A HISTORY OF SUICIDE AND THE PHILOSOPHIES AGAINST IT

JENNIFER MICHAEL HECHT

AUTHOR OF *DOUBT*

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STAY

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Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xiii

Introduction 1

ONE The Ancient World 15

TWO Religion Rejects Suicide 45

THREE To Be or Not to Be: New Questions in the Rise of Modernism 63

FOUR Secular Philosophy Defends Suicide 90

FIVE The Argument of Community 116

SIX Modern Social Science on Community and Influence 149

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SEVEN Hope for Our Future Selves 175

EIGHT The Twentieth Century's Two Major Voices on Suicide 193

NINE Suffering and Happiness 209

TEN Modern Philosophical Conversations 224

Conclusion 231

Notes 235

Index 253

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Preface

It was through my scholarly work that I first grew interested in the subject of what people live for in difficult situations, especially when they have no religion, as was the case with many of the people I wrote about in my book *Doubt: A History*. It was through my personal life that I became interested in suicide. In 2007 an old friend and successful poet, Sarah Hannah, whom I had known from graduate school at Columbia University, took her own life. Had she not told me about her sadness, I wouldn't have guessed: she had good friends and a teaching job she loved, she was young and beautiful, and she was writing whip-smart, psychologically rich poetry. At the time I had been going through some frighteningly dark emotional times myself, and so while her death was not incomprehensible to me, it was intensely shocking nonetheless. Our mutual friend from graduate school, Rachel Wetzsteon, another poet, felt that same shock and expressed it in an afterword to Sarah's posthumous poetry book. Then in 2009, just after becoming the poetry editor at the *New Republic* and completing another highly praised semester of teaching, Rachel took her own life as well. These events knocked me around, forced me to confront how we today think about our lives and deaths, and drew

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me to ask questions of history and philosophy, the realms I always turn to seeking understanding. A year or so after Sarah died I was planning a scholarly essay about the conclusions I had reached. Before I could write it, I found myself trying to take in the fact that Rachel was gone too.

A few weeks after I heard that Rachel killed herself, I wrote an open-letter essay about it for a website I blog for, The Best American Poetry. I began by stating plainly that I was feeling rattled by the death. My husband had recently run into Rachel on the High Line, the Manhattan park built on old elevated train tracks; I related the encounter, he with our kids, she with her boyfriend, all walking around, looking at the flowers, looking down at the city. Then I addressed the reader with a bold imperative: "So I want to say this, and forgive me the strangeness of it. Don't kill yourself. Life has always been almost too hard to bear, for a lot of the people, a lot of the time. It's awful. But it isn't too hard to bear, it's only almost too hard to bear." In the West, I wrote, the dominant religions had told people suicide was against the rules, they must not do it; if they did they would be punished in the afterlife. "People killed themselves anyway, of course, but the strict injunction must have helped keep a billion moments of anguish from turning into calamity. These days we encourage people to stay alive and not kill themselves, but we say it for the person's own sake. It's illegal, sure, but no one actually insists that suicide is wrong." I announced: "I'm issuing a rule. You are not allowed to kill yourself. When a person kills himself, he does wrenching damage to the community. One of the best predictors of suicide is knowing a suicide. That means that suicide is also delayed homicide. You have to stay."

I told my readers that I was grateful to everyone who remained alive. I was thinking of specific poets I know who

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I thought might stumble upon my post or find it in searching for information on Rachel. I imagined these men and women on the edge of doing what she had done, and I knew many other people unknown to me were struggling; I hoped that they might read my plea, might heed my plea. They were out there, maybe at their desks, and I was inside, at my desk; I was moved to support them, and with a little effort I could feel them supporting me. I claimed that some part of them doesn't want to end it all, and said to that part, "I'm throwing you a rope, you don't have to explain it to the monster in you, just tell the monster it can do whatever it wants, but not that. Later we'll get rid of the monster, for now just hang on to the rope. I know that this means a struggle from one second to the next, let alone one day at a time." I said, "Sobbing and useless is great! Sobbing and useless is a million times better than dead. A billion times. Thank you for choosing sobbing and useless over dead." The essay ended: "Don't kill yourself. Suffer here with us instead. We need you with us, we have not forgotten you, you are our hero. Stay."

The essay drew a large response on the Internet, prompting an editor of the Ideas section at the *Boston Globe* to contact me and ask to publish it in the Sunday paper. The *Globe* printed it on a lovely blue background over a half-page. In the days and months that followed I received a lot of email from people who had read the essay. I heard from men and women who had lost parents to suicide, and several who had lost a child. I heard from people who had once been suicidal and people who were suicidal now. I remember a woman worried for her teenaged son and a husband in despair for his suicidal wife. They thanked me for saying what they hadn't been able to say: "Stay." They had not known how to ask.

I was, and still am, especially moved by people who tell

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me that my word and ideas got them through a bad time. The urgency of this made me dedicate myself to the present project, difficult though it has been to think so deeply and constantly on such a painful topic.

After I'd written this manifesto in the heat of emotion, and gotten a significant positive response, it became necessary to recheck all the claims that held the argument together. Did religion take a stand against suicide across most of Western history? How and why? Even more important, how true was the claim that suicide influences others to suicide? Is it demonstrably true that "one of the key predictors of suicide is knowing a suicide"? What about this idea of "a monster in you" that needed to be outsmarted until it could be chased away—does this metaphor imply that no one is fully in his or her "right mind" when ending it all? Then I went looking for philosophers and other writers who had declared that human beings contribute just by continuing to persist in life and rejecting suicide despite anguish. I also surveyed what had been said about the consistent nature of the self over time in relation to such a final act as suicide. The results of these investigations surprised me. The only idea that I had presented that I did not find in my studies was the notion that we owe each other gratitude for staying alive. This book contains what I have learned in my historical and sociological research into these matters and my thoughts on what all of this may mean to us today.

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Introduction

Ancient Roman history begins with a suicide. The virtuous and lovely Lucretia lived in the late sixth century B.C.E. A married woman and the daughter of a man of distinction, she was known for her industry and faithfulness. The boot of Italy was ruled in ancient times by Etruscan kings, but its people already called themselves Roman. Noble Roman families supported Etruscan kings, but there were considerable tensions. Then one night, as the story is told, a group of Etruscan and Roman men were drinking and got into a discussion comparing the character of their wives. Lucretia's husband boasted about her virtue, and when the men sent someone to check on her, indeed Lucretia was at home weaving and supervising her servants' work. The son of the Etruscan king, Tarquin, was among the drinking party, and he grew obsessed with Lucretia. Waiting until she was alone, he went to her, told her he wanted her, and offered to make her his queen. He told her that if she resisted he would rape and kill her, then cover up the deed by killing a male slave and telling everyone that he had chanced upon them having sex and had

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killed them for it. To avoid ruining her reputation, she gave in to her attacker. He left believing that to defend her life and her good name, she would guard the secret of what had happened.

It is an awful story, of course, but for the Romans who told it, it is Lucretia who triumphs. She dresses herself in black and runs to her highborn kinsmen, calling together her husband, father, brothers, and friends, and tells them what the Etruscan prince did. She demands revenge against the man who did this to her, but also on the entire political system that allowed it. Then she takes out a dagger and kills herself. Having told her own story, she protects her own honor. As she breathes her last, the gathered men pass around the dagger that killed her and swear on it an oath that begins, “By this blood—most pure before the outrage wrought by the king’s son . . . ” and ends “I will not suffer them or anyone else to reign in Rome.” The story then usually takes the spotlight off Lucretia’s corpse and follows instead the men as they storm off to overthrow the Etruscans. Thus begins the story of Roman self-governance.

Lucretia’s death took place at the very commencement of Roman history in 508 B.C.E., and it remained an article of Roman faith that the outrages that led to her death spurred her countrymen to overthrow their foreign king and to establish not another kingdom but the Roman Republic. The story emphasizes how highly honor was prized in the ancient Roman and Greek world, even unto death. Across the next six centuries Lucretia was celebrated with increasing fervor. Suicides accent the ancient Greek and Roman worlds: Socrates, Cato, Seneca, and Cleopatra. Socrates in particular showed how to dispatch oneself with benign calm. Sentenced to death for atheism and corrupting the youth, he accepted his cup of hemlock, soothed his friends, and contentedly downed the

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poison. The Stoics especially came to regard death lightly; accepting death without emotion was a sign of philosophical maturity.

Lucretia's heroic death ensured her cultural immortality. Centuries later she was painted by such celebrated European artists as Titian and Botticelli, as well as by the most renowned woman painter of the Renaissance, Artemisia Gentileschi. Lucretia's image was rendered by the acclaimed engraver Marcantonio Raimondi, and by such lights as Dürer, Raphael, and Rembrandt. Lucretia's story was also told in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales,* in Dante's *Inferno,* and in Shakespeare's long poem *The Rape of Lucrece*.

In this book we shall follow Lucretia through history, scrutinize several other key suicides—some more famous today, like Samson's under his ceiling and Cleopatra's with her asp—and track self-murder's strange, sometimes eerie, and always instructive guises. These historical travels will reveal a fascinating story about the meaning of suicide across history. It is a compelling story in its own right. It also helps us understand the way people think about suicide in our time. It is a tremendous issue.

In the United States over the past twenty years more than 30,000 people have taken their own lives per year. In the latest documented data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, from 2010, the number was up to 38,364.[1] Consistently, historically and now, more people die of suicide than are murdered.[2] Worldwide, more die of suicide every year than by drowning, or fire, or maternal hemorrhage. Worldwide, for both men and women between the ages of fifteen and forty-four, more die of suicide than in war. In the first half of 2012, active-duty U.S. troops killed themselves at a rate averaging one a day; in 2010 (the latest year for which statistics are avail-

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to society at large, and especially to our personal communities, to stay alive. The second is that we owe it to our other selves, especially, as I have mentioned, to our future selves. Both religious and philosophical writers have written marvelous things about both these ideas, but they are often in the background. The reason is that a foreground argument has gotten all the press: Religious people have tended to lean heavily on the argument that God forbids suicide. Meanwhile, in response, secular, philosophical people have insisted that we are free to take our own lives. In my experience, outside the idea that God forbids it, our society today has no coherent argument against suicide. Instead, many self-described open-minded, rationalist, sophisticated thinkers emphatically defend people's right to do it. How did the secular philosophical worldview come to claim people's right to suicide? How did those in the modern world—who fight death so fiercely elsewhere—come to accept or at least leave unchallenged an ideology that kills? The answer is a fascinating story of a reaction against religion that somewhat accidentally led to a dark fatalism.

Historically there have been some great minds, religious and secular, who have argued for our interdependence and mutual need. More recently, there have been numerous sociological, epidemiological, and psychological studies demonstrating the reality and power of suicidal influence. We also have evidence that intervention can reverse that influence. Schools have been shown to experience a rise in the suicide rate after a single suicide, but "talk-throughs" can change those results. Ideas can take lives and other ideas can save lives.

Throughout the medieval and early modern periods in Europe, suicide was condemned by the major Western religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Suicide was consid-

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ered a more damning sin than murder, because you were actually stealing from God; what is more, you were doing so with no time left for repentance. The prohibition did not stop everyone, but we have examples in fiction and nonfiction from across history of people turning away from suicide because of the religious rule against it. It was not only divine justice that a suicidal person had to worry about, though. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Christian Church condemned suicides; commonly the church enforced punishment of the corpses, which might be dragged through the streets, impaled on a fence and left to rot and be eaten by animals, or buried at crossroads with stakes through their hearts. More practically, the suicide's estate could be confiscated, further harming his surviving family. Dante's *Inferno* is but one of many works of literary and figurative art to provide graphic depictions of the hell awaiting the suicide's soul, and these must have been a serious deterrent for some Christians.

Religion took a wrong turn by relying so heavily on divine disapproval of suicide, and on corporal (even postmortem) punishment of the offender, and secular philosophy took a wrong turn when it concluded that without God and religion, man was his own master and thus people should be free to kill themselves. Both religious people and those against or indifferent to religion have written about other reasons to reject suicide, and my intention is to bring those arguments to modern attention.

In the early modern period, Hamlet could not think about suicide without worrying about the possibility that the afterlife might be a horrible dream. Shakespeare wrote the play around 1603, just as ideas about suicide were in flux, with some theatrical description still showing it as evil and some

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taking it as a reasonable response to bad fortune. Indeed, it is worth hearing him mull it over in his own words:

> To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause: there's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life;
> For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
> The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
> The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
> The insolence of office and the spurns
> That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
> When he himself might his quietus make
> With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscover'd country . . .

A bodkin is a large needle with a large eye used for pulling ribbon through a hole or loop in fabric. It will come up several times in the history of suicide.

"Who would bear" this painful life, Hamlet asks, if he or she were not kept from suicide by "the dread of something after death"? Even for those who did not believe in the specifics of Christian hell, the prospect of some kind of life after death was full of fears and doubts. For Hamlet, suicide is off the table because death might be worse than life.

During the Enlightenment, as people questioned church doctrines, from its attitude toward poverty to sexual mores and marriage laws, the prohibition of suicide also came under

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scrutiny. Philosophers such as David Hume and the Baron d'Holbach launched campaigns defending suicide. The church had long had enormous power over private citizens, and its gruesome suppression of suicides and would-be suicides reflected that imbalance. Secular thinkers now declared that the church had no right to outlaw suicide. Wrote Hume,

> The superstitious man, says Tully, is miserable in every scene, in every incident in life; even sleep itself, which banishes all other cares of unhappy mortals, affords to him matter of new terror; while he examines his dreams, and finds in those visions of the night prognostications of future calamities. I may add that tho' death alone can put a full period to his misery, he dares not fly to this refuge, but still prolongs a miserable existence from a vain fear lest he offend his Maker, by using the power, with which that beneficent being has endowed him.[8]

The Enlightenment enhanced the value of the self above that of community and tradition and made of each man and woman an independent being. As we will see, both Hume and d'Holbach sometimes advocated the right to suicide so vociferously that they can be said to have been recommending suicide. Thus, built right into the world's most momentous revolution about the value of average individual human beings was a mechanism by which they were invited to judge their own lives, possibly to find them without value or worth, and to end them.

The Enlightenment's rationalist defense of suicide grew through particular historical events and conversations, especially between clergy and philosophers. On the one hand, persecution of attempted suicides continued, albeit in much

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attenuated form, and in some places, the suicide's estate was still liable to seizure. On the other hand, some secular voices rejected the religious condemnation of suicide, even defending it as a positive phenomenon, honorable and emancipating. For the clergy, suicide was wrong because God said it was wrong, and harsh injunctions against it were demanded. For Voltaire and Hume and d'Holbach and other rationalists, God and the church had nothing to say about the matter.

The advance of modernity brought new concern for individual rights and private property, and these, as well as the rise of the scientific medical profession, began to have an effect on government policies. In the seventeenth century suicide had still been seen, in part, as the work of the devil. By the eighteenth, "melancholia" was the dominant term in discussing suicide—and melancholia was the purview of doctors. From the worst sin possible, suicide became relatively value neutral; it could even be seen as virtuous when enacted in protest against an insult to one's ideals. By the twentieth century, there was a general sense among secularists that people had a right to suicide, and a right to make the decision on their own.

Today, millions of people have no religion, and there are millions more whose religious beliefs do not completely rule out suicide. Yet our culture's only systematic argument against suicide is about God. This limitation is untenable because even among believers, some believe that God will forgive the act and provide a blessed afterlife, and even in the absence of that faith, a suicidal person in her darkest hour might not be able to feel the God she otherwise believes in. Those who believe in no god, obviously, will not be dissuaded from suicide by a divine proscription. Generally, we *ask* people not to do it, for their own sake, but we do not say that they must not do it. We have no secular, logical antisuicide consensus. The arguments

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Conroy offers a description of his life as "too sad by half." Tolstoy's and Flaubert's heroines had many predecessors.

Familiarity with these stories provides a strange solace. In 1621 the scholar Robert Burton wrote, "I write of melancholy by being busy to avoid melancholy."[10] Likewise, reading about depression can lend some peace of mind. It helps to find out that one is really not alone in extreme sadness, but that it has been shared by much of humanity. Many people have contemplated suicide. Many have done it. Many have rejected suicide for one powerful reason or another. In this book I intend to let the arguments against suicide pile up, in the hope of letting these thinkers lobby the reader on behalf of life.

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1
The Ancient World

The tale of Samson, in the book of Judges, is one of the most famous biblical stories of someone engineering his own death. Samson was special from before birth. His mother said that during her pregnancy she was visited by an angel and told that as long as the infant followed Nazirite vows he would have special strength from God. These included refraining from all alcohol—the mother-to-be also had to stop drinking—and never cutting his hair. He grew up in an Israel controlled by the Philistines, and when he became an adult, his strength against them was legendary, demonstrated by such feats as killing a thousand armed soldiers using only the jawbone of an ass. Once he was attacked by a lion and killed it with his bare hands. This vignette fits into the story of his engagement to a Philistine woman. On his way to a party for the coming wedding, he visits the site of his dead lion and finds that a swarm of bees has made its hive in the lion's ribcage. He takes some of the honey, shares it with others without telling them where he got it, and teases his in-laws-to-be with a riddle: "Out of

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the eater something to eat, out of the strong something sweet." It ends in a bloodbath. The Bible says that in the time of the Philistines, Samson ruled Israel for twenty years. It is love for another Philistine woman that topples him. He falls for Delilah, who nags him to expose his secret weakness, until eventually he tells her that he must not cut his hair.

She immediately betrays him, shaving his head as he sleeps. The Philistines capture Samson in this weakened state, and they blind him with a sword. Later they chain him and make the strongman use his residual strength to push the grindstone around a grain mill, like an ox. The Philistines then drag Samson to their temple, where thousands are gathered to celebrate their victory over him. Meanwhile, however, Samson's hair has grown back a bit, and he prays to God for renewed strength. Samson does not ask God for an escape from his captivity and restoration of his reign, though. Rather, he asks for one last burst of power so that he can pull down the ceiling and kill as many Philistines as possible. As for himself, he says, "I will die with the Philistines." Then Samson flexes mightily, and the ceiling comes down on the multitude. It was said that Samson killed more in death than he did in life. The biblical author says nothing of the morality of his action and does not tell the story as a tragedy. Instead, it is framed as the last impressive act of an unusual hero.

Nor did the ancient Hebrews express explicit disdain for the suicides of lesser figures, which occur on a few occasions in the Hebrew Bible and are mentioned as mundane responses to failure. Wounded and defeated, Saul asks his armor bearer to kill him; when the man refuses, Saul falls upon his own sword, which the armor bearer then does as well. A character named Anhithophel tries to overthrow King David, and when he fails, hangs himself; Zimri usurps the throne of Israel,

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fails, and burns down the palace around him; and Abimelech, wounded in battle and dying of a broken skull, has his armor bearer kill him. Jonah tried several times to kill himself, but God kept saving him, most notably when Jonah jumped overboard on a voyage he was taking to avoid doing God's bidding. God caused him to be swallowed by a whale, which later spat him out. For thousands of years, Samson and Saul and Jonah have remained part of the conversation about suicide.

Overall, the Hebrew Bible has been seen as neutral toward suicide, but there are exceptions. Job, for example, though he is made so miserable that he wishes he had never been born, resists suicide even when his wife suggests that he "curse God, and die" (Job 2:9).[1] Job says, "My soul chooseth strangling, and death rather than my life" (7:15)—seemingly suicidal words, yet he does not do it. For this reason, Job has long been seen as an antisuicide book.

Consider also some of the wisdom of the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, written around the second century B.C.E.

> Give not over thy mind to heaviness, and afflict not thyself in thine own counsel. . . . Love thine own soul, and comfort thy heart, remove sorrow far from thee: for sorrow hath killed many, and there is no profit therein. Envy and wrath shorten the life, and carefulness bringeth age before the time. . . .
>
> For of heaviness cometh death, and the heaviness of the heart breaketh strength. In affliction also sorrow remaineth: and the life of the poor is the curse of the heart. Take no heaviness to heart: drive it away, and member the last end. (Ecclesiasticus 30:21, 22–24; 38:18–20)

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tree beneath which her father was buried." As another source tells us, "sorrowful Erigone wept her fill for her slain sire, and already was untying the fatal girdle, and bent on death was fastening it to the sturdy boughs."[3] The sad story of loss does not end there. Erigone's dog Maera led her to her father's grave, and having done so, the little dog threw itself into a well.

Two stories of special powers lost stand out. The Sphinx strangled and devoured anyone unable to answer her riddle, "What creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?" But when Oedipus solves the riddle, answering "man," who as a baby crawls on all fours, as an adult walks on two feet, and then in old age walks with a cane, the Sphinx leaps from the acropolis to her death. Similarly, the Sirens kill themselves when Ulysses successfully evades them: "Ulysses proved fatal to them, for when by his cleverness he passed by the rocks where they dwelt, they threw themselves into the sea."[4] They could not accept having their power thwarted, even once. In each case the supernatural beings had one cardinal purpose and, bested, they could not allow themselves to survive.

Iphigenia, the daughter Agamemnon sacrifices so that Artemis will allow the winds to shift and launch the Greek fleet toward Troy, provides an example of death for a community at war. But in some versions of this tale, Iphigenia makes the sacrifice on her own, for love of her country. "I have chosen death: it is my own free choice. I have put cowardice away from me. Honor is mine now."[5] Honor in this world is not only about the family but also about the polis, the city-state in which one lived. That final short sentence makes it clear that Iphigenia sees something positive in dying in this fashion for the sake of her community.

Yet that is not how her mother, Clytemnestra, reads the

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situation; when Agamemnon returns from the war, she avenges her daughter's death by killing her husband. Her other daughter, Electra, then persuades her brother Orestes to avenge their father's death by killing their mother. Having done it, he is driven mad by divine spirits. He is later tried and acquitted by an Attic court, with Athena casting the deciding vote. Though a certain equilibrium is restored, Iphigenia's suicide had wide and mortal repercussions, from Agamemnon's House of Atreus to the walls Troy.

Another memorable account from Greek mythology of sacrifice for community is the story of the Coronides, Menippe and Metioche, daughters of Orion. After their father's death, their mother raised them with the help of the gods—Athena tutored them in weaving, and Aphrodite gave them beauty. When all of Ionia was suffering a plague, an oracle declared that two young women must be sacrificed willingly. As one ancient chronicler tells it,

> Of course not one of the maidens in the city complied with the oracle until a servant-woman reported the answer of the oracle to the daughters of Orion. They were at work at their loom, and, as soon as they heard about this, they willingly accepted death on behalf of their fellow citizens before the plague epidemic had smitten them too. They cried out . . . that they were willing sacrifices. They thrust their bodkins into themselves at their shoulders and gashed open their throats.[6]

Other sources have one of the sisters cracking her loom over her skull.

The illustrious Roman poet Ovid (43 B.C.E. to 18 C.E.),

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wrote of an artist's depiction of Orion's daughters, pictured in the streets of Thebes, wounding themselves with great courage, "cutting their throats, piercing their brave hearts with swords," and dying "for the sake of their people."[7] Here too, suicide has a laudatory quality to it, frighteningly explicit in the wounds they suffered, but summed up as a self-sacrifice for the community.

A classic suicide of shame in ancient literature is that of Ajax. When Achilles is killed, his armor is to be awarded to the next-greatest Greek hero, and Ajax assumes it should fall to him. When the armor is awarded to Odysseus, Ajax goes mad and seeks revenge against his former comrades. Duped by Athena, Ajax slaughters a herd of sheep, thinking they are the Greek warriors. When he awakens from his stupor and sees what he has done, he is so dishonored that he kills himself with his sword. There is a shimmering irony in the fact that the dispute was over armor: the protective garb has left Ajax vulnerable to the foe no piece of armor could have protected him from: his own jealousy, rage, shame, and regret.

Another suicide of shame is that of Jocasta, Oedipus's mother. The story, told most famously by Sophocles, begins with Laius, king of Thebes, being informed by the oracle at Delphi that any son born to him would kill him. When his queen, Jocasta, gives birth to a son, they set him out to die by exposure, piercing his ankles with a small stake. But a servant saves him and gives him to a shepherd; eventually he is adopted by the childless king and queen of Corinth. As a young man, Oedipus hears a rumor that he is adopted, and he visits the oracle to learn the truth. There he is told that he is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. In an attempt to avoid this destiny, he travels far from those he assumes are his parents, all the way to Thebes. On the road he finds himself blocked

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by another chariot, that of Laius, his true father, and the two fight over who should pass first. In self-defense Oedipus kills Laius. Continuing his journey, he encounters the Sphinx and answers her riddle, thus bringing about her death. The people of Thebes are so grateful to be free of the Sphinx that they make him king and marry him to the newly widowed Queen Jocasta. Four children later the truth is gradually revealed to Jocasta and Oedipus; she hangs herself in shame, and he blinds himself with a pin from her cloak.

One of the great myths of suicide for love is that of Thisbe, a beautiful Babylonian girl, and Pyramus, the boy she loves but is forbidden to marry. They plan a secret meeting one night, but things go horribly wrong. Arriving at the meeting place early, Thisbe is frightened by a lion and runs away, dropping her shawl. The lion, its mouth still bloody from an earlier meal, chews at the garment. When Pyramus finds the bloodstained shawl he thinks Thisbe has been killed and stabs himself in his anguish. Thisbe returns, finds Pyramus dead, and stabs herself. In Ovid's account she cries out in agony over the loss of him, then picks up the sword, places the point of it beneath her breast, and falls "onto the blade still warm with her lover's blood."[8] This prototypical story of love gone wrong later provided a template for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet.*

The story of Narcissus is a story of self-love. In Ovid's famous account, when Narcissus sees himself in the water's reflection, he is frozen there by his own beauty and dies. In two earlier versions he kills himself. In one attributed to Parthenius of Nicaea and written around 50 B.C.E., Narcissus is so tortured by his own image that he plunges himself into the water and purposefully drowns himself. In a version by the mythographer Conon, a slightly earlier contemporary of Ovid,

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Narcissus is said to destroy himself, after which the narcissus flower blooms in the ground soaked with his blood.

Then there is Hercules, who represents a whole different kind of self-enacted death, one that may not even be suicide. His lover yearns to make the straying Hercules love her anew. Tricked by an enemy of the demigod, she soaks his robe in what she believes is a love potion, but when he puts it on, it sears his flesh, and when he tries to take it off, it pulls out his organs. He asks his friend to build a pyre, and he throws himself on it and dies. A suicide might be called Herculean when it simply hastens an inevitable and otherwise painful end.

Euripides, who lived from around 480 to 406 B.C.E., was the most modern of the three ancient Greek playwrights whose work survives to this day. In his play *Iphigeneia in Aulis* he writes: "Ill life o'er passeth gracious death"—that is, even a bad life is better than a good death.[9] In *The Madness of Hercules,* Euripides' hero says: "Yet, thus I have mused—how deep soe'er in ills—shall I quit life and haply prove me craven? Or, . . . I will be strong to await death."[10] Euripides values life and seems to disapprove of suicide.

These ancient suicides of myth and literature are all marked by considerable passion. But historical suicides in the ancient world are characterized less by passion than by philosophical calm. The prominent Greek and Roman suicides were typically people who were being told—often by legal authority—to kill themselves. Though our modern definition of suicide doesn't generally include forced self-murder, the protagonists in these historical events are included because they killed themselves with a display of bravery and even indifference to death. Such deaths were celebrated as a prime feature of the philosophical approach to life. We will also look at some commentaries on suicide from the ancient Greek and Roman era.

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afraid of the most dreadful of all possibilities, death and suffering," could not bear the thought of the disgrace that would come to them after their deaths and this ended the epidemic. These events have been remembered as a mysterious and disturbing phenomenon throughout history.

More understandable was Socrates' death in 399 B.C.E. It is easily the great suicide of ancient Greek history, and like many suicides of the ancient world, it was enforced. Socrates left no writings, believing that philosophy was best done in conversation, so almost all we know of his ideas comes from his student Plato. Socrates questioned every aspect of life in his contemporary world of ancient Greece, especially the hunger for power, envy of riches, and competition—all distractions, in his view, from what was real in life. He famously said that he knew nothing but had more wisdom than most because at least he knew that he knew nothing. Eventually, he was charged with corrupting youth. His death, described by Plato in the *Phaedo,* has been remembered as a model of poise and resignation. To save the women the trouble of washing his corpse, he bathed; then he requested the poison hemlock before it was forced upon him, and calmly described its action in his body to the friends and students who stood around him.

Socrates in his jail cell mused to his listeners that there might be a kind of philosopher's heaven where life's intellectual conversations and convivial drinking continue, but this afterlife is suggested as only one possible outcome. It adds a critical dimension to the famous coerced suicides that the victims had been, on some level, willing or even glad to go. A second written account of the death of Socrates, by Xenophon, shows a world-weary philosopher not just resigned but almost eager to die and avoid the humiliations of old age. Xenophon's Socrates proclaims himself "better off dead." Socrates is de-

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picted as somewhat indifferent to the outcome of his trial, paying more attention to discussing ideas than to winning, and he does not plead for his life.

The two accounts agree that Socrates' friends would have been able to bribe the guards to allow his escape. But he rejects flight, saying that he must live by the laws of his polis and accept his community's dictates. Moreover, he said, wherever he might run, he would always be his same questioning self and thus would eventually infuriate someone else and get into similar trouble. To escape would just be putting off the inevitable.

Still, in his famous dying scene recorded by Plato, Socrates tells his followers that suicide is wrong. The gods put us here, he contends, and only they should be allowed to tell us when to go. He encourages others to live, to reject suicide. He borrows the formulation of Pythagoras, asserting that each of us has been put in life the way a sentry is assigned a guard post; suicide is a terrible abandonment of that calling. Absent a compulsion such as that which Socrates' own sentence carries, everyone must stand at his post. We will take a closer look at responsibility and community as bars to suicide in Chapter 5.

Plato, who lived from around 424 to 348 B.C.E., wrote about society, government, and morality but also thought about the true nature of the world—conceiving, for example, the theory of ideals, wherein everything in the visible world has somewhere an ideal form that represents its true reality. Plato described the hidden nature of reality in his telling, in the *Republic,* of Socrates' Parable of the Cave. In it, people are chained to face the far wall of a cave on which shadows of objects pass by, cast by representations of the objects in front of a fire. When a person is freed from the chains and turns around, he is blinded, first by the fire, then by the light outside. Gradually he begins to see the real world, including, eventu-

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ally, the sun that illuminates everything. The lesson is that what passes for "knowledge" is merely a shadow; true knowledge comes in stages of understanding that are painful and disorienting at first.

Given this penchant for otherworldliness and extended metaphor, on suicide Plato was relatively straightforward. In his *Laws* Plato listed the types of suicide and the circumstances that might excuse suicide. To kill oneself when compelled by the state, like Socrates, Plato wrote, was not contemptible, and suicide was also forgivable for someone who had experienced a truly extraordinary loss or intense shame: for one so dishonored as to be beyond redemption, suicide could be the right path, assuming it did not add further disgrace. In the end the only proscribed suicide was killing oneself out of "weakness to the vicissitudes of life," which we may take as plain sadness.

Plato's student Aristotle was the more practical-minded of the two, the inventor of many sciences and disciplines from marine biology to logic, ethics to psychology. He rejected suicide as an injustice to society, since a person cannot steal from himself but can steal himself from others. It is a concept we will revisit in coming chapters. By contrast, he allowed self-sacrifice for the sake of the country. Aristotle made it clear that suicide was wrong, and yet giving up one's life for the community was to be lauded. In practice, such distinctions are rarely so easy to make, as young people in particular can be swayed by such ideas to put themselves in harm's way.

Likewise, medical opinion on suicide is rarely as straightforward in practice as it is in conception. Here too the ancients provide an express rejection of suicide. Hippocrates, one of the founders of scientific medicine, lived from around 460 to 377 B.C.E. As is well known even today, his byword for doctors was "First, do no harm." This principle included a rejec-

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tion of helping healthy people commit suicide. Indeed, part of the Hippocratic Oath specifies, "I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make any suggestion to this effect." That said, however, for Hippocrates, passive euthanasia was another matter. Here he suggests that doctors not try to treat patients who are being "overmastered by their disease."[13] These matters may seem more salient for us than for the ancient world because we have more effective treatments, so withholding them is really equivalent to bringing on premature death. Yet practitioners of ancient medicine were often as convinced of its efficacy as are our medical personnel today, and they saw the decision to treat or not to treat as of great consequence. We do not know exactly where Hippocrates drew the line, but it is significant that he was not willing to give a fatal drug to someone who wanted to die; "First, do no harm" was not only a warning against excessively invasive medical practices but also a guide for the physician faced with a suicidal patient.

That medicine took such a firm stance is especially important when we come to the era of the Stoics, who might otherwise convince us that the ancient world had no objection to suicide. Stoicism, which began late in the Greek period, was a dominant philosophy throughout the Roman period. It was founded in the third century B.C.E., by Zeno of Citium, and thrived until 529 C.E., when the Byzantine emperor Justinian closed all the philosophical schools in deference to Christianity. At the heart of Stoicism was the idea of accepting life as it is. When you are suffering you have a choice, Stoics said, of either achieving your desire or conquering your desire so that you are at peace. Stoics called for doing one's duty, so faced even with death, they encouraged one another to accept the situation calmly. This came to mean a willingness to die even if

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it was not necessary. Stoics counseled one another to stay alive so long as life was pleasing. One should leave life as one leaves a room that has become too smoky. The Stoics considered this to be strength, but from our perspective, such a suicide might seem rather to indicate weakness, a choice not to bear the difficulty of life. With the Stoics, the weight was never on actually committing suicide but rather on not fearing death. Nevertheless, Stoicism has been famously connected to the tolerance of suicide.

Like the ancient Greeks, the ancient Romans, with some exceptions, thought of death in naturalist terms. The idea of an afterlife for ordinary people, distinct from gods, begins to emerge, vaguely, in the Judaism of the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., starting with the prophet Isaiah. Centuries later the author of Ecclesiastes dismisses the notion of an afterlife, thus providing evidence that some believed in one:

> For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knoweth the spirit of man that goeth upward, and the spirit of the beast that goeth downward to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:19–21)

Elsewhere the eponymous Preacher writes:

> For to him that is joined to all the living there is hope: for a living dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know that they shall die: but the dead

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between universes, oblivious to our existence. He counseled ways of meditating on its absoluteness so that it would appear less frightening. Why, for example, should we fear something about which we will be utterly ignorant when the time comes?

> Whatsoever causes no annoyance when it is present causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not. It is nothing then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.[14]

Still, despite his counsel that we not fear death, Epicurus was adamant that suicide was unreasonable, even a kind of weakness.[15] He was certain that the motives that lead to self-murder are not physiological. He suggested that people who choose suicide do so because they grow tired of the vicissitudes and tedium of life, and weary of their fear of dying. Epicurus does make allowances for people in dire pain and insupportable illness.

The Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius was the great bard of Epicureanism and is said to have taken his own life at age forty-five, in 55 B.C.E. The report of Lucretius's death by suicide comes to us, however, in a text written four hundred years afterward, by the Christian chronicler Jerome, who decried the views of Epicurus and Lucretius and the huge movement they represented. Since Lucretius wrote a great deal about how to be happy and at peace, Jerome's account could have been mere slander. But Jerome was a lot closer to events than we are today, so neither can we automatically dismiss his testimony. After all, Lucretius wrote about how to alleviate pain, but it was

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from a rather dark emotional perspective, so suicide would not be inconsistent with what we know of his temperament.

Because we have so little of Epicurus's own writing today, we get a lot more detailed information from Lucretius's book-length poem *On the Nature of Things*. Following Epicurus, Lucretius dispenses with worry about death by attempting to get his reader to face it, to see that everyone dies and that the length of one's life is a trivial matter:

> Death, then, is nothing to us, no concern,
> Once we grant that the soul will also die.
> Just as we felt no pain in ages past
> When the Carthaginians swarmed to the attack,
> *
> So too, when we no longer are, when our
> Union of body and soul is put asunder,
> Hardly shall anything then, when we are not,
> Happen to us at all and stir the senses,
> Not if the earth were embroiled with the sea and
> the sea with heaven!
> * * * * * * * * * * * * *
> Now if you happen to see someone resent
> That after death he'll be put down to stink
> Or be picked apart by beasts or burnt on the pyre,
> You know that he doesn't ring true, that something
> hidden
> Rankles his heart—no matter how often he says
> He trusts that there's no feeling after death.[16]

The reason for this resistance, Lucretius suggests, is that "he posits, unknowing, a bit of himself left over." As Epicurus argued and Lucretius expanded and put into verse, since there

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are no gods intervening for us or watching us, nothing is required of us other than that we get along with others. Pain doesn't last long, and when it does it is usually bearable.

We do not know much about Lucretius, but in contrast to Epicurus, who exalted friendship and his conversation garden, Lucretius seems to have been a solitary figure. He expounds the same philosophy that Epicurus describes in his letters, but Lucretius counsels his reader from a stance that feels more like existential nihilism. He encourages his fellows to think often about the multitude of those already dead and how little it now matters how long they lived. He deals with self-criticism and embarrassment with the same pointing toward death; in this context, he observes, such things do not matter. While friendship and a basic joy in the small things in life were key to Epicurus's system, Lucretius seems to have been a more pessimistic fellow.

Lucretius wrote so much about being philosophical about death that his purported suicide is considered to be proof that he "lived by his word" on the subject, rather than evidence of depression. Having written so much about taking death lightly, the thinking goes, he took his own death lightly. But Lucretius may well have been a despair suicide. He wrote compellingly of the sufferings of humanity, especially of the anxiety, worry, and disappointment that oppress us. "Thus," he wrote, "each man tries to flee from himself, but to that self, from which of course he can never escape, he clings against his will, and hates it." According to the unsympathetic Jerome, Lucretius went mad after taking a love potion, remained intermittently mad during the period when he wrote his books, and eventually took his life for this reason. Again, we must remember that this account was written centuries after Lucretius died, by an author with an antagonistic agenda, so we cannot know how true it is.

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Also important because it was to be remembered for the next two thousand years is the story of Arria. In the year 42 C.E., Caecina Paetus was accused of disloyalty by the emperor Claudius and ordered to kill himself. When he found himself unable to do it, his good Roman wife, Arria, grabbed the dagger from him and stabbed herself, famously saying, "Non dolet, Paete!"—It doesn't hurt, Paetus!—and handed the dagger back to him for his turn.[17] She became an epitome of noble self-sacrifice and a paragon of the philosophical spirit.

In the late first and early second centuries C.E., there were reports of many Stoic suicides. This was the era of the Pax Romana, but though the Mediterranean was peaceful, expansion of the Roman Empire ensured continuous wars on the frontiers. Stoicism, with its attention to duty and self-discipline, even self-abnegation, was a dominant belief system among the soldiers.

Pliny the Younger (61–c. 112 C.E.) praised several of the era's suicides. Some of these remind us of the praise bestowed on Arria. He told the story of a man suffering so acutely from ulcers that he wanted to take his life but could not bring himself to do it, until his wife helped.[18] Praising her as the equal of Arria, Pliny told how this ulcerous man's wife aided him by tying the two of them together with a rope and then jumping into a lake—achieving both their deaths.

Virgil (70–19 B.C.E.), the great Roman poet who gave us the epic *Aeneid*, tells a story of suicide for love. Dido, the first queen of Carthage (in modern day Tunisia), was in love with Aeneas; in anguish at his leaving Carthage, she stabbed herself to death. Consider this romantic passage on the ancient queen:

> "Let me die, I go gladly to the dark.
> May the heartless Trojan see my flaming pyre
> from far out on the deep

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> and let it bring him evil omens." She spoke
> and then her maidens saw her fall
> upon her sword, the red blood spouting
> and frothing over her sword
> drenching her hands.[19]

There is no apparent condemnation of her action here. By Virgil's time suicide tended to be described as a choice that might be made by anyone so inclined.

For ancient Romans the only people expressly forbidden to kill themselves were soldiers and slaves, because of their respective duties of service to others. (The Stoic army suicides show that this prohibition was not altogether effective.) For no one else was there a religious or legal prohibition against suicide. Yet the culture and philosophy of the age that praised a few famous suicides also encouraged most people to persevere and bear even a difficult life, including one full of inner turmoil and self-hatred. Life, whatever its hardships, was meant to be lived for others, and honor required a person to live as long as life gave him, unless an occasion presented itself by which he could aid his fellow citizens.

We have seen that the story of the Roman Republic begins with the suicide of a woman in the name of family honor. It ends with an equally fascinating and macabre suicide of a man in the name of political honor. The Roman Republic began around 500 B.C.E., underwent centuries of advancement, crisis, revival, and reform, and eventually ended with a dramatic shift to empire in the mid-first century B.C.E. The Republic did not go out quietly, though. After five centuries during which the ideas of honor and duty were employed to manage the chaos of human society, the last pious plea for the sanctity of

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or put them in her mouth and suffocated from the fumes; it is likely that in fact she burned coals in an unventilated room and died of carbon monoxide poisoning, and history and romance muddled the details.[21] Either way, it is a poignant image of swallowing what cannot be swallowed. She has been remembered as both a devoted wife and a devoted Republican, and as either deeply philosophical or a little mad with grief.

Just a bit later in Egypt, Cleopatra responded to Augustus Caesar's triumph in 30 B.C.E. by taking her own life, clutching two poisonous asps to her breast. Her lover Marc Antony took his own life as well. Mistakenly thinking that Cleopatra has already killed herself, he stabs himself with his sword. Still living, he is brought to Cleopatra and dies in her arms. Of all the ancient suicides, Marc Antony had the worst reputation within his own culture, not because he took his life, but because he took his life for love. Like despair suicide, this was not what the ancients had in mind when they praised a man for ending his own days.

In the first century C.E., Stoic philosopher Seneca is also remembered as having taken his own life. He wrote plays and other literature, often relying on the tenets of Stoicism. Coming after the Golden Age of Latin—the era of Cicero, Lucretius, Virgil, and Ovid—Seneca is one of the most prominent of the less illustrious Silver Age writers. He was also a political adviser to the emperor Nero. Seneca wrote that we must not worry inordinately about our own death, but neither should we run to it. Seneca committed suicide after being implicated in a plot to assassinate Nero; he was probably innocent, but Nero ordered him to kill himself. This might make us think of his suicide as entirely coerced, but his contemporaries observed that he had some choice in the matter. Even without our knowing whether he could have avoided his fate, Seneca's writing

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about despondency makes him seem like a despair suicide, a suicide of sadness. Here is how he talks about the bad times:

> Hence the boredom, the disgust for oneself, the tumult of a soul fixed on nothing, the somber impatience that our own inaction causes, especially when we blush to admit the reasons . . . tightly contained in a prison with no exit. . . . As Lucretius says, "Thus all continually flee themselves." . . . We follow ourselves; we cannot get rid of that intolerable company. . . . We lack the strength to bear anything: work, pleasure, ourselves, everything in the world is a burden to us. There are some whom this leads to suicide because their perpetual variations make them turn forever in the same circle and because they have made all novelty impossible for themselves, they lose their taste for life and the universe.

But Seneca never advocated suicide in his writings. Indeed, he tells his reader to resist the temptation to die. He writes of having experienced a time of misery in which he was tempted to end his life, but consideration of the feelings of his aged father kept him from doing so. "I saw not my own courage in dying, but his courage broken by the loss of me. So I said to myself, 'You must live.' Sometimes even to live is an act of courage." George Minois, a historian of suicide, wrote in 1995 that the kind of *taedium vitae* that Seneca talks about did not really take lives; rather, "its most typical manifestation was floating in a perpetual state of indecision between life and death."[22] This nagging vacillation between living and dying has been a major theme of the suicidal through to modern times. After Socrates' death, Seneca's is one of the most remembered

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ancient suicides. When he took his own life, it was by rather gruesomely cutting himself up.

These stories stake a place in one's memory. Socrates and Seneca are the famous coerced suicides. Most others were putting an end to what seemed to be an intolerable situation. Lucretia, Cato, Cassius, Brutus, Porcia, and Cleopatra all refused to let anyone conquer them, but you cannot quite say they "won." Instead, they fashioned exits from difficult situations. Clearly, in the ancient world, for a person who had been defiled or humiliated, or was threatened with the like, killing oneself might sometimes be a praiseworthy response. These suicides were not seen as exacerbating their crime or failure, they were not called cowards for escaping punishment, but rather seemed to be partially absolved, as if the act were a self-punishment that could assuage the stigma of bad luck and redeem earlier wrongs.

It is reasonable to surmise that the same force that took Lucretia's life and the lives of Orion's weaving daughters actually kept a lot of people alive in the ancient world. People were profoundly enmeshed in their families and in their tribes or city-states. Honor before everything means that under normal circumstances one has to stay at one's post. Lucretia is compromised and furious, but she is not killing herself because she is depressed. She is not killing herself in spite of her family's protests. She is enacting the values of the group, which here are about a woman's chastity. She is putting her family first in removing herself from life. Orion's girls, Menippe and Metioche, put their community first in taking arms against themselves. Their deaths have to do with being profoundly connected to their society. This is quite the opposite of the alienation and loneliness often associated with suicide in the modern world.

Before we leave the ancient world, we have to look at one

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last development in our story, suicidal martyrdom. As we saw, the Hebrew Bible does not feature many suicides. Yet in the period of history after the five books of Moses, when Jews confront the power of Rome, martyrdom emerges. When Roman soldiers tried to march through town, the ancient Hebrews took offense that there were graven images on their shields, and in the ensuing confrontation, the Romans were surprised by the Hebrews' willingness to die rather than allow any trespass of their laws. Such martyrdom is not technically suicide: though the victim does opt for death, the oppressor does the killing. Still, in a case like the siege of Masada, it is hard to deny that it is suicide in fact as well as intent. The ancient chronicler Josephus tells the gruesome story. After the Romans surrounded and laid siege to the fortress Masada, the Jews had no prospect of escape. To avoid being conquered, the men agreed that each would kill his own wife and children. After tearful goodbyes, they dispatched their families, then drew lots to choose a squad who would kill their comrades, each man to be slain lying down and embracing the corpses of his family. At last a final executioner was chosen, again by lot, and he killed the killers, ultimately running himself through with his own sword.

Only two old women and some children chose to hide and survive; 960 died. The Romans broke through the defense the next day expecting a fight; instead, they entered an eerily quiet place of "terrible solitude" and could not guess what had happened. Even after the hiding women emerged and reported the mass suicide, the Romans did not believe it until they found the bodies. They "could take no pleasure in the fact, though it were done to their enemies." It was just too disturbing.[23] Lucretia had long been a Roman heroine, but those who witnessed this mass suicide found it profoundly unsettling.

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Religion Rejects Suicide

The ancient Roman world in which Christianity emerged prized manly honor and female purity above all else, certainly above longevity. There was no reason for early Christians, at first a sect of Judaism, to suddenly imagine suicide a sin. Judas is the only suicide in the Christian New Testament—there are conflicting accounts, but in Matthew 27 he hangs himself. Many have claimed that Jesus was a suicide as well, including the early bishop of Hippo, Augustine; the later theologian Thomas Aquinas; and the Elizabethan poet John Donne (about whom more later). Jesus certainly fits the criteria of clearly accepting his coming death and of declining to take any of several courses of action that might have saved his life. Like Socrates, he refuses to plead his own case at trial, even seeming to mock and provoke his judges. In the book of John we find Jesus saying: "No man taketh [my life] from me, but I lay it down of myself" (John 10:18).

Christianity evolved and took shape in the Roman Empire. This, we have seen, was a world that accepted suicide as a

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voluntary and can be understood as a suicide.[2] Kaplan's bolder statement is that Christians experienced something like a suicide survivor's guilt, confusion, and anger over Jesus's decision to die, which they then took out on themselves and, later, on Jews at large. While acknowledging that for martyrs, death was unavoidable, Kaplan finds also "a desire, and indeed, an active pursuit of death."[3] He points to the Donatist heresy as an extreme manifestation of this impulse: "Whole companies of Donatists, for example, threw themselves from rocks." Donatists would not accept the sacraments from priests who had renounced the faith during the period of persecution. The church accepted such men back into the fold and sanctified sacraments performed even by compromised priests, holding that the office, not the man, conferred their sacredness. The Donatists disagreed and in many cases were more than willing to die in support of their beliefs.

Kaplan does not use this terminology, but he implies that the martyrs were a "suicide cluster" that started with Jesus: "What are the potential responses of the Christian survivor to the death of Jesus?" According to Kaplan, "He may choose to die as a martyr-suicide himself. This brings him close to Jesus Christ in two ways: 1) through imitation of the death of his savior and 2) through offering a reunion with Jesus Christ in the next world."[4] Martyrs' zeal for death can be easily shown—"I am yearning for death with all the passion of a lover," wrote Ignatius of Antioch—but the idea of an immediate and blissful afterlife provides a radically different context for the question of imitation.[5] Still, it is something to consider in our analysis of the ripple-effect repercussions of suicide.

The death of Jesus may have reverberated in the death of the martyrs, yet even in the early days of Christianity, suicidal martyrdom was not recommended as a path by the key figures

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of the religion. Even Paul, who was fixated on the afterlife, did not advise suicide. He wrote, "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you" (Philippians 1:23–24).

Despite Paul's choice of life, the rage for martyrdom in Christianity, or sects of it, continued after adherents were no longer being persecuted. In fact, the popularity of martyrdom outlasted its usefulness for the movement. As Christianity became more established, martyrdom stopped seeming like a valiant defense of the religion and started to seem like an unnecessary tragedy. Losing its members this way no longer made sense for the church. Efforts to quell the popularity of martyrdom resulted in the first general bans on suicide. In 305 the Council of Guadix amended its list of martyrs by deleting the names of all those who had died by their own hand. The 348 Council of Carthage went farther than the church had before, actively condemning all those who had chosen suicide under the pretext of piety but in fact for personal reasons.

One of the outstanding theologians of this early period of Christianity was Augustine of Hippo, North Africa, whom the church canonized. Saint Augustine made a point of asserting that Jesus' death was voluntary, writing, "His soul did not leave his body constrained, but because he would and where he would and how he would." Yet Augustine deprecated other suicides. Writing around the year 400, Augustine considered Eusebius's story about the pretty virgin girls killing themselves and decided that Eusebius was wrong in his judgment. For Augustine, the sexual act would not have been the girls' sin. He held that they should not have killed themselves. With that reversal we leave behind the classically inflected sense that honor—or even virtue, or purity, or the absence of sin—ought

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to decide the matter of guilt. We have arrived at a morality dependent on individual intention.

In his *City of God* Augustine has no tolerance for suicide, calling it a "detestable crime and a damnable sin." Augustine's approach to morality is based on the afterlife, and his ideas about suicide are squarely prohibitive. Consider his certainty and his proclaimed reasons: "This we affirm, this we maintain . . . that no man ought to inflict on himself voluntary death . . . that no man ought to do so on account of another man's sins, for this were to escape a guilt which could not pollute him, by incurring great guilt of his own; that no man ought to do so on account of his own past sins, for he has all the more need of this life that these sins may be healed by repentance. . . . Those who die by their own hand have no better life after death."[6] It is fascinating that Augustine makes this rather generous plea to the suicidal person who feels guilt and self-revulsion: you must stay here to redeem past sins. Still, for Augustine's judgment such arguments are secondary; God had issued a command that one must not kill oneself, within the commandment "Thou shalt not kill."

> It is not without significance, that in no passage of the holy canonical books there can be found either divine precept or permission to take away our own life, whether for the sake of entering on the enjoyment of immortality, or of shunning, or ridding ourselves of anything whatever. Nay, the law, rightly interpreted, even prohibits suicide, where it says, "Thou shall not kill." This is proved especially by the omission of the words "thy neighbor," which are inserted when false witness is forbidden: "Thou shall not bear false witness against thy neighbor."

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> . . . The commandment is, Thou shall not kill man; therefore neither another nor thyself, for he who kills himself still kills nothing else than man.

Augustine finds this injunction so strong that he must hypothesize that Samson had received special orders from God. "Samson . . . who drew down the house on himself and his foes together, is justified only on this ground, that the Spirit who wrought wonders by him had given him secret instructions to do this."

He even speaks of the purity of Lucretia:

> But all know how loudly they extol the purity of Lucretia, that noble matron of ancient Rome. When King Tarquin's son had violated her body, she made known the wickedness of this young profligate to her husband Collatinus, and to Brutus her kinsman, men of high rank and full of courage, and bound them by an oath to avenge it. Then, heart-sick, and unable to bear the shame, she put an end to her life. What shall we call her? An adulteress, or chaste? There is no question which she was. Not more happily than truly did a declaimer say of this sad occurrence: Here was a marvel: there were two, and only one committed adultery. Most forcibly and truly spoken.

Even though her body had been violated, Lucretia was chaste, according to Augustine, and no adulteress. Furthermore, in a wonderful turn of phrase: "This crime was committed by Lucretia; that Lucretia so celebrated and lauded slew the innocent, chaste, outraged Lucretia." The only crime of this cele-

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brated, highly praised woman was that she killed an innocent, pure, and furious woman—herself. He continues:

> Pronounce sentence. But if you cannot, because there does not appear any one whom you can punish, why do you extol with such unmeasured laudation her who slew an innocent and chaste woman. . . . She is among those
>
> Who guiltless sent themselves to doom,
> And all for loathing of the day,
> In madness threw their lives away.[7]

Since rape and incest are strong predictors of women's suicides in our own time, it is useful to know the story of Lucretia and that centuries of thinkers have insisted that what happened to her was not her fault. In his disdain for suicide Augustine was a man of his times—the Christian proscription against self-murder had its philosophical roots in the early Middle Ages—but his reasoning was original.

In the wake of the movement led by Augustine and other church fathers to end voluntary martyrdom, the first legislation in canon law to rule against suicide was passed at the Council of Arles in 452. The logic was similar to the ancient Roman law against slaves committing suicide—that it was a kind of theft—but now the injunction applied to everyone. The Council of Angers reiterated the injunction in 453. The second Council of Orleans in 533 denied funeral rites to suicides who had been accused of crimes. This was generalized by the Council of Braga to all suicides in 563. The Council of Antisidor ruled against churches taking offerings for the souls of suicides in 590.[8] Over the succeeding centuries, suicide

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The style of desecration varied widely from place to place, in part because of the cult roots of the practice, but a common thread was the idea that the suicide's soul was a danger to the living and had to be ritually disposed of. The self-murderer had to be ostracized from the community in order to prevent a kind of pollution. At Metz and Strasburg, suicides were set adrift on a river. In other areas of France and in Germany, suicides were dragged to a place of execution, hung on chains, and left to rot. In England and elsewhere, suicides were buried at crossroads with stakes through them to help keep their souls from wandering around and harassing the living. The Council of Hertford promulgated a canon in 672 denying self-murderers normal funerals; in 693 the Council of Toledo decided that those who attempted suicide would be excommunicated; and a canon attributed to King Edgar around the year 1000 repeated the prohibition, exempting the mad.[15]

The next big change in how suicide was discussed in Christianity came in 1271, when the medieval Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas expanded on Augustine's rule. Aquinas agreed that Jesus had essentially taken his own life, but Christians were not permitted to follow this example.[16] Aquinas championed a prohibition of suicide for three reasons: 1) it injures the community of which an individual is a part; 2) it is contrary to natural self-love, whose aim is to preserve us; and 3) it "violates our duty to God": since he gave us life, only he should be allowed to end it. Aquinas's first two concerns, for community and for the self, are powerful secular arguments as well, and we will return to them in later chapters to see how they might be applied outside of a religious context. His last argument was so strong in the Christian context that over the years the other two reasons were marginalized. Over time, the idea that God requires one to bear up under one's burdens and

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stay alive—no matter what—grew into a significant part of Christian theology. Obedience to God meant that the believer must simply stay and do her part, whatever that part may be.

After Aquinas, throughout Christendom, suicide was regularly understood as sinful. It was not something you could do to escape a sinful life, or to avoid having to succumb to sinful circumstances. In the 1300s, Dante gave enough weight to Aquinas to put (most) suicides in one of the worst circles of hell. Dante has compassion for Dido, the queen of Carthage abandoned in love, and places her in a gentler outer circle. But the devil is at the center of Dante's hell, and the three-faced devil has a trio of famous suicides in his mouths: Cassius, Brutus, and Judas. Each was condemned for his fatal betrayal, but it is also true that for Dante, suicide was very wrong indeed.

Dante's devil was huge and had wings (unfeathered, "like a bat") and chewed on all three of these sinners, crunching them so that they suffered horrendously and constantly. It clawed at them to such a degree that much of their skin was removed. Judas was said to suffer the worst, for his head was in the devil's mouth, with his legs dangling out. Cassius and Brutus did not have it much better: they were held by their legs with their heads hanging upside-down from the devil's maw.

In life as well as literature, Christian religious practice in the high Middle Ages was to condemn suicides. Records show families of suicides arguing for leniency for a father or sister, and the pleas of the highborn were sometimes granted. Regardless of rank, though, suicides were increasingly punished.

The ferocity of the response to suicide can seem unbelievable, but examples from across Europe span several centuries. The records of Paris are uniquely comprehensive. When a Parisian man killed himself by plunging into the Seine in 1257, his body was fished out and his case tried. He was found guilty,

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and his body was sentenced to torture; most commonly, that meant being drawn and quartered, or eviscerated and hanged by the neck before the community and left there until birds and maggots consumed the corpse.[17] In 1288 a man committed suicide near the Church of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, and the abbey hanged his body. It was later decided that they had neglected the important rite of dragging his body through the streets behind a horse, so the entire "execution" was repeated, this time with the grisly detail enacted. In 1299 the miller Jean Cliot drowned himself in a river and the abbey ordered his hands to be pierced with wooden stakes before his body was drawn and quartered.

When reasons for these suicides are mentioned, they are generally deep sadness, suddenly dire circumstances, or the devil's influence. The evidently "mad" were much more likely to be forgiven and given minimal censure. Self-murder was often the recourse of women facing poverty after having lost their husbands, for instance, and of men facing criminal punishment. In the 1300s the idea of despair appears more specifically, as when in 1394 Jean Masstoier threw himself in a river, was saved, and later—still in an anguish of "melancholy of the head"—he drowned himself in a well. In the 1400s, chronicles were likely to add to any reason for a suicide that the person was "tempted by the enemy," that is, lured by the devil. In 1421, Denisot Sensogot, a Paris baker, hanged himself, and the reason reported was that he did it "by the temptation of the enemy and on the occasion of his madness and illness." There were odd exceptions: Jeannette Mayard, a shoemaker's wife and "good Catholic," in 1426 hanged herself because she was "given to drink and jealousy," but she was not much blamed for it.[18] By and large, sane suicides were discussed as sinners and religious criminals; they were tried, and when

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found guilty, their bodies were violated, then buried in such places as a "cemetery of the damned," or, at the very least, just outside the churchyard.

The idea of the devil tempting people to suicide was deeply ingrained and widespread. It had some conceptual advantages in that it allowed people to externalize their most self-destructive impulses, and in a form that they were already conditioned to think of as something to be resisted and rejected. Consider the testimony of one troubled woman:

> Then Satan tempted me again and I resisted him again. Then he tempted me a third time, and I yielded unto him and I pulled out my knife and put it near my throat. Then God of his goodness caused me to consider what would follow if I should do so. . . . With that I fell out a weeping and I flung away my knife.[19]

Judaism was not as extreme in its punishment of suicide as the Christian Church, but in the Middle Ages, temples too refused suicides burial in Jewish cemeteries. There were (imperfect) Latin versions of the work of Josephus in circulation in the Middle Ages (a better version in Greek was discovered in 1544) and Jews were aware of Josephus's words against suicide: "It is equally cowardly not to wish to die when one ought to do so, and to wish to die when one ought not. . . . 'It is noble to destroy oneself,' another will say. Not so, I retort, but most ignoble; in my opinion there could be no more arrant coward than the pilot who, for fear of a tempest, deliberately sinks his ship before the storm. No; suicide is alike repugnant to that nature which all creatures share, and an act of impiety toward God who created us. Among the animals there is not one that

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deliberately seeks death or kills itself, so rooted in all is nature's law."[20] Also, from at least as early as the tenth century Jews annually studied *The Ethics of the Fathers,* which dates from between 200 B.C.E. and 200 C.E., and contains such admonitions as this:

> Let not your heart convince you that the grave is your escape; for against your will you are formed, against your will you are born, against your will you live, against your will you die, and against your will you are destined to give a judgement and accounting before the king, king of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be He.[21]

In the Middle Ages and into the early modern age (from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries) the idea of "rites of reversal" arose. Like the long-administered stake through the body of a suicide, the rites of reversal were intended as a hindrance to resurrection. Following these rites, the cadaver of a suicide would be placed in the ground face down, lying north-south, opposite to the normal burial practices. The standard ritual of the stake was also further elaborated during this period: in 1590 the coroner of London ordered that the top of the stake pinning down the corpse of Amy Stokes be left exposed to provide deterrence to other would-be suicides.[22] Corpses were hanged by their feet or dragged head down, satisfying the terms both of rites of reversal and of postmortem torture.

The Protestant Reformation spread across Europe beginning in the early 1500s, but as Martin Luther and John Calvin wrought revolutionary changes in worship and policy, both followed the medieval Catholic Church's teachings on suicide. Both held that whatever their suffering, people ought to re-

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destined for hell. Within the church and among the lay population, anti-Calvinists blamed predestination for a spate of self-murders.

While the behavior was barbarous, it must be said that the intention may not have been cruel insult to the deceased, but rather just what the authorities were claiming. People across history speak of being haunted by suicides and tempted by them toward the grave. The harsh practices surely would help to make the mind feel sure the person is gone, and would also be a deterrent to further suicides. Postmortem torture and exposure of the corpse has often been explained as expressing supernatural beliefs, but the reasons for some of it may be closer to the ancient Greek story of the virgin suicide cluster and how it was stopped by the threat of a different kind of postmortem exposure.

The macabre abuse of corpses was eventually ended for the same reasons that the practice of torturing live bodies of criminals before their execution came to be seen as barbarous, in part to civilize public space and in part because individual people's crimes and punishments were increasingly seen as matters belonging to them personally rather than to the community in general. It no longer seemed reasonable to attack a man or woman's body for the purpose of teaching other people a lesson. Lynn Hunt, in *Inventing Human Rights,* outlines this process, as a cornucopia of corporal punishments for living and dead dwindle down, over less than a century, to incarceration for the living, with the dead finally escaping further mortification. With the rise of modernity in the sixteenth century, suicides' corpses were increasingly left in peace.[26]

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3

To Be or Not to Be

New Questions in the Rise of Modernism

The Middle Ages have traditionally been characterized as a period of religious domination, when the arts, science, philosophy, and politics largely stagnated. That assessment has undergone a number of revisions as historians have discovered innovation in those years and connections between the period and the one that followed it, the Renaissance. Still, the Renaissance represents a dramatic efflorescence in almost every aspect of human ingenuity. The painter Giorgio Vasari, looking back in 1550 at the previous two hundred years of Italian art, first termed the period a "rebirth" of culture and of ancient ways of thinking, writing, and making art. The Italian Renaissance is generally dated, as Vasari dated it, from around 1350 to 1550, with the rest of Europe starting later and taking the movement into the seventeenth century.

The Renaissance is best remembered for its changes in art, in the development of perspective and other new artistic techniques, and in the proliferation of superb artists, most

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notably Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Literature also was revolutionized during the era, as authors began writing in the language of their own countries, rather than in Latin, and subject matter became more inclusive and more personal than it had been since ancient times. Francesco Petrarch, seen by contemporaries as the leader in this change, searched old monasteries and libraries for ancient texts and took as one of his heroes the Roman writer Cicero. Like Cicero's speeches and writings, Petrarch's letters and poems were conversational and witty, unlike the stark style of the Middle Ages. Petrarch was also among the first of his age to reject medieval philosophy and to base his philosophical thinking on the views of the ancient world.

As we have seen, medieval punishment for suicide had been intensely cruel, and it became even crueler during the rise of the Protestants. In the late Renaissance, those who took their own lives continued to suffer nasty treatment, but these practices began to be sharply contrasted by philosophical and literary investigation of suicide. In fact, several writers and thinkers of the Renaissance and the early modern period that followed it were fascinated with suicide and looked at it from different angles. Most still came out against suicide, but the reasoning now was based less on church doctrine and more on independent assessment of the situation. The Renaissance was also a time of innovation in diplomacy, economics, and social mores, so it is not surprising to see changes in every aspect of culture, and the new way of looking at suicide was part of these larger cultural and political changes. Petrarch led the way in philosophy and literature: his hero Cicero, we have seen, was at least tolerant and sometimes admiring of certain ancient suicides. Moreover, the printing press, which fueled the Renaissance's dissemination of knowledge, churned out its

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first book, the Bible, in 1453, and by 1473 it had printed *On the Nature of Things,* by Lucretius, named by some as a suicide himself.

The Renaissance brought a revival of many classical authors, whose works had been hard to find for centuries. Through new editions of Plutarch, Livy, and Pliny, the reading public learned of Epicureanism and Stoicism, of Lucretius, Cato, Brutus, and Seneca. Petrarch in 1366 made use of classical texts to write a polemic against suicide. He reprises the classical arguments against suicide, including the ideas that it is not proper to abandon one's post and that killing oneself is against human nature. Moreover, he adds, in a Christian context, suicide is against God's will. Of Cato and Seneca he writes, "I grieve to condemn such great men; but I have strangely wondered indeed, how so cruel an opinion could enter into the heart of so worthy a man as Seneca, who does indeed say I will leap out of this ruinous building of my body—but O Seneca, though sayst not well!" Cato, he observes, has been commended by some and "sharply reprehended" by others; he sides with those who see him dying not to defend the Republic but out of envy of Caesar. Petrarch even suggests that perhaps "Cato sought occasion to die, not so much to escape Caesar's hands as to follow the principles of the Stoics; and by some notable deed to give his name to posterity."[1] Thus are dismissed the heroes of ancient suicides. Petrarch also writes that suicides are caused by anger, disdain, impatience, and "a kind of furious forgetfulness of what thou art." Of those who procured their own deaths, "how glad would they now be to return into this world again, to abide poverty and all adversity."[2] For Petrarch, suicide is an unmitigated evil.

This attitude was not monolithic. Ten years later, Chaucer's poem *The Legend of Good Women* included long sections

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dedicated to the suicides of Lucretia, Dido, Cleopatra, and Pyramus and Thisbe. Chaucer praises them all. He describes Lucretia after she has told her kinsman what happened to her:

> She seide, that, for her gilt ne for her blame,
> Her husbond sholde nat have the foule name,
> That would she nat suffer, by no wey
> And they aswereden all upon hir fey,
> That they foryeve hit her, for hit was right;
> Hit was no gilt, hit lay nat in her might
> And seiden her ensamples many oon.
> But al for noght; for thus she seide anoon
> "Be as be may," quod she, "of forgiving,
> I wol nat have no forgift for no-thing."
> But prively she caught forth a knyf,
> And therwith-al she rafte re-self her lyf
> And as she fel adoun, she caste her look
> And of her clothes yit she hede took;
> For in falling yit she hadde care
> Lest that her feet or swiche thing lay bare
> So wel she loved clennesse and eek trouthe.

There is forgiveness for Lucretia here, for the crime committed against her, but her final act is taken as the pinnacle of being a "good woman."

In the late 1500s, there begin to be more suicides in literature, and suicide is often depicted in a positive way.[3] For example, in an anonymous English manuscript of 1578, Saul is put on trial for killing himself. Saul boldly defends himself by calling upon the examples of Samson, the Christian martyrs, Socrates, and Cato.

Another somewhat positive take on suicide was writ-

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eyes and posture they hint at her inner life, and we now begin to see her as an individual suffering a grave problem, ascertaining the value and meaning of her own life. She is often holding a long dagger and sometimes has already stabbed herself in the belly, or is about to do so. Raphael drew her with spread arms depicted in such vibrant lines that she seemed to be dancing with the knife, barely pointed at her. For this graceful pose she is dressed in a toga, which falls in disarray over her body, one breast exposed, her head back and eyes closed, the emotion of the moment almost lifting her up off the courtyard stones. Raphael drew his Lucretia for a collaboration with printmaker Marcantonio Raimondi, and it became one of the most famous prints of the Renaissance. This Lucretia does not make one think of the state, or even of sacrifice. Instead it is all about the woman pictured, who seems miserable and as yet uncommitted to death.

Alternatively, Lucretia was sometimes imagined as the epitome of calm, virtuous and reasonable, as in the work of an unknown Dutch painter of the early sixteenth century. Sometimes she is angry, as in Albrecht Dürer's 1518 *Suicide of Lucretia,* which shows her naked and frowning monstrously at the sky. She has already stabbed herself here, and blood spurts out of the wound, but she is still standing and practically growling, a powerful figure seemingly still full of life. This picture has been generally dismissed as Dürer's worst. The art critic Fedja Anzelewsky has written that Dürer "tried in vain to convey something of the tragic greatness of the Roman heroine through her expression."[5] It is true that she is not beautiful here, but it can be argued that if you approach the picture with an interest in the woman herself in this terrible decision, her anger and her ugliness become singularly appropriate as representations of her inner state.

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Titian's 1517 *Tarquinius and Lucretia* portrays her earlier in the story, fighting off her attacker. Tarquin is dressed in princely finery—red stockings, red velvet pantaloons—and she is naked save for a wisp of bedsheet across her thigh. Surprisingly, he has a dagger, and she is doing everything she can to keep it away from herself: the image of the archetypical suicidal woman here fights for her life. She is adorned with a bracelet on each wrist, big earrings, a ring, and a necklace of pearls. She has a pretty face, a complex blond hairdo, and a curvaceous body, all of which represent a powerful woman of considerable status, and full of life.

In the 1630s Lucas Cranach the Elder, the preeminent German painter of his age, painted a whole gallery of Lucretias. All are in some stage of undress, most look directly at the viewer, and while each held a dagger to her waist or breast, no one seems hurt. The Flemish artist Joos van Cleve showed Lucretia in Flemish finery, breast exposed, and having already plunged the dagger into her chest. The look on her face is misery. The Italian Baroque painter Guido Cagnacci also has Lucretia alluring in her bare-breasted disrobe, dark of feature and demeanor, having already taken the knife into her side. Cagnacci also painted a poignant *Death of Cleopatra*, another famous ancient suicide.

Nowhere is Lucretia more powerful and more dreamily contemplative than in Rembrandt's *Lucretia* of 1664. For him she is fully dressed and looking European in a noblewoman's gown and jewels, her blade threatening herself from a good distance. She seems more commanding than vanquished. She is not exactly killing herself anymore, and she seems to be a new, stronger vision of the self. These pictures, by Dürer, Titian, Cranach, van Cleve, Cagnacci, and Rembrandt, provide evidence of a fascination with Lucretia that transcended a

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