



UNIVERSITÄTS-
BIBLIOTHEK
PADERBORN

Universitätsbibliothek Paderborn

The Works Of Horatio Walpole, Earl of Orford

In Five Volumes

Walpole, Horace

London, 1798

The World, No.CXCV.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-54372](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-54372)

The WORLD.

By ADAM FITZ-ADAM.

* NUMB. CXCIV. *Thursday, September 23, 1756.*

—Generosius
Perire quarens, nec muliebriter
Expavit ensem.

HOR.

To Mr. FITZ-ADAM.

SIR,

TO a well-disposed mind there can be no greater satisfaction than the knowledge that one's labours for the good of the public have been crowned with success. This, sir, is remarkably the case of your paper of September the 9th, on suicide; a fashionable rage, which I hope you will proceed to expose; and I do not doubt but you will be as famous for rooting out what, may I be allowed to call, *single combat*, or the humour of fighting with one's self, as your predecessor *The Tatler* was for exploding the ridiculous custom of duels. The pleasantry of your essay on the reigning mode of voluntary deaths has preserved to a little neighbourhood a very hospitable gentleman, to the poor a good friend, to a very deserving son and daughter a tender parent, and has saved the person himself from a very foolish exit. This character, sir, which perhaps from a natural partiality I may have drawn a little too amiably, I take to be my own; and not to trouble you with the history of a man who has nothing remarkable belonging to him, I will only let you into what is so far necessary, as that I am a gentleman of about fifty,

* This paper is a sequel to N^o 193, written by James Tillson, esq.

VOL. I

B b

have

have a moderate estate in very good condition, have seen a great deal of the world, and, without being weary of it, live chiefly in the country with children whom I love. You will be curious to know what could drive my thoughts to so desperate a resolution, when I tell you farther, that I hate gaming, have buried my wife, and have no illness. But alas! sir, I am extremely *well-born*: pedigree is my distemper; and having observed how much the mode of self-murder prevails among people of rank, I grew to think that there was no *living* without *killing* one's self. I reflected how many of my great ancestors had fallen in battle, by the axe, or in duels, according as the turn of the several ages in which they lived disposed of the nobility; and I thought the descendant of so many heroes must contrive to perish by means as violent and illustrious. What a disgrace, thought I, for the great grandson of Mowbrays, Veres and Beauchamps to die in a good old age of a fever! I blushed whenever I cast my eyes on our genealogy in the little parlour—I determined to shoot myself. It is true, no man ever had more reluctance to leave the world; and when I went to clean my pistols, every drop of Mowbray blood in my veins ran as cold as ice. As my constitution is good and hearty, I thought it would be time enough to *die suddenly* twenty or thirty years hence; but happening about a month ago to be near choked by a fish-bone, I was alarmed for the honour of my family, and have been ever since *preparing for death*. The letter to be left on my table (which indeed cost me some trouble to compose, as I had no reason to give for my *sudden resolution*) was written out fair, when I read your paper; and from that minute I have changed my mind; and though it should be ever so great a disgrace to my family, I am resolved to live as long and as happily as I can.

You will no doubt, good sir, be encouraged from this example to pursue the reformation of this contagious crime. Even in the small district where I live, I am not the only instance of a propensity to such a catastrophe. The lord of the manor, whose fortune indeed is much superior to mine, though there is no comparison in the antiquity of our families, has had the very same thought. He is turned of sixty-seven, and is devoured by the stone and gout. In a dreadful fit of the former, as his physician was sitting by his bedside, on a sudden his lordship ceased roaring, and commanded his relations and chaplain to withdraw, with a composure unusual to him even in his best health; and putting on the greatest appearance of philosophy, or what, if

the chaplain had said, would have been called resignation, he commanded the doctor to tell him, if his case was really desperate. The physician, with a slow profusion of latinized evasions, endeavoured to elude the question, and to give him some glimmerings of hope, "That there might be a chance that the extremity of the pain would occasion a degree of fever, that might not be mortal in itself, but which, if things did not come to a crisis soon, might help to carry his lordship off."—"I understand you, by G-d," says his lordship, with great tranquillity and a few more oaths; "Yes, d—n you, you want to kill me with some of your confounded distempers; but I'll tell you what, I only asked you, because, if I can't possibly live, I'm determined to kill myself; for rot me! if it shall ever be said that a man of my quality died of a cursed natural death. There, tell *Bowman to give you your fee, and bid him bring me my pistols." However, the fit abated, and the neighbourhood is still waiting with great impatience to be *surprised* with an account of his lordship's having shot himself.

However, Mr. Fitz-Adam, extensive as the service is which you may render to the community by abolishing this heathenish practice, I think in some respects it is to be treated with tenderness; in one case always to be tolerated. National courage is certainly not at high-water mark: what if the notion of the dignity of self-murder should be indulged till the end of the war? A man who has resolution enough to kill himself, will certainly never dread being killed by any body else. It is the privilege of a *free-dying Englishman*, to choose his death: if any of our high-spirited notions are cramped, it may leaven our whole fund of valour; and while we are likely to have occasion for all we can exert, I should humbly be of opinion, that you permitted self-murder till the peace, upon this condition, that it should be dishonourable for any man to kill himself, till he had found that no Frenchman was brave enough to perform that service for him.

Indeed the very celebration of this mystery has been transacted hitherto in a manner somewhat mean, and unworthy people of fashion. No tradesman could hang himself more feloniously than our very nobles do. There is none of that open defiance of the laws of their country, none of that contempt for what the world may think of them, which they so properly wear on other

* The name of lord Chalkstone's gentleman in Lethe.

occasions. They steal out of the world from their own closets, or before their servants are up in a morning. They leave a miserable apology behind them, instead of sitting up all night drinking, till the morning comes for dispatching themselves: unlike their great originals, the Romans, who had reduced self-murder to a system of good-breeding, and used to *send cards* to their acquaintance to notify their intention. Part of the duty of the week in Rome * was to *leave one's name* at the doors of such as were starving themselves. Particular friends were *let in*; and if very intimate, it was even expected that they should use some common-place phrases of dissuasion. I can conceive no foundation for our shabby way of bolting into t'other world, but that obsolete law which inflicts a cross-road and a stake on self-executioners: a most absurd statute; nor can I imagine any penalty that would be effectual, unless one could condemn a man who had killed himself, to be brought to life again. Somewhere indeed I have read of a successful law for restraining this crime. In some of the Grecian states the women of fashion incurred the anger of Venus—I quite forget upon what occasion—perhaps for little or none; goddesses in those days were scarce less whimsical than their fair votaries—Whatever the cause was, she inspired them with a fury of self-murder. The legislature of the country, it seems, thought the resentment of the deity a little arbitrary; and, to put a stop to the practice, devised an expedient, which one should have thought would have been very inadequate to the evil. They ordered the beautiful bodies of the lovely delinquents to be hung up, naked by one foot in the public squares. How the fair offenders came to think this attitude unbecoming, or why they imagined any position that discovered all their charms could be so, is not mentioned by historians; nor, at this distance of time, is it possible for us moderns to guess: certain it is, that the penalty put a stop to the barbarous custom.

But what shall one say to those countries, which not only allow this crime, but encourage it even in that part of the species, whose softness demands all protection, and seems most abhorrent from every thing sanguinary and fierce? We know there are nations, where the magistrate gravely gives permission to the ladies to accompany their husbands into the other world, and where it is reckoned the greatest profligacy for a widow not to demand leave to burn her-

* Vide Pliny's Epistles.

self alive. Were this fashion once to *take* here, I tremble to think what havoc it would occasion. Between the natural propensity to suicide, and the violence of conjugal engagements, one should not see such a thing as a lozenge, or a widow. Adieu, jointures! adieu, those soft resources of the brave and necessitous! What unfortunate relic but would prefer being buried alive to the odious embraces of a second passion? Indeed, Mr. Fitz-Adam, you must keep a strict eye on your fair country-women. I know one or two, who already wear pocket-pistols; which, considering the tenderness of their natures, can only be intended against their own persons. And this article leads me naturally to the only case, in which, as I hinted above, I think self-murder always to be allowed. The most admirable death in history is that of the incomparable Lucretia, the pattern of her sex, and the eventual foundress of Roman liberty. As there has never been a lady since that time, in her circumstances, but what has imitated her example, I think, sir, I may pronounce the case immutably to be excepted: and when Mr. Fitz-Adam, with that success and glory which always has and must attend his labours, has decried the savage practice in vogue, I am persuaded he will declare that she is not only excusable, but that it is impossible any woman should live after having been ravished.

I am, sir,

Your truly obliged

humble servant,

and admirer,

H. M.

A WORLD