Fact, Truth, and the Limits of Sympathy: Newspaper Reporting of Suicide in the North of England, circa 1750–1830

In a recently completed study of suicide in England and Scotland, 1500–1850, I used all types of non-fictional documentation, including sermons, in order to give a textured understanding of how survivors handled its practical, spiritual, and ideological aftermath. These included coroners’ inquests, financial account books, estate papers, legal texts, civil and criminal court records, and asylum case notes. Among these sources newspapers stood out as the most important mass medium that shaped changing representations of self-murder in the Georgian era. The accepted version of their role stems from Foucault, who proposed that eighteenth-century papers offered increasingly bland “factual” accounts of crime that were dry, unemotional, and lacking social depth: “les silences de la chronique” (Ambroise-Rendu; Foucault 59–69). They substituted a minimal amount of vicarious knowledge for direct and textured experience obtained through personal interchange.

The leading historians of English suicide, Michael MacDonald and Terence Murphy, followed this line, while arguing that newspapers were instrumental in promoting a more matter-of-fact, secular, and sympathetic understanding of self-murder among their readerships: a modern medium promoting a modern message in MacDonald and Murphy’s extended narrative of modernization, Sleepless Souls. Instead, I have followed the line so brilliantly set out by Kathleen Wilson in her study of the eighteenth-century provincial press:

Newspapers were ... central instruments in the social production of information. Both representing and verifying local experience, they refracted ... events into socially meaningful categories and hierarchies of importance, bestowing order on the disordered and coordinating the imagination of social time and space. (40)

My project is explicitly British, comparing northern English and Scottish newspapers from the early eighteenth century to the 1820s. Because of the remit of “Beyond Depression,” I discuss only the north of England in this article. In my study, I compare coverage of suicide in newspapers from con-
trasting parts of the north: the bustling commercial and industrial city of Newcastle and the commercially important, but more rural and stable county of Cumberland and Westmorland. The Newcastle Courant fulfilled the need for a paper with an early start (1711), steady publication, and regional readership in the northeast. The northwest did not have its own newspapers until relatively late, but the Cumberland Pacquet, or Ware’s Whitehaven Advertiser, published consistently from 1774. I pored through a total of 7,681 numbers of the Courant and 2,620 copies of the Pacquet, starting from first publication and finishing in 1824, just after the law on the burial of English suicides was changed to prevent the notorious practices of staking and highway burial. Local and regional suicides can be found at the beginning or the end of the section of local news headed “Newcastle” or “Whitehaven,” which in the second half of the eighteenth century comprised about 15% of the two papers’ four pages of three columns each. The few suicides lifted from London papers were usually in the main part of the paper on pages two or three.

The question I asked of these newspapers was simple: how did they make suicide look? The first thing to notice about northern English newspapers is that suicide reporting was unusual until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Runs of months or even years during the eighteenth century are innocent of suicides: a finding that distances the north of England from MacDonald and Murphy’s claim that references appeared “several times a week” in the southeastern papers they skimmed (303). It was not until the 1750s that suicide reporting was anything other than occasional in the Courant and not until the 1790s that it became a regular feature of local news for that paper. On average after 1800, local suicides appeared in one out of eight for each of the northern-English weekly papers. In the whole 50 years of the Pacquet, the ratio is one in eleven. I located a total of 470 local and regional reports, plus a small number of others lifted from London papers.

So what was reported? The handful of cases in the northeast during the early and mid-eighteenth century tended to be non-local and sensationalist, featuring murder and suicide or some gory but unusual ending such as evisceration. Early newspaper reporting of suicides in the northern English papers was unusual in two senses: both rare and shocking. The transition from personal to vicarious knowledge with the emergence of newspapers was marked by a phase of sensationalist reporting, not by a quick change to the flat neutrality implied by Foucault and his followers. Early- and mid-eighteenth-century reporting selected the sensational and then sensationalized it further.

Yet even as suicide reporting became more common, it was socially selective. Suspicious or sudden death has been investigated by coroners’ inquests in England since 1194. By systematically comparing newspaper reports with
the few surviving coroners’ inquests for parts of the north of England, I was able to assess the level and type of selectivity. Here I used the Pacquet and the inquests for the nearby Honour of Cockermouth and Egremont (Cumberland) and another paper, the Berwick Advertiser, with coroners’ papers from the town where it was published, Berwick-upon-Tweed, between 1811 and 1831. This laborious exercise shows how news was made by carefully extracting some cases for mention and omitting others. Put simply, reported suicide was of people at or below the lower-middling levels of society. Those of higher rank were omitted altogether from the papers, or they appear in the “Deaths” column rather than among local news, without any hint of the coroner’s finding of suicidal death. These were precisely the classes most likely to buy and/or read provincial English newspapers of this period (Barker and Burrows 13–14).

While it may be unsurprising that reporting was socially selective, making news was not just about who was mentioned, for there is also the issue of what was said about those whose suicide was reported. The first thing to note is that most reports were very short: 80% had fewer than 100 words. Yet they managed to cram in a wealth of meaning, and the rest of this article looks at the qualitative aspects of how suicide was made to look. Virtually all reports give a location. The principal patterns are that the geography of reported suicide was overwhelmingly regional, and within regions it leaned strongly toward urban examples. In all, nearly 60% of reported instances in the Courant came from communities classed as cities or market towns. The Pacquet’s reporting was less urban, but so too was its catchment area, the total urban proportion still being 24%. These figures show that, even in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, newspapers purveyed the impression that suicide occurred mainly in urban (especially urban industrial) areas, a perception that Olive Anderson has also identified as a canon of belief for the Victorians.

It would be tempting to follow early sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Maurice Halbwachs, who claimed that suicide was disproportionately urban. However, there is no way of proving whether this reflected underlying rates because there is no source that gets us anywhere close to a true epidemiology of suicide. Moreover, the survival of coroners’ inquests in local archives is patchy. Still, from published studies of early modern English suicide it is highly improbable that the pattern was anything like as urban as even the Pacquet made it look. All the evidence can support is that representations of suicide made it appear that killing oneself was an urban pathology.

We might think that the geographical location of suicides is the most neutral of facts, but the place of residence of a person who died by his or her
own hand spoke volumes to the informed reader of a local newspaper. For readers of the Courant, the location was often Newcastle’s Sandgate, Quay, or Back Row; or Gateshead, then to Newcastle what Southwark was to London; or the sailing and coal-loading communities of Tynemouth and North and South Shields. Even without explicit information about status, the reports could use dwelling place to hint broadly enough to readers who knew the quarters of the major towns and the economic makeup of the lesser ones. The apparently neutral act of locating suicides in space immediately alerts us to the way reporting conveyed loud social resonance and carried weighty moral baggage. The communities just cited were on the borders of the main cities or were ghettos within them that had connotations of economic marginality. What seem to modern eyes to be mere topographic identities were for contemporaries endowed with strong moral equivalence. So even when status was not given (in about two-fifths of cases), the person’s residence suggested a humble station and a manual occupation, poor housing, straitened circumstances, and, in all probability, consequent moral weakness born of want and dependency.

When we are given a suicide’s social status, it explicitly reinforces this picture. Reported suicides were usually in a manual occupation or a dependent position like servant, sailor, soldier, or prisoner. The near absence of landed and professional gentry was matched by the predominance of these groups and the crafts and trades people, who made up by far the largest single category, were mainly humble men and women like stallholders, chapmen, carpenters, flax dressers, weavers, tanners or skinners, carriers, and drink sellers. Just as readers sought comfort in imagining suicide and other social deviances being limited to physically removed places or dangerous margins, so too did they selectively allocate it to the more lowly elements of society, creating a sort of moral geography of status and space that reinforced their mental map of their own comfortable world.

The other prominent slant in local or regional reporting relates to sex as newspapers discreetly but determinedly emphasized the moral strengths and weakness of Georgian society. The Courant reported 105 female suicides, including three where the woman took an infant or child with her, and 130 male, giving a sex ratio of 124 (the sex ratio is the number of males per 100 females). For the Pacquet, the figures are 84 female (with two multiple suicides) and 152 male, with a sex ratio of 181. The Pacquet’s ratio is closer to the levels of 250–300 found nationally in coroners’ inquests, but it remains clear that reporting was selective of female suicide.

Women who killed themselves were apparently more newsworthy than men, because it was thought particularly shocking. The abandoned women
who took their own lives reinforced patriarchal stereotypes that stressed the self-control (and all-round superiority) of men. While constructions of female suicide focused on problems in personal relations (usually of young, unmarried women), the nexus of the family rendered what appear private problems a matter of public importance that touched both sexes. In the reports, the family provided external support as well as bolstering self-discipline through a sense of order, conformity, and responsibility.

Indeed, men and women were linked together by the associations and protections perceived to come from fidelity, financial stability, and affection within a narrowly conceived vision of a family. Other aspects of familial obligation were highlighted. Both the Pacquet and the Courant recounted the story of a poor old man called White from Thursby near Carlisle. He bid farewell to his friends and drowned himself in the river Eden, next to which his clothes were found; in a pocket was a letter from the parish saying they would help support him, provided his son contributed—the implication being that White junior had failed in his filial responsibility (Pacquet 829: 1

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Table 1. Attempted and successful suicides where occupation or status is known, as reported in the Newcastle Courant, 1733–1824, and the Cumberland Pacquet, 1774–1824.

<table>
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<th>Status</th>
<th>Newcastle Courant</th>
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<th>Cumberland Pacquet</th>
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<td>Number known</td>
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Fact, Truth, and the Limits of Sympathy: Newspaper Reporting of Suicide

Sept. 1790; Courant 5943; 4 Sept. 1790). More explicitly, the Courant reported an inquest near Blyth on Jane Bone, an old woman "who hanged herself in a fit of insanity, occasioned in a great measure by poverty, and the unnatural and cruel treatment of her son" (Courant 7389: 22 May 1818). A third account blended the corrosive effect of poverty with disapproval of marital break-up. With affecting and carefully chosen detail, the Courant told the story of William Thompson of Love Lane, Newcastle, age 52, who hanged himself in his house. He had been "very melancholy, probably occasioned by his extreme poverty, two or three potatoes, and an onion, being the only articles of provision found in the house." Formerly a master mariner, he had lately eked out a living as a furniture broker, "where he failed in business a short time since. He has left a widow (who recently was separated from him) and two children" (Courant 7150: 16 Oct. 1813). Among other things, this account proposes not that poverty and marital break-up could provoke suicide, but that the sort of people whose marriages dissolved were also those who fell on hard times and, ultimately, that they were the sort who killed themselves. A story that looks humane offers in reality a censorious argument about social problems and individual failings.

Negative moral comment could be woven into apparently incidental or neutral forensic detail such as the means of death. A detailed report in the Pacquet for March 1789 tells how Hugh Christian of Ballachree, Isle of Man, hanged himself with a bridle while his blind father was in the same room. Christian was 46, unmarried, and in good circumstances; it was thought that the outcome of a lawsuit led him to take "this solitary method of consoling himself." The verdict in Manx was "Ve blebbin"—"He was a fool." The Courant explained that "This differs from the terms generally employed in these kingdoms, on such horrid occasions; but the unqualified expression of a Manks [sic] Jury conveys as just a sentiment of the cause, and an idea something more abhorrent of the fact" (Pacquet 751: 4 Mar. 1789). As well as explicitly condemning the event as "horrid," the paper picked out for comment "the singularity of the instrument" of death because halters or bridles signified submission and also carried overtones of betrayal in the symbolic language of early modern England. The story told readers that Hugh was dependent on his father and abandoned him by a selfish and ungrateful act, rather than that he was a dutiful son who cared for a disabled relation.

Both the gendering and the wider social and moral message in reporting went even deeper than this, for when circumstances were expounded more fully, the proffered ideals of family life and the social assumptions that underlay them become quite clear. The Courant's long description of a harrowing murder and suicide in 1742 paints a graphic picture of a dysfunctional
husband and wife from Otley in Yorkshire. The husband had a history of madness, and the town had hired a man and woman to look after the family (including seven children) while he was deranged, because the wife “tho’ Trouble, ill Usage &c.... [was] a little craz’d.” As recounted by the surviving children and a young man who had been summoned by one of them to help, the man had a razor in his hand, so his wife “beg’d of him to pray God to bless him, and to have no ill Thoughts in his Mind.” He burned his clothes; with the onlookers powerless to help, he jammed his wife’s head into a bedpost and almost decapitated her with the razor before cutting his own throat (Courant 2540: 28 Aug. 1742). The story’s aim is to offer an extreme version of what happened when husband and wife did not live together in industry and harmony. It is a story of domestic abuse and neglect of familial and social roles culminating in the stigma of formalized help from the parish and a grizzly end.

Newspapers could easily point such a moralizing finger at the laboring poor. Suicide meant irresponsibility and a lack of control, which, like inappropriate use of physical force in any context, was to be deplored in the ordered society of Georgian England. Contrast the narrative of the death of Mr. Andrews, mercer and draper in Maryport in Cumberland, “who had for some time laboured under a melancholy.” Andrews cut his throat while washing and while his wife was standing behind him “endeavouring to raise his spirits.” His death was a tragedy, for he was “much respected by all who knew him, as an active honest tradesman” (Courant 5681: 27 Aug. 1785). The circumstantial detail—the wife literally as well as metaphorically behind him in a supportive role—adds to the pathos while explicitly moralizing about a home-based, supportive role for women. Andrews is one of the few men of this social and marital status ever mentioned in the columns of local news; the Courant used his tale to make a positive point about the values of social association and familial responsibility. The moral lesson of shared family life in this story is plain on both sides: the protection of the nuclear and extended family is only available to those who serviced its relationships diligently. Newspapers promoted the social classes and the social values of rationality, responsibility, industry, and patriarchy celebrated, for example, by James Mill in his 1828 “Essay on Government.”

One might suggest that this sort of reporting brought closure for readers, who could write off suicides as everything they felt they were not. By that token it may seem counter-productive to state that the cause of suicide was unknown, for that implied a loose end. Yet such instances, too, were used to make a social and moral point. For example, in 1789 “an old man, in the poor house of Alnmouth, put an end to his existence, without any cause of com-
plaint assigned” (Courant 5874: 9 May 1789). Similarly, when William Barton or Barlow, a 21-year-old apprentice plasterer, cut his throat in November 1815, the Berwick Advertiser recorded the lunacy verdict but added that no one could find a cause “for his desperate and unjustifiable conduct” (411: 11 Nov. 1815). In fact, inexplicability itself was just another value judgment that shifted the burden of blame from outside agency onto the suicidal person, for it was important to show that no fault attached to family heads, employers, or staff of public institutions. Saying there was no explanation was as much an argument as was an explicit attribution of cause.

The point is that newspaper reporting of suicide in the north of England is best seen not as a dispassionate or even sympathetic rendition of a human failing, but instead as a calculated, didactic dissection of society’s perceived weaknesses. When the papers did offer explicit commentary, it too served to pathologize rather than normalize suicide’s alleged frequency. For example, the Pacquet pronounced in July 1791: “The progress of suicide, in this country, affords an alarming consideration to every reflecting mind” (Pacquet 874: 12 July 1791). Here the Pacquet spelled out its condemnation. But as with geographical location, each word in a report added to the impression of the social and economic marginality and the moral weakness of many suicides. When set in their proper context, words that seem sympathetic or compassionate have more complex connotations. Describing self-murder as “horrid” is clear and “rash” is similarly reproving, with undertones of a hasty, impetuous, moody, or obsessed state of mind. The word “poor” is another example. It might seem to express pity, but in its correct context it simply meant that the person was economically marginal. Just as “poor” can be construed as compassionate, descriptive, or judgmental, an adjective like “unhappy” should not always be read in its twentieth-century meaning. Sometimes it meant “wretched in mind,” but more often it retained early modern connotations of “troublesome,” “unfortunate,” or “mistaken.” Almost every apparently neutral or even sympathetic term used in reporting in fact carried multiple meanings whose basically judgmental content is only clear from close analysis of context and language.

The balance of probability might be seen tipping toward sympathy if reports without evident moral commentary are treated as positive. Perhaps Foucault is correct to believe that when no obviously value-loaded terms are used, the matter-of-fact tone of reporting helped to create an impression of normality. But my argument is that even if some accounts are detailed and others record only names, places, and verdicts, none of them is merely factual, and every single piece of information is designed to explicate a deeper moral point.
Far from normalizing or trivializing suicide, newspaper accounts located it in a specific social and ethical context, conveying moral truth rather than merely literal facts. Often terse and one-dimensional, they may have lacked social depth, but they made up for this with profound social meaning, exemplified in an apparently neutral “fact” such as residence. Moral commentary may sometimes have been subtle, but, far from being reduced to a minimum, it was the main purpose of suicide reporting in the newspapers I have examined. Behind the apparently value-neutral language of occasion and causation lay value-loaded undertones of personal failure and social fracture.

It will already be clear that newspapers did not help to modernize attitudes, if by that we mean that suicide became desocialized: that is more comprehensible, acceptable, private, separate, and veiled. I have used the word sympathy or sympathetic more than once because historians tend to believe that newspapers promoted more compassionate understandings of suicide. To see if that is true, we need to answer two questions. First, what literary rules did the papers follow? Second, what was “sympathy” in the Enlightenment?

In the longer accounts where there was emotional content, I believe that newspapers followed the rules of Aristotelean rhetoric: a story or its teller required pathos (affective persuasion) along with ethos (a statement of authority or moral competence) and logos (logical appeal founded on facts). These rules were modified by Renaissance humanists, and some of the undertones in Enlightenment accounts resemble the selectively nuanced examples of virtuous suicide in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writings. Most of these are about women, opening up further insights into the gendering of suicide. Other tropes in the late-Georgian press are similarly reminiscent of Jacobean drama, which used suicide as “the definitive theatrical image” for female virtue and passionate love (Wymer 156). From Renaissance to Enlightenment, there was a strain in literature that allowed for the nobility of acts of self-sacrifice in a context of the protection of virtue and morality, both of the passive victim—“virtuous, emotionally bereft, and abandoned or betrayed by her lover”—and those close to her (Higgonet 71-74). In the contexts of defeated love and chastity, female suicide was comprehensible.

Carrying into the Enlightenment examples found in the Renaissance (and much earlier in Ovid’s *Heroïdes*), this powerful undertow in reporting is exemplified in the longest description of a local suicide in the *Courant*. The report concluded that hostility to seducer was greater than to suicide. This case was portrayed as comprehensible because it embodied a set of conventional (if vague) female virtues of vulnerability: “passivity, frailty, modesty, patience, loyalty, acceptance, and self-renunciation” (Kushner 468). Elizabeth Stennett, the suicide, had followed all the rules and thus retained a moral
integrity that most other reported suicides (and certainly her seducer) had utterly lost. Untouched by her dreadful predicament or even seemingly by the fact of her own self-murder, she was a model of helpless virtue, her unmanly seducer a paradigm of a corrupt and vicious world:

On Saturday last, an inquest was held on the body of Elizabeth Stennett, the unfortunate young woman, who destroyed herself by taking opium, in Gateshead, on the Thursday preceding, as mentioned in our last. It was adjourned to Monday, with the view of compelling the attendance of George Drury, one of the guards of the Royal Charlotte coach, who was deeply implicated in the affair, but he did not arrive with the coach as expected. The verdict was, that the deceased was insane and distracted. By the account which this unfortunate young woman gave to different persons, and which was sworn to before the coroner, it appears, that a few weeks ago, she had taken her passage by the coach from Grantham, the place of her residence, to Ferry-bridge, and that the guard had against her will brought her forward to Newcastle, under a pretext of shewing her the town, and carrying her back the next day, threatening if she would not come herself, that he would bring forward her trunks. The promise of taking her back he had under various pretences eluded from time to time, till on the fatal Thursday morning, her patience being exhausted, she waited for the coach in Gateshead, and attempted to climb up, but the brutal villain pushed her violently down, and ordered the coachman to drive on. This inhuman conduct, and the sense of her forlorn situation, it is supposed urged her to the desperate act. At the same time, it is but justice to her character to observe, that there is no reason to suspect that she had any criminal attachment to the offender, or that he had succeeded in his views upon her chastity, if he entertained any, as the person at whose house she lodged during the time she was there, declared before the jury, that no indecent familiarities between them had taken place there; and it is certain that she was not pregnant as reported. (Courant 6677: 29 Sept. 1804)

In the most used Enlightenment sense of the word, this is a “sympathetic” account that embodied “efforts to focus on the situation of another (however discovered) and to bring to mind everything that is relevant to a full understanding of this situation and a feelingful response to it” (Radner 190). But the account also shows pathos in the classical Greek sense: an image of transient emotion (passion) coupled with passive suffering. The account exemplifies the rules of Renaissance rhetoric, and especially Erasmus’s advice that, to
mobilize pity in furthering an argument, "the deepest emotions will be stirred if one gives a vivid picture of the consequences" (Erasmus 81). The account exemplifies the Stoic line that nothing except virtue is good. But it also carries the Stoic warning that emotions are not to be trusted.

Once laid bare, the centrality of these rhetorical rules to descriptions of suicides is hardly surprising. A central tenet of Enlightenment opinion was that rhetoric should form the basis of the instruction of the social classes who wrote for the papers and many of those who read them. It is certainly a mistake to regard them as a sign of sensibility new to the eighteenth century, for both the mode of expression and the sort of content (if not the exact details) followed rules that were centuries old. Understanding the rules of rhetoric and the classical or humanist roots of newspaper tropes makes it much harder to treat later Georgian reporting as either new or benign. Furthermore, the reporting of English suicide was far from morally neutral, and its tendency toward the "sympathetic" was grounded in eighteenth-century understandings of the term rather than in the easy universalism of later ages. It selectively condemned certain types of behavior and some classes of person in creating an explicit set of social commentaries. For the improvable society of the British Enlightenment was based on a narrow definition of society's acceptable members and their place in its structure. The young were nourished and educated to be virtuous, Christian pillars of society, for they were malleable (if vulnerable); those adults to whom no blame could be attached were cared for; the rest were viewed with distrust—to be controlled by the courts or by public opinion.

Sympathy is often proffered as a development of the Enlightenment, a modern emotion that helped distance modern people from the vengeful savagery of their historic past. Yet in truth, sympathy was a complex and contingent set of ideas whose modern meaning was only one of several that eighteenth-century people understood. Sympathy or compassion had initially been seen by Thomas Hobbes and his immediate successors as instinctive: a counterpoint to selfishness. David Hume followed this line by seeing sympathy as wholesale identification with the sentiments of its object based on shared humanity: "The sentiments of others can never affect us, but by becoming, in some measure, our own; in which case they operate upon us, by opposing and encreasing our passions, in the very same manner, as they had been originally deriv'd from our own temper and disposition" (233–34). Modern observers find Hume's formulation appealing, but it was not the only way of interpreting sympathy in the eighteenth century.

Against Hume, Adam Smith followed the main current within the Scottish Enlightenment—which for most purposes was the British Enlightenment—
by seeing sympathy as an imaginative understanding of others, which did not necessarily mean that their sentiments became those of the observer (See Haakonssen 70–74 and McCarthy). Objects of sympathy could not be unqualified, for against sensibility had to be set the need for self-command, especially in men. An inclination to assist did not prove a disposition to agree, and facts did not necessarily create compassion and action. Sympathy in the mainstream British Enlightenment meant openness to the sentiments of others rather than necessarily an adaptation to those feelings, let alone a wholesale acceptance of alternative motives and passions. All might have felt the same, but some were more “sensible” than others, meaning that not everyone reacted in the same way to emotions and experiences because not all were equally capable of refinement. Sympathy was dependent on “efforts to attend, to infer, to reflect, and to remember”: it was a moral virtue that required education in sensibility and thus was not available to all (Radner 190). Being sympathetic meant being discriminating, and it meant retaining an appropriate distance from social problems that could have no part in the lives of the enlightened.

If we accept this line of thought, it is easy to understand how compassion could turn to condescension and relations of humanity into those of power, for debates about social and moral issues took place against a background of stark social polarization and the perception of mounting social problems. In the language of Enlightenment writing, the growing acceptability of “sympathy” over “empathy” had a price in social terms: “Even the most humane sentimental constructs implied a complex system of social layering and distancing, containing elements of control.” Though the exchange between givers and receivers “affirmed the values of humanity and community, it invariably transformed many objects of sympathy into victims of power” (Dwyer 115).

Meant as pity or compassion, sympathy is not some benevolent universal or essentialist quality that can simply be juxtaposed with malignity, vindictiveness, or judgmentalism, but is itself a historically situated, socially constituted, selective, and contingent set of value judgments. Eighteenth-century literati proclaimed themselves and those like them as people of sensibility and sensitivity, more polite, restrained, and civilized than those who had come before—and more than some of their contemporaries. The age of Enlightenment saw “a new emotional fashioning” in which sentiments were privileged, but that does not necessarily make it more civilized or more sympathetic or more modern (Pollock 588). The reporting of suicide shows the contradictions and limitations of sympathy (587–88).

The analysis so far has focused on local cases not only because these were by far the largest proportion of suicide reporting, but also because they
were located in the mental map of parish, village, town, county, and region that northern readers possessed. It is, of course, well known that provincial papers borrowed heavily from metropolitan sheets. The influence of London on all English newspapers is plain, and London was not so alien a place.

Tony Wrigley has famously estimated that one person in six may have had experience of living there in the century 1650–1750 (49). Because of the coal trade, the northeast had particularly strong ties with the metropolis, and the traffic in Irish cattle and colonial tobacco made Whitehaven too a thriving hub of trade with the southeast in the eighteenth century. By the most commonly accepted models of social and attitudinal change, not only fashions in material culture but also new ideas about all sorts of things originated in the capital and spread to the darker, less civilized corners of the land.

However, the message northern readers of newspaper reports on suicide got was that odd things could happen to those who went to London. The way London suicides were reported was quite different from local reporting, and this helped distance provincial from metropolitan life. In short, to claim that reading about London made provincial people approve of it is mere supposition. For example, in 1812 Mrs. Ann Potts, a young widow with four children, formerly of Newcastle, hanged herself in London. Her brother said it was because she followed a Baptist minister and studied so much that she hardly ate (Courant 7059: 25 Jan. 1812). It was not just London. All non-regional stories had something evidently off-beat about them. Some were tinged with illicit (and exotic) romance. In 1810, the Courant told readers about Mr. Dugard, a French naval pilot who shot his wife through the heart in a fit of jealousy and then shot himself. It happened at Plymouth: “Mrs Dugard was a native of that town, very handsome and much younger than her husband” (Courant 6973: 2 June 1810). The Dugard story was unusual, perhaps even glamorous, but it was also dangerous, and foreign stories were deployed to make a point about morality through shocking contrast. Like Londoners, foreigners marked the boundaries of the normal. Aristocratic suicides did the same. Famous suicides like that of Lord Londonderry, Earl of Castlereagh, who cut his throat at his home in Kent in August 1822, informed people of law and attitudes, but the understandings thus created were not representative of society's usual responses to such events (See Simpson). The account of Castlereagh ran to several columns over multiple numbers of papers across provincial Britain.

For the correct context to such reports, we should turn to Donna Andrew, who has shown that attacks on aristocratic morals, increasingly frequent from the 1770s, tried to link a range of pathologies with the upper classes—dueling, gambling, and adultery, as well as suicide. Rather than aping their betters, as
MacDonald and Murphy imply, the middling ranks sought instead to use them as markers of the unacceptable (309–10). The reporting of London suicides, where the dead were usually men in public life and society, reinforced this social distancing. Non-regional examples were chosen for their peculiarity, useful as examples of how people ought not to behave. Offered as synonyms of dysfunction, they showed what happened when a virtuous life became perverted. Whether in accounts of distant parts or of elevated social strata, newspapers presented what happened outside the north as a distant, “unsympathetic” aberration that stemmed from personal failings and a consequent lack of public virtue in what they warned were dangerous, alien environments.

CONCLUSION

Newspaper representations of suicide in the north of England are wholly at variance with the Foucauldian model. The newspaper “is not only reflecting, registering, and broadcasting” an interpretation of suicide, but “also constituting and ‘shaping’ that interpretation through its use of language, thereby contributing something novel and irreducible to its meaning” (Zelnik 57). Reporting suicide was a way of commenting upon, but also coping with, social change by separating the reader from the experiential world that gave rise to it. The created (and creative) narratives of suicide in newspapers gave an illusion of intimacy and even empathy, while actually establishing a moral distance between the reader and the event—not to mention the broader phenomenon it exemplified.

The words used in newspapers need to be treated with care because it is unwise to regard eighteenth-century vocabulary as a transparent register of meaning immediately and obviously intelligible to the modern reader eager to experience the apparently unmediated voice of inner experience. “Sympathy” had clear limits and, in contrast with the stable and the integrated, the more marginal, transient, and abandoned were allowed to stand in newspaper columns as unadorned self-murderers, exemplars of disgrace and despair in an admonitory narrative of social worth. The resulting representations are not bare facts, but what McGowen calls “dense and intricate forms of argumentation” (35). They placed suicide in a traditional social and moral realm, not the modern liberal and tolerant one conceived by MacDonald and Murphy.

Northern newspapers created a single vision of social interest in the face of manifest divisions and problems within society. Rhetorical devices drew the reader into a shared cultural community of the classically educated who had been trained to read morality into narratives and to use exemplary stories to
back up ethical arguments, allowing them to conceive of a united moral universe bounded by multiple pathologies, including suicide. If newspapers were “collective productions—manifestations of cultural practices and collective beliefs,” then they expressed primarily one “collective” of people who sought to judge more than to empathize (MacDonald and Murphy 302). The act of inclusion in a newspaper characteristically involved attributing moral exclusion, while those excluded were, paradoxically, part of the included social and moral community to which the newspapers spoke. According to MacDonald and Murphy, “The publication of reports of suicide in the press made the victims members of the community of its readership” (336). I hope I have shown that the exact reverse is true, for reporting in the north of England marked the limits both of the community of readers and of sympathy.

University of St. Andrews

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