The Formidable Widow: a Comparison of Representations and Life Accounts of Widows in Early Seventeenth-Century England

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The portrayal of widows in seventeenth-century English ballads and comedies exaggerated and played with the cultural notions of the day surrounding the social and economic status of widows. A dichotomy existed between the portrayal of widows in popular English arts and the actual lives of many widows. This research paper explores the popular cultural portrayals of widows in ballads and plays, in contrast to specific case studies of widows themselves in order to understand a variety of these women and their experiences in England in the seventeenth century.

England in the seventeenth century was a nation in which women did not have many property or individual rights outside of marriage. In the eyes of the law, women were the subjects of the closest male figure in their lives, and thus all legal decisions regarding women were often made by men.¹ One of the only ways in which a woman could have control over property, have an income of her own, and make established investments was if she was widowed. A widowed woman was able to exercise many of the same rights as a male citizen if they had the property or monetary means to do so.² Upon the death of her husband, a widow most often became the executor of her husband's estate and received a dower, which during the seventeenth century legally consisted of one-third of the deceased husband's land or a lifetime provision from the income of his estates.³ A widow who had her own money and possessions at the beginning of the

¹ Amy Louise Erickson, "Common Law Versus Common Practice: The Use of Marriage Settlements in Early Modern England," *Economic History Review* 43, no. 1 (1990): 24.

² Ibid, 26.

³ Ibid, 24.

marriage often got to keep possession of what she owned as well as bonds in order to provide for any dependent children the marriage produced.⁴ Many of these provisions for widows were established in marriage settlements much like modern prenuptial agreements.⁵ Marriage settlements in the seventeenth century were not reserved for the rich; ordinary people used them, and, as such, widows of all classes inherited their husband's property and belongings. Thus, upon widowhood a woman could find herself in one of the highest positions of personal and legal authority a woman in this period could achieve.⁶

Once a woman's husband died she could choose to remain single as the highest authority of her household if she had the provisions to do so, or she could choose to remarry, which would legally forfeit her status to a husband. If a widow remarried, the property and wealth in her possession from her previous marriage would become the property of her new husband. However, legal stipulations could be put in place to prevent a new husband from owning goods that would belong to the children of the previous marriage as their inheritance.⁷ These legal barriers on inheritance rights were rarely put in place due to the difficulties of a woman obtaining legal aid and the social stipulations on a woman questioning the rights of her future husband.⁸ The expectation of widows to forfeit ownership of their deceased husband's money and property to a new husband upon marriage was the origin of the portrayal of rich widows as naïve and desirable for

⁴ Ibid, 25.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, 24.

⁷ Ibid, 27.

⁸ Ibid.

marriage in popular plays and ballads.⁹ For many young men, marriage to a rich widow would give them immediate social value and wealth. There was much to be gained for a young man if he married a widow with substantial financial savings from a previous marriage.

Strike While the Iron is Hot (1625) is a ballad that encouraged young men to make their fortune by marrying widows quickly. One of the first verses states, “for one many ther's women twenty, this time lasts but for a space, she will be wrought, though it be for nought, but wealth which her first husband got, let younge men poore, make haste therefore, tis good to strike while the iron tis hot.”¹⁰ This ballad is a prime example of the sentiment that was present in many seventeenth-century plays and ballads about widows, which were primarily written by men; it encouraged young men to target rich widows in order to gain personal fortunes.

The next passage of *Strike While the Iron is Hot* (1625) states, “that old Widowes love young men, Oh then doe not spare for asking, though she's old, shele toot agen: she scornes to take for Ritches sake. Thy Money she regardeth not, with love her winne, together joyne.”¹¹ This passage informs young men that they are desirable to widows and argues that widows will not care about the money the young men have, but rather will care about the love that the young men can give them. The message conveyed in the passage above is that widows were naïve and had a disregard for the potential fortunes they held and were merely concerned with the goal of gaining another man in their lives to love. *Strike While the Iron is Hot* serves as an example of a ballad which created a

⁹ Christine Peters, "Single Women in Early Modern England: Attitudes and Expectations," *Continuity and Change* 12, no. 3 (1997): 341.

¹⁰ Martin Parker, "Strike While the Iron is Hot," 1625, UCSB English Broadside Ballad Archive.

¹¹ Ibid.

perception of widows that discounted their individuality and disregarded the ability of widows to have any form of agency over their own lives. Contrary to the message portrayed in the ballads, women at this time would have had some degree of choice in who they married and, if financially capable, would have likely refrained from remarriage as indicated by the declining rate of remarriage in the seventeenth century.¹²

Strike While the Iron is Hot then goes on to state, “if a poore Young-man be matched with a Widdow stord with gold, And thereby be much inritchd, though hes young and she is old, twill be no shame unto his Name.”¹³ This passage reflects social attitudes at the time regarding negative ideas about a woman being older than her husband, because youth was associated with womanly values and desire.¹⁴ This ballad suggested that if young men sacrificed having a young wife and instead married a rich old widow there would be no shame in it because of the riches they could gain. *Strike While the Iron is Hot* acts as a social commentary portraying themes and attitudes reflected in English society in the seventeenth century, in which it shamed women who were old and men who married old women unless they were rich. *Strike While the Iron is Hot* displayed ideas about wealth and age, particularly that being young and rich was viewed as the best a person could be and old and poor was the worst, especially as a woman.

Strike While the Iron is Hot ended in a direct statement to the listener, calling to the young men who lived in London to go and marry the supposed abundance of rich widows while the opportunity was available to gain a fortune through marriage. “Young-men all who hear this Ditty, in your memories keep it well, Chiefely you in London City,

¹² Patricia Crawford and Laura Gowing, eds., *Women's Worlds in Seventeenth-Century England* (London: Psychology Press, 2000), 169.

¹³ Parker, “Strike While the Iron is Hot.”

¹⁴ Crawford and Gowing, 170.

where so many Widowes dwe[ll] the Season now doth well alow Your practise, therefore loose it not, fall toot apace, while you have space, And strike the Iron while tis hot.”¹⁵ Widows were the main subject matter of this ballad but were not given any direct role or called anything but rich and old, which conveyed to the listener that the value of the widow was only in her wealth. Her wealth was worth the sacrifice of a young man of not having a young wife. Though not uncommon, this portrayal of widows as naïve, easy to deceive, and desirable only for their potential fortunes serves as an example of social expectations of widows to be compliant individuals who were assumed to be ready to give up their fortunes to the next suitor who presented himself.

Another popular form of media in the seventeenth century was plays. Plays circulated ideas about culture, politics, custom, and desire that were then exaggerated and placed in the eyes of the urban public.¹⁶ Plays offer a unique historical insight into contemporaries’ ideas about the composition of their society and the different phenomena that occurred in the lives of people at that time. In the comedy *The Widow's Tears* (1606), the widow Eudora gained a fortune after the death of her husband. She was deceived and wooed by the young and poor Tharsalio in order to gain her riches. Tharsalio described her first in the following passage: “know you (as who knows not) the exquisite lady of the palace, the late governor's admired widow, the rich and haughty countess Eudora? Were not she a jewel worth the wearing, if a man knew how to win her?”¹⁷ This description of Eudora set the tone for how she was portrayed in the rest of the play, as a desirable object for courtship due to her wealth and social status as a widow.

¹⁵ Parker, “Strike While the Iron is Hot.”

¹⁶ Jennifer Panek, *Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 54.

¹⁷ Ibid, 58.

Throughout the play, the character Eudora lacked personality and detail besides her wealth and stature. Indeed, her role appeared to be only of an object of desire and gain for the leading character Tharsalio, as her role ended once Tharsalio obtains her as a bride. Throughout the play Eudora is portrayed as naïve and easy to entice into marriage. Eudora's character appeared not to care about the fortune she was left and her ability to manage it but rather was portrayed as seeking the affection of a young man and the contentment of marriage, happy to give away her wealth. In one scene, she calls out after her husband saying: “‘Husband,’ my countess cried, ‘take more, more yet.’”¹⁸ The use of Eudora's character in this play, as a widow who is complicit in a young man's desire for her riches in exchange for “marital pleasure,” is representative of other sources in seventeenth-century popular media that displayed accepted notions about how widows were easy targets for money-hungry young men.

In an examination of seventeenth-century ballads and plays about widows, themes of male anxieties over widows possessing some degree of power over their potential mates emerged. Male anxieties over powerful widows was a key theme in the ballad *A Batchelers Resolution* (1629).¹⁹ In this ballad, the character of the bachelor contemplated the best choice of woman to be his wife. He categorized the women based on their age and previous marital status, i.e. maid or widow. When contemplating a marriage with a widow, the character stated that “Widows will not be controlled” which displayed male anxieties about widows potentially holding power and expressing independence over their male counterparts.²⁰ *A Batchelers Resolution* additionally highlighted some of the distinct categorizations of widows at the time, specifically based on their age. The

¹⁸ Ibid, 58.

¹⁹ “A Batchelers Resolution,” 1629? UCSB English Broadside Ballad Archive.

²⁰ Ibid.

bachelor states, “If I should wed a widow old, I had better take a younger.”²¹ In context, the bachelor was discussing the probability of a widow exercising independence and power over him as a partner, to which he concluded if he were to marry a widow, she would need to be young because she would be more submissive due to her age.²² This ballad served as an example of the male anxieties surrounding the courtship of widows and the social categorizations and values that were placed on widows due to their age. For example, a young and rich widow was thought to be a naïve target for a beneficial marriage, or an old widow was thought to be too independent to control and thus undesirable for marriage.

Complementary to the analysis of *A Batchelers Resolution, Widows and Suitors in Early Modern English Comedy* by Jennifer Panek examines the different ways widows were perceived in media throughout early modern England. By investigating the roles widows played in comedies, Panek was able to uncover cultural ideas and anxieties about the social mobility of widows through marriage, economics, and sex.²³ Panek argues that seventeenth-century comedies portrayed male anxieties of a widow exercising independent authority separate from any male partner or authority figure.²⁴ Panek states that, “Age and wealth along with sexual, legal and economic experience all factored into men's anxious fantasies about the remarried widow as wife, making her simultaneously desirable and deeply threatening, a figure who, as I will argue, had the potential to both establish her husband's manhood and undermine it.”²⁵ Elizabeth Hanson makes a similar argument in her analysis of seventeenth-century English dramas. In her article, “There’s

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Panek, 54.

²⁴ Ibid, 47.

²⁵ Ibid, 48.

Meat and Money Too: Rich Widows and Allegories of Wealth in Jacobean City Comedy,” Hanson argues that, “an anxiety that emerges in marriage manuals and other descriptions of married life present[s] marriage to a widow as demanding an especially forceful assertion of masculine authority.”²⁶ The presence of these anxieties amongst males in the artistic culture of seventeenth-century English life brought light to ideas of widows opposing the categorical representations and laws surrounding their existence. Widows did not always fit nicely into specific representations based on wealth and age, but instead were individuals who learned to navigate their new status as widows depending on their personality, age, wealth, and social status. In an effort to bring attention to widows whose existence pushed back against the contemporary depictions of widows, two case studies stand out: the life of Katharine Austen and the life of Bess Hardwick.

Barbara J. Todd examines the life of seventeenth-century widow Katharine Austen in her article, “Property and a Woman's Place in Restoration London.”²⁷ Austen’s life served as a case study that contrasted with assumptions about how widows in the seventeenth century acted in comparison to their portrayal in ballads and plays. She rejected the character of the desirable, naïve, and rich widow without a care for her money and only the desire for another marriage. Upon becoming a widow, Austen rejected the popular cultural categorizations that were suggested of rich widows as seen through ballads and plays. Instead, she took advantage of her newfound legal agency

²⁶ Elizabeth Hanson, “‘There's Meat and Money Too’: Rich Widows and Allegories of Wealth in Jacobean City Comedy,” *ELH* 72, no. 1 (2005).

²⁷ Barbara J. Todd, “Property and a Woman's Place in Restoration London,” *Women's History Review* 19, no. 2 (2010): 183.

through which she thrived and eventually pushed beyond the limits that were set before her.

Austen never married again after her husband's death. Instead, she took on the role as head of her family and began to engage highly in economic sectors in order to provide for her children.²⁸ She initially took over the family properties, but soon began to be more aggressively involved in property and economic investment.²⁹ It was in this period that stocks were growing in popularity, and Austen became a stockholder in large companies including the East India Company, which amassed her and her children a large amount of wealth while she was still relatively young.³⁰ Austen went on to engage in highly controversial matters concerning land ownership and investment including one instance in which she defended a bill involving her son's claim to land in the House of Commons in Parliament, an act drastically outside of the role of a woman at this time.³¹ Todd noted that, "When Austen began buying and developing London real estate, she was doing something distinctly uncommon."³² Though Austen was not the norm at the time, her life serves as an example in contrast to the mediated portrayals of widows of her financial status and age. Austen displayed immense economic competence and independence upon taking the role of widow.³³ She worked within the legal rights she had been given and set out to be the head of her household as the sole economic provisioner and mother.³⁴

²⁸ Ibid, 185.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 195.

³² Ibid, 185.

³³ Ibid, 192.

³⁴ Ibid, 198.

Austen stood out as a highly successful woman of this era. The success of her economic involvement could indicate that, although it was not the norm at the time, other women were able to engage in economic sectors after widowhood and likely did so. Though little historical evidence from this period exists from women themselves, and especially not financial records, widows were indeed capable of exercising their legal rights. Thus, some widows' lives could have been lived in contrast to the image of the wealthy naïve widow and instead displayed that they were formidable women that stood to give reason to the male anxieties of a female asserting independent economic control as was examined in ballads and plays circulating in popular media at the time.

In Allison Levy's book, *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, there is a case study on the life of Bess Hardwick, who was a widow four times. Over the course of her life Hardwick experienced widowhood very differently and adapted to her situation as a widow very differently each time as well.³⁵ Hardwick was first married at the age of fourteen and left a widow by the age of sixteen when her husband died very young at the age of fifteen.³⁶ Hardwick married again three years later to William Cavendish, who was of a much higher age and social rank than her, as he had formerly been on the royal Privy Council.³⁷ Hardwick's first remarriage served to largely enhance her social and financial standings and, as Sarah French notes, appears to have been a loving relationship.³⁸ It is through the marriage to Cavendish that Hardwick had her six

³⁵ Sarah French, "A Widow Building in Elizabethan England: Bess of Hardwick at Hardwick Hall," *Widowhood and Visual Culture in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Allison M. Levy (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), 164.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

children.³⁹ French comments in her study that it is during her marriage to Cavendish that Hardwick likely began to be involved with owning and managing lands.⁴⁰ After Cavendish's death, Hardwick was left with a large debt.⁴¹ Even though her social standing had risen, she was left with six children to raise and no money to raise them with.⁴² After her second widowhood, she remarried again to a rich man to increase her wealth and pay off her debts, Sir William St Loe, the Grand Butler to Elizabeth I.⁴³ It was in the course of this marriage that Hardwick began to build and manage her own estates, separate from her husband's, though he financed them.⁴⁴ Six years after their marriage, Sir William died and Hardwick remarried yet again, though this time not to increase her monetary value, as she then held several independent resources that could provide for her and her children. French notes that in her final marriage Hardwick likely married in order to increase her and her children's social standing.⁴⁵ Hardwick's final marriage was to George Talbot, who held earldoms in Britain and the custody of Mary Queen of Scots.⁴⁶ By entering into this marriage, Hardwick secured politically advantageous marriages for several of her children, eventually placing her granddaughter Arbella Stuart within the legal line of succession to the English and Scottish thrones.⁴⁷

Hardwick was a widow who stepped out of the stereotyped role portrayed in ballads and plays; though she was rich and did remarry, she seemingly did so on her own terms and through decisive and independent choices. Each of her marriages proved to be

³⁹ Ibid, 165.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 164.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, 165.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 164.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 165.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 166.

advantageous for her, raising her from relatively poor beginnings to the household of royalty by the end of her life. Over the course of Hardwick's life, she took advantage of the economic capabilities that came with being a widow. Hardwick began to purchase, manage, and build properties during her second marriage, then went on to invest and made advantageous arrangements for herself and her kin following her last marriage.⁴⁸ French's study of Hardwick's life is telling of the large amount of detail and individual attention that Hardwick put into the houses she built and managed. Hardwick herself took responsibility for these projects, giving even the most minute details and carefully selecting the interior designs in order to reflect, as French argues, moralistic and intellectual values.⁴⁹

Though she began as poor, Hardwick became the ideal of a rich widow that was portrayed in early modern England's plays and ballads; but a further study of Hardwick's life reveals that she was not as she would be portrayed in a play. Hardwick took control of her own decisions and worked within the confines of her social standing in order to meet the needs of herself and her children as well as increase the standing of her family. Though Hardwick would not have been an ordinary woman during this period, her life was as an example of a woman who worked within the confining legal system of early modern English society and stepped out of the expectations governing them. She was an anomaly but served to prove that widows were portrayed in forms of popular media in an untrue fashion through a biased lens that was clouded with male anxieties and the need to exert authority over women who held the potential for power within a difficult legal system and society they were in. England at this time was not in a gender war of women

⁴⁸ Ibid, 168.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

against men but, as it stood, there was a large divide between the economic abilities of men and those of women. Through the tragedy of death, some women were able to break out of their expected roles and surprise the world around them with their success.

The portrayal of widows in seventeenth-century popular culture invoked ideas about widows that would have undermined their abilities and not been representative of their real situations. The dichotomy between widows and their representations in the media portrayed them as naïve, easy targets for their money, discounting their individual experiences. A narrative of male anxieties emerged in artistic plays about widows in which males feared that widows would step out of their traditional roles as submissive women in their newfound legal status. Some of these anxieties proved true as is seen in the case studies of Hardwick and Austen. Some widows in seventeenth-century England maneuvered through their legal situations, remarrying or not, in order to make conscious decisions for themselves and their families, not always being subject to the men in their lives.

When it comes to widows in seventeenth-century England, there is still much to be studied and discovered about their lives and experiences. This essay reviewed a wide variety of literature concerning widows, but there was a lack of information available on topics other than sexuality, children, and land rights. Questions such as how widows perceived themselves could be further studied. As well, examinations of the lives of widows of lower classes would add valuable information to the academic community. Resources such as diaries and personal letters should be reviewed in order to bring a voice to widows from the seventeenth century, rather than having to rely on sources that others wrote about them. A greater understanding of the ways in which seventeenth-

century English life was experienced could be achieved by examining much of the yet to be discovered information about the personal experiences of many of these women from all areas of life such as culture, class, personal identity, occupation, and interests.

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