

## Summaries of articles

### **Suicide in the Middle Ages**

Jean-Claude SCHMITT

*Studies on suicide number into the thousands, but among these works the perspective of the historian is almost entirely lacking. This essay deals with suicide in feudal society even before the appearance of the word itself. Suicide, at that time, was considered a kind of homicide, a murder of oneself, and resulted in damnation. Despite certain common elements of behavior, it was a reality quite different from today's suicide.*

*A study of approximately fifty concrete cases of suicide permits us, over and above the distinction made at the time between the suicide of a madman and deliberate suicide, to define suicide as a social behavior, consummating a break between the individual and the group. The dynamic treatment of the home-space by the person committing suicide and by the collectivity during the ritual punishment of the corpse, emphasizes this particular sense of suicide as break. The Church condemned suicide, but even more tried to obstruct or prevent the act through the intervention of the confessor. In the courtly romances, situated on the border between nature and culture, one of the functions of the hermit was to help the desperate hero rejoin the living.*

### **Dying in Paris (16th, 17th, 18th centuries)**

Pierre CHAUNU

*This article outlines a research project currently being directed by the author on the attitudes of the inhabitants of Paris towards death in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries.*

*Three principal sources: post-mortem inventories, "images volantes", wills contained in the Central Records of the Parisian Notaries (Minutier Central des Notaires parisiens). Ten thousand wills (out of nearly 450,000 preserved) were used.*

*The study confirms the conclusions of Michel Vovelle for Provence and the analysis of Philippe Ariès. In Paris, the reaction is more rapid than in Provence. Especially noteworthy are the abbreviated formulations of the "Mérites du Christ" in the invocation to the will (dominant from the end of the 16th to the beginning of the 18th century) and the importance of the Church's deductions on inheritances, around 10% for the middle of the 18th century, at the height of the Catholic Reformation.*

**« Arts de mourir » 1450-1600**

Roger CHARTIER

*This article proposes first of all a quantitative reading of a corpus situated at the very heart of the work of E. Mâle, J. Huizinga and A. Tenenti: the "arts de mourir", copied, published and engraved from the middle of the 15th century up to the Council of Trent (1545-1563). The first stage is an analysis of the circulation and the survival of the Ars moriendi and of the iconographic series which frequently accompanies them. Examining the output of books, we find that the reeditions of the Ars cease after 1530-1540 and the subsequent literature dealing with the preparation for death (préparation à la mort) seems at the same time more scattered and of less consequence. The iconography of the battles between angels and demons over the soul of the moribund is more resistant and coexists during the 16th century with the new images of the memento mori. An evaluation of this production through its titles permits us to advance two observations: "préparations à la mort" constitute between 3 and 4% of the religious incunabula; the genre fades out in the 16th century. This tendency is confirmed by the contents of private libraries. The second stage consists of examination of several texts both for their normative contents,—they recommend to the Christian a system of gestures and practices in which the priest occupied an increasingly prominent position—and for the collective fears surrounding the last moments, fears which can be detected in these documents.*

**« La Mémoire de la Mort » : research on the place of the « arts de mourir » in publications and reading habits in France during the 17th and 18th centuries**

Daniel ROCHE

*The reconstruction of the corpus of "arts de mourir" published in the 17th and 18th centuries permits us to see how the production and circulation of a language of dying takes shape. An inventory of titles and publications shows that after an initial phase of adaptation, the genre reaches a peak between 1675 and 1700. During the Enlightenment, the curve of publications remains nearly stable but, in contrast, the shrinkage in the number of titles points up the fact that the theme itself does not undergo a renewal. A sociological study of the authors permits us to attribute the greater part of this production to the members of the Company of Jesus and to representatives of the major religious orders. The use of this production covered a wide social range and had three basic aims : pastoral care, individual prayer, youth education.*

*Finally, an analysis of this language permits us to reconstruct how one learns the acts of this preparation and to show how the gestures of living, illness and dying form a pattern in the Mémoire de la Mort.*

**Attitudes towards death : methodological problems, approaches and different readings**

Michel VOVELLE

*The author presents the progress achieved in the studies dealing with man's attitude towards death. Several recent works have clearly indicated the importance of this question for historians of mental habits and more particularly for those who study collective attitudes and behaviour over long periods of time. The article reviews the research in the field up to the present and then examines the different approaches (descriptive, impressionistic, or on the contrary "serial") required for the study of a case which is both replete with information about human behavior and protected by many taboos. The collected data are used to compare several of the "models" which have been put forth to explain the evolution of the phenomenon from the Middle Ages to the present day; in particular the "Ariès" model (Western Attitudes towards Death) and the Vovelle model (Mourir autrefois). This comparison leads to the final development on the sensitive question; why does the image of death change?*

*In conclusion, the author poses the problem of the phenomenon which we have been living for several years and even more markedly for the last few months: why, at the very time the "death taboo" model seemed self-evident to our contemporary societies, the spectacular movement towards a rediscovery of death, and this not only in the field of science?*

**Michelet, the dead and the year 1842: The poverty of history: the historian at grips with historicism**

Michel CROUZET

*This article is an effort to shed some light on the intimate and "pathétique" rapports that Michelet had with death, rapports which stem from Michelet personally but also from his function as a historian. Working from the texts of his Journal, and in particular those of 1842, a crucial year for the evolution of Michelet's thought and for the direction that his work was to take, M. Crouzet analyses Michelet's mourning as an indisputably pathological process. Underlying the fascination which death and the other life of the tomb hold for Michelet, one discerns in reality a basic rejection of death, the death of loved ones and of others, and above all, a denial of the basic fact of man's mortality; the historian lives the death of others as his own; that is his process of "mourning", but he also lives it as something unthinkable which he can only reject or "transcend". A forerunner in his undertaking to push back the limits of human life, a pioneer in "transcending" death, simultaneously in the process of mourning which he lives, or successively if one considers the evolution of his depictions, to resorb death in two ways: as an historicist he tries to assimilate personal death to death as it is conceived by the historian who sees history destroy in order to accomplish, and who himself believes that he conceives the dead and their societies in their true light; for a global history which forces the limits of historical knowledge and seeks to rediscover what men were and not merely what they did, the dead become a cumbersome community with which the historian lives in awful communion; as a gnostic, he elaborates a system to describe the world, an*

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erotology of cosmic, human and "Micheletistic" bisexuality which, by means of cyclic recreation, affirms the belief in a natural and infinite continuation of life. The intersection of the historicist and the gnostic paths would be the book *Le Peuple* and particularly the texts on "le Génie".

### ***Dealing with death***

Claudine HERZLICH

*In this article, the author examines attitudes and practices concerning death and the dying, in the light of an analysis of the function of hospitals as an institution and of medical practice viewed as a process of producing death. She tries to show how death even though relegated to the hospital, remains nonetheless socialized. She also tries to pinpoint the first signs of a rebirth of the collective sensitivity to the problems of death and dying in contemporary society.*

### **« Fataa, fáa, fo'ó'a : the word, the action, the act »**

Remo GUIDIERI

*Theories of ritual exist: Durkheim, Mauss, Hocart, Van Gennep. But their explanations are based upon a priori descriptions which are either weak or inadequate. Before interpreting a ritual, a valid approach must be found. Having put forth this observation and made this reservation, the author enters into a description of rituals belonging to an archaic culture which, acting in a context of the ancestral dead, accomplishes these rituals and thinks in terms of them.*

*First, the author examines the categories of the empirical word and action (speaking, proclaiming, acting, causing) in contrast to the single category of the ritual Word and Act. He then proposes a reading of propitiary and expiatory rites which concludes with a presentation of the forces implicit in these processes. The article ends with a study of the symbolic necessity of the notions contained in the relations between the sexes and the rapport with the dead: impure, not impure, sacred.*