

Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe

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How does one define widowhood? In spite of its widespread acceptance, the classic definition of widowhood as the phase of marriage following the death of one of the partners is never entirely satisfactory. Even if we leave aside the methodological problems of identifying who had and who had not been widowed, given that contemporary documents were far from consistent in their readiness to record widowed status, and, as several contributions to this collection point out, contemporaries were often not able to differentiate between women whose husbands had died and married women whose husbands had left them and moved away, widowhood was a highly subjective condition. The state of widowhood can be considered as one of personal loss, encompassing everything from the immediate psychological impact of the loss of a partner to the material deprivation of an income, a home, or of unpaid contributions to the domestic economy. On the other hand, widowhood was also a new conceptual framework or frameworks within which the widowed individual now had to function, the fact of being no longer married, with all that this implied in terms of moral reputation, relationships to one's kin, relationships to property-ownership, and even one's potential as a future marriage partner. The subjectivity of widowhood was the starting point for the symposium on *Widowhood: Condition or Construction* held at the University of Exeter in 1996, which forms the basis for the present collection of essays on widowhood in medieval and early modern Europe. It is debatable whether any aspect of social history can escape the conclusion that it is a construct. Even the most enduring indices of all, the laws controlling the rights of the widowed individual were constructed in the light of the customs and prejudices of lawmakers. As a result, the question as posed in the original symposium loses much of its force. On the other hand, this collection raises a much more interesting set of questions about the individual experience of widowhood and how successfully widows and widowers negotiated a position for themselves within a complex framework of contemporary attitudes. Cavallo and Warner are to be congratulated for making a contribution not only to the history of widowhood, but also for raising a number of broader issues.

The first is the recognition that the experience of widowhood was deeply gendered. Although widowhood was a condition which was shared by men and women alike, their contrasting experiences reflected the patriarchal society in which they lived. While publications on widows began with a trickle in the 1970s and a flood in the last decade, work on widowers has been much more sparse. Explanations for such an imbalance are not difficult to find. While widowhood is a recognised dimension of women's history, widowerhood has been considered until recently for its demographic rather than its social significance.⁽¹⁾ Widowers were only of interest to historians because they remarried, and since they remarried faster and to a greater extent than widows, with a correspondingly shorter period of being widowed, their numerical presence in society was smaller and less prominent than widows. Above all, the loss of a wife rarely altered a man's status, while the loss of a husband invariably and irrevocably brought about a change in a woman's life. Widowerhood receives its due share of consideration in this collection, and yet the main conclusions to be drawn from the three essays in which widowers are discussed tell us more about attitudes towards widows than they do about widowers. Warner's study of the legal debates in France over the extension to remarriage of the 1560 edict about remarriage of widows and their property rights demonstrates that the threat to property upon remarriage had major implications for both sexes, and that a man's property in particular needed to be defended in the interests of social stability. In spite of the widespread view in contemporary literature that men were stronger and more rational than women, the law suit which eventually persuaded the Parlement of Paris to extend the 1560 edict was taken by many commentators to be an illustration of the way in which a second wife could manipulate her husband in her own interests (the stereotype of the scheming widow). Pelling's Norwich widowers came from the opposite end of the social spectrum. Her statistics of male remarriage rates are consistent with earlier studies. Here, though, they take on an added resonance. High male remarriage rates can also be taken as a measure of the essential roles played by a wife in the economy of the poor. While women sometimes had the economic independence to live alone, men, and particularly poor men, simply could not afford to do so. This conclusion is also implied by Sharpe, writing about a later, early industrial, England, when there was a correlation between reduced remarriage rates among both men and women and the growing recourse by widowers in the absence of any support from the state to seek shelter with adult daughters. Much more could be said about widowers, however, and it is unfortunate that none of the contributors were able to consider any of the parallels between descriptions of affective loss in the autobiographical writings of both men and women in the early modern period. There are several examples of writing by widowers in Ralph Houlbrooke's anthology of English family life.⁽²⁾

Many of the contributions to this collection discuss the long-standing issue of choice in widowhood. How far did widowhood enable a widow to assert her own identity and chart her own waters in life, and how far were these choices constrained by the society in which she lived? The main focus of the debate has moved on from discussions of the extent to which control over an independent income gave widows autonomy of action to embrace broader questions about the range of empowerment opened up to widows upon entering their new status. The evidence does not all lead in the same direction. The dividing line between widowhood empowerment and the empowerment of adult females in general is often uncertain. Some widows are acclaimed for their business acumen, their ability to supervise law suits, to administer their property, to supervise their children's inheritance, or to negotiate new relationships, but the case can often be made that these skills had been developed while they were still married. Tim Stretton's essay on widows and the law in Tudor and Stuart England confirms that widows were prominent among female litigants before the Court of Requests. He makes it equally clear that some of the lawsuits in which they were involved were a continuation of litigation which they had initiated jointly with their husbands, as in the case of Jane Fellowes, who accused two men of having made her late husband drunk in order to trick him into signing agreements which he was unable to keep.

Studies of remarriage by widows also highlight the continuities in experience and skills which stretched across the period of widowhood from a first marriage to a second. If anything, the empowerment which a woman experienced during her first marriage was enhanced by a period of widowhood and then exercised in subsequent marriages. Elizabeth Foyster's vigorous contribution to this collection may be entitled *Marrying the experienced widow in early modern England: the male perspective*, but it is the wives who

come to the fore in her study of failed marriages. Their experience as sexual partners enabled them to conduct extramarital affairs in their own homes. Where money was a source of contention widows who remarried knew the value of what they had brought with them. They also had expectations of the kind of lifestyle to which they were entitled. Catherine Beverley complained before the court that her new husband, a Frenchman, had maltreated her by providing only a meagre diet amply flavoured with herbs, so that she was forced to visit her neighbours in order to eat meat. Beverley, in common with many unhappy wives, had the support of a network of family, friends and acquaintances to help her. Many of these dated back to the time of their first marriages and clearly persisted during widowhood, offering a cushion of reassurance in a world of negative stereotypes such as the lusty widow, the scheming widow, the masochistic widow, or the widow as imbecilic victim.

Widows' freedom of choice often pitted them against conventional authority however. Several cases arise from this collection. It remains to be seen whether they were typical of widows' behaviour or not. What are we to make of Maria Maddalena Landucci, an eighteenth-century Tuscan widow, who should, according to the law, have given up her two daughters to a guardian appointed by the state because she had remarried? Landucci did everything possible to avoid separation from her daughters, but Giulia Calvi's essay on widows, the state and guardianship in early modern Tuscany suggests that she went much further to take control over her first husband's property. When her elder daughter returned home from a convent because she was seriously ill, Landucci aided her to write a will which effectively left all the paternal patrimony to her mother. By the time Maria Maddalena had drawn up her own will, both her daughters had died, leaving their property to her. She had succeeded in transferring her first husband's property to a number of heirs from her natal family. Her second husband does not seem to have benefited at all, unlike the cause celebre which engendered the 1560 French edict discussed in Warner's essay. While Maria Maddalena was responding to the rules established by the Tuscan state to safeguard the property of orphaned children when their widowed mothers remarried, the independent actions of her German contemporary, Barbara Maurerin, took place in an entirely different context. While both women fought for the right to keep their children with them, Maurerin was motivated by a sense of religious injustice. According to Dagmar Friest's essay on religious difference and the experience of widowhood in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, the Elector Palatine subverted legislation permitting widowed parents to bring up their children in the faith of their choice, in order to privilege the dominant Catholic religion in his state. He required their children to be taken to a Catholic orphanage after Maurerin's estranged husband converted from being a Mennonite to Catholicism on his deathbed. In spite of Maurerin's appeals and those of her two older daughters, the latter were eventually banished from the territory of their birth. Even the case of widows who chose a life of religious devotion could give rise to tensions. Patricia Skinner's study of widowhood in medieval Southern Italy poses the problem faced by wealthy contemporaries that, in spite of the wholehearted support by the Church for the claustration of widows, the supply of places in convents rarely matched the potential demand for them. Their families were obliged to take responsibility for them, an action which soon merged with a clear sense that a widow's future had to be subordinated to the perceived dynastic requirements of their families. In this context, the fury of the fifteenth-century Florentine Davizzi brothers in the face of the actions of their sister Lena, studied by Isabelle Chabot, is entirely comprehensible. As Chabot points out, her case was exceptional. Most Florentines insisted that their widowed kin returned under their roofs by the evening of their husband's funeral. Lena Davizzi, on the other hand, a member of a powerful banking family, took advantage of her brothers' absence from Florence on business in London to arrange for her dowry to be passed to the Church rather than her natal family as part of her decision to join the nuns of Foligno. Her organisation of the property to which she had access could be said to show considerable financial acumen. Chabot does not state whether Lena Davizzi received any outside advice, however. Much more preferable in the eyes of elite families was the reflected glory to be found by association when widowed members acted as sponsors of ecclesiastical institutions. According to Jordi Bilinkoff's essay on the elite widows of early modern Avila, wealthy families encouraged their widows to extend their social hegemony by adorning the buildings of religious institutions to which the widows had given their personal and financial support with prominently placed coats of arms, as well as providing members of these families with additional honorific posts in convents and hospitals. On the other hand, by taking an active role in these institutions, these widows were able, if not to escape from their families, then at least to distance themselves in all-female

households where which they played the dominant role.

The final evidence for female empowerment arises from a context in which widows were able to manipulate conditions laid down by the state in their own favour. Sharpe's essay stands apart from the others in this collection in both chronological and socio-economic terms, and her argument that widows took advantage of prevailing legislation and morality to present their claims in the most favourable light, emphasising their respectability and capacity to support themselves when seasonal work presented itself, should be seen partly in that context. On the other hand, both the image presented by widows in their written claims for relief and the ideas underlying poor relief in nineteenth-century Britain show strong continuities with those which ran through the society of early modern Europe.

The question still remains whether this collection has achieved one of its objectives: to provide a contribution to the history of widowhood in medieval and early modern Europe. Unfortunately, it does not quite live up to its title, and, in so doing, it has missed a number of opportunities to permit comparisons between different societies, religious confessions and social groups to be made. Its geographical range is less 'European' than might be expected. Instead, the book permits the reader to draw comparisons between the English experience from pre-conquest times to the nineteenth century (seven essays), and Italy, (three essays, mainly about Tuscany), France, Germany and Spain (one each). This is only partly compensated for by the bibliography. Readers would do well to look at the work of Diefendorf and Gager on France, Wytjies and Marshall on the Netherlands, Robischeaux on Germany, and at Fiona Colclough's recent Northumbria PhD on early modern Venice.⁽³⁾ There are substantial imbalances too in the book's chronological range and in the social groups considered. In retrospect, it would have been better to omit the essays by Julia Crick and Patricia Skinner, which, for all their individual merits, contribute little to the book's central themes, where the focus is on the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. This might have permitted some further discussion of the extent to which widows' conditions improved over time. Amy Louise Erickson's study of property and widowhood in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century England argues that the increase in sentimentality and sensibility in English society during this period was matched by a tightening of the laws circumscribing widows' access to property. Calvi's evidence from eighteenth-century Tuscany, on the other hand, suggests that the opposite was taking place, and that the case of Maria Maddalena Landucci discussed above reflected a much more relaxed attitude about the disposal of property in Italy. The absence of more continental material also prevents the reader from gaining more than the occasional insight into the impact of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation on widows' experience. Todd's study of the virtuous widow in Protestant England is an honourable exception, and while Friest highlights the casualties of mixed marriages in an age of confessionalisation in Germany, there is little overt discussion of widowhood and Counter Reformation Catholicism. The emphasis on the widows of the wealthy and well-born is also open to criticism, although it does reflect the distribution of surviving written sources. Only Pelling and Sharpe introduce us to the poor widow, while the work of Foyster, Friest and Stretton demonstrates that there is some highly suggestive material about the middling groups in society. Much more needs to be done to explore how far the experience of the wealthy widow was shared by those who were least fortunate, or whether the social construct of widowhood in European patriarchal societies was deeply nuanced by the economic and social background of each widow. With these reservations in mind, Cavallo and Warner have succeeded in bringing together a useful and suggestive collection, which both reflects new thinking about aspects of the experience of widowhood and will stimulate much further debate.

Notes

1. J. Dupaquier et al (eds.) , *Marriage and Remarriage in Populations of the Past*, (London, 1981).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. R. Houlbrooke, (ed),*English Family Life, 1576-1716. An Anthology from Diaries*, (London, 1988).
[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. F. Colclough, *Widows and Widowhood in Early Modern Venice*, unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Northumbria, 1999.[Back to \(3\)](#)

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