

## Shakespeare's Widows of a Certain Age: Celibacy and Economics

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### *Abstract*

*Often more honoured in the breach than the observance, the prevailing discourse of early modern England encouraged widows to live as celibates, to epitomize piety, and to devote themselves to safeguarding their children's interests. Of these injunctions, celibacy was crucial. Among Shakespeare's elderly widows, all but Mistress Quickly remain single, a condition most vehemently prescribed by Catholic writers, who reluctantly exempted only the youngest widows—prejudged as concupiscent by virtue of their nubility and gender. In print, if not practice, Catholics and Protestants alike appeared to regard celibacy as the only suitable state for older widows. My paper briefly considers five widows of a certain age: Mistress Quickly, who violates the injunction when, between Henry IV, Part 2 and Henry V, she weds Ancient Pistol; Paulina of The Winter's Tale who, by the end of Act V, has not formally accepted Camillo as a substitute for Antigonus; and the celibate, child-focused widows of Coriolanus and All's Well That Ends Well, 'widows indeed'. Whether these characters remarry or remain celibate depends, to a significant extent, on their financial situations, those with greater economic needs remarrying if they can.*

Although neglected as a category, widows are prominent in Shakespeare's plays, appearing in every genre. Including 'seeming widows'—wives uncertain of their marital status like Amelia in *Comedy of Errors*, Thaisa in *Pericles*, and Paulina in *The Winter's Tale*, or like Imogen in *Cymbeline*, who mistakenly believes herself widowed—I count thirty-one members of this character group.<sup>1</sup> The hefty number reflects early modern English demographics, the percentage

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<sup>1</sup> Aemilia ( *The Comedy of Errors*), Lady Grey (*Henry VI, Part 3, Richard III*), Queen Margaret, Duchess of York, Lady Anne (*Richard III*), Tamora, Lavinia (*Titus Andronicus*), Hortensio's wife (*The Taming of the Shrew*), Duchess of Gloucester (*Richard II*), Juliet, Nurse (*Romeo and Juliet*), Lady Faulconbridge, Constance, Elinor (*King John*),

of widows hovering around some fifteen percent.<sup>2</sup> Most historical widows, of course, were older women, as are only about a third of Shakespeare's. (Even though played by boys, younger women, presumably, would have more audience appeal.) But like their real-life counterparts, literary widows regardless of age are inherently embedded within a specific and individual set of political, social, and economic circumstances. Was it political power and safety that Gertrude sought between incestuous sheets? Having enjoyed the social status of a queen, did she choose to pre-empt a successor? Did she fear dwindling means? In contrast, ideological 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 value judgments as if widows were a monolithic abstraction.

Elderly widows were a favourite target. Despite basic contradictions between residual Catholic and dominant Protestant discourses of widowhood (celibacy versus remarriage), their expositors generally saw eye-to-eye concerning women past the age of childbearing. Celibacy was the approved behaviour. The purpose of marriage was, above all, procreation. Forestalling fornication and providing mutual comfort were secondary.<sup>3</sup> Body-curers supported soul-curers, the former opining that sexual intercourse between aging spouses was hazardous to their health.<sup>4</sup> Steven Mullaney provides insight into a more extreme view. Explaining Hamlet's response to Gertrude's remarriage, he writes: 'Gertrude's *aging* sexuality [is] conceived at times as a contradiction in terms, at times as a violation of [Gertrude's] own body akin in its unnaturalness to a rebellion in the body politic: hers is a passion that "canst mutine in a matron's bones"'.<sup>5</sup>

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Lady Percy, Hostess Quickly (*Henry IV, Part 2, Henry V*), Gertrude (*Hamlet*), Countess of Rossillion, Widow Capilet (*All's Well That Ends Well*), Mistress Overdone (*Measure for Measure*), Regan (*King Lear*), Cleopatra, Octavia (*Antony and Cleopatra*), Volumnia (*Coriolanus*), Thaisa (*Pericles*), Cymbeline's Queen, Imogen (*Cymbeline*), Paulina (*The Winter's Tale*), and Three Queens (*The Two Noble Kinsmen*).

<sup>2</sup> Amy M. Froide, 'Marital Status as a Category of Difference: Singlewomen and Widows in Early Modern England', in *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250–1800*, ed. by Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1999), pp. 236–69 (pp. 236–37). Following Laslett (see note 31 below) but covering a more inclusive period and area, Rosemary O'Day finds twenty percent of households headed by widows; *The Family and Family Relationships, 1500–1900: England, France and the United States of America* (New York: St. Martin's, 1994), p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Kathleen M. Davis cites Henry Smith, *A Preparative to Marriage* (1591) and Heinrich Bullinger, *The Golden Book of Christian Matrimony* (1543) to this effect; 'Continuity and Change in Literary Advice on Marriage', in *Marriage and Society: Studies in the Social History of Marriage*, ed. by R. B. Outhwaite (London: Europa, 1981), pp. 58–80 (p. 62).

<sup>4</sup> Keith Thomas, 'Age and Authority in Early Modern England', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 62 (1976), 205–48 (p. 243).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Mullaney, 'Mourning and Misogyny: *Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy*, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600–1607', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 45 (1994), 139–62 (p. 151).

Mullaney's reading points to a broader question engaging social historians and literary critics: did a significant part of the English populace share Hamlet's feeling about the unnaturalness of women's 'aging sexuality'? Was there, as received opinion would have it, a stigma against the older remarrying widow in Elizabethan England? Did her neighbours think her a 'lustful widow', comical, pitiable, or immoral, according to their lights?<sup>6</sup> Or was the widow's remarriage, as Jennifer Panek argues, approved of 'socially, economically, and morally'?<sup>7</sup> Whereas Panek excludes Shakespeare from her study, I focus on his contribution to the discussion, taking as my subjects a widow no longer young who weds again, a widow who *may* wed again, and two widows who elect celibacy. What does a study of these characters, in the context of each one's particular social and material circumstances, tell us about Shakespeare's attitude toward a single-minded ideology?

Whom one labels as no longer young is a subjective determination.<sup>8</sup> Generally, Renaissance women were thought to have become old between the ages of fifty and sixty, perhaps earlier if widowed.<sup>9</sup> Social historians distinguish between chronological, functional (decrepitude), and cultural old age, the last primarily dependent on appearance,<sup>10</sup> for like Nestor an older woman can be 'most reverend for [her] stretch'd-out life' (*Tr.*, I. 2. 61), yet healthy and energetic.<sup>11</sup> Maimonides asks, 'Who is an old woman?' and replies, 'One who is called old and does not protest'.<sup>12</sup> Being unable to chat with Shakespeare's widows, I fall back on the adjective 'old' prefaced to the widow's name in the text as a useful marker of age. Diana's mother, the

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<sup>6</sup> Most social historians hold that vestiges of the condemnatory Catholic position lingered on; see, for example, Barbara J. Todd, 'The Virtuous Widow in Protestant England', pp. 66–83 (pp. 70–75), and Elizabeth Foyster, 'Marrying the Experienced Widow in Early Modern England: The Male Perspective', pp. 109–12, both in *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (Harlow, Essex: Longman/Pearson Education, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 11. She argues that remarriage was never stigmatized in England, the lustful widow trope in comedies by Shakespeare's contemporaries and successors being an empowering fantasy for suitors of wealthy widows.

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause in Rural Women of Early Modern Suffolk', in *Women and Ageing in British Society Since 1500*, ed. by Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane (Harlow, Essex: Longman/Pearson Education, 2001), pp. 43–65 (pp. 60–61). Also valuable is Lynn Botelho and Pat Thane, 'Bibliographical Essay: Older Women in Britain Since 1500', in Botelho and Thane, *Women and Ageing*, pp. 232–38.

<sup>9</sup> See Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', p. 43; and Amy M. Froide, 'Old Maids: The Lifecycle of Single Women in Early Modern England', in Botelho and Thane, *Women and Ageing*, pp. 89–110 (p. 91).

<sup>10</sup> Claire S. Schen, 'Strategies of Poor Aged Women and Widows in Sixteenth-Century London', in Botelho and Thane, *Women and Ageing*, pp. 13–30 (pp. 14–15).

<sup>11</sup> All Shakespeare references are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, 2nd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

Widow Capilet in *All's Well That Ends Well* and Queen Margaret in *Richard III* are so described. Widow Capilet appears in the *Dramatis Personae* as 'An old Widow of Florence'; similarly, a stage direction states, 'Enter old Queen Margaret' (*R3*, I. 3. 109). The descriptor 'old' may be part of the dialogue, as when Parolles inquires about *All's Well's* Countess of Rossillion by asking the Clown, 'O, my knave, how does my old lady?' (II. 4. 19),<sup>13</sup> or when the page in 2 *Henry IV* refers to 'old Mistress Quickly' (II. 2. 152). Mercutio mocks Juliet's nurse as 'an old hare hoar' (*Rom.*, II. 4. 134) and 'ancient lady' (II. 4. 143), and Juliet fidgets when the nurse is late: 'But old folks –many feign as they were dead' (II. 5. 16).<sup>14</sup> Paulina, whom Leontes in anger calls a 'crone' and 'hag' (II. 3. 77, 108), refers to herself as 'an old turtle' (*WT*, V. 3. 132), determined to mourn her husband Antigonus, lost to her sixteen years before when their oldest child was fourteen. We may question Paulina's notion of agedness, as we may doubt Mercutio's and Juliet's (to the young most adults are old), but by early modern demographic standards Paulina and the Nurse may indeed be elderly.

There are various less direct signals of age. *Errors's* Abbess Aemilia is not called old, but her husband Aegeon is (I. 1. 96).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, she believes her sons to be thirty-three and, despite some textual confusion about this matter, she should know. In *Richard III* the Duchess of York indicates that she is old when she promises that should Richard triumph in the ensuing battle, she will promptly die 'of grief and extreme age' (IV. 4. 186). Also in *Richard II* the Duchess of Gloucester, having just foretold her own death, reveals her age as she loses her train of thought and then contradicts herself:

Lo this is all – nay, yet depart not so;  
 Though this be all, do not so quickly go;  
 I shall remember more. (I. 2. 63–65)<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Botelho, 'Old Age and Menopause', p. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Occasionally the Folio speech prefixes read 'Old Countess' or 'Old Lady'.

<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, since the nurse's daughter Susan, had she lived, would have been Juliet's age, the nurse may be younger than she appears to Mercutio and Juliet. Having lost most of her teeth—'I have but four' (*Rom.*, I. 3. 13) —the nurse would look older than her years, 'culturally old'.

<sup>15</sup> From what we know about age at marriage among the 'middling sort' in Shakespeare's England, we may assume that the difference in years between them is not great.

<sup>16</sup> She is played in David Giles's 1978 television production for the BBC series, *The Shakespeare Plays*, by the very elderly Mary Morris.

Yet another signifier of age is the widow's relationship to her fellow characters. Elinor in *King John*, convinced that the Bastard Faulconbridge is a Plantagenet, claims him as a grandson: 'I am thy grandame, Richard, call me so' (I.1.168). *Coriolanus*' Volumnia is also a grandmother. Though her grandson appears to be no more than seven or eight years of age, Coriolanus seems older than the Bastard, perhaps thirty, thus making Volumnia an incipient older woman. She appears no younger than Menenius, an elderly man, and behaves with the authority of age. All in all, we may count some eleven widows of a certain age.<sup>17</sup>

At least in theory, the authority of age was extended to men, who possessed the right to rule by virtue of their wisdom and experience, but no such claim was made on behalf of older women.<sup>18</sup> Status—i.e., wealth, rank, and what today we would call social class—would have largely accounted for their position in society.<sup>19</sup> Despite great differences in widows' status, for the most part conservative ideologues, the would-be makers of manners, assumed that widows were able to get along financially. But while polemicists continued to echo traditional views, encouraging widows to live as celibates, to epitomize piety, and to devote themselves to safeguarding their children's interests, and while playwrights successfully exploited the trope of the lusty widow, the English were remarrying with impunity. Remarriages are commonly estimated at about a third of all marriages, albeit most on the part of widowers, who were also apt to remarry sooner than widows.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to historical remarrying widows, Shakespeare's older widows are a particularly chaste lot, all but Mistress Quickly remaining single. In print if not practice, celibacy was crucial for elderly widows. Not only was sexuality, the presumptive driving force behind remarriage, considered unseemly in women past middle age but, at least according to George Minois, the appearance of the old was thought to be repulsive, in part because of the Renaissance privileging of youth and beauty. Also distasteful was female longevity; aristocratic women were beginning to outlive men, a phenomenon particularly evident

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<sup>17</sup> I exclude Mistress Overdone from the category of elderly widows only because the text tells us nothing about her age. Of course, it must have taken some years for her to acquire and shed nine husbands. Also the profession of bawd or madam is associated with a woman older than her staff and, as Jeanne Addison Roberts notes, was frequently employed by Renaissance dramatists to sexualize a crone; 'Types of Crone: The Nurse and the Wise Woman in English Renaissance Drama', *Renaissance Papers* (2000), 71–86 (p. 74).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas, p. 207.

<sup>19</sup> Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England 1550–1720* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 180 and p. 193.

<sup>20</sup> Demographic scholars state that 'it is *a fortiori* beyond reach to discover what proportion of those who were widowed later remarried'; E. A. Wrigley and others, *English Population History from Family Reconstitution 1580–1837* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 171 and p. 173.

from 1575 to 1600.<sup>21</sup> A consequence of these aesthetic and demographic factors was that in early modern English literature a widow of fifty or older with a predilection for the altar was on shaky *moral* ground, whatever her status.

The gap between precept and practice was a wide one. For example, Anne Locke, among the ‘godliest’ of women, being the friend of John Knox, was thrice married. Daughter of a widower who had himself remarried, Anne first wed Henry Locke, a mercer.<sup>22</sup> Two years after Locke’s death in 1571, Anne married Edward Dering, a preacher ten years younger than she, who died within three years at the age of thirty-six. Anne remarried for the last time in her late forties or early fifties, this time to a draper three times mayor of Exeter, and remained a woman of the highest repute. Nonetheless, the literary widow who married a younger man was apt to be represented as a joke. Remarriage is hardly a joke in Shakespeare, though. More than half of the ten Shakespearean widows of all ages who remarry die, two—Anne Neville and Gertrude—killed by their second husbands.<sup>23</sup> The tacit assumption of writers’ praises and canards is that every widow has a choice; she is the site of a *psychomachia* in which fidelity to her deceased husband opposes lechery.

Lechery wins the battle over Mistress Quickly. Should she be seen as a ‘lusty widow’, a stereotype so ancient as to disable a myth of origin? Does any man know where to have her? In *1 Henry IV* ‘an honest man’s wife’ (III. 3. 119), she becomes ‘a poor widow of Eastcheap’ in *2 Henry IV* (II. 1. 70), betrothed, or so she thinks, to Falstaff. A tavern keeper who would have inherited her husband’s privileges from the Vintners’ Company, she is something of a financial prize. To the horror of moralists and the amusement of cynics, widows like Quickly often quickly remarried. Although Sir John falsely engages her affections, she soon has her choice of two ne’er-do-well untitled suitors, Nym and Pistol.<sup>24</sup> The tavern hostess never becomes a lady, a rank that might have lightened her labours, but Ancient Pistol, as Quickly’s husband in *Henry V*, improves his economic standing significantly, though he perceives a decline in status:

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<sup>21</sup> George Minois, *The History of Old Age: From Antiquity to the Renaissance*, trans. by Sarah Hanbury Tenison (Oxford: Polity Press, 1989), p. 249 and pp. 292–93.

<sup>22</sup> Despite his protests, upon Knox’s entreaty she left her husband for two years (1557–59) to live with the Protestant exiles in Geneva, where she translated works by Calvin. Patrick Collinson, biographer of Anne Locke, recommends Robert Louis Stevenson’s 1875 essay, ‘John Knox and His Relations to Women’: Collinson, *Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), p. 279.

<sup>23</sup> Elizabeth Woodville, Hortensio’s wife, Mistress Overdone, and Octavia survive. Anne Neville, Tamora, Hostess Quickly, Gertrude, Cleopatra, and Cymbeline’s Queen die, as does Regan, who wished to remarry.

<sup>24</sup> Usually the fewer children, the sooner the early modern English widow would remarry (Wrigley, pp. 177–78).

Base tike, call'st thou me host?  
Now by Gadslugs I swear I scorn the term;  
Nor shall my Nell keep lodgers. (*H5*, II. 1. 28–30)

Though now, it would appear, legal owner of the Boar's Head, Ancient Pistol immediately abandons the tavern to his wife's care. Eager for martial male camaraderie, he follows the wars. Why then did Pistol marry Nell?

A popular plot motif during the first two decades of the seventeenth century was the 'widow hunt', in which the widow was involved in predatory financial relationships. She might be presented as the object of a hunt motivated by her wealth, or the widow might be the wealthy (and lusty) hunter of a younger spouse. Among satirical widow-hunt plays are Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*; Middleton's *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, *The Duchess of Milan*, and *The Widow*; Jonson's *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*; and Fletcher's *Wit Without Money*. In tragedy the widow-hunt is often a corollary of the widow's first cuckolding, and then killing her husband, as in Webster's *The White Devil* and Middleton's *Women Beware Women*.<sup>25</sup> Shakespeare gives the widow hunt a political spin in *Richard III*, when Richard seduces the vulnerable Anne, not for her money but for her prestigious family status. (Although the histories generally occlude desire for material gain as a motive, we may assume that Shakespeare trusted his audience to understand the nexus of wealth, status, and power.) One could read Nym's and Pistol's rivalry for Nell Quickly as an aspect of a widow hunt, a parody of an inherently parodic courtship, mercenary at bottom.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, however, Shakespeare is wary of the 'lusty widow' trope. If Quickly is lusty, never came lust in such mundane attire. Among Shakespeare's widows, only the foreigners Tamora and Cleopatra—two out of thirty-one—have explicitly sexual lines, *prima facie* textual evidence of lust. Quickly's sexual malapropisms testify to her naivety in language as in life. Yet the textual confusion over whether it was Nell or the prostitute Doll who contracted 'a malady of France'

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<sup>25</sup> See Katherine Harriett James, 'The Widow in Jacobean Drama' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1973), pp. iii–iv and p. vi. She notes, '[t]he early satiric treatment of the character is modified considerably as Jacobean satiric comedy changes to Jacobean romance in the second decade of the century' (p. iii).

<sup>26</sup> Aside from Quickly's and Anne's courtships—neither explicitly mercenary—I find no other widow hunts in Shakespeare.

(*H5*, V. 1. 81),<sup>27</sup> continues what may be a deliberate blurring and can be read as an attack on the entrepreneurial woman.<sup>28</sup> If Nell died, are we to believe that aside from her two husbands there were unsanctioned others who might have infected her? We *have* heard Falstaff swear cryptically, ‘A pox of this gout! or a gout of this pox!’ (*2H4*, I. 2. 243–44). In her most recent study of crones in Renaissance drama, Jeanne Addison Roberts observes that the crone, whom she defines as ‘a mature woman not characterized primarily as virgin, wife, sex object, or potential mother’ is frequently ‘trivialized’ and/or ‘sexualized’.<sup>29</sup> Mistress Quickly, she notes, is trivialized as a stupid woman, ‘easily duped and given to malapropisms’;<sup>30</sup> to this we might add that the nature of her fatal illness sexualizes her as well.

But like real widows left with taverns, Quickly, no less than her suitors, would have had a financial motive for remarriage. Although Peter Laslett describes the owner of a commercial undertaking as head of an extended family,<sup>31</sup> which normally ensures a regressive social stability, such is not the case when a woman replaces the patriarch and the undertaking is both criminal and democratic. Quickly presides over the unruly society of a tavern where princes mingle with paupers, Lenten fasts are broken, and prostitutes are lodged. ‘We cannot lodge and board a dozen or fourteen gentlewomen that live honestly by the prick of their needles but it will be thought we keep a bawdy-house straight’ (*H5*, II. 1. 32–35), complains Hostess Quickly. In establishments such as hers, robberies were planned, and their perpetrators concealed. Alice Clark, drawing on the Hertford County Records for 1626, describes one woman innkeeper, ‘who received stolen goods at the sign of the “Leabord’s Head” in Ware, [and] had there a “priviye place” for hiding stolen goods and suspicious persons. Clark continues, ‘at the press for soldiers she hid five men from the constables, and can convey any man from chamber to chamber into the backside’.<sup>32</sup> Paul Slack’s comment on

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<sup>27</sup> David Bevington, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5th edn (London: Pearson/Longman, 2004) and G. B. Evans have Ancient Pistol lamenting the death of Doll. See Evans’s ‘Note on the Text’, pp. 1015–17 (p. 1016). But Stephen Greenblatt, *The Norton Shakespeare* (New York: Norton, 1997), following the Oxford edition, changes ‘Doll’ to ‘Nell’.

<sup>28</sup> See Jean E. Howard and Phyllis Rackin, *Engendering a Nation: A Feminist Account of Shakespeare’s English Histories* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 176–85, especially p. 180.

<sup>29</sup> Jeanne Addison Roberts, ‘The Crone in English Renaissance Drama’, *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 15 (2003), 116–37 (p. 116).

<sup>30</sup> Roberts, ‘Crone in English Renaissance Drama’, p. 123.

<sup>31</sup> Peter Laslett, *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age*, 2nd edn (New York: Scribner’s, 1973), p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century* (1919; repr. New York: Kelley, 1968), p. 233.

alehouses holds for Quickly's tavern as well; they were 'obvious centres of disorder, where stolen goods could be disposed of, whores picked up, money wasted and youth corrupted'.<sup>33</sup>

Running such an enterprise would pose a challenge. Some widows had to contend with guild restrictions on the widow's right to ply her husband's trade.<sup>34</sup> Even where there were no restrictions, hired help was an additional expense, whereas an improvident husband's labour was free and his self-interest might promise a great incentive to hard work. So for all her fear of swaggerers, Mistress Quickly remarries, perhaps to console herself for a lost mate—or the lost title she had dreamed of—perhaps for companionship, even desire, but surely for a helpmate to keep her demanding business solvent. That she is misguided in her choice of spouse is regrettable, but as her audience would have known, many a widow, caricatured as lusty, above all sought security through remarriage.<sup>35</sup> Shakespeare's plays reflect current findings that English widows at whatever class level who did not need a husband to conduct a business, provide legal protection, or help to raise children, were less likely to wed again.

Another widow of a certain age who *might* remarry—in an unwritten epilogue—is Paulina of *The Winter's Tale*. Finally assured of her widowhood, Paulina is offered a replacement by the king, guilt-ridden for effectively causing Antigonus's death:

LEONTES

I'll not seek far

(For him, I partly know his mind) to find thee

An honorable husband. Come, Camillo,

And take her by the hand. (*WT*, V. 3. 141–44)

Setting aside the question of whether Camillo is truly inclined to wed (that is, does Leontes know anyone's mind?), will Paulina accept the king's offer? If Shakespeare took English matrimonial law

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<sup>33</sup> Paul Slack, *Poverty and Policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Longman, 1988), p. 103. More than a third of the complaints listed in Norfolk petitions to justices of the peace between 1600 and 1669 have to do with alehouse offences; see S. D. Amussen, 'Gender, Family and the Social Order, 1560–1725', in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, ed. by Anthony Fletcher and John Stevenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 196–217 (p. 210).

<sup>34</sup> On widows' relation to the guilds throughout much of Europe, see Olwen Hufton, *The Prospect Before Her: A History of Women in Western Europe, Vol. 1: 1500–1800* (New York: Random/Vintage, 1998), pp. 243–49.

<sup>35</sup> Historians agree on the role material circumstances played in remarriage. See, for example, O'Day, p. 114; Mendelson and Crawford, p. 176 and pp. 182–83; and Margaret Pelling, 'Finding Widowers: Men Without Women in English Towns Before 1700', in Cavallo and Warner, pp. 37–54 (pp. 46–47).

for Sicilian, he might have been aware that an English Paulina determined to remarry would not necessarily have been barred from doing so. In Section 26 of *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights*, on 'Captivity or long absence of one which is married', the author explains:

It falleth out not seldom, the one of them which are married to be taken captive or otherwise so detained that it is uncertain if he live or no. Therefore because it is in some sort dangerous to expect long the uncertain return of an absent yoke-fellow, here the civil law did ordain that after a husband had been gone five years and nothing known whether he lived or no, the wife might marry again and so might the husband that had expected his wife, etc. But the common law commandeth simply to forbear marriage till the death of him or her that is missing be certainly known.<sup>36</sup>

Indentured servants and apprentices would have been constrained by the common law; a woman of means, however, could bring her case in the appropriate court with a reasonable chance of success. Presumably a great lady and close companion of the king would have won such a case. Paulina, however, could not have remarried until Perdita was found, for Paulina's self-imposed dual mission was to shelter the queen and to prevent the king from taking another wife. For Paulina, celibacy was a duty. But once she has restored Hermione to a nominally more reliable Leontes, Paulina is dramatically a loose end that can be tied up by a new husband *ex machina*. And tied up she must be, for ideologically she is an 'unheaded woman',<sup>37</sup> unruly and masterless. Her powers of resuscitation, however benignly used, could be read as validating Leontes's earlier characterization of her as 'a mankind witch' (*WT*, II. 3. 68), whom he appropriately threatens to burn. To once again invoke Roberts, demonization was yet another way to deal with the threat of the powerful crone. Supplying Paulina with a mate would not only salve Leontes's conscience—her old petticoat brings forth a new codpiece—but would disempower and subsume her under

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<sup>36</sup> *The Law's Resolutions of Women's Rights*, ed. by T. E., 1632, in *Daughters, Wives, & Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England, 1500–1640*, ed. by Joan Larsen Klein (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 39. Klein observes that *The Law's Resolutions* was apparently written at the turn of the century, although printed later.

<sup>37</sup> T. E. describes the widow as one whose 'head is cut off, her intellectual part is gone' (in Klein, p. 50). The adjective 'unheaded' is used in the anonymous play *The Puritan: or, the Widow of Watling Street* (1607), once attributed to Shakespeare. The widow has almost wed the jailbird, Idle, unmasked in the nick of time by a nobleman, who concludes, 'such is the blind besotting in the state of an unheaded woman that's a widow' (V. 4); *Disputed Plays of William Shakespeare*, ed. by William Kozlenko (New York: Hawthorn, 1974), pp. 230–61 (p. 256).

Camillo's domestic authority and legal coverture. Perhaps Shakespeare's nod to the scepticism of the more judicious playgoers is Paulina's and Camillo's silence when confronted with the king's surprising offer.<sup>38</sup>

Contrary to the tropes of the lusty widow and the widow hunt, in early modern England wealthy widows were not apt to remarry. Amy Louise Erickson, an economic historian, interrogates the received notion of the 'wealthy widow' as a prize, wealth supposedly being a primary source of a widow's allure: 'Aside from the breathtaking arrogance of both the contemporary and the historical stereotype, it is wholly untenable in the light of demographic and economic facts'. As compared to poor and 'middling sort' widows, the well-to-do were least likely to remarry 'from medieval England to nineteenth-century Virginia'.<sup>39</sup> For a woman of property, remarriage could be a desperate gamble; unless she had legally sequestered some part of her possessions before marriage, all she had became her husband's to spend or bequeath at will; moreover, 'though he bequeath them not, yet are they the husband's executor's and not the wife's which brought them to her husband'.<sup>40</sup> Thus, despite the protection offered by prenuptial contracts, despite the wisdom of the era which taught that 'The rich Widow weeps with one eye and casts glances with the other',<sup>41</sup> over half the widows of London aldermen (a representative group of well-to-do women) remained single.<sup>42</sup>

There is, however, a downside to celibacy, not only for the elderly widow but also for the child who becomes the focus of her life. This is obvious in *Coriolanus*, as Volumnia, addressing her daughter-in-law, cheerfully imagines herself in Virgilia's stead and her son's bed: 'If my son were my husband, I should freelier rejoice in that absence wherein he won honour than in the embracements of his bed where he would show most love' (I. 3. 1–5). Having lived vicariously

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<sup>38</sup> The text allows Leontes' final speech to be played accordingly. Leontes could pause at line 146, as if waiting for a physical or gestural reply from Paulina and Camillo. Embarrassed that it is not forthcoming, he quickly orders, 'Let's from this place', only to encounter more cause for discomfort as Hermione shrinks from Polixenes, 'What? look upon my brother' (V. 3. 146–47).

<sup>39</sup> Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 196.

<sup>40</sup> The Law's Resolutions in Klein, p. 47.

<sup>41</sup> Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), p. 722a, entry W340.

<sup>42</sup> Vivien Brodsky, 'Widows in Late Elizabethan London: Remarriage, Economic Opportunity and Family Orientations,' in *The World We Have Gained: Histories of Population and Social Structure*, ed. Lloyd Bonfield, Richard M. Smith, and Keith Wrightson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), pp. 122–54 (p. 123). Also see Barbara Todd, 'The Remarrying Widow: A Stereotype Reconsidered', in *Women in English Society 1500–1800*, ed. by Mary Prior (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 54–92 (p. 69).

through her son, dominated his life, fostered his prowess and fatal inflexibility, and gained esteem through him, she becomes Rome's saviour by delivering him to death (V. 3. 185–89). The downside is less obvious in *All's Well That Ends Well*, but, reading against the grain perhaps, I argue that the play's two well-intentioned widowed mothers do their children far more harm than good. Aside from the works of psychoanalytically oriented critics, little has been written about the Countess, Shakespeare's addition to his source, other than praise for her graciousness and gravity. The best known comment on the Countess is still Bernard Shaw's; hers is 'the most beautiful old woman's part ever written'.<sup>43</sup> Yet the play's very first line, revealing the peculiar nature of the Countess's fidelity to her dead husband, gives us pause: 'In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband' (I. 1. 1). Blurring the separate identities of husband and son, she implies through the obvious reluctance with which she lets Bertram leave Rossillion that she is losing a husband surrogate.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, knowing herself old and wishing herself young—'To be young again, if we could' (II. 2. 37)—she blurs her identity with Helena's. Having raised Helena and formed her character far more successfully than she has Bertram's, the Countess unconsciously sees herself in the receptive child of her own sex. With Helena's father dead, the Countess's attachment grows more intense; she steps into the role of Helena's mother as if retreating into a Lacanian Imaginary in which distinctions between mother and child are erased. Taking Helena's part against Bertram, she becomes Helena;<sup>45</sup> in this sense, she herself may marry Bertram while fulfilling her chief family obligation: to ensure the continuance of the Rossillion line. A passive abettor of Helena's suit, the Countess nevertheless plays a part in Bertram's unwelcome marriage. Publicly disgraced by his own lies, Bertram is trapped by the fulfilment of the impossible conditions he set for Helena, trapped in his mother's dream. How he feels is indicated by his response to Helena's question: 'Will you be mine now you are doubly won?' He replies not to

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<sup>43</sup> George Bernard Shaw, *Our Theatres in the Nineties* (London: Constable, 1932), I, 30.

<sup>44</sup> W. Speed Hill describes the Countess as 'one so close to him [Bertram] that he has supplied for her the place of her own absent husband'. He further suggests that because Helena is the Countess's adoptive daughter, Bertram 'wants—and fears—that transposed intimacy [with his mother] in equal measure'; 'Marriage as Destiny: An Essay on *All's Well That Ends Well*', *English Literary Renaissance*, 5 (1975), 344–59 (p.351, p. 355). Richard P. Wheeler speaks of Bertram's need to 'win a woman he can isolate from his unconscious dread of incest'; 'Marriage and Manhood in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *Bucknell Review*, 21.1 (1973), 103–24 (p. 116).

<sup>45</sup> See Ruth Nevo, 'Motive and Meaning in *All's Well That Ends Well*', *'Fanned and Winnowed Opinions': Shakespearean Essays Presented to Harold Jenkins*, ed. by John W. Mahon and Thomas A. Pendleton (London: Methuen, 1987), p. 33; she cites Otto Rank and Norman Holland as having earlier identified the countess's unconscious motives. The transference has also been enacted on stage. J. L. Styan writes, 'With "Why, Helen, thou shalt have my leave and love" the Countess gives her such a blessing and embrace as to suggest that she is actually reliving her own story'; *All's Well That Ends Well. Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 48.

Helena but to the King, and he uses the conditional: ‘If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly | I’ll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly’ (V. 3. 308–10, my emphasis). His squirming suggests that, despite the evidence of the rings and her belly, he still hopes that she will not be able to prove her assertions. Is Helena ever likely to seem loveable to a very young man of shallow affections and unresolved tensions over his mother/wife/sister?<sup>46</sup>

Though no countess, Widow Capilet is also gifted with an impressive lineage, being ‘derived from the ancient Capilet’ (V. 3. 158), one of the great families of Italy.<sup>47</sup> But since her ‘estate be fall’n’ (III. 7. 4), she needs a generous dowry for Diana if the girl is to make an advantageous marriage. This mother’s motives are not buried within her unconscious but are blatantly pecuniary. Suspecting that Helena is Bertram’s wife, Widow Capilet initiates the ‘sale’ of Diana: “This young maid might do her [Bertram’s wife] a shrewd turn if she pleas’d’ (III. 5. 67–68). Helena understands, and two scenes later offers three thousand crowns in addition to the gold she has already given the Widow, buying the Widow’s consent to an encounter in which Diana is to ‘buy’ Bertram’s ring by falsely promising to sleep with him; or conversely, Diana must promise to sell herself to Bertram. Within a hierarchical society in which beauty contributes to the vulnerability of the poor, to protect Diana from seduction the Widow must contribute to her daughter’s psychological scarring: ‘My mother told me just how he would woo | As if she sat in’s heart. She says all men | Have the like oaths’ (IV. 2. 69–71). The cautions of an elderly single parent burdened by economic responsibilities and by a minatory double standard of morality, have led Diana to universalize Bertram. Filled with mistrust of men, she decides, ‘Marry that will, I live and die a maid’ (IV. 2. 74). She is no more likely to change her mind than is Bertram, her experience of him in France having revealed an even darker vision of the prerogatives of male desire and disregard than she had seen in Italy. Even when the King offers to pay her dowry, Diana remains silent.<sup>48</sup> The bedtrick that assures the continuance of the Countess’s line becomes all the more problematic by reason of its unexpected toll on the Capilet’s.

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<sup>46</sup> Ann Blake asserts that although *All’s Well* is Shakespeare’s ‘only play concerned with actual discrepancies in rank in a serious affective relationship,’ for all but Bertram, that discrepancy becomes irrelevant. By the end of the play, the discrepancy that destroys the possibility of romance is his lack of desire for her; ‘Breaking Rank in Shakespearean Marriage Plots’, in *Shakespeare Matters: History, Teaching Performance*, ed. by Lloyd Davis (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2003), 103–15 (p. 113).

<sup>47</sup> Bertram’s companions in Florence, the two French lords, refer to Diana as ‘a young gentlewoman’ (IV. 3. 13), and apparently think his seduction of her all the more heinous because of her birth.

Would things have gone better for Bertram and Diana had the child-focused widows remarried? —a question not to be asked. Yet *All's Well* does allow spectators to reflect on whether celibacy is necessarily the ultimate good that ideologues and their literary advocates would have had widows believe. We may also observe that Paulina, Volumnia, and the Countess reflect how financial sufficiency enabled celibacy among wealthy English women, and that Mistress Quickly reflects how financial inadequacy deterred celibacy among entrepreneurs. (Granted old Widow Capilet remains celibate, but the financial considerations that lead her to put her desirable daughter's reputation at risk can be seen as a displacement.) Broad generalizations about Shakespeare reinforcing or undermining the celibate imperative admittedly risk warping individual plays; moreover, Shakespeare's conscious concern was ever with telling a story, not with critiquing a discourse of widowhood. Even so, the plays I have examined intimate that the exaltation of celibacy falls short. Unlike the ideologues who had wholly sexualized a behaviour to a considerable extent contingent on material factors, Shakespeare's elderly widows gently interrogate the paradigm of the faithful 'relic' of her deceased husband, who achieves happiness for herself and others as she freely chooses the single state in a social, political, and economic vacuum.

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<sup>48</sup> In an insightful Lacanian reading, Susan Snyder doubts whether Helena's desire is ever fulfilled or whether Diana marries; "'The King's Not Here': Displacement and Deferral in *All's Well That Ends Well*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 43.1 (1992), 20–32 (pp. 29–30).