

Widows in Cultural Representation and History: The 'Lusty Widow' Trope and Jacobean Comedies

Asuka Kimura (木村明日香)

The remarrying widow haunts early modern English drama. Many playwrights, both familiar and unfamiliar, persistently represent the figure in multiple genres: tragedy, comedy, tragic-comedy and many other hybrid forms that the period produced. Widows are usually associated with wealth or high social standing, believed to be “lusty and demanding in their sexuality” (Brodsky 125). They almost exclusively remarry with a young, penniless suitor, of dubious quality but of unquestionable sexual prowess, quickly after their husband’s death. The same image of the ‘lusty widow’ also appears outside the stage-plays, in proverbs, pamphlets, conduct books, and theological treatises. Widows and their remarriage thus acquired great significance in early modern English culture.

Taking this significance into consideration, this paper tries to take an overview of the cultural representation of remarrying widows in early modern England. First, we will look at contemporary attitudes toward the widow’s remarriage. Although some early critics have considered them to be wholly unsympathetic, they were rather fluctuating between approval and disapproval. Then, we will examine some statistical studies for the historical facts of widows and their remarriage. As we will see, the widow’s remarriage was a common sight in contemporary England. Finally, we will consider the representation of remarrying widows in early modern comedies, especially those plays written in the Jacobean age, in which the ‘lusty widow’ trope enjoyed great popularity in theatre. After discussing the theatrical representation of widows as a symbol of wealth and sexuality, we will eventually refer to the larger issue of male anxiety over the widow’s autonomy underlying these plays.

Contemporary Attitudes toward Widow’s Remarriage

Many contemporary texts seem to refer to the widow’s remarriage in disapproving, if not contemptuous, attitudes. Often quoted by critics as a representative formulation of the early modern attitude toward the widow’s remarriage, Juan Luis Vives’ *De institutione feminae christianae* (1523), which was first translated into English by Richard Hyrde (1592), proclaims: “That it is better to abstain than marry again is not only a counsel of Christian purity, that is, of divine wisdom, but also a recommendation of pagan, that is, human wisdom” (Vives 322). Citing Valerius Maximus and St. Jerome, who “preferred celibacy not only for priests but also for other Christians” (Geller 293), Vives clearly associates remarriage with lechery: “the experience of many marriages was an indication of a kind of legitimate intemperance” (Maximus, qtd. in Vives 323). Thomas Fuller, later in *The Holy State and the Profane State* (1642), condemns “[s]o many overhasty widows” for “cut[ting] their yeare of mourning very short, and within few weeks

mak[ing] post speed to a second marriage” (Fuller vol. 2, E1^r). Then he maintains: “it is not enough to be unmarried, but to be undefiled” (Fuller vol. 2, E1^r). In both Vives and Fuller, remarriage is condemned as a betrayal of the deceased husband and an indication of the widow’s lechery. Indeed, while they admonish against remarriage, these writers commend those widows who remain faithful and chaste. Vives advises widows to “consider that [their] husband...is still alive with the life of the soul” (Vives 309), and Fuller recommends them to revive their “husbands memorie” by looking at the “children he hath left [them]” and sharing the memory of him with their “husbands friends” (Fuller vol. 2, E1^r). The same contrast between a lecherous, remarrying widow and a chaste, faithful one can be seen in John Webster’s *New Characters* (1615). Contrasting “A vertuous Widdow” who “marries no more” and “never receives but one mans impression” (478) with “An ordinarie Widdow,” repeating remarriages with “a full stomacke to bedward” (479), Webster also presents the widow’s remarriage as an indication of her lechery.

Taking the apparent hostility in these texts, which invariably associate remarriage with the widow’s lechery, into consideration, some earlier critics have assumed that contemporary attitudes toward the widow’s remarriage were thoroughly negative. Clifford Leech, for instance, in his reading of *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), maintains that “the woman who re-married did not escape criticism” in the seventeenth century (69). He stresses how Webster punishes the widow’s remarriage in the play, making the Duchess a sister of Julia, whom Leech dismisses as “the rank whore” (75). Charles Carlton follows Leech by calling the contemporary representation of the remarrying widow: “a figure, at best, of fun, and, at worst, ridicule” (119). One of his examples is a now lost play, *Keep the Widow Waking*, most probably co-written by Dekker, Ford, Webster and Rowley before the winter of 1624 (Sisson 81). As far as we know from Richard Hodgkins’ ballad on the play and a record of the incident which became its source, both of which were documented in 1624, the play indeed ridicules an old widow, deceived by a young suitor and deprived of her late husband’s inheritance as a punishment for her lechery (Sisson 80-107). Regarding the ‘lusty widow’ trope as a reflection of male anxiety over “posthumous cuckoldry,” Carlton tries to indicate how the widow’s sensuality and intention for remarriage were punished in literature (125). Such an image of the ‘lusty widow’ is by no means new. As a reflection of male anxiety over “posthumous cuckoldry,” it has a long history in literary tradition (Panek 2; Geller 287). As early as 1 BC, Petronius treats the theme in *Satyricon*, and this story about the widow of Ephesus who proffers her husband’s body to save her lover is adopted by George Chapman in *The Widow’s Tears* (1612). Also in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, the wife of Bath who “ha[s] had fyve” (158) husbands is associated with “hipes large” (15), which is clearly an indication of lechery. Both Leech and Carlton situate contemporary plays within the context of this literary tradition, regarding these plays as the same “ideological weapon used to enforce a widow’s continued celibacy” (Panek 7).

However, the attitudes toward the widow’s remarriage and function of the ‘lusty widow’ trope in early modern England are far more complex than assumed by Leech and Carlton. Indeed, while contemporary writers are often seemingly hostile toward the widow’s remarriage, they still admit it as a possible choice. Vives, for instance, advises widows not to speak ill of their former husbands, partly because “such evil talk will make it all the more difficult to find a

prospective partner” (Vives 310). Some writers even encourage widows to remarry. William Gouge, in *Of Domesticall Dvities* (1622), answers the question, “[a]re they who haue buried their husband or wife so free, as they may marie againe,” as following: “Yea, as free as they who were neuer before married” (186). Or much earlier in *The Commendation of Matrimony*, translated by David Clapham and published in 1540, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa maintains that “there is no impediment to second marriage” (Camden 64). Agrippa censures “an other no lesse damnable custome, whiche hath taken place among many nations to speake commonly euyl of them that mary the second time” (C5^r). In *The English Secretorie* (1586), Angel Day admonishes a widow not to waste her “youthfull yeares, with such vnprofitable, or rather as I may cal it, desperate kind of mourninges” (216). Nor can the contemporary plays appropriating the ‘lusty widow’ trope be simplified as what Panek terms “an ideological weapon.” While Chapman appropriates the traditional story of a faithless widow in *The Widow’s Tears*, for instance, he simultaneously destabilizes his source material. In this play, Lysander tries his wife’s faith by pretending his own death. Disguising himself as a “sentinel” who “watch[es] and guard[s]” the buried bodies (4.2.43-44), Lysander at first exalts to see his wife, Cynthia, “exiled her eyes from sleep or sight, / And given them wholly up to ceaseless tears” (4.2.30-31). However, his self-satisfaction turns into perplexity when Cynthia falls in love with himself in disguise. While Cynthia proves Tharsalio’s contemptuous description of “how short-lived widows’ tears are” (1.1.141), the audience is not only deterred from condemning her thoroughly but also induced to question the dubious motivation of her husband.

This paradoxical nature of contemporary attitudes toward the widow’s remarriage, which has been first indicated by Carroll Camden and Frank W. Wadsworth, can be partly explained from changes in theological argument, as Margaret Lael Mikesell attempts to explain. It is generally maintained that the Protestant “re-evaluation of the nature of matrimony” had also revised the attitude toward widowhood and remarriage (Mikesell 266). Rather than as a necessary evil to avoid fornication and adultery, marriage after the Reformation has been understood and praised in terms of “companionship” (Mikesell 269). Along with this change, remarriage was “sanctioned by Protestant doctrine” (Panek 6), and it gradually replaced the Catholic “prestige of celibacy” (Rose 297; Klein 152). Also, by “strip[ping] marriage of its status as a sacrament” (Kehler 23), the Protestant doctrine secularized it as “a concretized relationship enacted by individuals in social life,” and allowed individuals much more freedom of marital choice (Rose 297; Stone 1990, 15, 56). Gouge, Agrippa, or Day’s positive attitude toward remarriage can be partly explained as a product of this transition to a new theological perspective. As Mikesell maintains, the social context of early modern England was “[a]n apparent amalgam of Catholic and Protestant ideas of widowhood” (270). The contemporary attitude toward the widow’s remarriage was by no means uniform or consistent, but rather a mixture of approval and disapproval.

The Widow’s Remarriage in Early Modern England: A Historical Overview

Whereas contemporary discourse on the issue of widows remarrying seems to fluctuate between approval and disapproval, statistical studies by W. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield,

Vivian Brodsky, Mary Prior, Barbara J. Todd, or more recently, Jeremy Boulton and Jane Whittle have all shown that this was a common feature in early modern England.¹ Although, as Todd notes, “remarriage rates and the factors...varied considerably from place to place” (61), all scholars agree that “[r]emarriages were common everywhere,” especially so in London (Williams 506).² According to Wrigley and Schofield, “as many as 30 per cent of all those marrying were widows or widowers in the mid sixteenth century” England (258). In London, where plays were mainly performed, “[r]emarriages comprise some 45 per cent of all license marriages” and “[o]f all women marrying by licence, some 35 per cent were widows” (Brodsky 128). Some widows remarried not just once but “two or three times before reaching old age” (Houlbrooke 139). Remarriage also “tended to take place fairly quickly” (Wrigley & Schofield 351). Whereas Wrigley and Schofield give the median interval to female marriage as 19.4 months for England between 1600 and 1799 (qtd. in Brodsky 122, Sharpe 188), Brodsky proves that almost half of tradesmen’s widows remarried within six months in London (167). While Brodsky’s study focuses on fairly well-off widows who could afford to pay for “[t]he expense of a licence,” which “was a deterrent for most persons of low socio-economic standing” (Elliot 82), Boulton complements her study by revealing a similarly high prospect for remarriage for those less fortunate and married by banns, and concludes that “in the economy of poorer Londoners, youthful widows possessing even a little property were particularly attractive in the male dominated marriage market” (344).

It is not surprising to see such a high remarriage rate in the early modern period, whose mortality rate was also high. Elliot’s calculation shows that “life expectancy in early seventeenth century London was drastically low: 22.3 years on average,” although provincial areas show a relatively higher figure (90). It is not difficult to imagine from such a high mortality rate for adults that “the average length of marriages was relatively short” (Boulton 337). Brodsky, for instance, claims that “more than half of all marriages lasted ten years or less” in contemporary London (136). Though the average lengths calculated by Brodsky, Macfarlane and Todd for London, Norwich (Norfolk), Abingdon (Berkshire) respectively, are longer than Keith Wrightson’s speculation that “[m]any marriages were broken after only a few years” (1982, 103), these figures seem to explain the relatively high number of widows and their frequent remarriages in contemporary England.³

It is also noteworthy that many scholars maintain that “marriages were interrupted more frequently by the earlier death of husbands” rather than wives (Brodsky 123).⁴ As Amy Louise Erickson explains, it is often assumed that “women died more often than men in the early years due to the hazards of childbirth” (154). However, though “female mortality was probably only slightly higher than male mortality during the childbearing years,” wives tended to outlive their husbands who were often several years older than their wives at the time of their marriage (Erickson 154; Elliott 83; Wiesner 92). Under such circumstances, the high prospect of the widow’s remarriage must have been also favourable for communities, as it “enabled some pre-industrial towns and cities to maintain their population sizes” (Boulton 325; Callaghan 272). Regarding the fact of this “frequent and often rapid remarriage” as an indication of “a widespread tolerance” or even “zest,” Alan Macfarlane concludes that “the general populace showed little opposition” (236), and maintains: “despite our expectations, the outstanding

impression for the whole period from the fourteenth to nineteenth century is that this was a society which tolerated, even encouraged, remarriage” (234).

Although the influence of social expectation or theological argument as discussed in Mikesell should not be fully dismissed, therefore, it is more precise to conclude that these factors were rather a “poor second to economic convenience” in reality (Geller 303). Indeed, as articulated in Macfarlane, these statistical studies also reveal that the widow’s remarriage in medieval Catholic England was as common as in early modern Protestant England. Widows in the medieval period were similarly prone to remarry, especially when they were left with young children (Barron xxv). Surveying the rate of widowed mothers who remarried between 1309 and 1458, Barbara A. Hanawalt finds 120 remarrying widows out of 212 widowed mothers, consisting 57 per cent of the whole (151). While common law did not necessarily exclude women from participation in the economy (Prior 103), their opportunities for employment were “severely limited” from the medieval time (Elliot 91).⁵ Not only widows, but also husbands seem to have acknowledged the economic predicament for single women. Studying husbands’ wills in Abingdon, Berkshire during the mid-sixteenth century, Todd finds how these “make it clear that [husbands] viewed [their wives’ remarriage] calmly as a predictable, even desirable event” (72-73). Similarly, studying wills of husbands in six Norfolk parishes during 1440-1579, Whittle finds only 9 per cent of wills making some provision to hinder their wives from remarriage (56). Moreover, those restrictions rarely took a form of penalty, but rather “gifts,” prescribing additional inheritance if she had remained unmarried (Whittle 56-57). These studies reveal that husbands in contemporary England were not offended by their wives’ second marriage, at least as severely as Carlton might have expected. Remarriage in reality was thus primarily regarded as “a necessary survival strategy” for widows (Mendelson & Crawford 182).

Remarrying Widows in Jacobean Comedies as A Symbol of Wealth and Sexuality

In contemporary plays, however, remarriage hardly appears as a mere “survival strategy.” Although some widows in Shakespeare’s historical plays, such as *3 Henry VI* (c.1592) or *Richard III* (c.1592-3), remarry in order to secure their lives, “most stage widows are young [and] wealthy,” lacking any motive for remarriage but their sensuality (Jacobs 133). Indicating a discrepancy between the stage representation and the historical record, Kathryn Jacobs maintains that the ‘lusty widow’ of the stage is “not created with the intention of mimicking marital reality” (133). Yet, pace Jacobs, the widow’s remarriage in contemporary plays is clearly associated with meanings and concerns, both of which were strikingly relevant to the lives of contemporaries. We will now examine the representation of the remarrying widow in Jacobean comedies, focusing on its relation to the real-life widow’s remarriage.

In early modern England, “[w]idows were at high premium in London marriage market” (Elliott 84). Not only well-off widows, but also those who were comparatively poor, if they were at least financially capable of preparing a dowry, had a high prospect of remarriage. The reason for their popularity was obviously in their property. In those days, most widows had customary “rights of dower or freebench,” which entitled them to “all, a half or a third of her husband’s land, either for her lifetime or for her widowhood only” (Whittle 54). Dower, in the early modern

sense, was a portion of the husband's freehold land the widow was given at the husband's death.⁶ Freebench was a counterpart of dower, but for the husband's copyhold land (Whittle 54).⁷ The portion of the land given to the widow seems to have varied according to the custom of each manor.⁸ There was also a practice called jointure: "an agreement that property be held in the name of both husband and wife, with a provision that the wife becomes sole owner in the event of her husband's death" (Wayne 392). The widow was then regarded as a "surviving tenant," and could acquire his land "without the payment of fine" (Whittle 48; Mate 83).⁹ Although the widow could not obtain both dower and jointure by the Statute of Uses (1535), she was still given a right to choose the greater one (Jowitt vol. 1 "Jointure", 1021; Baker 270).¹⁰ In addition to the husband's inheritance, the widow also could receive the dowry, paid at the time of her marriage and now returned to her. Since "the legal identity of the married woman was merged with that of her husband," the wife, as *feme covert*, "was incapable of owning property" (Prior 102-103). Unless she held it jointly with her husband, therefore, these "possessions that a bride had brought to the home" became "by law her husband's" (Emmison 102). "[O]ften comprising extensive amounts of furniture, household utensils and quantities of linen," dowry was also returned to widows at their husband's death (Brodsky 146). As Ralph Houlbrooke explains, "[t]he support and comfort of their widowed partners seems to have been a major concern of most husbands" (138). Many husbands proved their generosity by offering their wives a greater proportion of property than customarily required in their wills (Houlbrooke 139; Emmison 101-102; Brodsky 145).¹¹ It should be also noted that "[w]ills often fail to reveal the full extent of provision for widows," skipping to mention the customary "thirds" or "an income already arranged for her by means of a marriage settlement" (Houlbrooke 138; Amussen 85). Though individual circumstances differed in degree according to the prosperity and generosity of their husband or customs of the manor, widows were thus left with a fair portion of their husband's inheritance.¹²

It is, therefore, not surprising to see the popularity of widows in the early modern marriage market. There are indeed many texts encouraging penniless youths to catch a widow in contemporary England. Hodgkins writes, though ironically, when he notes about the play, *Keep the Widow Waking*: "sometimes that haps in an houre, / that comes not in seaven yeare, / Therefore let yong men that are poore, / come take example [of how to deprive widows] here, /.../ The play will teach you at the Bull" (qtd. in Sisson 106). Also, Martin Parker writes in his ballad, "A proverb old, yet ne'er forgot": "Wealthy Widowes now are plenty, / where you come in any place, /.../ But wealth which their first Husband got, / let Young-men poore / make hast therefore, / Tis good to strike while the Irons hott" (230). There were indeed some fortunate youths who encountered with such opportunities in reality. According to Brodsky, widows of craftsmen and tradesmen often remarried to "an apprentice and journeyman in the same or related trade or craft as that of her late husband" (127). Not only it was convenient for widows to continue their late husband's business (Brodsky 127), but also for bachelors, as it could afford them a chance for earlier independence and economic stability. As Jennifer Panek notes, male adulthood was generally "marked by the acquisition of citizenship," i.e. "the completion of an apprenticeship," acquirement of "a wife, and a household of one's own" (Panek 48-49). In early modern England, "'establishment of household'" involved setting "up a household which in most

cases was also a centre of production” (Rappaport 327). Usually, it took “seven or more years” for men to complete the apprenticeship (Rappaport 237) and “two or three years after they completed their apprenticeships” to enter marriage and establish one’s household (Rappaport 327). Marriage to a widow, who was entitled to a right to inherit her husband’s business allowed men to establish their household without completing their apprenticeship.¹³

Not only for apprentices and journeymen, but also for “younger brothers” of gentry, with “uncertain prospects, living on small annuities” due to primogeniture, marriage to a widow must have been an extremely attractive prospect (Slater 104; Stone 1966, 34-35). Though examples from real life are scarce, in plays, the penniless suitor is often represented as a gentleman’s prodigal younger son. In *The Widow’s Tears*, Tharsalio complains that his predicament forces him to woo the wealthy widow, Eudora, because Lysander, his elder brother, “were too forward” and “stepped into the world before [him], and gulled [him] of the land that [his] spirits and parts were indeed born to” (1.1.45-47). Also in Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Scornful Lady* (1616), though the destitution of the younger brother is rather a corollary of his prodigality, the contrast between the two brothers is clearly drawn at the beginning of the play. Whereas Elder Loveless will “leave the Land” (1.1.11) and go abroad in order to prove his integrity to his lover, Young Loveless has almost forfeited his property to a usurer, being unable to pay his debt (1.1.8-9). Young Loveless also exults when he receives a false report of his brother’s death, hoping to be able to inherit his house and knighthood. For those youths who had neither money nor the privilege of birth, marriage to a widow was the most feasible way to acquire wealth and advancement. Most comedies appropriating the ‘lusty widow’ trope are basically written from this suitor’s point of view. By enacting a male fantasy of “a young gentleman being spent, to have a rich widow set him up again” (1.2.2-4), as Ricardo maintains in Middleton’s *The Widow* (c.1615-1617), they fulfill the audience’s “social ambition and wishful thinking” (Jacobs 134).¹⁴

The sensuality of the ‘lusty widow’ also serves favourably to the suitor in these comedies. Having already had sexual experience, widows were generally believed to be desperate for more. In Middleton’s *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (c.1605-1606), hearing feigned news of Witgood having successfully wooed a widow with his “fine little voluble tongue” (1.2.30-31), his host replies: “No, ’tis a tongue with a great T, my boy, that wins a widow” (1.2.32-33). “T” is clearly associated with “male genitals with the shape of ‘T’” and it reiterates a common saying of “a man’s ability to persuade or seduce a widow with the size of his penis” (Wayne 380). Thomas Whythorne, an English composer and “a serial widow-wooer” (Panek 1), also tells twice in his autobiography: “he that wooeth a maid must be brave in apparel and outward show, so he that wooeth a widow must not carry quick eels in his codpiece but show some proof that he is stiff before” (Whythorne 33, 156). Indeed, the widow whom Whythorne laid his first attempt seems to have fulfilled this image by telling him: “I would fain have my man to be in love with me, for then he would not be thus far from me, but would be always at mine elbow” (29). This stereotype was not merely empirical, but also supported by medical theory. As Ian Maclean notes, female illness was “nearly always attributed to the influence of the uterus” (41). It was generally maintained that the uterus of a woman who was sexually inactive “was more likely to wander,” triggering a mental disorder (Haslem 451). Robert Burton, in *Anatomy of Melancholy*, articulates that “symptomes of maides, nannes, and widowes melancholy” are related to a lack of sex: “the

best and surest remedy of all, is to see them well placed, and married to good husbands in due time,...thats the primary cause, & this the ready cure, to give them content to their desires” (416).¹⁵ These plays, as a corollary, endow the suitor with sexual prowess, while depriving him of both wealth and status. While William proves his potency by sleeping with the widow in *Ram-Alley* (1608) Ricardo boasts of his experience with “[a] thousand” women (1.2.59) in *The Widow*. The premises of the widow’s sensuality and the suitor’s sexual competency are thus both indispensable for these comedies, as they together realize the marriage of the widow to the suitor and bring in a happy ending to the play.

Anxieties over Widow’s Autonomy and Masculinity

Interestingly, whereas the widow’s sensuality appears favourably for the suitor in contemporary comedies, many historical documents rather reveal how her previous sexual experience appeared as a threat to the young suitor’s masculinity. Whythorne, for instance, was contemptuously dismissed for being “a huddypick” who “lack[s] audacity,” and ultimately turned down by his widow (33). Even when marriages were consummated, widows often proved a difficult wife for their new husband. Elizabeth Foyster gives an episode of a remarrying widow, who shamed her new husband with cuckoldry (120-121). Accused of her adultery, this widow retaliated on her husband by claiming that “he did not sexually satisfy her within marriage as her previous two husbands had done” (Foyster 121). It was not only the widow’s sexual experience, which appeared as a threat to the new husband’s masculinity, but also their previous enjoyment of liberty and autonomy. In early modern England, widows were not only entitled to a fair amount of properties, both movable and immovable, but also practically the only female figures who could participate in both economic and legal activities.¹⁶ “[S]tanding out free from the governance” of male authority (husband / father) and entitled to the same rights and freedom as men, widows could enjoy their autonomy exceptionally within the patriarchal society (Kelso 121; Camden 103; Wrightson 2000, 44). Having enjoyed their liberty, some widows seem to have been reluctant to forsake their autonomous state on remarriage. In order to preserve their control over properties, these widows ingeniously made “a settlement” and frustrated their new husband by refusing “what he believed [to have] had been promised at the wedding” (Foyster 115). It is therefore not surprising to see Joseph Swetnam calling a marriage to a widow “a thousand woes” in his notorious misogynist treatise, *The Araignment of Lewde, idle, forward, and unconstant women* (1615): “widowes are so forward, so waspish, and so stubborne, that thou canst not wrest them from their wills, and if thou thinke to make her good by stripes thou must beate her to death” (12’).¹⁷ Dekker, in *The Batchelars Banquet* (1603), also warns those who marry widows with “much experience; who by the trial which she had of her first husband, knows how to handle the secod [*sic*]” (263). Contrary to its usual theatrical representation, the marriage to a widow could be rather a disaster for the suitor’s masculinity.

The issue of the suitor’s sexual competency in the Jacobean comedies then starts to appear significant. As Panek argues, the theatrical representation of the widow’s sensuality can be understood as the means to “assuage” male anxiety over widows (10). It is by no means coincidence that the suitor in *Ram-Alley* suppresses the widow’s “tongue,” as he threatens her

with his sword: “Keepe close your womanish weapon, hold your tongue, / Nor speake, cough, sneeze or stampe, for if you doe, / By this good blade Ile cut your throte directly” (H2^v). In early modern usage, a “tongue” often signified the male genital.¹⁸ By using his sword and penis, the suitor subdues the widow’s “tongue,” i.e. autonomy and masculinity. By changing their sexual experience from strength to weakness, or from threat to opportunity, these plays demonstrate how widows can be subordinated in such a way as to complete the suitor’s fantasy.

Paradoxically, by suppressing their power through remarriage, these plays ironically remind us of contemporary anxiety over the unique status of widows under patriarchy. Widows, especially those who enjoyed their high social standing or their husband’s right for running business, were much feared as a threat to male authority for their economic independence and autonomy. As many statistical studies reveal, early modern widows often preferred to remarry than to remain in celibacy, partly because their legal and economic independence was incessantly undermined by male hostility. While widows were entitled to a right to take over their late husband’s business, it was in fact difficult for a sole woman to continue it (Brodsky 143). Prior finds no single widow “attending ordinary meetings” or “listed as members over long periods” of the trading community in Oxford (103). Also in London, “female economic activity was restricted by the combined forces of patriarchalism and fraternalism institutionalized...in about eighty London companies” (Brodsky 141; Wiesner 105). What we see partially in these plays is, therefore, not only a mere fantasy of potential suitors, but also the same dynamics of patriarchy, which attempt to suppress female autonomy.¹⁹

The Widow’s Presence and the Happy Ending

Yet, it would be too simplistic to conclude that the contemporary playwrights were invariably hostile toward the widow’s autonomy and self-assertiveness. Indeed, there were some playwrights who have represented her presence as something felicitous. For instance, in the following three plays, it is the widow character who is given the power to resolve the play happily. In *The Widow’s Tears*, Act 5 Scene 5, Chapman presents the governor of Cyprus for the first time, making the audience expect him to bring in a denouement to the play. However, it is immediately revealed that he is “[t]he perfect draught of a most brainless, imperious upstart” (5.5.163-164). Accusing Lycus of the murder of Lysander, who is in fact living in disguise, the governor proclaims the execution of Lycus without lending his ears to the defendant: “How it will be proved, I know not. Thou shalt therefore presently be had to execution” (5.5.188-190). Eudora, a widow of the former governor now remarried to Tharsalio, stops this autocratic sentence by giving him “a word in private” (5.5.289). Not only does she save Lycas from his unjust execution, but also she whispers to Cynthia at the very end of the play, presumably trying to reconcile Lysander and Cynthia, whose marital love has been endangered by Lysander’s plot. Also in *The Widow*, Middleton endows Valeria with sufficient intellectual brightness to choose the best suitor through an ingenious plot. Pretending that all her wealth has been transferred to her brother-in-law, Valeria sorts Ricardo out of mercenary suitors, fulfilling her earlier proclamation: “I must take one that loves me for myself” (5.1.305). In some plays, the widow appears as a moral centre, whose “desire” for the young prodigal is always “mingled with a

desire to reform” him (Panek 56). As Panek argues, there is an example of this benign representation in *The Scornful Lady*, in which the Widow persuades Young Loveless to part with his rogue friends: “Pray Sir cast off these fellowes, as unfitting / For your bare knowledge, and farre more your company” (4.2.1-2). By making Young Loveless dismiss his former friends, the Widow tries to reform her new husband’s behavior. Although she does not immediately succeed, her “slyly ambiguous” response to Young Loveless indicates that her persuasion would be repeated unless he reforms in their subsequent marital life (Panek 57). As these examples reveal, some contemporary playwrights, while seemingly containing her power through remarriage, not only represent the widow’s experience and intelligence positively, but also allow her to retain the power to control the plot in the end.

In this paper, we have taken an overview of the cultural representation of the issue of remarrying widows and its historical background in early modern England by referring to both contemporary texts and recent statistical studies. While the real-life widow’s remarriage was primarily understood as an essential means for survival, it was invariably associated with lechery in its cultural representation. Moreover, the widow’s sensuality in comedies, unlike its representation in other contemporary texts, does not appear as a means to enforce her celibacy. While it is theatrically necessary in order to enable the suitor to realize his wealthy alliance with the widow, it is also the means to assuage male anxiety over her autonomy and self-assertiveness. Yet, as we have seen in the last section, it is noteworthy that some playwrights, though seemingly following the conventional representation of the ‘lusty widow,’ represent her presence and power as something felicitous. Although further studies are needed, these examples provide us with an opportunity to reconsider contemporary comedies as the playwrights’ attempt at self-conscious deviation from the conventional images of remarrying widows.

Notes

Unless otherwise indicated, Middleton quotations are taken from *The Collected Works* (2007). For other dramatic works, I followed each critical edition. Assumed dates of performance or writing are similarly taken from these editions.

¹ Carlton, on the contrary, maintains that “demographic evidence shows that widows rarely remarried, and even if they did, seldom chose younger men” (119). His observation is based on a remarriage rate of Colyton, Devonshire between 1550 and 1679 (122). However, his claim seems to be precarious, especially when we recall that the plays and texts mentioned in his article are mainly performed or published in London. Also, Pamela Sharpe’s recent study on Colyton between 1538 and 1837 indicates the rate to be much higher than Carlton’s calculation (187). See also Brodsky (126) in which she treats his study critically.

² For the remarriage rate outside London, see Prior for Oxford, 1601-1700; Todd for Abingdon, Berkshire, 1540-1720; Whittle for north-east Norfolk, 1440-1580.

³ Macfarlane, for Norwich, 1547-1603, gives twenty years for duration of marriage. He also notes that one-fifth of marriages lasted as long as thirty-five years (231). Todd, for Abingdon between 1540 and 1720, notes that “[t]he marriages of women widowed in the sixteenth century lasted about 10-12 years on average,” while in the early seventeenth century the figure increased to 18-20 years (63).

⁴ For the male mortality rate, see Boulton (69), Carlton (122). For the male life expectancy, see Rappaport (69-71). On the contrary, Mary Beth Rose maintains that “the chance that a wife would die in the first fifteen years of marriage was almost one in four, more than twice that of her husband” due to “the risks associated with childbirth” (Rose 294). She depends on Lawrence Stone’s *Crisis of the Aristocracy* (1965) for this observation, and as she articulates it, the figure refers to the wealthy members of society rather than commoners (Rose 294n.5). Erickson also notes a higher female mortality rate for “the elite” (154).

⁵ For instance, Steve Rappaport finds women only constitute “less than 2 per cent of 32,000 apprentices enrolled in seven companies during the sixteenth century,” though most of them are widows (41). Also surveying the apprenticeship registers for fifteen London companies between 1580 and 1640, Elliot sees no single woman appearing among 8,000 entries (91).

⁶ Originally, “dower” indicated “a gift from husband to wife” given “at the church door” on the day of their marriage (Baker 269). The lands for dower were “nominated before the nuptials, and the wife is given “tokens symbolizing dower” along with a wedding ring (Baker 269). The wife is thus provided with a lifelong right to those lands, only if she outlives her husband. In medieval time, the husband ceased to specify the dower lands and provided generally all of his lands (Baker 270). Dower, in the fourteenth century, then became “a common-law right,” with which the widow was granted one-third of all her husband’s estate, “independent of any agreement or formality at the time of marriage” (Baker 270).

⁷ While Mavis E. Mate explains “free-bench” as “the right to reside in the chief messuage for life so long as [the widow] did not remarry” (90), *Oxford English Dictionary* gives an instance from the third edition of Thomas Blount’s *Nomolexicon: a law dictionary* (1670), in which “free-bench” is explained as an “estate in Copihold Lands which the Wife, being espoused a Virgin, hath, after the death of her Husband, for her Dower, according to the custom of the Mannor” (“free bench”). While “free-bench” and “dower” seem to be used exchangeably in Blount, the definition it gives is very similar to that of Whittle’s article (54). Burke also lists a word, “widow-bench” in *Jowitt’s Dictionary of English Law*, explaining it as “the share of her husband’s estate which a widow was allowed besides her jointure” (Jowitt vol. 2 “Widow-bench”, 1898).

⁸ For instance, whereas most widows in London were entitled to at least one-third of their husband’s land (Brodsky 145), Hevingham Bishops, one of the north-east Norfolk parishes, seems to have lacked the practice of dower itself (Whittle 54). Still, instances like Hevingham Bishops were rather an exception, and widows in England were normally given some portion of their husband’s land (Whittle 54).

⁹ According to Mate, it was a wedding custom that “the bride’s family provided money or goods (the marriage portion) and the groom’s family ceded a portion of its estate,” and these properties were often held by the couple jointly (83). We can see this settlement depicted in Act 2 Scene 1 of *The Taming of the Shrew* (c.1594), in which all three suitors promise Baptista, the brides’ father, that they would hold their properties jointly with their future wives. Also for the properties subsequently acquired in their marital life, the couple could choose to hold them in the same manner (Mate 83).

¹⁰ In places like Hevingham Bishops, in which “rights of dower in customary land are not evident,” jointure was the only practical means for widows to acquire their husband’s land (Whittle 54).

¹¹ In England, “all land is held in tenancy, either from a noble landlord, or ultimately from the Crown” (Jardine 80; Baker 231). In feudal society, this meant that the incumbent tenant had no “right to pass it on to his natural heirs” by making a will (Jardine 78). It was “ultimately a matter” settled “between the lord of whom the land was held and any possible inheritor” (Jardine 78). It is only after the enactment of the Statute of Wills (1540) that a landholder was allowed to make a will to leave lands to his own heir (Jowitt vol. 2 “Will”, 1900).

¹² As pointed out in Mendelson & Crawford, the widow’s right to her late husband’s properties was restricted after the statute of 1670, in which “[a] childless widow’s right to her husband’s goods was halved, and the courts strictly enforced the more restrictive widows’ entitlement, reducing it to one-third” (178).

¹³ According to Rappaport, “[a]pprentices were forbidden to marry during their terms” in theory (236). He refers to some cases, in which married apprentices were forced to “seek admission into companies by redemption,” i.e. payment of a fine (237). Indeed, he gives an example of one apprentice who married his master’s widow and sought for admission by redemption (237). However, Rappaport notes that “fines such as these were very rare” in reality: “Although the possibility of widespread flaunting of the ban on marriage during apprenticeship cannot be discounted entirely, it would have been with the implicit consent of the companies” (237).

¹⁴ As Stephen Greenblatt and Jeniffer Panek explain, such a fantasy must have been very common among contemporaries (Greenblatt 176n.4; Panek 10). Indeed, as they both indicate, John Manningham, in his diary of February 2, 1601, mistakenly calls Olivia, a wealthy heiress in *Twelfth Night* (c.1602), “Lady widdowe” (Manningham 18).

¹⁵ The whole section about “Symptomes of Maids, Nunnes, and Widowes Melancholy” (Part. 1, Sect. 3, Memb. 2, Subs. 4) does not appear in the first edition of *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). This section seems to be added later. I quote from the critical edition of the fourth edition (1632). Elizabeth Foyster explains the stereotype by referring to another set of medical theory: “At a time when popular medical lore held that both women and men produced the seed which was required for conception, its accumulation within the body was thought to cause illness” (111). Her observation is based on Aristotle’s *Masterpiece* (1694), a widely-read advice book on sex.

¹⁶ According to Rappaport, “English common law distinguished a *femme sole*, a widow or unmarried woman legally of age, from a married woman or *femme coverte* [*sic*],” endowing the former with a legal identity (37). Therefore, theoretically, both widows and unmarried women could “acquire and dispose of property, contract debts, make wills, engage independently in a craft or trade” (Rappaport 37). Yet, since unmarried women under their father’s control hardly enjoyed any such opportunity, it was, in reality, only widows who could act as economic and legal individuals (Rappaport 39).

¹⁷ As a critical response to Joseph Swetnam’s slander on widows, Ester Swetnam, whose pseudonym is enough to indicate his/her abhorrence toward this precedent work, retorts to him in *Ester hath hang’d Haman* (London: 1617): “You say, *A young woman of tender yeares as is flexible, obedient, and subject to doe anything, according to the will and pleasure of her Husband.* How commeth it then that this gentle and milde disposition is afterwords altered? your selfe doth giue the true reason, for you giue a great charge not to marrie a widow. But why? because say you in the same Page, A widow is framed to the conditions of another man. Why then, if a woman haue forward conditions, they be none of her owne, she was framed to them” (G1’).

¹⁸ For instance, in *The Duchess of Malfi*, Ferdinand compares the male genital to “the Tongue” (1.1.324), and perplexes his sister.

¹⁹ Although contemporary attitudes toward the widow’s autonomy were generally negative, there were some exceptions. For instance, *The Law’s Resolutions of Women’s Rights* (1632), whose author is unknown but which was emended and published later by T. E., claims: “Why mourn you so, you that be widows? Consider how long you have been in subjection under the predominance of parents, of your husbands; now you be free in liberty, and free...at your own law” (50). Yet, as the fact that this work by an anonymous author “was not demonstrably popular in its own time” but “issued only once and never reprinted” indicates, such a positive attitude toward the widow’s female liberty must have had been rather in the minority (Klein 27).

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