albuquerque: U of New Mexico P, 1948), p. 155.
16. Salter, *Records*, p. 26.
17. Salter, *Records*: Thomas Astol, fell asleep on his knife at the dinner table, p. 24; Henry de Stodley, stumbled onto his neck and cut his throat while drunk, p. 39; John de Wynter, fell on his knife while walking, pp. 39-40; Nicholas Huske, fell on his knife while walking, p. 50.
18. Murray, *Suicide*, I. Interestingly, these two examples are both in England: a pregnant woman in Northumberland kills herself with a razor in 1279, p. 160; Symeon of Durham notes a nun who slits her throat—see second half of this paper—Murray cites Symeon on p. 117.
19. Murray, *Suicide*, I, some of the self-hangings cited: Jeannette Maillart, 1426 France, pp. 223-4; Isabel Tronart, 1352 France, pp. 207-8; Sacristan’s wife, 1469 Germany, p. 101; Anonymous, 1293 England, p. 132; Dulcia, 1256 England, p. 151; Anonymous, 1256 England, p. 175; Melissant, 1238 France, p. 181; Mehand du Molin, 1266 France, p. 181; Belon Feret, 1317 France, p. 182; Maroie Paravaise, 1364 France, p. 183; Anonymous, 1252 Italy, p. 248.
20. Although Murray does cite one case of a thirteenth-century Kentish woman who killed herself by burning down her house (*Suicide*, I, p. 150), I have omitted

- burning /candle deaths from this argument—for both sexes—as flammable lodging materials and falling candles or sparks did result in accidental deaths.
21. Thorold Rogers, *Oxford*, pp. 155-6.
 22. Salter, *Records*, pp. 8-9.
 23. Thorold Rogers, pp. 161-2.
 24. Salter, *Records*, pp. 9-10.
 25. The ellipses in these excerpts omit the names and parishes of the jurors.
 26. Salter, *Records*, p. 14.
 27. Salter, *Records*, p. 19.
 28. Salter, *Records*, p. 28.
 29. Salter, *Records*, p. 37.
 30. Salter, *Records*, p. 38.
 31. Salter, *Records*, p. 43.
 32. Salter, *Records*, p. 46.
 33. Salter, *Records*, p. 50.
 34. Salter, *Records*, p. 26.
 35. The jurors, all of whom are men, were probably not at the well.
 36. Salter, *Records*, p. 31.
 37. Salter, *Records*, pp. 45-6.
 38. Salter, *Records*, p. 46.
 39. Salter, *Records*, p. 50.
 40. Murray, *Suicide*, I, p. 177.
 41. Murray, *Suicide*, I, p. 177.
 42. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Leo Sherley-Price (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 251. Bede, *Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum*, ed. Charles Plummer, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon, 1896), Bk. IV, Ch. 25, p. 262.
 43. Bede, *Ecclesiastical*, p. 253. Coldingham was a double monastery, not uncommon in Anglo-Saxon England, in which nuns and monks utilized the monastery together but lived in separate lodgings. Bede, *Historiam Ecclesiasticam*, Vol. I, p. 265.
 44. Symeon of Durham, *Libellus de Exordio Atque Procursu Istius, hoc est Dunhelmensis Ecclesie; Tract on the Origins and Progress of this the Church of Durham*, ed. and trans. David Rollason (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), p. 107. All quotations from Symeon are David Rollason's English translations.
 45. Symeon of Durham, *Libellus*, p. 109.
 46. Symeon of Durham, *Libellus*, p. 109.
 47. Symeon of Durham, *Libellus*, p. 109.
 48. Symeon of Durham, *Libellus*, pp. xvii-xli.
 49. Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Sanford Brown Meech (London: Early English Text Society, 1940), p. 6. All translations from Margery Kempe are my own.
 50. Kempe, *Book*, p. 7.
 51. Kempe, *Book*, p. 7.
 52. Kempe, *Book*, p. 8.

53. John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, Vol. II, ed. Russell A. Peck (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS, 2003), p. 157, l. 252-4. All translations from Gower are my own.
54. Gower, *Confessio*, p. 158, l. 307-11.
55. Gower, *Confessio*, p. 157, l. 286-290.
56. Gower, *Confessio*, p. 158, l. 312.
57. Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), p. 613, l. 1328. All translations from Chaucer are my own.
58. Benson, *Chaucer*, p. 613, l. 1358-1364.
59. Murray, *Suicide*, I, p. 380.