SHAKESPEARE'S WIDOWS

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Shakespeare’s Widows
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For Pauly and Evi—with love

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Unless otherwise indicated, Shakespeare quotations are taken from the second edition of The Riverside Shakespeare (1997) with editorial brackets omitted, biblical references from the Geneva Bible (1560), the most popular family Bible during Shakespeare’s career. When using original editions, I have retained old spellings and the exchange of “v” for “u,” and “i” for “j” (but not “long s” for “s”).
A few months before his death at fifty-two, Shakespeare drafted his last will. To his sixty-year-old wife, Anne Hathaway Shakespeare, he bequeathed his “second-best bed.” Although the family was well-off and his widow would have been comfortably provided for under English law, the connotations of “second-best,” particularly when joined to an object so crucial to nuptial bliss as a bed, have long intrigued posterity. How William felt about Anne we will never know. Nor will we know how he felt about his mother, widowed at sixty-one. What we may discern are Shakespeare’s insights into the psyches of a wide array of women, figured in thirty-one characters young and old, common and noble, recently or long widowed, all of whom have dealt with loss. At one extreme is Measure for Measure’s Mistress Overdone. A brothel keeper, noteworthy for her nine husbands, “Overdone by the last” (2.1.202), she mentions none of her erstwhile spouses. At the other is Cleopatra, mourning the death of Antony before her own suicide:

Noblest of men, woo’t die?  
Hast thou no care of me? Shall I abide  
In this dull world, which in thy absence is  
No better than a sty? O, see, my women:  
The crown o’ th’ earth doth melt. My lord!  
O, wither’d is the garland of the war,  
The soldier’s pole is fall’n! Young boys and girls  
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,  
And there is nothing left remarkable  
Beneath the visiting moon.  

(Ant. 4.15.59–68)
So great a disparity raises questions. During Shakespeare’s lifetime, how were widows, some 15 percent of English women, expected to behave? (Froide, *Never Married* 16). How did they in fact behave? And how does Shakespeare represent widows?

A principal way in which patriarchal cultures constructed the widow was as emotionally needy, an old woman defined by incompleteness and her husband’s absence, possessing little beyond the widow’s mite, and more apt to be grouped with orphans as objects of charity than stereotyped as wealthy or merry. Whereas contemporary urban societies stop short of destroying the widow’s sexual appeal, not so some traditional communities. Modern readers are struck by Balzac’s “sombre portraits of crow-like widows” in the *Comédie humaine* (Holderness 423). Through the 1950s if not later, in southern Italy, especially in the countryside, widows were expected to wear black for the rest of their lives. In Michael Cacoyannis’s film *Zorba the Greek*, immediately after the death of Madam Hortense, a swarm of black-clad Cretan widows loot her home; a beautiful young widow who dares to love again is murdered. In parts of India, unattractive clothing was prescribed and the widow’s head was shaved (Lopata 24). Today, in many developing countries, widow stereotypes and roles are relics of a transitional phase between traditional social organization (often patrilineal, patrilocal, and patriarchal) and a society ostensibly dedicated to egalitarianism. To borrow Raymond Williams’s terms, the older stereotypes are residual elements in what is, one hopes, the dominant culture (41). Nevertheless, even in fully industrialized nations, widowhood commonly evokes a dreary image of women already dead in spirit. Not surprisingly, they disappear from our consciousness. Once the funeral and mourning period end, widowhood is merely a statistic, a sociological category without a specific social role or visible identity. This amorphousness as well as our distaste for the subject of bereavement—aptly called the West’s “pornography of death” (Gorer 9)—may in part explain why widowhood is not much acknowledged in mainstream discourse.

In contrast, widows in early modern England, at least according to the literati, did have a prescribed social role, albeit more honored in the breach than the observance. Of the roles available to women—maid, wife, widow (Lucio in *Measure for Measure* adds “punk” or whore)—only that of widow is grounded exclusively in the past. In keeping with an older Catholic and primarily continental tradition, male polemical writers of conduct books and other guidance manuals for married couples, as well as the entertainment-oriented authors of plays and popular ballads, usually cast virtuous widows as models of Christian charity, of devoted motherhood, and—above all—of fidelity to their deceased...
spouses. The faithful, celibate widow could donate freely to her church and satisfy her emotional if not physical needs through commitment to her children. The Catholic ideal of celibacy lingered and was not without appeal for Protestants, despite its doctrinal rejection. John Webster, the Anglican author of thirty-two Overburian *Characters* (1615 printing) describes the attributes of “A Vertuous Widdow”: “Shee gives much to pious uses, without any hope to merit by them: and as one Diamond fashions another; so is shee wrought into workes of Charity, with the dust or ashes of her husband.” Webster assumes that the widow is a mother: “For her Childrens sake she first marries, for she married that she might have children, and for their sakes she marries no more.” She foregoes remarriage because “she thinkes shee hath traveld all the world in one man; the rest of her time therefore shee directs to heaven” (Paylor 70). As for the “lusty widow”—the alternative widow construction popular with playwrights—she was food for satire and censure.

While those of Shakespeare’s widows who reject celibacy have generated some interest, mostly negative, by and large Shakespeare critics have marginalized the widow characters, reflecting the situation of real widows throughout history and ignoring a vital element of the canon. Widows or “seeming widows,” comprise a prominent and impressive character group, appearing in over half of Shakespeare’s plays. I use the term “seeming widows” to denote wives uncertain of their status or mistakenly believing themselves widowed—Aemilia in *Comedy of Errors*, Thaisa in *Pericles*, Imogen in *Cymbeline*, and Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*. From this group and from the larger category of widows, I exclude *Henry VIII*’s Katherine of Aragon, a Renaissance Anita Hill; historically, Katherine denied that her “marriage” to Henry’s older brother had been consummated, and I believe her. That said, if we classify the widows (including “seeming widows”) by genre, the greatest number—ten—appear in the history plays, nine in the tragedies, seven in the romances, and five in the comedies. If we classify by life events, sixteen are mothers, ten remarry (or eleven, if we count Cleopatra), and twelve die. We may infer a lesson from the fact that over half of the remarried die, none peacefully, and two at the hands of their second husbands—but more of that to come.

By multiplying the number of widows in individual plays, Shakespeare increases their conspicuousness. Thus, he pairs widows in *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *All’s Well That Ends Well*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Cymbeline*; he groups them in *Richard III*, *King John*, and *The Two Noble Kinsmen*. In five of the nine plays, widows form a good/evil binarism: in *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia is associated with celibate virtue (for her a function of inclination as well as mutilation), Tamora with
remarriage—and evil. Similarly, *Cymbeline*’s Imogen protects herself from men through male disguise, whereas her wicked stepmother is a remarried widow. Less prominent yet still detectable is the binarism in *Romeo and Juliet*. Despite the unsettling ideological implications of deeming the child-widow’s suicide romantic, Juliet’s Liebestod guarantees celibacy. Whereas the heroine chooses death over life without her husband, the widowed nurse, who counsels bigamy in the face of Romeo’s banishment and Juliet’s sexual deprivation—“and you no use of him” (3.5.225)—is dismissed from Juliet’s heart and the audience’s regard as an “ancient damnation” (3.5.235). In *Henry IV, Part Two*, the binarism is created as foolish Mistress Quickly, now widowed, looks forward to wedding Falstaff, whereas the admirable Lady Percy’s moving eulogy for Hotspur implies perpetual celibacy. *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry IV* demonstrate that when widows of both higher and lower classes are represented, the aristocracy’s monopoly on steadfastness is a class marker. In *King John*, Constance, who dies of grief for her son, is opposed to the murderous Elinor (and the adulterous Lady Falconbridge). In *Antony and Cleopatra*, Octavia is not responsible for the political remarriage engineered by her brother, so she occupies the moral high ground over lusty Cleopatra, widowed at least once. Shakespeare augments the importance of these widow, ex-widow, and briefly widowed characters (Juliet), insofar as more than a few can be considered central to their plays: Queen Margaret in *Henry VI, Part Three* and *Richard III*; Tamora in *Titus*; Constance in *King John*; Gertrude in *Hamlet*; the old Countess in *All’s Well*; Volumnia in *Coriolanus*; Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*; and Juliet and Cleopatra in their plays.

No less telling, all of Shakespeare’s widowed characters to some extent act as they do because they are widows—not merely queens, mothers, or bawds. Shakespeare was aware of the widow’s freedom, often in tension with her private terrors, and made those attributes an element of his characters’ distinctive subjectivities. Although he viewed widowhood from a male perspective and wrote roles for an all-male cast, to gloss over a character’s widowhood is to read her incompletely. Consider, for example, Angelica, the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet*. Having lost her husband—“’A was a merry man” (1.3.40)—and her daughter Susan, contrary to custom she finds protection within the Capulet household and emotional satisfaction caring for Juliet, who takes the place of her infant. Had she not been widowed, like other wet nurses of the time she would have taken Juliet to her own home for three years, then lost contact with the toddler (Paster 199). Except for her widowhood that allowed her to live with the Capulets, she could not have involved herself so completely in Juliet’s life. The representation of Constance,
Geoffrey Plantagenet’s widow in *King John*, which reveals Shakespeare’s willingness to tamper with historical fact in the interests of convincing motivation, is another case in point. In the play, after Geoffrey’s death Constance is alone in the world except for her young son, Arthur, claimant to the English throne. Fearing for his safety, she goes mad. Shakespeare suppresses Holinshed’s mention of her two remarriages. Obviously, he thought Constance would be more affecting and believable as a widow than a wife. Probably the best known of the widows is Gertrude. *Hamlet* turns on Shakespeare’s not suppressing her remarriage, for to Hamlet and the Ghost, Gertrude never becomes Claudius’s wife but instead remains a shameful remarried widow. Thus, despite the highlighting of female characters by feminist critics, the need for a study of Shakespeare’s thirty-one widows qua widows remains. This lacuna is all the more striking since every genre includes strong-minded, developed widow characters. While widow status is more important in some plays than in others, the character’s perception of widowhood changes her subjectivity. Whether she conforms to or rebels against her new gender role, her behavior reflects awareness of social protocol for widows and is one of the ways Shakespeare achieves psychological realism.

Reading historically and sociologically, Shakespeare’s widows, and more broadly the plays they figure in, describe a strategic negotiation between the opposed poles of an ancient ideology designed to impel women to police themselves into celibacy and a fairly progressive practice. Depictions of the widow characters by England’s greatest cultural authority not only reflect literary expectations for bereaved wives but also interrogate those expectations. Shakespeare’s widows are prone to elude ideology by embodying their author’s insights into the economic and gender issues that constitute the infrastructure underlying a patriarchal construction of reality. If my analyses of the widows’ reasons for remaining single or wedding again seem to undervalue the power of love, either for the deceased spouse or for a new mate, I intend no disrespect to Cupid. I mean only to redress the balance between readings that focus on personal emotion and those that focus on social concerns, the latter, like the widows themselves, having suffered from neglect, although demographers assure us that “there were close links between economic circumstances and marriage decisions in the past. Because of the nature of the institution of marriage, the decision to marry was peculiarly susceptible to economic pressures” (Wrigley, *Reconstitution* 125).

While little has been written about Shakespeare’s widows as a category, one finds even less about Shakespeare’s widowers. To better understand the widow, it behooves us to locate her male counterpart in Elizabethan culture and in Shakespeare. The dearth of writing about
widowers is not curious, since “widower” is not a primary source of identification in the plays, nor did it ever figure in early modern society as prominently as the death of a spouse did for women. For Shakespeare’s female characters few attributes are as socially definitive as marital status, but for male characters it is only one among many equally or more imperative situating factors. In Elizabethan and Tudor England, more often than not widowers were listed on government documents as “single men” (Pelling 42). Because the circumstance of being widowed did not become a descriptive category for men, the widower “was not inundated with advice on his conduct, the remembrance of his first wife, or the administration of the estate” (Cavallo and Warner 8). The Shakespearean widower’s role is more likely to be signaled inconspicuously by the absence of an onstage wife. In fact, we cannot always be sure of who actually is a widower, and who is not. Most often the audience sees the character not primarily as a widower but as a ruler, a soldier, a courtier—a noun, not a past participle.

When a role in private rather than public life is foregrounded, the widower is drawn above all as a father. Most often, he has only one child, a daughter, or if he has other children, only one is a daughter. Thus, Much Ado’s Leonato wishes that both he and his daughter were dead when she is dishonored, and Brabantio’s heart is broken when Desdemona marries Othello. A Shakespearean hallmark is the number of widowers who, rather than remarrying, displace their affections onto their daughters. What may look like emotional incest elsewhere in the canon becomes the thing itself in Pericles. On a happier note, Pericles makes real the fantasy of the seemingly dead wife’s restoration to her husband as a reward for his attachment to her memory—an attachment that, we are free to imagine, takes the form of celibacy. In The Comedy of Errors and The Winter’s Tale, deriving from the same source as Pericles, Egeon’s Aemilia is restored to him after thirty-three years, and Hermione returns to a husband who, rather than remarrying, for sixteen years “shuts up himself” (WT 4.1.19). While in The Tempest Miranda’s father, Prospero, perforce remains celibate on his uninhabited island, for the most part we can only guess at whether or not Shakespeare’s other widowers abstain. Shakespeare may employ the impression of celibacy to make the intense relationship between father and daughter more plausible.

Perhaps merely for the sake of dramatic economy, a remarrying widower in Shakespeare is a rare bird, contrary to the demographics of early modern England where “the widower appears to have been not so much submerged as short-lived, or hardly existent at all.” Not only was there minimal legal pressure for men to define themselves as widowers rather than as single men, but throughout England—in
fact, throughout all of Europe—widowers were likely to soon abandon that category, remarrying more frequently than widows, sooner than widows, and at older ages than widows (Pelling 37, 46). Statistics suggest that men need marriage more than women do; modern European widowers’ disproportionate deaths owing to bereavement are almost three times as high as that of widows (Brockmann and Klein 568). But few widowers remarry in Shakespeare. Of these only Cymbeline, who with breathtaking lack of judgment weds his would-be murderer, is portrayed as a father; more specifically, he is a senex in the vein of Silvia’s father in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Antony marries Octavia only to desert her for Cleopatra (as he deserted his former wife Fulvia). His fatherhood is mentioned only once in *Antony and Cleopatra*, and nothing is made of it. Richard III, who authored his own widowhood, attempts unsuccessfully to remarry his politically useful niece. All are punished, Cymbeline losing to Rome, Antony to Octavius, and Richard to Richmond, who becomes Henry VII.

The desire for exclusive power over the child and the father’s sexual/aesthetic attraction to a young woman rather than to a woman of his own age are only two explanations for a widower’s shunning remarriage. It may be that Shakespeare was inclined to the Catholic privileging of celibacy, a doctrine that inspired Torquato Tasso to view marriage as a spiritual union continuing after death. Although unwilling to blame those who remarry, in “The Father of the Family” (1580), Tasso instructs widowers as well as widows that “the happiest are still those who have been bound by the marriage knot only once in their lives”; for Tasso, “once the knot that binds a soul to a body is dissolved, that particular soul cannot be joined to any other body . . . and therefore it also seems fitting that the woman or man whose first marriage knot has been dissolved by death should not form a second” (81). Whereas most Protestant divines favored remarriage, Shakespeare appears to reserve his approbation for a single standard of eternal fidelity for both sexes. Unlike the theologians, however, Shakespeare observes the heavy toll celibacy may take on emotional relations between widowed parents and their children. In the plays, more often than not, practice subverts precept.

Another explanation for the single standard may be fear of an unloving stepparent. The second wife of King Cymbeline plans not only his death but also that of his child by his first marriage; similarly, Claudius, Gertrude’s second husband, tries to kill Hamlet. Do Shakespeare’s widowers seldom remarry for fear of incurring the risk of cuckoldry once again? References to such a risk appear too frequently throughout the canon to discount them as an explanation for the widower’s remaining single. Cuckoldry jokes, plots turning on the
slandered lady, references to physical likeness as proof of paternity, and many variations on Prospero’s jest—“Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and / She said thou wast my daughter” (1.2.56–57)—all suggest male anxiety about marriage.19

That anxiety, prominent long before the sixteenth century, bred a code of proper behavior for widows—“relicts” of their husbands and therefore (it was hoped) still under the marriage yoke. In England, widowed celibacy was largely associated with Catholicism, remarriage with Protestantism. Yet in spite of the Reformation and the practice of remarriage by even the most “godly” widows, prescriptive writings and literary works continued to honor the celibate. One explanation is economic. In traditional societies vested interests are fairly obvious; both the widow, whose social role obligates her to remain with her husband’s family and to have sexual relations with his brother (leverite marriage), and her opposite, the widow forbidden remarriage and made physically undesirable, surrender their own inclinations for the financial advantage of the husband’s family. Law and custom are designed to secure the widow’s dowry and productivity as mother and/or laborer for the patrilineal unit. In early modern societies, economic interests were rarely as transparent; nevertheless, remarriage could be financially detrimental to the widow’s children—and by extension, to her deceased husband’s family. In time, the Quakers would insist on the widow’s religious duty to make appropriate settlements for the children of her first marriage before embarking on a second voyage (Fraser 87). Patrilineal economic benefit being an important reason for the literati’s privileging of celibate widowhood, Shakespeare’s widow characters invite a materialist reading.

In part because the canon valorizes widowed celibacy for both sexes, Shakespeare may seem ambivalent about patriarchal ideology. Seeking a broad, heterogeneous audience, he serves his interest by maintaining the stance of a consummate relativist. As a playwright, his widows, like their real-life counterparts, are embedded within a specific and individual set of political, social, and economic circumstances. To take remarried Queen Gertrude as an example, was she, as she is so often figured, a “lusty widow”? Or was she, rather, the object of a mercenary “widow hunt,” her status as queen conferring validity on Claudius’ new title? Having enjoyed the social status of a queen, did she choose to preempt a successor? Did she fear dwindling means? Was it political power and the security it brings that Gertrude sought between incestuous sheets? In contrast to Shakespeare, patriarchal preceptors, whether in the name of morality or decorum, were prone to ignore the particular circumstances that each widow faced. Rather, they lay down rules and made judgments as if widows were a monolithic abstraction.
Early modern Europe was transitional in its conceptions of the widow’s place. If “marriage constitutes the great image of patriarchal political order” (Rackin, *Stages* 162), widowhood was an image of potential instability and disorder. Widows were “unheaded women.” The term derives from Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians 5.22–23: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is wise’s head, even as Christ is the head of the Church. . . .” A widow is called “unheaded” on stage in *The Puritan: Or, the Widow of Watling Street* (1607), once attributed to Shakespeare. She has almost wed the jailbird, Idle, unmasked in the nick of time by a nobleman, who concludes, “such is the blind besoting in the state of an unheaded woman that’s a widow” (5.4). As the anonymous author of *The Laws Resolutions of Women’s Rights* (1632) laments, “But, alas, when she hath lost her husband, her head is cut off, her intellectual part is gone . . .” (232).\(^{20}\) Then, surprisingly, having paid his debt to ideology, he consoles the widow, urging her to rejoice in her autonomy:

Why mourne you so, you that be widowes? Consider how long you have beene in subjection under the predominance of parents, of your husbands, now you be free in libertie . . . you may see . . . that maidens and wives vowes made upon their souls to the Lord himselfe of heaven and earth were all disavowable and infringible, by their parents or husbands unless they ratified and allowed them, either express or by silence, at the day when such vowes came first to their notice and knowledge: But the vow of a widow or of a woman divorced, no man had power to disallow of, for her estate was free from controlment.

As he provides legal advice and practical caveats, enabling the independence of his “unheaded” reader, the author encourages her to face the future with a more auspicious than dropping eye. Many of Shakespeare’s widows take up that challenge.

Attention to widowhood, with its own political and literary history, uncovers important facets of the plays: the broad, nuanced range of ways in which Shakespeare represents a status that was, in effect, a site of contestation for control. Nominally at stake was the widow’s sexuality, seen as an ever-present threat, particularly to the children of the deceased husband. But since the reward for chastity, although rarely acknowledged, was autonomy, which was all the more substantial when accompanied by economic independence, many a widow may have thought it no great sacrifice to eschew remarriage. We cannot know to what extent remaining single entailed remaining celibate, but—if it is any indication—among Shakespeare’s widows, only two of the thirty-one are portrayed as having
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had affairs: *Titus Andronicus’s* Tamara and Cleopatra. (*King John’s* Lady Falconbridge had a liaison with Richard the Lionhearted before she was widowed, and *King Lear’s* Regan appears to have lacked the opportunity; that the widow Gertrude slept with Claudius at any time prior to their marriage is a questionable inference.) At the mercy of a gender system characterized by male domination and female subordination, most literary widows were dressed in ideological robes, lauded for fidelity if they remained unwed and devout, mocked if they remarried. Ideology concealed an unacknowledged truth. Real-life widows were largely an economic category, their actions more apt to be determined by materialist than theological considerations.

Why does the Shakespearean widow remarry? Most often because her back is to the wall either politically or economically—and the former entails the latter. That nexus is crucial to reading Shakespeare because all but a handful of his widows are women of rank. The insecurity they face is portrayed as political, but the “middling sort” who made up the bulk of Shakespeare’s audience would have known that the losers of political conflicts were at best slated for financial dependency. Whereas the commoner worried about money, the aristocrat worried about land and status, which equated to money. Mistress Overdone’s shady business could only benefit from the authority of a husband, so she accumulates nine of them; Lady Grey begs Edward IV for her family’s lost estate and gains the king along with the estate. For both widows the economic motive either overrides sexual desire or competes with it for center stage. Admittedly, throughout this book I privilege political/economic motives over sexual desire in my analysis of why Shakespeare’s widows remarry, for the stereotype of the “lusty widow” has overshadowed material reasons. Of course material and amatory causes may coincide. Ambition, too—the queen in *Cymbeline* plotting to crown her son by her former marriage, Hostess Quickly dreaming of a title—is another face of politics and economics.

A significant part of the energy captured in the twenty-one plays I discuss is generated by the clash between a materialist practice reflecting English Protestant values and a conservative Catholic ideology that derides the lusty, remarrying widow and extols the celibate. Whether or not Shakespeare’s audiences avowed the Pauline line, conservative ideology was what they would have been accustomed to hearing. As a popular playwright, Shakespeare was obliged to appeal to the preconceptions of his audiences by grounding his widow characterizations in recognizable types. I use the plural “characterizations” advisedly because widowhood had its phases, depending on the widow’s economic class and age, on whether or not she remarried, on whether she had children and, if she
did, on the nature of her relationship with them, and so on. Similarly, audiences were anything but monolithic, including men and women of all sorts, among them potential widows, single widows, and remarried widows. This “widow” group would have been quite sizable in a period when women usually married older men and outlived them, the average marriage enduring between sixteen and twenty years (Hufton 223). In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* when Master Ford, suspicious of the friendship between his wife and Page’s, jibes, “I think if your husbands were dead, you two would marry,” Mistress Page retorts breezily, “Be sure of that—two other husbands” (3.2.14–17). Elizabethan women watching *Hamlet* may therefore have related ambivalently to an ideology that censured remarriage, experiencing a more complex queen than did men. To the extent that ideology persuades in Shakespeare, it is not necessarily because of the spectator’s predisposition but because the plays, and none more than *Hamlet*, urge a male point of view: “Frailty, thy name is woman!” (1.2.146).

If an alternative, noncolonizing ideology was less accessible than a conservative one, an alternative life experience was ready to hand. To revisit Gertrude, what would female playgoers have made of her? Among their number, were there not some who might have pitied or even disdained Gertrude for her “o’er hasty marriage” (2.2.57) without affirming her construction as lusty and reprehensible? Would not women have intuited that the remarriage of a widow who could afford to stay single might be unwise or impractical, even self-betraying, but an error, not a sin? Would not some women have understood that a dowager queen was apt to be neutralized along with her son, and that for Gertrude a marriage to the new king could protect her and Hamlet from a politically—and therefore economically—precarious future? So, too, in *Titus Andronicus*, Tamora, queen of the defeated Goths, a prize of war and therefore penurious, expediently marries the victorious Roman emperor. And during the House of York’s ascendancy in *Richard III*, Lancastrian Anne, utterly vulnerable, yields to Richard of Gloucester, younger brother of the Yorkist king, although Richard has killed her husband and her father-in-law. Women of all social strata could find themselves in need of a protector. Because social historians have shown that English widows who considered themselves comfortably off were far less prone to wed again than the financially anxious, we can understand Shakespeare’s remarrying widow characters more realistically.

Nevertheless, an ideology of widowhood predating the Renaissance is not entirely defunct, though a number of recent studies conclude that because modern wives expect more from marriage but lack negotiating power “widowhood might turn out to be a relief more than a
burden” (Brockmann and Klein 569). The corollary of regarding the widow as a remembrance of things past, a metonym for mortality, is that her shattered marriage is still idealized as a paradise lost. Implied is the sentimentalization of a social institution, which in life as in Shakespeare suits some better than others. Among those early modern women whom it did not suit was Lady Elizabeth Hatton, known for remarking of her deceased husband, “We shall never see his like again—praises be to God” (qtd. in Mendelson and Crawford 175). For anxious men, a widow’s relief upon the death of her husband was disquieting. No less so was her craving for another man. Many Jacobean plays in which the frailty of women is a given are “Widow of Ephesus” variants. George Chapman’s Countess Eudora in The Widow’s Tears (1605) calls remarriage adulterous and incestuous, yet is quick to wed again. Mistress Thomasine in Thomas Middleton’s Michaelmas Term (also written in 1605) swoons at her husband’s funeral—out of desire for the lover she immediately marries; she is presented as a typical widow. That some men have feared an irreverent response to their demise is evidenced by the plot motif of the husband who feigns death in order to observe his widow’s reaction. In Middleton’s The Witch (c. 1615–16), a Duke believes that his wife has arranged his death by promising her sexual favors to his murderer. To his credit, upon learning that she has preserved her chastity, he rises from his coffin and magnanimously pardons her! Nathaniel Hawthorne’s eerie tale “Wakefield” and Krzysztof Kieslowski’s film thriller Trois Couleurs: Blanc [Three Colors: White] evince the motif’s continuing interest.

In Shakespeare, residual widow stereotypes and male anxiety are most obvious in the tragedies, histories, and those comedies markedly orchestrating a male subject position. Different sources make different demands on the playwright. The surfaces of some plays advance a male perspective more insistently than do others. Witness the final condemnation of Hortensio’s wife, a “wealthy” and “luxy” widow in The Taming of the Shrew (4.2.37, 50), a comedy that interpellates the spectator, inviting agreement with conservative codes and acceptance of only moderately altered pejorative stereotypes. In other plays the widow is scapegoated like Mistress Overdone, Measure for Measure’s brothel keeper—no pardon for her at the end of the play. Or, like King John’s Constance, the widow may see herself as innately a victim and ventriloquize a masculinist ethos: “A widow, husbandless, subject to fears, / A woman, naturally born to fears . . .” (3.1.14–15). If she triumphs within a patriarchal system, it is by subscribing to it, as does the “seeming widow” Abbess Aemilia in The Comedy of Errors. In still other plays, Shakespeare’s widow characterizations are more progressive, modifying
what was essentially a European Catholic ideology based in part on a Pauline valorization of the soul over the body. Shakespeare creates greater complexity, some qualification of traditional stereotypes, and the overdetermination that expands interpretive possibilities. But however forceful or flexible the plays’ subject positions, my study seeks to lift the ideological veil from the widow constructions, to demonstrate the symbiotic relationship between gender issues, politics, and economics, which Shakespeare so artfully complicates.

To that end, Chapter 1 serves as a prologue to Shakespeare’s representation of widows, tracing the ideology of widowhood from its classical and Christian antecedents to its Renaissance manifestation. Juxtaposed against ideology is the actual behavior of widows in early modern England—behavior influenced by demographics and law. In the ensuing chapters, I group Shakespeare’s widows into key categories. Chapter 2 considers characters in comedy and romance uncertain or wrongly certain of their status as wives or widows and therefore liminal, betwixt and between. Cymbeline’s Imogen, erroneously (if briefly) believing herself widowed, belongs to this group of “seeming widows.” Although three of the four occupy a liminal status for many years—Abbess Aemilia in The Comedy of Errors for thirty-three, Thaisa in Pericles for fourteen, and Paulina in The Winter’s Tale for sixteen—none remarry. Instead, Aemilia and Thaisa choose piety—Aemilia rising to a position of command in the Christian hierarchy, Thaisa becoming a priestess of Diana, the goddess of chastity. For serving as exempla of fidelity, their long-lost husbands are returned to them. Paulina, a great noblewoman, continues to serve her royal patrons and is compensated with power over the king himself. Imogen’s pledge of fidelity to the memory of her husband is inscribed in the pseudonym she takes, Fidele, and substantiated by her disguise as a boy. The Roman army provides her with the protection Amelia finds in the abbey, Thaisa in the temple, and Paulina in the court. As celibates, all endorse a patriarchal ideology, but the abbess and Paulina are ideologically disruptive by virtue of their empowerment, and Imogen’s moral superiority to her murderous husband, quick to believe slander, problematizes the supposed inferiority of “the weaker vessel.”

Chapter 3, “Problematic Widowed Mothers,” begins with Cymbeline’s stereotype of the wicked stepmother, here a widowed mother who remarries in order to advance her son. Because Cymbeline pairs the queen, an erstwhile widow, with Imogen, a “seeming widow,” I discuss them together. In contrast to Cymbeline with its evil queen, All’s Well That Ends Well depicts two “Vertuous” widowed mothers, the Countess and the Widow Capilet who, like the wicked queen, behave as the moralists recommend, centering their lives on their children—with notably
destructive results. Although about half of Shakespeare’s widows are mothers, motherhood is not always conspicuously enacted. Abbess Aemilia, reunited with her sons only at the very end of Errors; Juliet’s Nurse, whose daughter Susan died fourteen years before; and Cleopatra, who apparently forgets that she has children, are among the mothers whose chief interests lie elsewhere. In the “problem play” All’s Well, among the most problematic characters are the mothers. Equally problematic are King John’s Lady Falconbridge, Elinor, and Constance and Coriolanus’s Volumnia, the last three characters based on historical sources.

Those sources, however, did not restrict Shakespeare’s representations to “the facts.” The sources themselves were not reliable; the historiographers’ moral didacticism and partisanship were expected and acceptable. In the interests of compelling drama, Shakespeare felt free to change, embroider, or omit all but the most well-known facts. Hence, although King John had to be succeeded by his son Henry, the play forgets that Constance was thrice married. Plutarch represents the mother of Coriolanus as a subdued, ordinary woman, but she is Shakespeare’s fiercest matriarch. The widows in Chapter 3 all exhibit notions of motherhood counter to a patriarchal code that viewed the mother as handmaiden to the child, as modern psychology all too often still does, when it considers the mother at all (Benjamin 23–24). Shakespeare endows these widowed mothers with fully developed, intriguingly warped subjectivities, their independent identities exceeding the impact of their influence on their progeny. In this respect, he proves himself ahead of both Freudian and object relations psychology (Garner 76–80).

Chapter 4 discusses war widows, most of whom appear in the history plays. Thanks to the pacific proclivities of Elizabeth and James, during Shakespeare’s lifetime fewer women would have lost their husbands in battle than was the case in most reigns. But in the canon, war widows comprise almost a quarter of the widow category, figuring mainly in the histories as victims of the War of the Roses. Some are mothers: the first tetralogy’s Lady Elizabeth Grey who becomes Queen Elizabeth in Henry VI, Part Three and Richard III; the latter play’s Duchess of York, mother of Richard III; and old Queen Margaret of Anjou, widow of Henry VI. Other war widows are childless: Lady Anne in Richard III and Lady Percy in Henry IV, Part Two. The war widows’ power is insidious. The “wailing women” of Richard III, defying the patriarchal code that enjoins their silence, curse and dishearten Richard despite their own divisiveness. Lady Percy in her grief dominates her cowardly, calculating father-in-law, who is responsible for her widowhood. In the last of his plays, Shakespeare returns to war widows. Their collectivity suggests a prototypical support group, and like their earlier versions
in the histories, the three supplicant queens of *The Two Noble Kinsmen* subvert militarism by representing its effects.

Unlike Shakespeare’s mostly aristocratic widows, the vast majority of widows in England were self-supporting servants, skilled or semiskilled laborers, entrepreneurs, and homemakers whose economic sufficiency challenged the ideology that subordinated them. Chapter 5 focuses on Shakespeare’s working widows. They represent the demographic realities of the period—in tragedy, Juliet’s Nurse, ensconced within a wealthy family; in the chronicle plays Hostess Quickly, owner of the Boar’s Head Tavern. Widowed in *Henry IV, Part Two*, Quickly parodies the bourgeoisie in her hope for an upscale second marriage. The dark comedies feature Widow Capilet of *All’s Well That Ends Well*, an innkeeper whose ancestry is superior to her current status and whose social pretensions are centered on her daughter, and Mistress Overdone of *Measure for Measure*, whose brothel had prospered better than her nine husbands but who faces ruin by play’s end.

Chapter 6, “Lusty Widows/Remarried Widows,” is devoted to characters who, by remarrying or seeking to remarry, exemplify the most popular of early modern widow stereotypes. While all women were supposedly consumed by lust, none were drawn as more prey to passion than widows. Extremist ideologues afforded no more respect to those who remarried than to the promiscuous. Remarriage confirmed not only the widow’s fickleness but also her insatiability. Alert to changing attitudes toward remarriage and sexuality in widows, Shakespeare’s constructions of the lusty widow, while not approving, are more often subversive than recuperative. Of the four characters I discuss, only Hortensio’s bride in *The Taming of the Shrew* is expressly identified as a “lusty widow” (4.2.50), and she proves to be more outspoken than lickerish. Tamora of *Titus Andronicus* remarries for the power to avenge her son’s death, her lust having long since found an outlet in her lover rather than in her new husband. *Hamlet*’s Gertrude, and her counterpart Gertred of the First Quarto, serve as controversial examples of widows whose lust resides not in their lines but in the eyes of the beholders. I argue that Gertrude weds the new king with an alacrity that appalls her son in order to save her position and to protect Hamlet’s life and claim to the throne. As for Regan, in light of her relationship with Goneril and the possibility of a renewed French invasion, *King Lear*’s widow (who dies unsatisfied), needs a daring man to lead her troops as well as to warm her bed. If deceased husbands are “so soon forgot”—a recurrent motif in the construction of lusty widows—it is because few widows can afford to live in the past. In Shakespeare, the present offers them an abundance of theatrically compelling challenges.
“Opting Out,” Chapter 7, concerns three characters who die for love. The youngest of Shakespeare’s widows, Juliet, and one of the oldest, Richard II’s desolate Duchess of Gloucester who deliberately chooses to pine away, in effect commit a less painful form of sati—suicide on the deceased husband’s pyre once expected of certain upper-caste Indian women. So, too, does Cleopatra, if reluctantly. Widow of her younger Ptolemy brother (and in spirit, perhaps in law, Antony), Cleopatra epitomizes problematic motherhood and the lusty widow topos, the latter with all of its histrionic appeal. Yet despite the gross political distortions of the victor’s accounts available to Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra is haunted by Cleopatra’s strategic, nationalistic motives born of Egypt’s precarious position vis-à-vis Rome. Although suicide as the ultimate gesture challenges Christian doctrine, descriptions of sati that had reached England were quite palatable to Western audiences, spectators being more likely to find such suicides romantic or natural or tragic, but rarely a direct consequence of materialist causes. Shakespeare disrupts ideological notions of sacrificial suicide by revealing the unacceptable alternatives his doomed characters confront.

The Conclusion returns to the totality of Shakespeare’s widows, considering them in relation to the residual literary ideology that prevailed and to the actualities of early modern England. Moving the widows to center stage and reading with an awareness of their materialist context exposes the damage conservative ideology with its role restrictions and demeaning stereotypes can inflict. The plays are ambivalent about traditional widow roles and stereotypes, perhaps because Shakespeare was disinclined to rile female playgoers, surely because ideological correctness defeats compelling characterization.

I hope that my book will be regarded as a contribution to a stream of progressive criticism and productions that do worthwhile cultural work—helping to assure that the greatest of dramatic poets remains attractive to judicious readers and spectators increasingly put off by what many regard as a patriarchal ethos. Nonetheless, even today Shakespearean drama remains a touchstone of high culture, a vehicle that both interrogates and perpetuates ideology, whether as school texts, stage performances, or films, and is not entirely without influence on the way people feel or think they should feel about loss. All too often readers and spectators report the lines a character speaks as the playwright’s belief, and “Shakespeare says” still has the ring of authority. It matters, therefore, that in the world of Shakespeare’s plays society may not stigmatize the remarrying widow, but it prefers the celibate. Unlike the moralists, however, Shakespeare acknowledges that celibacy does not come cheap. Not all widows find it affordable.