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‘No future to look forward to’, Suicide Pacts, Intimacy and Society in 1920s and 1930s Britain

Abstract

In the years after the First World War, a worrying legal and cultural phenomenon appeared in the English criminal court, something that would captivate the reading public throughout Britain. Young people, specifically young couples, were agreeing to die together, in what would become known as a ‘suicide pact’. This article examines the curiously brief life of the suicide pact as a legal, social, and cultural problem in Britain. It contends that the suicide pact became a site through which the scale and pace of modern life, and particularly intimate life, was debated and judged. The suicide pact, this article argues, provides another vantage point to unpack the fraught twentieth-century relationship between individual freedom in sexual life, and the norms, values and patterns of community and the family. In exploring this tension, this article also presents a new way of thinking about the history of both intimate and social life in twentieth-century Britain.

Introduction

Morbidity has been a productive framework for historians looking to characterize British culture in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Not just capturing a preoccupation with death and mortality in the aftermath of the

* I would like to thank my doctoral supervisors Matt Houlbrook and Chris Moores, who have been a constant source of insight and support. Thanks also to Rose Debenham and Zoë Thomas who read early drafts of the piece. I submitted an earlier version of this article to the Duncan Tanner prize ran by TCBH, I am grateful for the expansive and constructive comments of the two anonymous reviewers, as well as the wider editorial team’s support. This research was funded by a scholarship from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, through the Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership [grant number: AH/L50385X/1]. j.t.fredrickson@bham.ac.uk

¹ See for instance: Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain Between the Wars* (London, 2009).

First World War, morbidity also connoted a tendency towards excessive introspection and the effect of mass culture on the dissolution and dislocation of established social norms.² This article examines a little remembered cultural and legal spectacle that for many, reinforced they were living in morbid times. In 1922 alone, four people faced murder trials after unsuccessfully attempting suicide along with another person. Almost all were romantic couples who had agreed to die together. In what was known before the 1920s as a 'mutual suicide', it increasingly became known by a term previously only used in the USA, the 'suicide compact', 'suicide pact', or 'death pact'.³ As one regional newspaper commented, the suicide pact was, 'a phrase which the morbidity and sensationalism of the age have brought into being'.⁴

For George Orwell, the suicide pact was the archetypal morbid act for morbid times.⁵ As his protagonist, Gordon Comstock declares in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*:

For can you not see, if you know how to look, that behind that slick self-satisfaction, that tittering fat-bellied triviality, there is nothing but a frightful emptiness, a secret despair? The great death wish of the modern world. Suicide pacts. Heads stuck in gas-ovens in lonely mai-sonettes. French letters and Amen Pills.⁶

The suicide pact stands amongst the detritus of a modern consumer culture that, for Orwell, was increasingly devoid of meaning. This article is interested in what the emergence of the suicide pact as both a cultural event and a personal crisis reveals about modern intimacy and modern social life. As a means to launch a critique on the dangers of modernity, the suicidal couple, as much as the flapper or the ex-serviceman, became a recognizable archetype in 1920s and 1930s Britain. This archetype dramatized wider concerns of how mass culture and consumerism increasingly blurred the boundaries between fantasy and reality,

² Morbidity has been a useful frame to capture a sense of damage and dislocation in the aftermath of the first world war, for its use with multiple different focuses see: Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks: Politics and Trauma in Britain, 1918-1931* (Basingstoke, 2009); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 2009); Laura Doan, 'Topsy-Turvydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12 (October 2006), 517-42.

³ 'Amazing Story of Lovers' Suicide Pact', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London), 14th May 1922, 5; 'Holiday then Death Pact', *The Daily Sketch* (London), 12th May 1922, 3; 'Lover's Dramatic Story of a Death Pact', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London), 21st May 1922, 7.

⁴ 'Suicide Pacts', *Derby Daily Telegraph* (Derby), 19th December 1922, 2.

⁵ On the salience and centrality of morbidity, anxiety, and nervousness to British culture in the period see: Susan Kingsley Kent, *Aftershocks*, 26-27; Max Saunders, *Imagined Futures: Writing, Science, and Modernity in the To-Day and To-Morrow Book Series, 1923-31* (Oxford, 2019), 154.

⁶ George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (London, 2000 [1936]), 16.

encouraging young people to imagine themselves hero(ines) of their own love stories.⁷

The cultural reach of the suicide pact was disproportionate to the number of people who entered into pacts. Nonetheless, beyond the archetype stood actual couples who in the act of suicide saw a solution to a modern intimacy they experienced as impossible. John Holloway and Elizabeth Kirkham were one such couple. Young sweethearts both under 25, John had enlisted in the Marines a few years earlier and Lizzie was a domestic servant. In September 1923, having spent a week together while John was on furlough, they both became increasingly despondent at having to part. A day after he was due back on ship, John was dead, and Elizabeth had been charged with his murder. Elizabeth and John had taken poison, salts of lemon acquired at the local chemist. As Elizabeth wrote to her friend Annie, they were now 'two lovers who find rest and a pleasant future'.⁸ John wrote to his mother that he had 'no future to look forward to, so I have gone elsewhere, taking Lizzie'.⁹ Lizzie's future, positioned within the imagined space the couple inhabited through death was 'pleasant' and emancipatory, where the constraints on their relationship and the hardships of the present melted away.

Inspired by queer theoretical approaches to the study of time, this article examines and historicizes John and Lizzie's inability to imagine a future for themselves.¹⁰ Historicizing this future explains how the suicide pact became such a powerful cultural trope in the early 1920s and why these young people attempted to end their lives. Thinking through the reasons people gave for considering a suicide pact, listening to them in their own words, reveals with startling clarity the acute pressures involved in managing socially transgressive intimacies. These couples were caught between the continued rigidity of social norm and the growing primacy of self-fulfilment in legitimating healthy and happy relationships.

As seen from the pages of popular newspapers, the free-floating suicidal couple were archetypal of what Vernon has called a 'society of strangers', something he sees as the primary condition of modernity and modern social life.¹¹ The indeterminate performativity of modern

⁷ On the relationship between mass culture and the 'fictionality' of everyday life see: Matt Houlbrook, "'A Pin to See The Peepshow": Culture, Fiction And Selfhood in Edith Thompson's Letters, 1921-1922', *Past & Present*, 227 (May, 2010), 215-49, 223; On the 'spectacularization' of British culture see: Michael Saler, "'Clap If You Believe in Sherlock Holmes": Mass Culture and the Re-Enchantment of Modernity, c. 1890-c. 1940', *The Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), 599-622, 607.

⁸ The National Archives (TNA), Justices of Assizes (ASSI), 6/58/3.

⁹ TNA, ASSI 6/58/3.

¹⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, 2004), 4; José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, 2009), 11; C. Dinshaw et al., 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 13 (January 2007), 177-95, 180-81.

¹¹ James Vernon, *Distant Strangers: How Britain Became Modern* (Berkeley, 2014), 61-62.

subjectivities and modern social life has proved an influential framework for cultural histories of Britain in the 1920s and 1930s.¹² Yet the suicidal couple problematizes Vernon's claim that anonymity determined the nature and feel of modern social life. The suicide pact, as an archetype, certainly contributed to a sense that modernity had both an anonymous and fantastical feel to it. Yet what led these couples to consider suicide in the first place was precisely the fact that they were not living in a society of strangers. Rather it was the claustrophobic pressures of family life, the workplace, and the wider community that led them to see, in John Holloway's words, 'no future to look forward to'.¹³ Modern social life increasingly existed in the space *between* the anonymity and fictionality of the society of strangers and the patterns of sociability rooted in the community, the workplace and the street. The modern social was anonymous only in very specific spaces—the West End street, the seaside resort or the tube or train carriage for example—spaces defined by their temporary nature and fundamental transience.¹⁴ In the daily reality of lives within persistently knowable communities, the happy ever after ending these couples dreamed of was ultimately unimaginable.

As Jon Lawrence has argued, the cramped reality of life lived in crowded streets, particularly for working-class communities, meant that social life felt anything but strange. Yet Lawrence also sees a shift in patterns of working-class sociability in this period, what he refers to, following Raymond Firth, as an 'assertive separateness' between the couple and the home on the one hand, and a wider network of family, neighbours, and community on the other.¹⁵ A shift reminiscent of what Deborah Cohen has charted in the twentieth century middle-class family, where the increased value placed on privacy reflected and reinforced the growing centrality of individual freedom.¹⁶ A freedom to choose and shape a personal future often guided by dreams and fantasies of romantic fulfilment. The suicide pact phenomenon of the 1920s was the consequence,

¹² Such work often takes the work of sociologist Erving Goffman as its starting point who saw the performativity of social relations as one of the key conditions of modernity: Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, 2021, [1959]), 48–50; For how British historians have explored this see: Houlbrook, *Prince of Tricksters: The Incredible True Story of Netley Lucas, Gentleman Crook* (Chicago, 2016), 5–7; Laura Doan, 'Topsy-Turvydom: Gender Inversion, Sapphism, and the Great War', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 12 (October 2006), 517–42, 518–19; Angus McLaren, 'Smoke and Mirrors: Willy Clarkson and the Role of Disguises in Inter-war England', *Journal of Social History*, 40 (2007), 597–618; James Vernon, "'For Some Queer Reason': The Trials and Tribulations of Colonel Barker's Masquerade in Interwar Britain', *Signs*, 26 (2000), 37–62.

¹³ TNA, ASSI 6/58/3.

¹⁴ For an excellent discussion of the Tube as an exemplary modern space see: Simeon Koole, 'How We Came to Mind the Gap: Time, Tactility, and the Tube', *Twentieth Century British History* (August 2016), 525–54, 525–27.

¹⁵ Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019), 5; Raymond Firth (ed.), *Two Studies of Kinship in London* (London, 1956), 34.

¹⁶ Deborah Cohen, *Family Secrets: The Things We Tried to Hide* (London, 2014), 235–36.

I argue, of this faultline in intimate and social life. A product of a new conception of intimate life increasingly linked to the privacy of the couple, while constrained and constricted by the persistent power of the norms and values of community and familial networks.

My argument is structured in three parts. I begin by situating the suicide pact within a broader history, and historiography, of suicide. I then turn to examining the suicide pact's association with dreaming, fictionality and performance within an atomized and anonymous modern social. I focus on how the suicide pact emerged with such force and became fixed as a cultural archetype. While I argue that such a framing obscured as much as it elucidated about the actual causes of suicide pacts, the resources provided by a mass consumer culture of romance were increasingly important for suicidal couples to both structure a dream of the future they experienced as impossible, and ameliorate the pain of living with an impossible intimacy in the present.

I finish by exploring the limitations of conceptualizing the suicide pact too narrowly through the frame of romance, fantasy and the dream-worlds of a 'society of strangers'. Cutting through the obfuscations of the romantic tragedy metanarrative, I tease out the fear, threat, shame and stigma that came with negotiating an impossible intimacy that was incompatible with the norms, values and expectations of everyday life. I highlight how the society of strangers was only one—fleeting and transient—space through which modern Britons moved. In so doing I argue that the experience of modern intimacy was increasingly defined by the act of negotiating the incompatibility between, and the contradictions in, the different spaces both material and fantastical, in which romance and the romantic self were lived and made meaningful.

Situating the suicide pact

Historians of suicide have stressed the need to deeply historicize the categories and knowledge regimes that shape meanings affixed to suicide.¹⁷ They argue that the act itself has an inherent plasticity, indeed that it can almost resist or refuse interpretation. This makes its study both a fiendishly difficult and uniquely productive site of historical analysis.¹⁸ The changing meanings and social responses to suicide point towards a productive method in charting change over time. Historians such as Michael MacDonald and Olive Anderson chart how the disciplinary regimes attending to suicide were reflective of, and produced by, the deep historical processes of secularization, industrialization, and

¹⁷ Terri L. Snyder, 'What Historians Talk About When They Talk About Suicide: The View from Early Modern British North America', *History Compass*, 5 (2007), 658–74.

¹⁸ Marc A. Hertzman, 'Fatal Differences: Suicide, Race, and Forced Labor in the Americas', *The American Historical Review*, 122 (April 2017), 317–45.

urbanization.¹⁹ Yet the persistent thorn in these historians' sides is the difficulty of linking the broad to the particular, and doing justice to the lives of those who committed suicide, particularly given that scholars across disciplinary boundaries have warned of the dangers of attempting to explain why someone decided to end their life.²⁰ In light of this, the cultural life of suicide is perhaps safer historical ground.²¹ Yet in this article I want to make a plea for a method that unpacks the cultural meanings affixed to suicide while being attuned to the particular contexts and crises that led people to attempt to end their life. I will argue that to do one without the other fails to grasp the complexity and slipperiness of suicide and its history. I do not profess to do justice to or to fully understand the causes of suicide presented here. Yet I follow the recent work of Ella Sbaraini to stress that the most sensitive and productive method in tracing the history of suicide, is to listen carefully to the historical actors who faced such acts, understanding their intentions in their own words.²²

The suicide pact phenomenon of the 1920s and 1930s stood at a critical juncture in the history of romance and intimate relationships between men and women. As historians have long made clear, the period witnessed the solidification of companionate marriage as a hegemonic ideal.²³ Central to this was marriage as an emotional bond and a happy marriage as a key, indeed a pre-requisite, to self-fulfilment.²⁴ The pursuit of emotionally nourishing companionate marriage reflected and reinforced an intensification of what James Vernon refers to as the 'emotional economy' of the family.²⁵ Declining family size, the rise of home ownership and the growth of suburban living, placed a new significance on the

¹⁹ Michael MacDonald, 'The Secularization of Suicide in England 1660-1800', *Past & Present* (1986), 50-100; Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England* (Oxford, 1987); Victor Bailey, *This Rash Act: Suicide Across the Life Cycle in the Victorian City* (Stanford, Calif, 1998).

²⁰ Ronald Holmes and Stephen Holmes, *Suicide: Theory, Practice, and Investigation* (Thousand Oaks, 2005), 27-38.

²¹ For work that takes this approach see: Georges Minois, *History of Suicide: Voluntary Death in Western culture* (Baltimore, 1999); Katherine Gaudet, 'Liberty and Death: Fictions of Suicide in the New Republic', *Early American Literature*, 47 (2012), 591-622; Lisa Lieberman, 'Romanticism and the Culture of Suicide in Nineteenth-Century France', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 33 (July 1991), 611-629.

²² Ella Sbaraini, 'The Materiality of English Suicide Letters, c. 1700 - c. 1850', *The Historical Journal* (October 2021), 1-28.

²³ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2003), 55; Timothy Willem Jones, 'Love, Honour and Obey? Romance, Subordination and Marital Subjectivity in Interwar Britain', in Alan Harris et al. (eds), *Love and Romance in Britain 1918-1970* (Basingstoke, 2014), 128-29; Karen Chow, 'Popular Sexual Knowledges and Women's Agency in 1920s England: Marie Stopes's 'Married Love' and E. M. Hull's 'The Sheik'', *Feminist Review* (1999), 64-87.

²⁴ Hannah Charnock, "'A Million Little Bonds': Infidelity, Divorce and the Emotional Worlds of Marriage in British Women's Magazines of the 1930s', *Cultural and Social History*, 14 (May 2017), 363-79, 365.

²⁵ James Vernon, *Distant Strangers*, 62.

home, the family, and the couple as the primary site for intimate and emotional sustenance.²⁶ This was further compounded by a popular culture of romance that presented romantic love, and the quest for romantic happiness, as the essential condition of a modern, aspirational selfhood.²⁷ This new emotional and intimate terrain of marriage and the family monopolized what it meant to live a happy and satisfying life, a constitutive component of what T.J. Jackson Lears sees as a modern subjectivity constantly in the 'pursuit of perfection'.²⁸ In this context, dreaming and fantasy were important ways in which people imagined and experienced an aspirational future rooted in conjugal happiness.²⁹

The suicide pact 'crisis' emerged in the spaces between the imagined ideal of romantic happiness and the messy reality of its failure. The social and financial threats marital failure and transgression posed compounded the impossibility and intolerability of the future. As historians of heterosexual practice have observed, the financial and social costs of reproductive sex constantly stalked and policed the limits to pre- or extra-marital relationships.³⁰ The archival traces of failed suicide pacts heave with the weight of shame and fear caused by pregnancy, failed marriages, and extra-marital relationships. The conjuncture that led to the suicide pact's emergence, I argue, were the specific claustrophobic pressures of sexual and intimate life in the early 1920s, where the potency and primacy of dreams clashed with the continued permanency and inflexibility of marriage and the continued costs of sexual transgression.

This article examines fifteen instances of attempted suicide pacts which culminated in criminal proceedings between 1922 and 1932. Prior to 1957, English common law stipulated that a sole survivor of a suicide pact was liable for the murder of the deceased.³¹ In UK, it was the *failure* of a suicide pact that was the precondition for its emergence as a vehicle to mobilize anxieties about modern love. I am not suggesting that successful pacts did not happen or were not important in the construction of the cult

²⁶ Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb: Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford, 2004), 48–9; Peter Scott, *The Making of the Modern British Home: The Suburban Semi and Family Life between the Wars* (Oxford, 2013), 11; Selina Todd, *Young Women, Work, and Family in England 1918–1950* (Oxford, 2005), 221–2.

²⁷ Barbara Caine, 'Love and Romance in Interwar British Autobiography' in Harris et al. *Love and Romance in Britain*, 21; See also: Bridget Fowler, *The Alienated Reader: Women and Romantic Literature in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1991); Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain, 1914–1950* (Oxford, 1992).

²⁸ T. J. Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York, 1994), 162.

²⁹ Houlbrook, 'A Pin to See the Peepshow', 223–4.

³⁰ Pat Thane and Tanya Evans, *Sinners? Scroungers? Saints?: Unmarried Motherhood in Twentieth-Century England* (Oxford, 2012), 31–3; Simon Szreter and Kate Fisher, *Sex Before the Sexual Revolution: Intimate Life in England 1918–1963* (Cambridge, 2010); Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage in Britain 1918–1960* (Oxford, 2006).

³¹ J. E. Hall Williams and J. C. Read, 'The Homicide Act, 1957', *The Modern Law Review*, 20 (1957), 381–6.

of the suicide pact. We know that successful pacts happened, precisely because the same newspapers who followed suicide pact murder trials also reported on the inquests of couples who did die together.³²

Nonetheless, it was the murder trial which elevated the suicide pact to its archetypal status.³³ It was popular newspapers, particularly the more sensationalist Sunday weeklies such as *Reynolds's Newspaper* and *The News of the World*, that helped turn isolated and infrequent instances of attempted suicide into cultural spectacles dramatized and invested with broader warnings about the state of society.³⁴ The suicide pact spectacle was reflective of the emergence of journalism as a distinct genre, one which borrowed from—and indeed informed—the generic and discursive toolkit of middlebrow popular fiction.³⁵ Reportage drew upon tropes of both romantic and crime fiction to present the suicide pact as a dramatic narrative of love and death. Such frames of representation also reinforced the salience of the fantastical and fictional to the broader culture of romance and intimacy in the period.³⁶

Yet, as Adrian Bingham has warned, it is important to recognize that ‘popular journalism’ did not speak with one voice in this period.³⁷ The suicide pact was a case in point. The trial reports of *Reynold's* or *The News of the World*, both papers well known for their sensational excess, were deeply invested in heightening the romantic drama of the suicide pact, often invoking the classical and folkloric. For them, these cases revealed the pain of ‘timeless lovers’, caught in ‘tragic trysts’.³⁸ Other newspapers were openly critical of such styles however, viewing the fictional excess of the sensational trial report as dangerous aspects of modern life that had created the conditions for the suicide pact in the first place.³⁹ The suicide pact as a warning about the effects of the modern social followed the more conventional modern frame for understanding suicide, associated

³² See for instance: ‘Father’s Phone Call Drama’, *The Daily Mail* (London), Tuesday 1 November 1932, 9; ‘Poison Mystery of Girl and Man’, *The Daily Mail* (London), Friday 10 June 1932, 11.

³³ Lucy Bland, *Modern women on trial: Sexual Transgression in the Age of the Flapper* (Manchester, 2013), 7–8; For work using trials in similar ways see: Angus McLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (Chicago, 1997); George Robb and Nancy Erder, *Disorder in the Court: Trials and Sexual Conflict at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1999).

³⁴ For how popular newspapers used other criminal trials for similar purposes see: Bland, *Modern Women on Trial*.

³⁵ Victoria Stewart, *Crime Writing in Interwar Britain: Fact and Fiction in the Golden Age* (Cambridge, 2017), 64–5; Shani D’Cruze, ‘“The Damned Place was Haunted”: The Gothic, Middlebrow Culture and Inter-War “Notable Trials”’, *Literature & History*, 15 (May 2006), 37–58.

³⁶ Matt Houlbrook, ‘Commodifying the Self Within: Ghosts, Libels, and the Crook Life Story in Interwar Britain’, *The Journal of Modern History*, 85 (June 2013), 321–63, 325–6.

³⁷ Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-War Britain* (Oxford, 2004).

³⁸ ‘Lovers’ Tragic Tryst’, *The News of the World* (London), 21 November, 1926, 2.

³⁹ ‘Suicide Pacts of Morbid Girlhood’, *Sunday Mercury* (Birmingham), 14 January 1923, 4.

primarily with the sociology of Emile Durkheim and his followers. Such thinking saw suicide as the archetypal barometer of the health of modern societies and indicative of the dangers of urbanization, industrialism, and modern capitalism.⁴⁰ Yet the suicide pact as romance borrowed from a slightly different register, one that drew on the long-held literary representations of romance and suicide and the figure of the 'doomed lovers'.⁴¹

Agreements to die together predate the 1920s, and are not of course a phenomenon unique to Britain. In the reportage of focus here, we can clearly see resonances with how suicides were represented and apprehended in the nineteenth-century British press. By the mid-nineteenth century, stock associations of suicide centred on the 'lonely, unhappy, ruined or the lovelorn'.⁴² Scholars have demonstrated how both suicide and mutual suicides have stood at the symbolic centre of other political or social 'crises', whether that be Weimar Berlin, the eighteenth-century American Republic, or fin-de-siecle France.⁴³ However, it is clear that the instances of mutual suicides increased in 1920s Britain, and they took on new significance when clothed in the language of the suicide pact.

The precedent books on capital crimes kept by the Home Office list twelve cases of attempted 'joint suicides' between 1900 and 1918. In contrast, the Home Office records double the number, 24, for 1918–39.⁴⁴ Contrast this to a meagre nine cases between 1939 and the Homicide Act of 1957, and we can start to see that something significant occurred in the years bookmarked by two world wars. The majority of cases in the 1920s were also classed, in the Home Office's own classification system as 'joint suicides: mistresses, paramours, sweethearts and fiancés'.⁴⁵ In contrast, the periods both preceding and following it present a much more varied picture. Romantic suicide pacts still occurred, but not as frequently as they had previously, and were rivalled in number by mutual suicides caused by the more recognizable drivers of suicide such as economic misfortune or ill-health.⁴⁶ From the vantage point of the Home Office's

⁴⁰ Philippe Besnard, 'Durkheim's Squares: Types of Social Pathology and Types of Suicide', in Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Durkheim* (Cambridge, 2005), 70–79.

⁴¹ Lieberman, 'Romanticism and the Culture of Suicide in Nineteenth-Century France', 614; Michelle Faubert and Nicole Reynolds, 'Introduction: Romanticism and Suicide', *Literature Compass*, 12 (December 2015), 641–51.

⁴² Barbara Gates, *Victorian Suicide: Mad Crimes and Sad Histories* (Princeton, 2014), 38.

⁴³ Moritz Föllmer, 'Suicide and Crisis in Weimar Berlin', *Central European History*, 42 (2009), 195–221; Gaudet, 'Liberty and Death', 592.

⁴⁴ TNA, Home Office (HO) 384/158, 'Capital Cases Volume 1'; HO 384/159, 'Capital Cases Volume 2'.

⁴⁵ TNA, HO 384/158.

⁴⁶ The standard historical accounts of modern suicide in England are: Olive Anderson, *Suicide in Victorian and Edwardian England*, and Victor Bailey, *This rash act*.

precedent books at least, the 1920s and 1930s emerge as the high noon of the overtly romantic suicide pact.

What should we make of this trend? To paraphrase Matt Houlbrook, we could say that if the suicide pact was not unique to the 1920s and 1930s, it was *characteristic*, and came to be seen as characteristic of the age.⁴⁷ The spotlight placed on it as a modern archetype almost certainly increased the number of suicide pacts and attempted pacts. If the suicide pact was conceptualized as a gruesome archetype of the modern age, it was because in very material ways it *was*. Its cultural visibility was dependent on the institutions, styles, and genres of mass culture. It was the debates over the effects of mass culture on the individual mind and body that led to so much worry and concern over the increase in suicide pacts. On the other hand, attending to the archival traces left by those who attempted a suicide pact further highlights its historical specificity, a product of the increasing difficulty in containing desire and self-actualization within the existing norms and institutions of marriage and family life. Shorn of its spectacular framing, couples were negotiating the impossible tensions they felt in reconciling socially transgressive intimacies.

The Suicide Pact, Modern Romance and the ‘society of strangers’

In the latter months of 1922, the playwright Sutton Vane was struggling to attract interest in his new manuscript. Much to the annoyance of the producers who turned him down, the self-produced *Outward Bound* would be one of the more surprising theatrical hits of the decade.⁴⁸ ‘There is no doubt’, wrote *Tatler*, ‘that Sutton Vane’s interesting play will create a good deal of discussion’.⁴⁹ Their prediction was an apt one. Vane’s play was so successful that Warner Brothers would release a film adaptation by 1930.⁵⁰ Set on a cruise-liner, the early scenes are stalked by Henry and Ann, a mysterious young couple who appear fleetingly, saying little before floating silently back to their cabin. As the play reaches its climax, and the audience realize that the liner’s destination is in fact the afterlife, Henry and Ann admit that they had agreed to die together in a suicide pact.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Matt Houlbrook, ‘“The Man with the Powder Puff” in Interwar London’, *The Historical Journal*, 50 (March 2007), 145–71, 151.

⁴⁸ ‘“Outward Bound” At the Everyman’, *The Sketch* (London), 25 August 1926, in ‘Outward Bound by Sutton Vane’, Theatre Collection, Cadbury Research Library (CRL), MS38/4937.

⁴⁹ ‘The Passing Shows’, *Tatler* No. 1167 (7 November 1923) in ‘Outward Bound’, CRL, MS38/4937.

⁵⁰ *Outward Bound* (1930), dir. Robert Milton.

⁵¹ Sutton Vane, *Outward Bound: A Play* (London, 1934), e.g. 6–12.

In choosing the cruise-liner as his setting, Vane used the claustrophobic transience of the ship to force intimacy between a disparate group of strangers. The cruise-ship became perhaps the archetypal space of the 'society of strangers' in the 1920s and 1930s, something Agatha Christie would explore in *Death on the Nile*, as would Alfred Hitchcock in 1931's *Rich and Strange*.⁵² The denouement of Christie's novel also includes a suicide pact of sorts, although one markedly different to the emerging trope of young impossible love coming to define the act in this period.⁵³ The cruise-ship enabled writers to explore, subvert and play with the implications of anonymous forms of leisure, consumption, and the transitory anonymity of modern life.⁵⁴ The forced intimacy between strangers, however, was the pressure cooker that meant, ultimately, characters were unable to sustain such performances and the truth would eventually win-out.

Vane's suicidal couple was a means to include a reflection on the changing nature of modern love within a play whose raison d'être was to dramatize and pass judgement on modern life itself. Henry and Ann's shadowy presence in the early scenes heightens the sense they are totally consumed in each other. When we do hear them, they describe their love in powerful, terrifying terms. 'Ann, haven't you and I sinned in some way', Henry asks in act one, 'we've been true to each other We've done nothing that isn't right We've never cared for the world. We're not going to care for it now,' Ann reassures Henry.⁵⁵

Outward Bound premiered in October 1923, a year after the startling explosion of the suicide pact into British public life. Vane's play was a response to an event that both legal and government institutions struggled to make sense of as cases appeared in the criminal courts in 1922. The year saw three criminal trials of suicide pact survivors. Both the judiciary and Home Office officials were unnerved by something they clearly understood as novel and unfamiliar.⁵⁶ The courts struggled to establish a consistent disciplinary approach.⁵⁷ In the trials of Maude Hibbert and Alfred Hibling in May and July of 1922 both judges dismissed the murder charges against them. In Hibling's trial, Mr Justice Acton captured the general mood when he declared:

⁵² Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile* (London, 1937); *Rich and Strange* (1931) dir. Alfred Hitchcock; For an interesting reflection on the experience of being at sea and its relationship to the feel of modernity see: Tamson Pietsch, 'Bodies at sea: Travelling to Australia in the Age of Sail', *Journal of Global History*, 11 (July 2016), 209–28.

⁵³ Christie, *Death on the Nile*, 242.

⁵⁴ For a discussion on the importance of modern mobility in Christie's novels, albeit with a focus on the train rather than the ship see: Chris Ewers, 'Genre in Transit: Agatha Christie, Trains, and the Whodunit', *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 46 (2016), 97–120, 98–9.

⁵⁵ Vane, *Outward Bound*, 48.

⁵⁶ TNA, HO 144/19035.

⁵⁷ 'Death Pact Problem: Judge's Ruling', *Pall Mall Gazette* (London), 7 July 1922, 4.

public feeling was that these cases belonged rather to an age ... we had now passed ... Twice within the last months ... learned judges ... considered it undesirable that the full charge be proceeded with.⁵⁸

Acton was referencing the negative public reaction to Maude Hibbert's trial, where Mr Justice Horridge, while dismissing the murder charge, had sentenced Maude to nine months' hard labour. As Horridge surmised, 'I have a great feeling myself against murder trials when one knows that the sentence ... will not be carried out'.⁵⁹ For Horridge, Maude's suicide pact was not, really, a case of murder. A petition led by George Bernard Shaw protesting the sentence Horridge *did* serve amassed thousands of signatures.⁶⁰ An indication that many agreed with Horridge's premise but went further, seeing the suicide pact, and suicide, as neither murder nor a crime at all.

The actions of Horridge and Acton were judicial responses to an event that exposed the inadequacy and unpopularity of certain aspects of homicide law. From the perspective of the popular press at least, it was clear that there was considerable opposition to the practice of trying a suicide pact survivor for murder. The National Conservative MP Edward Spears even introduced a private member's bill in 1924 in an attempt to amend the criminal law. In opening his debate he railed against the 'inhumanity of the criminal law' and made an appeal for mercy to those, 'unhappy people who appear to me to be, perhaps, the most unhappy of all—people who, having felt that life was too much for them, find that, after all, they are compelled to face it, and this time to face it alone'.⁶¹

In 1922, the rulings of Acton and Horridge were attempts to align the criminal law with broader popular opinion. However, these were scuppered by a definitive ruling on the legal status of the suicide pact survivor in the court of appeal in December 1922. In an altogether more unpleasant case, Lionel Symonds was charged with the murder of Gladys Wall, only fifteen years of age and the daughter of his employer. The post-mortem revealed that Gladys was four months pregnant, and a series of letters written by Gladys found in Lionel's coat revealed the increasing strain and fear this pregnancy caused.⁶² Summing up, Lord Chief Justice Hewart directly addressed the differing interpretations of the law that had characterized 1922, delivering a definitive judgement on the matter:

⁵⁸ 'Judge and Death Pact Survivor', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London), 3 December 1922, 9.

⁵⁹ 'Sentence in Brighton Death Pact Case', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London), 7 July 1922, 1.

⁶⁰ 'GBS on Unsuccessful Suicides', *Dundee Courier* (Dundee), 2 November 1922, 5.

⁶¹ Hansard, HC Deb 30 July 1924 vol. 176 cc2068-71; Spears's Bill passed its first reading and was co-sponsored (among others) by Nancy Astor. It failed to receive the support of Macdonald's first Labour Government however, and never received a second reading.

⁶² TNA, HO 144/19035.

One has heard to-day in this court phrases such as 'suicide pact'. It is quite obvious that there is a great deal of misapprehension regarding this part of the criminal law. The meaning of it is that if two persons agree to commit suicide together. . . the survivor is guilty of murder. . . because. . . he incited, aided and abetted the dead person to take his or her life.⁶³

Hewart's judgement settled the matter from that point on. If a suicide pact case made it to trial, the murder charge was almost always heard. Mr Justice Horridge was perhaps overcompensating after his earlier judgement when he heard his second suicide pact case in 1929:

it is not an unreasonable law, you know, the law is seldom unreasonable, because if a man induces a woman by agreement with her, to take deadly poison. . . it is not an unreasonable thing to say that the man is guilty of murder, and that is what the law is.⁶⁴

Making explicit what Hewart had implied through the language of incitement, judges increasingly conceptualized the suicide pact as a gendered crime of male coercion.

It is in the contest over the legal status of the suicide pact survivor that we must assess the significance and cultural resonance of Sutton Vane's inclusion of the suicidal couple in *Outward Bound*. It is probable that Ann and Henry were modelled on Maude Hibbert and her lover (and brother-in-law) George Hibbert. Maude and George's pact was the first of the decade's high-profile murder trials.⁶⁵ Like Henry and Ann, George and Maude saw their suicide as the only way to reconcile the constraints on their love for each other. In a letter to her mother, Maude explained her actions with reference to impossible love, 'Neither of us can go on without each other, which you know is impossible, so we have decided what we think is best.'⁶⁶ Maude stressed the freeing, emancipatory effects of her suicide, 'My last wish mother is to be with him forever. . . Don't waste money on black or flowers. But come in your brightest clothes, as black means sorrow, mother, and I am happy.'⁶⁷

Maude's letter was similar in framing to Elizabeth Kirkham's considered in the introduction. The impossibility of the present was contrasted with an emancipatory, imagined future unshackled from the social constraints that foreclosed the ability to live openly and legitimately together. Such future-orientated desires were reflective of the increasing power held by scripts of individual flourishing dependent upon sexual and

⁶³ TNA, HO 144/19035; 'Court of Criminal Appeal: The "Suicide Pact"', *The Times* (London), 19 December 1922, seen in TNA, HO 144/19035.

⁶⁴ TNA, HO 144/19816.

⁶⁵ 'Amazing Story of Lovers' Suicide Pact', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London), 14 May 1922, 2.

⁶⁶ TNA, ASSI 36/35/8.

⁶⁷ TNA, ASSI 36/35/8.

romantic coupledness. In Maude and Elizabeth's letters we see the historical antecedents of what queer theorists have referred to as the overpowering hegemony of 'heterosexual futurity'. That is the very idea of the future itself shaped by the institutions of social, familial, and sexual reproduction.⁶⁸ Yet, in Maude's 'last wish' to 'be with him [George] forever', we see an articulation of an afterlife that owes as much to the centrality of religion and Christianity in British society as it does to the role of say, fantasy and fiction in forging a sexual and romantic self. Elizabeth's desired 'future elsewhere' was not explicitly a Christian one, she made no mention of heaven, yet the ability to imagine a future beyond the temporal present was clearly indebted to what Callum Brown would refer to as the diffuse and pervasive presence of a 'discursive Christianity' in Britain. That is, a Christianity that shapes the practice of everyday life without necessarily being linked explicitly to formal religious practice.⁶⁹

Other suicidal couples were more explicitly religious in their thinking about the future. Mabel Hill—who we will encounter in more detail later—wrote to her mother in, 'hope [that] the good Lord will forgive me'.⁷⁰ Such tortured words were reflective of Mabel's complex relationship to her faith. Mabel's hope of forgiveness contained a tacit understanding that the Lord may well *not* forgive, given scripture's clear insistence that suicide was a sin against God's will. This then points towards the uneven processes of secularization in modern Britain. The religious taboos on suicide had diminishing purchase in the twentieth century. Yet as Mabel, Elizabeth and Maude's letters attest, both Christian ethics and Christian life narratives still structured approaches to subjectivity, mortality, and the afterlife that made life intolerable and a future beyond it worth attempting. In their own pained reflections on faith, the suicidal couple further reveal their critical conjectural status, standing at the pivot point between a religious and secular world. In so doing, they also help clarify how religious thinking and ethics shaped scripts of romantic life and individual flourishing now regarded as explicitly secular.

As with the fictional lovers of Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound*, Maude and George also moved anonymously through urban and leisure spaces in the days before their suicide attempt. They visited London before travelling to the coast, where they attempted suicide in a block of furnished

⁶⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 3–5; Lauren Gail Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Brooklyn, NY, 2012), 70–73; Jonathan Katz, *The Invention of Heterosexuality* (Chicago, 2007).

⁶⁹ Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (London, 2009); For a critique of the concept of 'discursive Christianity' see: Jeremy Morris, 'The Strange Death of Christian Britain: Another Look at the Secularization Debate', *The Historical Journal*, 46 (2003), 963–76.

⁷⁰ TNA, CRIM 1/624.

apartments in Brighton.⁷¹ As George wrote in his goodbye letter to his brother, 'I met M.E. (Maude) in London last Monday morning, and we did London fairly well, leaving there for Brighton . . . We have lived this time for one another, knowing full well the final consequences which we are both prepared and willing to take'.⁷² In a letter Maude wrote to George prior to their trip she wrote, 'Now love, I am going to ask you for some money to get a pretty nightie for our last week together'.⁷³ In Maude and George's letters we see the emancipatory potential that leisure and consumer culture could bring those living transgressive intimacies. Doing London 'fairly well' or purchasing and wearing a 'pretty nightie' were means of embodying and experiencing an intimacy primarily lived as fantasy. Within the walls of a London hotel or seaside apartment, the boundaries between fantasy and reality melted away.

Maude and George were not the only suicidal couple who travelled to the coast before attempting suicide.⁷⁴ The seaside resort as a popular spot for young couples to both go unnoticed and then end their lives reflected, and helped contribute to, the persistent cultural and legal associations seaside resorts had with danger, crime, and sexual transgression.⁷⁵ It is not a coincidence that Brighton and Blackpool hotels and boarding houses appear frequently in divorce proceedings of the period, as well as playing central roles in literary representations of infidelity and marital breakdown.⁷⁶ The spectacle of the suicide pact further reinforced the hotel and the seaside resort as sites of potential emancipation *and* transgression.

As with their movements through liminal and anonymous leisure spaces, Maude and George's engagement with the (consumer) culture of love and romance made tolerable the intolerable pain of agreeing to and enacting suicide. This was also the case for Marjorie Hill and Henry Fleming, who in March of 1930 attempted suicide by gas-poisoning in a rented lodging-room in Aldershot. The *Daily Mail* described how 'flowers had been arranged in vases in the drawing room, and attached to a bunch of violets was a piece of printed paper bearing the words: 'Morning will soon end my dreams'.⁷⁷ The couple had used a gramophone during

⁷¹ 'Holiday Then Death Pact', *The Daily Sketch* (London), 12 May 1922, 3.

⁷² TNA, ASSI 36/35/8; 'Amazing Story of Lovers' Suicide Pact', *Reynolds's Newspaper* (London), 14 May 1922.

⁷³ TNA, ASSI 36/35/8.

⁷⁴ See the case of Herbert Turner and Mabel Hill for instance: TNA, HO 144/19281.

⁷⁵ See for instance: John K. Walton, *The British Seaside: Holidays and Resorts in the Twentieth Century* (Manchester, 2000); Peter Gurney, "'Intersex" and "Dirty Girls": Mass-Observation and Working-Class Sexuality in England in the 1930s', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 8 (1997), 256–90; Emma Short, *Mobility and the Hotel in Modern Literature: Passing through* (London, 2019).

⁷⁶ Henry Kha, 'The Spectacle of Divorce Law in Evelyn Waugh's *A Handful of Dust* and A. P. Herbert's *Holy Deadlock*', *Law & Literature*, 30 (May 2018), 267–85.

⁷⁷ 'The Last Record', *The Daily Mail* (London) 25 February 1930, 7.

Sunday evening, and the title of the last-played record still on the instrument was: 'Let me dream in your arms again'.⁷⁸ Marjorie and Henry made sense of their impossible love through the materiality of a consumer culture that increasingly valued and valorized the debilitating effects of romantic love and the pain of separation.⁷⁹ But in so doing Marjorie and Henry further aligned the suicide pact, and the intense romantic love that supposedly fuelled it, with performance, spectacle and fictionality. It made the suicidal couple themselves transitory figures who occupied the border lands of fact and fiction, warning of the dangers of the increasingly performative subjectivities that modern consumer culture encouraged.

As the *Daily Mail's* coverage of Violet's inquest demonstrated, newspaper coverage was particularly invested in representing suicide pact cases as romantic tragedies. *Reynolds's Newspaper* took an intense interest in Maude's trial and was clearly invested in representing it as a crime of romantic passion. 'Tragedy', wrote *Reynolds's* 'special correspondent', 'decreed by the hand of fate, put an end to the illicit love of a man for his brother's wife, and the same mysterious hand foiled the runaway lovers in their final decision to take the step into eternity together, for one of them died—the other is yet alive'.⁸⁰

The News of the World would employ similar methods in subsequent cases. The 1926 trial of William Hallowes, following his suicide pact with Kathleen Wheeldon, was for *The News of the World* a 'Lovers' Tragic Tryst'.⁸¹ The 'tryst' described the crime in melodramatic, almost gothic, terms; 'In the gathering gloom of a summer's night lovers kept a tragic tryst in a lonely wood on the outskirts of Manchester, and realising the futility of their mutual infatuation, entered into a suicide pact'.⁸² Evoking the gothic was a favourite literary trope in their approach to the suicide pact. Writing a year earlier during the trial of George Temperton, *The News of the World* began, 'Whilst the peaceful township of Conisbrough, surrounded by pretty well-wooded country, near Doncaster, lay wrapped in slumber, a tragedy that shocked the district was brought to light'.⁸³ Replete with lonely woods and gathering gloom the gothic invocations of shadows, of seeing and not seeing, heightened the melodramatic aspects of the suicide pact and further fixed it first and foremost as a romantic tragedy of doomed love.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ 'The Last Record', 7.

⁷⁹ Chow, 'Popular Sexual Knowledges', 71.

⁸⁰ 'Amazing Story of Lovers' Suicide Pact', *Reynold's Illustrated News* (London), 14 May 1922.

⁸¹ 'Lovers' Tragic Tryst', *The News of the World* (London), 21 November 1926.

⁸² 'Lovers' Tragic Tryst'.

⁸³ 'Crime Drama by Arches: Midnight Tragedy Revealed', *News of the World* (London), August 30 1925.

⁸⁴ On the importance of the gothic and melodrama in interwar crime reportage see: D'Cruze, 'The Damned Place was Haunted', 38.

In 'No Verdict', a 1926 satirical short story on the suicide pact, the Anglo-American novelist Mary Borden captured this investment newspapers had in representing the suicide pact as a romantic tragedy. Describing her protagonist Charlie she wrote, 'It was impossible to take this little man seriously, either as a criminal or as a hero of romance. He was too insignificant, but the law said he was a criminal and the papers had made out that he was a hero of a love story'.⁸⁵ The associations between romance, suicide, and fictionality lay at the heart of Borden's story. In describing the love affair between her two protagonists, Borden held a keen eye on the power of fiction in narrating and making romance meaningful. Charlie, it turns out, was an aspiring writer, who would read passages of his work to his lover, Susie. He described the effects his stories had on Susie during his trial:

it made her eyes shine listening to it, and she'd get so excited I'd begin to think it was some good, and that maybe I would get it published some day and get money for it, and be able to take her off there or somewhere. . . It was a kind of make-believe you see. I told her she was the girl in the book – we'd make believe we were both in it living in the story.⁸⁶

It was not just newspapers that made Charlie and Susie heroes in a romance: they had already done that themselves.

For Borden and other commentators, the suicide pact demonstrated the consequences of the increasing centrality of 'a kind of make-believe' to modern intimacies. It is easy to characterize Borden's approach to the suicide pact as another thinly veiled critique of a democratic mass culture that encouraged men like Charlie to consider themselves writers and women like Susie to imagine their own life as romantic fairy-tales.⁸⁷ Yet in Charlie and Susie's 'shining eyes' we see a glimpse of the nourishing and enriching potential fiction and the wider popular culture of romance held for young couples and the suicidal couple in particular. It is reminiscent of Maude and George 'living life for one another' in the days before their pact, and of Violet and Henry's use of flowers and gramophone records to make sense of suicide. It reminds us of the pleasures and possibilities fiction and the fantastical provided when negotiating intimate life, albeit intimacies that in this context were constrained, painful and ultimately fatal.

⁸⁵ Mary Borden, 'No Verdict', *Four O'Clock and Other Stories* (London, 1926), 129.

⁸⁶ Borden, 'No Verdict', 149.

⁸⁷ On the 'democratising' effects of mass culture see; D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford, 1988); On the democratization of writing see: Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (Cambridge, 2006), 6–10.

Beyond Romance—the Lived Experience of Negotiating an Impossible Intimacy

The 1922 pact of Lionel Symonds and Gladys Wall was a rare case where romantic tragedy *was not* invoked in the reportage of the popular press.⁸⁸ Gladys's youth, the fact that she was pregnant, and Lionel's clearly manipulative behaviour limited the extent to which newspapers invoked romance during his trial.⁸⁹ Lionel and Gladys were found on railway tracks half a mile to the south of the town of Walton in Surrey. Gladys was dead and Lionel was found in a disused carriage close-by, severely injured, his left leg mangled and his right foot completely missing.⁹⁰ Always eager for a sensational angle, the focus of popular newspaper reportage was less on the romantic relationship between Lionel and Gladys and more on the spectacle of the 'foot-less' man carried into court.⁹¹

Revealingly, Lionel was only one of two suicide pact survivors for whom the jury did not recommend a reprieve from the death penalty.⁹² An indication that sympathy for suicide pact survivors was often contingent on the extent to which it could be framed as a (consensual) romance. While the Home Office followed precedent in commuting the suicide pact survivor's death penalty, Lionel served just over twelve years in prison, the longest prison sentence of the period.⁹³ Officials and politicians at the Home Office, as Lionel Symonds' case testifies, increasingly punished cases involving transgressive—and illegal—sex and sexual relations more severely.⁹⁴ In his briefing note to the Home Secretary, the Home Office's Legal Advisor Ernley Blackwell, the most senior lawyer in the department, wrote in reviewing Lionel's case, 'This was a very bad case of its kind . . . A girl who was probably barely fifteen when their relations commenced . . . The prisoner should serve a long term'.⁹⁵

Lionel Symonds' long sentence was reflective of a disciplinary trend in the 1920s where suicide pact survivors served significantly longer sentences than they had previously. This was in stark contrast to the very thin precedent officials drew on in earlier cases. In 1919, Blackwell had informed the Home Secretary that survivors usually served a sentence of twelve-months.⁹⁶ Between 1919 and 1932, in the eight cases that

⁸⁸ 'Young Gladys Wall's Fate on Railway after Midnight Walk', *Glasgow Weekly News* (Glasgow), 29 April 1922, 1.

⁸⁹ TNA, HO 144/19035.

⁹⁰ TNA, HO 144/19035.

⁹¹ 'Footless Man Sentenced to Death', *The Daily Mirror* (London), 7 December 1922, 1.

⁹² 'Hersham Death Pact: The Question of Suicide', *The Times* (London), 7 December 1922, seen in: TNA, HO 144/19035.

⁹³ TNA, HO 144/19035.

⁹⁴ See for instance, the long prison sentences given to Arthur Hallows and Ralph Pattison: TNA, HO 144/19810; TNA, HO 144/19816.

⁹⁵ TNA, HO 144/19035.

⁹⁶ TNA, HO 144/1674/369548.

culminated in a guilty verdict, the average sentence was five and a half years. Hardening attitudes in the Home Office towards—and increased attempts to control—illegal, illicit, and transgressive sex begin to explain such disciplinary trends.⁹⁷ The approach the Home Office took to the suicide pact reflected and reinforced heightened concern with consent, sexual abuse, and sex trafficking in the early twentieth century.⁹⁸ This explains how Blackwell could use the phrase 'very bad case of its kind' with little further clarification when adjudicating on Symonds's punishment. Officials at the Home Office did not see the suicide pact as a romantic tale of impossible love. Rather, as with judicial pronouncements on suicide pact law after 1922, the Home Office comprehended the failed suicide pact through the gendered frame of sexual coercion and control.⁹⁹ It is no coincidence that all pact survivors who were found guilty of murder were men. There were three criminal trials where women survived their suicide pact, but none were found guilty of murder. The regularity with which men survived affirmed the Home Office's own reading of these cases as sites where young women needed protecting from the dominating influences of older men.

Though there was one person who saw, and experienced, Lionel and Gladys's pact as a romance: Gladys herself. In stressing this, I am not trying to deny that Lionel was abusive and coerced her through emotional manipulation into suicide. He did. Rather I am arguing that in seeing her only as a manipulated victim fails to grasp how important scripts of romantic fulfilment were to Gladys herself. In her letters to Lionel, Gladys paints a rich, vivid, and expressive picture of her love. This was a powerful, maddening love:

Oh love I do love you ever so much and darling for always, you are all to me and all I want dear. . . Last night before you went I got hugging your coat and did not like leaving it dear. I very nearly go mad over that, because it belongs to my darling, my own dearest in all the world for ever.¹⁰⁰

Dreams of, and longing for, Lionel, performed and practised through coat-hugging and letter-writing, were central to how Gladys lived a

⁹⁷ Julia Laite, *Common Prostitutes and Ordinary Citizens: Commercial Sex in London, 1885-1960* (Basingstoke, 2012); Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, 2005).

⁹⁸ Carol Smart, 'A History of Ambivalence and Conflict in the Discursive Construction of the "Child Victim" of Sexual Abuse', *Social & Legal Studies*, 8 (September 1999), 391-409, 393; Julia Laite, *The Disappearance of Lydia Harvey: a True Story of Sex, Crime and the Meaning of Justice* (London, 2022), 156.

⁹⁹ On the disciplinary preoccupations of the Home Office in this period see: Houlbrook, *Queer London*; Christopher Hilliard, *A Matter of Obscenity: The Politics of Censorship in Modern England* (Princeton, NJ, 2021).

¹⁰⁰ TNA, HO 144/19035.

constrained intimacy, 'I do miss you so, dearest, but I suppose we must be satisfied, as we have had a lovely time together this week. I do hope some day we may be together for always, dearest.'¹⁰¹

Her letters were sites where Gladys dreamt. She worked through her aspirations of romantic happiness, while negotiating the corporeal demands of pregnancy and the psychological demands of an abusive, coercive relationship. Pain and fear in the present both produced, and clashed with, dreams of an impossible, unattainable future. Her romance was as dreamlike as the others we have explored, even if we accept that such dreams were shaped and tempered by the manipulative behaviour of Lionel. Gladys's letters are useful not only in betraying the limits to who could become the archetypal suicidal lover of the period, but also helps reassess the material causes of the cases under consideration here. They draw attention to the material, social and bodily co-ordinates, bodily pain and social shame, that pushed young people towards suicide in the first place.

In her letters to Lionel, Gladys also negotiated the implications of her pregnancy, and the physical pain of her changing body. It is the possibility she might be pregnant that first leads to the idea of suicide, 'If anything does happen I think the only thing is for me to kill myself'.¹⁰² Unsure and ill-experienced, Gladys constantly sought Lionel's guidance, 'Well, you know when you told me to take them salts, dear, well, I did...but to be sure, could you tell me what it is like when you know, dear.'¹⁰³ Gladys's body was a constant, and growing source of anxiety, 'every night or when I make the bed there seems to be some spot, you know dear, I wonder if I did.'¹⁰⁴ Her attempts at administering a miscarriage clearly also caused her significant physical pain, 'these pains what I had are like I never had before dear', she wrote, 'so there might be some hope yet dear.'¹⁰⁵ The 'hope' that came with her pain and illness an indication of the trauma that Gladys had to bear on her own, without the help of her family or friends and with limited support from Lionel.

As Gladys's letters testify, the implications of pregnancy, and the stigma of unmarried motherhood was so great as to render certain futures impossible. Three of the eight criminal trials this article looks at involved pregnancy. While contraception was increasingly available and advertised by the 1920s, ignorance of sexual matters and birth control remained both widespread *and* was actively encouraged in pursuit of performing a respectable gendered self.¹⁰⁶ The dangers implicit in procreative sex

¹⁰¹ TNA, HO 144/19035.

¹⁰² TNA, HO 144/19035.

¹⁰³ TNA, HO 144/19035.

¹⁰⁴ TNA, HO 144/19035.

¹⁰⁵ TNA, HO 144/19035.

¹⁰⁶ Kate Fisher, *Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage*, 67–8.

outside marriage, the ignorance or unavailability of ways to limit the threat of pregnancy, further served to imbue futures not contained within marriage and the family with precariousness and shame. A precarity further compounded by the familial and social hostility, as well as the significant financial hardships, unmarried mothers faced.¹⁰⁷ For the women who bore the brunt of the risk attached to extra or pre-marital sex, the weight of shame contributed in very materially and corporeally rooted ways to a sense that the future was impossible to imagine.

Marjorie Hill, whose suicide pact with Henry Fleming we explored earlier, was pregnant with her second illegitimate child. According to evidence given at Henry's trial, she told him she would 'rather die' than 'have another child by a married man'.¹⁰⁸ Unable to bear telling her mother, she asked Henry to write; 'We love each other, and are very happy, but Marjorie was terrified that those at home will come and denounce her and then she will be homeless.'¹⁰⁹ The ability to imagine a future was shaped as much by questions of finance, food and housing as it was by affective and fantastical dreams of romantic happiness.

Marjorie's inability to write to her mother reveals the painful, ambivalent relationships those who considered suicide pacts had with their parents, their family, and the wider community in which they lived. Romantic couples' illicit and secret relationships were embedded within larger familial and community networks that meant their romances were always constrained, secret and ultimately impossible. The pressures of negotiating illicit intimacies come to the fore in Gladys's letters. The love letter has been theorized—particularly by historians and literary scholars—as a textual means to negotiate intimacy and desire across distance.¹¹⁰ Yet the opposite was true for Gladys and Lionel. As an apprentice in the bakery Gladys's family both lived and worked in, Lionel was constantly close by. More scrawled notes than carefully composed love letters, they were the means by which Gladys and Lionel communicated in a setting where they very rarely went unnoticed. As one of Gladys's notes ends, 'Oh, I do love you dear, goodbye. You have just come in, I hear. xxx.'¹¹¹ We can almost feel the claustrophobic limits on Gladys and Lionel's relationship. This was an intimacy lived out in

¹⁰⁷ Thane and Evans, *Sinners?*, 31–3; Jane Robinson, *In the Family Way: Illegitimacy Between the Great War and the Swinging Sixties* (London, 2015); Cohen, *Family Secrets*, 220.

¹⁰⁸ TNA, HO 144/20114; 'Zero Hour Has Come', *The Daily Mail* (London), 5 April 1930 in TNA, HO 144/20114.

¹⁰⁹ TNA, HO 144/20114.

¹¹⁰ Cohen, *Family Secrets*, 221; Seth Koven, *The Match Girl and the Heiress* (Princeton, 2014), 226; Erika Rappaport, "'The Bombay Debt': Letter Writing, Domestic Economies and Family Conflict in Colonial India', *Gender & History*, 16 (2004), 233–60; Margaretta Jolly and Liz Stanley, 'Letters as / Not a Genre', *Life Writing*, 2 (2005), 91–118.

¹¹¹ TNA, HO 144/19035.

fleeting moments when they could slip out of view from the constant presence of family.

In other cases, the decision to commit suicide was preceded by a rather dramatic showdown between the couple and disapproving family members. William Hallows and Kathleen Wheeldon's relationship—the 'Lovers' Tragic Tryst' we explored earlier—was thrown into jeopardy when Kathleen's mother discovered what had been going on. Kathleen was only fifteen at the start of their relationship. 'She is going to the police' Kathleen wrote to William, adding, 'mother called you a dirty little bastard'.¹¹² The threat of police involvement a reminder here how ideas around sexual consent and agency stalked the suicide pact. It was not just the Home Office who saw the suicide pact primarily as a consequence of the predatory behaviour of (older) men.

Herbert Turner, in the last notable trial of the period in 1932, recounted how Mabel Hill's husband—coincidentally also called Herbert—confronted the pair in Blackpool, where they had been holidaying for the weekend. Mabel escaped, rather dramatically, through the window of a café, and she and Herbert [Turner] subsequently travelled south to London, before attempting suicide in the Regent's Palace Hotel in the heart of Piccadilly Circus.¹¹³ Mabel's farewell letter to her parents exemplifies how painful negotiating the tension between falling in love and the expectations and responsibilities of social life could be:

My Darling Mother, I hope you will try and forgive me for what I am about to do. I cannot think of any other way out for a bad girl. . . I am brokenhearted [sic] at what I have done and the world is well rid of me.¹¹⁴

In constructing a 'bad' self, Mabel drew on cultural scripts that aligned failed marriages with personal failure, particularly the failure of women and wives to 'work' on their marriage.¹¹⁵ In Mabel's letter, we see the stakes of failing, or transgressing, social norms. Her failure to conform to the expectations of married and family life internalizes a guilt so powerful—seeing the world as 'well rid' of her—it would ultimately kill her.

In Mabel's letter we see someone negotiating the impossibility of a social life where she is anything but anonymous. Her every word and action were scrutinized, judged, and assessed in relation to the expectations and constraints of acceptable and respectable femininity. The importance of respectability was also apparent in the campaign Herbert's family mobilized in the wake of his conviction. In an attempt to lobby the Home Office to reduce his sentence, Herbert's solicitors sent six letters of a

¹¹² TNA, HO 144/19810.

¹¹³ TNA, HO 144/19281.

¹¹⁴ TNA, Central Criminal Court (CRIM) 1/624.

¹¹⁵ Charnock, 'A Million Little Bonds', 372.

supposed eighty attesting to his good character. The letters they chose were a *Who's Who* of local notables, including the local vicar, the secretary of the local chapter of the society of Oddfellows, the headmaster of Herbert's old school, and the director of Longside Weaving Company, one of the largest employers in Shipley. As the vicar E.A. Elwin wrote, 'He comes from a good and industrious family, well respected in the neighborhood. His father is a butcher, straightforward and honest, his mother is a good and respectable woman who has brought up her children carefully'.¹¹⁶ The deployment of the local community in the service of Herbert's respectability reveals, ironically, the very conditions that shaped his and Mabel's decision to commit suicide. What came to Herbert's aid—the norms and values of the local community—was also what led Mabel to see her future as intolerable.

Unlike the depictions of the suicide pact in newspaper reports, or in Mary Borden's short story, the suicidal couple were, in reality, fleeing a social life they could not bear precisely because they could not go unnoticed, and they left in their wake parents, marriages, families, and friends who would struggle with the effects of their attempted suicide for years to come.

Conclusion

It is worth reflecting on why the life of the suicide pact as a legal problem and cultural phenomenon was so brief. It was not, after all, until 1957 and the passing of the Homicide Act that survivors of a suicide pact were no longer treated as liable for murder.¹¹⁷ The striking absence of murder trials involving suicide pacts from the late 1930s onwards suggests something else was also at play. Key to this story, I would argue, is that the terrain on which marriage, love, and intimate life intersected was shifting. Amendments to divorce law in the 1937 Matrimonial Causes Act further increased access and availability to divorce.¹¹⁸ While rates of divorce continued to remain low, the Act removed some of the acute pressure that created the particularly claustrophobic conditions which led couples to consider suicide. Within this context, couples negotiating intimacies outside marriage increasingly had other—albeit still precarious and insecure—means of reconciling and living with marital breakdown. In short, the institutionalized and social co-ordinates of marriage and intimacies had shifted, and relented just enough, to release the acute pressure that forced many to contemplate suicide over the preceding years.

¹¹⁶ TNA, HO 144/19281.

¹¹⁷ Williams and Read, 'The Homicide Act, 1957', 382.

¹¹⁸ Sharon Redmayne, 'The Matrimonial Causes Act 1937: A Lesson in the Art of Compromise', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 13 (1993), 183–200.

The suicide pact was the product of a specific tension in the history of modern intimacy on the one hand, and the modern social on the other. It further clarifies how people negotiated their desires, intimacies, and sense of self in the *space between* mass culture and the norms, values, and networks of everyday life. In making this point I am not dismissing the analytic utility of the society of strangers as a way of conceptualizing the feel and condition of modernity. Performance, shapeshifting, and spectacle *were* central to how the suicidal couple were represented. And the wider popular culture of romance provided vital resources which helped ameliorate the pain of intimacies experienced as impossible.

In appreciating the gap between cultural representations and the material causes of suicide pacts, we can see how the anonymity of the modern social was one that brought only temporary and fleeting relief. For John Holloway and Lizzie Kirkham, Mabel Hill and Herbert Turner, Marjorie Hill and Henry Fleming, it was claustrophobia, rather than anonymity, that defined their experience of modern life and modern intimacy. This suggests the need to see the society of strangers as one of several spaces modern subjects moved through.

We might want to think of the suicide pact couple as existing in a twilight zone. Following Anna Clark's conception of twilight in conveying the moral regimes used to discipline subversive and illicit sex, we might argue that the suicidal couple occupied both a moral and historical twilight zone.¹¹⁹ Moral, in that their sexual relations weren't exactly deviant in the emerging taxonomies of psychological and sexual science, but were morally unacceptable—indeed unthinkable—within the existing norms that guided married, family and community life. Historical, in that the impossible love felt to be so intolerable for these couples both looked forward to the increasing primacy of self-fulfilment to sexual selfhood yet was constrained, and ultimately constrained intolerably, by norms, values and practices of everyday life that had yet to quite lose their strength.

¹¹⁹ Anna Clark, 'Twilight Moments', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14 (2005), 139–60, 142.