

BOOK REVIEW

Stuart, Kathy. *Suicide by Proxy in Early Modern Germany: Crime, Sin and Salvation*

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023. Pp. 466.

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Kathy Stuart has written an excellent study of suicide by proxy, a term she uses to refer to people who committed crimes, usually the killing of young children, with the intention of being executed. Such actions were based on the belief that direct suicide would result in damnation, whereas committing a capital crime afforded the perpetrator time to repent prior to the execution and thereby be saved. Other scholars have uncovered this phenomenon in Germanic areas, including Scandinavia, but Stuart demonstrates that it was much more widespread than previously believed.

Stuart's most important contribution is her linking suicides by proxy to social discipline, which, historians agree, greatly increased among both Protestants and Catholics during the Reformation era. Other scholars have associated suicidal murders with Lutheranism, but Stuart persuasively shows that these cases crossed confessional lines. Examining a variety of sources—newspaper accounts, sermons, execution registers, in addition to court records—Stuarts draws evidence principally from two cities, Lutheran Hamburg and Catholic Vienna, both of which had high numbers (close to a hundred in each) of suicides by proxy. Findings from these and other locations reveal a remarkable total of approximately four hundred cases of suicide by proxy, most of which were prosecuted in the later seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Across confessions, women comprised the large majority of those who were guilty of suicide by proxy because, Stuart asserts, women “bore the brunt of social disciplining initiatives of the early modern state” (10), a provocative claim that not all scholars of discipline will accept. In contrast to trials of witchcraft, no confession of suicide by proxy was extracted by torture, and perpetrators typically turned themselves in to authorities. Prior to the early eighteenth century, many people voluntarily confessed to witchcraft, bestiality, or infanticide—regardless of whether they had committed such crimes—in order to be put to death. By the time the witch-hunts had waned in the early 1700s, however, such self-denunciations were less likely to result in capital punishment. Thereafter, by far the most common form of suicide by proxy was the premeditated murder of a child. According to Stuart, a key precondition for the development of proxy suicides was the increase in religious rituals surrounding executions. This included the public participation of the clergy, among both Catholics and Protestants, who offered consolation and blessings, assuring the condemned that salvation was possible if they had truly repented for their sins.

Catholic Vienna experienced a form of suicide by proxy not found in Protestant areas. In addition to suicidal child murders, the Viennese witnessed many cases of suicidal iconoclasm, involving sacrilegious or blasphemous acts such as defiling a crucifix or a consecrated host. In Vienna, executions for blasphemy, mostly physical rather than verbal forms of desecration, peaked in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, which is noteworthy insofar as capital sentences for such crimes were at that time rare elsewhere in Europe. As with suicidal murders, most perpetrators of suicidal iconoclasm were female, aptly seen in a six-month period in 1712 when six women and one man were beheaded for attacking a crucifix or desecrating a host. When shortly thereafter Austrian officials shifted from executing to imprisoning those who committed such acts, suicidal people changed from blasphemy to child murder to attain their goal. Quite fascinating are the records of Vienna's Confraternity of the

Dead, whose function was to accompany condemned criminals to their execution and then carry the body in a procession to the graveyard for burial. Their goal was to get the condemned to show repentance and confess their sins in hopes of a Christian burial and, more importantly, the salvation of their soul. Most of the convicts agreed to play the role of the repentant sinner, and authorities went to extraordinary lengths to get those who were “obstinate” to play this part, even if that meant postponing the execution.

Stuart makes a very good case that the great reduction in religious rituals surrounding executions, starting especially in the 1770s, played a key role in the decline of suicide by proxy in both Lutheran Hamburg and Catholic Vienna. In Austria, for example, funerary processions for executed criminals were prohibited, and in 1775, Joseph II, who would later abolish capital punishment, forbade the Confraternity of the Dead to participate in any way in executions.

Stuart makes a strong argument connecting suicide by proxy to social discipline. This does raise the question, though, of why certain other polities did not experience this phenomenon. No city experienced a greater increase in social discipline than Geneva, where the Consistory, a morality court created by John Calvin, was incredibly intrusive and enjoyed considerable success in altering the behavior of the rank and file. Geneva would experience an explosion in direct suicides in the late eighteenth century, but there is no extant record from the early modern era of anyone committing a crime with the explicit goal of being sentenced to death. Though this paradox requires an explanation, Stuart has nonetheless produced an excellent piece of scholarship.