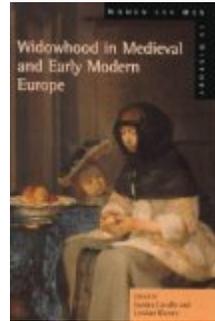


Sandra Cavallo, Lyndan Warner, eds. *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. New York: Longman, 1999. xiv + 272 pp. \$49.60 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-31748-2; \$89.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-582-31747-5.

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Surviving Both Spouse and Society in Early Modern Europe

According to seventeenth-century common law, all Englishwomen were “understood either married or to be married,” and as such the temporary dependent of a father or the permanent dependent of a husband. Termed *feme covert* in law, their legal existence was literally “covered” over by the male head of their household. Only when widowed did the early modern Englishwoman become legally visible, “A woman at her own commandment.”[1]

With widowhood early modern women become uniquely visible to historians as well; in this collection of essays edited by Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner, historians of medieval and early modern Europe probe the gendered cracks in social constructions and social arrangements caused by the loss of a spouse. Located at a point of rupture in the European family and socially defined by their lack of a normative life-partner, the widowed provide historians with a myriad of opportunities to explore questions of gender roles, family finances, household structures, community welfare systems, and experiences of the life-cycle. These issues are amply treated in Cavallo and Warner’s volume, who use their introductory essay to set the problem of widowhood within a framework of gender difference, gender commonality and long term cultural change. Cognizant of the uniquely gendered position of the widowed woman and adamantly attentive to the reality of widowed men, both the editors and assembled authors challenge the historiographical commonplace that widowhood was an essentially feminine experience. Addressing both widowhood

and “widowerhood,” the contributors seek to comparatively engage the gendered dimensions of spousal loss.

As several contributors note, due to their unusual visibility in pre-industrial society, widows have long drawn the attention of women’s historians.[2] Many of the chapters seek to both build upon and complicate these existing narratives of widowhood and women’s lives in medieval and early modern Europe. These essays cover a variety of sources and circumstances, from analyzing the prescriptive rhetoric of English advice-books to surveying Italian institutional records to search out documented cases of widows negotiating their control over their property, their children or their lives. But a common theme through them is the potential problem posed to family, church and state by an adult woman no longer governed nor maintained by a husband. This problem was both conceptual and practical, and the authors engage both literary constructions and institutional actions to explore how social authorities, families and the widows themselves negotiated systems in which all women were “understood either married or to be married.”[3]

Collectively the authors sketch a picture where families and social institutions attempted alternating strategies to cope with the problem of widowed women, sometimes seeking to recontain them within marriage or monasticism, sometimes cooperating to construct a viable identity and space for the independent widow. When viewed as a drain of parish or family resources, or as a danger to the patrilineal transmission of prop-

erty, name or religion, male relatives and government officials could be quick to push widows back under available forms of male stewardship. Isabelle Chabot's chapter "Lineage strategies and the control of widows in Renaissance Florence" and Giulia Calvi's chapter on Tuscan widows and child guardianship both explore this dynamic by examining the patrilinear pressures placed on widows in early modern Italy. In Chabot's work on the conflicting claims and interests of the Florentine widow's birth family and her in-laws, the profound efforts by both families to control the widow are revealed as efforts to retain patrilinear control of the property and children attached to the widow. Calvi's research on widows, their children, and the Tuscan Magistrato dei Pupilli (court of wards) documents similar patrimonial conflicts and an emerging collaboration between widows and state authority to defend women's guardianship over their children. While Chabot and Calvi find Italian widows triangulating state and family in struggles over lineage, Dagmar Freist narrates the religious confrontations between German state authorities and the widows of mixed marriages. In the confessionally partitioned states of the late seventeenth-century Holy Roman Empire, Freist finds officials intervening to separate the children of Catholic fathers from their now-widowed Protestant mothers.

These essays show that perceived threats to lineage, property or other patrilinear prerogatives could provoke attempts by families and officials to reintegrate widows into institutions of patriarchal control. These attempts were often facilitated by the inability of authorities to imagine a natural social role for autonomous adult women; as Patricia Skinner notes in her chapter "The widow's options in medieval southern Italy," both secular and ecclesiastical officials believed that the widow had only two possible futures: monastic withdrawal or remarriage (58-60). But Skinner and other authors also uncover joint efforts to enable women to occupy a chaste and independent role as a widow.

Barbara Todd's chapter "The virtuous widow in Protestant England" analyzes a male-authored advice-book for widows that extolled the spiritual opportunities for freedom and masculine self-control inherent in widowhood. Tim Stretton's piece on widows 'waging law' in early modern England shows them actively and independently litigating, as their widowed status released them from legal coverture. Despite the discouragement from public activity found in conduct-books and cultural stereotypes, many of Stretton's widows used both the law courts and conventions of feminine vulnerability in order to pursue their interests. More unexpectedly, Stretton

finds that the courts themselves frequently accommodated the special problems confronting widows as plaintiffs. Skinner herself notes that despite the societal expectation that widows would inevitably take either the veil or a second husband, many widows in medieval Selerno adopted a "fashion" of piety that allowed them to stay both unmarried and at home (61).

Documenting the social and cultural tensions created by "unheaded" women, these authors underscore the centrality of marriage as an organizing principle of late medieval and early modern society. As such, its significance encompassed both genders; as Olwen Hufton has remarked elsewhere, men too were almost universally expected to marry in early modern Europe.[4] As husbands, medieval and early modern men experienced spousal loss and its effects. Emphasizing this, the editors and several contributors highlight the question of how men's experience of "widowerhood" was gendered. Cavallo and Warner observe that the terminology of widowerhood is linguistically atypical; the masculine noun unexpectedly derives from the feminine, rather than the reverse (4). Probing the historical record, some contributors find that widowerhood as an identity and an experience often derived its character from the more prevalent feminine model. Alternately, they also find it often absent or effaced in circumstances where widowed women were generally present.

Chapters by Margaret Pelling and Pamela Sharpe discuss the relative "invisibility" of the English widower. Chronicling the tendency of seventeenth-century widowers to disappear rapidly into remarriage, Pelling argues that both Englishmen and English cultural norms rejected the state of male widowhood. Pelling suggests that men overwhelmingly preferred and needed domestic partners, and that English society was organized to ease and encourage their remarriage. Sharpe's treatment of nineteenth-century poor relief and widowed men and women finds a similar absence of widowers and a similar resistance to living without a household helpmeet. In particular Sharpe finds poorer widowers employing daughters as "miniature" wives when remarriage was not immediately possible. Widowhood acquired invisibility as remarriage and other preferential forms of social support relieved the widower from the solitude and poverty which often culturally characterized the widow.

However, like the widow, the widower could be seen as destabilizing to the marital and reproductive order. Becoming "visible" in such moments, they could also find themselves defined by the dominantly feminine mean-

ings of widowhood. In her chapter “Widows, widowers and the problem of second marriages in sixteenth-century France,” Lyndan Warner discusses how legal restrictions originally enacted to control widowed women were eventually imposed on widowed men. Studying a precedent-setting case, Warner explores how the rhetoric of weakness and emotional susceptibility, conventionally applied to widowed women, was extended to widowed men. Despite the fact that this rhetoric undermined the authority of the remarried widower as a husband, householder, and representative of the larger patriarchal order, it was nonetheless deployed by lawyers, families and the courts when the widower’s marital ambitions undermined the heirs and established property rights of his previous family.

Highlighting contrasts in male and female experience of spousal loss, these chapters provide insights into the ways that masculinity and male dependency were negotiated at the individual and cultural level in medieval and early modern society. Placed in dialogue with the other essays, they illuminate some of the ways in which European constructions of male and female experience were fluid and mutually defining. Taken together, all the chapters provide an alternative angle on the historical dynamics of family relationships and the range of influence which marriage exercised upon the identities and lifestyles of medieval and early modern men and women.

Although the volume is intended to span the medieval and early modern periods, the majority of contributed chapters deal with early modern Europe. Two essays address medieval widowhood and two extend into the nineteenth century. This makes the collection most pertinent to an early modernist audience. However, the essays dealing with earlier and later time-frames are both strategically included and placed. Julia Crick’s chapter on widows and widowers in pre-conquest England and Sharpe’s chapter on poverty and English widowhood from the Elizabethan to the Victorian era begin and end the collection, rooting the early modern material in a longer temporal framework. The inclusion of these essays allows for a comparative discussion, and illuminates the interaction between long term changes in European patterns of conjugal partnership and constructions and experiences of widowhood. Crick in particular illustrates how the relative scarcity in formalized and monogamous marital arrangements in early medieval England obscured the identity of widows and widowers in pre-Norman terminology and texts, a dramatic difference with the more distinctively identified widows of late medieval and early modern marriages. On the other end of

the timeline, Amy Louise Erickson’s examination of the property rights of widows in the long eighteenth century charts a decline in the executorial and financial agency of widows accompanying the rise of the ideal of the romantic marriage.

Aimed at students, the volume contains a substantial annotated bibliography. The range of topics, from litigation to religion to child custody give it an effective breadth for assignment in historiography courses in gender and the early modern family. The book has the additional pedagogical virtue of transcending the typically fragmented quality of multiple author essay collections. With several of the papers originating in a 1996 conference on the history of widowhood, the chapters possess a high degree of cross-reference and convey a strong sense of a shared scholarly conversation.[5] This gives the collection an unusual cohesiveness and thematic unity. As a collection of current work actively engaged with the issues and approaches of comparative gender history, this volume should provoke discussion while providing a revealing window into the historiographical problem of how men and women were gendered in early modern society.

NOTES

[1]. *The Law’s Resolutions of Women’s Rights* [London: 1632], excerpted in Joan Larsen Klein Ed., *Daughters, Wives and Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England, 1500-1640* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 32; 51.

[2]. For a survey of the historiography of widowhood see Frouke Veenstra, Kirsten van der Ploeg, “Widows in western history: A select bibliography” in Jan Bremmer and Lourens van den Bosch Eds., *Between Poverty and the Pyre : Moments in the History of Widowhood* (London ; New York : Routledge, 1995); Ida Blom, “The History of Widowhood: A Bibliographic Overview,” *Journal of Family History* 1991 16(2): 421-450. For relatively recent discussions of early modern widowhood in the context of women’s roles and women’s life-cycles, see Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, 1500-1800* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), Ch. 6; Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550-1720* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 174-183.

[3]. *Law’s Resolution of Women’s Rights*, *ibid.*

[4]. Hufton, *Prospect Before Her*, 62-5.

[5] “Widowhood: Conditions and Constructions”,

University of Exeter, UK: 16-17 May 1996. My thanks to Dr. Lyndan Warner for information on the symposium. work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

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