"UNTOMY WIFE IWOULD NOT BE THE BRIDE": RICH WIDOWS AND ANXIOUS SUITORS IN THOMAS MIDDLETON'S COMEDIES

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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DISSEIERATION ABSTRACT

"Unto my wife I would not be the bride’: Rich Widows and Anxious Suitors in Thomas Middleton’s Comedies”
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This thesis contextualizes the remarrying widow and her suitors in Thomas Middleton’s comedies within the social, economic, and sexual concerns surrounding a wealthy widow’s remarriage in early seventeenth-century London. While scholars have viewed the early modern construct of the “lusty widow” as a dissuasive tactic of a culture which frowned upon female remarriage, the construct frequently works instead to enable remarriage, re-circulating widows’ property back into the male-controlled economy. To an impecunious young man, marrying a prosperous widow was both attractive and threatening, as the wealthier, experienced woman was feared to dominate her husband. To assuage his anxieties over entering this potentially emasculating marriage, the suitor compensated for his threatened masculinity by fantasizing the widow’s need of his sexual virility, a fantasy on which the theatre capitalized with comedies eliciting and then managing such anxieties as they celebrated a man’s conquest of a widow through her lust. Middleton, who staged seven comic remarrying widows over his career, gradually undermined and mocked this fantasy, exposing the male anxieties beneath it.

After an introduction questioning scholarly opinions concerning the early modern English condemnation of female remarriage, Chapter One uses a range of period texts to argue that the idea of a widow’s lust helped assuage men’s fears that she would prove an ungovernable wife. Chapter Two examines fifteen comedies between 1600 and 1625, showing how fears and desires about widows and remarriage merged with theatrical
conventions in the work of Middleton's contemporaries. Chapter Three then analyzes three of Middleton's earliest comedies which conform fairly closely to conventional views of remarrying widows: *The Phoenix* (1604), *The Puritan* (1606), and *Michaelmas Term* (1606). Chapter Four shows how *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605) and *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* (1613) begin to expose the male self-interest and anxiety which construct the stereotypes of the widow. The comedies in Chapter Five—*More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1615) and *The Widow* (1616)—continue this kind of undermining, with *The Widow* providing Middleton's most explicit exposure of how the theatrical fantasy of the "lusty widow" debases women to assuage the anxieties of men.
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“Unto my wife I would not be the bride”: Rich Widows and
Anxious Suitors in Thomas Middleton’s Comedies

Introduction

Any study of the widow and her suitors in early modern English drama must take into account the existence of a widespread scholarly opinion that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English culture disapproved of and sought to discourage remarriage for women, a disapproval in unsurprising accord with the overall patriarchal suppression of women’s sexuality and freedom of choice. Consensus on this condemnatory attitude to a widow’s remarriage is not universal, but social historians and literary critics alike furnish it with more support than dispute. Among social historians, Alan Macfarlane (Marriage 234-36) and Miriam Slater (106-07) describe early modern English society as tolerating and even encouraging remarriage for both sexes; others, however, paint a thoroughly different picture. For instance, in her investigation of declining remarriage rates in Abingdon in the later seventeenth century, Barbara Todd cites Vives’ The Instruction of a Christian Woman (trans. 1529), Erasmus’ De Vidua Christiana (1529), St. Paul, and a 1620 English manuscript treatise titled The Widdowe Indeed to argue that throughout the seventeenth-century the English widow faced both doctrinal opposition to remarriage and “a barrage of propaganda discouraging her from remarrying” (“Demographic” 430). Antonia Fraser reports that second marriages were often seen as a form of bigamy or cuckoldry (82), while Janet Thompson and Miranda Chaytor find societal disapproval of widows’ remarriage to have been strong enough to erupt in the ritualized hostility of charivari (Thompson 37; Chaytor 43). Among literary critics who undertake historically informed analyses of widows in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, the idea that early modern English widows were discouraged from taking second
husbands has been opposed by Frank Wadsworth and Lila Geller, who point out that remarriage for widows was sanctioned by Protestant doctrine and was therefore far from universally condemned; however, the pervasiveness of the belief that Elizabethan and Jacobean society frowned on female remarriage is indicated by the fact that Geller’s 1991 article must argue against its influence on criticism of Thomas Middleton’s More Dissemblers Besides Women (1615) thirty-five years after Wadsworth undertook the same task for John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi (1614). Moreover, in a recent study of Hamlet’s Gertrude, Dorothea Kehler observes that although English reformed clerics distanced themselves from the Catholic valorization of celibacy by officially approving of remarriage, popular resistance to female remarriage remained largely unchanged. As an example of “persistent conventional sentiments,” she quotes the Duke of Milan from More Dissemblers:

> For once to marry
> Is honourable in woman, and her ignorance
> Stands for a virtue, coming new and fresh;
> But second marriage shows desire in flesh
> Thence lust, and heat, and common custom grows. . . (2.1.76-80)

“Most Protestant thinkers and polemicists,” she adds, “. . . knew in principle that they should feel differently. Even while urging remarriage, however, they could not escape its age-old coding as a betrayal of the deceased” (403). Similarly, Margaret Lael Mikesell notes that both literary portrayals of widows and “didactic tracts which address practice as well as theory” (namely Alexander Niccholes’ A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving

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1 See also Pearson 126, who remarks that Elizabethan society condoned early remarriage to protect widows from fortune hunters.
2 All dates of plays are from Annals of English Drama 975-1700 and are approximate.
[1615]) show that the traditional Catholic antipathy to a woman’s remarriage remained highly influential in the culture despite Protestant teachings (270). Theodora A. Jankowski describes a different kind of ambivalence: remarriage was urged for widows who inherited too little to support themselves and risked becoming financial burdens, for they would then “again become governed by a man and thus acceptable to the patriarchal social structure.” Men, however, found female remarriage a threatening reminder of their own mortality and replaceability (35).

There is an even stronger consensus on the function of the stereotype, so aptly summarized by Middleton’s Duke, of the “lusty widow.” Shelter from the infamy of this epithet, which loomed large in both religious and secular ideas about widows, might be sought in a prudent remarriage arranged by the widow’s family (Pearson 140-41) or, preferably, in a celibate life of dutiful modesty and propriety (Todd, “Demographic” 430), but the power of the stereotype was that it coerced widows, at the risk of their reputation, to eschew any kind of behaviour—from independent business enterprise to remarriage for “love” to an attractive young man—that could be construed as evidence of unchastity or lustfulness. Faced with the threat of a woman who was legally, economically and sexually independent, men constructed and deployed the notion of the sexually rapacious widow as a kind of ideological substitute for the official male control from which she had slipped free. Linda Woodbridge, while enumerating among the stereotype’s contributing factors “male wishful thinking” about widows as “an easy sexual mark,” and “nagging worry on the part of husbands about what was to become of their wealth and their name if they predeceased their wives,” concludes that “the conjunction of charges of lust with widowhood’s inherent freedom of action combines with other literary evidence to suggest that the charge of lechery was a smear tactic
against assertiveness and liberty” (178). Charles Carlton writes of how men feared that widows’ sexuality would “disrupt the social order” (127), and Geller explains that “the literary convention of the insatiate widow may well be a reflection of societal fear. Society in general or her [the widow’s] family in particular may promote the vow [of perpetual widowhood] to prevent the control of her property passing to her new husband, or to control her sexuality so that she produces no more children to become competing heirs” (288). A similar explanation for why widows were slandered with a reputation for “hypersexuality” is offered by Jankowski, who observes that “branding widows as social pariahs . . . served to contain that one group of women who could exist with a legal identity and without direct control of a man” (36). In general, scholars agree that remarriage was equated with lust, and that accusations of lust were an effective tactic to scare widows away from remarriage, as Vives makes clear in his rebuke to widows wishing for a second husband: “confesse thine own vitiousness. For none of you taketh a husband but to the intente that she will lie with him, nor except her Iust pricke her” (D6v). Remarriage, according to “Elizabethan moralists,” was “at best, a kind of legal adultery, at worst, an overt form of lust” (Brustein 41), and “the widow’s ‘honour’ lay in remaining single” (Todd, “Demographic” 430). Since, as many of the period’s comedies make clear, the wealthy widow was also a highly desirable commodity in the marriage market, she found herself caught in an unhappy paradox: while mercenary suitors exerted an intense pressure on her to remarry, only by abjuring remarriage could she be counted chaste and virtuous (Juneja, “Widow” 5, 11-12).

3 The idea of the “lusty widow” stereotype as a curb to widows’ freedom appears first in Pearson 140, and again in MacDonald 17-18, whom Woodbridge cites. Unlike Woodbridge, Pearson suggests that fear of this slander hurried widows into the protection of second marriages.
Remarriage for widows, then, according to the prevailing scholarly opinion, was generally disapproved of, except in the theological polemics of some Protestant divines; widowed chastity was upheld as the ideal, and widows were slandered as lustful in an effort to shame them out of fully realizing their legal independence and, above all, to prevent them from using their sexual independence to take a new husband of their choice. Accepting these views, which present a plausible account of how a patriarchal society worked to contain women as they emerged out of wifely subordination and coverture, I began my work on the remarrying widow in Middleton’s plays intending to corroborate them with a greater variety of contemporary primary sources than the ones which regularly turned up as evidence for attitudes towards widows in early seventeenth-century England: Vives and Erasmus; Niccholes’ counsel against marrying widows in A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving; the Overburian characters of the chaste “Vertuous Widdow” and the remarrying “Ordinarie” one; and plays such as More Dissemblers, The Duchess of Malfi, and Hamlet. I compiled a considerable list of late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century texts from the Short-Title Catalogue that appeared to have something to say about widows, and then, at random, I selected and read a long narrative poem by one John God, titled “A Discourse of the Great Crueltie of a Widdow Towardes a Yong Gentleman, and By What Meanes He Requited the Same” (1569).4

The first few lines of the poem, which is set in Italy, introduce us to Zilia, the widow of the title, a woman of unspecified age who is renowned for her beauty and wit. But Zilia, we are darkly informed, did not conduct herself as she should:

But yet one stayned spot

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4 The source of God’s poem is the twenty-seventh novel of William Painter’s Palace of Pleasure, “The Lord of Uirle.” The poem is thus an adaptation of a translation, but it is nonetheless significant that God selects this tale over the numerous others in Painter’s collection for what appears to have been his one and only poetical endeavour. God follows his source very closely in both content and tone.
hir body did defile
Whose haggard wonts, & churlishe deedes
At length did hir begile.
Who went astray from natures course
and thereby lost hir name:
Hir cruell gests and foolish deedes
did bring hir to disdaine: (A5r-A5v)

After this gloomy prognosis (a hasty, lust-driven second marriage? shocking sexual escapades?), her story begins at the death of her husband. Zilia, rather to our surprise, turns out to be a model widow. After mourning her lost mate "with sorowe greefe and paine," she settles down to housekeeping:

She bent her selfe hir house to decke
with toyling paine and greefe,
As spinning carding and such like
to finde hir selfe releefe.

.........................

Hir maides she doth employ with worke
though she possessse great lande.
Shee thought that nothing wel was done,
that came not through hir hande. (A5v)

"Because she would not get reproche/nor yet hir selfe abuse," Zilia scrupulously avoids feasts, "sports," and outings with "daintie dames," seldom goes abroad except to church, and keeps her tongue "tyde from talke" (A6r-A6v). When a young gentleman named
Philibert is smitten in church by her beauty and plucks up the courage to approach her, she conducts herself with the utmost propriety:

For if of love he spake to hir

she streight wold turne hir tale,

And talke to him of housshold things

which made his heart to quaille. (A8r)

Philibert’s go-between, who delivers his proposal of marriage, gets an even chillier reception: Zilia, hard at her spinning, chides the woman for “gad[ding] the streets about / so fondly all alone” and firmly dismisses the suit:

I thought that you would not have sought

my chastity to break,

Nor go about a thing so fond

whereby great shame might rise:

I truly thought that you had bene,

more sober, sage and wise.

Why should you thus now go about

to get my whole consent:

That ever since my husband dyed,

did seeke love to prevent? (B4v-B5r)

Is this paragon of chaste widowhood Zilia before she “went astray from nature’s course”? One would certainly expect so. But the poem, oddly enough, does not exactly hold this behaviour up as an ideal. Zilia’s housewifery does merit a brief encomium, in which housewifery in general is praised over the fastidious idleness of “our dames” (A5v); but although her industry is lauded, her increased thrift, which might be seen as a
reasonable measure to protect her household after its master’s death, is denigrated as avarice:

Whereas before she largely gave,
now she doth covet all.
Hir bountie great, hir courteous giftes
are turned now to thrall. (A5v)

Even more surprisingly, it becomes evident that her strict chastity and care of her reputation have won her a name not for virtue but for a number of less pleasant characteristics. When Philibert first inquires her name of “standers by” at church, he gets an earful:

Hir stubborne state and churlish deedes
to tel they did not spare,
Hir greedy minde and coyly lookes
to him they do declare. (A7v)

Similarly, his go-between despairs of her errand, knowing that Zilia’s “stubborne nature was so fierce / that she durst not present / His cause before hir state” (B1r-B1v). And the narrator concurs, describing her dismissal of the love letter as “rancour” (B5r), and her chaste refusal of Philibert as “spiteful,” and “ennironed,” delighting in his “torments” (D3r). Zilia, one should note, is not a hypocrite or a tease, nor is she “churlish” in any other apparent way. Her chastity, diligence, and thrift are very real. She simply does not wish to remarry, be it Philibert or anyone else.

Bizarrely enough, Zilia pays heavily for such intransigent adherence to widowed chastity. When Philibert finally agrees to give up his suit, she grants his request for a farewell kiss, on the condition that he swear to obey a certain unspecified request she will
make afterwards. He agrees, and the request—evidently an excessive measure to protect her reputation for chastity—is that he speak to nobody for three years. Angry and disillusioned at her cruelty, but too religious and "stoute of heart" (D4v) to break his vow, Philibert goes off to France and distinguishes himself in its war against England, winning the favour of the French king. The king, who wants Philibert as a counselor, offers a large sum of money to anyone who can cure his dumbness. and when news of the reward reaches Zilia, she sees it as an easy opportunity to line her purse. Believing that she can simply release Philibert from his vow, she is undeterred by the penalty for failure: a fine in the sum of the reward, or death. But Philibert, still rightfully annoyed at her treatment of him, refuses to respond to her "cure." In desperation, Zilia finally "suffer[s] him to have of her / that lovers do desire," although she does so "more for feare of losse of life / or price of the rewarde" than for love (E6r). (The sense is that love would have been a more acceptable motive.) Philibert, however, refuses to speak until Zilia is thoroughly penitent and on the verge of execution, whereupon he takes pity on her and explains the whole situation to the king. The king condemns Zilia’s "ill deedes" to lasting shame, praises Philibert’s "most faithfull and gentle heart," (E7v-E8r) and the pair are finally married.

The moral of the story is clear—Zilia’s violation of “nature’s course” is not her eventual sexual yielding to Philibert, which interestingly is presented with moral condemnation only for her non-sexual motive. It is her refusal to yield to Philibert’s impassioned suit for her hand in marriage. The widow Zilia, in essence, is castigated for refusing to remarry, and for not being lustful enough.

The story of Zilia and Philibert seemed a potential anomaly, and I put it aside to read on through the other works on my list. But my thoughts kept returning to it, because
something about it resonated with the widow-situations in Middleton’s comedies, far more than did the accepted formulation that male anxiety about a widow’s unrestrained sexuality created the stereotype of the “lusty widow” as a scare tactic to discourage remarriage. If “lusty” was a terrible slander which all widows sought to avoid, what would possess so many suitors to accost the widows they were courting with the kind of bawdy insinuations and crude appeals to their supposedly heightened sexual appetites which they could only perceive as overt insults? Why would Ricardo boast lasciviously to Valeria in *The Widow* (1616) that “having me, y’have the truth of a man, all that you see of me is full mine own, and what you see, or not see, shall be yours” (2.1.55-57)? Why would the disguised Kate Low-water, who can only win back her estate by convincing Lady Goldenfleece to marry “him,” proceed to assail the lady with “make but short service, widow, a kiss and to bed, I’m very hungry i’faith, wench” (*No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’*s 2.3.125-26)? To reply that men wooed widows with sexual forwardness because they believed that widows were lustful only returns us to a central question: why did men believe widows were lustful? To reply, as Renu Juneja does, that such wooing reveals “misogyny” (“Widow” 9-10), or men’s contempt for widows, is perhaps true but equally problematic: a wooer may well feel contempt for the woman he woos, but if he wishes to succeed, he does not usually display it as a prominent feature of his courtship. The more I read about widows in contemporary texts\(^5\)—not only in plays but also in poems, ballads, letters, conduct books, jests, sermons, polemics and anything else which might have something to say about widows—the more I became convinced

\(^5\) For the purposes of this thesis, I have considered “contemporary” texts to be those published roughly within Middleton’s lifetime (1580-1627). More liberty has been taken in including material from the two decades preceding his birth (which arguably would have informed the ideas of his time) than in including texts postdating the closing of the theatres, the latter being part of the rather different world of the civil war and Restoration periods.
not so much that the conventional explanation for the stereotype of the lustful widow is always wrong, or that it could not be used to prevent widows from remarrying (one can hardly deny that Vives holds the accusation of lust as a threat over a widow’s head to keep her celibate, or that Duke Ferdinand attempts to do so in *The Duchess of Malfi*), but that there is also another side of the story to be told, a different deployment for the ideology of the widow’s inordinate sexual appetite. In many cases the “lusty widow” appeared to be less a manifestation of male anxiety (the fear that widows’ desire for sexual pleasure will drive them into second marriages or into disruptive non-marital sexual activity) than a notion which functions (imperfectly) to assuage a rather different kind of male anxiety, centering around money, domestic government and the remarried widow as wife.

This thesis will make a case for the existence of this alternate deployment of the stereotype of the lustful widow and for its function as an enabler rather than a preventer of remarriage, tracing its probable causes, its pitfalls, and, above all, the integral part it plays in a fantasy which appealed to at least a segment of the playgoers of early modern London. The theatre of Middleton’s day was, in Douglas Bruster’s words, “a place where money [could] buy the fantasy of one’s choosing” (6), and the fantasy of obtaining wealth and status through marrying a widow of property was evidently a popular and lucrative one. Observing that “the lady richly left was a major male wish-fulfillment fantasy in a culture where the pursuit of wealth through marriage was an avowed and reputable preoccupation” (*Shakespearean* 69), Stephen Greenblatt gives an example of how far the theatre normalized the widow as the centre of this fantasy: John Manningham’s early seventeenth-century summary of *Twelfth Night* (1600) mistakenly

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6 The same point is made in Erickson 153.
assumes that the maiden heiress Olivia, who leaves mourning for her brother to pursue an attractive young page, is in fact a remarrying widow (*Shakespearean* 176 n.4). In chapter one, I will first show that contemporary English society did not in fact seek to discourage the remarriage of most widows, and that the proportion of remarrying widows in London—the site of the theatres, and the setting for many of the comedies in this study—was particularly high. I will then argue that the image of the sexually susceptible widow does not usually work to dissuade widows from remarriage but is instead deployed to counteract another, equally prevalent concept about widows, especially wealthy ones: namely, that they make insubordinate, unmanageable wives who seek to control what they perceive as "their" money and to dominate their husbands. Marriage to a wealthy widow with an established household, secure property, and perhaps a flourishing business left to her by her late husband would have been an attractive prospect to a London youth who desired marriage and a household to mark his attainment of full manhood but feared the well-known financial difficulties of setting up this household with his own hard-earned resources. Yet paradoxically, the very marriage that would effortlessly establish him as a man among his peers also threatened him with the prospect that his masculine authority as a husband would be usurped by the remarried widow, a woman with sexual and marital experience, accustomed to being the head of her own household and adamant that the family wealth, now legally her new husband’s, is rightfully hers to control as she pleases. Unable to bring to the marriage the kind of equal or superior wealth and social prestige that might enable him to assert his domestic authority, the suitor assuages his anxieties about not being a "man" in his prospective household by drawing on another facet of his masculinity—his physical, sexual manhood. Drawn by the widow’s wealth yet anxious about his potential subjugation, he compensates for his threatened
masculinity by constructing the widow as lustful, eager to exchange her wealth in marriage for an end to her sexual deprivation. Her sexual need, in this fantasy, degrades her even more than the suitor’s financial need debases him, and renders her accessible to the man, poor as he may be, who can best stir and then promise satisfaction to her desires. As I will suggest, however, the compensatory fantasy of the widow’s desire seems to breed yet another anxiety within itself, for the suitor’s pre-marital image of the widow as driven by her sexual appetite may merely add another facet to his worries after marriage: in addition to being domineering, the widow may well prove a jealous, insatiable, and perhaps unfaithful wife. And so the notion of profiting from a widow and then escaping her was also in circulation in Middleton’s culture.

Chapter two will address the question of how the remarrying widow is specifically adapted to comedy, and will survey the ways in which controlling widows, desirous widows, and anxious suitors are staged in fifteen non-Middletonian comedies from 1600-1625, with particular attention to how the theatre of the period offered a form of the fantasy I have described above, which I will term “the lusty widow fantasy”; the popular image of the sexually susceptible widow that results from this fantasy will be called “the lusty widow stereotype.” The remaining three chapters will explore how Middleton, who returned in his plays to the motif of the remarrying widow more often

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7 My argument is partially anticipated by Oakes’ unpublished dissertation, “Heiress, Beggar, Saint, or Strumpet: The Widow in the Society and on the Stage in Early Modern England” (Vanderbilt U., 1990). Oakes writes that “the widow’s presumably notorious passion existed mainly in the imagination. It is my theory that her very marriageability gave rise to the stereotype. In the marital market, the widow was Fortuna personified. Were she libidinous, then the apprentice, the ‘bankrout,’ or the younger son had an edge; he could trade his sexual services or his bloodline for her money. Without her carnal desire, why would she need him?” (91). However, Oakes does not explore how this fantasy may be complicated by male anxiety, nor does she investigate the connections between the imaginary desirous widow and the concept of the remarried widow as unmanageable wife.

8 In these phrases I am using “lusty” in its obsolete sense of “lustful, lascivious” (OED “lusty” 4); it is, however, the common early modern sense of the word, and—at least when modifying “widow”—a sense very familiar to scholars of renaissance drama, thanks to The Duchess of Malfi, The Taming of the Shrew, and other well-known plays.
than any of his contemporaries, treats the fantasy of winning a widow—or of just winning her wealth—in seven of his comedies: *The Phoenix* (1604), *The Puritan* (1606), *Michaelmas Term* (1606), *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (1605), *No Wit, No Help like a Woman's* (1613), *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (1615), and *The Widow* (1616).\(^9\) Middleton’s practice of parodying, undermining, or otherwise subverting theatrical conventions is well known. While his city entertainments and masques often required an unequivocal and conventional stance, in his plays he was, as John F. McElroy puts it, “An instinctive parodist, . . . almost constitutionally incapable of letting an established idea, posture, or technique evoke the expected (i.e., the conventional) response” (68).\(^{10}\) It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Middleton undercuts the conventional fantasy of a rich widow made available to a young man by her desires. With the exception of two of his earlier comedies, *The Phoenix* and *The Puritan*, in which he plays on the fears that the widow-as-wife can arouse in men, Middleton’s theatrical use of the widow and her suitors over his career progressively exposes the self-interested and degrading constructions of “widows’ nature,” the wish-fulfillment, and the anxious masculinity that underlie the traditional fantasy plot.

The widow and her suitors stand at the intersection of the two most prominent concerns of the Jacobean genre known as city comedy, and perhaps of Jacobean comedy.

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\(^9\) Evidence for Middleton’s (probably sole) authorship of *The Puritan*, together with a summary of earlier attribution work on this play, is found in Lake 109-35. The only subsequent challenge to Lake’s conclusion is from Dominik, who argues on the basis of stylistic evidence for the presence of Shakespeare as a minor collaborator.

\(^{10}\) For Middleton’s unorthodox handling of theatrical convention, see also Ewbank (passim), and especially Rowe. Rowe, in my opinion, generally attaches too much moral weight to the playwright’s undercutting of comic conventions, but his book assembles much evidence of such undercutting itself.
in general: sex and money. As Bruster observes, “Although the links between the sexual and the monetary have long been a customary site of cultural exploration, the literature of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras displayed a special, if anxious, fascination with the topic” (xi). In numerous comedies of the period (N. J. Rigaud counts twenty-two in the Jacobean era) there are widows who have money and want sex (or are so perceived), and suitors who want money and are willing to supply the sex, usually marital, to get it. Perhaps the deceptive simplicity of this equation has steered most scholars away from giving it more than a cursory examination, for surprisingly little has been written specifically on the widow despite her promise as a point of departure into the stage’s two main preoccupations. Some work has been done on particular widows in certain plays, and has often been prefaced with useful historical investigations of theological or economic issues around widowhood, but the focus has largely been on tragic widows, particularly Hamlet’s Gertrude and the Duchess of Malfi. Work on comic widows, individually or as a group, and especially studies which break away from the characterization of the widow to explore the situations that widows and their suitors play out on the stage, is decidedly scarce. The best general analysis of dramatic widows, comic and tragic, remains the few pages that Linda Woodbridge devotes to them in Women and the English Renaissance (177-78. 255-62). Three widows from city comedy are discussed (specifically as widows) in Theodore B. Leinwand’s The City Staged (180-86), and five of Middleton’s widows are surveyed in Juneja’s article “The Widow as

11 See Leggatt, Citizen Comedy 4-5; Leinwand, City Staged 45. With regards to city comedy, the remarrying widow also fits into Paster’s formulation of the “circle of reciprocity” at work in the genre: the limits of the city impose an “ironic fellowship” and a system of involuntary sharing which “seems to result inevitably from the discrepancy between the limited resources of the city and the limitless appetites of its citizens. Over and over action reinforces the fact of limit” (Idea of the City 156-57). The widow and her money recycled to become another man’s wife and property, and the multitude of suitors which descends after a husband’s demise are striking examples of city comedy’s predatory “circle of reciprocity.”

12 For essays that focus on tragic widows as widows, see Wadsworth, Mikesell, Kehler, and Jardine’s chapter “I am the Duchess of Malfi still: Wealth, Inheritance, and the Spectre of Strong Women” 68-102.
Paradox and Paradigm in Middleton’s Plays,” but the only book-length study on the topic is Rigaud’s *La Veuve dans la Comedie Anglaise au Temps de Shakespeare 1600-1625.*

Rigaud’s book provides valuable evidence of the remarkable prevalence of widows in Jacobean comedy: she discusses twenty-two widows who are involved in wooing and remarriage plots. Eleven widows (mainly mothers and guardians) who are not, and six of what she terms “fausses veuves”—women like Thomasine in *Michaelmas Term* and Cynthia in *The Widow’s Tears* (1605) who mistakenly believe their husbands to be dead (11-12). However, despite a chapter on the widow’s position in English law, society and prescriptive literature, Rigaud is more interested in the mythological and archetypal aspects of the stage widow than in what a contemporary audience (or indeed a contemporary playwright) would make of her. The result is a curious flattening of the entire range of the drama’s remarrying widows into the idealized Earth-goddess figure of “la Veuve.” With a “feminine” stability, beneficence and forgiveness which ally her to the earth (65). “la Veuve” consistently displays “un certain nombre de traits fondamentaux: la liberté complète de mouvement et de décision, la richesse et la générosité, l’aptitude à raisonner juste sans l’aide d’un mentor…. elles savent surmonter l’opposition entre le désir sensuel et l’interdit moral par le libre exercice de la raison”

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13 For studies of individual comic widows, see Geller, and Juneja, “Widowhood and Sexuality in Chapman’s The Widow’s Tears.” A brief discussion of several Middletonian widows is also found in Cherry 94-96. There are also several unpublished theses which deal with widows in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, by Bensel-Meyers, Chamberlain, James, MacDonald, and Oakes; I have obtained only Oakes’ and MacDonald’s.

14 According to Rigaud, the widow who does not remarry cannot fill this ideal role, because “privée de l’action que constitue la préparation au mariage, elle est en même temps privée de ses chances d’affirmer, voire de découvrir. ses qualités propres” (197) (“… deprived of the action which constitutes the preparation for marriage, she is at the same time deprived of the chance to affirm, or rather to discover, her own qualities.”); the “false widow” is similarly disqualified, as “Ses actes n’ont pas d’importance pratique. Son autonomie est une chimère” (108) (“Her acts have no practical importance. Her autonomy is a chimera.”). The fact that she fully believes in her autonomy and in the importance of the choices she makes as a “widow” is not taken into account. The above and all subsequent translations of Rigaud are my own.
While generosity certainly plays a part in the fantasy of marrying a widow, and while some widows may possess some of the above qualities, the attempt to find these virtues in all comic remarrying widows leads to some rather odd readings, to say the least. When Chapman’s Eudora, aroused by Arsace’s description of Tharsalio’s sexual prowess, asks herself, “What might a wise widow resolve upon this point, now?” (*The Widow’s Tears* 2.2.126-27), the line would doubtlessly have elicited a knowing snicker from a contemporary audience; Rigaud, however, glosses it as follows:

Nous voici en plein aristotélisme. Face au contingent, à l’inattendu,
Eudora, comme le veut Aristote pour l’être raisonnable, “délibère.”
Elle ne pose pas le problème uniquement par rapport à elle-même;
elle se propose un modèle, la “wise widow,” c’est-à-dire celle qui
est toute pénétrée de la qualité majeure pour le Stagyrite: la
Prudence morale, dont l’objet porte, non sur la contemplation des
idées, mais sur “le variable, le fluctuant, le contingent.” (99)

Regarding the stage widow as “une oeuvre d’art” (16), Rigaud sees playwrights as disparate as Philip Massinger and Middleton, John Fletcher and Ben Jonson all transcending the ideology of their age to produce a unified character who gives the lie to a host of misogynist stereotypes.17

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15 A certain number of fundamental traits: complete freedom of movement and of decision, wealth and generosity, the ability to reason correctly without the aid of a mentor. . . . They [widows] know how to surmount the opposition between sensual desire and moral prohibition by the free exercise of reason.”

16 “Here, we are in full Aristotelianism. Faced with the contingent, the unexpected, Eudora, as Aristotle requires the reasonable person to do, ‘deliberates.’ She does not pose the question solely in relation to herself; she proposes herself a model, the ‘wise widow,’ that is to say she who embodies the most important quality for the Stagirite: moral prudence, which is brought not upon the contemplation of ideas, but upon ‘the variable, the fluctuating, the contingent.’”

17 See, for instance, the book’s conclusion; “Tandis que les opuscules pour ou contre les femmes se multipliaient sous sortir d’une rhétorique répétitive étayée par des examples historiques illustres et répondant à l’invective par l’adoration, les dramaturges proposaient une vision qui sortait des sentiers battus” (241). (“While controversy literature defending or attacking women multiplied without escaping a repetitive rhetoric supported with illustrious historical examples and responding to invective with adoration, playwrights proposed a vision which left the beaten path.”)
After over a decade of new historicist, cultural materialist and other post-structuralist re-evaluations of early modern drama—and after having displayed my own historicist colours in the preceding pages—it is perhaps unnecessary for me to state that Middleton, not to mention the paying audience for whom he wrote, was indeed a product of his period and its ideology. If the theatre was in the business of selling fantasies—fantasies which it not only reflected back to the culture which produced them, but which it itself helped to shape—it is useful, even necessary, to approach its plays with as detailed a knowledge as possible of the substance, the underlying circumstances, the assumptions, and the blind spots of those fantasies as they circulated outside as well as inside the playhouse.\(^{18}\) Inevitably, some constituting aspects of any fantasy will be familiar to us in our present historical moment, but numerous others will be culturally alien. Of the customs and ideologies which inform the fantasy of marrying a wealthy widow, for example, get-rich-quick schemes are still very much with us; however, marriage dissolvable only by death, a woman’s loss of rights to her property under coverture, and a husband’s prescribed absolute domestic authority, while still accepted to various degrees among certain religious and ethnic groups, no longer exist as the norm in mainstream Western culture nor are inscribed in its laws. It is these culturally alien aspects—the tissue of every-day experience to an early modern playwright and audience—that an historically informed exploration of the drama must seek to reintegrate with such values and desires as are still relatively intelligible today.

Within this project, however, it is important to recognize that what one is capable of reconstituting as “history” is necessarily a function of one’s own historical and political position.\(^{19}\) If the playwright is within the ideology of a certain period, so too is...

\(^{18}\) On the theatre’s power of “shaping fantasies” see Montrose 40, 109.

\(^{19}\) This point is addressed in recent essays by Howard, Grady, and Belsey.
the critic within that of his or her own culture, and it is at least disingenuous to imply (even by simply remaining silent on the subject) that the patterns which one pieces together from the available historical traces can give a purely objective picture of "how things actually were." The project of investigating fantasies about widows in early modern culture and Middleton's plays is situated, of course, in the practice of feminist literary criticism which has evolved over the past twenty or so years. In her lucid and insightful essay "Towards a Postmodern, Politically Committed, Historical Practice," Jean E. Howard cautions against the ideological trap, into which both new historicists and feminists risk falling, of "mak[ing] partial and interested histories turn back, in effect, into versions of true and complete histories" (114). It is necessary, rather, to "work avowedly within a situated project of knowing, [which] means eschewing claims to see everything as if one were located outside of history, as if one were an omniscient, disembodied god. Feminists make feminist knowledge, not all knowledge; and they do so within the determinant ideological parameters of a specific time and place" (116).

To recognize the partial nature of any account of history is not to say, however, that the only knowledge such an account can produce is a knowledge of the scholar's own subjectivity. To quote Howard again: "Like any collective project of making knowledge, feminist work has to be accountable to internal standards of coherence and adequacy to 'the facts' as they are known. Postmodernism does not mean the disappearance of the 'real', but rather of a belief in true, complete and unmediated accounts of that real" (117). And it is partially my quest for coherent and adequate "facts" that has steered this study away from the kind of feminist analysis of stage widows that has sometimes been done: a comparison of how widows are presented in the plays with
the "reality" of widows' lives in early modern England. The contrast of fiction and reality has proved an effective starting point for social historians like Todd and Vivien Brodsky, who use the theatrical figure of the sex-starved widow to open their respective analyses of actual rates of remarriage in Abingdon and London. I find it less useful, however, as a way into Middleton's plays, for it seems a pointless exercise to expect the author of saleable fictions for the stage to churn out "true-to-life" portraits of contemporary widowhood, and to praise him for doing so, or to fault him for inaccuracies and distortions. Furthermore, to return to my point about coherent and adequate facts, it is very difficult to construct any acceptable picture of "widows' experience," especially if one wishes to rely upon the widow herself as the source of information. One can learn about remarriage rates, family formation, widows' wills, widows' inheritances and widows' property from the work of Brodsky, Todd, and Chaytor, and from Amy Louise Erickson's recent detailed survey, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (1993). One can also, to a much more limited extent, look to the writings of contemporary widows themselves, such as Lady Anne Clifford, Lady Grace Mildmay, and Martha Moulsworth: however, with the exception of Moulsworth, whose only surviving manuscript is a short poem, these women have little to say on the subject of widowhood.21 Both of these avenues of investigation are useful, and I make reference to such sources throughout this study. But due to the familiar patriarchal restrictions on women's writing and publishing, the vast majority of extant early modern writings on

20 See, for instance, Juneja, who argues that "Middleton's plays...reveal a sympathetic understanding of the pressures exerted on women" ("Widow" 3), and MacDonald, who concerns himself with the question of "whether the widow appearing in the drama is an accurate reflection of the widow as she existed in real life" (5).

21 Another exception is Katherine Austen, whose journal meditations on her own widowhood Todd presents in " 'I do no injury by not loving': Katherine Austen, a Young Widow of London." However, Austen's journal dates from 1664-1666, placing her outside the range of my study.
widows and widowhood are by men. Here we are clearly out of the realm of lived experience (though rarely as avowedly as in Nichole's *A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving*, where he prefaces his observations by declaring himself "a batchelor in the Art he never yet put in practise") and into what men thought about widows.

Yet these texts are what any critic must concern herself with if she intends, as I do, to practise what Greenblatt has called "anthropological criticism" (*Self Fashioning* 4). Leah Marcus, who like Greenblatt, makes use of anthropologist Clifford Geertz's paradigm of "local knowledge," describes how such knowledge "can be constructed through techniques of 'thick description' that assemble many detailed observations from diverse elements of the culture, including its art and drama, in order to find important recurring patterns" (37). That the recurring patterns yielded by Geertzian "thick description" of the early modern remarrying widow can only be less of widows' experience and far more of men's ideology has led me away from the stage widow as character and towards an examination of her suitors, and of the fantasies and anxieties they play out as they woo her and wed her. While moving away from an earlier mode of feminist literary criticism which sought to recover women's voices and women's experiences through looking at female characters (and which sometimes risked forgetting that these "women" were themselves male creations), my project still retains the feminist goal of exposing the construction, and the complex interests behind the construction, of a supposedly "natural" female condition: the widow's extraordinary sexual appetite. When Lawrence Stone can observe, regarding a higher rate of bridal pregnancies in eighteenth-century France among widows than among first-time brides, that "it is to be presumed that the reason for this enormous discrepancy is that the libido of widows had been aroused by their first marriage, and that they were therefore more willing than young
virgins to risk pre-marital sex. since they enjoyed it and missed it more” (Family 609), the relevance of such work becomes all too clear.22

My choice to use Middleton’s plays as the focal point of this work, rather than to survey the widow throughout Jacobean comedy, is based in more than a desire to reduce almost two dozen plays to a more manageable number. Middleton, quite simply, is uncommonly interested in widows: of the thirteen undoubted, unassisted plays in the Middleton canon, eight include a widow, a remarried widow, or a woman who thinks herself, or is thought by others, to be a widow.23 When we add two plays now widely considered to be his—The Puritan and The Revenger’s Tragedy, the total number of widows rises to ten. And if we look solely at his nine undisputedly canonical non-collaborative comedies, six of them feature widows who remarry or seek to do so. (The exceptions are Your Five Gallants [1605], A Mad World, My Masters, and A Chaste Maid in Cheapside.) “The typical figures of Middleton’s city comedies,” remarks Muriel Bradbrook, “are the rich widow and the young spendthrift. For Middleton, the hunting of a widow and the setting up of a broken gallant are the favourite bases of intrigue” (164). While this rather obsessive interest may stem from the playwright’s early family life, as I will explain when I discuss The Phoenix, the result is that Middleton’s plays show an unusual sensitivity to the complexity of his culture’s ideas about the remarrying widow. His staging and re-staging of various facets of these ideas, together with his

22 Stone adds that this rate of pregnancy in widows was found “probably also in England”; presumably, he is referring only to the eighteenth century, as he does record that pre-nuptial pregnancies in general were relatively uncommon in the late sixteenth century. It is worth noting Todd’s observations that “little evidence has ever been adduced to indicate that English widows were particularly likely to transgress sexual rules” and that “studies of bastardy indicate that it was uncommon for widows to bear children out of wedlock” (“Remarrying” 77).

23 They are The Phoenix, Michaelmas Term, A Trick to Catch the Old One, No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s, More Dissemblers Besides Women, The Widow, A Fair Quarrel, and Women Beware Women. Lake appends The Widow to his list of twelve canonical plays as “only barely a doubtful case, since it is accepted by nearly all students of Middleton today as a work of his sole authorship” (1).
characteristically irreverent attitude towards theatrical convention. result in works which explore the subject of remarriage in ways different from its often formulaic presentation by playwrights who feature a remarrying widow in only one or two plots over their careers. These playwrights will be discussed in chapter two, for they provide much evidence that the widow was a popular and profitable figure on the Jacobean stage, a figure which was often used to evoke and then comfortingly to manage male anxieties. But Middleton, I will argue, not only understood his audience's predilection for comic plots involving remarrying widows, but over more than a decade of manipulating the conventions of those plots eventually began to expose the complex fantasy of gain and loss, money and masculinity, inherent in them. I turn now to examine the historical and social underpinnings of this fantasy itself, and the way in which early modern English culture deployed the lusty widow stereotype for ends quite opposite to those proposed by the hypothesis of dissuasion that has dominated much modern criticism of the remarrying widow in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama.
Chapter One

The London audiences who consumed the comic plots which early seventeenth-century playwrights created around the widow and her suitors would have been aware that the literary stereotype of the widow who hastily remarries with a younger man was, in their era and their city, based to a certain extent in reality. Beginning with this fact, on which I will elaborate shortly, this chapter will build an historically-based picture of the rich widow’s place in the imagination of early modern Londoners. As I will show, the remarriage of widows in all but the most elite of social classes was for the most part economically useful both to widows themselves and to the men who wed them. Moreover, contrary to the opinion of much modern scholarship, it appears that the remarrying widow was not only supported by Protestant doctrine but encountered very little societal disapproval. But while few voices in either prescriptive or popular literature condemned a woman’s remarriage per se, the culture promulgated plenty of warnings to men that a widow, especially a wealthy one, was likely to make a dreadful, troublesome wife who would battle for the right to control what she saw as “her” property and “her” household. The prospect of marriage to a widow, then, would have faced a young man with an array of conflicting fears and desires. Marrying a widow with money and an established household would instantly elevate him to the respected adult status he coveted and allow him to evade the onerous male domestic responsibility of providing for a wife, children, and servants with his own labour. But while such a marriage permitted him the desirable abdication (at least in part) of his financial responsibilities, it also threatened him with the forced abdication of the concurrent responsibilities of governing his wife and the family property. It is in response to this anxious desire for a potentially
emasculating marriage, I will argue, that the fantasy of a widow's sexual hunger emerges to allow a young man to seize his economic advantage with some peace of mind.

That City widows did often remarry with younger bachelors is the finding of Vivien Brodsky's work on the remarriage patterns of London widows in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Although Brodsky has no data on the percentage (out of all widows) of widows who remarried (128), she describes how "the records point to the existence of an active remarriage market, particularly for the widows of city craftsmen and tradesmen. Such women appear to have remarried quickly and to have often married single men younger than themselves" (123).\(^1\) Investigating marriage by licence in London between 1598 and 1619\(^2\)—the period, incidentally, during which all of Middleton's comedies involving widows were staged—she finds that 35 per cent of all brides were widows; furthermore, widows marrying bachelors comprised 19 per cent of all marriages, compared to just 10 per cent of marriages being between widowers and spinsters (128). Nearly 30 per cent of all low status craftsmen (such as blacksmiths, weavers, butchers and carpenters) marrying by licence for the first time married widows, as did 22 per cent of high status tradesmen (grocers, haberdashers, goldsmiths and drapers), both of which proportions Brodsky describes as high ("Single Women" 83). Of the remarrying widows

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\(^1\) All references to Brodsky are to "Widows in Late Elizabethan London: Remarriage, Economic Opportunity and Family Orientations" unless specifically marked as being to "Single Women in the London Marriage Market: Age, Status and Mobility, 1598-1619." The latter article appears in my bibliography under the name Vivien Brodsky Elliott. As I make much more reference to the former article, for the sake of clarity I refer throughout the text to both Brodsky and Brodsky Elliott as "Brodsky."

\(^2\) A couple who, for the sake of less waiting time or more privacy, wished to dispense with the calling of the banns could purchase a licence (usually costing from 3s. 8d. to 10s. 4d.) from the consistory court on the provision of reliable witnesses to swear that no legal or religious impediment to their marriage existed (Cook 158).
of craftsmen and tradesmen, 60 per cent married bachelors rather than widowers; in 80 per cent of these widow-bachelor marriages, the man was younger than his bride (127).3

The average age difference between an older widow and her younger new husband was about 4.5 years, with the widows of low status craftsmen showing a generally larger age gap (6.3 years) than their high status counterparts (2.2 years) (127). This difference is perhaps explained by the fact that the wealthier tradesmen tended to take brides several years younger than themselves ("Single Women" 84-86), and consequently may have left younger widows. The widow's age was also a factor in her choice of second husband: while women aged 45 to 65 tended to remarry with widowers, often older than themselves, widows under 40 showed a preference for a younger bachelor. The marital choice of widows aged 40 to 44 was split equally between bachelors and widowers (130). As for the speed of remarriage, 67 per cent of all the widows in Brodsky's group remarried within one year of their husbands' deaths, and wealth certainly seems to have expedited the matter: "nearly 47 per cent of all tradesmen's widows had remarried within six months or less—a significant difference from widows of craftsmen, only 28 per cent of whom had found a new partner in the same interval" (132).

While Brodsky admits her study is biased towards middling to wealthier Londoners who could afford to marry by licence (128-29), Jeremy Boulton's evidence from the other end of the social spectrum reveals that remarriage was equally if not more common among poor widows. In the poor East London parish of Stepney, widows made

3 While I have been unable to find any statistics on the proportion of early seventeenth-century London spinsters who married men younger than themselves, Brodsky's figures on mean age differences between spouses suggest that the general pattern, as it is today, was of women marrying men older than themselves. The amount by which the husband was older than his never-married wife ranged from an average of 14 years for London-born spinsters marrying widowers to a few months for migrant spinsters who married lower-status crafts- and tradesmen ("Single Women" 84-89).
up 43-45 per cent of all brides between 1615 and 1625—an "extremely high" proportion (328). Stepney widows too showed a distinct preference for younger men: about 46 per cent of them married men younger than themselves, and more than one quarter married a man five or more years their junior (336). Boulton has no data on the speed with which these widows remarried, but his evidence for the period before 1625 corroborates Brodsky's to suggest that remarriage was then a common part of London life.4

That this tendency towards remarriage, especially with younger men, was specifically a London phenomenon—a fact which Brodsky is careful to emphasize—goes some way towards explaining its popularity on the stage, especially in city comedy. Rapid remarriage, especially, was the behaviour of city widows: while "the median interval to remarriage in 14 provincial parishes was 19.4 months, ... for the wives of London craftsmen and tradesmen it was as low as nine months" (134). And while the pattern in other parts of England was of a higher incidence of male remarriage and shorter intervals before the remarriage of widowers compared with widows, London women remarried as often and as quickly as their male counterparts (122, 134). The theatre may exaggerate and parody this behaviour—Thomasine in Michaelmas Term is remarried even before she settles the bill for her husband's funeral, while Cicely Swaine, the speediest widow in Brodsky's study, at least waited three weeks (132)—but the evidence is clearly against scholars like Carlton who use statistics of rural remarriage to argue that the London stage presented unsubstantiated slander (119, 127; cited in Brodsky 126).

4 Only among London's elite does remarriage seem to have been somewhat less common. Adamson's study of the families of London aldermen, the city's wealthiest men, found that only a third of 208 aldermen's widows married again (188; cited in Rappaport 40). As Boulton points out, however, Adamson's figures are not broken down by age and may refer to a predominantly older as well as richer group of widows (326).
Setting aside for the moment intangibles such as love and companionship, it can be generally stated that it was in the economic interest of many London men to marry widows, and in the similar interest of many London widows to remarry. As Erickson explains, "all studies of wills in early modern England agree that in general widows were the principal beneficiaries of their husbands’ wills, almost invariably receiving much more than their legal entitlement of one third" (162). Most men named their wife as sole executrix (80 per cent in Brodsky’s sample [145]), giving her “virtually complete control over her former husband’s estate. . . . The most common bequest to the executrix was ‘all the rest of my goods moveable and unmovable left unbequeathed,’ in addition to any specified bequests,” which residual goods usually comprised the bulk of the estate (161-62). A husband was legally able to reduce his widow’s inheritance to her “thirds” (or half of his estate if there were no children) and the goods she brought into the marriage (if he had not disposed of them beforehand) and also to stipulate that she forfeit any bequest above that amount upon her remarriage. However, very few husbands actually did so. Brodsky found only 35 such “punitive” wills among a sample of 315; the vast majority of wealthier citizens left “large sums of capital, shops and leases to ‘dear’ and ‘well-beloved’ wives” without constraint, while their poorer neighbours’ wills expressed regret that even the bequest of their whole estate endowed their widows with so little (144-47). Under the law of coverture, all of this property would accrue to the widow’s new husband: her moveables and leases became his to dispose of as he pleased, her freehold or copyhold land his to control and profit from during his lifetime (Erickson 24-25).
For an apprentice or journeyman, marrying the widow of an established member of his craft or trade was also a step up to the status of master. In some cases, it could be a ticket into the company itself: the man who married a Printer's widow did not even have to be a Printer himself to enjoy the right to continue her late husband's business, for unlike the widows of other companymen, Printers' widows retained their rights in the company even after remarriage (Clark 161-62). Other men clearly found it worth their while to leave their own crafts or trades to marry a widow of a different company: Steve Rappaport lists three such cases from the Merchant Taylors’ records of the late 1580s and early 1590s, including that of Thomas Wiggin, whose company permitted him to leave to marry a Vintner's widow and even waived the usual fine exacted for this transfer because he was found "to be a young man and his estate to be but small" (41). Perhaps Wiggin could not afford the fine, but the Merchant Taylors may also have been understanding towards a poor young man’s desire for such a match.

Although the widow of a crafts- or tradesman was technically entitled to keep her husband’s business, practising his craft or trade with the continued assistance of his apprentices and loans from his company, it appears that not many actually did so (Brodsky 140-43). Free from coverture, a widow had all the necessary legal rights to support herself independently, such as the right to acquire and dispose of property,

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3 Technically, an apprentice could not improve his status by marrying a companyman’s widow because he was prohibited by City law from marrying within the term of his service. However, records from the Repertories of the Court of Aldermen (Rep. 18, 78v, 1/10/1573; Rep. 18, 389v, 9/6/1575; Rep. 24, 314v, 7/11/1598; Rep. 24, 323v, 16/11/1598; Rep. 48, 37v, 12/12/1633) show that an apprentice who married within his term and thus disqualified himself from obtaining his freedom by apprenticeship could instead purchase his freedom by redemption, customarily paying a fee of five marks (three pounds, six shillings and eight pence). Thus, an apprentice who had found favour with a well-off widow would find it in his interest to break the rules and pay his way out of the remainder of his service. Rappaport notes that there is no evidence to suggest that apprentices commonly defied the rule against their marriage, but he also reports the case of one Humphrey Naylor, who married his late master’s wife after four and a half years of his apprenticeship; paying the redemption fee, Rappaport adds, was presumably not a hardship for Naylor (236-37). I am indebted to Peter W. M. Blayney for providing me with the records of married apprentices before the Court of Aldermen.
contract debts, take apprentices, or make a will, and she was the only woman "who in practice possessed the economic rights of companymen and thus could ply a craft or trade with some degree of institutional freedom" (Rappaport 37-40). Some widows did exercise their right to pursue their late husband's work, but as the research of Brodsky, Rappaport, and Mary Prior has shown, a network of formal and informal male control throughout the company system ensured that these women were exceptions to the rule. Prior states that in "the craft guilds widows were tacitly excluded from office, and in Oxford, which was probably typical, there is no evidence that they attended the regular meetings of the guilds and companies" (96). In London, Brodsky describes a similar pattern: "The London companies provided an overarching structure for the thousands of male apprentices, journeymen and small masters, and were highly masculine in their identity and occupancy of positions of power—the masters, the wardens, the liverymen, the assistants and the yeomanry" (141). Moreover, a young woman was deprived of almost all opportunities for formal apprenticeship, and although when she married a companymen she would often assist him in his craft or trade, the work that she performed in this context was unorganized, piecemeal, and auxiliary.\(^6\) As a result, a widow generally lacked both the skills and the organized support network to continue efficiently the business to which she was legally entitled, for she was without formal training in her husband's craft or trade, and, as a woman, was overtly or tacitly excluded from the company's activities. Whether a widow remarried within her late husband's company (as one third to one half of widows tended to do), or outside of it, numerous "formal

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\(^6\) Although most companies apparently had no written rules prohibiting the apprenticing of women (the Weavers, however, are known to have officially barred females from the company in 1550), in practice it seems to have been a fairly rare occurrence. Adamson's study of women in Tudor London, for example, found the names of only seventy-three women among thousands of apprenticeship enrolments from the sixteenth century (Rappaport 36-37).
obstacles and informal pressures emanating from well-organized male structures served to make rapid remarriage an attractive alternative to the independent exercising of a craft or trade as a widow” (Brodsky 142).

When these London widows remarried, did they do so in the face of strong social condemnation? As described earlier, both social historians and literary critics have widely claimed that they did, and that the stereotype of the lustful widow was an integral part of the culture’s deep-seated ambivalence towards second marriages for women. Too often, however, such claims are based on uncontextualized literary evidence, dubious historical extrapolations, or too narrow a range of didactic texts. Dramatic characters certainly offer some memorably pithy remarks against remarriage, but it is, of course, crucial to remember who is speaking. When a Catholic duke, so crazed with jealousy on his death bed that he envisions suffering from “everlasting envy” in heaven (More Dissemblers 2.1.65), tells his wife that remarriage is dishonourable, is he really, as Kehler claims, voicing the “persistent conventional sentiments” of a seventeenth-century English audience (403)? While Kehler at least supports this view with other sources,7 Brustein’s only cited evidence for his statement that Elizabethan moralists considered remarriage “at best, a kind of legal adultery, at worst, an overt form of lust” is from The Duchess of Malfi: Duke Ferdinand exclaiming “Marry? they are most luxurious will wed twice” (41). One could just as well, though, quote Lord Lovell of Massinger’s A New Way to Pay Old Debts (1621):

I grant, were I a Spaniard to marry

A widdow might disparage me, but being

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7 Kehler cites Middleton’s duke, the two Overburian widow-characters, and Raleigh’s advice to his son as proof that “many sixteenth-century English writers were loath to abandon earlier [Catholic] attitudes” (403).
A true-borne Englishman, I cannot find
How it can taint my Honour; nay what’s more.
That which you thinke a blemish is to me
The fairest lustre. You alreadie Madam
Have given sure proofes how dearly you can cherish
A Husband that deserves you. (5.1.51-58)

Given the choice between the opinion of a villainous Italian nobleman, shortly about to murder his sister and degenerate into a raving lycanthrope, and that of Massinger’s exceedingly sane and exquisitely proper English lord, to select the former as representative of early modern English attitudes to remarriage is rather perverse.

Leaving literary evidence for historical, what can we make of the claim that a remarrying widow faced public humiliation in the form of charivari, or rough music? Such ostracization would certainly indicate intense societal disapproval of her choice. In her study of Ryton households in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Chaytor writes:

Remarriage was not only economically unnecessary, it was also socially discouraged: ritualised hostility to second marriages (charivari, Katzenmusik, rough music) has been widely documented and convincingly explained, for the woman who married again had a number of groups to appease. First she had to placate her dead husband and his kin; then there were the children (hers or her husband’s) whose property expectations might be compromised by the new marriage; and third, the young single women in the community may have resented her for having taken
an eligible husband from the pool. Given these charivari, why did women persist in angering the community, particularly when their economic independence as widows was legally guaranteed? (43)

Similarly, Thompson, focussing on seventeenth-century Devon, observes that “lower-class ostracism as expressed in the form of charivari could be extremely cruel to women who remarried. The woman and her new husband might be subjected to all sorts of mocking abuse or even violence, particularly if there was a disparity in their ages” (37).

However, the sources that Chaytor and Thompson cite for these claims have nothing to say about Ryton, or Devon, or indeed any part of England. Both historians refer the reader to works by Natalie Zemon Davis: Chaytor to “The Reasons of Misrule: Youth Groups and Charivaris in Sixteenth-Century France,” and Thompson to a chapter of Davis’ Society and Culture in Early Modern France. But Davis, as her titles suggest, tells us only that charivari directed against remarriage existed in late medieval and sixteenth-century rural French villages. Chaytor further cites an article on early modern Germany, and E. P. Thompson’s “The Grid of Inheritance: a Comment.” The latter at least discusses English custom but, regarding charivari, offers only an unsupported parenthetical remark concerning a case in which a widow’s remarriage risked impoverishing her children: “One wonders whether it was cases of marriage of this kind which would have been the particular occasion of rough music in England and charivari in France?” (350). Janet Thompson’s additional sources are Keith Thomas and Antonia Fraser. Thomas merely observes that “unsuitably matched couples” were sometimes subjected to charivari (77), while Fraser’s discussion of widows never mentions the practice at all. In fact, remarriage in England has not been documented to have been an occasion for rough music or “ridings,” which Martin Ingram’s study shows to have been
reserved primarily for suspected cuckolds, insubordinate wives and, occasionally, adulterers or unpopular public officials (86-92).  

The dangers of assuming that sixteenth-century French views of remarriage were comparable to seventeenth-century English ones become evident when we look at a pair of prescriptive texts: Henricus Cornelius Agrippa's *The Commendation of Matrimony*, translated into English by D. Clapam in 1540, and William Gouge's *Of Domesticall Duties* (1622). Both authors say that remarriage is morally permissible and not sinful; that in itself, however, tells us little. What is significant here is how the two men state this opinion. Agrippa castigates

an other no lesse damnable custome, whiche hath taken place among many nations to speake commonly evyll of them that mary the second time. yea and moreover they co[n]demne them that mary agayne in a certayne somme of money, and the same they ley up for a knotte of good company, to make mery with, and they make Joseph the husbande of the moste blessed vyrgin Mary, the patron of this so wicked sclander against goddes misterye.... But this damnable fascio[n] must be taken away and plucked cleane out of the dominyons of Fraunce. (C5v-C6r)

Here, on the other hand, is Gouge:

1. *Quest*. Are they who have buried their husband or wife so free as they may marie againe?

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8 See also Underdown 121, 127-34; Macfarlane, *Marriage* 236; Todd, "Remarrying" 80.
Answ. Yea, as free as they who were never before married. [A selection of biblical passages from the Old and New Testaments supports this assertion.]

2. Quest. May this libertie be extended any further then to a second mariage?

Answ. We finde no restraint from a third, or fourth, or more marriages, if by the divine providence so many wives, or husbands one after another be taken away while there is need for the surviving partie to use the benefit of mariage. (186-87)

The sixteenth-century French text is clearly taking on an established tradition of disparaging second marriages: people “speake evyll” of them; they have a specific, customary method of deriding them; the custom has a well-known name involving St. Joseph (perhaps on the blasphemous assumption that he took a wife who was “used goods”); the custom is sufficiently widespread, and probably sufficiently raucous, to have raised the author’s ire, as shown by the heated tone of the final sentence. Gouge, however, who can be heated enough himself where he finds sins to condemn, treats the question of remarriage in a calm, rather perfunctory manner as part of his section on who is fit to marry whom. As his didactic method involves matching each ideal or duty with its “contrary”—the ideal inverted, or the duty neglected—his scripturally-based approval of remarriage is contrasted with others’ opinion that second marriages are a form of adultery. But while most of Gouge’s sinful “contraries” are drawn from everyday life for the better edification of his London parishioners, in the case of remarriage he apparently lacks material of this sort, and is obliged to fall back on censuring the opinion of ancient heretical sects, the Montanists and the “Cataphryges” (187). That Gouge, a Puritan
minister. approves of remarriage is not especially surprising; that he evidently feels he is addressing a public who shares his sentiments may well be.

Other Protestant ministers, both Puritan and Anglican, are in agreement with Gouge on the remarriage of widows, for Protestant doctrine on the subject opposed itself to the Catholic belief that celibacy, whether virgin or widowed, was a state more pleasing to God than wedlock. For “younger” widows, according to many Protestant prescriptive tracts, remarriage is more than a lawful option: it is almost an obligation. Quoting St. Paul (1 Timothy 5), and Naomi’s words to Ruth (Ruth 1.11), Edward Topsell speaks of “the duty of younger widows and women, which is to marry and to beare more children” (43, my italics). “What is more seemly for a young widow,” agrees Thomas Becon, “…than to marry in the fear of God, and to take unto her an husband, by whom she may have children and godly to bring them up, and to govern her household virtuously, and to do such other things as appertain unto an honest and godly wife?” (365). Richard Bernard even combines his approval of remarriage with an unexpectedly sympathetic view of widows who do so hastily: “…wives cannot but mourn, except they conceit a new comfort very quickly, as some do, for fear the old grief should lie too long at the heart for him that is dead, and cannot be recalled. So with them, the living is better to be liked of

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9 See Greaves 191-95; Geller 292-97, Mikesell 266-70. It is, as Greaves notes, difficult to know how widely held Catholic ideas on celibacy were in early modern England. As the subsequent discussion will show, I do not agree with Mikesell that unflattering literary depictions of remarrying widows, including the lusty widow stereotype, prove the continued influence of the Catholic tradition. For a discussion of pre-Reformation controversy over remarriage, see Brundage. The Catholic position is expressed in Vives, Erasmus, and Lessius. All three praise widowed chastity above remarriage, but agree that remarriage is acceptable for young widows who, in Vives’ words, “cannot avoide the prickes of nature” (D7v). Vives and Erasmus, in fact, sometimes seem to be less against remarriage per se than against the female sexual desire they see as leading to it: a widow “should not onely seeke for no bargain, but rather refuse them offered: neither take any offers, but sore against her will, and compelled to the second marriage, if she be a good woman” (C5r); “…it is unfitting for a widow to court a man—a widow who ought more properly to be courted herself…. it is for men to court and for women to be courted—or, better still, to be seized forcefully” (Erasmus 225). Only Vives’ text appears to have been well known and influential in early modern England: Erasmus’ De Vidua was not translated into English until the twentieth century, and was never widely disseminated (O’Malley xlviii-1). Lessius’ The Treasure of Vowed Chastity, translated and printed abroad for Catholic recusants, would not likely have been mainstream reading.
then the dead, for they know their husbands would, perhaps, have so dealt with them” (8-9). As far as Protestantism is concerned, the “doctrinal opposition to remarriage” that Todd describes is hard to find.

Critics such as Mikesell and Kehler have plausibly suggested that although Protestant clergy were “devising a theology out of difference” (Kehler 404) which included opposition to Catholic teachings on widowed celibacy, the Catholic attitudes towards remarriage which held sway in pre-Reformation England were not so easily rooted out of popular belief. However, this theory relies at least in part on the assumption that “Catholicism” had created a set of values and customs in England that were essentially the same as those of southern Europe, the provenance of Vives’s and Lessius’s Catholic manuals for a widow’s behaviour. In fact, a report written by an early sixteenth-century Italian ambassador to England reveals that despite the uniformity of Catholic doctrine concerning remarriage, there also seems to have been a variety of local, culturally approved practices. Observing Catholic England around 1500, he notes with surprise that upper-class widows commonly remarry with the young men who serve in their household, and that

No Englishman can complain of this corrupt practice, it being universal throughout the kingdom; nor does any one, arrived at years of discretion, find fault with his mother for marrying again during his childhood, because, from very ancient custom, this license has become so sanctioned, that it is not considered any

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10 See also Gataker 16 and Perkins 67-68, who explains that it is acceptable for even a clergyman to marry a widow.
11 The ambassador refers to these young men as “apprentices,” but it appears from the context that he is in fact talking about the practice among wealthy families of sending their adolescent children into “service” in other households of similar status.
discredit to a woman to marry again every time that she is left a widow. However unsuitable the match may be as to age, rank, and fortune. (Sneyd 27)

After the Reformation, those English men and women who tenaciously remained faithful Catholics despite legal and societal pressures towards Protestantism may well have also cherished strict orthodox beliefs about the virtues of celibacy. But in general, even if we allow the Italian ambassador some room for shocked exaggeration, it is evident that the remarriage of widows was hardly a new-fangled Protestant notion preached to a resisting public.

One reason why a widow’s right to choose a second husband was an approved “ancient custom” in Catholic England but not in other Catholic countries such as Italy or Spain probably had less to do with piety than with southern European marriage and dowry customs. As Christine Klapisch-Zuber explains, the Italian dowry system created a situation in which both the family of the widow’s late husband and, if she was very young, her family of birth, were motivated to strongly pressure her into celibacy or remarriage respectively. If she continued to live celibately in the house of her in-laws, then her late husband’s relatives and heirs—who were not necessarily her children—were assured the continued use of her dowry. Her blood kin, however, could benefit from asserting their own right to a young widow and the dowry they had given her, bestowing her and the money in another alliance advantageous to themselves (120-4).

“Extraordinarily few” rich widows, young or old, managed to live independently; rather, contemporary reports “leave an impression of widows’ abject submission to the demands

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12 I am indebted to Anne Lancashire for referring me to Sneyd’s translation.
of their kin” (Klapisch-Zuber 126). An English bride, on the other hand, did not customarily move in with her husband’s family upon marriage, and the amount of dowry or “portion” she brought her husband usually reverted to her independent use when he died. The pre-Reformation English widow also had the option of assuming “the mantle and the ring” in a lay vow of chastity, but here again, cultural practices and material considerations may well have held more sway than Catholic doctrine. According to Mary Erler’s work, such “vowesses” appear to have been driven by primarily economic motives and benefits. Vowesses tended to be busy, worldly women of the mercantile elite with much property to safeguard for their children, and the profession of chastity freed them from the pressure to remarry, allowing them the “continuance of an active life as an economic agent” (180). Two of the three widows whom Erler studies took the vow in response to their husbands’ willing them extremely large amounts of property for the duration of their widowhood, and one of these subsequently broke her vow for an even more profitable marriage. When cultural customs are taken into account, then, it becomes difficult to use the prescriptive tracts of southern Europe to claim that Renaissance England was struggling to emerge from a monolithic “Catholic” attitude towards widowhood which closely resembled that depicted in The Duchess of Malfi or More Dissemblers.

Secular texts, and the few glimpses we have of individual lives, indicate that accepting, even encouraging attitudes towards a woman’s remarriage seem to have been

12 Klapisch-Zuber’s work focuses on fifteenth-century Florence, but she observes that the dowry system and its effect on widows was not unique to that city (122). Calvi, who studies widowhood and remarriage in Tuscany from 1580 to 1750, shows that the pressures which family and dowry customs placed on Italian widows were still active in Middleton’s day (279).

13 See Erickson 119-22 on the recouping of portion through jointure (a widowhood annuity settled on a bride at the time of marriage); at a lower social level, widows who did not receive the bulk of their husband’s estate were often willed back the goods they brought into the marriage (162). Erickson observes that “the expectation that a woman took out of marriage what she took into it seems remarkably consistent over time” (122).
commonly held, and were not merely Protestant doctrinal orthodoxies.¹⁴ A treatise of 1579 describes itself as “A Pithie Epistle and learned discourse, of the worthiness of honourable Wedlocke, sent written (as a Juell) unto a worthie Gentlewoman, in the time of her widowwoode, to direct and guide her in the election of her seconde husbande.” The author, I.R., a kinsman of the gentlewoman, seems unaware of any societal disapproval connected to the issue on which he advises her. He spends most of the text discussing the qualities of a good husband, but as far as the choice itself to remarry goes, he remarks laconically that “therein you may best be your own judge, for you know best where your shoe wringe you: neither neede you any Counsaylour to bid you cut where it doth wringe you” (52). In The English Gentlewoman (1631), Richard Brathwait’s advice to widows borrows heavily from Vives (making him perhaps the strictest English dictator of a widow’s conduct), but omits almost all of the Catholic author’s overt condemnations of remarriage. For instance, while counseling a widow to eschew “goodly arayment,” Vives threatens that everyone will “abhere her, that after her first husband’s death, sheweth her selfe to long after another & casteth away her spouse Christ, and marieth the devill first, & since man, beeing both widow, wife, and adulterer” (C5r). Brathwait, in the same context, notes that widows who “tricke and trimme” themselves are seeking husbands, and adds that “it were much more commendable” for widows neither to seek nor to accept new husbands, “lest enforced by necessity, or wonne by importunacy, or giving

¹⁴ One apparent exception to this rule is the inclusion in pro-woman controversy literature, like Heale’s 1609 An Apologie for Women 8-9 and Newstead’s 1620 An Apology for Women: Or Womens Defence 24-26, of encomia of Classical and foreign widows who kill themselves to follow their husbands in death. Oakes cites such authors to prove contemporary idealization of the chaste widow, adding that widows were meant to take “a slightly less drastic ideal” (i.e., perpetual chastity) as their model (49-52). Remarkably, however, the authors themselves do not draw this seemingly obvious connection nor use their praise of Classical suicides and Indian suetee to recommend an analogous but milder faith to the English widow. It is difficult, then, to know how to take these encomia, and it is possible that their effect might have been the opposite from that which Oakes suggests: faithfulness to a dead husband, they may imply, requires extraordinary measures or is a bizarre foreign habit, unthinkable to emulate; ordinary Englishwomen remarry.
way to their frailty. they make exchange of their happy estate for a continuate scene of misery” (Gentlewomman 111). This is Brathwait’s only explicit dissuasion to the widow who would remarry: society’s “abhorrence” and a marriage to the devil are replaced by concern for the risk of a bad match.

From a personal rather than an abstract viewpoint, the written traces of three very different lives reveal a similar acceptance of a widow’s remarriage and little hint of societal disapproval. Fearing execution in 1603, Sir Walter Raleigh counseled his wife to remarry. “for that will be best for you, both in respect of God and the world” (Hammond 276); ten years earlier, the Puritan minister John Penry wrote in similar circumstances: “my most dear sister and wife / I againe advise you not to be a widowe long after my daies / for you know the ordinance of God / that it is good for a man not to be alone / so it is a great blessing for a woman to have an head”. And far removed from the tumultuous public lives of Raleigh and Penry, a middle-class London widow, Martha Moulsworth, evidently felt the same way. In her Memorandum (1632), an unusual glimpse into a seventeenth-century widow’s thoughts on her own widowhood, Moulsworth lovingly remembers her three husbands (two goldsmiths and a draper) without any sense that she transgressed her culture’s values in marrying them; rather, she seems to take pride in the religious significance of their number:

Thrice this Right hand did holly wedlocke plight

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15 Raleigh is perhaps better known for having counseled his son against letting his wife “enjoy her second love in the same bed wherein she loved thee,” to be accomplished by restricting her inheritance to her widowhood (22). But these two apparently contradictory statements do not necessarily exemplify “an ineradicable ambivalence within the culture,” as Kehler claims they do (403). Taken in context, the latter remark reveals less sexual jealousy than a prudent desire to protect one’s estate for posterity: “let her not enjoy her second love in the same bed wherein she loved thee nor fly to future pleasures with those feathers which death hath pulled from thy wings; but leave thy estate to thy house and children in which thou livest upon earth while it lasteth” (22). And in the letter where he advises his wife to remarry, he also informs her that “my lands were conveyed to my child bona fide” (Hammond 276). The contradiction is thus rather less than it may appear.
And thrice this Left with pledged ringe was dight
three husbands me, & I have them enjoyed
Nor I by them. nor they by me annoyde
all lovely. lovinge all, some more, some lesse
though gonn their love, & memorie I besse. (Evans 206)\textsuperscript{16}

Moulsworth, who describes her three marriages as a “threefold cord,” was especially happy with her third husband, and refrained from taking a fourth in the belief that she would be unlikely to find one better than him (Evans 207-08).

Only two classes of widows, it would seem, incurred society’s condemnation when they remarried: the very old, and those whose children’s wellbeing was jeopardized by the second match. While scholars who claim remarriage was frowned upon usually acknowledge that some exception was made for young widows (Todd, “Remarrying” 80; Kehler 404), they seldom clarify what early modern authors meant by “young.” If we imagine women who were untimely bereaved in their teens or twenties, the contemporary opinion comes as rather a shock: “there is a time when women are too old to marry…. Now if any ask when that is. I answer, as I suppose, when a woman is about sixty years of age” (Bernard 19).\textsuperscript{17} Other sources which condemn the remarriage of old widows are similarly directed at the truly elderly woman: Niccholes derides “meere Croanes . . . lip-bearded, as wiches, with their warted antiquity and age [who] have angled into their beds with this bayted golden hook . . . youth whose chinnes have never yet fallen under the razor” (17), while a 1635 ballad, “The olde Bride, or the gilded Beauty” describes a gray-haired, toothless, disease-ridden old widow about to take her eighth husband. The ballad is, of course, deliberately exaggerated, but when as serious an author as Becon turns to

\textsuperscript{16} For biographical details of Moulsworth’s life, see Evans, “The Life and Times of Martha Moulsworth.”
\textsuperscript{17} The age of sixty, which comes from St. Paul’s criteria for church widows, is also cited in Erasmus 242.
censure the remarriage of "old widows," he too focuses on those who at "almost fourscore years old, have been known to marry with boys of eighteen years old," and "another sort, being so plagued with diseases that they were not almost able to stir in their beds, [who] have not withstanding given themselves to marriage" (366). The robust widow of forty who wed her twenty-five year old journeyman would not have been likely to see herself in these portraits.

Besides elderly widows, widows with children were also sometimes discouraged from remarriage on the basis that a stepfather and stepsiblings might lay claim to the children's rightful inheritance. It is this premise, as Geller points out, which forms the opening rationale for the Overburian character (usually attributed to John Webster) of "A Vertuous Widdow": "A vertuous Widdow is the palme-tree, that thrives not after the supplanting of her husband. For her childrens sake she first maries, for she maried that she might have children, and for their sakes she marries no more" (Geller 290; Overbury 138). Vives, too, in his chapter "Of second marriages," keeps returning to the fear that the remarrying widow "bringeth upon her children an enirny, and not a nounsher: not a father but a tirant" (D6v). It is probably no coincidence that the only extant contemporary English work devoted to counseling widowed chastity, William Page's manuscript treatise "The Widdowe Indeed" (c.1620), was written by a son for his mother.¹⁸ However, as several other authors point out, the prudent man legally safeguards his children's inheritance in his will without needing to dissuade their mother from remarriage. The Office of Christian Parents (1616) urges "Christian Fathers, in time of their health and memorie, to set downe such order, as the sweete savour of peace and love

¹⁸ I am indebted to Barbara Todd for bringing this manuscript to my attention.
may remaine behind him, between his wife and children" (127), and realistically sees the wise mother not as one who vows never to remarry but as a woman who seeing the fashion of the world, and perhaps suspecting her own weaknesse, desireth her husband to divide his goods by will, and to allot every child his portion; not so much that she should not be troubled by it, as because shee knowes not how she may be intercepted, to doe her children wrong; as also if shee doe take caution for her children without the fathers will, it may hinder her peace with the second husband. (129)19

With a simple legal method at his disposal, the husband who wanted to protect his estate for his children did not have to resort to ideological condemnations of remarriage such as the dissuasive deployment of the lusty widow stereotype.

Since there seems, then, to have been little stigma attached to a widow’s remarriage, and no concerted effort from any quarter (apart from Catholic teachings) to persuade her to remain single, why did the image of the widow’s prodigious sexual appetite proliferate in innumerable plays, ballads, jests, and other texts, ingraining itself in the imagination of a culture?20 To begin to answer that question, we need to realize that although the theatrical uses of the stereotype which are best known to readers and audiences today—Duke Ferdinand’s threats to his sister, Hamlet’s revulsion towards

19 See also Brathwait, *The Good Wife* B7r; Raleigh 22. On the testamentary safeguarding of children’s portions, see Brodsky, “Widows” 145, and Erickson 166-69. Widows themselves also had, and frequently used, legal means of keeping their children’s portions out of a new husband’s control (Erickson 129-39). It is worth noting that widowers, too, were sometimes urged not to remarry for the sake of their children: see ch. 5 of *The Court of Good Counsell* (1607), and especially Newnham passim. Despite a wife’s lack of legal rights to her husband’s property, her influence and control were clearly still something to be reckoned with.

20 The stereotyped lustful widow was also present, of course, in medieval and classical thought, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath and the Widow of Ephesus being the two best known examples. I am not sufficiently familiar with either period to know whether the image was as popular and widespread as it was in Elizabethan and Jacobean times; however, my argument is not based on the idea that the stereotype was new.
Gertrude—are condemnatory, most contemporary representations of the widow’s lust are not from the point of view of irate brothers or of the sons of murdered fathers, but from that of her suitors. As such, they range from the matter-of-fact to the salaciously celebratory. The Elizabethan composer Thomas Whythorne accepted a widow’s carnal appetite as a simple truth: recalling his stint as servant and music-teacher to a flirtatious widow, he regrets that he was too naïve a youth to realize that “he that wooeth a widow must not carry quick eels in his codpiece but show some proof that he is stiff before” (33). While the thoughts of Whythorne’s mistress on this matter are unfortunately unknown, a young widow in John Taylor’s A Juniper Lecture (1639) turns down an unsuitably ancient wooer (and encourages young ones) declaring, “I will have a Husband that shall be alwayes provided like a Souldier, never not with standing, but in a Centinell posture, and with his Match lighted, and cocked bolt upright, and ready to do execution” (19). The Overburian character of “An Ordinary Widdow,” often taken as straight moral condemnation of remarriage, in fact takes similar delight in describing a widow’s desires with outrageous sexual wordplay:

A churchman she dare not venture upon; for she hath heard
widowes complain of dilapidations: nor a souldier, though he have
candle-rents in the city, for his estate may be subject to fire: very
seldom a lawyer, without he shewes his exceeding great practice,
and can make her case the better: but a knight with the old rent
may do much, for a great coming in is all in all with a widow.

(140)

Moreover, the character ends with a punning tip: “Lastly, while she is a widdow observe her, she is no morning woman: the evening, a good fire, and sacke may make her listen to
a husband: and if ever she be made sure, 'tis upon a full stomack to bed-ward” (140). The widow’s appetites here are not to be feared and suppressed, but cultivated and turned to a man’s advantage.

The advantage, of course, is financial, as is candidly explained by a ballad titled “A Proverb old, yet nere forgot, / Tis good to strike while the Irons hott, Or, Cousell to all Young men that are poore, / To Marry with Widowes now while there is store” (c.1625). Punning on the idea of a widow as metal heated (sexually) by her first husband, and the proverbial expression for seizing an opportunity, the ballad offers thirteen stanzas of encouragement like the following:

All waies take this for a maxime,

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,

And strike the Iron while tis hott. (Rollins, Garland 231)

In this ballad’s mercenary celebration of widows’ desires, we are already far from the “lusty widow” as a smear tactic to discourage remarriage. Of course, to anyone familiar with Jacobean comedy, the idea that impoverished young men cherish the thought of a sex-starved widow eager to hand over her property in marriage will not come as much of a revelation. But seeing the stereotype as born of straightforward wishful thinking (a poor
young suitor likes a widow to be lustful so she will marry him without concern for his poverty) is an oversimplification which fails to take account of another body of thought on widows as pervasive as the concept of their voracious carnal appetite.

Alongside the fantasy figure of the wealthy, lustful widow as an easily-won prize for penniless youth, there existed a much articulated fear that life with a remarried widow was hell. Even the ballad quoted above betrays traces of this fear, in its urging, “take courage, young man” tone, and in a stanza which admits:

Some perhaps may make objection
that Old-women jelous are,
Let not that change thy affection,
though they be doe not thou care. (Rollins, Garland 231)

Jealousy was only one of the burdens a widow’s new husband would have to bear: she would also be froward, shrewish, intractable and difficult to govern, given to praising her late husband, and to reminding her new one that she was the source of his good fortune. Authors of serious moral tracts, such as Bartholomew Batty, describe marriage to a widow as an uncomfortable feat of continuous re-education:

...who taketh a Widdowe to wife, tyeth hym selfe chiefly unto two great troubles, first hee must desire and labour by all meanes possible, to make her forget the manners and qualities of her first husbande: secondly, hee must acquaint her verie warely with his owne nature and qualities, and make her to have a good opinion & liking of himselfe, and of his maners, both which hee shal hardly doe, without great pollicie and discretion. (98-99)
Less circumspect writers paint the miseries of such a life in more lurid colours.

Niccholes, one of the few authors who in fact condemn second marriages, does so in the context of warning men of what bad wives widows usually make. He has an eye to the appeal of marrying a rich widow, but warns bitterly of the consequences: “He that takes her thus halfe-worne, makes account she hath that will pay for new dressing, shee seemes to promise security in her peace, yet invites many times to a troublesome estate, when the conquest atchieved scarce countervailles the warres” (24). Joseph Swetnam, who devotes a separate section of his notorious misogynist treatise to “The Bearbaiting or the vanity of Widdowes,” states flatly that “commonly widowes are so froward, so waspish, and so stubborne. that thou canst not wrest them from their wills, and if thou thinke to make her good by stripes thou must beat her to death” (59). Whether one resorted to the brutality of Swetnam’s methods, or to the wary persuasion advocated by Batty, it was generally agreed to be all but impossible to transform a widow into a properly subordinate wife. Anyone who valued his peace over his purse would do far better to marry a maid.\(^{21}\)

Essentially, then, there were two main branches of early modern English discourse about widows: one, that widows were lustful and easily wooed to marriage (or, according to moralists, that they ought to marry because of their irrepressible appetites ); and two, that widows made highly unmanageable wives. It is possible to think of these two branches as two sides of the same dissuasive tactic employed by a society that disapproved of second marriages for women, the first frightening widows away from remarriage with accusations of lust, and the second discouraging men from marrying widows. This view, however, is problematic for several reasons. First, as I have argued,

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\(^{21}\) Conduct books which describe the difficulties of living with a widow include *A Glass For Householders* C6r and *The Court of Good Counsell* B8v-C1r; for a similar view in non-didactic literature, see Taylor, *Juniper* 44-50; “A Batcheler’s Resolution”; Guildenhuys 125-28; Heywood 156, 166.
there is little evidence to suggest that widows (if they were under sixty and either childless or with children whose portions were protected) were actively discouraged from remarriage, and thus little evidence to support the claim that the lusty widow stereotype formed part of an ideological campaign to keep them single. While some individual husbands (such as the thirty-five punitive testators in Brodsky’s study) no doubt attempted to persuade their own wives not to remarry for a wide variety of personal reasons, a man’s worries about his own widowed wife cannot be assumed to extend to an anti-remarriage vigilance towards other men’s widows. From an economic viewpoint, such a campaign would be waged, illogically, on behalf of the dead, for men stood to gain from the re-circulation of the widow’s property, while children could be provided for by testament. Secondly, the observation that many texts attempted to discourage men from marrying widows by portraying widows as ungovernable shrews merely points to the interesting fact that men appear to have been less anxious about the power and independence of widows as single women than they were about the authority and assertiveness of widows as wives. Men were certainly advised against marrying widows: this advice, however, was based not on a moral stance against remarriage per se, but on the belief that the man who did so was asking for trouble (Wadsworth 398).

Rather than seeing “lustful” and “unmanageable” as two separate branches of dissuasion, then, it is more illuminating to consider whether the stereotype of the sexually eager widow may in fact have been deployed to assuage the anxiety aroused by the prospect of wooing and wedding a widow. In a society where marriage and the setting up of a household were viewed as the beginning of adult manhood, yet also warned of as a heavy moral and financial burden, the prospect of marrying a widow was both tempting.

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22 For the argument that men feared the unmarried widow’s independence, see Woodbridge 178; Carlton 126; Geller 288; Pearson 140; Erickson 153.
and threatening. A young bachelor’s path to manhood would be smoothed, as the widow provided a ready-made household, money, and property; yet paradoxically, the arrangement threatened his manhood even as it established it, for the difficulties of achieving mastery over a woman accustomed (for however short a time) to directing her own household, sexually experienced, possibly older than himself, and fully aware that she had been the provider of the household, money, and property now legally his, were known and feared. On the verge of entering a position so potentially compromising to his masculinity, the suitor could assuage his anxieties by constructing the widow as in need of the very masculinity—in its physical aspect—which she threatened: he may need her money, but she, deprived of marital pleasures and racked with desire, stands in at least equal need of his virile sexual performance. Indicative of her feminine weakness, her need is in fact more degrading than his. Thus bolstering the suitor’s masculinity, the lusty widow stereotype transforms the relationship of benefactor and recipient, which places the wealthy woman in a position of power and thus inverts the traditional domestic gender hierarchy, into a more reassuring exchange in which the man maintains the upper hand. What has come down to us today, of course, are less the dealings of actual suitors than the plays, tales, and ballads which reveal the workings of masculine anxiety as they cater to the fantasy of a widow’s fortune ready to one’s hand.23

To investigate the attractions and perils of marrying a widow, it is necessary to try to understand how a young man in early modern London would have viewed marriage.

23 The one suitor whose wooings survive in detailed written records seems to corroborate the pattern I have described: Thomas Whythorne, whose remark about “quick eels in his codpiece” is quoted earlier, courted another widow who, after an initial show of favour, turned cold toward him, first complaining that he had delayed the marriage and then saying “And if I should have you, what should I be enriched by the having of you?” Whythorne’s response to this display of economic self-interest was to conclude that he had been too slow in his wooing, that he had not shown her frequent enough attentions, and that although he was as “stiff before” as he should be to woo a widow, he had displeased her by not “attempt[ing] any dishonesty unto her” (153-56).
First of all, he would have seen it as a necessary step in his transition to adulthood. As Rappaport explains, the possession of citizenship (gained by two-thirds of London men through the completion of an apprenticeship), a wife, and a household formed the basis of contemporary conceptions of male adulthood, with the establishment of a household as the pivotal event in the transition from youth to manhood (328). By this definition, most men did not reach adulthood until their mid- to late twenties, when society considered them mature enough to handle the weighty responsibility of governing themselves and others. The court minutes of the Merchant Taylors’ company, describing this passage to adulthood, give a sense of the seriousness with which it was viewed: men at its threshold are described as “young beginners and newly ENTERING into the world to deal for themselves . . . which word ‘ENTERING’ does strike a great impression into the heart” (Rappaport 328). While the life of a married householder promised the apprentice or journeyman a new world of independence and status, it was a permanent state not to be entered lightly, as Niccholes makes clear in the introductory verse to his Discourse of Marriage and Wiving, addressed

to you, whose weary bonds yet keepe,

Severing the Armes wherein you long to sleepe;

That have before-hand, many a tedious houre,

Wisht that approaching minute in your powre,

Which when arriv’d, most slowly brought to passe,

Cancels but Parchment to inroule in Brasse. (A3r)

The youth making the transition to manhood gained a position of respect, licensed sexual satisfaction, and freedom from servitude, but exchanged temporary indentures for the responsibilities of a husband and householder, which, as Niccholes points out, “not so
short a terme of yeares shall end / Unlesse one shew himselfe the kinder friend” (A3r).
That death might be welcomed as a “friend” who ends a marriage by taking one’s wife—or in a yet more desperate situation, oneself—suggests the level of anxiety that might accompany this irrevocable decision.

Marriage and householding, then, were desired as the markers of full adulthood, but they were also warned of as a daunting moral responsibility. The author (identified only as Ste. B.) of Counsell to the Husband: To the Wife Instruction cautions, “Verily, it is a great burthen which governours of families doe beare, and their account is great” (8), highlighting these words with “Note this” in the margin. Contemporary conduct books describe the role of the husband and master as one of almost limitless authority, but an authority that he must use wisely and vigilantly guard from internal weaknesses and external contestation at the risk of imperiling himself and his household. William Whately, for instance, sees marriage as a balancing act requiring immense skill: the husband must not allow his wife to usurp his superiority, yet he must at the same time discern between his own selfish desires and “the good and benefit of the party governed” (Bride-Bush 21). He must govern himself with the utmost caution, avoiding any behaviour that would lose the respect of his inferiors, especially passionate anger, unthriftiness, and “lightness,” which includes “chylidish and unosober trickes, that have no print or stampe of gravity upon them” (20). “He must keepe his authority,” insists Whately, “and maintaine himselfe in that place, wherein his Maker hath set him. Nature hath framed the lineaments of his body to superiority, & set the print of government in his face, which is more sterne, lesse delicate than the womans. He must not suffer this order of nature to be inverted . . . if he doe, that is a deformed family” (Bride-Bush 18-19). Male domestic government was supposedly decreed by Nature, but the amount of
didactic ink expended on its maintenance reveals that it must have come anything but naturally to many men. As the anonymous translator of *A Discourse of the Married and Single Life* (1621) writes in his “Preface to the Masculine Reader,”

> The husband is, by the very institution of marriage, ordained to be the head, and the head was made to rule and govern the body. Now, the difficulty that is incident to this regiment, is such, and so great, that few men take pleasure in possessing it, none at all performe it in that manner they should. (A7r-v)

While a prospective householder may or may not have taken to heart the prescriptions of a moralist like Whately, the statement that “few men take pleasure in possessing” the government of their households suggests that most men were unpleasantly aware of what was expected of them in this role, whether or not they tried to live up to it.

> Even a man who set lightly by his moral responsibility, however, would have known that marriage also presented a daunting financial responsibility. In 1556, London aldermen passed an act prohibiting young apprentices from gaining the freedom of the city until the age of twenty-four, partly in an attempt to prevent “the overhasty marriages and oversoon setting up of households of and by the youth and young folks of the said city . . . [who] marry themselves as soon as ever they come out of their apprenticehood, be they never so young and unskilful.” Such marriages led to children on parish relief, and many other “mischiefs and inconveniences,” for the young men were “so poor that they scantly have of their proper goods wherewith to buy their marriage apparel and to furnish their houses with implements and other things necessary for the exercise of their

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24 Whately’s *A Bride-Bush* gives seventeen pages of instruction for the husband, compared to only seven for the wife. For other prescriptions of male domestic responsibility, see Gouge 349-426; Perkins 163-73; Griffith 392-412; Ste. B 8-12; the onerousness of this responsibility is acknowledged in Lessius 110-11. The spiritual duties of the head of the household are also discussed in Hill 429-66.
occupations, whereby they should be able to sustain themselves and their families" (Rappaport 325-26). The poverty of newly-formed households seems to have been a perennial problem, though, for in 1624, Whately warns that

Very many after marriage be put into the close stocks of miserie, want, and necessitie, not having wherewithall to provide convenient food and rayment for themselves, and for their charge, which unawares, and without fore-sight, is now growne heavie upon them. It is an easie thing to fill one belly, and cloath one backe, and keepe something in the purse, when but one hand must fetch out of it: but to provide diet and attire for a wife, for many small children, for some servants; to pay for house-rent, and fewell, and candle; to disburse the compelled charges of the weaknesse of a wife, of children, of servants, and to bring up many with the fruite of one mans labour and industrie; this doth oftentimes prove farre lesse easie, then men in imagination can deeme it to be. (Care Cloth 56)

It was the husband’s duty to take “provident care” of his wife, supplying her with all “things needful” (Gouge 396), and the master’s duty to “be carefull to provide for [his] families competent bodily provisions, that so they may live a peaceable and comfortable life under [his] roofe” (Griffith 405). Whether or not a man set store by the moral advice of the prescriptive texts, the material concerns of feeding, clothing, lodging, and supporting the expensive “weaknesses” of a family were a responsibility that even the most worldly husband could not ignore.
Not merely the subject of moralists’ warnings, the financial burden of maintaining a wife is a favourite theme of popular literature. In addition to being shrewish and sexually demanding, wives were regularly satirized as being idle and extravagant. In *The Parlament of Women*, which facetiously sets out “the merry Lawes by them newly enacted . . . [to] live in more Ease, Pompe, Pride, and wantonnesse,” one “Mistris Dorothy Doe-little” lists a string of material luxuries with which wives must be provided, concluding:

> And for our more ease, let us lye abed till ten of clock, and then have a Caudle brought to our bedside for our breakfast; and then be ready by dinner time, and then walke abroad to take the ayre till Supper-time; and so spend the week about, and if they [our husbands] aske the reason thereof, tell them it must be so; because it must be so . . . (A7v)

The hapless husband of the ballad “Anything For a Quiet life, Or The Married Man’s Bondage to a Curst Wife” (STC 698.5) proves to have married a wife more expensive than “curst.” Here, a young man eager to finish his apprenticeship and marry finally does so, only to find himself “molested” by “crooked cares of Household charge,” and the rest of the ballad reads like a shopping list of the goods his wife proceeds to demand: “Plums and Peares and Cherries ripe / of twenty shillings a pound,” peascods, a caudle of muscadine, woodcocks, larks, “dainty lawnes and Cambricks fine,” sugar plums, conserves, a “garded gown,” a “Petti-coat of Stammell red,” and a horse, in addition to the charges the birth of a child runs up in nurses’ fees and gossips’ feasts. Childbirth seems to have been particularly regarded by some men as a time when wives were likely to put their husbands to unnecessary expenditures. Gouge’s criticism of “covetous”
husbands who scrimp on their wives’ childbed expenses has a flavour of reality about it, as he describes men who insist their wives make do with the nearest midwife rather than the more distant one they prefer, who refuse to hire a nurse on the grounds that the family maid will do, who see no reason to move their expectant wife to “more convenient lodging,” or who, conversely, move her out of town “lest her friends should by importunity draw him to expend and lay out more upon his wife then he is willing” (401). That pregnancy was a time when wives were entitled to have their demands met—“For it is well knowne, that it is very dangerous both for mother and childe to want her longing” (Gouge 399)—no doubt had much to do with some men’s view that childbirth was used as an excuse for extravagant spending.

The perception that a wife was a financial burden would probably have been especially pronounced in the city. As Susan Amussen notes, the concept that “the duty of the husband is to get goods; and of the wife, to gather them together and save them” (Cleaver 170) is an urban one. Migrants to London, and those London-born citizens only a generation or two removed from their rural roots, would have seen their mothers and grandmothers at work in a rural economy where women’s economic production was at least as conspicuous as their consumption. Men were responsible for livestock and field crops, but women were in charge of the dairy, the brewhouse, the poultry, and the kitchen garden as well as what we traditionally think of as “housework.” Rural women were thus directly involved in producing much of the household’s sustenance, and in selling any surplus goods (Amussen 68). Since Alice Clark’s seminal study, Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century (1919), historians have debated her claim that the rise of capitalism in the seventeenth century robbed women of the respect and status accorded to their work in an earlier era of domestic industry; however, one does not have to posit a
pre-capitalist “golden age” for women. nor to argue that rural men actually held their
wives’ work in high esteem. to suggest that the sheer visible difference between the
productive labour of a rural wife and of an urban one would have made the latter appear
idle, a smoker rather than a getter.25 This is not to say that city wives did not work: the
feeding, clothing, and boarding of a household which included servants and apprentices
as well as husband and children, along with unpaid labour in the unskilled or semi-skilled
parts of a husband’s craft or trade, made wives significant contributors to the urban
economy (Rappaport 41). As Prior points out, however, such work was generally
considered to be simply a woman’s “duty,” as distinct from a man’s occupation (95). It
did not, on the whole, produce quantifiable, saleable goods like butter, cheese, or beer.
And what the urban housewife could not make, she was obliged to buy—with what her
husband might well have seen as “his” money.26 The difference in male perceptions of
country wives and of city wives is apparent in John Taylor’s series of satirical anecdotes,
Divers Crabtree Lectures (1639): all the anecdotes depict shrewish wives, the first a
farmer’s wife and the rest the wives of various city crafts- and tradesmen. Only the
farmer’s wife, though, is given a good reason for the nasty trick she plays on her
husband: he ends up getting hit on the head with a frying pan because he interferes with
her making of pancakes, “taking unjust exceptions at the crouserness of the flower, the
taste of the Suite, the thicknesse of the batter, and the like,” while she, irritated at being
“so crost and troubled in hir businesse,” knows full well that “he was better experienced
in the Plough than the Panne” (4-5). The city wives, on the other hand, simply harangue

25 For discussions of the changing nature and status of women’s work, see Erickson’s introduction to Clark
vii-xxii; Fletcher 223-55; Vickery 401-14; Cahn 33-63; Shepherd, Amazons 41-51. The notion of early
modern England’s transition from a peasant society to a capitalist one is analyzed and critiqued in
Macfarlane, Origins.
26 See Cahn 92-94. Cahn’s comparison of Lady Margaret Hoby’s household work at her country estate and
in London illustrates the extent to which the city transformed women from producers to consumers.
their husbands at length for more sex and more luxuries: the tailor’s wife, for instance, derides the tailor for lining other men’s hose when he has no stuffing in his own breeches, and uses her knowledge of how he defrauds his customers to blackmail him into buying her a new gown (52-57). Taylor’s country wife may be a shrew, but she has a defined productive role in which she rightly expects respect, while his city wives are little more than demanding parasites.

That men could perceive the responsibility to control, govern, and especially provide for a household as an intolerable burden rather than as part of the welcome privileges of patriarchy is explored by Lena Cowen Orlin in her insightful analyses of Othello and A Yorkshire Tragedy. In what Orlin terms “domestic abdications,” men like Othello and the Husband of the latter play react violently against their sense that marriage is but the unverifiable possession of a wife’s chastity and a set of oppressive financial responsibilities (234). Feeling trapped by their prescribed role, they move from refusal to perform their domestic duties to the destruction of the household itself. The urge towards male domestic abdication, I would add, is not only revealed in bloodshed and tragedy. For one thing, it can be seen to account for the tremendous and otherwise inexplicable popularity of Swetnam’s The Araignment of Lewde, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women (1615). Swetnam’s pamphlet, as his contemporary feminist detractors were quick to point out, is disorganized, illogical, repetitive, unoriginal, and ungrammatical.27 As a piece of rhetoric, it is hopelessly bad, and by 1615, misogynist controversy literature hardly had the appeal of novelty. Nevertheless, the Araignment went through at least ten editions in nine years.

27 See Speght 74; Sowernam 88; Munda 140-47.
When one gets past the horrors of his style, Swetnam’s content repays a closer reading than it usually receives, for out of the jumble of invective two things become clear: first, the tract is utterly preoccupied with how women, and wives in particular, are a drain on a man’s purse; and second, it is a telling parody of contemporary conduct books. The obsession with money pervades the work from beginning to end: its opening line informs the reader that “Moses describeth a woman thus: At the first beginning (saith he) a woman was made to be a helper unto man, and so they are indeed, for she helpeth to spend & consume that which man painefully getteth” (1). Paragraphs that begin seemingly having nothing to do with money manage to work it in by the end: for example, Swetnam uses the saying “Joan is as good as my lady” to note that all women are sexually alike, but then proceeds to attribute the proverb to a “Country man . . . who gave a great summe of money to lye with a Lady, and going homeward hee made a grievous mone for his money” (9). His condemnation of three famous harlots of antiquity ends up praising the one who serviced customers for free (19-21), while passages like the following are too numerous to count:

To what end then should we live in love, seeing it is a life more to be feared then death, for all thy monie wastes in toyes and is spent in banquetting, and all thy time in sighes and sobbs to think upon thy trouble and charge which comonly commeth with a wife, for commonly women are proude without profit, and that is a good purgation for thy purse, & when thy purse is light then will thy heart be heavy. (7)

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28 See Shepherd, Revenge 54. Shepherd describes the Araithment as a “travesty of domestic advice,” though not as a deliberate parody.
Part way through his third chapter, though, Swetnam appears to change his tune. The vitriolic condemnations of women are replaced by advice on how to choose and live with a wife. Biblical and classical examples (Sarah and Abraham, Lucrece, St. Paul) are trotted out as Swetnam goes through the conventional paces of recommending virtue over beauty, advising a man to observe the character of his potential bride’s parents, and to choose a bride of “neere equall yeares and good qualities” (50-51). Once married, the husband must “satisfie the honest desires of his wife, so that neither by necessity nor superfluity be the occasion to work her dishonour” (sic) (53). Not meddle in her housework, share his counsel with her, and account her “as the only treasure he enjoyeth upon earth” (53). He must also govern her with wisdom and patience—when he “espie[s] a fault.” the husband “ought to rebuke hir with wordes secretly, and seeke to reforme her by good counsaile. he ought to lay before her the shame of ill dooing, and the praise of well doing, if this will not serve yet he ought rather paciently to forbeare her than rigorously to beate her” (55). Much of this material is lifted verbatim from The Court of Good Counsell. But then, just as this wave of traditional advice reaches its peak, urging men to have the utmost sympathy for their wives during childbirth (that notoriously expensive event), Swetnam unexpectedly announces “Now if thou like not my reasons to expell love, then thou maiest try Ovids arte who prescribes a salve for such a sore…” (57). “You set down no remedies for that torment of love, as you call it” (110), objects Esther Sowernam in her reply to his pamphlet, but here she misses the joke. Swetnam’s parroted prescriptions of husbandly duty, especially when taken together with his earlier warnings of how a wife will empty one’s purse, are his “reasons to expell love.”

Swetnam understood that the conduct books’ exhortations to male domestic

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29 Compare, for instance, Swetnam 53 with Court C1v, C8r.
responsibility—a difficult mixture of loving attention to a wife’s needs and discipline of her desires, material provision and perpetual financial vigilance—did not exactly inspire all men to seize their patriarchal role. They made many of them want to run a mile.

Like Swetnam’s readers, the Londoners who went to see *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) clearly understood both the prestige that marriage and householding bestowed on a man, and the anxiety over financial responsibility that came with it. Allwit, a comic figure of male domestic abdication *par excellence*, is drawn to elicit a curious mixture of envy and contempt. He is contemptible, obviously, because he has relinquished his sexual rights over his wife to Sir Walter Whorehound and so reduced himself to an impotent simulacrum of masculinity. As his servants—who refuse to call him master—scornfully observe, “Now’s out of work, he falls to making dildoes” (1.2.58). A dildo, or a false phallus, is a fitting symbol for the emasculated Allwit; but the servant’s pun also happens to be inspired by the fact that Allwit is merrily singing a ballad refrain, “La dildo, dildo la dildo” as he joyfully contemplates how Whorehound relieves him of the economic burden of maintaining a wife and family. Allwit’s servants may not respect him, but among his neighbours he enjoys the status of a prosperous householder and prolific father, all at no expense to himself. “I have the name,” he exults, “and in his gold I shine” (1.2.40). His well-known introductory speech, “The founder’s come to town,” with its vivid images of a comfortable domestic life untroubled by financial worries, is surely designed to evoke something other than unmitigated contempt from the hearer:

I walk out in a morning; come to breakfast,

Find excellent cheer; a good fire in winter;

Look in my coal-house about midsummer eve,
That's full, five or six chaldron new laid up;
Look in my backyard, I shall find a steeple
Made up with Kentish faggots, which o'erlooks
The water-house and the windmills; I say nothing.
But smile and pin the door. (1.2.22-29)

Significantly, the play's centrepiece is Mrs. Allwit's very costly lying-in, all paid for by Whorehound. Throughout the play, Middleton teases his audience into considering how much Allwit is really a preposterous fool and how much a savvy chap with an unorthodox but rather good deal. "Allwit" is "wittol" transposed, but the play holds out the possibility that he may also be, quite simply, "all wit."

For a man who wished, like Allwit, to find "a table furnish'd to his hand" (1.2.12), the socially sanctioned (not to mention more likely) alternative to profitable wittolry was to step into the vacant spot in a functioning, established household by marrying a wealthy widow. I have dwelt at length on the prevalence of male anxieties about the financial aspect of marriage and setting up a household because I believe it is wrong to see the fantasy (and, no doubt, the reality) of marrying a rich widow as confined to a small group of morally dubious "fortune hunters." While warnings against loveless matches for wealth were commonplace, economic considerations, even of a fairly calculating nature, carried far less stigma than they do today.\(^3^0\) When Whythorne's friend offered to "help [him] to a widow, who is come of worshipful parentage and hath twenty pounds a year dowry or jointure," and Whythorne, deciding after one meeting that he "misliked her not," informed his friend that in the case of a match he would "increase her wealth as much as you say hers is" (150-51), neither man saw himself as doing anything

\(^{30}\) See Cook 120; Greaves 195.
remotely reprehensible. The widow-hunt as played out in the theatres usually involved a disreputable wastrel or two, but the audience members it catered to were most likely ordinary men for whom a widow promised the prestige of marriage without the financial hardship; as Rappaport points out, “marrying the widow of an established companyman made householders out of journeymen and even apprentices and, if her late husband was a liveryman, often meant promotion to the elite” (370). A man who stood to profit from a widow of a different company could petition to transfer into hers, or could merely use his new wife’s wealth to improve his present position. Men of a higher class with neither inherited wealth nor livelihood also looked to widows for financial security, and widows, they liked to think, were happy to provide it: among other supposed female fantasies decreed as laws in The Parlament of Women, we find “it is thought meet, that rich widowes shal marry gentlemens youngest sonnes that have no meanes to maintaine themselves” (B5v).

Although young virgins with sizeable marriage portions might equally be expected to provide material for dreams of marrying money, the widow was the fantasy of choice for one important reason: she was free to bestow herself and her property on whom she pleased. Young, never-married women in London fell largely into two categories: relatively poor, single, migrant women who came to the city for employment and who married free from parental authority, and the daughters of well-to-do Londoners, whose parents ensured that their portions were destined for an economically desirable choice (Brodsky, “Single Women” 84-86). Neither, obviously, was a good option for a

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31 The correspondence of Henry Waller and Sir John Eliot about the latter’s potential match with a widow worth 30000 pounds reveals the same kind of business-like interest in estate. See Eliot 14-23.
32 See also Holderness 428; Brodsky, “Widows” 126-27; Brodsky, “Single Women” 83-84; Clark 161, 189-91. Concerning the marriage of apprentices, see note 4 in this chapter.
33 See also Saltonstall, “A Widdow” B7v-B8r.
young man with only his person to recommend him, who wished to establish himself through marriage. As "A Proverb old. Yet ne'er Forgot" puts it:

And besides thers many Lasses,

dares not marry when they list,

Cause her Portion ere she passes

must come from her Fathers fist:

but still you see

a Widowes free,

For friend or foe she careth not,

then who would misse

such time as this

Tis good to strike while the Irons hott. (Rollins, Garland 232)

In reality, most widows probably exercised as much economic prudence in choosing a mate as their suitors did, but there was always the possibility, and so the hope, that a widow might give it all away for love. And sometimes one did. In 1627, the twenty-six year old William Lilly, servant to a Salter’s widow, married his mistress despite “the disproportion of years and fortune being so great betwixt us” (51):

My mistress, who had been twice married to old men. was now resolved to be couzened no more . . . . She had many suitors, old men, whom she declined; some gentlemen of decayed fortunes, whom she liked not, for she was covetous and sparing: by my fellow servant she was observed frequently to say, she cared not if she married a man that would love her, so that he had never a penny; and would ordinarily talk of me when she was in bed. (50)
Accepting his eventual proposal that “what [he] had not in wealth, [he] would supply in love,” the widow signaled his elevation from servant to husband by inviting him to “sit down at dinner with [his] hat on [his] head” (51). When, after the marriage, some of her acquaintance objected to her choice—for the disparity in age appears to have been considerable—she replied “that she had no kindred; if I proved kind, and a good husband, she would make me a man: if I proved otherwise, she only undid herself” (52).34

“She would make me a man.” While Lilly claims that he and his wife lived “very lovingly” (53), her choice of idiom expresses (perhaps not unwittingly) both the prosperity a widow offers and a reason why a man may be anxious about accepting it.

What the widow ostensibly means is that by marrying her young servant she will make him a full adult, a householder, and, especially, a man of substance. But the subtext is a threatening one: if she has “made him a man,” then his manhood is under her control and is not truly his own. As she clearly states, she will “make him a man” if he pleases her. The statement is illogical (the act of marriage bestows wealth and status on the husband, regardless of his subsequent behaviour), but this illogicality itself points to the dual meaning and suggests her own sense of power in the marriage. With the advantage over him in age, marital experience, and wealth, she is well equipped to appropriate the masculine role in the household and maintain (or at least skillfully struggle for) authority over the domestic affairs, the family property, and him. As Brodsky observes, “it cannot be doubted that...age inequalities must have given bachelor-widow marriages a different character, providing greater opportunities for psychological and sexual dominance within marriage by the older woman” (“Widows” 127-28).35 Such a concern is evidently behind Vives’s’ decree that remarrying widows should

34 Lilly’s case is discussed in Brodsky, “Widows” 126-27.
35 See also Wrightson 103.
get such husbands as be according for widows to be married unto, not yong men, wanton, hot & ful of play, ignorant & riotous, that can neither rule their house, nor their wife, ne ther selfe neither: but take an husbande something past middle age, sober, sad, and of good wit, expert with great use of the worlde: which with his wisdom maye keepe all the house in good order: which by his discretion may so temper and governe all thing, that there may bee alway at home sober mirth and obedience . . . (D8r-D8v)

Other texts, which I will discuss shortly, indicate that disparity in wealth, perhaps even more than disparity in age, was feared to be a source of female dominance in marriage. The man who married a widow much wealthier than himself accomplished the enviable abdication of his financial responsibility to establish and provide for a household, but he simultaneously placed himself in a position potentially compromising to his masculinity.

It may be objected that since the husband legally took possession of all his wife’s property upon marriage, the relative wealth or poverty of the bride would have been immaterial to the distribution of power in the household. It does not appear, however, that the absolute legal rights of the husband translated in practice into his sole and unquestioned control over the household wealth. To begin with, the wife’s right to use and dispose of the household goods as she saw fit is one of the very few issues on which contemporary prescriptive authors do not agree. On one side, William Perkins argues that without the husband’s consent, the wife could only dispose of things either “reserved upon the match made betwene them [ie, through a legal premarital contract], or else peculiar unto her by their mutuall consent,” and not of “the goods which are common to them both” (175). Since the two former conditions are merely consent granted
beforehand, the wife’s actual power over the goods is almost nil. On the other side, though, Henry Smith castigates husbands who say “that which is thine is mine, and that which is mine is my owne,” and observes that wives may justly reply “he which hath given me himselfe, can he deny me any thing? The bodie is better than the goodes; therefore if the bodie be mine. the goods are mine too” (57). Brathwait agrees that the married couple should “join in purse as they doe joine in care,” though for the more cynical reason that the wife who sees herself limited in this way is likely to try to cheat her husband out of his goods anyway (“Good Wife” B6r, original italics). Matthew Griffith evaluates both sides of the dispute—“Some hold that a wife hath no power to dispose of any thing, meerely of her selfe, but only by allowance . . . . Others (as wide on the other side) think that the wife hath right, and power, over her husbands goods to give, when and what, and to whom she pleaseth”—and attempts to reach a compromise. However, the three criteria he proposes to justify the wife’s disposal of property are so open to interpretation that they would likely incite more conflict than they would resolve: the wife does not require consent if a) her action tends to God’s glory and her husband’s good; b) her husband is “Foolish and weake, and not able to discerne what is good for himselfe, and his family”; c) her husband is “an enemie to the workes of Mercy” (331-33).

Of all the moralists, Gouge gets the most embroiled in the question of a wife’s right to the family goods, devoting an extraordinary sixteen pages to explicating degrees of consent, investigating exceptional cases, disputing posited objections, and evaluating legal issues. He comes out on the side of near-absolute male control, but he examines the issue in such detail precisely because this was the one aspect of wifely submission that
his female parishioners were not prepared to swallow. Having once been attacked on the matter. Gouge is on the defensive:

I remember that when these Domesticall Duties were first uttered out of the pulpit, much exception was taken against the application of a wife's subjection to the restraining of her from disposing the common goods of the family without or against her husband's consent. But surely they that made these exceptions did not well thinke of the Cautions and Limitations which were then delivered, and are now againe expressly noted: which are, that the foresaid restraint be not extended to the proper goods of a wife, no nor overstrictly to such goods as are set apart for the use of the family, nor to extraordinary cases, nor alwaies to an expresse consent, nor to the consent of such husbands as are impotent, or farre and long absent. If any other warrantable caution shall be shewed me, I will be as willing to admit it, as any of these. ("Epistle Dedicatory," original italics)

Out of a treatise that lays down all the rules of domestic hierarchy in their strictest form, it was the denial of authority over the day to day administration of money and goods that enraged the wives of Gouge's congregation. For while many other facets of a wife's subjection to her husband could be nebulous and hypothetical, the question of who controlled the money was about power of a very concrete and immediate kind.

If wives in general so staunchly defended their right to the family purse, it is not surprising that widows were feared to demand an unseemly share of household authority when they had contributed the bulk of the household's wealth. Having already
relinquished to his wife the masculine role of financial provider, a widow’s new husband was seen to enter a continuous power struggle for the masculine attributes of domestic government, headship, and superiority. Batty states the case very clearly: a maid, he advises, will "be more tractable then a widdow. who rather will looke to bee obeied, as wel for that shee hath been before acquainted with love matters, as also because for the most part they bring greater wealth unto their husbands, then the maides doe.... For whoso matcheth with farre richer wives then themselves, they seldom acknowledge them for their husbands, but rather account them as bondmen of their dowrie." (97-98). The Bachelor’s Banquet describes an unfortunate young man wed to “a lusty widow of a middle age and much experience, who, by the trial which she had of her first husband, knows how to handle the second” (Guil denhuys 125). The new husband is reduced to the traditional status of a wife:

Her first attempt is to usurp superiority and to become his head, and this she obtains without any great difficulty, for there is nothing so lavish as a simple and well-natured young man, being in subjection—that is, married—to a widow, especially if she be, as most of them are, of a perverse and crabbed nature.

(Guil denhuys 126)

While the Banquet’s author leaves the widow’s methods of usurping superiority to the imagination, Swetnam does not:

... if thou at any time are desirous to be merry in her company, she will say thou art merry because thou hast gotten a wife that is able to maintain thee, where before thou wast a beggar and hadst nothing...; if thou make provision to fare well in thy house she
will bid thee spend that which thou broughtest thy selfe. If thou shewe thy selfe sparing she will say thou shalt not pinch her of that which is her owne, and if thou doe anything contrary to her minde she will say her other husband was more kinde . . . . if thou go abroad and spend any thing before thou comest home, she will say a beggar I found thee and a beggar thou meanest to leave me: if thou stay alwaies at home she will say thou art happy thou hast gotten a wife that is able to maintain thee idle. . . . (59-60)

Exactly such an emasculating harangue is put in the mouth of a newly married widow in *A Juniper Lecture*, as she berates her second husband with the virtues of her first:

I had a man before, but now I have a foole . . . . Though you have got all my estate into your hands by your faire words, yet you are deceived; I have a bagge in store that you shall never know of, nor be a penny the better for it, no nor any of yours neither, for using me in this manner: my estate hath made you a man; before you had my estate, which my deare loving husband left me, you were a beggar, and not worth a groate before you met with me . . . .

(45-46)

The husband has been “made a man” and yet is not a man, for having created his manhood with her wealth, the wife is bent on keeping both the money and his masculinity firmly in her own grip. Even her taunt that she has “a bagge in store” undermines his manhood, for it plays on the common dual meaning of “bag” as both “purse” and “scrotum.” This conflation of money and masculinity is not new: the Wife of Bath, for instance, boasts that in wedding her five husbands, she “pyked out the beste, / Bothe of
here nether purs and of here cheste” (Karras 202). The Juniper Lecture widow, however, is less interested in sexual attentions (perhaps because her husband has proved a disappointment in that area too, having fallen “farre short of what I did expect from you” [45]), and more intent on proving that the spouse who holds the “bagge” also holds, so to speak, the bag.

The threat to one’s masculinity attendant upon marrying a widow can be seen as yet another manifestation of the inherent anxieties of early modern masculinity, as described by Mark Breitenberg. Understanding, as I do, “masculinity” and “femininity” as “historically specific deployments of gender differences sensible only in relation to one another” (8), Breitenberg argues that masculinity in a patriarchal society is inherently and inevitably anxious, for such a society “always and only sustains itself in constant defense of the privileges of some of its members and by the constraint of others,” and therefore “those individuals whose identities are formed by the assumption of their own privilege must also have incorporated varying degrees of anxiety about the preservation or potential loss of that privilege” (3). As he points out, both “identity” and “anxiety” are best understood in the early modern period as social phenomena (as opposed to the modern, psychoanalytic concept of them as individual, psychic phenomena), based preeminently in such factors as “property, reputation, and status” (12). “Anxious masculinity,” then, is “the internalization of specifically social tensions that are endemic to the early modern sex-gender system” (13). The man who wished to marry a widow contemplated entering a position which incited anxiety specifically in respect to property, reputation, and status: the family property was legally his, but maintained only against the widow’s constantly assuming her right to it; his reputation and status were enhanced by his new role as a wealthy householder, but simultaneously threatened by the widow’s
attempt to usurp superiority and reduce him to the conventional laughingstock of a husband “in subjection.”

If the suitor was not to be scared off by these prospects, he needed reassurance, and this reassurance was available from another facet of masculinity: sexual virility. As Anthony Fletcher notes, for early modern men, “the most telling test of manhood was of course sexual prowess and performance” (93); while romantic love was often considered a kind of effeminacy, sexual conquest had the opposite connotations (Fletcher 94-97). This, then, was where the stereotype of the lustful widow came into play. By imagining the widow as driven into marriage by her sexual needs, and himself as the man most capable of satisfying those needs, the suitor compensated for the threat the marriage offered to his manhood, both by focussing on and bolstering the sexual aspect of his masculinity, and by representing his claim to her property as a fair exchange of need for need, or perhaps even as his due earnings for services rendered. I do not mean to imply that individual suitors did this ideological work for themselves, much less that they were aware of the process that constructed the fantasy of the widow’s sexual susceptibility out of male anxieties. The stereotype and its deployment as an enabler of remarriage were made available to them by a culture with a material interest in the recirculation of the widow’s wealth back into the (male) economy. In a society which feared female dominance, the image of the sexually needy widow was required to transform the idea of marrying her into a palatable fantasy.36

36 A secondary, complementary function of the stereotype of the sexually needy widow may have been to enable remarriage by encouraging widows to see themselves as in need of a man: living in a state of perpetual unsatisfied sexual desire was well known to be dangerous to a woman’s health, and in particular, to provoke attacks of hysteria, or “the Mother.” See Fontanus 4-6; Jorden 22 (also numbered G2v); Jardine 130.
We can now see what is really going on in the story of Zilia and Philibert, with which I introduced this study. The poem’s unexpected condemnation of Zilia’s widowed chastity and careful husbandry of her goods makes sense when we understand this behaviour as her failure to conform to the fantasy of a widow eager to bestow her property on a young man in exchange for sexual pleasure. Zilia is portrayed as both “churlishly” chaste and avaricious because the poem sees her chastity as avarice, as a refusal to allow men access to her wealth, which includes “great lande.” She simply does not permit the fantasy: while her firm grip on her property warns suitors of what they may expect from her as a wife, her carefully guarded reputation as sexually cold does not allow them to enjoy the compensatory bolstering of masculinity which would enable them nonetheless to woo her boldly. Zilia is so very cold and chaste, and has so unequivocally demonstrated her unbreachable celibacy through her refusal of even innocent pleasures, that Philibert is unable even to imagine her as capable of sexual interest. In consequence, he spends most of his “courtship” of her alone pining tearfully on his bed, timidly sending letters and go-betweens. And Zilia’s punishment for failing to behave as a widow should is a set-piece of poetic justice. It is her avarice which leads her to France to “cure” Philibert of his dumbness:

Not caring for to see hir love
    but to get praise and thankes:
And causing him to speake, she should
    obtenye ten thousande frankes

Who blinded with dame Avarice,
    hir heart like fire did burne. (E2v-E3v)
Burning with greed instead of desire, Zilia drives herself into a situation where she finally, in a sense, needs Philibert sexually: she beds him because she needs him to accept her “cure” and save her life. The widow who held on to her money and refused to remarry is ironically rendered sexually accessible through her own covetousness.

The moral of the story, as explained in “The Preface to the Reader,” is that widows should not presume that they can live chastely single, nor should they be too careful of their purses:

If the vaineglorie and arrogant presumption of a chastitie impregnable, had not deceived the Gentlewomanne following in this Treatise, if the sugred hunger of golde had not blinded her, it coulde not have bin knowne wherein her inconstancie consisted, not in the minion delites and alluring toyes of a passionate Lover, but in the covetous desire of filling her purse, and hypocriticall glorye of praise amongst menne.... But the fault of one whiche by hir owne presumption disceved hir selfe, ought not to obscure the glorie of so manye vertuous, faire, and honest dames, who by their chastitie, liberalitie, and curtesie be able too deface the blot of follie, covetousnesse, and crueltie of this Gentlewoman heere, and of all other that doe resemble hir. (A3r-A3v)

The “chastitie” that accompanies a widow’s financial “liberalitie” and loving “curtesie” certainly would be of the (re)married variety. And aspiring to anything else is “follie.”

If *A Discourse of the Great Crueltie of a Widow* is a cautionary tale of how widows ought not to behave, Thomas Deloney’s *Jack of Newbury* (1597) is what Alexander Leggatt describes as “a fantasy of wish-fulfillment” (*Citizen Comedy* 15), with
its first chapter devoted specifically to the fantasy of marrying a wealthy widow. Deloney makes the fantasy available to his readers in its purest and, for our purposes, most instructive form. By “making the fantasy available,” I mean to indicate that it is the text, not the fictional suitor, which constructs the widow as lustful, so as to present a fantasy to the reader of what widows are “really” like: the fictional suitor need do nothing but perceive, correctly, that the widow “is” lustful. Jack is in the service (whether as a journeyman or a kind of senior apprentice is unclear) of a weaver’s widow, a “very comely auncient Woman, and of reasonable Wealth” (5), who begins to show him signs of favour, discussing her suitors with him and dropping broad hints that she “like[s] better of one nearer hand” (8). Noticing her interest, Jack finds himself torn between his desire for the ready-made household and wealth such a match would bring him, and the fear that the widow will prove an insubordinate wife:

. . . knowing therefore the womans disposition, and withall that her estate was reasonable good, and considering beside that he should finde a house ready furnished, servants ready taught, and all other things for his trade necessarie, he thought it best not to let slip that good occasion, least hee should never come to the like. But againe, when hee considered her yeares to bee unfitting to his youth, and that she that sometime had beene his Dame, would (perhaps) disdaine to be governed by him that had beene her poore servant, that it would prove but a badde bargaine, doubting many inconveniences that might growe thereby, he therefore resolved to be silent rather than to proceed further: (11-12)
Well might Jack be worried, for his mistress’ desire for him as a husband stems from her appreciation that “she had never a Prentise that yeelded her more obedience then hee did, or was more dutifull” (7).

Fortunately for him, however, Jack’s decision to do nothing results in his being carried passively along to prosperity on the tide of the widow’s desire. She dismisses her three wealthy suitors in favour of Jack for distinctly sexual reasons: one “being overworne in yeares makes mee overloth to love him;” another is “so long a ranger, he would be at home a stranger;” and the third, a parson, “will bee so bent to his books, that he will have little minde of his bed” (8-9). She relates a dream to him that is a thinly veiled allegory of her love, pointedly tells him she intends to sleep with her chamber door open, and one winter night she plies him with sack, tucks him into “his masters best bed,” and later creeps in herself, with the excuse that “the night is so extreame cold, and my Chamber walles so thin, that I am like to be starved in my bed” (20). Deloney is unforthcoming about what happens in the bed—“John being a kind young man would not say her nay. and so they spent the rest of the night both together in one bed” (20)—but the next morning the widow takes Jack to a chapel and reminds him of a promise he once made “not to hinder mee, when I came to the Church to bee married, but rather to set it forward” (21). Lisa Jardine describes Jack as being “tricked . . . into an actual marriage ceremony” (129), but a contemporary reader would probably recognize that his promise to the widow could in no way be upheld as a legal betrothal. When Jack marries the widow at this point, he does so of his own free will; his earlier anxieties have evidently been counterbalanced, neutralized by the widow’s display of her sexual need for him. For the privilege of having Jack in her bed, the widow elevates him to the place of master
over his former fellow servants, and bestows upon him household, workshop, wealth, and all.

As one might imagine, however, being married to a widow who marries out of lust is not exactly unproblematic. There are a number of texts which focus, sympathetically or judgmentally, on the troubles a widow lets herself in for when she imprudently indulges her desires by marrying a young man: tales of unfaithfulness, abuse, and financial ruin which seem to be partly based in fact (the inequity of contemporary marital property laws was bound to breed its share of heartless con-men) and partly, perhaps, promulgated in the interests of older men excluded from the youth-and-virility game but still wanting their chance with a widow and her estate. More relevant to the pattern traced here, though, are those discussions of remarriage which take the new husband’s point of view. Some of these I have mentioned earlier, texts which portray remarried widows as complaining, domineering wives. Another key characteristic in this unflattering portrait is jealousy: old widows, especially, are assumed to live in constant suspicion that their husbands are having adulterous liaisons with younger women. *A Juniper Lecture*, for instance, presents a five-times married widow who jealously berates her twenty-four year old spouse for being ashamed of being seen with her in the street, yet always eager to go out with “any of your old acquaintance, those young gill-flurts, who tricke up themselves like a Bartholomew-faire Babie, or any other light Gossips” (52). While a husband’s jealousy in the early modern period is best understood as a man’s fear of the emasculating stigma of cuckoldry, female marital

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37 See, for example, Niccholles 18; T.E. 331-32; Becon 366; “A Rich Widow’s Wooing;” “The Cunning Age.” True stories of exploitative second marriages are found in Clark 190-91, Greaves 196, and especially, Sisson’s account of Tobias Audley’s plot to marry Anne Elsdon, dramatized in the lost play *Keep the Widow Waking*. Significantly, a ballad which apparently describes the plot and tone of the play celebrates what it depicts as the young man’s triumph in marrying the lascivious old widow, and the play would seem to have done likewise. The ballad is reprinted in Sisson 238-40.
jealousy, a much rarer phenomenon in texts of the period, is based in no such stigma. Rather, it appears to have been seen as a function of sexual deprivation. The jealous wife in *The Bachelor's Banquet*, for example, fears that her husband's limited sexual energies are being expended elsewhere than in her bed:

>This jolly widow will, within a while grow jealous, fear and suspect that some other dame hath part of that which she so mightily desireth and wherewith she could never be satisfied, so that if he glut not her insatiable humor, straightway she conceiveth this opinion if he do but talk, nay, which is worse, look on any other woman, for she by her good will would always be in his arms or at least in his company. (Guildenhuys 126).

A similar construction of female marital jealousy as sexual deprivation is offered in *The Widow's Tears*: "For wherefore," Tharsalio asks, "rage wives at their husbands so, when they fly out? For zeal against the sin?". "No," rejoins the bawd Arsace, "because they did not purge that sin" (2.3.27-29). Such jealousy, as "A Proverb Old, Yet Ne'er Forgot" asserts, can only be taken care of with plenty of sex:

>Some perhaps may make objection that Old-women jelous are, Let that not change thy affection, though they be doe not thou care if thou be true and give her due Shele nere mistrust thee feare it not shele love thee deare
then doe not feare
But strike the Iron while tis hott. (Rollins, Garland 231-32)

It is worth considering, then, whether there is more to the notion of the widow as jealous wife than the commonsense assumption that an older woman will naturally be suspicious of younger rivals: namely, whether the image constructed to assuage certain male anxieties—the widow’s voracious sexual appetite—in fact carries within it the seeds of another anxiety which blossoms after marriage. Having bolstered his threatened masculinity by fantasizing the widow’s lustfulness, the suitor, now a husband, is left with the after-image of that fantasy, a potentially insatiable wife. Formerly in the pleasing position of seeing her desires open to his advantage, he assumes the marital burden of having not only to satisfy those desires and so to guard against jealousy but also to constrain and police them so as to guard against something far worse—cuckoldry. Of course, fear of being cuckolded was potentially the lot of any married man; my point is that the pre-marital fantasy of the widow’s voracious desire would likely have exacerbated it.38

A sense of the dangers of the desirous widow as sexually insatiable wife surfaces in several texts. I will return to Jack of Newbury shortly—for the story of Jack and the widow does not quite end at their marriage—but first I wish to examine a richly ambiguous ballad titled “Nobody his Counsaile to Chuse a Wife: Or, the Difference betweene Widdowes and Maydes.” The ballad is ostensibly a list of reasons why widows make better wives than maidens do, but the title itself alerts the reader (or hearer) to look for hints that these reasons are not to be taken at face value. The method of comparison is simple: one stanza describes the difficulties of marrying a maid, and the next explains

38 On cuckoldry anxiety, see Breitenberg 5-6, 147-49; Fletcher 103-04.
why marrying a widow avoids these problems. On the surface, the ballad presents the basic elements of the fantasy: widows, who are eager to marry for sexual pleasure, provide a man with a functioning, expense-free household. But into its praise of how little a widow will require from her husband for childbirth expenses (described as the “married mens curse” [Rollins, Garland 265]), there creeps a sly, punning reminder that the widow-wife is sexually used goods, with the appetite that such goods usually have:

He that deales with a Widdow,

hath these [articles needed for childbirth] at command:

*He takes a commodity

*broke to his hand,

He neede not stand carking,

for linnen nor Cradle:

If he bestow getting,

to keepe it shees able:

She seldom will pray

her husband to pay:

*If he bestow night worke,

*then sheele bestow day. (266, my italics)

A little later, this hint is developed further, in a stanza that starts out innocently enough with housekeeping and ends up, with dark insinuations, in the bedroom:

A Widdow will alwayes,

looke well to her home:

Let him do his businesse

or let it alone,
Sheele buy what is needfull
to serve her owne use:
In words she will never
her husband abuse
Abroad she is kinde,
in bed he shal finde:
A woman that strive will,
to pleasure his mind. (268)

Eric Partridge’s dictionary of Shakespearean bawdy glosses sexual meanings for
“business,” “serve,” “use,” “abuse” (“To make a cuckold of; to wrong by infidelity” [55]), and “strive.” No matter how a husband tries to do his “businesse” (that is, to please his wife sexually), reads the subtext of double-entendres, the widow may use her wealth to get what she feels she needs in the way of sexual services from other men to “serve” her “use.” She thus will not “abuse” her husband in words but in deeds; that is, she will cuckold him. The next two lines convey their implication by teasingly appearing to contain an enjambment: “Abroad she is kinde in bed, he shall finde.” And presumably, she will do her best to “pleasure his mind” by appearing to be faithful. The ballad’s refrain is similarly equivocal, suggesting one thing as a refrain to the earlier stanzas about wooing and yielding, but another when it follows the stanzas which describe the widow as wife:

For Maydens are wanton
and often times coy:
But Widdowes be wilfull
and never say nay. (264, original italics)
That which is a boon to the suitor becomes a curse to the husband: the widow who "willfully" chooses her own mate and never refuses his proposals is likely to be a "willful" (lustful, headstrong) wife who "never says nay" to the improper advances of anyone. As Niccholes commiserates, "the best is, though the worse for thee, they [widows] are navigable without difficulty, more passable than Virginia, and lye at an easier Rode, as unsatiable as the sea, or rather the grave" (25). It is not coincidental, perhaps, that "Nobody his Counsaile to Chuse a Wife" is sung to the tune of "The Wanton Wife of Westminster" (Rollins, Garland 263).

Jealousy, insatiability, and the threat of cuckoldry are also the undercurrents of the little drama of wifely insubordination that closes the first chapter of Jack of Newbury. While the widow's desirousness enables Jack to lay aside his reservations about marrying a potentially domineering wife and move into his master's place, he is not immediately able to enjoy this position in peace. For the widow fears that "so lustie a young man as he would never love her being so ancient" and so launches a sort of pre-emptive strike. Before Jack can neglect her, she resolves to "take him downe in his wedding shooes," neglecting him and her household by gadding about from morning to night "among her gossips and acquaintance to make merrie." When Jack admonishes her about it, she responds in true widow's fashion:

The day hath beene when I might have gone forth when I would, and come in againe when it had pleased me without controulement: and now I must bee subject to every Jacke's checke. I am sure (quoth she) that by my gadding abroad, and carelesse spending I waste no goods of thine. I pittyng thy povertie, made thee a man,
and maister of the house, but not to the end I woulde become thy slave. (22)

Having “made him a man,” she now shows him exactly how much his manhood is still in her power. Although we are never told what the widow gets up to when she goes out, “gadding abroad” and insubordination are traditionally associated with adultery. The man who could not make his wife obey was conventionally assumed to be a cuckold as well (Underdown 127), and the wife’s breach of the boundaries of the home was equally conventionally linked, at least in theory, to her breach of chastity. Such implications of her behaviour surface on the night she returns home at midnight to find that Jack has locked her out, and he insinuates that she is a whore:

What, is it you that keepes such a knocking? I pray you get hence and request the Constable to provide you a bed, for this night you shall have no lodging heere.

I hope quoth shee, you will not shut me out of doores like a dogge, or let me lie in the streetes like a strumpet.

Whether like a dogge or drab, quoth hee, all is one to mee, knowing no reason but that as you have stayed out all day for your delight, so you may lie foorth all night for my pleasure. (23)

Even at this point, though, the widow manages to keep the upper hand. After luring Jack outside with a show of submission, she locks him out, scolds him for having lectured her, and forces him to “go to bed with [his] fellowes” the apprentices, putting him, quite literally, in his place. The couple reaches a truce the next morning, but despite the assurance that they then “lived long together, in most godly, loving and kind sort,” the truce seems to be very much on her terms. Jack, exasperated and defeated, decides to
“leave [her] to [her] own wilfulness,” which elicits the following satisfied response:
“seeing yee have sworne to give mee my will, I vowe likewise that my wilfulnesse shall not offend you” (24-25). This resolution, with its echo of the Wife of Bath’s tale, does not detract much from the widow’s control.

A fantasy of wish-fulfillment? It would seem that however a widow’s sexual appetite may temporarily neutralize her threat to her suitor’s masculinity, that threat returns after marriage with a vengeance. But Jack of Newbury does indeed offer marriage to a lustful widow as a fantasy to its readers, with the magic words that conclude the first chapter: “in the end she died, leaving her husband wondrous wealthie” (25). The end of Chapter One and the end of the widow are merely the beginning for Jack. The deeds of bravery, generosity, and public spirit which win the admiration of his fellow citizens and his king proceed to unfold in the ten chapters of his story which follow. In these chapters, Jack has a new wife at his side, one of his own maidservants. The story of their wedding, with its emphasis on the maid’s parents’ consent and Jack’s generosity in making her the mistress of such a wealthy, thriving household, effectively re-orders the domestic hierarchy which his first marriage had inverted (26-30). Chapter Two also opens with a glorious description, partly in verse, of Jack’s “great household and family,” hundreds of merry, orderly, well-fed workers industriously weaving and spinning and filling his warehouses with valuable cloth. All this is Jack’s, courtesy of the widow, who is never mentioned again. If marrying a wealthy widow is a fantasy fraught with anxiety, the ultimate fantasy may be obtaining a widow’s wealth without having to keep the widow.

In Jack of Newbury, any such desire is of course left unsaid, for the suggestion that Jack harboured a death-wish towards his first wife would be at odds with the folk-hero good will that is the basis of his character. Other writers are less reticent in their
expression of this fantasy, though even they are careful to defuse its moral unacceptability with humour. Swetnam’s “Bearbaiting of Widows,” for instance, contains five anecdotes about men unhappily married to widows, three of which feature the widow’s death. One, concerning a man who refused to go to heaven if his wife was there, begins “One having married with a widowe, it was his luck to bury her…;” another involves a widow who hangs herself in a fit of jealousy, leading to the punch line “I would said he that all trees did beare such fruit.” The third tells of

Another merry companion having married with a widowe and carrying her over the Sea into France there sodainely arose a great storme, in so much that they were all in danger of drowning, the maister of the Ship called unto the mariners & bad them take & throw over bord al the heaviest goodes in the Ship, this married man hearing him say so, hee tooke his widdow and threw her overboord, and being asked the reason why he did so, he said that he never felt any thing in all his life that was so heavy to him as she had beene. (62-63)

In the same vein, but more even explicit, is a sardonic little rhyme from A Juniper Lecture, cautiously titled “An advice for some:”

A Widow that is rich
and wondrous old,
Wooe her, and stew her
tender in her gold:
If she be cold, a yong mans
flame will toast her,
Or else his fire of youth
will rotten roast her:
But let him day and night
himselfe apply
To please her still, and
shee’le the sooner dye. (26)

The main joke of this rather unsavoury bit of verse is that the advice purports to satisfy both parties: while the widow would be the gratified recipient of exactly what she married for, her young husband would be calculatingly hastening the day when the gold would be his with no widow attached.

In the comedies of the period, the fantasy of getting rid of the widow takes a somewhat less vicious turn, at least partly for the obvious reason that the constraints of genre prohibit killing off anybody. But while many plays, such as Lording Barry’s Ram Alley (1610?), Nathan Field’s Amends for Ladies (1611), and Fletcher’s Wit Without Money (1614), simply end with the young man’s successful engineering of the sex-for-money exchange, the motif of the hero who gets wealth from or by means of a widow whom he then loses along the way crops up in enough plays to form a significant pattern. Instead of death—the only way most real contemporary marriages could be dissolved—playwrights make use of a variety of elaborate stratagems and coincidences to allow the hero to keep the money and discard the widow. In Michaelmas Term, Quomodo comes back from the “dead” and manages to reclaim his wife but not his property from Thomasine’s new husband; in No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s, the “bridegroom” keeps the widow’s money but renders the marriage invalid when “he” reveals “himself” to be a woman in disguise. In Ben Jonson’s The Alchemist (1610), Face uses the Widow Pliant,
whom he had intended to marry, as a bribe to persuade his master, Lovewit, to forgive his use of the house for his confidence games, and the play suggests that the servant gets the better deal. Face keeps the proceeds of his trickery, while Lovewit marries a bride who may not be all that he hopes for. In Middleton’s A Trick to Catch the Old One, there is even less danger of the young hero marrying a widow, for the “widow” whom he uses to extract money from his uncle with the pretence of being on the verge of a wealthy match is in fact a penniless courtesan. Most fantastic of all, perhaps, is Lucklesse’s success in wriggling out of his marriage to the masterful Widow Fitchew in Richard Brome’s The Northern Lass (1629). Regretting his choice even before his wedding night, Lucklesse plots to obtain a divorce by avoiding consummation, and finally discovers, to his joy and the audience’s surprise, that the marriage was never valid because his friend, Tridewell, who feared it a bad match, rigged up a phony parson to perform the ceremony. Lucklesse does not keep Fitchew’s money (the implication is that even as her husband, he would have never got his hands on it), but his liaison with the widow leads directly to his marriage to a well-dowered maid, the “Northern Lass” of the title. Fitchew, for her part, is handed over to Tridewell, who has the age and experience needed to handle her, although the play’s conclusion hints that even Tridewell may not be inclined to take the risk of marrying her. The Northern Lass is beyond the period of 1600-1625 which this thesis deals with, but it is an interestingly extreme example of the anxiety generated by a widow’s superior wealth and power. Excepting Brome’s, all of the above plays will be dealt with in more detail in subsequent chapters. At this point I simply wish to show how the stage, as well as popular non-dramatic literature, at times took the fantasy of profiting from a widow to its ultimate step of escaping a marriage to her.
In the preceding pages I have tried to provide the beginnings of a “thick
description” of the lusty widow stereotype as it functioned in early seventeenth-century
London, investigating what ideological work it performed and the extent to which it
performed that work successfully. I have argued that the imperative of preventing a
widow’s remarriage was not sufficiently strong or widespread to account for the
extraordinary popularity of this image, nor for the decidedly non-dissuasive situations in
which it frequently figured. I have suggested that any such imperative which discouraged
widows—particularly childless widows—from remarrying and re-circulating their wealth
among men would in fact have been economically counter-productive. And I have traced
an alternative, remarriage-enabling deployment of the “lusty widow” which stems from
the conflict between men’s desire for and men’s fear of the wealthy widow as wife, a
deployment deeply informed by the anxiety that the remarried widow will pose a threat to
her new husband’s masculinity. Fantasizing the widow as sexually needy, sexually in
need of him, bolsters the suitor’s masculinity against the potentially “feminine” position
he will enter in the widow’s household.

This introduction is an incomplete description, though, for until now it has for the
most part deliberately ignored the fictions which played perhaps the most significant role
in both reflecting and shaping the fantasy of accessing a widow’s wealth through her
desires—the fictions of the popular theatre. Before turning to the plays themselves,
however, I want to consider the question of for whom these fantasies were being
produced. As Andrew Gurr has shown, London playgoers were a heterogeneous lot,
comprising both sexes, all ages, and a wide range of social classes (Playgoing 50-80).
Considering Middleton alone, we can see that his earlier comedies—The Phoenix, The
Puritan, Michaelmas Term and A Trick—written for the more expensive “private” indoor
theatre of Paul’s Boys, may have played to a more exclusively wealthy audience than *More Dissemblers* and *The Widow*, which the King’s Men likely performed both at Blackfriars and at the Globe. But it would be misleading to assume a corresponding difference in social class, education, or moral values between Middleton’s earlier and later audiences. Paul’s Boys’ repertory was not targeted at the elite classes but rather at “citizen interests,” and showed a “sense of belonging to London and to city audiences” (Gurr. *Shakespearian* 342-43), while the relatively elite Blackfriars Boys’ audience which the King’s men “inherited” when they took over that theatre in 1608 enjoyed the same fare that provided summertime entertainment at the cheaper, more accessible Globe.  

A few of the non-Middletonian plays that will be discussed in the following chapter, including Chapman’s *The Widow’s Tears* and Beaumont and Fletcher’s *The Scornful Lady*, were produced by Blackfriars Boys (also known as the Queen’s Revels Children) which, unlike Paul’s Boys, geared its offerings towards what Gurr describes as “the sexual cynicism of a narrow and highly opinionated segment of London’s society” (*Shakespearian* 354). The spectacle of an impecunious and sexually daring young man winning a rich widow may have had particular appeal to this clientele of “discontented courtiers and wits, younger sons of gentry, lawyers and Inns of Court students” (*Shakespearian* 352). However, as chapter two will show, the marriage of a bankrupt young man and a libidinous widow was a motif associated with no one theatre or company, and presumably appealed across the spectrum of London audiences; none of the plays would have been intended to cater solely to an audience of young, single men, who might be assumed to be the prime consumers of the lusty widow fantasy.

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39 The venues, repertory, and class appeal of the later Paul’s Boys and the King’s Men are described in Gurr, *The Shakespearian Playing Companies* 337-46, 366-93. It is not certain which company produced *No Wit, No Help: Annals* tentatively assigns it to the Lady Elizabeth’s Men, but Gurr does not list it among the plays of this or any other company.
It is therefore difficult to generalize about how actual audiences would have received the stage representations of the widow and her suitors. Even if we take the basic formula of a widow making a young man's fortune through marriage in exchange for sexual satisfaction, and assume that it offered young men in a similar social position the dream that they too could rise in this way, what of the audience's married citizens and their wives, single young women, or widows, both single and remarried? To what extent did individual spectators identify with or resent the depiction of characters who most closely resembled them, and to what extent did they accept the conventions of fiction and enjoy the hero's conquests? But while we can only speculate on how different segments of the audience might have received these plays, it is still possible to trace in a general way the audience responses each play seems designed to elicit, the pattern of sympathies and antipathies it suggests, the fantasies it offers or undermines, and the anxieties it assuages or arouses, by historicizing as accurately as possible the frame of reference that a Jacobean audience would have brought to each new play. The necessity of such a frame of reference, basic to any new historicist work, is theorized in Hans Robert Jauss's writings on the aesthetics of reception, where he explains how "The reconstruction of the horizon of expectations, on the basis of which a work in the past was created and received, enables us to find the questions to which the text originally answered and thereby to discover how the reader of that day viewed and understood the work" (18-19). To gain insight into an original audience's "reception" of (or response to) a literary text, one must consider

first . . . the familiar standards or the inherent poetry of the genre;
second . . . the implicit relationships to familiar works of the literary-historical context; and third . . . the contrast between
fiction and reality, between the poetic and the practical function of language, which the reflective reader can always realize while he is reading. The third factor includes the possibility that the reader of a new work has to perceive it not only within the narrow horizon of his literary expectations but also within the wider horizon of his experience of life. (14)

The plays to be discussed in the following chapter, along with the non-dramatic popular literature examined earlier, provide the context of “familiar standards” and “familiar works” that circulated prior to and during Middleton’s theatrical career. And if it is somewhat naïve to hope to recover “the contrast between fiction and reality,” and almost impossible to reconstruct the “experience of life” of actual play-goers, one can still usefully posit “the audience” as a collective construct, a culture whose written traces provide evidence that its individual members held, in innumerable variations, some combination of the beliefs, desires, and fears mapped out here.

The readings of the plays which follow propose three basic modes in which a play can interact with the culture’s desires and fears concerning widows. As some overlap inevitably occurs between modes, I will consider them not as discrete categories into which individual works can be slotted, but more as guidelines to lend coherence to the analysis of otherwise quite disparate situations, plots, and characters. A play can offer the fantasy “straight,” depicting a young man who wins a wealthy and obviously desirous widow through his sexual boldness, declared passion, or evident virility. Or a play can perform the flip side of the fantasy, focussing on how justified male fears of marrying a widow are, and sympathetically acknowledging that the widow, though tempting, is not really worth having. Both of these modes involve the acceptance of conventional
ideology about widows: the first merely promulgates an optimist’s view, and the second, a cynic’s. The third mode, however, has more subversive possibilities: by presenting the widow and her suitor in such a way that her lustfulness is clearly seen to be constructed by the suitor and so reflects more on him than on her, the play can expose the fantasy as *his* fantasy, and even reveal its underpinnings of threatened masculinity. As Jauss explains, each new literary work “evokes for the reader (listener) the horizon of expectations and rules familiar from earlier texts, which are then varied, corrected, changed or just reproduced” (13). Subverting the expectations established by over a decade of comic widow-plots, such later Middletonian comedies as *No Wit* and *The Widow* are not content to merely reproduce the culture’s conventional ideology.

For a playwright who turns so frequently for comic material to the widow and her suitors, Middleton never becomes predictable or repetitive. In the seven plays dealt with here, we begin with a villainous sea-captain who so regrets his marriage to a widow that he tries to sell her (*The Phoenix*), and then move on to a widow who high-handedly selects a clever rogue for her husband only to have him equally high-handedly denied to her (*The Puritan*); a naïve young man who gets his property back from a swindler by marrying his widow (*Michaelmas Term*); a bevy of suitors who chase a false “widow” constructed by a pair of tricksters and their own imaginations (*A Trick*); an entirely self-constructed “suitor”—a cross-dressed woman—who woos and wins a very real widow (*No Wit*); an aristocratic widow dealing with the constraints of Catholic doctrine and Italian custom (*More Dissemblers*); and last of all, a widow with every good quality who spends most of her play suing a dishonest and disagreeable fellow only to turn around and marry him in the end (*The Widow*). Three of the earlier plays, I will argue, are informed by the conventional line of thought on widows: *The Phoenix* and *The Puritan*
suggest that marrying a widow is not the boon it might seem, while *Michaelmas Term* is the play where Middleton comes closest to offering the fantasy of marrying a lustful, wealthy widow in its purest, most optimistic form. Although *A Trick* is chronologically closer to the first three plays (it may slightly predate *The Puritan* and/or *Michaelmas Term*), and *No Wit, No Help* closer to the later *More Dissemblers* and *The Widow*, these two plays are similar in that the first constructs a fake widow, and the second, a fake suitor. Both plays ostensibly offer the fantasy to their audiences but the explicit constructedness of widow and suitor continually threatens to undermine it. *A Trick*, with its widow *only* a fantasy, effectively reveals the images her suitors project upon her, while Kate’s wholly fictional masculinity parodies the anxious masculinity which needs to believe in a widow’s sexual susceptibility. *More Dissemblers* takes a somewhat darker look at how men attempt to mould widows out of their own projections and prescriptions. Finally, *The Widow* gives us Middleton’s last comic use of this favoured motif, and presents a pointed and explicit debunking of the fantasy of the “lusty widow,” satirically exposing its roots in male anxiety and denying the audience its customary pleasure in the “hero’s” triumph, in exchange for the more astringent and sophisticated pleasure of seeing through certain theatrical conventions. It is those conventions, as they appear in plays other than Middleton’s, that the next chapter examines.
Chapter Two

Although the image of the lustful, domineering widow who marries for sex and then battles her husband for mastery dates back at least to Chaucer’s time, the Elizabethan and Jacobean plays that have survived until the present day suggest that the remarrying widow may not have become a stock character on the comic stage until the beginning of the seventeenth century. The small number of extant plays and the lack of figures for London widows’ remarriage rates in the decades prior to the turn of the century only invite speculation about whether the widow may have gained in theatrical popularity due to the high rate of female remarriage in London between 1600 and 1625; few remarrying widows, however, appear in surviving comedies prior to 1600. The only one I have found is the unnamed widow whom Hortensio marries at the end of Shakespeare’s *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1594). Unlike most of her later counterparts, this widow is a very minor character, and the audience does not witness her wooing. Nevertheless, the play briefly makes use of the conventional elements of a widow’s second marriage, presenting the widow as a foil to the supposedly ideal maiden Bianca, and to Kate as reformed shrew. Tired of the drawn-out difficulties involved in wooing Bianca, Hortensio opts for the easy route, “a lusty widow... / That shall be woo’d and wedded in a day” (4.2.50-51). He does so, however, in the expectation that he will have to “tame” her (4.2.53), and predictably he fails. The widow proves to be the least obedient wife of the three: in the husbands’ contest of wifely submission, Kate comes at her husband’s bidding, Bianca politely sends word that “she is busy and she cannot come,” but the widow wishes her husband to obey her, returning the message that “She

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1 Nicholas Udall’s *Ralph Roister Doister* (1550) features a remarrying widow, Dame Christian Custance. However, Custance is contracted to be married when the play begins, and maintains her pledge to her betrothed against Ralph’s advances. Quite apart from the play’s allegorical implications, Ralph’s behaviour is more akin to the attempted seduction of a chaste wife than to the wooing of a marriageable widow.
will not come. She bids you come to her” (5.2.82-93). While the ungovernable widow will return periodically throughout the plays of the next quarter century, the wealthy, lustful widow eager to be “woo’d and wedded in a day”—the fantasy which compensates for the fear that she is ungovernable—becomes a theatrical staple.

Before I turn to the drama itself, it is necessary to consider why the fantasy of profiting from marriage to a lustful widow should be specifically a feature of comedy. Renaissance tragedy has its share of remarrying widows, but in these remarriages—between Claudius and Gertrude in Hamlet, Richard and Lady Anne in Richard III, or the Duchess of Malfi and Antonio—the political significance of the match and the noble or royal status of the couple provide the impetus to tragedy, as well as rendering irrelevant the common domestic concerns around which the fantasy revolves: money, sex, and household government. There are, to my knowledge, no extant domestic tragedies dealing with a widow’s remarriage. The ordinary woman who takes a second husband, it would seem, gives rise to celebration, lewd jokes, or at most, comic strife; her decision, as the previous chapter has shown, is morally unexceptionable and socially unremarkable, not exactly promising ground for tragic complications. There is also another kind of tragic widow: women like Isabella in Marston’s The Insatiate Countess, or Middleton’s Livia in Women Beware Women, who take lovers outside of marriage and ultimately pay for their sins with their lives. One of the plays in this chapter—Fletcher’s The Captain, which contains a subplot dark enough to verge on tragicomedy—comes close to portraying such a character, but Lelia is saved, despite herself, from the act and its consequences.

Squandering their wealth on whomever strikes their fancy but refusing to settle it legally on a husband,² sowing discord instead of establishing new households, these women—

² Marston’s Isabella in fact remarries, but runs off with another man the day after her wedding; her humiliated husband is driven to relinquish his wealth and join a monastery.
not the ordinary comic widow eager to remarry for sex—are the theatre’s truly threatening unruly widows.

The other plays to be discussed here fall squarely into the genre of comedy, and with a few exceptions they present a version of the familiar comic plot that the Renaissance inherited from Roman New Comedy: a young man overcomes obstacles, usually created by a member or members of the older generation, to marry the woman of his choice. English playwrights not only drew upon Classical formulae but adapted plot structures and characters from sixteenth-century Italian comedy, itself a development of New Comedy. Unlike the Romans, the Renaissance Italians tended to give their comedies “a sexual center,” making a prominent figure of the “giovane innamorata,” whom the protagonist sought to marry (Clubb 8). “The woman desired and desiring” (Clubb 8) became as much a fixture of English Renaissance comedy as of its Italian counterpart, and on occasion, the giovane innamorata was replaced by the lustful widow.

The substitution of a widow for the young maiden varied and complicated the standard marriage plot in a number of ways. First of all, it may have added a note of timeliness and topicality to the traditional formula. Although, as I have mentioned, the shortage of both London remarriage statistics and extant plays from before 1600 makes it impossible to draw any firm conclusions, the high female remarriage rates in London as compared to the rest of the country in the first quarter of the seventeenth century suggest that the figure of the remarrying widow might have had the appeal of local humour. The plot line and structure of comedies was—and still is—based on ancient patterns, but as regards the humour of comedy (and these plays were, on the whole, designed to evoke

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3 On the prevalence of this formula in New Comedy, see Salingar, Traditions 105, 199; Nelson 20; Miola 18; Konstan 24.
laughter). James K. Feibleman’s claim that “the contemporaneity of comedy is one of its essential features” (465) is as relevant to Jacobean theatre as it is to the modern sit-com.

As further regards comedy’s relation to jokes and laughter, it is probable that theatrical plots based on a young man’s courtship of a widow held considerable comic potential for a culture in which, as I have argued, such a courtship and marriage were anxiety-laden situations. As Keith Thomas points out, “laughter has a social dimension. Jokes are a pointer to joking situations, areas of structural ambiguity in society itself; and their subject-matter can be a revealing guide to past tensions and anxieties” (77). Jokes about “lascivious widows” and other unruly women, Thomas adds, were “a means of confronting the anomalies of insubordinate female behaviour which constantly threatened the actual working of what was supposed to be a male-dominated marital system” (77). The wooing of an older, wealthier widow by a poor young man always held within it the potential for a disorderly, female-dominated marriage, and the tension it generated could be released by its humorous portrayal on the stage and in contemporary popular comic literature like The Bachelor’s Banquet or Taylor’s A Juniper Lecture. This humour, moreover, consisted largely of bawdy jokes at the widow’s expense, whether in the form of the widow’s self-exposure through unconscious double entendre (such as when Taffata in Ram Alley instructs her kneeling suitor to “stand up, I more desire a man should stand, / Then cringe and creep that means to winne my love” [2170-71]) or of male characters’ wittily obscene remarks to or about her (like Quarlous’ graphic suggestion that sex with an old widow is like entering “a tomb, with a torch or three handfuls of link flaming hot . . . so thou mayst hap to make ’em feel thee” [Bartholomew Fair 1.3.63-64]).

4 See also Mangan, who notes that “unevenly-matched spouses” are a “traditional source of humour in medieval literature, in folk-tales, and in comic traditions such as that of the commedia dell’arte” (26).
theories about tendentious jokes are instructive here, although the dynamics of the theatre are somewhat different from those between Freud’s joke-teller and joke-hearer:

In the case of obscene jokes, which are derived from smut, it [the joke] turns the third person [the joke-hearer] . . . into an ally, before whom the woman must feel shame, by bribing him with the gift of its yield of pleasure. In the case of aggressive purposes it employs the same method in order to turn the hearer, who was indifferent to begin with, into a co-hater or co-despiser, and creates for the enemy a host of opponents where at first there was only one. (133)

The fictional character who directs jokes against the widow cannot usually be said to be seeking an ally in the spectator, but by evoking laughter at her expense he reveals himself, the play, and the audience members who join in the laughter to be allied together against the threat of insubordination posed by the widow as potential wife. As one of the aims of the sexual humour at the widow’s expense is to reduce her from the suitor’s financial and social superior to a mere woman at the mercy of her appetites, the obscene and the aggressive joke collapse into one.5

To return from joking situations to New Comedy structures, we can see that placing a widow instead of a maid at the centre of the love intrigue concentrates dramatic interest in the female character, for the widow, in most cases, functions as her own blocking figure. Typically, reciprocal love between a young man and a maiden is established before the action begins or at an early stage in the play, and the plot then deals with the young pair’s battles against parents or other obstacles that stand in the way of their union. There are some exceptions, such as Elder Loveless and the Lady in

5 Elsewhere in his study, Freud appears to collapse this distinction himself, noting that “A person who laughs at smut that he hears is laughing as though he were the spectator of an act of sexual aggression” (97).
Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady* (1613), and in a slightly different vein, Petruchio and Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*, but as a rule the young man’s ultimate "success" consists of conquering external hindrances, not of conquering the young woman herself. The widow, however, is both more physically accessible and more independent than the maiden, and nobody has the authority to prohibit her marriage. She herself poses the obstacle that the successful suitor must overcome, either in her inclination to marry another (usually wealthier) suitor, or in her contempt for his own low social status, bad reputation, or lack of money. The plays in this chapter will demonstrate that the suitor’s usual method of overcoming the widow’s sense of his unworthiness is to appeal to her carnal appetite with the kind of aggressively sexual wooing that would be unthinkable to offer to a maiden.

As I have argued in the previous chapter, the suitor typically attempts to reduce the widow to her sexual cravings so that he may assuage his anxieties and marry her despite the threat to his masculinity posed by the power she holds through her wealth. The widow, then, not only combines desired object and obstacle in one figure, but is also part of another common motif of New Comedy, the transfer of money from one generation to the next. Leo Salingar describes how the conflict between age groups in New Comedy is "usually a struggle over money occasioned by love" (*Traditions* 122), adding that one function of the genre’s trickster figure (who, in widow-wooing plots, is generally the suitor himself) is “to keep the family going precisely by conveying money from one generation to another . . . , typically, from the father’s use to the son’s; or better still, by transferring it to the son’s use from unsympathetic outsiders” (*Traditions* 127).

The widows’ ages are not specified in the plays dealt with here, but apart from the nineteen-year-old Dame Pliant in *The Alchemist* (1610), of whose desirability so much is
made that one may justly suspect her to be an exception to the rule, they appear to be mature women. And as the money that they hold is the legacy of an older man—the late husband—they are more closely aligned with the older generation than with the younger. Functioning simultaneously as the desired bride, the hinderer of the match, and the person who holds the needed money, the widow is more than a mere conduit of wealth from an old man to a young one. Rather, her power as a member of the older, established generation creates a dramatic tension not found in the traditional marriage-plot of New Comedy. When a young man marries a widow, who has really won control over whom?

The widow-marrriages which conclude comedies like Barry’s *Ram Alley*, Cooke’s *Tu Quoque*, Fletcher’s *Wit Without Money*, or Field’s *Amends For Ladies* are explicitly presented as the suitor’s triumph. However, comedies which involve such a marriage often also contain elements of the Prodigal Son paradigm—six of the plays to be examined in this study are included in Ervin Beck’s list of “English Prodigal Son Plays” (121-22).6 Evolving from a blend of the native morality play and the “Christian Terence” tradition in which Continental drama moralized Classical sources, the English Prodigal Son play is defined by Beck as one focussing on “a young man [who] has departed from the values of his forebears—values which the play assumed he ought to reembrace” (110). It is, as Beck claims, “a precise inversion of the paradigm of youth in New Comedy,” where “the young hero is usually vindicated and the older generation is discredited” (110-11). What happens, though, when the prodigal marks his return to the values of his forebears by marrying a wealthy widow? Such marriages hang in an uneasy balance between the resolutions of New Comedy and those of Prodigal Son comedy. The young man has defeated the *senex* generation (represented by older, wealthier rivals, and

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6 They are *A Trick to Catch the Old One; Michaelmas Term; Ram Alley; Tu Quoque; Wit Without Money;* and *A New Way to Pay Old Debts*. 
by the widow’s own scruples against his poverty and youth) to win the woman he desires, but as the woman he marries is, to a certain extent, a member of the generation he has supposedly defeated, the young prodigal’s traditionally happy assimilation back into society now comes at the risk of his being placed in subjection to a “father” figure who does not hold a father’s unproblematic right to authority—his new wife, the remarried widow. The Prodigal Son paradigm thus adds one more layer of complication to the widow’s multivalent role as prize, blocking figure and money-holder—she becomes, sometimes overtly, as will be seen in *The Scornful Lady*, sometimes less explicitly, an authority figure to whom the reformed prodigal must submit, or against whom he must rebel anew. This intersection of traditional comic structures and cultural anxieties (the fear that an impecunious husband will be dominated by the wealthier, more experienced widow he has married) generates varying amounts of tension in each of the comedies discussed in this chapter. Those which invite the audience to enjoy the fantasy of marrying a widow for her wealth must manage this tension by demonstrating that the young suitor can sufficiently assert his masculinity to control his potentially insubordinate wife.

Apart from the seven plays by Middleton which will be the focus of this study, there are fifteen comedies from the years between 1600 and 1625 which feature a remarrying widow. In some of these plays, such as *The Widow’s Tears* or Rowley’s *A New Wonder*, *A Woman Never Vexed* (1625), the character is central. In others, her wooing and remarriage figure in a sub-plot, as they do in *The Scornful Lady*, or form the basis of one among several equivalent plots, as in Field’s *Amends for Ladies* (1611). A few comedies, notably Jonson’s *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614), have

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7 The dates 1600-1625 roughly comprise both Middleton’s theatrical career (c. 1602-1624) and the Jacobean era (1603-1625).
remarrying widows as minor characters and present little that could be described as wooing, yet the final marital allocation of the widow is still significant in interpreting the endings of these plays. The following analyses will focus very narrowly on the situation of the widow and her suitors in each of the comedies. In the plays where these characters are central, the analyses naturally will have more bearing on the central issues of the play; where the wooing of the widow is peripheral, I will not attempt to address unrelated plots and themes in much detail, important as they may be to the play as a whole. I am primarily interested in investigating how these plays deal with the fantasies and anxieties about marrying a widow which I have outlined in the previous chapter, and in seeing to what extent the Jacobean theatre supports the hypothesis that the lusty widow stereotype works to bolster a suitor’s masculinity, threatened by the widow’s greater wealth and feared domestic dominance.

Most of the plays do in fact give fairly straightforward presentations of the widow-fantasy which I have outlined in the previous chapter, attesting to its popularity and profitability: a bold, virile, but impoverished young man uses his boldness, virility, and youth to catch the easily-stirred sexual fancy of a wealthy widow and marries her for her money. Often the widow displays the characteristics of dominance and determination to control her estate that fuel the anxiety behind the fantasy, whereupon the importance of her desirousness in helping the suitor to assert his manhood becomes especially evident. A smaller group of plays (Patient Grissil [1600], The Alchemist, and Bartholomew Fair) does not offer the fantasy, but instead provides evidence of the fears that require the deployment of the lusty widow stereotype for their assuagement, focussing on the widow as a troublesome or potentially troublesome wife, and undermining the conventional widow-as-prize motif with the ironic revelation that the widow might be a booby prize.
Two plays, *The Captain* and *A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed* support the fantasy by rewarding or punishing the widow according to how she conforms to the role which it requires of her. For purposes of clarity and brevity, I have arranged the plays into three groups roughly along the lines explained above—those that offer the fantasy of winning a widow through her lust, those that focus on the anxieties that accompany marrying a widow, and those that present a reward or punishment scenario—and I will examine certain more relevant or representative plays at greater length than others. I begin with a play that is completely preoccupied with the courtship and remarriage of widows, providing one plot offering the fantasy of marrying a widow, and another punishing the widow who refuses to make herself available to suitors. This play is *The Widow's Tears*.

"Fantasy" widow-plots: *The Widow's Tears; Ram Alley; Amends for Ladies; Greene's Tu Quoque; Wit Without Money; The Scornful Lady; Sir Giles Goosecap; Satiramastix; A Match at Midnight*

**George Chapman: The Widow's Tears (Queen's Revels Children, 1605)**

*The Widow's Tears* appears to have been popular in its day. It was produced in two theatres. Blackfriars and Whitefriars, was not published until seven years after its first performance (with a dedication noting that it was "of many desired to see printed"), and was played at Court even a year after its publication (Parrott 797). If we view its original popularity alongside most twentieth-century criticism of the play, it would be hard to escape the conclusion that Jacobean audiences favoured some extremely harsh and condemning satire against the widow who chose to take a second husband. With a few exceptions, most critics start from the premise that Chapman depicts Eudora's and

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8 All dates are from *Annals* and most are approximate within a range of a few years.
Cynthia’s failures to live up to their vows of widowed chastity as moral degradation of
the greatest magnitude. Whether the critics argue that Chapman is chiefly satirizing the
two women’s female lust and frailty, Tharsalio’s scheming arrogance, or Lysander’s
jealous folly, they generally agree that the result of this frailty, arrogance and folly is a
similarly serious fall for both women.\(^9\) Samuel Schoenbaum’s reading is typical,
describing how “Eudora falls, and her collapse is represented as the betrayal of not only a
sacred oath and the ideals of widowhood, but also of the great principle of degree” (326),
and adding that Cynthia’s “degradation is social as well as moral . . . [for] in giving
herself to a common ‘eightpenny sentinel’ she has betrayed the venerable house whose
honour it is her duty to uphold” (328).\(^10\) Some critics inexplicably blacken the two
women even beyond what the play seems to warrant, forgetting that Eudora is a widow
and that Cynthia truly believes herself to be one. After describing Eudora’s capitulation
as demonstrating “the universal fickleness of female virtue” (354), Albert H. Tricomi
refers to Cynthia’s “betrayal of the marriage vow” (356), while Paul V. Kreider lists both
Eudora and Cynthia under the category of “faithless wives” (84-85).\(^11\)

Those readers who do not assume that the play portrays a widow’s “inconstancy”
as a sin akin to adultery tend to regard it as a fortunate fall into self-knowledge, breaking
life-denying societal restrictions to acknowledge sexual “human needs” (Bliss 170;

\(^9\) Schoenbaum, Kreider, and Parrott believe the play is a misogynist satire on the women, with Parrott
observing that the play allows “no hint even at a soul of Goodness in things evil” (805); Weidner and
Tricomi read it as an attack on Tharsalio’s values; Corballis sees Lysander as the primary target.
\(^10\) See also Weidner 526-27; Corballis 34-35.
\(^11\) Though taking a much more lighthearted view of the play, Williamson similarly sees the contemporary
comic taste for “the faithless widow” as an extension of the taste for comedies about cuckolded husbands
and adulterous wives (“Matter” 35-36).
This approach argues that Chapman sympathetically understands and opposes "the prejudice against the remarriage of widows . . . which we know did exist in this period" (Herring 161). While such readings are certainly closer to the spirit of the play, they risk being so close as to fall into its ideology: widows are inherently lustful, so it is better for all concerned if they are allowed to indulge their natural urges. Such is indeed the view of widows that the play offers to its audience, but rather than explaining it as showing that Chapman "is on the side of life" (Herring 161), or that he breaks with traditional mores to recognize that "the widow seeks sex as one of the natural pleasures of life" (Juneja, "Widowhood" 173), I wish to investigate the methods Chapman uses to provide his audience with the fantasy of marrying a widow. Far from being a satire against the remarrying widow, the play explicitly advocates a woman's remarriage, showing it to be not only inevitable but desirable as well. Eudora and Cynthia are indeed targets of satire, but the satire is directed against their intentions not to remarry, and its harshness to each character is in direct proportion to the strength and resolution of these intentions.

It has often been noted that in terms of plot structure The Widow's Tears is a "broken-backed" play (Corballis 34), with the two plots (Tharsalio's wooing of Eudora, and Lysander's temptation of Cynthia) presented successively rather than being interwoven. Clearly the first plot, played out to its conclusion of marriage before the second plot properly gets under way, is intended in some way to colour the audience's perception of the second. The first plot presents a text-book case of a young man wooing

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12 Bliss, however, differs from Herring and Juneja by seeing only Eudora's capitulation as fortunate, and argues that Tharsalio's manipulation of Lysander and Cynthia has "disastrous" results which distance the audience from Tharsalio over the second half of the play (179). As subsequent discussion will show, I agree with Bliss that there is a significant difference between Eudora's fall and Cynthia's, but believe that the audience maintains its comic identification with Tharsalio to the end.
and winning a rich widow; the second is a variation on Petronius' tale of the Widow of Ephesus, who is seduced by a new lover as she mourns in her husband's tomb. The story of Tharsalio and Eudora, I will argue, conditions the audience for how they are to take Cynthia's sexual yielding to the disguised Lysander, while the second plot is a cautionary tale, not unlike that of Zilia and Philibert, against a widow's presumption to remain chaste and unavailable to suitors.

The first half of The Widow's Tears is a kind of dramatized how-to manual on the successful courtship and marriage of a wealthy widow, complete with symbolic names for the characters (Tharsalio, or confident audacity, wins Eudora, richly-endowed generosity), and Tharsalio's frequent explanatory comments on his wooing techniques. The play's first scene introduces Tharsalio, the kind of young man who will through the rest of the Jacobean period become the classic successful suitor of numerous widow-wooing plots. Tharsalio enters invoking his "goddess," Confidence, reveals in some expository dialogue that he is a poor younger brother endowed only with "valour, and good clothes" (1.1.32), and announces his intent to marry "the rich and haughty Countess Eudora" (1.1.59-61). Undeterred by his former lowly relation to the Countess as a page in her household, he is convinced that her vow of perpetual chastity masks a lustful widow who "has taken note of my spirit and surveyed my good parts, and the picture of them lives in her eye; which sleep, I know, cannot close, till she have embraced the substance" (1.1.75-78). Any threat posed by Eudora's superior rank and wealth will be taken care of by his sexual mastery, as he asks Confidence to

Command thy servant deities, Love and Fortune,

To second my attempts for this great lady,
Whose page I lately was; that she, whose board
I might not sit at, I may board a-bed
And under bring, who bore so high her head (1.1.176-80)

Tharsalio’s only rival for the Countess’ hand, the Spartan lord Rebus, is drawn so that his defects illuminate the attributes which fit Tharsalio out for success. Rebus is a coward, timid in his wooing, “wedded” to a venereal disease and probably impotent (1.2.33); Tharsalio is bold, thrusting himself uninvited into the Countess’ presence to advertise his sexual abilities and to make loud, lascivious promises on which he evidently has the youthful virility and vigor to follow through. Tharsalio also shows undaunted persistence in continuing to press his suit after two humiliating rejections, and cleverness in his use of the bawd Arsace to provide the finishing touch of seemingly objective evidence of his sexual prowess. Rebus promises the Countess honour, houses, palaces, and courts, along with an elevation in rank through a kinship alliance with the Spartan Viceroy (1.2.39-62), but as he brings “no better ware than letters in ’s packet” (2.4.8), he fails. Tharsalio promises her but one thing—sexual satisfaction—and wins.

A few aspects of Tharsalio’s courtship are particularly noteworthy. The first is the way in which his language becomes especially sexually suggestive whenever Eudora attempts to pull rank on him and sneer at him as a subordinate, as in the following exchange:

Eudora: How now, base companion?
Tharsalio: Base, madam? He’s not base that fights as high as your lips.
Eudora: And does that beseeem my servant?
Tharsalio: Your court-servant, madam.
Eudora: One that waited on my board?

Tharsalio: That was only a preparation to my weight on your bed, madam. (1.2.67-74)

When Eudora asks him if she is “so scant of worthy suitors that may advance mine honour, advance my estate, strengthen my alliance (if I list to wed), that I must stoop to make my foot my head?” his response is again sexual: “No, but your side, to keep you warm a-bed” (2.4.164-68). To her rebuff that marriage to him would be “stooping to my vassal.” he lewdly offers himself as “your drudge, madam, to do your drudgery” (2.4.162-63). Tharsalio’s (justified) confidence in the widow’s lust and in his own ability to satisfy her desires allows him to deflect the threat that even in marriage he would always remain a “servant” and a “vassal” to a woman so much his superior in rank and wealth. The ultimate mastery, as he implies in his earlier speech about “boarding” his former mistress to bring her “under,” is sexual mastery. Furthermore, although Tharsalio fantasizes to himself about inverting the roles of master and “underling,” his speeches to the Countess make exceedingly clever use of the language of their original positions. As her “court-servant” and her “drudge,” one who weights/waits on her bed instead of her board, he implies that as her husband he will merely enjoy a lateral promotion from household servitude to sexual servitude. Tharsalio insinuates that marriage is not a wife’s subjection to a husband but her right to his sexual services on demand. I will return to this point shortly, for it is a vision which the play continues to uphold.

As his consistent, apparently deliberate use of service imagery indicates, Tharsalio is quite aware of his courtship technique. I earlier referred to his wooing of the widow as a how-to manual on the subject, and it is Tharsalio’s tendency to expound his methods to other characters and to offer himself as a model of the successful suitor which
lends it that flavour. He begins by informing Lysander of women’s proneness to accept the “impression” of one attractive man after another (1.1.120-29), and then suggests that he could teach his adolescent nephew a useful thing or two: “It would be a good breeding to my young nephew here, if he could procure a stand at the palace to see with what alacrity I’ll accost her countess-ship, in what garb I will woo her, with what facility I will win her” (1.1.153-57). After his success, he gleefully explains his technique to his brother and sister-in-law: “This is the way on’t, boil their appetites to a full height of lust, and then take them down in the nick” (3.1.99-100). A widow’s wealth and status, he explains further, ought to be not a hindrance but a help to the sexually audacious suitor, as “great” women have “the full stream of blood to bear them, the sweet gale of their sublimed spirits to drive them, the calm of ease to prepare them, the sunshine of fortune to allure them, greatness to waft them safe through all rocks of infamy” (3.1.106-10). With Tharsalio’s undeniable success, all this explication and advice can, in the terms of the play, only be taken as “correct,” and its effect is to reach out beyond the enclosed world of the fiction to enhance the play’s offer of the lusty widow fantasy for the audience’s consumption. With his wit, energy, and vitality, his ability to assess realistically the Countess’s true desires, and his unabashed declarations of his intent and methods, Tharsalio establishes himself as a man in the know, and cheerfully “teaches” the other characters—and the audience—how a widow is to be won.

As for Eudora’s “vow” of widowed constancy, the play treats it in such a way as to prevent the audience from ever taking it quite seriously. It is mentioned by Cynthia in the play’s opening scene, only to be mocked by Tharsalio, but significantly Eudora herself never once speaks of it, or of any disinclination to remarry. The next scene reveals that Eudora is “already accessible for suitors,” succumbing despite her vow to “a certain
itch in female blood . . . to be sued” (1.2.6-12), and the wooing which follows is defined as Tharsalio against the wealthy, aristocratic Rebus, not as Tharsalio against the widow’s widow. In these scenes, Eudora speaks and behaves like a widow who fully intends to remarry, speaking of Rebus as her “poor suitor” (2.4.159) and telling Tharsalio she can choose among plenty of “worthy suitors” (2.4.164). Much later in the play—after Arsace’s success at arousing Eudora with tales of Tharsalio’s manhood—the audience is given the fullest description of Eudora’s supposed views on taking a second husband.

Once again, it is not Eudora but a third party who voices the Countess’ opinions, here her servant Sthenia:

I have been witness to so many of her fearful protestations to our late lord against that course; to her infinite oaths imprinted on his lips, and sealed in his heart with such imprecaions to her bed if ever it should receive a second impression; to her open and often detestations of that incestuous life (as she termed it) of widows’ marriages, as being but a kind of lawful adultery, like usury permitted by the law, not approved; that to wed a second was no better than to cuckold the first . . . . (2.4.21-30)

Not only is this comically ironic in the context of the episode with Arsace which has preceded it, it also suggests that Eudora’s opposition to remarriage may have primarily served to pacify her “late lord.” Furthermore, as Herring points out, it presents her “detestation” as unreasonably extreme (161). I have argued in the previous chapter that few early seventeenth-century Londoners would have seriously conceived of remarriage as adulterous; a character who goes so far as to describe it as “incestuous” is either protesting too much. or is due for a comic comeuppance, or both. By keeping Eudora’s
vow in the background until she is clearly won over, and then revealing it as extreme and possibly insincere. Chapman manages to make the point about the frailty of widows’ resolve which will be so important to the second plot, while simultaneously allowing the audience to enjoy Eudora’s awakened desire without much sense that she deserves moral condemnation.

To help ensure that the marriage is seen primarily as Tharsalio’s triumph and not Eudora’s fall, her actual acceptance of him occurs offstage, leaving Tharsalio’s description to control completely the audience’s perception of what happened. The speech in which he does so is a brilliant piece of sustained double-entendre which depicts the sex-for-money exchange central to the widow-fantasy as the source of blissful pleasure for both partners:

I opened my counting-house, and took away
These simple fragments of my treasury.
“Husband,” my Countess cried, “take more, more yet;”
Yet I, in haste, to pay in part my debt,
And prove myself a husband of her store
Kissed and came off, and this time took no more.

Then were our honoured spousal rites performed,
We made all short, and sweet, and close, and sure. (3.1.66-74)

Tharsalio is literally describing to Lysander and Cynthia how he afforded his luxurious new suit of clothes, but with bawdy quibbles on “oped,” “counting-house” (not to mention “Countess,” a pun which operates throughout the play), “debt,” and “came off,” as well as the Countess’ impassioned cry, the speech describes her pleasure in his sexual
generosity (with a hint of insatiability) as much as his satisfaction in being master of her funds. Both characters have found in the marriage precisely what they most desired.

In fact, the Tharsalio-Eudora plot goes out of its way to paint the widow’s second marriage as equally delightful for the wife as for the husband. Chapman is careful to point out that the marriage is free from the problems that conventionally haunt men married to widows: the battle for control of the estate and household affairs, the widow’s jealousy and shrewishness. Tharsalio’s freedom to use Eudora’s money is emphasized in the passage quoted above; at the wedding masque, Eudora pointedly disputes the notion that “True love is ever full of jealousy” (3.2.55); and Tharsalio’s husbandly control of the widow’s household is implied by his assumption of the right to marry his wife’s daughter to a mate of his choosing, his own nephew Hylus. The play even naturalizes this dynastic manoeuvering as a love match so as to ensure continued audience approbation for Tharsalio. And while Tharsalio reaps the rewards of the successful widow-wooer, the widow herself is shown to have entered a marriage which is all sweetness and sexual service. Unless it is couched in thoroughly sexual terms, such as Tharsalio’s resolution to bring Eudora “under,” or Eudora’s ecstatic offering of self and wealth in “take more, more yet,” nobody in the play ever allows that marriage for a widow involves subjection to a husband and loss of rights to her property. The female experience of marriage is defined purely and unequivocally as licensed sexual satisfaction; the widow who does not remarry simply “make[s] the noontide of her years the sunset of her pleasures” (3.1.167-68). Tharsalio has wooed the widow with the language of sexual servitude, and when

14 For the sexual quibbles, see the respective entries in Williams’ *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*. The speech also seems to indicate that Eudora yields sexually to Tharsalio before they are married. The “honoured spousal rites” could be a betrothal ceremony, a wedding, or sexual intercourse, and even if they are one of the first two, a sexual reading of the “counting house” scene still suggests premarital relations.
they appear as a married couple at the masque, he is fulfilling his promises. He still calls her “dearest mistress,” she calls him “worthiest servant” (3.2.78-79), and all is harmony. The first plot of The Widow’s Tears does not merely offer the fantasy of a lustful widow eager to hand over her wealth to a virile husband. It advertises remarriage to widows as sexual delight and sexual mastery, while subtly acknowledging (through the arranged match between Hylus and Laodice) that the “servant” is really in control.

The story of Eudora primes the audience for the story of Cynthia, the play’s second “widow” who opts for contentment over chastity. Tharsalio’s successful wooing of Eudora, in which the widow’s lust overcomes disparities in rank and wealth as well as a vow of celibacy, has proved that it is impossible for a woman whose appetite is “whetted with nuptial delights” to forego sexual pleasure, and that remarriage is beneficial to both widow and suitor. In his own family, however, Tharsalio is faced with his brother and sister-in-law’s dangerous valorization of widowed chastity:

she hath so possessed my brother’s heart with vows and
disavowings, sealed with oaths, of second nuptials, as in that
Confidence he hath invested her in all his state, the ancient
inheritance of our family, and left my nephew and the rest to hang
upon her pure devotion, so as he dead, and she matching (as I am
resolved she will) with some young prodigal, what must ensue, but
her post-issue beggared, and our house, already sinking, buried
quick in ruin? (2.3.78-85)

This speech reveals only part of Tharsalio’s motives for leading Lysander to suspect his wife (revenge for their teasing and an urge to unmask moral pretense also figure strongly in his behaviour), but his own almost fatherly care to arrange a profitable marriage for his
nephew indicates that this logical economic reason for testing Cynthia is not just an
excuse to cloak baser intentions. Tharsalio sets out to convince his brother that a widow’s
lust makes her remarriage inevitable, and that testamentary precautions are as necessary
as vows and dissuasions are futile. And in doing so, he touches upon a notion that will be
played out to ironic effect in the tomb scenes, and will add the finishing touch to the
already double-strength fantasy of remarriage The Widow’s Tears offers to its audience:
rather than presenting perpetual widowhood as the natural evidence of wifely love, the
play suggests that the two may be mutually exclusive.

From the start, Cynthia and Lysander assume that a woman’s continued celibacy
as a widow is the natural sequel to her love and loyalty to her husband, and perhaps even
their proof. Lycus, the reasonable friend to both brothers, describes how the couple
conflates widowed chastity and marital love:

You know how strange his dotage ever was on his wife, taking
special glory to have her love and loyalty to him so renowned
abroad; to whom she oftentimes hath vowed constancy after life,
till her own death had brought, forsooth, her widow-troth to bed.
This he joyed in strangely, and was therein of infallible belief... .

(2.3.50-55)

“Strangely,” for as Lycus points out to Lysander, the two modes of behaviour are not
necessarily inseparable. Not even Tharsalio, Lycus assures the uneasy husband, doubts
that Cynthia is a model of wifely virtue, and does not impugn that when he questions her
resistance to remarriage. It is possible, he implies, to question the latter without negating
the former: Tharsalio cannot “misconceive/ Her spotless love and loyalty,” but may

15 Tharsalio, of course, plays on this assumption to tease Cynthia and to goad Lysander into suspicion
(Bliss 173). See, for example, 1.1.103-14, and 2.1.9-25.
nonetheless refuse to believe that “you being dead, no man might stir a spark / Of virtuous love, in way of second bonds” (2.1.68-72). Even Lycus himself, who believes whole-heartedly in Cynthia’s virtues, is not quite as confident as Lysander on the point of perpetual widowhood (2.1.78-79).

Later on, after Lysander has faked his death and Cynthia has shut herself up in the tomb, the suggestion that remarriage does not negate the love a wife had for her husband during his life is taken a step further. Tharsalio’s cynical remark that Cynthia seeks to be “deified” for her excessive mourning provokes the following exchange:

Lycus: I for my part will say that if her faith be as constant as her love is hearty and unaffected, her virtues may justly challenge a deity to enshrine them.

Tharsalio: Ay. there’s another point, too. But one of those virtues is enough at once. All natures are not capable of all gifts.

(4.1.127-32)

These lines have received scant critical comment, but they have startling implications for the end of the play. The virtues in question are “faith,” in this context widowed constancy, and “hearty and unaffected” love for the man who has died. By observing that either “faith” or love is “enough at once,” and that a woman’s capability for one may preclude her capability for the other, Tharsalio makes the logical and pragmatic implication that the woman who truly loved her husband and was happy as a wife (and by extension, sexually faithful) would reasonably wish to resume this happy state after his death. The notion that a widow’s celibacy shows her love for her late husband is turned

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16 Juneja cites them to make the point that Lysander must learn to accept “the contradiction of Cynthia being both true and human” (“Widowhood” 169).
on its head. Instead, it is the remarrying widow who proves herself to have been the truly loving wife.

Cynthia, however, chooses to ignore her “nature” and indulge her pride, fasting and mourning in her husband’s tomb to enhance her reputation for virtue and loyalty. “This strain of mourning wi’ th’ sepulchre,” scoffs Tharsalio, “like an overdoing actor, affects grossly, and is indeed so far forced from the life, that it bewrays itself to be altogether artificial” (4.1.105-08). Lycus rebukes him for his cynicism, but the cynic is right: Cynthia herself calls her excessive mourning “compliments [that] might have their time for fashion sake” (5.2.27-28), observing that “The praise I have had, I would continue” (4.3.80). Critics have been quick to blame Tharsalio and Lysander for testing Cynthia with unreasonable cruelty, but they tend to gloss over the fact that Cynthia’s method of making a spectacle of her mourning is her own calculated plan, and was certainly not part of Tharsalio’s agenda. Starving oneself to death in one’s husband’s tomb is not the approved Cyprian custom for mourning widows—it is “unexpected” and “extraordinary” (4.1.6-7). What Tharsalio had in mind for Cynthia when he and Lysander planned the test was a comfortable, conventional widowhood along the lines of Eudora’s, where he would “come to visit the distressed widow, apply old ends of comfort to her grief.” bringing her “choice of suitors” and counselling her “to take a living comfort that

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17 It is important not to confuse the evident fact that the society depicted in the play considers widowed chastity a sign of female virtue with the way that men want widows to behave. Chastity is indeed virtuous and may get a woman “deified”; remarriage is evidence of lust, but although lust is degrading and incompatible with sexual virtue, it brings women down to earth where men can, in the terms of the day, “have at them.” In the case of Eudora and other rich widows, it lowers them enough to neutralize any anxiety on the part of their socially inferior suitors.

18 Schoenbaum, Williamson (“Matter”), Tricomi, and Corballis do not mention that Cynthia’s style of mourning is unusual, nor discuss her motive for it; Weidner assumes that when Cynthia follows Lysander to the tomb, she is simply “fulfilling her vow of fidelity to her husband” (523). Juneja claims that Cynthia’s decision is “molded by societal expectations” (“Widowhood” 169); Bliss argues that Tharsalio’s “test” imposes “impossible choices” that require Cynthia’s suicide to prove her sincerity, but ignores the fact that it was Cynthia, not Tharsalio, who introduced the possibility of death into the situation (177).
might ferret out the thought of her dead husband” (3.1.217-22). Had Cynthia simply behaved as a widow customarily does, she may or may not have resisted her suitors, but her degrading behaviour in the tomb would have been avoided.

While the revelation of Eudora’s desirousness merely affords the audience some salacious amusement at her expense, without denigrating her character beneath the conventional level of a comic lustful widow, Cynthia’s appetites lead to her genuine moral degradation. Eudora takes a husband, but Cynthia is shown to be capable of fornicating in her husband’s tomb with her husband’s murderer and of desecrating his body to defend her lover. The magnitude of Cynthia’s degradation is in direct proportion to her resistance to the prospect of remarriage. Eudora, whatever her private resolutions, makes herself accessible to suitors. Cynthia, however, plans to take herself completely out of the marriage market in the most irreversible way possible, through her suicide. As with Zilia’s eventual desperate sexual yielding to Philibert in “A Discourse of the Great Crueltie of a Widdow,” which is brought about by her avarice, the very action that defines Cynthia’s resolve to be self-interestedly chaste—her descent into the tomb—ironically works to bring about her sexual humiliation. In the context of Eudora’s story, Cynthia’s behaviour with the “soldier” is both further evidence that all widows are sexually susceptible and easily won, and Cynthia’s punishment for attempting to deny men the right to exploit that lust in their interests.

A yet deeper irony of the situation is that at the same time as the play punishes Cynthia for her presumption of chastity, it reveals the truth of Tharsalio’s belief that “all natures are not capable of all gifts” and that wifely love does not equate to widowed chastity. For in loving the soldier, Cynthia demonstrates how dearly and constantly, even selflessly, she loves her “husband,” whomever he may be at the time. (It is important to
remember that a promise of future spousals, which 5.2.10-12 indicates has been made, plus sexual consummation constitutes a legally binding if irregular marriage. Cynthia likely sees herself as married to the soldier.\(^\text{19}\) She is willing to sacrifice the reputation she once valued above her life so that the man she believes to be her new husband may “enjoy the honour of [his] fortune in public, sit in Lysander’s chair, reign in his wealth” (5.2.10-11). She offers the “corpse” up for crucifixion with the words “I have a body here which once I loved / And honoured above all; but that time’s past” (5.3.16-17), implying that her love and honour are now due with equal devotion to the soldier. Cynthia’s faithful love is even visible when she refuses (as is her wifely right) to give evidence against her “husband’s” crime, declaring “Would I had never seen thee, or heard sooner / This bloody story; yet see, note my truth, / Yet I must love thee” (5.3.34-36). The layers of irony here are complex: while Lysander hears only the hideous irony of his wife describing as love and truth the very acts which prove to him her faithlessness, the audience may realize that Cynthia is proving exactly what Lysander wanted her to prove (that she is a loving, loyal wife) in precisely the opposite way from which he wished her to prove it. And a third level of irony arises from the fact that since Lysander is the soldier, Cynthia’s love and truth are pledged to the “right” man all along. The mixture of degrading lust and genuine devotion that Cynthia displays in the tomb ironically reveals that a widow’s remarriage is not only inevitable but desirable—perhaps even from the husband’s point of view.

The end of The Widow’s Tears ensures that the audience does not discount the truths that Tharsalio has unmasked throughout the play. By having it be Tharsalio who

\(^{19}\) Although Cynthia and the soldier do not have sexual relations during his first entrance into the tomb (Lysander says she would have given “the utmost earnest of her love” had not his “shame withstood” [5.2.40-41]), they apparently do so later, for Tharsalio challenges her to deny that she “plight[ed] indeed with him the utmost pledge of nuptial love” (5.3.159) and she does not.
reveals Lysander’s true identity to Cynthia before it is too late, Chapman gives the
closest character a touch of compassion which maintains him in the role of the clear-sighted
realist who controls the play’s action and the audience’s viewpoint, and prevents him
from being dismissed as merely a dangerous mischief-maker. Given that Tharsalio is
aware that Lysander might kill his wife for her faithlessness (3.1.224-227), his revelation
to Cynthia is economically prudent as well as compassionate, for should Lysander be
convicted of murder, his property (under contemporary English law, if not the laws of
Cyprus) would be confiscated by the state, defeating Tharsalio’s reason for provoking the
test in the first place. More importantly, however, Tharsalio’s beneficent arrangement of
a wealthy marriage for Hylus has secured his future so that Lysander’s folly and
Cynthia’s lust are no longer as economically relevant as they once were.

The appearance of the foolish Governor in the final scene emphasizes rather than
undermines Tharsalio’s control.20 The Governor’s perverse and naïve ideas of “justice”
only clarify the fact that true authority has less to do with rank than with having the wit to
understand human behaviour for what it is and to make the best of it. The Governor
thinks he can legislate the sexuality of his citizens and “whip lechery out o’ th’ city”
(5.5.244), but Tharsalio has revealed that lechery is unquenchable, especially in those
who most deny its power. The Governor plans to “have all young widows spaded for
marrying again” (5.5.258), but Tharsalio and the play have demonstrated not only that a
young widow’s desires will inevitably lead her to remarriage, but also that her remarriage
is in her best interests, her new husband’s and even, paradoxically, her late husband’s as
well. The Widow’s Tears is neither a bitter satire against remarriage nor a proto-feminist
celebration of a woman’s right to sexual fulfillment. It is instead the period’s most

20 For readings that identify Tharsalio with the Governor to claim that both are condemned, see Bliss 180-
83; Weidner 530-31; Tricomi 357-59.
sustained and thorough-going theatrical offering of the lusty widow fantasy to bachelors, widows, and married men alike.

Lording Barry: *Ram Alley* (King’s Revels Children?, 1610?)

From what we know of Lording Barry, the only play he ever wrote was written with an eye to bringing in as much revenue as possible. In 1607 Barry borrowed large sums of money, probably to become a shareholder in the Children of the King’s Revels company which opened at Whitefriars in the spring of that year. The company seems to have lasted only a year, and by the summer of 1608 the playwright’s creditors began to sue for their money. Owing over two hundred pounds, Barry was imprisoned in the Marshalsea. When two of his creditors bailed him out, he apparently tried to improve his fortunes by embarking on a dual career as both a playwright and a pirate.\(^{21}\) *Ram Alley* is a lively city comedy, bawdy to the point of obscenity, and packed with every element that might be hoped to spell success at the box office: a crooked, usurious lawyer whom a couple of wily gallants trick into marrying a whore, a maiden who cross-dresses as a page to follow her faithless lover, and the most irrepressibly lustful widow of the decade, won by a young fellow whose boldness makes Tharsalio look like a milksop.\(^{22}\) Barry’s piratical tendencies were evidently not confined to the seas—*Ram Alley* borrows widely

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\(^{21}\) Barry’s career is described in Jones viii-ix; Holdsworth, “Ben Jonson” 482-86. *Ram Alley* is usually dated 1608 and, on the evidence of its title page, assigned to the short-lived King’s Revels Children (1607-08); Jones assumes that Barry produced the play before being imprisoned, subsequently becoming a pirate. Holdsworth, however, proves that *Ram Alley* could not have been written earlier than mid-1610, when Barry was already a known pirate, and that either the King’s Revels survived past 1608 or the publisher erroneously substituted “King’s” for “Queen’s.”

\(^{22}\) For a different reading of the Widow Taffata scenes in the play, see Leinwand, *City Staged* 180-83, who claims that “Lording Barry introduces all the contemporary stereotypes and cliches about widows because, it would seem, he accepts them.”
from Middleton and Jonson\textsuperscript{23}—and while Barry’s talents as a playwright may not match Chapman’s, his Widow Taffata and Chapman’s Eudora are sisters under the skin.

The Widow Taffata’s lustfulness is established from her first appearance, where she and her maid pass the time admiring “proper men and gallants” from their window (219-20): Taffata yearns for “a good legge wore in a long silk stocking, / With a long cod-peece” to come back into fashion (220-21), and describes how “a witty woman” distinguishes men by their “noses” (she is partial to the Tuscan nose, which is “lovely, large and brawde”) (232-34). Spotting a likely looking young man, Taffata drops her handkerchief out the window and reels in the first of her suitors, Boutcher. Boutcher, however, has been warned by a fortune-teller that marriage to a widow would “indanger” him (368-69). and while Taffata is initially enticed by his reticence, his wavering and lack of decisive action allow a rival to carry her off. For Boutcher, though, this is no real loss, as he is the gentleman being followed by the disguised maiden, Constantia Somerfield, who happens to be an heiress as well. Even his friend and successful rival, William Smalshankes, knows that a rich virgin is a better catch than a rich widow, and that anyone so lucky as to have the choice should have no trouble deciding:

\begin{quote}
Why thou dejected taile of a Crab,

Does not the faire Constantia Somerfield

Doate on thy filthy face; and wilt thou wed

A wanton widdow? what canst thou see

To doate on her [?] (1890-94)
\end{quote}

When Constantia reveals her true identity at the end, Boutcher is well provided for.

\textsuperscript{23} On Barry’s debt to Middleton’s city comedies, see Leggatt, \textit{Citizen Comedy} 59-65; Jones’ notes to \textit{Ram Alley} lines 78, 133, 1417, 1617. On his borrowings from Jonson, see Holdsworth, “Ben Jonson” 483-86.
Taffata’s second suitor is Sir Oliver Smalshankes, William’s father. The old knight is, of course, portrayed as sexually inadequate: his first words of courtship to the widow are “Widdow I must be short,” prompting another character to chide him “Will you shame your selfe, ha? You must be short, / Why what a word was that to tell a widdow?” (1190-92). Short as he may be, the old man offers Taffata a title, the society of the court, a five hundred pound jointure, and rich gifts of plate and jewels. The widow considers him, but only because he can be made to submit entirely to her will and to her plans to cuckold him: he agrees to let her have her own chamber to receive “visitants” in, to buy her a new coach specially designed to prevent the coachman from overhearing the occupants, and to obey her orders as to when he may “presume unto [her] bed” (1227). Eventually she agrees to marry him because she has “a kind of itching, / To be a lady” (1564-65). Her “itching,” however, is no frivolous taste for titles, but a calculated move to keep a firmer hand on her money: “I have some debts at court, and marrying you, / I hope the Courtier will not sticke to pay me” (1568-69). A marriage to Sir Oliver promises not only wealth but, more importantly for her, independence, power, and control.

Such promises are what William Smalshankes is up against when he schemes to win the widow away from his old father. The widow, William notes, “Has substance both in bretch and purse” (1698), and the old man needs the latter no more than he can use the former:

... pitty and sinne it were she should be wed
To a furd cloake and a night-cap. Ile have her,
This widdow I will have; her money
Shall pay my debts and set me up againe,
Tis heere, tis almost forg’d, which if it take
The world shall praise my wit, admire my fate. (1699-1704)

William has already proved his wit (not to mention his need for money) as the mastermind behind a plot to trick the usurer Throte into thinking his whore is an heiress and forgiving his debts for the privilege of marrying her. No tricks are needed, however, to lure Taffata away from Sir Oliver. Sexual aggression and explicit promises of sexual satisfaction are William’s only tactics to win the widow; and they are enough to make her give up a marriage in which she would be master. A widow’s lust, as the fantasy would have it, can be used to neutralize her willfulness.

William plays on Taffata’s desires until she is his, betrothed and safely bedded before the wedding. He begins by informing her in graphic detail of his father’s physical repulsiveness and impotence—“if you wed the stinckerd, / You shall find the tale of Tantalus / To be noe fable widdow” (1671-73)—while advertising his own youthful abilities at “pricksong” (1616-18). His father overhears this exchange and, understandably enraged, kicks his son out of the house, but William returns at night to accost the widow when she is undressed in her bedroom. Although she resists him at first, the very words she uses to do so reveal her lasciviousness and prove her refusal to be a kind of assent. When William kneels to sue to her, hinting lewdly that “Some wantons do delight to see men creepe, / And on their knees to woe them,” she responds:

I am none of those,

Stand up, I more desire a man should stand,

Than cringe and creepe that means to winne my love . . . .

(2169-72)

In a display of pure sexual aggression, William then produces the stage-property equivalent of the erection she demands—a naked sword—and holds it to her throat,
forcing her to kiss him and to listen as he explains how the match benefits both of them: he is in desperate need of money, and she, “a widdow that has knowne the quid of things” (2212). is in equal need to be saved from marriage with an old man who “Hath not a member to his palsie body, / But is more limber then a Kings head pudding, / Tooke from the pot halfe sod” (2216-18). As is usual in the lusty widow fantasy, the match is envisaged as a mutually profitable exchange of her money for his sexual service:

Have you not wealth enough to serve us both?
And am I not a pritty handsome fellow,
To doe your drudgery [?] (2219-21)

He threatens to kill her if she rejects his proposal, but the play is careful to show that Taffata is won by desire, not fear. Through all his swordplay, the widow raises only one objection: William is known to keep a whore. When he assures her that the girl has been discarded (and, by implication, that she as his wife will receive her full sexual quota), she agrees to marry him. He insists on bedding her that very night, eliciting the widow’s unequivocal approval of his aggressive wooing:

Ile love thee while I live,
For this attempt give me that lusty lad,
That winnes his widdow with his well drawne blade,
And not with oaths and words: a widdows wooing
Not in bare words but should consist in doing,
I take thee to my husband. (2247-52)

Given William’s own unabashed desire for Taffata’s money, it may seem a little unfair that his friend Boutcher should justify the match to the angry, cheated old father by telling him “You could not love the widdow but her wealth” (2468). Boutcher is quite
right. though, for in the context of the play, to “love” the widow is to sexually satisfy the widow. Responding to the commonplace remark that “the soule once gon / The best part of a man is gone.” Taffata agrees,

And ifaith

If the best part of a man be once gone.
The rest of the body is not worth a rush,
Though it be nere so handsome. (2477-80)

For Taffata, the soul is superseded by the phallus, the love that comes from the heart by the loving that comes from the groin. Given her criteria, who can object that the most mercenary young suitor, if he be virile enough, marries his widow only for money and not for love?

Nathan Field: *Amends for Ladies* (Queen’s Revels Chidren, 1611)\(^\text{24}\)

The “amends” made by *Amends for Ladies* are for Field’s earlier play, *A Woman is a Weathercock* (1609), but his portrayal of the widowed Lady Bright could as well be making amends for stage widows such as Taffata, Eudora, and Cynthia, who are not only easily aroused but willing to bed their suitors before marriage. Lady Bright, one of the play’s trio of exemplary women who each represent one of the three female estates—maid, wife, and widow—staunchly defends her chastity against the stratagems of her suitor, the aptly named Bould, until he finally tricks her into marrying him. Leinwand objects, understandably, that matching the widow with a man who tries twice to trick her into marriage is a rather questionable way of upholding her honour, and speculates that

\(^{24}\) The play’s title page refers to a production of the play by the Prince’s Men and Lady Elizabeth’s Men, but as Peery points out, this is likely a later performance and is not incompatible with an original performance by the children’s company. See Peery’s introduction to *Amends for Ladies* 144-45.
the audience's need to see her strong will and forthrightness safely contained in the bonds of marriage precludes the possibility of a different kind of "amends" (City Staged 184). But while the modern reader may prefer to see Lady Bright maintain her independence, it is important to recognize that Field could have chosen to make his amends to widows in a number of ways. He could have shown, for example, a widow who remained true to her husband's memory, defending her vow not to remarry against the onslaught of suitors. That he chose to make his exemplary widow a remarrying widow is not only further evidence of the widow-fantasy's theatrical popularity but, given the play's avowed purpose to please the women of the audience, it is also an indication that the story of Lady Bright was what he felt that those women wished to see. Both of the play's other plots amply fulfil the title's promise: the "maid" plot shows maids to be faithful, clever, and resourceful in the tradition of the cross-dressed heroine; Lady Perfect of the "wife" plot passes her husband's chastity test with flying colours, reducing both him and the deceitful friend he employed to seduce her to penitent tears for presuming to attempt her honour. In the "widow" plot, Lady Bright loves and desires Bould (who, unbeknownst to her, has moved in with her disguised as a waiting gentlewoman) but fights him off with a sword when he tries to seduce her. Later, having bound her lands and goods in a promise not to hinder his marriage (to a fiancée who proves to be a man in disguise), she happily acquiesces when he reveals that her promise and his "fiancée" are merely set up to oblige her to give in to her love for him and become his wife. Amends for Ladies offers the usual fantasy of marrying a wealthy widow, but the play may also be evidence that women—even widows—did not object to the depiction of widows as sexually eager and glad to

25 All further references to Leinwand are to The City Staged unless otherwise noted.
remarry, as long as they kept within the bounds of conventional chastity and refrained from premarital sex.

Lady Bright may be "the fairest, wisest, chastest, richest Widdow that ever conversation coapt withall" (1.1.191-93), but she is far from being cold or uninterested in sensual matters. Her opening speech, in which she praises the estate of widow over that of maid or wife, makes it clear that she enjoys being her "own commander," likes "the blisse/ Of wooers," and has a frank appreciation of "what that is, men with their wives do doc" (1.1.38-54). Despite the pleasure she takes in "wooers," she has for unspecified reasons commanded one of her suitors. Bould, to "forbeare [her] sight" (1.1.226), but the enterprising young man disguises himself as an elderly waiting woman named Mary Princox and is referred into Lady Bright's employment by Lord Feesimple. The audience is then treated to a titillating variation on the usual widow-wooing scene as the disguised Bould, alone with Lady Bright in her bedchamber, undresses his mistress and shares an intimate, bawdy conversation with her about sex and men. The widow's conversation is filled with sexual jokes and innuendo, which she cheerfully defends on the grounds that "if ill come into my fancie. I will purge it by speech" (3.3.39-40); evidently, her fancy runs much on one theme. She also declares herself partial to "masculine" men: "I like not these starch'd gallants: masculine faces and masculine gestures please me best" (3.3.94-96). When Princox asks her opinion of Bould, she disparages him as too masculine, so far

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26 Bould enters the play in disguise, but there are numerous clues up until he reveals his true identity that "Mary Princox" may in fact be a man: Princox first appears with Bould's friend, Well-tried, prompting Lady Bright to observe how strange it is for Bould and Well-tried to be asunder (1.1.228-29); both Feesimple and Well-tried are thrown into confusion when Lady Bright asks them the "woman's" name (1.1.304-06); it is pointedly noted how old and ugly "she" is (1.1.334-39); "she" fumbles awkwardly when she has to pin her mistress' ruff (2.4.44-48), and Lady Bright even remarks outright once, "me thinkes thou doest not do things like a woman" (3.3.47-48). Of course, the obviousness of Bould's disguise would depend much on how it was staged. When performed by the adult companies, the Prince's men and Lady Elizabeth's men, the role of Bould could have been taken by an adult actor, distinguishing the elderly (and suspect) Princox from the play's "women" played by youths.
from the effeminate extreme of the “starch’d Gallant” that “he spends as much time to make himself slovenly, as the other to be spruse” (3.3.107-09). Speaking of Bould, however, seems to make the widow suddenly feel her own loneliness, for she concludes her criticism of him with the words “Princox, I would have you lie with me, I doe not love to lie alone” (3.3.113-15). This is just the chance that Bould has been waiting for. In what is almost a literal dramatization of the fantasy of using sexual aggression to confirm one’s masculinity in the face of a widow’s emasculating power, Bould strips off the disguise that literally places him in a position of feminized subservience (as a maidservant) and heads off to the widow’s bed to seduce her in all his masculine glory, exulting “Of [sic], false disguise that hast been true to me, / And now be Bould, that thou mai’st welcome be” (3.3.130-31).

Ostensibly, Bould fails. The next the audience sees of him, Lady Bright is fending him off with a sword as she upbraids him for attempting her chastity. In the long debate which follows, she flatly refuses either to yield to his sexual demands or to marry him. The widow’s reasons for her refusal, however, are extremely specific, carefully calculated not to disturb the fantasy. Lady Bright does not turn down Bould’s advances because she is coldly chaste and uninterested in sex, nor because she is resolved never to remarry, nor because she is put off by Bould’s boldness and trickery, nor because she does not love him (she freely admits that she does [4.1.13-17]). Rather, she produces a single, uncomplicated reason: “I had rather farre confound / The dearest bodie in the world to me / Then that, that bodie, should confound my soule” (4.1.83-85). By invoking a power higher than her desires or Bould’s masculine prowess, she negates neither, yet still maintains her virtue.
The widow could, of course, satisfy herself, Bould, and Heaven too by agreeing to marry him, but she fears what people will say:

**Widow:**

I do love you so,

My blood forsakes my heart now you depart.

**Bould:**

S'heart, will you marrie me heereafter then?

**Widow:**

No, you are too yong, and I am much too old;

I and unworthy, and the world will say

We married not for love, good morrow servant.27

(4.1.132-37)

In this context, Bould’s stratagem to trick her into marriage is less evidence of his underhandedness than of his ability to give her exactly what she wants. At the end of the play, the widow binds her goods and lands in a promise not to hinder Bould’s marriage, only to have him claim her as his bride:

**Bould:**

Then once again, I say, widdow thou’rt mine:

Priest marrie us, this match I did intend,

Yee are all witnesses, if thou hinder it,

Widdow your lands and goods are forfeit mine.

**Widow:**

Ha, nay take me to, since there’s no remedie,

Your Widdow (without goods) sels scurvilie:

**Omnès:**

Whoop, God give you joy. (5.2.244-50)

27 Leggatt claims that Bould “cuts a shabby and even ridiculous figure” in the scene of attempted seduction, and is comically deflated by the widow’s successful defense of her chastity (Citizen Comedy 112). While the joke is indeed on Bould in this scene, the widow’s avowed love and desire for him make him more an object of amused sympathy than of ridicule and save him from truly losing face the way he would with an outright rejection. What he does lose, he makes up as a successful trickster at the end.
Bould’s trick relieves Lady Bright from the burden of the world’s opinion; as she is “forced” into the marriage, no one can point a finger at her for marrying a man so much her junior. In fact, her friends and acquaintances immediately welcome the match with enthusiasm. Far from failing to uphold her honour, the comedy’s conclusion assuages the widow’s own worries about her reputation.

The “widow” plot in Amends for Ladies is based on the assumption that the real smear against widows is the suggestion that they are sexually available outside of marriage. A virtuous widow, the kind of widow whom both women and men presumably will accept as exemplary, can still be bawdy, desirous, lonely, eager to remarry, in love with a much younger man, and not turned off by aggressive wooing. Given the high rate of remarriage in early seventeenth-century London, it is probable that Field did not misjudge his audience when he incorporated this kind of “virtuous” widow into the traditional fantasy of remarriage.

Jo. (John?) Cooke: Greene’s Tu Quoque, or the Cittie Gallant (Queen Anne’s Men, 1611)

The early years of the decade seem to have seen something of a fad for virtuous widows. In the subplot of Greene’s Tu Quoque, the chaste and charitable Widow Raysby repairs the fortunes of young Spendall, a penitent prodigal. Like Amends for Ladies, Cooke’s play offers the fantasy of winning a widow by stirring her desires without soiling the widow’s reputation, and, like Amends, proves that the portrayal of a virtuous widow does nothing to undercut the fantasy: a Lady Bright or a Widow Raysby, while refusing pre-marital sex, is shown to be just as available as a Taffata or a Eudora, and perhaps even more of a prize. The man who wins such a widow is less obliged to arm himself
against his knowledge of the widow’s easy virtue with Tharsalio’s cynical resignation:

“Is it not madness for me to believe, when I have conquered that fort of chastity the great Countess, that if another man of my making and mettle shall assault her, her eyes and ears should lose their function, her other parts their use, as if Nature had made her all in vain, unless I only had stumbled into her quarters?” (The Widow’s Tears 1.1.124-29). The virtuous widow in Tu Quoque, then, may be a way of smoothing over the fears of a widow’s insatiability inherent in the fantasy. But while this particular element of assuagement remains submerged in the play, another condition of the fantasy becomes very clear in Tu Quoque, namely the use of sexual aggression to compensate for the suitor’s emasculating position of dependence and inferiority. The centrality of such sexual aggression to the fantasy of marrying a widow becomes apparent when we consider Tu Quoque’s widow-wooing scene as an adaptation of William’s sword-wielding seduction of Taffata in Ram Alley. As Alan Berman points out, Tu Quoque’s version of the scene is softened and sentimentalized for the citizen playgoers at the Red Bull (x-xix), who would have looked askance at what Gurr describes as the “cynical depiction of ‘gallant’ male sexuality” (Shakespearian 354) consumed by the more upmarket and sophisticated Blackfriars Boys’ audience. This “softening,” though, consists of only two significant changes—Spendall, unlike William, does not enter into distasteful sexual competition with his own father, and Widow Raysby, unlike Taffata, insists on marriage before consummation. The spectacle of a young man using a weapon and explicit sexual promises to threaten and cajole a widow into submission was evidently quite acceptable to those supposedly less “cynical” citizen tastes.

Spendall, the eventual successful suitor, is the picture of a loveable young prodigal. As the play opens, his newly knighted master, Sir Lionel Rash, makes him
master of his mercer’s shop, which Spendall quickly runs into the ground with debts. Spendall’s debts, however, are the result of what Berman describes as his “immoderate, indiscriminate generosity” (xiv): he showers money on everyone from his whore to the little tennis-court boy who blesses him for his handsome tips. Thrown into debtors’ prison, this good-hearted fellow quickly and sincerely repents his folly, and is rewarded by the news that his debts have been paid by the “Charitie” of “The able, and wel-minded Widdow Raysby” (2168-70). The widow has also sent him a sum of money to buy new clothes, and Spendall, freed from prison, goes off to thank her.

The widow, whom the audience meets for the first time in the next scene, is about to marry Sir Lionel. As with Taffata’s prospective marriage to Sir Oliver, there is a suggestion that Sir Lionel is prepared to let his new wife have her own way: “for what is mine, is yours: you may command / Heere as at home, and be as soone obayde” (2299-2300). But the Widow Raysby does not seem willful and, more unusually, she is not portrayed as lustful. There are no bawdy double-entendres in her speech, and she accepts Spendall’s thanks with some sage advice to live within his means and without any hint of sexual attraction. The audience is thus quite unprepared for Spendall’s response. Upset that his old friends are shunning him in his poverty, he convinces himself in soliloquy that the rich widow longs for him:

It was an argument of love in her
To fetch mee out of Prison, and this night,
She claspt my hand in hers, as who should say,
Thou art my Purchase, and I hold thee thus:
The worst is but repulse, if I attempt it:
I am resolved, my Geneus whispers to mee
Goe on and win her, thou art young and active:
Which she is apt to catch at, for there's nought
That's more unsteadfast, then a woman's thought. (2470-78)

Spendall thus refuses to see himself as an object of charity, finding it more soothing to his poverty-wounded pride to consider himself “purchased” with her gift as an advance payment for services he knows he can perform. Essentially, he reverses the relative status of their positions: from a magnanimous superior, the widow is reduced to a mere woman of “unsteadfast” sexual desires, while he becomes defined by what he does have and she wants—youth and vigour—rather than by what he lacks.

That night, as the widow is reading in her chamber at Lionel’s house, Spendall bursts into her room, declares his love to her, and tries to kiss her. Astonished, the widow responds by reminding him that he owes her respect as his benefactor, and that she has the power to reduce him to his former desperate state:

Why thou impudent fellow, unthrift of shame,
As well as of thy purse; What has moved thee
To prosecute thy ruine? hath my bountie,
For which thy Maister was an orator
Importuned thee to pay mee with abuse?
Sirra retire, or I will to your shame,
With clamors rayse the house, and make your Maister
For this attempt, returne you to the Dungion
From whence you came. (2513-21)

As soon as the widow assumes that her “bountie” to him entitles her to a position of superior power (the same position she could well assume were she to marry him),
Spendall’s whole demeanour changes. From being “soft and courtious, full of love” (2506), he becomes violent and sexually explicit, threatening her with his phallic dagger (referred to, inevitably, as a “naked weapon” [2572, 2582]), forcing kisses from her, and spelling out the desired exchange of her wealth for his sexual performance in no uncertain terms. He begins, significantly, with an image that repudiates her scorn of him as a needy spendthrift by implying that she is the needy one, a beggar with a “clapdish”:

Widdow, hold your Clapdish, fasten your Tongue  
Unto your Roofe, and do not dare to call,  
But give mee audience, with feare and silence;  
Come kisse mee: No?  
This Dagger has a poyn, doe you see it?  
And be unto my suite obedient,  
Or you shall feele it too. (2522-28)

Demanding her obedience, her “feare and silence,” he presents himself as a man “That has both youth and livelihood upon him; / And can at midnight quicken and refresh / Pleasures decayed in you” (2538-43). When her maid knocks at the door, he forces the widow to send her away, relishing the power he now has over her: “Very well, why now I see / Thou’lt prove an obedient wife: come, let’s undresse” (2570-71). Widow Raysby refuses to undress but, Taffata-like, she declares herself won over by his sexual aggression:

By all my hopes I love thee, thou art worthy  
Of the best widdow living: thou tak’st the course;  
And those that will win widdowes must doe thus. (2578-80)

In lieu of immediate consummation, she agrees to sign a marriage contract.
Then, for a few moments, it appears that Spendall may not have known the way to win a widow after all. Asking for assurance that he will be sexually faithful, Widow Raysby says that she will bind him to his word, and proceeds instead to bind him to a bedpost, display her riches before him, and tear up the contract, claiming that he would only use her wealth to “revell with amongst your Curtizans” (2630). However, it quickly proves to be all a test, and a very easy one at that: when Spendall refuses to curse her (by which he would gain nothing anyway), she joyfully announces:

Take me unto thee, these, and all that’s mine;
Were it thrice trebled, thou wert worthy all:
And doe not blame this triall, cause it shews
I give my selfe unto thee, am not forc’d
And with’t a love, that ne’r shall be divorc’d. (2643-47)

Evidently, the proposed “exchange” has proved as tempting as the young suitor had hoped. Spendall now claims that he never meant to use the dagger, renews his promise of sexual fidelity, and the widow leads him off to church. Once again, it is proved that “those who will win widdowes must doe thus,” and even her feigned objection to him is based in the widow’s conventional desire to monopolize her new husband’s sexual attentions, so as not to disturb the fantasy with even a hint that she does not desire him or that his audacity is offensive. Even the most truly virtuous and seemingly non-lustful widow is thus shown to be accessible to a sexually potent young man, and his ability to play on her desires transforms his position from a humble recipient of her bounty to a man whose sexual generosity is worth “thrice treble” of what she can offer.
John Fletcher: *Wit Without Money* (Lady Elizabeth’s Men?, 1614)

*Wit Without Money* is the story of a deliberately penniless young wit named Vallentine who adopts an unusual technique to win the wealthy Lady Heartwell. Unlike Bould, William Smalshankes and Spendall, who make the widow an offer she can’t refuse, Vallentine plays hard to get. Intrigued by his blunt insults and aroused by his warnings to beware of lust, the widow eventually pursues him to his chamber, “sharpe set as a Sparrow hawke” (5.4.13), where he “reluctantly” agrees to marry her. Vallentine’s courtship methods, however, are an interesting but not particularly significant variation on the usual formula of the widow won through desire. The play’s more illuminating contribution to our understanding of the fantasy of profiting from a lustful widow is its treatment of “manliness,” for it explicitly opposes the kind of manhood attained by being a prosperous householder to the manliness of wit and sexual virility and, with Lady Heartwell’s choice of Vallentine, proves that the latter is the only kind of masculinity needed to subdue and win a widow.

Vallentine is not a spendthrift but a young man who has willfully rejected the life of care and responsibility that comes with owning property.28 His principles a mixture of socialism and sponging, Vallentine believes the world is “all a common riches, all men bound / To be his Bailiffes” (1.1.10-11) and lives off men who appreciate him as a knowledgeable and witty companion. As his uncle worriedly observes, he scorns as less than “manly” the conventional male responsibilities of householding, and would have housekeeping expenses “vented / Into more manly uses, Wit and carriage,” never thinking “of state, or meanes, the ground workes” (1.1.18-20). Vallentine thinks wives are mere sensual “trinkets” and prefers masculine society; children he sees as “but

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28 A full analysis of how Vallentine differs from the conventional stage prodigal is provided by Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy* 45-46.
charges / And disobedience” (2.2.46-53). The audience is not led to sympathize entirely with him, for he is not a witty trickster surrounded by swindlers and gulls but a rather eccentric youth who has to defend his willful poverty to his concerned uncle, disgruntled tenants, and destitute younger brother. Nevertheless, he is attractive in his arcadian philosophy of “the way of nature / A manly love, community to all / That are deservers. not examining / How much, or what’s done for them” (1.1.189-92). Even the brother he has ruined gives assurance that Vallentine is “Fraughted as deepe with noble and brave parts, / The issues of a noble and manly spirit / As any he alive” (1.2.60-62). While his tenants want him to settle down and be a good householder like his father who “kept good meate, good drinke, good fellowes, / Good hawkes, good hounds, and bid his neighbours welcome” (1.1.69-70), Vallentine has chosen to avoid the expense and care that make a youth a man, and instead to define a “manly spirit” as a spirit of wit and freedom.

For all his eschewal of domestic responsibility, Vallentine’s picture of an ideal wife is a highly conventional one. His uncle advises him to marry, but he insists he will only consider a woman without vanity or wantonness, “all her ends / Obedience, all her houres new blessings” (1.1.242-43). When he finds out that some of his friends are trying to court a widow, he warns them of the troubles they can expect:

It is to wed a widdow, to be doubted mainly,
Whether the state you have be yours or no,
Or those old bootes you ride in. Mark me, widdowes
Are long extents in Law upon mens livings
Upon their bodies winding sheetes, they that enjoy um,
Lie but with dead mens monuments, and beget
Onely their owne ill Epitaphs. (2.2.26-32)

He advises them instead to find a maid who will be “With one man satisfied, with one raine guided, / With one faith, one content, one bed agreed” (2.2.97-98). He alone, he declares, could have an “equall venture” with a widow because he has nothing to lose, no money she can “law nor claw away,” and so he could contemptuously “laugh at her tears, neglect her angers. / Heare her without a faith” (2.2.74-79). Vallentine then offers to “discover” the widow and report back to his friends (for the fee of his maintenance) what kind of woman she is, for she has denied the suitors access to her for a month. His motives are ambiguous—is it merely a paid service, as he claims, or does he plan to get her for himself? Whatever his initial plans are, his subsequent dealings with Lady Heartwell win him a wife.

Lady Heartwell herself proves to be less unpleasant than Vallentine had intimated, but still closer to the kind of shrewd, controlling widow he warns his friends about than to the self-effacing, obedient girl he envisages as a wife for himself. As Vallentine’s uncle puts it, “a great Fortune has made her Mistresse / Of a full meanes, and well she knowes to use it” (1.1.44-45). The widow’s maid says her mistress is “old” (1.2.16)—although we are not told how old—and her own sister describes her as “A woman of a presence” who is “A subtill Chimicke wench, and can extract / The spirit of mens estates” (1.2.22-24). As the widow’s first appearance is in a scene where she angrily denounces her sister Isabella’s romance with Vallentine’s impoverished brother—“Ile stoppe her heate, / And turne her charitie another way, / To blesse her selfe first” (2.1.24-26)—the others’ estimates of her are not unjustified. She is in fact preparing to whisk Isabella out of town away from her lover when Vallentine accosts her with a barrage of misogynist insults with which he means to test her for pride and peevishness. Lady Heartwell shows
a more attractive face as she eloquently defends herself and her sex against Vallentine’s insults, but even as she laughs at his charges of lust and insatiability, those charges work to lower this stately, prudent woman into the young prodigal’s grasp. She is evidently stirred by his relation of a rumour that she killed her husband with her insatiability and now needs four more to replace him, and by his lewd commendation of her as “as good a woman / As any Lord of them all can lay his legge over” (3.2.179-80). After he reveals that he has been testing her, she admits to herself that she is attracted to his “manly” nature:

As I live a fine fellow,

This manly handsome bluntness, shewes him honest;

What is he, or from whence? blesse me, foure husbands!

(3.2.194-96)

The widow’s desire for Vallentine is first increased by another encounter with him, where he rids her of her unwanted suitors (his former friends) and advises her to control her sexual appetite with fasting and labour; it is fanned again when his uncle brings her titillating rumours that Vallentine has married her and got her with child. Feeling an “itch” (5.1.82), she heads off to make the young man hers.

Confronting Vallentine in his chamber, the widow reveals her interest in him, “tests” his love by claiming to have sold her lands,\(^39\) and then goads him into marrying her by casting aspersions on his manhood. The aspersions are apparently quite accidental: speaking of the rumours of their marriage, she claims he is reported to have married her to be his “Nurse.” She means a sick-nurse, for “stitching up [his] ruines” (5.4.44), but he takes her to mean a baby’s nurse and responds by angrily asserting his sexual

\(^{39}\) This is not much of a test, for as Forker points out, Lady Heartwell would have substantial wealth even without the land (“Vit” 177).
masculinity: "my Nurse, yes, you shall rocke me: / Widdow Ile keepe you waking" (5.4.49-50). In what might be seen as a pre-emptive strike against what he knows of widows as troublesome wives (and a response to counteract her assertiveness in pursuing him). Vallentine agrees to take the widow "in anger," offering more of a threat than a proposal:

But tis in anger yet, and I will marry thee,

Doe not crosse me; yes, and I will lie with thee,

And get a whole bundle of babies, and I will kisse thee,

Stand still and kisse me hansomely, but do not provoke me,

Stirre neither hand nor foote, for I am dangerous,

I drunk sacke yesternight, do not allure me:

Thou art no widdow of this world, come

In pitty and in spite Ile marry thee,

Not a word more, and I may be brought to love thee. (5.4.66-74)

Lady Heartwell speaks not a word more, and the next scene finds her led off to church, a little reluctant and a little shamed by Vallentine's loud assertions of how he will sexually handle her:

Vallentine: Nay you shall know I am a man.

Widdow: I think so.

Vallentine: And such proove you shall have—

Widdow: I pray speake softly.

Vallentine: Ile speake it out Widdow, yes and you shall confesse too,

I am no nurse child, I went for a man, a good one,

If you can beate me out oth' pit—
Widdow: I did but jest with you.

Vallentine: Ile handle you in earnest, and so handle you . . . . (5.5.21-27)

Although Vallentine’s repeated assertions of his manhood may betray a certain insecurity, the widow’s newly subdued responses suggest that he has indeed mastered her. And with the widow’s money, he pays off the mortgage on his estate and now happily adds the manhood conferred by a household and family to his youthful manliness of wit and sexual prowess. A widow handily provides the former kind of manhood, but it takes the latter to woo and subdue her so that a young man can enjoy her wealth without having himself and it under her thumb.

**John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont: The Scornful Lady (Queen’s Revels Children, 1613)**

Like Vallentine in *Wit Without Money*, Young Loveless is an unrepentant prodigal whose sexual attractiveness invites a widow to “make a man” of him. The play, in which “prodigality wins through, unrepentant and uncorrected” (Leggatt, *Citizen Comedy* 47), is also careful to show that the marriage is not one where Young Loveless’ manhood will be under the widow’s control. Although the widow (she has no other name) threatens to take up authority over him, he does not marry her until he has bested her in a symbolic argument about whether his old disreputable companions are fit to live with him in her “civil” house. Whereas Vallentine chooses to give up his madcap ways and redeem his mortgage with his widow’s money, Young Loveless takes the fantasy a step further. He gets to keep the benefits of a widow and the pleasures of a prodigal as well.
Young Loveless’ wooing of the widow is easily accomplished with the conventional tactics. In fact, the match is so easily made that it serves as a foil to the main plot, in which Elder Loveless, the prodigal’s older brother, is tormented and frustrated in his pursuit of a coy maiden, the scornful lady of the title. Like the ballad refrain, the play reminds its audience that “Maydens are wanton / and often times coy; / But Widdowes be wilful / and never say nay.” By contrast with the maiden, who is made to look both cruel and foolish, the widow is commended for her frank availability. Young Loveless wins the widow away from the usurer Morecraft, to whom he has lost all his money. After he has caught her eye as a “handsome gentleman” (2.3.64), all it takes is for the young prodigal to make the widow a few speeches about the misery of being a usurer’s wife and the horrors of bedding an old man (3.2.106-22). The widow primarily wants to marry a knight—and Young Loveless eventually buys himself a knighthood—but she much prefers a young, virile knight over an old one, and is eager to enter into the traditional exchange of money for sexual pleasure, here described by her suitor’s brother:

Elder Loveless: Faith bee not mercilesse, but make a man; hees young and handsome, though he be my brother, and his observances may deserve your love: hee shall not fail for meanes.

Widow: Sir, you speake like a worthy brother; and so much I doe credit your faire language, that I shall love your brother: and so love him, but I shall blush to say more. (3.2.182-88)

As much as she desires Young Loveless, however, the widow also has plans to reform him. During his dealings with the usurer, she warns him not to sell his lands, and wishes he were “wiser” (3.2.30-31; 2.3.132). And when she agrees to marry him, she is invested with the authority his elder brother had attempted to exercise over him: “Now
brother I should chide.” Elder Loveless tells him, “but Ie give no distaste to your faire Mistrisse. I wil instruct her in’t, and she shall doo’t: you have bin wild, and ignorant, ‘pray mend it” (3.2.190-93). The widow does chide him: as they are on their way to church to be married, she urges him to cast off his old companions as “unfitting / For your bare knowledge, and farre more your company” (4.2.1-2). His companions try to silence her by bawdily reminding her of the pleasures she will enjoy that night, but she insists that her new husband “shall be civill / And slip off these base trappings” (4.2.24-25). When his companions swear to abandon him if he becomes “civill,” Young Loveless is faced with the choice of settling down as a sober, prosperous householder with the widow and her money, or opting for what Vallentine would call “more manly uses” of his youth, drinking and wenching with his male companions.

Instead of choosing, however, Young Loveless uses his wit to have it both ways. He cleverly twists the widow’s objection in a way that enables him both to defend his friends successfully and to prove himself to be the kind of careful, sober husband she wants. She wants him to get rid of the men because they are base and unfit for a civil household, which they undeniably are, but he answers her as if she had objected to the expense of keeping them:

You do not understand these Gentlemen:
I will be short and pithy; I had rather
Cast you off by the way of charge: these are Creatures
That nothing goes to the maintenance of
But Corne and Water. I will keepe these fellowes
Just in the competency of two Hennes. (4.2.48-53)
Distracted from her original argument, the widow agrees to keep them if he can prove this extraordinary claim to be true. Young Loveless then launches into a long and clever speech on the asceticism of ale drinkers, winning the widow’s acquiescence:

You have halfe perswaded me, pray use your pleasure:
And my good friends since I doe know your dyet,
Ile take an order, meate shall not offend you.
You shall have ale. (4.2.101-04)\textsuperscript{30}

Rather than being reformed or controlled by the widow, Young Loveless sets up their marriage as a confirmation and continuation of his relationship with the male friends whom he will support with the widow’s wealth: “Come forward gentlemen, to Church my boyes. / When we have done, Ile give you cheere in boules” (4.2.107-08). Young Loveless disarms the widow’s authority with wit and not, as is more usual, with sexual mastery, but the effect is similar. With the anxiety about a widow’s potential for domestic control accounted for and contained, the fantasy of marrying her wealth is ready for consumption.

These six comedies illustrate all the important features of how the fantasy of arousing, subduing, and wedding a wealthy, lustful widow was played out on the Jacobean stage—the widow’s easily-stirred sexual proclivities; the successful suitor’s youth, physical prowess, and audacity; the widow’s threatening tendency to recognize that she is her suitor’s superior (his mistress, his benefactor, or merely a woman older, wiser, richer, and more esteemed than him); and the suitor’s successful defusing of that

\textsuperscript{30} It is just possible that the widow thinks she will get rid of the men by starving them out, and from a realistic point of view, she would probably succeed. But the play is not realistic on this point, for Younger Loveless and his companions have earlier demonstrated that they can live very happily on nothing but “three hundred pounds in drinke” (1.2.140-41).
threat by means of sexual aggression. Of the three remaining comedies in this group, Chapman’s *Sir Giles Goosecap* (Chapel Children, 1602) and *A Match at Midnight* (Red Bull Company?, 1622), possibly by Rowley, are minor and less interesting works, while the remarrying widow has a very small role in Dekker’s *Satiromastix* (Chamberlain’s Men and Paul’s Boys, 1601). All three, however, sketch in the features of the fantasy of winning a sexually susceptible widow, although *A Match at Midnight*, the latest of this group, opts for a rather clumsy surprise ending that prevents the expected marriage. *A Match at Midnight* features a hilarious “wooing” scene in which the amiable young spendthrift Alexander performs a striptease to force Widow Wagge to contract herself to him. As Alexander undresses down to his breeches, the widow agrees to the match for fear of being found alone in her chamber with a man “As naked as Grantham steeple” (4.5.96), but she also finds the young man attractive (3.1.122-31) and is not averse to what she sees. But in the final scene the widow’s servant reveals himself to be her husband who was supposedly drowned at sea, and Alexander must be content with a reconciliation to his undeserving father, the usurer Bloodhound. *Sir Giles Goosecap* provides a less startling variation on the usual theme: the courtship of the poor scholar Clarence and the rich, learned widow Eugenia is conducted on a more refined and spiritual level than is Tharsalio’s pursuit of Eudora, with Eugenia’s earthy uncle Momford supplying the boldness and the cynical attitude towards women that his friend Clarence lacks.\(^{31}\) For all her intellectual veneer, however, Eugenia reveals herself to have a widow’s conventional propensity to be stirred by passion and bold tricks of wooing, and her eventual agreement to marry a poor man is rewarded by the discovery that Clarence has been made her uncle’s heir. Bawdy innuendo and sexual aggression are

\(^{31}\) The plot is inspired by Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*, as several critics point out (Parrott 894; Herring 166).
again front and centre in Captain Tucca’s wooing of Widow Miniver in *Satiromastix*. The play awards the rich and elderly widow to Tucca as a prize, both for his role as principal satirist in the main plot (Dekker’s scathing reply to Jonson’s attack on him in *Poetaster*)\(^{32}\) and for the outlandish impudence of his courtship. Accosting her with a barrage of sexual promises and sexual insults, Tucca simultaneously stirs the widow’s desires and deflates her social pretensions, winning her away from three richer and more genteel rivals. Widow Miniver, for all her pride in being “worshipt . . . to my face a thousand times” (2.1.11), is easily subdued by Tucca’s appeal to her carnal appetite. The widows in the following comedies, however, are represented as a more serious threat.

**Undercutting the widow as prize: Patient Grissil; The Alchemist; Bartholomew Fair**

Thomas Dekker, Henry Chettle, and William Haughton: *Patient Grissill* (Admiral’s Men, 1600)\(^{33}\)

The apparently harmonious marriages destined to the widows and their poor young suitors portrayed in the plays discussed above may disguise how the stereotype of the lustful widow is required in service of anxieties that such a marriage would likely be an emasculating struggle for domestic mastery. The decade’s first widow on the comic stage, however, is a strong reminder of the fear behind the fantasy: Gwenthyan, the Welsh widow in the subplot to the Griselda story, is not a woman happily to relinquish her money and independence for a life of sexual contentment. Gwenthyan’s wooing by Sir Owen is over before the middle of the second act, and the rest of the plot focuses on the continual strife of their marriage. As all of the play’s critics point out, the Gwenthyan subplot functions as a foil to the main plot. While Grissill submits meekly to Gwalter’s

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\(^{32}\) For a full account of the plays and persons involved in “the war of the theatres,” see Hoy 180-97.

\(^{33}\) The subplot discussed here is attributed to Haughton. See Hoy 143-46.
ill-treatment, Gwenthyan is determined that her husband will not make her “such ninny pobbie foole as Grissill” (3.2.202), and fights him tooth and nail for her own way in everything. The two plots display several obvious parallels: Grissill makes the wedding preparations for Gwalter’s second marriage, but Gwenthyan angrily ruins a banquet that Gwalter is to attend at her house; Grissill humbly puts her rags back on at Gwalter’s command, but Gwenthyan insists on wearing rags to embarrass her husband before his guests. The subplot evidently works to affect the audience’s view of the main plot, but critics disagree as to whether it upholds or undercut the conventional moral of wifely submission and patience put forth by the Griselda story.\footnote{Keyishian argues that “patience wins the day” in the subplot as well as the main plot (260); Bronfman claims Gwenthyan agrees to make Sir Owen her head, but describes the play’s resolution as “troubling” and “unsatisfactory” (219). Neither critic notes that Gwenthyan effectively unsays this promise directly after she makes it (5.2.290-92). Comensoli, Levin, and McLuskie see the subplot as undermining the main plot: Comensoli believes it is intended to do so (209-10), Levin sees it as a structural weakness (Multiple Plot 50-51), and McLuskie describes it as a “strand of resistance” not quite contained by the comic conclusion (103-04). See also Hoy 143 and Pechter 86, who note the plots’ contrasts without commenting on their effect.} Oddly enough, all the debate about the play’s “moral” tends to overlook the very specific moral that Gwalter clearly explains at the end of the play. Paying little attention to the fact that Gwenthyan is not just an unmanageable wife but a remarried widow, and perhaps unaware of contemporary notions of the relative merits of widows and maids as wives, critics have failed to notice that the play makes use of the conventional widow/maid contrast to evade as far as possible the problems of moralizing Griselda.

The play spends little time on Sir Owen’s courtship of Gwenthyan, and emphasizes neither a need for money on his part nor lust on hers. The courtship does reveal, though, exactly what Gwenthyan expects from a husband. Sir Owen hints at sexual matters when he tells the widow that he loves her as “Tavie love Mistris Persabe” (i.e. as David loved Bathsheba), but he primarily advertises himself as wise and valiant...
(2.1.175-85). “Sir Owen, Sir Owen,” replies the widow, “tis not for faliant, Gwenthyan care so much. but for honest and fertuous, and loving and pundall to leade her have her will” (2.1.192-94). Dismissing the traditional male attributes of wisdom and courage, Gwenthyan instead demands the qualities that men conventionally seek in a wife: love, virtue, honesty (sexual fidelity?) and submissiveness. Although Sir Owen believes he can “pridle her well enoughe” (2.1.196), he has in fact got himself into a marriage where he is expected to take the subordinate, “feminine” role.

Predictably enough, at Sir Owen’s next appearance he is begging Gwalter to teach him how to tame his wife, but only gets the enigmatic advice to cut three green osiers and lay them safely away. Sir Owen has much to do to keep Gwenthyan from breaking the osiers (she assumes he intends to beat her with them), and finally cajoles her into quiet with promises of a new coach and attendants, only to have a fresh quarrel break out over an expensive rebato she has bought for herself. When he forbids her to pay for it, Gwenthyan furiously asserts her control over the couple’s money by tearing up some valuable bonds she brought to the marriage, crying “Goe loog, is now paide for her repatoes, ile have her wills and desires, ile teadge her pridle her Lady” (3.2.269-70). True to the warnings in moral tracts and popular literature alike, the widow Gwenthyan proves herself one of those intractable wives who “will looke to bee obeied, as wel for that shee hath been before acquainted with love matters, as also because . . . they bring greater wealth unto their husbands, then the maides doe” (Batty 97). Not satisfied with this revenge, she further demonstrates her control by inviting a swarm of beggars to devour a feast her husband has arranged for Gwalter and his courtiers, meeting the guests with her house a mess and herself in rags. As Gwenthyan and Sir Owen bewilder their servants with contradictory commands, and reports trickle in of chaos in the kitchen
where "the cookes curse her Lady, and some pray for our Lord" (4.3.128-29), the episode extends the effects of a remarried widow’s insubordination beyond the personal strife of a couple to show how it creates a disordered household. And in case one is tempted to think that Gwenthyan is just an irascible individual, Sir Owen points out the specific source of his troubles:

Sir Owen is pridled I warrant: widdows (were petter Gods plude marry whoore) were petter be hang’d and quarter, then marry widdowes as God udge me: Sir Owen fall on her knees, and pray God to tag her to mercy, or else put petter minde in her Lady: awl prittish Shentlemans tag heed how her marry fixen widowe.

(3.2.272-77)

As Gwalter neatly sums up this emasculating marriage, "doe what he can, / I doubt his wife will proove the better man" (4.3.171-72).

Although the audience may well agree with Gwenthyan’s spirited insistence that Grissill is a fool to put up with Gwalter, her own unreasonableness, her disorderly household, and the play’s use of conventional sentiment on widows as wives ensure that they do not see her and her methods as an acceptable alternative to Grissill’s submission. As Richard Levin explains, both couples represent extreme deviations from the mean, with Gwenthyan’s shrewishness and Grissill’s subjection, Sir Owen’s docility and Gwalter’s tyranny at opposite ends of the spectrum of marital behaviour.\(^{35}\) Levin sees a problem with this structure, however, for “the values of the folktale source of the main

\(^{35}\) This point is also made within the play by Julia, Gwalter’s unmarried sister, who condemns both marriages and understandably decides to remain single. Julia, however, is rather too stridently anti-marriage in the tradition of the scornful maiden (for instance, she is glad to see Grissill tormented by Gwalter as it serves her right for giving up her “sweet libertie”) to be seen as a purely objective commentator. See 4.3.204-14.
plot dictate that Grissil’s utter self-abnegation be treated as the wifely ideal” and require that Gwalter’s tyranny be accepted “as the prerogative of his sex (and rank) as well as a justifiable subterfuge designed to demonstrate her worthiness” (Multiple Plot 50). What Levin does not note is that the play seeks to use Gwenthyan and Sir Owen to dodge the question of Gwalter’s rights and Grissill’s example altogether.

Essentially, the play uses the conventional ideas about unmanageable remarried widows played out in the subplot to impose an unexpected moral on the Griselda story. In the final scene, Gwalter asks Sir Owen to bring out his three osiers, and uses them to illustrate his wife-taming technique—which turns out to have as much to do with selecting a wife as with controlling her. When Sir Owen tries to braid his now-dry osiers, they snap in pieces, while Gwalter’s, braided on the day he cut them, are bent to their new shape. The marquess then explains his lesson:

I tride my Grissil’s patience when twas greene,
Like a young Osier, and I moulded it
Like waxe to all impressions: married men
That long to tame their wives must curbe them in,
Before they need a bridle, then they’l proove
All Grissils full of patience, full of love,

But you Sir Owen giving her the head,
As you gave liberty to those three wandes,
Shee’ll breake as those doe, if you bend her now... (5.2.238-49)

Although Gwalter suggests that Sir Owen might have tamed his wife had he been firm from the beginning, the symbolism of the green and dry osiers, taken together with what
the audience has seen of the two women, also suggests that the secret of having a good wife lies in the choice: even before marriage, the older, wealthy, widowed Gwenthyan had none of the poor young maiden Grissill’s submissive patience. Unsatisfactory as this moral may be to contain the issues raised by the main plot, it provides the playwrights with an original way to try to sidestep the problem that has plagued tellers of the Griselda story since Chaucer: how is the hearer to apply the tale’s example to his or her own life? A contemporary chapbook, *The Ancient True and Admirable History of Patient Grisel* (1619), could explicitly offer Griselda as a model for wives, but a trio of commercial playwrights who needed to appeal to the widest possible audience could run into difficulty doing the same. Nor was it feasible for a stage production to act out Chaucer’s abstract, ungendered moral about steadfast patience in adversity and obedience to God’s will. By imposing a moral declaring that maids make good wives who do not require taming, while remarried widows are ungovernable shrews, the play tries to exploit the popularity of the Griselda story while remaining as palatable as the latest comic ballad.

As for Sir Owen, he gets a few moments of relief when Gwenthyan announces she was only testing him and now plans to make him her head (5.2.261-65). But it appears that widows will be widows: a few lines later, she invites wives in the audience who “have husbands that you would pridle, set your hand to Gwenthian’s pill, for tis not fid that poore womens should be kept alwaies under” (5.2.290-92). As another character suggests, perhaps poor Sir Owen had really better just buy his winding sheet and wait it out (5.2.260).

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36 The chapbook and other Renaissance versions of the Griselda story, featuring an assortment of morals, are discussed by Bronfman.
Of the three comedies in this group, *Patient Grissil* sets out the threats the remarried widow poses to her husband most fully and explicitly, warning that the mature, maritally experienced woman who brings superior wealth into her next marriage may seek to subjugate her new husband, casting their household into disorder. Compared to the redoubtable Gwenthyan, the remarrying widows in Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Alchemist* (performed by Lady Elizabeth’s Men and the King’s Men respectively) play very minor roles, but both comedies, like *Patient Grissil*, make use of culturally current anxieties about the kind of wives that widows make. Helen Ostovich observes that “No-one [in Jonson’s plays] emerges morally superior, or wins an unambiguous reward (“Introduction” 54), and in both *Bartholomew Fair* and *The Alchemist* marrying the widow serves as a very ambiguous reward for the two men, Quarlous and Lovewit, who *seem* to have triumphed in the end. In *Bartholomew Fair*, Quarlous, who sets himself up as the ultimate unmasker of folly, tricks the Puritan widow Dame Purecraft into marrying him, but his doing so constitutes the unmasking of his own folly. As several critics have noted, Quarlous abandons his own principles against widow-hunting to pursue Purecraft’s money.\(^{37}\) Ignoring his own earlier advice to Winwife—which paints a graphic picture of marriage to a widow as a life of grotesque sexual drudgery with little hope of ever gaining control of her wealth (1.3.52-86)—he greedily asks himself “Why should I not marry the money when ‘tis offered me?” (5.2.71-72) and marries the unattractive and financially shrewd old widow. This marriage, together with his underhanded treatment of Winwife, undercuts his authority at the end when he declares his triumph and rebukes Overdo (Ostovich, “Introduction” 48-49).

The widow of *The Alchemist*, on the other hand, is too young and too much of a "good, dull, innocent" (5.4.67) to arouse the conventional fears of wifely domination, but she too threatens her new husband's masculinity. As her name, Dame Pliant, suggests, this easily-won widow will make an easily-seduced wife, liable to cuckold the elderly husband she eventually marries. The cunning servant Face, who had planned to marry Dame Pliant himself, instead uses her and her wealth as a bribe to persuade his master, Lovewit, to forgive his use of the house for alchemical trickery. Lovewit marries Dame Pliant not only for her wealth but for her youth and sexual attractiveness, which he hopes will rejuvenate his aging virility (5.3.84-86, 5.5.56-58). However, his closing speech to the audience contains an ironic subtext suggesting that he has instead married a wife who is liable to do precisely the opposite and undermine his manhood with the ignominy of cuckoldry:

Therefore, gentlemen

And kind spectators, if I have outstripped

An old man's gravity or strict canon, think

What a young wife and a good brain may do:

Stretch age's truth sometimes, and crack it too.

(5.5.152-56)

Lovewit thinks (as do some critics) that he has found a realistic version of the elixir of youth: his luscious young wife and clever servant will help him "stretch" or even "crack" the unpleasant "truth" of old age.\(^\text{38}\) But given Dame Pliant's name and nature—her easy compliance with any man who attempts her—and given the conventional anxiety over remarried widows as potentially unfaithful wives, the audience would be able to see a

\(^{38}\) See James 28-29. Presumably the "good brain" is Face, whom Lovewit earlier refers to as "my brain" (5.5.7), but Lovewit could also simply be speaking of his own cleverness.
meaning in these lines that Lovewit does not intend. What a “young wife” and a “good brain” (be it Face or another would-be adulterer) usually do to an “old man” is cuckold him, “stretching” and “cracking” the aged husband’s “truth,” which is both his credit or reputation, and the fidelity his wife owes him. Having swindled the gulls and double-crossed his fellow rogues. Face’s coup de grace is to bribe his master with a prize of dubious worth.

The widow punished and the widow rewarded: The Captain; A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed

John Fletcher: The Captain (King’s Men, 1612)

The Captain and A New Wonder should perhaps also be included among the comedies that play into conventional fears about remarried widows as wives, for the sexual voracity of Fletcher’s Lelia makes her a far more perilous prospect than the acquiescent Dame Pliant, while Mistress Foster in Rowley’s play is similar to Gwenthyan in her determination to control her husband and “her” money. But these two plays are mutually illuminating in another way, for each presents a widow who is rewarded or punished according to the extent to which she makes herself and her wealth available to the kind of poor young men whom the lusty widow fantasy traditionally favours. The intrigues of the widow Lelia which form the black comedy of The Captain’s subplot

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39 Rebhorn makes the point that Lovewit has entered a May-December marriage and may not be able to sexually satisfy his young bride (371). Dame Pliant’s status as a widow and Lovewit’s final speech, neither of which Rebhorn mentions in this context, further support his reading.

40 Most of the play’s critics believe that Lovewit triumphs in the end, reading his triumph either as evidence of his society’s thorough moral corruption or as the comic vindication of wit and ironic detachment. For examples of the former argument, see Blissett 333-34 and Ross 448; of the latter, Leonard, “Shakespeare” 68-69; Arnold 165-66; Van Dyke 268-69; Leggatt, Citizen Comedy 76-77. Some critics do point out that Lovewit is gulled (to varying degrees) by Face, notably Dessen, Moral Comedy 130-31; Thayer 106; Finnigan 103; and Rebhorn 355-56. Rebhorn 371 and Finnigan explicitly mention that Dame Pliant is not the prize she appears to be. For the opposite view, see James 27-29.
operate in a way similar to God’s poem, “A Discourse of the Great Crueltie of a Widdow,” as a cautionary tale of a widow who refuses to be accessible along the lines of the fantasy and who receives her just deserts. *The Captain’s* is thus a somewhat darker presentation of the remarrying widow than is found in the other plays examined here.

Lelia’s billing in the *dramatis personae* is as “a cunning wanton Widow,” which neatly sums up her two “crimes” against the fantasy: a good part of her “cunning” is that she calculatingly denies access to all but wealthy suitors, seeking not to share but to augment her own considerable wealth by enticing a rich man to marry her. And her wantonness, her willingness to use men she does not intend to marry to satisfy her sexual needs, enables her to resist the marital exchange of wealth for sexual pleasure inherent to the fantasy. Where Zilia is cold, Lelia is voracious, but as she refuses to channel her urges into the “natural” course of marriage with a poor young man, she too gets her due in being sunk to the depths of “unnatural” moral degradation.

Lelia’s refusal to share her wealth is shown from the start in the worst possible light. At her first appearance, she turns her destitute old father away from her door when he comes begging her for relief with the piteous protest that he once “gave up all [his] state to make [hers] thus” (1.3.61)—probably as a portion to help her to a wealthy husband. After he departs, Lelia instructs her woman on the kind of men she should admit to the house:

If thou seest

They looke like men of wealth, and state, and carry

Ballast of both sides like tall Gentlemen,

Admit ’em, but no snakes to poyson us

With poverty. (1.3.130-34)
She teaches her servant her “wise rule,” which is to ignore a suitor’s looks, youth, and charm unless he is wealthy, and to feign modesty “That men may fairly see / ’Tis want of means, not vertue makes thee fall” (1.3.147-48). Lelia thus explicitly denies herself to the kind of men who traditionally benefit from marrying a wealthy widow, the Spendalls and the Vallentines who have nothing to offer but youth and virility. When Julio, a man who evidently “promise[s] proffit” (1.3.153), knocks on her door she welcomes him with open arms. Julio, smitten by her beauty but aware of her reputation for wantonness, wants only a sexual relationship, but as he is rich, the widow tries to entice him into marriage.

Lelia is dangerous because she seeks to invert the fantasized exchange of a widow’s wealth for the sexual prowess of the suitor. Whereas the widows in the plays which offer the fantasy are unable to resist the sex appeal of a poor but audacious suitor and so eagerly hand over their money for a marriage of pleasure, Lelia sates her appetite with non-marital sexual encounters while deploying her own nearly irresistible beauty to snare a wealthy husband. Much of the plot is taken up with Julio’s and his friend Angilo’s comical endeavours to avoid falling prey to her charms and agreeing to become the husband of this “whore” (3.4.173). While the conventional sex-for-money exchange exposes the widow’s degrading sexual need and bolsters the suitor’s masculinity, Lelia’s tactics are antithetical to the fantasy: the men are humiliated and overpowered by their desire for her as she seeks to exploit them for her own mercenary ends.

Lelia, of course, can keep her sexual desires subjugated to her financial ones when it comes to choosing a husband because she has no scruples about taking her pleasure outside of marriage or even betrothal. And it is this practice, which represents a transgression both of conventional morality and of the kind of behaviour that makes a widow accessible to poor suitors, that leads to her downfall. Proving her sexual tastes to
be as unnatural—as un-widowlike, so to speak—as her lack of generosity, Lelia lusts after an elderly man, dismissing “young soft melting gristles” like Julio as “only for my safer ends,” which presumably are to augment her estate (3.4.7-8). A jaded sexual connoisseur, she desires the old man because he is “The greater novelty,” from whom she “may learn something in the way of lust” (4.4.122-26). Significantly, the widow does not intend to marry the old man, nor to spend any of her wealth on him beyond what it takes to lure him into her clutches (3.4.2-3). As her language reveals, she believes her sexual favours to be sufficiently rewarding, promising that in her bed “both my treasure, body, and my soule / Are your’s to be dispos’d of” (4.4.119-20), and assuring him that when she “robs” him of his kisses she will “yet leave / Thy lips as wealthy as they were before” (4.4.144-45).

When the old man reveals himself to be her father, Lelia’s punishment begins. Its first component is her moral degradation far below what she has already suffered in the audience’s eyes as a cruel daughter, a golddigger, and a whore. She now reveals herself to be capable of incest, coolly arguing that if nature had not intended her to couple with her father, “our organs / Will not be fit” (4.4.194-95). Finally, horrified beyond endurance, her father draws his sword on her. Angilo, who has overheard the encounter, prevents him from using it, and together they drag her away to confinement and repentance. Her father completes the punishment by confiscating her estate and marrying her to a foolish gull named Piso. Apart from being tricked into marriage with a whore, Piso must also submit to having her wealth doled out to him by her father according to his usage of her. For her sins, Lelia ends the play a penitent, having lost her estate, her independence, the wealthy match she had hoped for, and every last shred of moral decency. Like Zilia, and like Chapman’s Cynthia, Lelia flies in the face of the fantasy and
suffers the consequences.

_A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed (company unknown, 1625)_41

_A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed_ is essentially a moral citizen comedy praising the virtue of charity and exemplifying the properly charitable uses of wealth (Leggatt, _Citizen Comedy_ 16-17). As George Cheatham observes, the play can be reduced to two simple, explicitly moral formulae—“natural Christian charity yields harmony, while unnatural pride yields only chaos” (24)—formulae which are dramatized through the pairing of “two older men, Bruyne and Old Foster; two younger men, Robert and Stephen; and two women, the Widdow and Mistris Foster. The first of each pair is charitable, the other proud” (31). What Cheatham does not note is that the two women are paired more closely and specifically than merely by their sex: both are pointedly presented as remarrying widows, the Widow marrying early in the play, and Mistris Foster marrying shortly before the action begins (her status is explicitly announced in the first scene). In one sense, Rowley uses the conventional fantasies and anxieties about widows (widows are eager to give their wealth to young husbands / widows are domineering and controlling) as an apt vehicle for the play’s moral message. Given the cultural currency of the stereotypes, who more natural to embody generosity and selfishness in women than a pair of remarried widows? In another sense, however, the careers of the Widow and Mistris Foster tell the audience as much about widows as they do about charity. Within the larger moral framework, the Widow’s behaviour is upheld not only as an example of general charity, but as an example of how widows in particular may demonstrate their charity. On the other hand, Mistris Foster presents not just abstract

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41 The date of 1625 is assigned by _Annals_. Cheatham makes a case for a composition date of approximately a decade earlier, but there is no conclusive evidence on either side.
selfishness but a reinforcement of common anxieties about widows as wives, tempered, however, by the suggestion that youthful virility has conquering powers.

In *A New Wonder*, Rowley makes several significant changes to the traditional fantasy of the widow who hands over her property for sex. As the play is an overt celebration of generosity, particularly financial generosity, it does not downplay the Widow’s generosity in marrying the prodigal Stephen by playing up a lustful eagerness to “pay” him for sexual pleasure. Nonetheless, as it would entirely explode the fantasy to have a widow marry her young man out of pure pity and compassion, Rowley supplies the Widow with an amusing, harmlessly “selfish” motive for marrying the prodigal. Blessed all her life with almost perfect happiness and prosperity, the Widow wants to experience affliction for the health of her soul. She is assured by Mistris Foster that remarriage will do the trick—“Your second choyse will differ from the first: / So oft as widdowes marry they are accurst” (1.2.231-32)—and so when Mistris Foster introduces her to her prodigal brother-in-law Stephen at a gaming house, the Widow makes him a proposal:

> I say, seeke me out some rich widow; promise her faire; shee’s apt 
> to believe a young man; Marry her, and let her estate fly; no 
> matter, ‘tis charity; Twenty to one some rich Miser rak’d it 
> together; this is none of *Hercules* labours. (2.1.231-35)

His “charity” to her is not sexual, as the suitor’s usually is (although she does flatter his strength and sexual endowment to spur him on [2.1.209-10, 226-23]), but the Widow’s “selfish” generosity enables Stephen to save face while he benefits from her.42

42 Charity for a spiritually “selfish” motive is also espoused by Bruyne, the play’s generous merchant: “This is a Maxime sure. Some are made poore that rich men by giving may encrease their store” (1.1.58-60).
The Widow’s motive for marrying Stephen turns the audience’s expectations of a remarrying widow comically upside-down. Where a widow usually marries for pleasure, she marries for woe; rather than keeping a tight grip on her estate, she urges her husband to waste it, “spare it not; doe thy worst” (2.1.278). Her servant (a kind of wise fool) advises her to “take heed how you give away the head; it stands yet upon the shoulders of your widowhood” (1.2.13-14), but the Widow has no wish to dominate her husband and is delighted when Stephen grows peremptory and “stout” in demanding a binding pledge of marriage from her (2.1.284-86). But although the play presents the Widow’s choice of Stephen in this humourous light, the effects of her choice and her generosity are serious enough. Marriage to the Widow miraculously reforms the prodigal. Charity begets charity and the reformed Stephen not only carefully tends and increases his wife’s estate but adopts the nephew disowned by his selfish brother Old Foster, repairs his brother’s fortunes when Old Foster repents, and rises to become a Sheriff of London and a great public benefactor. The Widow is personally rewarded for her generosity when Stephen proves to be the perfect husband. Loving, provident, deferential (he always asks for her consent to all his charitable uses of her money), encouraging her to do “ought that may seeme good / To [her] own will” (3.2.98-99), even sexually “well hang’d” (2.1.225), Stephen is every widow’s dream. The message of the Widow’s story is the obverse of Lelia’s (The Captain) or Zilia’s (“A Discourse of the Great Crueltie of a Widdow”): the widow who risks her estate, independence, and happiness to marry a poor young man has money, freedom, and pleasure multiplied back to her. Of course, the good fortune which rewards the Widow’s charity is humorously exaggerated. Stephen’s reform is no more “realistic” than is the return of her lost wedding ring in the belly of the salmon her cook buys for dinner. But the pathos and gravity of the Foster family saga in which she
becomes involved, along with the overtly moralistic tone of the play, ensure that the Widow (whose namelessness suggests her potential in every widow) becomes an ideal, not merely a comic extreme.\textsuperscript{43} The Widow is not simply blessed with singular, inexplicable good fortune. Rather, she is singularly charitable, and her good fortune is shown to be a proportionate, providential reward.

While the Widow provides an example, albeit an exaggerated one, of how widows ought to express their generosity, Mistris Foster makes it clear that widows as wives frequently fall short of this “New Wonder.” Mistris Foster’s behaviour is not at all wondrous but rather what is expected of a remarried widow according to the stereotype. Complaining and belligerent, she does not let her husband forget that the money she brought to the marriage entitles her to a firm hand over the family affairs. She, even more than the prodigal Stephen or Old Foster himself, is portrayed as the true root of the quarrels that are tearing the Foster family apart when the play begins. Robert, Old Foster’s son from a previous marriage, is using the family’s money for the charitable relief of his uncle Stephen, who is imprisoned for debt. Bruyne, one of the play’s moral touchstones, sees Robert’s behaviour as “a naturall Nephewes part” (1.1.82), but his wife’s control over the household forces Old Foster to disagree:

\begin{quote}
Tis in neither well, Sir, for note but the condition of my estate;
I’me lately married to a wealthy Widow from whom my substance chiefly does arise, she has observed this in her son in law, often complaines and grudges at it, and what foule broyles such civill discords bring, few married men are ignorant of. (1.1.84-89)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} See Levin 50 n.25, who refers to the “never-vexed Widow” and the “ever-vexed Mistress Foster” as “comic extremes,” albeit one more amiable than the other.
As “present prooe” (1.1.90), Mistris Foster bursts onto the stage demanding “Shall I not live to breath a quiet houre? I would I were a beggar with content rather than thus be thwarted for mine owne” (1.1.91-93). At her urging, Old Foster disowns both brother and son, and is providentially punished with sudden bankruptcy. Even then, she berates her husband for having “made hot haste to empty all my Ware-houses” (3.3.165-66) and scolds away any tendencies towards repentance (3.3.194). Just as the Widow’s generosity reforms Stephen, Mistris Foster’s selfish preoccupation with “her” money nearly destroys her husband.

In the end, Mistris Foster is redeemed by the Widow’s kindness, but the play earlier offers some more irreverent suggestions as to the conquering of a remarried widow. As Mistris Foster complains to the Widow of how the Foster men have “swallowed up” her estate (1.2.215), the Widow’s witty servant keeps up a running commentary on how the real cause of her woes is sexual frustration. The Widow and a Doctor who is present remind the discontented wife that Old Foster is “A man of faire condition, well reputed,” but the servant chimes in with “But it may be he has not that should please her” (1.2.209-10); when Mistris Foster warns the Widow that remarrying widows are all “accurst,” the servant rejoins “I, curst widdowes are; but if they all had stifte husbands to tame’m, they’d be quiet enough” (1.2.232-34). Mistris Foster is not only a bad-tempered woman and a stereotypical domineering remarried widow, she is also a widow who has chosen an old man for her second husband, not for love or desire, but to look after her affairs when “worldly care did so o’reload [her] weaknesse” (1.2.205). The suggestion that a younger, more sexually vigorous husband may have been able to enjoy even Mistris Foster’s estate in peace ensures that she remains more of a

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44 See also 2.1.158-59.
warning to widows of the dangers of selfishness than a Gwenthyan-like caution of the impossibility of governing a widow as a wife.

_A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed_ does not present the conventional fantasy of marrying a lustful widow. Stephen, although he is permitted to retain the suitor’s customary immunity from having the widow marry him as an act of charity, “wins” the Widow with neither wit nor sexual prowess, nor any merit of his own beyond the luck of being in the right place at the right time. What the play does do, however, is to uphold a widow’s remarriage, her decision to “make a man” of an impoverished youngster, as something wholly moral and admirable. And by placing the responsibility for a marriage’s happiness or misery almost entirely on the wife, the play evades any prudent objections against such a choice. While only a “New Wonder” of a woman might be able to reform a wastrel like Stephen, Rowley implies that any widow’s marital generosity will reap rewards. Modern readers who assume that tragedies set in foreign lands, like *Hamlet* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, reflect early modern English society’s condemnation of female remarriage would do well to consider the comic destiny of the London widow in _A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed._

**Conclusion**

The period’s remaining comedy which features a widow is Massinger’s _A New Way to Pay Old Debts_ (Red Bull Company?, 1621). It fits into none of the above categories and instead uses the expectations generated by the conventions of the remarrying-widow plot for its own didactic purposes. Seeing the traditional pattern of a young wastrel being entertained by a wealthy widow, the audience is led to believe that Welborne, a ruined and disreputable young man of gentle birth, will conquer and wed the
rich and virtuous Lady Alworth. However, it is revealed that the young man seeks only to use the widow as a ruse to trick his creditor, Sir Giles Overreach, and in the end Welborne enjoys neither the wealthy match the audience might have foreseen for him nor much of the property he had hoped to regain by his scheme. Instead, no one in the play is allowed the kind of marriage that typically concludes a widow-wooing plot, in which the gendered domestic hierarchy is threatened by a wife who is her husband’s social and financial superior, and Welborne is obliged to redeem his lost reputation through military service before he can hope for the wealth he sought to obtain through the widow. Coming towards the end of the Jacobean period, Massinger’s use of the widow and the wastrel repudiates the sensual and mercenary amorality of the conventional fantasy of winning a widow through her lust.

The very approximate dating of the fifteen plays included in this chapter makes it difficult to trace a chronological progression in the presentation of the remarrying widow and her suitors on the Jacobean stage. However, it is fair to say that while two of the earliest plays, *Patient Grissil* and *Satiromastix*, suggest that the theatre was dealing with already established types when it presented the controlling widow-as-wife or the widow won through sexual audacity, the courting of the “lusty widow” as a comic theme became particularly prominent after *The Widow’s Tears*, Chapman’s popular play of 1605. *The Widow’s Tears* was performed by Blackfriars Boys, as was *Ram Alley*, and both comedies exemplify the satirical, sexually cynical fare that suited the taste of that theatre’s patrons: the widows are highly libidinous and easily bedded, the suitors amoral, given to obscenity, and verbally or physically aggressive to the point of violence. The aggression continues, although the cynicism begins to abate, in the second decade with comedies produced by both boys’ and adult companies—the suitors in *Amends for Ladies*
and *Tu Quoque* find themselves courting widows who virtuously insist on marriage before they satisfy their sexual desires, although those desires themselves are still a prominent and accepted part of their character. The idea that the widow is *not* the prize that such comedies make her out to be is continued in this decade by Jonson, with his satirically drawn widows in *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. By the 1620s, playwrights like Massinger and Rowley are revising the conventions of the remarrying-widow plot into more overtly moralistic comedies, where Lady Alworth and the charitable Widow of *A New Wonder* are, at least morally, only distant relations of Eudora and Taffata. The reasons for these changes likely have more to do with the theatre’s ongoing need to provide novelty than with a changing attitude towards widows outside the playhouse. The kinds of social and domestic concerns which the remarrying-widow plots address remain relatively constant over this twenty-five year period: in 1625 as in 1600, young men still need money to become married householders; women who are older, richer, and more experienced than their husbands still pose a challenge to the gendered domestic hierarchy, which still prescribes absolute male authority; and cuckoldry is as ignominious as ever. London’s proportion of remarrying widows to first-time brides begins to drop very gradually over the 1630s and 40s, and continues to decline for the rest of the century (Boulton 327-29, 343), but in the first quarter of the century, they remain uniformly high. If anything, the theatre over this period makes the fantasy of marrying a widow for her wealth increasingly attractive. The ungovernable Gwenthyan (1600) or the lascivious Eudora (1605) are desirable wives only in a strictly material sense, but the Widow of *A New Wonder* (1625) is ideal in every way, while Massinger treats his Lady Alworth (1621) as *too* valuable a prize to be awarded to his prodigal. Possibly the later playwrights’ more flattering treatment of the widow had an
eye to drawing more women to the playhouse; perhaps they observed that a widow who is accessible, desirous, but pre-maritally (and, by extension, extra-maritally) chaste was more appealing to both women and men alike.

Even with this slight shift in the theatrical presentation of the widow, however, most of the period’s plays support the hypothesis that the image of the sexually desirous widow can be deployed to assuage male anxieties about the enticing but potentiallyemasculating marriage that the widow offers. At least seven of the fifteen plays enact a fairly formulaic fantasy of the suitor mastering the widow by means of her lust. In *The Widow’s Tears, Ram Alley, Satiromastix, Amends for Ladies, The Scornful Lady, Wit Without Money*, and *Greene’s Tu Quoque* (*Sir Giles Goosecap* and *A Match at Midnight* are marginal members of this list), a sexually audacious young suitor arouses the desires of a rich widow to bring her down to the level where she, socially and financially far more powerful than he, submits to his demands and endows him with her estate in marriage. She may demand his sexual fidelity in return (after all, her benefit in the bargain is wholly sexual and she has the right to his best performance), and she may pose a rudimentary test of his “love,” but the audience is generally assured that the widow’s sexual need has enabled her suitor to seize the upper hand. Tharsalio entices Eudora with promises of sexual servitude, but ends up controlling her daughter’s marriage to advance his family; Young Loveless tempts the widow away from her rich usurer to marry her on the condition that she can enjoy him but not reform him; Taffata and Widow Raysby both display a predilection for young men who can master them with a “naked weapon,” while Lady Bright rejoices at being forced into marriage by Bould’s trick. The fear that the widow is liable to usurp superiority over her husband is acknowledged to varying degrees in these comedies—from Eudora’s haughty contempt for her “servant” to Widow
Raysby's insistence on the respect due to her as benefactor—before it is neutralized by the widow's desires. Its continued currency, however, is evident in comedies like *Patient Grissil* and *A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed*, while *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* employ specific elements of the widow-as-unmanageable-wife stereotype. The third common motif is the reward or punishment scenario, which plays a supporting role to the fantasy of accessing a widow's wealth through her desires. The punishment scenario stands alone in *The Captain*, where Lelia's insistence on marrying a rich man is depicted as part of her "unnatural" moral degradation, but its relation to the fantasy is made very clear in *The Widow's Tears*. Eudora admits suitors, succumbs to Tharsalio and reaps a marriage of sexual "content," while Cynthia pridefully sets out to make a spectacle of her chastity, withdraws entirely from the marriage market, and is punished with the degrading revelation of her frailty. Where selfish pride is castigated in Lelia and Cynthia, the Widow of *A New Wonder*'s decision to marry a poor prodigal is applauded as angelic generosity. No widow is ever punished for lustfulness alone.

Most playwrights of the period took casual advantage of the lusty widow fantasy's popularity, writing one or two comedies featuring a remarrying widow. Fletcher, with and without Beaumont, wrote three. Middleton, however, returned to the remarrying widow in seven comedies over the course of his career. Middleton's extended exploration of the fantasy repays close attention, beginning with how the possible source of his fascination with widows may figure in his earliest extant comedy, *The Phoenix*. 
Chapter Three

Of what are probably the first five plays of Middleton’s career—The Phoenix, Michaelmas Term, The Puritan, A Mad World My Masters, and A Trick to Catch the Old One\(^1\)—only Mad World does not deal in some way with a widow’s remarriage.\(^2\) I will discuss A Trick in chapter four, along with No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s, as both plays use impersonation to reveal the male desires and anxieties that lie beneath the fantasy figure of the lustful widow. The present chapter, though, will examine The Phoenix, The Puritan, and Michaelmas Term, three early plays which reproduce, to a greater extent than does Middleton’s later work, his culture’s conventional modes of thought on widows and remarriage: the anxiety that the young, poor man who stood to benefit most from the widow’s money also risked emasculation, for his wife could use her superior wealth and experience to dominate him and their household; the fantasy that this daunting widow was also lustful and could be rendered accessible, needy, even grateful by virile appeals to her sexual appetite; the fear, born in part of this very fantasy, that a remarried widow might prove sexually demanding, then insatiable, then unfaithful. Only Michaelmas Term adheres to the conventions exemplified by the earlier The Widow’s Tears and Satriomastix (and soon to be staged in Ram Alley, Amends for Ladies, and Tu Quoque) to present a fairly straightforward version of the lusty widow fantasy.

The decade had opened, however, with Sir Owen’s memorable lesson that “were petter be hang’d and quarter, then marry widdowes” (Patient Grissil 3.2.274), and The Phoenix and The Puritan, while portraying very different widows in very different situations, both

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\(^1\) Lake dates The Phoenix, Michaelmas Term, Mad World, and A Trick as the first four plays in the known Middleton canon (20), and later brings evidence for Middleton’s sole authorship of The Puritan (109-35).

\(^2\) It does, however, feature Frank Gullman’s mother, a single older woman who may either be a widow or have borne her daughter illegitimately; she passes among her neighbours for a respectable widow, but as she herself is not courted, functioning instead as Frank’s bawd, she is beyond the scope of this study.
subscribe to the similar belief that a man who marries a widow is in for more grief than her money is worth.

*The Phoenix* (1604, Paul’s Boys)

I am aware that such a view of *The Phoenix* is considerably different from the usual critical view of what happens between Castiza, the play’s remarried widow, and the Captain, her villainous second husband who attempts to sell her to finance his sea-voyage. The part of the plot which concerns their marriage (in which Phoenix begins his investigation into “abuses” in his kingdom by discovering the Captain’s abuse of his husbandly authority) illuminates the biographical roots of Middleton’s continued fascination with the widow as a dramatic character, for it is evidently inspired by the troubled relationship between the playwright’s mother, Anne Middleton, and her second husband, the grocer and sometime sea “Captayne” Thomas Harvey. As *The Phoenix* is a play with an obvious moral framework—Dessen describes it as an “estates” morality play superimposed with “the realistic or ‘literal’ surface that we expect in Jacobean comedy” (“Allegorical” 292)—most critics read the Captain and Castiza in allegorical black and white. According to George E. Rowe Jr., the Captain displays the “monstrosity and deformity” traditionally associated with vice, while Castiza, as her name implies, embodies the virtue of chastity (31-32); Clifford Davidson observes that “Castiza (Chastity), the mother of Fidelio, represents purity of mind and body in the face of evil” (127); Richard Hindry Barker calls the Captain “almost a symbol of unscrupulous greed”

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3 Eccles quotes a petition in which Harvey refers to himself as “‘captayne Thomas Harvey… sometyme a servitor both by land and Sea’” (“Thomas Middleton a Poett” 527). The correspondences between the real-life marriage and the play are most fully discussed by Brooks in “Middleton’s Stepfather” and in the introduction to his edition of *The Phoenix* 118-24. See also Heinemann 69-70.
When John B. Brooks takes the biographical link into account, he makes the unsurprising assumption that the playwright’s real-life sympathies are easily integrated into the allegory: “If the Captain in The Phoenix was modelled after Middleton’s stepfather, then it seems reasonable to assume that Castiza, one of the few wholly admirable characters in Middleton’s plays, is the playwright’s tribute to the memory of his mother, who probably died shortly before he wrote The Phoenix, and Fidelio, the faithful son, is Middleton himself” (“Stepfather” 384). Margot Heinemann implies a similar motivation when she describes the plot as “Middleton’s first and most brutal treatment of widow-hunting and property marriage, a subject which he had emotional as well as satirical reasons to return to many times in both comedy and tragedy” (69-70).

I wish to complicate such a straightforward view of Middleton’s first extant dramatic experiment with a remarried widow by showing that both our knowledge of his own experiences and a close reading of the Captain and Castiza suggest that his perspective in this play is closer to the conventional one—marrying a widow is a cause for anxiety—than is commonly thought. For one thing, as A. L. and M. K. Kistner point out, the play does not exactly idealize Castiza along the lines of her allegorical name (“Early Developments” 185). Castiza is not an entirely innocent victim, but a widow who suffers the consequences of marrying to satisfy her sexual appetite: in Phoenix’s words, “Indeed she was a beast / To marry him, and so he makes of her” (1.4.274-75). While the suggestion that remarriage to an impecunious young man might carry adverse

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4 See also Dessen, “Allegorical” 297-99, who stresses the symbolic nature of The Phoenix’s characters.
5 Anne Middleton died between 1600, when she was named as a defendant in one of Harvey’s lawsuits, and 1603, when she was mentioned in another dispute as the “late” owner of “certen apparrell” which should have been bestowed on her daughter Avis. See Eccles, “A Poett” 527, 531.
6 Brooks, it should be noted, amends his earlier comment when he writes the introduction to his edition of The Phoenix, dropping the claim that Castiza is “wholly admirable” and adding that “with his customary objectivity, Middleton does not portray the Captain’s wife as being above criticism” (124).
consequences for the woman is scrupulously avoided in plays which offer the fantasy of marrying a widow. the sense that Castiza is not wholly undeserving of the Captain’s treatment works here in aid of what I will argue to be The Phoenix’s evocation of a certain amount of amused enjoyment of the Captain’s outrageous behaviour. The story of Castiza and the Captain’s marriage and separation is not allegory, nor is it—to coin a new genre—domestic tragicomedy. To modern readers, lacking the cultural frame of reference in which marriage to a widow is acknowledged to carry the threats of usurped domestic authority and cuckoldry, the plot may appear to be a serious portrayal of unprovoked and inexcusable marital brutality. But where we might perceive averted tragedy, a Jacobean audience, I believe, would have been more likely to have seen black comedy centred on the stock comic situation, familiar from A Dialogue of Proverbs, Jack of Newbury, Patient Grissil and elsewhere, of a man who marries a widow for money and then has to put up with her as his wife. It is often noted that the other malefactors of The Phoenix are a comical lot—Justice Falso and the mad law-client Tangle in particular, but also the Jeweller’s Wife and her Knight⁷—and the overly-serious readings, apparently confirmed by the playwright’s biography, that have been offered of the wife-selling plot obscure the fact that the Captain is but another comic villain. As a corrective, then, I wish to trace how the play incorporates elements of common contemporary anxieties about remarried widows as wives to invite as much amusement as horror over the Captain’s outrageous treatment of his wife.

I would suggest, moreover, that the laughter evoked by The Phoenix’s comic villains may illuminate the play’s moral framework. The comic energy of the Vice figure

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⁷ See, for instance, Dessen, “Allegorical” 306-07; Gibbons 106; Ellis-Fermor 130-32; Barker 33-35; Heinemann 71; Covatta 68-70. Kistner and Kistner do observe that the Captain is one of the play’s “comic caricatures of evil” (“Early Developments” 185).
or figures is a didactic device dating back to the medieval morality tradition, where it functions to make evil more alluring than good so that the audience may experience a moral “fall” and redemption along with the play’s representative of humankind. In The Phoenix, however, the disguised ruler motif is firmly established in the first scene, changing the nature of any subsequent audience identification with the villains. The audience is always aware of Prince Phoenix’s surveillance and, as Ivo Kamps argues, is likely comforted by the knowledge that the abuses portrayed are on the verge of being reformed by a powerful sovereign (257). Secure that no real harm will befall the “good” characters, and entertained by the villains’ escapades, the audience is free to take a somewhat different view of the vices paraded before them than Phoenix does. Within the structure of a traditional morality drama, The Phoenix offers another, more tolerant kind of moral understanding. While Phoenix expresses orthodox moral judgements and metes out punishment as befits his royal, even quasi-divine position,\(^8\) the spectators’ enjoyment of the rogues may remind them that villainy is often motivated by desires which they themselves might share, and that the role of ordinary mortals is less to judge and to punish than to live quietly with others. For the play’s central moral touchstone is not Phoenix but Quieto, who values peace and forgiveness over justice and who teaches the young ruler a lesson in tolerance. Unequivocally good and evil characters and clear-cut moral judgements will become increasingly rare in Middleton’s subsequent plays, but even in the early, explicitly didactic Phoenix, harsh moral certainties are mitigated by a kind of laughter that may not be motivated solely by condemnation and ridicule but may also be tolerant and inclusive. I do not mean to suggest that Middleton’s audience would

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\(^8\) For Phoenix’s Christ-like attributes, see Rowe 32-33. Even Phoenix, however, is a remarkably compassionate judge: he sends the Captain to sea, where he wants to be anyway (Kistner, “Early Developments” 188), banishes Proditor rather than executing him for attempted treason (Brooks, “Introduction” 138), and pardons the rest of the rogues (5.1.206-07, 263-64).
have approved in any way of the Captain’s behaviour, but his escape from the responsibilities of an unhappy marriage and a mass of debts probably would not have been without appeal.

I believe it is useful, then, to at least partially rethink the assumption that the plot involving the Captain and Castiza is Middleton’s simple idealization of his mother as a virtuous victim and a vilification of her second husband as a mercenary monster, for neither characterization firmly supports this view. And while Middleton’s actual balance of sympathies and resentments during the protracted legal battles between his mother and stepfather can only be guessed at, what we know of these battles from their surviving records does not suggest a simple oppressor-victim dynamic. From the evidence collected by Mark Eccles, P. G. Phialas, and Mildred G. Christian out of a bewildering array of depositions, replications, and petitions, two points emerge with reasonable clarity: one, that Anne was at least as shrewd and determined as Harvey was (as Heinemann puts it, Middleton’s mother was “less passive and more ruthless than Fidelio’s” [69]), and two, that although Harvey was certainly a tremendous nuisance, he apparently succeeded in doing little serious damage to Thomas Middleton’s inheritance.

William Middleton, a bricklayer, died on January 20, 1585/6 after making a verbal will. He left an annual legacy of four pounds to his mother Joan and her husband Thomas Edge (Joan was evidently a remarried widow), thirty-eight pounds went to pay his debts, and the remaining net worth of the estate was assessed at three hundred and thirty-five pounds, six shillings and two pence, as well as leases for property on “the grounde called the Curteyn where now comenlye Playes be playde” and for a house and wharf in Limehouse (Eccles 518). By the custom of the City, a third of this sum was divided between his two children, Thomas and Avis, then aged five and three; their
mother Anne, “of her free graunte” added one hundred marks to each portion, making them up to sixty-six pounds, thirteen shillings and four pence apiece. Anne, who administered the estate and presumably inherited the remainder, was responsible for seeing these portions paid, and other citizens provided the Guildhall with sureties that she would do so (Eccles 516-17; Adams xxiv-xxv, n.5).^9 On June 27 of the same year, Anne took her late husband’s advice and conveyed all of the family property in trust to her three legal advisers, Edward Osborne, Thomas Drury, and John Jackson, all of the Inner Temple. The men reconveyed part of the property back to Anne for ten years, and by another deed conveyed the remainder to Thomas and Avis. It was a prudent move that would protect the children’s inheritances and apparently give Anne the upper hand in the troubles to come, but it would also prove true the warning given in The Office of Christian Parents, which claims that if a widow “doe take caution for her children without the fathers will, it may hinder her peace with her second husband” (129).

Safeguarding her property on the basis of William’s verbal advice, but lacking his written decree. Anne was to find her peace sorely hindered for the rest of her life.

One month after Anne conveyed her property in trust, Thomas Harvey returned to England from Virginia, where he had served for a year as chief factor in Raleigh’s colony at Roanoke (Eccles 519). Harvey had borrowed money to finance his expedition, and came home to London in debt (Christian 491-92, n.12). On November 7, 1586, he and Anne Middleton were married, “shee havinge settled her lykinge towards hym, as a fitt manne for her to make choise of.” She was in her late forties; his age is not known (Eccles 520-21). Apparently, Harvey agreed to the match in full knowledge that Anne had earlier conveyed her property away from any second husband, even meeting formally

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^9 All references to Eccles in this chapter are to "Thomas Middleton A Poett" unless otherwise stated.
with the trustees, and “seemed . . . att that tyme not to dislyke of anythinge.” He was later to claim that he himself brought five hundred pounds to the match, but Anne denied knowing that he was “worth five hundred pounds or worth one penny” (Phialas 188).

Immediately after the marriage, however, Harvey made his first attempt to get his hands on the Middleton property, and met with his first failure. Although he “grewe into great Coloure” with the trustees and tried to wrest the leases from them by appealing to the Lord Mayor and the Recorder, his suit was rejected with the admonishment to stop his “injurious dealinges” towards the trustees (Eccles 520; Phialas 189). Around the same time, Anne took a further step to protect her children—and further infuriated Harvey—by having herself arrested in Lord Mayor’s Court for the orphans’ portions. Harvey, responsible for his wife’s debts under coverture, was forced to “suffer his goodes to be sould at an outcrye at his doore” so that he could pay the portions into the Guild Hall in ready money.

Four years later, in 1590, Harvey tried another method of getting the rents from Anne’s leases. In February 1586/7, he had given his wife a letter of attorney empowering her “to lett and sett” the Curtain property and to use the rent to maintain herself and her children. The property yielded forty pounds a year, and had been described by her late husband in 1584 as “the only staye and mayntenance of your said Orator, his wife, and Children” (Eccles 518). Shortly after giving Anne the power of attorney, Harvey had sailed to Portugal and the Low Countries as part of England’s war effort against Spain. Anne had refused to send him any money while he was abroad; she also refused (whether before or after his trip is unclear) to pay his way out of debtors’ prison, where he “was constrained to get his living . . . with his own handes.” In retaliation, Harvey took away her power of attorney, eventually transferring it to his brother-in-law John Sackvill, who
in 1590 proceeded to sue the Curtain tenants for the rent they paid to Anne. Fourteen of her tenants, however, took exception to Harvey’s “secreet and ffraudulent conveyauce” of power over the lease, and countersued Sackvill (Christian 494-95). That the outcome of these suits may not have been in Harvey’s favour can be surmised from the facts that ten years later Harvey was once again suing Anne for the Curtain rents, and young Thomas was selling his half-share of the Curtain lease, along with his other inherited real-estate shares, to his sister’s husband, Allen Waterer (Eccles 526-27).

By the time Harvey launched his two final suits (of those we know of), one in June of 1600 and the other that December, his chief opponent was no longer Anne or her son Thomas but Waterer, who had married the sixteen-year-old Avis Middleton in 1598. On June 10, in the Court of Requests, Harvey sued Anne, Waterer, and Anne’s two surviving trustees, Drury and Jackson, alleging that the original conveyance of Anne’s property had been made after, not before their marriage (which would be illegal and render it invalid), and that the defendants evicted his tenants and refused to give him the rents, “so as he is extream poore” (Eccles 527; Phialas 188). Anne answered that the deed of gift to the trustees had been made before she had even met Harvey, adding that the property in question now belonged wholly to Thomas Middleton and to Allen and Avis Waterer. Harvey then named Thomas as a co-defendant in his December suit against Allen and his brother Roger for the Curtain and other rents, but by this time his quarrel was legally with the Waterers alone, because Thomas had sold his shares to his brother-in-law on June 28, 1600, in exchange for money “paid and disbursed for my advauncement and preferment in the university of Oxford where I am nowe a studient and for my maintenance with meat drincke and apparrrell and other necessaries for me meet and convenient.” The Court of Requests referred the dispute between Harvey and
Waterer to common law, where at least part of it seems to have been decided in Harvey’s favour, for one of the tenants, Anthony Richardson, reported that he began to pay his rent to Harvey (Eccles 526-29). Harvey also had other skirmishes with Waterer, none of which are especially illuminating of his relationship with Anne.

Harvey’s victory over Waterer was likely no great blow to Anne, for she and her son-in-law quarrelled almost as bitterly as she and Harvey did. The relationship apparently turned sour after the newlywed couple moved in with her. One Philip Bond, likely a friend of Anne’s, testified that she gave Avis and her husband “frendly enterteynement” but “they sought to thrust her out of All”; Waterer’s story was that Anne “went about by develishe and subtell practizes . . . to deceave all the world and lastlie her owne Children.” Another deponent offered what was probably a more balanced account of the matter, stating simply that “Allen Waterer and his mother in Lawe could not Agree together whereupon the said Anne harvie Commenced suyte againste him and much stryffe there was about the possession of the lands and tenements in Question.” Thomas came down from Oxford in 1598 to help his mother in this “suete,” in which Anne claimed that Waterer “forbade her tenantes to paye her any rent,” while Waterer, for his part, sought sureties of the peace against her, Thomas, and John Knapp, who held some of the Middleton property in trust (Eccles 526; Phialas 190-91).

During Anne’s suit against Waterer, Harvey was away at sea, as he was intermittently throughout the marriage. He and Anne quarrelled, separated, and reconciled a number of times. Anthony Snod, a deponent in one of the lawsuits, reported that Harvey had once intended to “deale hardly with his wyffe by making sale of that which he had by her and taking the same to sea with him,” but that he, Snod, had persuaded him to “deale better with his wyffe and to make over his estate to some frendly
neighbour in trust.” At one point, Anne accused Harvey of trying to poison her, and he was briefly imprisoned (Eccles 522). Throughout the records of this turbulent marriage, however, it is primarily Anne’s power, not Harvey’s, which is most remarkable. Harvey married, apparently wittingly, a widow who had conveyed her estate in such a way that he was unable to assert a husband’s legal right to it and use this power to place his wife at his mercy. Although the depositions on all sides of the quarrel are perhaps most safely regarded as biased, the records show a man forced to beg and (literally) sue for money from his wife, not a husband who was able to seize it as his prerogative. Sometimes Anne gave Harvey what he asked for: shortly after their marriage, she sold a bond for a debt owed to William so that her second husband could pay off his own creditors, and in 1595 she borrowed fifty-six pounds from her friends to help him go off to sea (Eccles 521-22). Sometimes she was less obliging: more than once, it would seem, she refused to aid Harvey when he was imprisoned for debt, and she ignored his letters from abroad “in gentle man[ner] entraetinge her” to send him money for his maintenance (Eccles 520-21, Christian 494). On his return from one voyage, he begged for “thirty pounds only of her to pleasure him Withall,” but she sent him away with a mere fifty shillings and a threat to have him arrested (Christian 495). Anne shrewdly protected her interests and her children’s inheritances, and was not above being, in the phrase of a neighbour of one of her tenants, “a troublesome woman” when she needed to be (Eccles 523). The result was that Thomas Middleton duly collected his portion when he came of age in 1601, and sold his shares in his father’s leases to his brother-in-law (Eccles 517, 526).

10 A different account of this fifty-six pounds is given by Phialas, who writes that Harvey borrowed it from Knap, giving Knap in exchange a lease from whose rent he was to pay himself the sum owed and collect the remainder in trust for Anne (190). Either way, the fifty-six pounds ultimately came out of Anne’s property.
What Middleton would have learned growing up amid the quarrels of his mother and stepfather, then, would likely have been more complicated than a simple concept of the remarried widow as a helpless victim of a mercenary second husband. Doubtless the playwright disliked and resented Harvey for the interminable lawsuits he brought upon the family: it seems probable that the caricature of Harvey in *The Phoenix* is split between the Captain and Tangle, the obsessively litigious client who juggles “nine and twenty” suits at once, declaring that “‘tis very marrow, very manna to me to be in law” (1.4.29, 111-12). But the twenty-three year old Middleton who wrote *The Phoenix* may well have also resented his mother for having brought such a difficult man into the household, and, above all, would have been very aware of how a marriage between a propertied widow and a penniless man could become the site of a bitter power struggle. And shortly before he wrote *The Phoenix*, he himself had taken on the charges and responsibilities of a husband (Eccles 531), a change which may have further complicated his perspective as he re-imagined for the stage the match between Anne and Harvey. The personal grudges and fantasies that Middleton brought to his first plot about a remarrying widow can thus be assumed to be more complex than a straightforward pattern of an evil husband oppressing a good wife. Moreover, writing a play normally entails more than indulging one’s personal grudges, and Middleton wrote for an audience familiar with the comical trials of the man who marries a widow. The resultant plot blends morality elements, personal caricature, and an understanding—probably drawn partly from eyewitness experience and partly from convention—that marriage to a widow is a troublesome proposition.

One can only speculate what motivated the well-off Widow Middleton to marry the debt-ridden Thomas Harvey, but in *The Phoenix* it is strongly hinted that Castiza,
despite her name, marries the Captain out of lust. Phoenix’s criticism of her as “a beast / To marry him” (1.4.274-75) has already been cited. Even more telling, however, is Castiza’s own response when the Captain accuses her of having married him because she thinks “as most of your insatiate widows, / That Captains can do wonders, when ’las, / The name does often prove the better man.” Instead of denying the accusation, she counters “That which you urge should rather give me cause / To repent than yourself” (1.2.87-91). It is difficult to see this retort as anything but an angry declaration of disappointed sexual expectations, not to mention an insult against her husband’s virility hardly compatible with idealized wifely virtue.

Castiza’s lustfulness contributes significantly to the Captain’s marital torments, which I will shortly discuss in detail, but in what might be a touch of filial wish-fulfillment she is eventually reconstructed as chaste through the manoeuvres of Phoenix and Fidelio. Having married the Captain out of sexual appetite (a motive, this play suggests, which is socially acceptable as long as the marriage goes well, but which is easily turned to the widow’s blame if it does not), Castiza betrays herself into a situation where her sexual honour is seriously threatened: she is to be forced into adultery when her husband sells her to Proditor. The situation with Proditor, however, not only allows Castiza to redeem, by resisting his advances, at least part of the chaste reputation she sacrificed by her remarriage but also enables Fidelio (aided by Phoenix) to intervene in the Captain’s attempt to sell Castiza to Proditor, a kind of compensation for his earlier inability to intervene in Castiza’s decision to give herself to the Captain. Fidelio complains early in the play that “that marriage knew nothing of my mind, / It never flourish’d in any part of my affection” (1.1.159-60), yet he must admit, not knowing the outcome of the match, that he has no right to consider his mother dishonoured by her
choice (1.1.161-65). With the Captain's sale of his wife to Proditor, however, Fidelio has an obvious disgrace to his mother which he can now prevent, banishing the Captain permanently to sea so that he may once again proclaim Castiza "My most honest mother!" (2.2.340). Furthermore, Phoenix prevents Castiza from a re-enactment of her original mistake in marrying the Captain. When the Captain begs her for a few crowns to take to sea with him out of the proceeds of her sale, she responds "I give it freely all" (2.2.333). Castiza, who calls her husband "My dear, sweet Captain" (2.2.294) even after he has sold her, is evidently still too prone to let her attraction to the man open her purse to him, which is a fair description of her earlier decision to marry him. Phoenix now chides her in terms that have telling connotations of sexual restraint—"I will contain you, lady" (2.2.334)\(^{11}\)—and makes her keep the money, dismissing the Captain with a few coins. Anne Middleton married Thomas Harvey when her son was a child of six; when Fidelio's mother remarries, her son is an adult with a powerful friend, and he gets a second chance to intervene in what he could not originally prevent. His reward is Castiza's repentant thanks to "My kind son, / Whose liking I neglected in this match" (2.2.298-99).

Although Phoenix hyperbolically announces the Captain's departure as "the bane of brightness fled; / Who sought the death of honour is struck dead" (2.2.338-39), the play's characterization of Castiza as a fairly conventional remarried widow ensures that the Captain is not seen as an unmotivatedly evil tormentor of pure virtue, nor does the play punish him as such. He is hardly "struck dead." Rather, Middleton includes the Captain in the play's rather compassionate attitude towards roguery by presenting him as a comic sufferer of the conventional anxieties associated with marrying a widow, and by

\(^{11}\) OED Contain 14: "To refrain from expressing or yielding to feeling, passion, etc.; to restrain oneself; to refrain or keep from (obs.); spec. to be continent, to keep oneself in chastity (obs.)."
allowing him a means of escape. The Captain feels as if everything about his marriage has conspired to emasculate him: he has given up his swashbucklingly masculine occupation to live on his wife’s money, he chafes under his wife’s demands that he care for the “credit” of responsible domesticity, and he has exchanged the opportunity to have his virility validated by dozens of wenches for the dread of being cuckolded by a woman he fears he cannot satisfy. The play makes it clear that he is not about to be cuckolded, for Castiza is the kind of “virtuous,” albeit desirous widow who confines her appetites within marital bounds; however, given that she accuses her husband of not living up to the sexual promise of a Captain, his fears are not entirely irrational.

The Captain is introduced as a roistering libertine repenting his ill-judged decision to take a wife; he is specifically tormented by the thought that his marriage has put an end to his sea voyages as a privateer. As a man with no inheritance (1.2.65-66), he has rashly decided to give up his exciting but only sporadically profitable ventures for “purchase” in exchange for the steady income—with strings attached—to be obtained by marrying a widow. Castiza is “not greatly rich” (1.2.67), but the Captain’s main goal in marrying is not to obtain money for its own sake but to have sex without the expense of a whore. His father having been “too rutlish to let me thrive under him,” he has inherited nothing to allow him to “bathe in sensuality,” and so finds himself foolishly “shackled with a wife” whom he married in a “lustful passion” (1.2.40-67). Shortly after the wedding, however, the Captain’s “soldiering fellows” come to him boasting of the “noble purchase . . . admirable purchase” (1.2.1-2) they are about to seize from three ships on their next voyage. The newly married Captain is driven mad by the thought that he is to be excluded from this “gallant” opportunity (1.2.5), and his friend’s oath, as he gleefully describes the ships they are about to plunder, neatly encapsulates just what it is the
Captain has given up: “And every one so wealthily burdened, upon my manhood” (1.2.8-9). The Captain’s disgust at his new, emasculating occupation of “husband” is evident when Castiza addresses him as “Captain, my husband” and he turns on her with “‘Slife, call me husband again and I’ll play the captain and beat you” (1.2.68-70). Rejecting the title which defines him as a man who is “tied” (1.2.10) to domesticity and dependent on his wife for money, he asserts himself as a “captain” and threatens to back it up with the overcompensating masculinity of physical violence. Although Castiza is justified in her response, the well-known image of the remarried widow who assumes herself superior to her less-wealthy husband places her speech on the fine line between a reasonable plea for better treatment and a widow’s conventionally shrewish tendency to throw her husband’s dependent status in his teeth, reminding him of the “respect” he owes her for accepting him in his poverty over offers of “better fortunes”:

I deserve more respect,
But that you please to be forgetful of it.
For love to you did I neglect my state,
Chide better fortunes from me,
Gave the world talk, laid all my friends at waste.

(1.2.75-79)
The Captain’s retort—“The more fool you” (1.2.80)—may well elicit a laugh at Castiza’s expense, if only for the reason that the audience, who see nothing worth loving in the Captain, are likely to have been silently formulating the same thought since the beginning of the scene.

After he considers poisoning his wife (probably one of the playwright’s gibes at Harvey), and unsuccessfully tries to arrange for her adultery so he can procure a divorce,
the Captain takes Tangle’s advice and decides to sell Castiza to Proditor. The sale marks the Captain’s return to his lost occupation in more ways than one. Not only is it intended to provide him with five hundred pounds to finance his new voyage but it also mirrors the privateers’ method of making money by profiting from the sale of seized goods. Rather than being obliged to “respect” a wife who is clearly aware of her generosity in having married him, he turns the tables of power and claims her as his legal property, insisting that “I sell none but mine own” (2.2.281). The Captain is clearly back in his element as he praises his merchandise to Proditor—“You have brought as lovely a pennyworth, my lord, as e’er you bought in your life” (2.2.111-12)—cracks bawdy jokes, and counts his money. It should be noted that when the Captain reasserts his threatened masculinity by acting on the male privilege to treat his wife as a chattel, he apparently does nothing that the corrupt laws of the play’s fictional society do not entitle him to do as a husband; however, as Castiza points out, the man who takes advantage of his power in this way does so to the destruction of his reputation. “Have you no sense,” chides Castiza, “neither of my good name / Or your own credit?” (2.2.5-6), and when her husband responds by inveighing against the kind of monetary credit that has landed him in debt, she is horrified:

    Oh, why do you
    So willfully cherish your own poison,

12 Wife selling was illegal in England and in Italy where the play is set, despite a tradition of apocryphal or folkloric tales about the practice (Brooks 1.4.252-4n). However, it does seem to be legal (albeit immoral) within the fictional society of the play, where Tangle describes selling a wife as a “common” practice for which there is “precedent” (1.4.254-55), and Phoenix implies that the Captain formally separates himself from his wife by “resigning and basely selling all his estate, title, right, and interest in his lady, as the form of the writing shall testify” (2.1.15-17). Assuming that contemporary English law applies, Brooks claims that Phoenix enforced the separation on grounds of cruelty, of which the attempted sale is merely proof (2.1.13n), but the play gives us no reason to believe that the power of legal separation is not in the bill of sale itself. Given the play’s emphasis on the monstrously corrupt legal system that Phoenix must reform, a legal loophole permitting wife-selling does not seem unlikely.
And breathe against the best of life, chaste credit?
Well may I call it chaste, for like a maid,
Once falsely broke, it ever lives decay’d.
Oh Captain, husband, you name that dishonest
By whose good power all that are honest live;
What madness is it to speak ill of that
Which makes all men speak well! Take away credit,
By which men amongst men are well reputed,
That man may live, but still lives executed. (2.2.17-27)

This distinction between legal and permissible household power is important to an understanding of male anxieties about marrying a widow. While the law possesses a husband of his wife’s entire estate—exaggerated in The Phoenix to include the wife’s person too—the husband’s practical control depends on a web of more complex conditions which he contests at his peril, including social expectations of decent husbandly behaviour and his wife’s expectations of the “respect” due to her, quite aside from any pre-marital legal measures she may have taken for her financial protection. What Castiza fails to understand, though, is that the Captain, who wants nothing more than to escape his position as a husband, has no use for the kind of domestic, even feminized “credit” that she urges, the credit that an honest householder prides himself in having among his neighbours, “By which men amongst men are well reputed,” and which she describes as “chaste, for like a maid, / Once falsely broke, it ever lives decay’d” (2.2.20-21). The Captain instead understands only a financial concept of “credit” (2.2.7-17), and so the sale of his wife, for him, restores his credit, while simultaneously allowing him to flee the kind of civil society where he must abide by the moral
expectations of “all that are honest” (2.2.23). The Captain’s disdain for his own reputation and the outrageous lengths to which he goes to escape his new household confirm him as a villain, but even the respectable spectator who would never dream of following suit might appreciate the fantasy of an escape from burdensome marital and financial responsibilities.

By selling Castiza to another man, the Captain also paradoxically ensures that he will not suffer the emasculation of being cuckolded. The sale is explicitly sexual—“For re-entries.” jokes the Captain, “I will not swear for her” (2.2.139)—but in taking the active role of merchant or bawd and forcing his will upon Castiza, the Captain repudiates the role of the passive, subordinate cuckold who cannot control his wife. Accordingly, no-one—not Phoenix and Fidelio in their moral outrage, not Tangle in his descriptions of wife-selling, not even Proditor in his final sneer at the Captain as a “baser slave” (2.2.229)—suggests that in selling his wife the Captain cuckold himself. The only character who talks about cuckoldry is the Captain himself, before he plans the sale, and it is clear that this anxiety outweighs even those caused by his financial dependency or by Castiza’s insistence on the husbandly virtues of “love and kindness” (1.2.75), “respect,” and “credit”:

And I to play the artificer and marry: to have my wife dance at home, and my ship at sea, and both take in salt water together! . . . That man is in danger every minute to be cast away, without he have an extraordinary pilot that can perform more than a man can do! And to say truth, too, when I’m abroad, what can I do at home? No man living can reach so far. And what a horrible thing 'twould
be to have horns brought to me at sea, to look as if the devil were i’ th’ ship! . . . Oh. that a captain should live to be married!

(1.2.27-52)

The ideal situation, as the Captain sees it, is the one enjoyed by his lieutenant, who goes one better than keeping a whore and has a whore keep him (1.2.31-32). “How?” admires the Captain. “Is there any such fortunate man breathing? And I so miserable to live honest! I envy thee, lieutenant, I envy thee, that thou are such a happy knave” (1.2.33-35). Being kept by a whore provides a man with financial maintenance, sexual satisfaction, the gratifying knowledge that a woman wants his virility enough to pay for it, and no risk of being cuckolded. This agreeable set-up is dramatized in detail later in the play by the Knight and the Jeweller’s Wife: he provides “Pleasure” and she provides “Revenue.” The exchange of pleasure for revenue bears a close resemblance to the fantasy of winning a widow by appealing to her sexual appetite, but the Captain has discovered how this fantasy can destroy itself. Once marriage is added to the equation of having a woman pay for one’s sexual services, the spectres of insatiability and cuckoldry rear their heads. Having married an “insatiate widow,” the Captain is now plagued by the fear that he will prove sexually inadequate, whether he is at home, where “the name [of captain] does often prove the better man” (1.2.89), or at sea, where he would need a truly “extraordinary pilot” to satisfy his distant wife.

It is a measure of the play’s sympathy with this point of view when the Knight comically confirms the Captain’s opinion—that a man is happier profiting from a paramour than wiving a widow—by turning out to be indeed the most “fortunate man breathing.” Escaping even the scolding which Phoenix metes out to the Jeweller’s Wife, and evading arrest by his creditors to boot, the Knight gets off scot free at the end of the
fourth act, saved by an unknown gentleman who appears without warning, distracts the arresting officers, and exits laughing, never to be seen in the play again. The Captain is not quite as lucky as the Knight, for he must submit to Phoenix's denunciation, and appears to be genuinely bothered by Proditor's prediction that his end will be "lousy" (2.2.231). but he in fact enjoys a similar fate. Just as the Knight is denied the hundred and fifty angels he expected to get from his "Revenue," but maintains his freedom nonetheless, the Captain is given only a few crowns of the five hundred pounds Proditor pays for Castiza, but is sent off to sea, where he badly wants to be. He thus escapes both his creditors (2.2.10-12) and his marriage, and his last lines are something of a sigh of relief: "Well, I'm yet glad, I've liberty and these; / The land has plagued me, and I'll plague the seas" (2.2.336-37).

Although The Phoenix's moral structure aligns itself (albeit not uncritically) with Castiza, a Jacobean audience would have recognized in the Captain not a monster who mistreats a perfect wife but a husband trapped in the conventional trials of marriage to a widow, a difference which would have made his villainy appear more humourous and less seriously reprehensible than it does to the modern reader. As a caricature of the playwright's stepfather, the Captain attests to the likelihood that the turbulent second marriage which played itself out in the Middleton/Harvey household was an even more complex and ambiguous battle than the one that appears on stage. When Middleton returns to the remarrying widow in his subsequent plays, he does so with a more traditional focus on the courtship. In The Phoenix, however, his portrayal of what happens after the wedding reveals the kinds of anxieties that will later be glimpsed beneath the suitors' aggressive bids for the wealthy widow. That being said, the next play to be examined is one in which the suitor makes no bid at all.
**The Puritan** (1606, Paul’s Boys)

After having portrayed the relationship between a widow and her second husband in his first play, *The Phoenix*, Middleton never presents a remarrying widow without some suggestion of what life will be like for the couple after the wedding. In much of Middleton’s comedy, marriage to a virgin is an end in itself, usually the reward of the hero’s victory over the traditional blocking figures inherited from the New Comedy tradition. Such marriages—of Touchwood Junior and Moll in *Chaste Maid*, Witgood and Joyce in *A Trick*, Fitsgrave and Katherine in *Your Five Gallants*—do not invite the audience to look any further than the triumphant wedding day. With a remarrying widow, though, the plays tend to move, however briefly, beyond the wedding to married life itself, either within the action (Lady Goldenfleece’s wedding night in *No Wit*, the short-lived domestic harmony of Thomasine and Easy in *Michaelmas Term*), or in the imagination of one of the characters (the Second Suitor’s graphic prediction of marital discord between Ricardo and Valeria in *The Widow*). The man who marries a virgin is given a clean slate, as the girl is yet to be moulded by her first husband, but a widow’s remarriage is always more problematic, for she knows from experience exactly what she means to have the second time around, and how to get it, whether it be the opposite of her first marital relationship or a repeat performance.

Lady Plus, the widow of *The Puritan*, is clearly interested in the latter: her loving description of the complete control she had over her life with her first husband leaves little doubt about the kind of marriage she will strive to impose on anyone who ventures to be the second. This glimpse into her “training” as a wife, together with the well-known potential for a rich widow’s domination over her penniless second husband, suggests that the play’s conclusion, often considered inept or unsatisfying, may in fact be full of comic
irony about exactly who is being rescued from whom. Having decided to marry the play's two tricksters, Captain Idle and George Pyeboord, Lady Plus and her daughter Frances find their weddings prevented by the unexpected intervention of an unnamed nobleman who delivers a moral lecture, reveals the two husbands-to-be as imposters, and pairs the women off with a couple of rich knights instead. The ending seems to fly in the face of the traditional comic rewards allotted to youth and wit—and, in particular, to work against the fantasy of the poor young wit carrying off the rich widow—and critics have understandably objected to it. Leinwand claims that "The play gets carried away with its elaborate intrigue only to pull up short, to dispose of its protagonist, and to champion the faceless, if respectable, gentlemen endorsed by the play's nameless 'Noble-man'" (119), while Leggatt describes the tricksters' "defeat" as "simply disappointing" (74 n.12).13 But does The Puritan offer the fantasy of winning a rich widow only to snatch it away, along the lines of A Match at Midnight, for a surprise moral ending? I will argue that far from offering the fantasy, the play not only undercuts Lady Plus' value as a prize but suggests that its tricksters—the only characters who have any claim to a measure of audience sympathy and respect—are not so much defeated as rescued from being led into unforeseen troubles by a trick that has veered off in a wildly unexpected direction. Rather than providing its heroes with the traditional comic reward of marriage, the play draws on the conventions of the jest book which inspired it—The Merrie Conceited Jests of George Peele (1605)14—to provide an alternative happy ending of escape. The Phoenix presented a villainous Captain tormented by his marriage to a widow; The Puritan gives

13 All references to Leinwand in this chapter are to The City Staged; all to Leggatt are to Citizen Comedy.
14 Although the earliest extant copy of the Merrie Conceited Jests of George Peele dates from 1607, the book was entered in the Stationers' Register on December 14, 1605 (Lake 110).
us the much more amiable Captain Idle prevented in the nick of time from blundering into the same mistake.

The opening scene of *The Puritan* quickly establishes that the newly bereaved Lady Plus embodies the three conventional attributes of a widow: she is wealthy, lustful, and willful. When her brother-in-law, Sir Godfrey, attempts to comfort her with the consolation that she will be much sought after by Knights who long “to marry rich widdowes. wealthy Cittizens widdowes, lusty faire-browd Ladies” (1.1.87-88), she ironically reveals her own sexual appetite even as she mourns the husband she vows never to replace. The first thing she misses as a widow is a man in her bed, and the repetition of “O!” in her already overtly sexual complaint drives home the bawdy point:

Oh, I have lost the dearest man, I have buried the sweetest husband that ever lay by woman . . . O, I shall never forget him never forget him; hee was a man so well given to a woman—oh!

(1.1.6-14)

Similarly, her protest that she had rather be “buried quick”\(^{15}\) than remarry serves to reveal exactly the kind of female mastery—especially financial mastery—that Lady Plus has learned to require as a wife:

Oh, out of a million of millions, I should nere find such a husband; he was unmatchable,—unmatchable! nothing was to hot, nor to deere for mee, I could not speak of that one thing, that I had not: beside I had keyes of all, kept all, receiv’d all, had money in my purse, spent what I would, went abroad when I would, came home

\(^{15}\) In the context of this scene, one must also suspect “buried quick” to be another sexual pun.
when I would, and did all what I would. Oh, my sweete husband! I
shall never have the like. (1.1.105-14)

Significantly, this lament also calls to mind the conventional complaint of a widow to her
second husband, in which she berates him for not measuring up to her idealized image of
the first: “I brought you good meanes, and meanes I will bee allowed,” rants a remarried
widow in _A Juniper Lecture_, and then lapses into moaning for the man she has lost: “Ah,
poore husband hee is dead and gone, I shall never forget his kindnesse to mee: hee was
the best conditioned man to mee that lived: hee was so kinde and loving that he never
came home empty handed to mee, but stil brought me home one knick knack or other: oh
he was the sweetest husband that ever lay by a woman” (47-48). The widow of _The Puritan_
tries to keep her vow never to replace her “unmatchable” husband, but when the
wealthy knights that Sir Godfrey had promised come to woo her, she betrays her carnal
urges with an unconscious double entendre that gives them the usual reason to hope for
“better comfort” on their next attempt: “O never, never! and I live these thousand years!
and you be good Knights, doe not hope; twill be all Vaine, Vayne,—looke you, put off all
your suites, and you come to me againe” (2.1.131-35). “Put off all their suites, quatha?”
observes her servant, Fraylty, “I, that’s the best wooing of a Widdow, indeed, when a
man’s Nonsuted; that is, when he’s a bed with her” (2.1.136-39).

Although typical in most ways, Lady Plus differs from most remarrying widows
in comedies in that she has children: a son, Edmund, whose plan to take advantage of his
father’s death and “rule the Roast myself” (1.1.182) is never developed much further, and
two daughters, Frank and Moll. Frank, the eldest, is less of a character in her own right
than a shadow and echo of her mother: when the widow vows never to remarry, Frank
vows to stay single so as never to “sustaine such losse / As a deere husband seemes to be,
once dead" (1.1.127-29); when the widow warms up to the idea of marriage and welcomes the knights with a kiss, Frank follows her instructions and kisses them too (4.2.29-32); when the widow selects Captain Idle for her husband, Frank declares her love to his partner Pyeboord; and at the end, the nobleman denounces only the folly of widows in being attracted to con-men, as if Frank’s intended marriage is subsumed under her mother’s. Moll, the younger daughter, is a sexually eager young wench who looks askance at her mother’s and sister’s vows, and would as soon renounce marriage as “vow never to come in Bed” (1.1.133). Taken together, the two daughters exemplify the two sides of their mother’s character—Frank the proper face that this Puritan widow shows to the world, and Moll the carnal appetites that surge beneath.16 In another way, too, Moll shows herself to be as much her mother’s daughter as Frank is, for like Lady Plus, she is interested in controlling her husband to her own material advantage. Her suitor, “a fine gallant Knight of the last Fether”

sayes he will coach mee too, and well appoint mee, allow mee money to Dice with-all, and many such pleasing protestations he sticks upon my lips . . . . troth, I’ll venture upon him, Women are not without wayes enow to helpe them-selves: if he prove wise and good as his word, why, I shall love him, and use him kindly: and if hee proove an Asse, why, in a quarter of an houres warning I can transforme him into an Oxe;—there comes in my Reliefe agen.

(2.1.5-19)

16 It may also be significant that both “Frank” (a diminutive of Frances) and “Moll” are names commonly associated with whores. See the respective entries in Williams. Middleton also uses the names “Moll” and “Frank” equivocally in Chaste Maid and Mad World respectively.
Although Moll is speaking of herself rather than of her mother, this speech makes clear the danger of marrying a libidinous woman with a taste for financial control: if unsatisfied in either matter, she can revenge herself by cuckolding her husband. The widow's being a Puritan only increases this possibility, for the alleged adulterous tendencies of Puritan women were a common satiric target (Shepherd, *Amazons* 57). As Lady Plus' servant Simon St. Mary Overies informs a non-Puritan, "wee may lie with our Neighbors' wife, but wee must not sweare we did so" (1.3.77-78).

While the play presents Lady Plus as a typical willful widow and arouses the conventional anxieties about her potential behaviour as a wife, the plot which leads her and one of the play's tricksters to the verge of marriage is anything but conventional insofar as widow-wooing plots go. After the widow and her family are introduced, the audience meets the tricksters, George Pyeboord and Captain Idle, along with a couple of minor collaborators, the soldiers Peter Skirmish and Corporal Oath. Pyeboord, based on the central figure of the contemporary jest-book *The Merrie Conceited Jests of George Peele*, is "a poore Gentleman, and a Scholler" who has "turnde to [his] wittes, to shift in the world" after being expelled from Oxford for stealing a cheese (1.2.36, 54-55). Captain Idle is not the braggart soldier his name might imply—that role is filled by Corporal Oath—but another amiable rogue who, suffering the enforced "idleness" of unemployment and unable to prosper in a peace-time world where "the tide runs to Bawdes and flatterers" (1.4.23-24), has turned to the less hypocritical occupation of a highwayman. Idle is a forthright chap who does not suffer fools gladly, and his comical exasperation as he tries to persuade his witless cousin (the widow's third Puritan serving-man, Nicholas St. Antlings) to help him out of prison ensures from the start that he shares

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17 For plot correspondences between the play and the jest-book, see Christian, "Middleton's Acquaintance."
the audience’s good will along with Pyeboord. As Idle is in danger of hanging, Pyeboord begins to “cast about some happy slight” (1.4.42) to free his friend and to improve both their fortunes, and little by little, a plan begins to take shape. According to Leinwand, the ultimate goal of the tricksters’ scheme is marriage: “Pye-boord goes to extraordinary lengths, setting up gullings within gullings to get what he has taken aim at—the widow, Lady Plus, and her daughter Frances” (119). A careful reading of the play, however, reveals that any such assumption about Pyeboord’s intentions can only be an assumption, because at no point before the actual betrothals does either Pyeboord or Idle indicate that he wants to marry anybody. Marriage, however, is what they almost get.

What Pyeboord and Idle apparently want to gain from the widow and her family is not a pair of wealthy matches, but a reputation as a conjuring and fortune-telling team which they can use to continue their lucrative gullings indefinitely. A brief outline of the tricksters’ elaborate scheme will help to clarify the relatively minor role that marriage is intended to play in it. Pyeboord has overheard Lady Plus and her daughters making their vows, and even before he teams up with Idle, he begins to hatch the idea for a confidence game in which he will pose as a fortune-teller and use his seemingly supernatural knowledge of their intentions to win their belief and trust. He originally intends to take Skirmish along with him to pose as a conjurer, but on learning that his friend Idle is in prison and that Idle’s foolish cousin Nicholas can be used as a link to the Plus family, he refines the scheme in order to procure Idle his release and a share in the profits. As it is carried out, the gulling has two distinct phases. In the first phase, Pyeboord goes to the widow and her daughters claiming to be a fortune-teller, and makes three predictions. The first is designed to make himself instantly credible: from having overheard their conversation, he knows that the widow and Frank have vowed never to take husbands,
that Moll plans to marry speedily, and that the widow’s late husband was a dishonest man who “would deceive all the world to get riches” (1.1.52-53). From this knowledge he concocts a “prediction” that the dead man will suffer for his sins in purgatory unless the three woman reverse their decisions. The second prediction works to strengthen his newfound credibility: he predicts that Lady Plus and Frank will run mad and that Moll will be struck dumb unless a man is killed that day before their door. Of course, Pyeboord has arranged for a fake killing, and even has plans to win himself a greater name by resurrecting the “corpse” at a later date. The third prediction, linking this gulling to the second phase, which will bring in Idle as a conjurer, is that Sir Godfrey will suffer a loss. By the time Nicholas hides Sir Godfrey’s gold chain, Skirmish has already stabbed Oath before the family’s door and the widow’s faith in the “fortune teller” is complete, allowing the second phase to get under way. Sir Godfrey bails Idle, the “conjurer,” out of prison so that he can conjure to find his chain, and with a little help from a timely thunderstorm, Idle and Pyeboord work in tandem for a hilarious scene of raising the devil in the Plus family’s dining-room. The chain duly reappears, earning the men forty angels and the utmost trust of the whole family.

The rogues also get something that does not seem to have been in the original plan. The widow is taken with the thought of marrying “a man a cunning” (the word is doubtlessly used with a bawdy quibble) from the first time she hears of Captain Idle as “a wondrous rare fellow . . . very strongly made upward” (4.2.15, 7-8). Perhaps Sir Godfrey’s praise of his conjuring—“oh cunning, cunning!” (4.2.296)—stirs up her inclinations again after the Captain has performed his trick, for she suddenly announces:

Well, seeing my fortune tells mee I must marry, let me marry a man of witte, a man of parts. Here’s a worthy Captaine, and tis a fine
Title truly la to bee a Captaines wife. A Captaines Wife, it goes very finely; beside all the world knows that a worthy Captaine is a fitte Companion to any Lord, then why not a sweete bed-fellow for any lady,—Ile have it so. (4.2.297-305)

The likelihood of sexual puns on “witte”/ “whit” and “parts,” together with the reputation of captains for superior performance as bed-fellows—as Castiza’s husband has testified¹⁸—suggests that Lady Plus chooses a husband for a widow’s usual sexual reasons and that her “fortune” has merely liberated her desires. And as she makes this declaration to the Captain’s face, her last remark—“Ile have it so”—drives home the point that this is less of an offer than a willful, peremptory seizure of what she wants. Idle has neither wooed the widow nor proposed to her, and his non-verbal reaction to his sudden appropriation by her would be determined by the performer, since in the text he is simply speechless. A few lines later Pyeboord has almost as little to say when Frank follows her mother’s cue and, without provocation, declares “I love you deereely, and could wish my best part yours” (4.3.27-28). Pyeboord, who replies in surprise “Love you me? then for your sweet sake Ile doo’t” (4.3.29-30), has the better deal, but Idle is snapped up by a woman whom his friend had earlier claimed to be not worth the trouble of taking were she to give herself to him: “Nay, heaven blesse me from a Widow, unlesse I were sure to bury her speedily!” (2.1.151-52). Whatever the responses of the two men to their sudden betrothals, it seems not to be a coincidence that the widow’s speech claiming the Captain for her husband is interrupted by the sudden entrance of Fraylty, announcing that he has seen two men pass by, “one going to burying, and another going to hanging” (4.2.309-10).

¹⁸ The sexual reputation of captains is described by Williams. See entry under “Captain.”
Marriage to a widow can be jokingly implied to be the equivalent to burying and hanging only in a play which does not offer her as a reward to youth and wit in the conventional fantasy of marrying her for her money. If *The Puritan* were to make it explicit that Pyeboord and Idle were scheming towards marriage—and the typical widow-hunting plot makes the suitors’ intentions very explicit—a spectator who wondered whether the tricksters were better off without the prize they sought would have to do so against the thrust of the play. As it stands, however, the audience simply has little reason to think that the men have been working towards this goal. It is possible to assume that when Pyeboord wins his credibility by playing on the women’s vows and telling them they must marry quickly, he means to suggest that they should marry him and his friend, but this oblique hint is as far as it goes. Not only is there no courtship (which could be explained as the tricksters’ way of avoiding the women’s suspicion of suitors), but of all the times that Pyeboord carefully explains his plans to the audience or to other characters, not once does he mention marriage. He has three speeches in particular where he might be expected to say that he and Idle will aim for a pair of wealthy wives. The first is his long soliloquy directly after he has told the widow her fortune, but here he merely describes how he had “laid the hole of mine eare to a hole in the wall, and heard ’em make these vowes, and speake those words upon which I wrought these advantages” (2.1.331-34), adds how he has planned for Skirmish to stab Oath to confirm his “fortunes,” and suggests that he means to use his new reputation as a fortune-teller and a raiser of the dead to embark on a lucrative new career: “so shall I get my selfe into a most admired opinion and under the pretext of that cunning, beguile as I see occasion” (2.1.351-53). Pyeboord is not very specific about what his further “beguilings” may entail or whether he seeks to obtain an “admired opinion” beyond the
Plus household; possibly he means to take his trade of conjuring for “lost” objects among the widow’s neighbours. He also has a second, short soliloquy after the stabbing takes place, but in it he merely reiterates his desire to win the widow’s credulity, not her hand or her daughter’s hand in marriage: “The amazed widdow / Will plant me strongly now in her beleefe. / And wonder at the virtue of my words” (3.1.72-74). And finally, he explains to Captain Idle the benefits the Captain can reap from entering the scheme as a conjurer: to “cheate within doores” is a safer way of stealing than highway robbery, and will make him a “Commander of rich fooles,” able to “geld fooles of more money in one night, than your false tailde Gelding will purchase in a twelve-moneths running” (3.5.49-66). While any of these expressions might vaguely describe tricking a rich widow into marriage, there is simply no reason for Pyeboord to resort to such subtle circumlocutions with Idle if such is his intent. Once again, the main implication of his speech is that he and Idle will go into business together. Settling down with the widow and her daughter does not seem to be on the agenda for the tricksters; a career as fraudulent cunning-men does, and the Plus family is merely a convenient target because of their “naturall simplicitie which will easily swallow an abuse, if any covering be over it” (2.1.336-37). Although marriage is a traditional reward for the hero or heroes of a comedy, it is almost always a marriage which he himself actively seeks. When marriage is thrust upon him, it may justly be suspected to be something other than a prize.

In the end, Captain Idle and Pyeboord do not settle down with Lady Plus and Frank, for the rich knights team up with Oath and Skirmish, who are disgruntled at having been used as “properties” for their co-conspirators’ advancement (5.3.9), and employ a nobleman to expose the fraud. The nobleman is intended to discredit the tricksters before the widow and “make ’em loathsome” (5.3.14-15), but although he sets
himself up as a moral authority, the play makes it difficult to see him as anything but a hired mouthpiece for the self-serving ends of Sir Oliver Muckhill and Sir Andrew Tipstaff. Had Middleton wished the nobleman to stand as a moral commentator on the preceding action, there would be little purpose in giving Muckhill such a long speech detailing his power over the man:

I sent late last night to an honourable personage, to whom I am much indebted in kindnesse, as he is to me, and therefore presume upon the paiment of his tongue, and that he will lay out good words for me: and to speake truth, for such needfull occasions, I onely preserve him in bond, and some-times he may doe mee more good here in the Cittie by a free word of his mouth, than if hee had paide one halfe in hand, and tooke Doomesday for t’other. . . . For you know, what such a man utters will be thought effectuall and to waighty purpose, and therefore into his mouth weel put the approoved theame of their forgeries. (5.3.16-33)

The nobleman’s servility is underscored by Muckhill’s pleasure that he can be made to appear at an unusually early hour to do his creditor’s bidding: “You see he loves me well: up before seaven! / Trust me, I have found him night capt at eleven” (5.3.40-41). Beneath this hireling’s rhetoric of love and regard, then, he merely castigates the widow for not choosing a rich husband over a poor one. It is, he informs her, “the blind besotting in the state of an unheaded woman that’s a widow”

to hate those that honestly and carefully love you, to the maintenance of credit, state, and posterity, and strongly to doat on those, that only love you to undo you: who regard you least are
best regarded, who hate you most are best beloved. And if there be but one man among tenne thousand millions of men that is accurst, disastrous, and evilly planeted, whome Fortune beates most, whom God hates most, and all Societies esteeme least, that man is suere to be a husband.—Such is the peevish Moone that rules your bloods. (5.4.8-23)

As my discussion of Fletcher’s *The Captain* pointed out earlier, this kind of thinking is antithetical to the lusty widow fantasy, where the widow and her desires exist to enrich exactly those men “whome Fortune beates most.” In *The Puritan*, however, the nobleman’s speech on behalf of the wealthy suitors is but the final touch in a play which rejects the fantasy all along. Rather than being allowed to make a potentially unmanageable wife for a man who is her social and financial inferior, the widow is married off to a rich knight who will look after her “credit, state, and posterity.” That the marriage between Muckhill and the widow may be one in which the traditional domestic hierarchy is upheld is suggested by the nobleman’s closing speech, where he tells the women “Come, enter into your Joyes, you shall not want / For fathers now” (5.4.125-26); as the speech is primarily addressed to the widow, and as “fathers” is plural, the implication is that the widow as well as her children is being re-placed under patriarchal
control. However, it may also be safe to say that the audience simply does not care whether Muckhill, a minor and thoroughly uninteresting character, ends up with a wife who is likely to be both foolish and domineering.

While this unexpected denouement would constitute a failed comic ending in a play that offered the fantasy of a widow as a reward for a penniless but audacious young man, The Puritan’s anti-fantasy of a widow not worth the winning, and of a man who is claimed by her as boldly as a widow is usually claimed by her suitor, allows for an ending which undercuts the conventional fifth-act marriages of comedy by juxtaposing their closure with the movement towards open-ended freedom found in the play’s jest-book source. The Merrie Conceited Jests of George Peele is a sequence of “jests” or comic anecdotes relating how Peele tricks an array of people to obtain money, clothing, food or other material goods. As the structure of the jest-book requires that the protagonist must be both continually needy and continually free to practise new tricks, each jest moves not towards closure but towards escape.20 Peele does not scheme to be set up for life, but merely to satisfy his present needs—a tavern bill, a few nights’ lodging, a pound or two in cash—and once he has obtained his goal, he typically flees.

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19 In “’Besotted on Sleights and Forgeries’: Widows and Witchcraft in The Puritan and The Alchemist,” Ostovich points out how both plays end with a gullible widow placed safely under male control, but implies that Middleton agrees with his nobleman and invests him with “moral and social authority” (7). Once it is noted how Middleton undercuts the nobleman’s authority in 5.3, however, the effect of his speech becomes far more complex. In the context of the play, the nobleman speaks part truth (the widow is indeed blindly besotted on a man who only loves her to undo her), part false assumption (“a flattering lip best wins you, or in a mirth who talkes roughest is most sweetest” [5.4.24-26], but the widow is neither flattered nor, as is usual, wooed with rough mirth), while the speech as a whole is politic and self-serving. Despite the nobleman’s generalizations about widows, the audience is reminded that his pronouncements are not moral absolutes but are instead thoroughly contingent on circumstances: in this case, it is better for all parties if the widow does not marry the poor young wit, but the power of wealth is to be seen as exactly that, and not as a kind of moral high ground.

20 For another example of the same kind of structure, see XII Mery Jestes of the Wyddow Edyth (Ed. W. Carew Hazlitt). The Widow Edyth engages in a series of confidence games in which she pretends to be either rich and marriageable or rich and in need of help to bring in her debts. She fleeces her suitors and the men who try to “help” her for their own mercenary motives, and then flees before they can claim what they are after. The widow generally nets very little from each scam, and her “jests” seem as much designed to mock men who would take advantage of her as they are to make a financial profit.
leaving his bridges to burn after him when his victims discover they have been gulled.

For example, in one of the book's simplest jests, "How George Peele served halfe a score Citizens." he invites the citizens to supper at a tavern, and when they call for the reckoning, he tells them he has paid it all already. They, "being men of good fashion, by no meanes will yeeld unto it, but every man throwes downe his money, some ten shillings, some five, some more: protesting something they will pay" (23). Peele then scoops up the money and slips out while the others are dancing, leaving them with the bill to pay over again. The trickster's plots do not always proceed without mishap—in another jest, he is deserted by the friend who has helped him pawn his clothing and the furniture out of the chamber where he is staying at an inn, is left trapped nearly naked in an empty room, and is obliged to sneak out in part of the room's décor, a suit of armor (26-27)—but he always accomplishes his immediate ends and escapes to move on to his next victim. The jest-book pattern of need, trick, and escape appears in the play in its traditional form in the self-contained incidents of act three, scenes three and four: Pyeboord is arrested for a debt to his innkeeper, convinces the officers he is about to collect five pounds for a device for a masque, talks his way into a gentleman's house and then persuades the gentleman, supposedly the buyer of this device, to let him escape out the back door. Although the drawn-out complications of the main action make its adherence to the jest-book pattern less readily apparent, it too can be usefully seen as a cycle of need, trick, and escape, with the added irony that the audience may be more aware than the tricksters of just what it is they have avoided. Pyeboord and Idle are clearly disappointed at having their brides taken away from them in the final scene, but the preceding revelations of the widow's character and her method of selecting a husband have made the audience suspect that what now appears to be a defeat may in fact be the
ultimate escape. Not only have the two rogues made a respectable sum of money from their venture, but Captain Idle has been bailed out of prison, Pyeboord has evaded his creditors, and in the end, both men are prevented from stumbling into the closure of marriage. instead preserving the continued freedom of the jest-book trickster.

*Michaelmas Term (1606, Paul's Boys)*

While the Captain of *The Phoenix* manages to escape with a few crowns from the widow he has married, and *The Puritan’s* Captain Idle gains forty angels before he is unwillingly freed from the one he is about to wed, Richard Easy in *Michaelmas Term* is undoubtedly awarded the best deal of the three. *Michaelmas Term* tells the story of Easy’s initiation into London life:

21: a naïve young gentleman from Essex, he is led into expensive habits and swindled out of all his property, but at his lowest point he is rescued by a rich “widow” through whose means he gains money, knowledge, and a position in the society of the City. Although the match between Easy and Thomasine Quomodo figures only in the last five scenes of the play, it is the closest that Middleton comes in his career to offering a straightforward, conventional version of the fantasy of marrying a lustful widow. And if, as I have argued, the fantasy of a widow’s desire and of the sex-for-money exchange is constructed to compensate for the threat her wealth and power pose to a second husband’s masculinity, it is not surprising that Middleton’s offering of the fantasy, considering the distrust of widows as wives evident in *The Phoenix* and *The Puritan*, pushes this compensation to its limit. Unlike *The Widow’s Tears*, which precedes it, and many of the theatrical offerings of the widow-fantasy which follow it,

21 See Covatta 85, who describes how “the process of initiation is at the heart of the play. On a fundamental level it introduces neophytes into a world more complex, sophisticated, and difficult than the one they had previously known.”
Michaelmas Term does not rely solely on the widow’s appetite and the young man’s sexual abilities (although neither of these are lacking) to neutralize the threat posed by the widow’s superior wealth and experience. The play, as I will show, also finds other ways to defuse that threat and to present this redemption of the “prodigal son” as an unequivocal enhancement of Easy’s manhood. Moreover, it takes the fantasy to what I have earlier suggested to be its ultimate fulfillment—Easy’s marriage to a widow turns out to be invalid, for Quomo’s death is a fraud, while Easy’s title to the property that the marriage brings him stands firm. But although the audience is allowed to enjoy the fantasy of Easy’s wonderful good fortune, the play also gently hints that the scenario it has built up is indeed too good to be true. Middleton does not take his widow-fantasy too seriously, and Michaelmas Term thus anticipates such later plays as No Wit and The Widow, in which the fantasy will be more deeply undermined.

Some critics consider Michaelmas Term a flawed play, claiming that it expects its audience to enjoy Easy’s eventual triumph but fails to arouse much more than contempt for his gullibility, and appreciative enjoyment of his opponent’s wit, throughout most of the preceding action. Levin, for example, objects that “the long complication [of the main plot] has given us such a vivid sense of Quomo’s and Shortyard’s brilliant mastery of the situation, and of Easy’s passive gullibility, that our sympathies tend to reverse” and that “we are never wholly persuaded that we should be pleased by the defeat of the man whose cleverness has been the chief source of our pleasure, or by the victory of one of the weakest and least interesting characters of the play” (Multiple Plot 177). Leggatt argues that in the last act Middleton “hits Quomo too hard. Suddenly and inexplicably, the linen-draper becomes a maladroit fool, and the former gull Easy becomes surprisingly efficient,” a conclusion that “assumes more hostility to Quomo on the part of the
audience that [sic] the play has actually aroused" (73-74). Leinwand suggests that the audience might well be intended to pity the merchant’s downfall, and at any rate, “with a noddy like Easy as our alternative to Quomodo, we can be sure that the theatre-wise London audience was not overidentifying with anyone on the choristers’ stage” (56).

Even Anthony Covatta, who views Easy’s success as the rightful New Comedy triumph of youth over sterile age, adds that “it is difficult to summon much sympathy for him in the first two-thirds of the play. The young heir is so gullible that he almost requires the treatment Quomodo gives him. Such a booby would not know what to do with his land if he could retain it” (95).\textsuperscript{22} If the play indeed invites the audience to view Easy with pure contempt, then his match with Thomasine cannot be considered as an example of the lusty widow fantasy, which requires not only that the reward be portrayed as a reward but that the suitor be deserving of that reward.

However, there are several elements in the play that work to mitigate the shift of audience identification that Levin posits. One is the traditional comic opposition, noted by Covatta (91), of youth and age: for all his energetic vitality when it comes to money matters, Quomodo is not an appealing trickster figure but an impotent old man (of the trickster’s three conventional attributes of youth, poverty, and wit, Quomodo possesses only the last). Easy may be foolish, but in the world of Middleton’s city comedies, even foolishness is better than impotence, and this fact alone may keep the audience sufficiently detached from Quomodo. I will shortly return to the significance of Quomodo’s impotence, but at this time I wish to point out two other elements which work in Easy’s favour and which are especially relevant to his dealings with Thomasine: his desire to belong in the City, and \textit{Michaelmas Term}’s use of the morality play genre.

\textsuperscript{22} All references to Covatta in this chapter are to \textit{Thomas Middleton’s City Comedies} unless otherwise stated.
In order to understand how the audience may view Easy as something more than a contemptible simpleton, it is necessary not to stop at the observation that he is gullible but to notice why he is gullible. Leinwand points out that Easy is a target for swindlers like Quomodo because he is guileless and unsophisticated, “frank, transparent, and honest” (100), a “fair, free-breasted gentleman, somewhat too open” (1.1.53). He is, in the words of Cockstone, one of the London gallants he falls in with, “yet fresh, / And wants the city powd’ring” (1.1.55-56). Cockstone’s choice of words, however, does more than describe Easy’s innocence (itself not a reprehensible quality): Easy not only “wants” or lacks experience in London ways, but “wants” or desires such experience, as is evident in his relationship with Shortyard. Acting as Quomodo’s agent, Shortyard leads Easy into the swindle with a method that relies heavily on the young country gentleman’s desire to fit into London society and his insecurity about being thought a gauche outsider. The dicing game of act two, scene one, where Shortyard (posing as a gallant named Master Blastfield) lends him money and encourages him to lose it, shows Easy as the grateful recipient of Blastfield’s continual advice on how a gallant is required to behave in the City: “You must always have a care of your reputation here in town, Master Easy; although you ride down with nothing, it skills not” (2.1.36-38); “Peace, I am ashamed to hear you; will you cease in the first loss? Show me one gentleman that e’er did it. Fie upon’t, I must use you to company, I perceive, you’d be spoil’d else” (2.1.106-09). All in the name of City ways, Blastfield counsels Easy on the “kind of bold grace” expected of him, on how one must observe “line and fashion” even to the extent of knowing which London fountain is the best to urinate at, and has him invite the other gallants for a dinner, for “Thus you make men at parting dutiful, / And rest beholding to you” (2.1.91, 93, 173-74). Above all, he arouses Easy’s envy of his own knowledgeable and respected
position in London, dropping the names of various merchants who are supposedly happy to lend him money without security. "It seems y'are well known, Master Blastfield," admires Easy, "and your credit very spacious here i'th' city" (2.1.87-88).

Easy's admiration of Londoners and dread of being dismissed as an outsider are what Quomodo and Blastfield eventually play on, with great success, to goad him into signing the first fateful bond which later helps to divest him of his property. When Quomodo insists that he must have a citizen, rather than Easy, to cosign Blastfield's bond, the insecure Easy is deeply affronted:

I hope you will not disparage me so. 'Tis well known I have three hundred pounds a year in Essex... And how doubtfully so e'er you account of me, I do not think but I might make my bond pass for a hundred pound i'th' city. . . . Deny me that small courtesy? 'Sfoot, a very Jew will not deny it me. . . . A jest indeed! Not take me into a bond quo' they. (2.3.257-81)

This scene is probably one that Leinwand refers to when he says that "Easy offers himself as a target" (102, original italics), but taken together with what has been shown in the dicing scene, this speech clearly establishes that there are complex and understandable motives behind Easy's signing of the bond, which tend to mitigate an otherwise very stupid act.23

The desire that brings about Easy's downfall—for all gulls are caught with their own desires—is the need to belong, to find a place for himself in the City world of

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23 Even Easy's need for money itself, which necessitates the loan in the first place, is clearly shown to stem from his desire to keep up his new reputation with the other gallants. Although he is so annoyed at being told that he is not as good as a citizen that he refuses to sign the bond, he relents when Blastfield reminds him that without the money he risks "the eternal loss of thy credit against supper. . . . And thy utter dissolution amongst gentlemen forever" (2.3.283-87).
gallants, merchants, and citizens in which he has newly arrived. I do not mean by this to
suggest that this world is a unified or harmonious one. As Gail Kern Paster points out, the
City of Michaelmas Term (like that of most city comedy) is a predatory place where the
inhabitants live off each other with ruthless disregard for class solidarity or even for
family ties (Idea of the City, 155-56). In Michaelmas Term, however, with its focus on
the experiences of new arrivals to the City (not only Easy, but also the country wench,
Lethe, and their respective parents), there is a strong sense that the City’s disparate and
predatory individuals are nonetheless bound together and distinguished from the new
arrivals by their understanding of how to survive in the system and of the role that each
of them plays in it, whether as a knowing consumer like Rearage who wilfully hazards
“consumption of the patrimony” (2.1.119) for the pleasure of gambling, or as a provider
of prostitutes, loans, or goods like Hellgill or Quomodo. The emphasis that the play
puts on Easy’s desire to join the City’s insiders thus places him somewhat apart from the
typical gulls of city comedy, who are contemptible not merely because they are deceived
but because the desires—and frequently, the methods—involved in their gullings are
laughable in themselves. The dupes of The Alchemist are a classic example: for the most
part, the victims of the venture tripartite present desires ranging from the ludicrous
(Kastril) to the absurdly extravagant (Sir Epicure Mammon) and are prepared to suspend
whatever intelligence they have and put faith in the dodgy pseudo-sciences of alchemy
and magic to obtain them. Easy, on the other hand, is deceived by a complicated business

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24 I differ here from Paster’s view that Michaelmas Term denies any distinction between “natives and
newcomers in the successive stages of the ‘city powdering’” by showing how the “veteran gallants” are
also deceived by Shortyard’s impersonation of Blastfield, and how Quomodo, like Mother Gruel, is
deceived by Lethe’s transformation to a fashionable gallant (Idea of the City 175-76). It is important to note
that although they fail to see through Shortyard’s disguise (disguises are, after all, conventionally
impenetrable), the “veteran gallants” are not gulled in any way, while Thomasine does not share
Quomodo’s blind spot about Lethe. Both shrewder and more ethical than her husband, Thomasine is the
Londoner who completes Easy’s training in the ways of the City.
transaction purporting to be an unfamiliar City custom, and what he desires is something which could be understood by any immigrant to London—a large proportion of its contemporary inhabitants—and by anyone who had struggled as an outsider against more established and powerful men. Easy’s eventual defeat of Quomodo is less the class-based triumph of gentleman over citizen than it is the hard-won success of the newcomer, a theme with broader appeal in a city which so many had first entered as strangers.

Regarding Michaelmas Term, Margot Heinemann observes that “in city comedy, hard up citizens and masterless men [in the audience] can enjoy the sufferings of the disinherited heir because he has the chance (as they scarcely have) of winning through to wealth and ease” (93). The way in which Easy wins through, however, is one which the high remarriage rates of early seventeenth-century London may have encouraged the audience to see as more possible than most. And the desire to become a London insider that leads Easy into Quomodo’s swindle is ironically fulfilled through the swindle itself: his plight having excited Thomasine’s sympathy and desire, she teaches him to recognize how he has been defrauded, invites him to become her husband and provides him with an established London household. Aided by Thomasine, Easy steps symbolically into Quomodo’s position, with all the powerful knowledge of the City system that that implies.

25 Early in the seventeenth century, approximately 3750 permanent immigrants arrived annually in London, a city of about 150,000 which had more than doubled in size due to immigration in the second half of the sixteenth century. The gross rate of immigration would have been even higher, as London served as a “vocational training centre” for apprentices from all over England, hundreds of whom entered and left the city each year (Rappaport 76).

26 It is widely agreed that Middleton’s presentation of the class conflict in Michaelmas Term is more complex and ambivalent than a simple upholding of true gentry over the arriviste lower classes. See Paster, “Triangular Desire” 168-70; Yachnin, “Social Competition” passim; Levin, Multiple Plot 182; Covatta 95-97. Kistner and Kistner, in “Heirs and Identity,” argue that the play upholds the old, agricultural order over the new, city-based one, but see both classes as equally implicated in the old order’s destruction.
The audience’s view of Easy is guided not only by his sympathetic role as an initiate into London society, but by an underlying morality-play pattern which is especially overt at the beginning and end of the play. Quomodo’s first appearance makes it obvious that he is about to play the Vice to Easy’s Mankind, as he calls to his assistants. “Oh my two spirits, Shortyard and Falselight, you that have so enrich’d me. I have industry for you both!” (1.1.74-75). Shortyard in particular is to behave exactly like the traditional instrument of the Vice in his temptation of the “fresh and free” young man:

Keep foot by foot with him, out-dare his expenses,
Flatter, dice, and brothel to him;
Give him a sweet taste of sensuality;
Train him to every wasteful sin, that he
May quickly need health, but especially money;
Ravish him with a dame or two, be his bawd for once,
I’ll be thine forever;
Drink drunk with him, creep into bed to him,
Kiss him and undo him, my sweet spirit. (1.1.120-28)

Quomodo’s clearly defined role as the chief Vice ensures that the audience can enjoy his energetic antics without necessarily expecting or wanting him to gain the final triumph over his victim: “the vices were often the most amusing and entertaining characters in a play, but by no means were they intended to hold the audience’s sympathy. That was reserved for the everymen [sic] figure, who like the irresponsible Easy, goes astray and is then reclaimed to virtue” (Kistner, “Heirs” 69). However, it is Middleton’s version of

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27 Numerous critics have remarked on this pattern. See, for instance, Kistner, “Heirs” 68-69; Chatterji 350-51; Chakravorty 47; Paster, “Triangular Desire” 168; Gibbons 129; and especially Rowe 61-72, who sees the play as specifically following the Prodigal Son paradigm.
the morality figure of the Angel of Mercy that truly makes *Michaelmas Term* into what Brian Gibbons calls "a modernised, urbanised version of* Everyman" (129),\(^2\) for this role is filled by Thomasine, when Quomodo's fraudulent death allows her to blossom temporarily from a sexually frustrated wife into a desirous and generous widow. The notion of a lustful widow as a figure of divine grace is at once hilariously incongruous and wonderfully apt (as can be seen by the fact that Rowley is able to present it quite straight in *A New Wonder, A Woman Never Vexed*), and through it Middleton simultaneously offers the fantasy of marrying a rich widow and gently mocks the fantasy as mere fantasy.

Kistner and Kistner, who describe Thomasine's function as the play's "good angel," do not observe that Middleton is incorporating the conventions of the lusty widow fantasy into his morality framework, and therefore try to whitewash Thomasine's obvious sexual appetite in order to make her virtue accord with what the role ordinarily demands. They rightly point out that her appearances as an unseen observer on the balcony during the scenes where Quomodo works his scheme on Easy direct the audience's sympathy away from the trickster and towards his victim (it can be added that it is not merely the "ethical weight" of Thomasine's comments which does so, but the fact that she is, in a sense, outwitting Quomodo by gaining knowledge he does not want her to have), but they deny the sexual implications of her speech:

Why stand I here (as late our graceless dames
That found no eyes) to see that gentleman

Alive, in state and credit, executed,

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\(^2\) The main plot of *Michaelmas Term* is in fact much more similar to that of *Mankind*, which follows the traditional morality structure of the human representative's temptation by vices and redemption by God's mercy, than to that of *Everyman*, which does not. There seems to be, however, a specific allusion to *Everyman* at 5.1.52-55.
Help to rip up himself, does all he can?

Why am I wife to him that is no man?

I suffer in that gentleman's confusion. (2.3.202-07)

Disagreeing with critics such as Covatta and Levin who read the penultimate line as evidence of Thomasine's sexual dissatisfaction with her husband, they claim that "there seems to be no basis in the text for such an assumption" and that in its context, "no man" refers solely to "her rejection of Quomodo's vicious, devilish aspects" ("Heirs" 69). But Middleton, master of the sexual double entendre, would hardly have a wife call her husband "no man" without carnal implications, and there is in fact ample evidence in the text to show that Quomodo is impotent and that there is a strong component of sexual frustration and desire in Thomasine's love for Easy.

The play makes it clear that Quomodo cannot satisfy his wife, not merely because he is an old man but because he has channeled all of his potential sexual energy into his obsession with money and land (Levin, *Multiple Plot* 178). A motif which Middleton goes on to develop with almost mathematical precision in *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, the inverse relation of potency to wealth also figures prominently in *Michaelmas Term*. Punning ironically on the double meaning of "bags," *Michaelmas Term* remarks in the Induction, "I think it be a curse both here and foreign / Where bags are fruitful'st, there the womb's most barren" (21-22). Along with infertility goes a lack of sexual ability, suggested when Quomodo tells Shortyard that "There are too few of thy name gentlemen / And that we feel, but citizens in abundance" (1.1.88-89); another merchant, who is named in the play but does not appear on stage, is called "Master Stilliard-down."29

Quomodo's own "yard," as he himself implies, is put to strictly commercial uses—"Why

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29 In his edition of *Michaelmas Term*, Levin glosses "Stilliard-down" as "false balance," for "a 'steelyard' was a scale for weighing" (2.3.225n), but the name also plays on still (always)-yard (penis)-down.
Thomasine, go to; my shop is not altogether so dark as some of my neighbors’, where a man may be made cuckold at one end, while he’s measuring with his yard at tother” (2.3.32-35). Having supplanted sexual desire by an appetite for land (1.1.99-101), Quomodo apparently believes that his acquisitions are a perfectly good substitute for virility. Unaware of any irony, he gloatingly compares the man who envies his acquisitive skill to one who suffers from impotence:

    Especially his envy I shall have
    That would be fain, yet cannot be, a knave,
    Like an old lecher, girt in a fur’d gown,
    Whose mind stands stiff, but his performance down. (3.4.8-11)

He even imagines that by acquiring fertile land he will rejuvenate his own virility—in Essex, “we citizens will laugh and lie down, get all our wives with child against a bank, and get up again” (4.1.75-77)—but as Covatta points out, Quomodo’s plans to burn the estate’s wood “to furnish the warmth his own worn-out body cannot provide” reveal that his are merely sterile fantasies (92). Impotent and complacent in his impotency (he accepts with equanimity Shortyard’s advice that “To be a cuckold is but for one life / When land remains to you, your heir, or wife” [1.1.109-10]), Quomodo not only sets himself up for his own cuckolding but ensures that Thomasine will be an understandably lustful widow on the very day that he fakes his death.

As Middleton has shown from the start that Quomodo is “no man” as far as sexual masculinity goes, and that his impotence is inherent in his grasping after wealth, it is unsurprising that Thomasine’s speech on the balcony in which she first pitied Easy should blend disgust at Quomodo’s tactics with an acknowledgement of sexual frustration. This combination of compassion and discontent turns readily into sexual desire when she
meets Easy: Thomasine, whose sexual susceptibility has already been suggested by her indignant response to Lethe's advances ("'tis for his betters to have opportunity of me"
[2.3.7-8]) receives the young man's greeting kiss with the aside "Beshrew my blood, a proper springall and a sweet gentleman" (2.3.403-04). For Thomasine, in fact, pity is the path to sexual attraction, and the explicit transformation of the former into the latter lays open one of the basic elements of the lusty widow fantasy: any pity for the young man's poverty, which involves a certain sense of superiority on the widow's part, must be replaced by desire (giving the suitor the power of a benefactor) before the fantasy can fulfill its function of assuaging anxieties of emasculation.  

By the time Quomodo's death is announced, "do[ing] that gentleman good" and "do[ing] myself a pleasure" have become one and the same to Thomasine (4.3.41-42). The "widow" dries even her counterfeit tears when Rearage reminds her of Quomodo's sexual neglect, responding with a rather graphic double entendre on her late husband's impotence, "Nay, that's true indeed, Master Rearage; he ne'er us'd me so well as a woman might have been us'd, that's certain; in troth, 't'as been our greatest falling out" (4.3.54-56). And having expressed her financial and matrimonial wishes to Easy by means of a hundred pounds, a letter, and a ring, she offers herself to him—during Quomodo's funeral procession—and answers his joyous acceptance with a succinct invitation to the traditional sex-for-money exchange: "Let this kiss / Restore thee to more wealth, me to more bliss" (4.4.77-78).

Easy, evidently, has no need to worry that his new wife might indulge in one of the conventionally-feared vices of the remarried widow and compare his sexual performance unfavourably to that of her late husband. The comparison is all the other way, as the newly-bedded Thomasine contentedly remarks, "What difference there is in

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30 Another, more violent example of this process is found in the wooing scenes between Spendall and Widow Raysby in Cooke's *Tu Quoque.*
husbands, not only in one thing, but in all” (5.1.50-51). The play, though, does not rely on the widow’s sexual appetite and the young husband’s prowess alone to neutralize the marriage’s potential for the husband’s loss of financial and other domestic authority. The most obvious additional factor is that Quomodo is not really dead, and so the marriage is unlikely to be valid or lasting; however, as it is not entirely clear until the final scene that Quomodo has not in fact cheated himself permanently out of his wife as well as his property, Middleton embellishes the fantasy yet further.

First, much of the wealth that Easy gets with his widow is *his* wealth, which Quomodo has swindled from him. Whereas the typical poor young man who marries a rich widow acquires property which in every sense except the strictly legal one belongs to his wife, Thomasine’s “generosity” is largely a restoration to Easy of what is rightfully his own. Technically speaking, Easy is destitute when he marries, but marriage to the widow who holds his swindled property ensures that he does not in fact enter the relationship in the emasculating position of Thomasine’s financial inferior. Second, Thomasine is not only well aware of the fact that she holds Easy’s wealth but marries him for the specific purpose of returning it to him. Her sexual desire for the young man, as I have already illustrated, is closely bound up with her desire to undo the damage that her husband has done to him, and the sex-for-money exchange is thus stated somewhat differently than it is in other widow-wooing plots of the period. Usually, the suitor or one of his allies reminds the widow of her sexual need and offers his services with only secondary emphasis on how he will benefit financially from the match; the widow, for her part, is primarily interested in marital sex, but must legally hand over her estate to obtain it. In *Michaelmas Term*, however, Thomasine’s pre-marital gift of one hundred pounds, and the fact that she, not he, states the exchange—“let this kiss / Restore thee to
more wealth, me to more bliss”—eliminates any doubt that she may renege on her part of the bargain and attempt to maintain control over the household finances. Moreover, the audience’s glimpse of the marriage confirms that this power is just where a suitor would wish it to be. Thomasine neither longs to be like Lady Plus, who “had keyes of all, kept all, receiv’d all” (The Puritan 1.1.109-10), nor reminds her husband, as The Phoenix’s Castiza does, that she might have made a wealthier match (1.2.77-78), but instead asks the question that would be music to a second husband’s ears: “But are you sure you have all?” (5.1.48-49). And like any good fantasy widow, Thomasine is careful to point out that she would have found her new husband desirable even if he had been truly poor and not just temporarily defrauded: “Did he want all, who would not love his care?” (5.1.57).

Easy not only gains financial authority within his new household, but also obtains through his marriage the knowledge and power that he lacked as a newcomer to the City. Although the marriage itself gives him back his goods and endows him with all of Quomodo’s own property, Easy is allowed to seize back the lands he lost with a display of manly aggression that works to redeem the passive gullibility of his earlier behaviour. Quomodo does not leave the lands to his widow, as he apparently does the rest of his property, but wills them specifically to his foolish son Sim (4.1.45-47), who is speedily cozened out of the lands by Shortyard soon after Quomodo fakes his death (5.1.2-13). When Easy appears on stage as Thomasine’s husband at the beginning of act five, he has evidently learned from her the details of Quomodo’s trickery and, for the first time, he is able to fight back against the men who took advantage of his inexperience. Thomasine points out Shortyard—“oh, behold the villain, who in all those shapes / Confounded your estate” (5.1.16-17)—and Easy attacks him, finally powerful in his awareness that his former “friend” is “Rogue, Shortyard, Blastfield, sergeant, deputy, coz’ner!” (5.1.20).
Easy's new-found power to expose Shortyard—not to mention the violence with which he "thirst[s] the execution of his ears" (5.1.22)—so intimidates the rogue that he readily offers up the lands:

I have cozen'd him again merely for you,
Merely for you, sir; 'twas my meaning then
That you should wed her, and have all again.
O' my troth, it's true, sir; look you then here, sir.
You shall not miss a little scroll, sir. Pray, sir,
Let not the city know me for a knave. (5.1.27-33)

Shortyard, who had once pretended to initiate Easy into the ways of the City, realizes that the influence is now in Easy's hands. And Easy, unmoved by his old teacher's new servility, promptly has him arrested. Easy, as Covatta points out, "has become wiser in the ways of the City" ("Remarriage" 461); it is important to our understanding of how the widow-fantasy operates in this play to notice that he does not achieve this wisdom on his own.

As the husband of Quomodo's widow and the new master of Quomodo's household, Easy has succeeded beyond his wishes of becoming a London insider and has obtained the best that the remarrying widow had to offer her suitors—an instant position in society as the head of an established, prosperous household. Easy does not inherit Quomodo's role (marrying a draper's widow does not make him a draper, nor, presumably, would he wish to be one), but instead gains the best of both his own world and Quomodo's. With his gentlemanly status, his lands, his new London real estate, and his new-found shrewdness on how to protect it all against City opportunists, he is no longer a foolish country gentleman but a savvy, landed, City gentleman. He thus realizes
both his own desire to “belong” in London as well as the state that Quomodo could only
dream about (3.4.5-18). Moreover, when Easy appears at Quomodo’s door as master on
the morning after his marriage, the play offers a momentary glimpse of a better, cleaner,
more honest Londoner: in this version of the widow-fantasy, marriage is a fresh start that
improves on the old order. The one domestic transaction that Easy and Thomasine
perform together—the one by which Quomodo cozens himself out of his own property—is a simple act of combined financial prudence and financial honesty. Unaware that the
“beadle” who comes to collect the fees for the funeral services is Quomodo in disguise,
Thomasine scrupulously counts out the full amount owed of five pounds and forty pence,
and calls her servant to write up a receipt. By the time Easy joins her to keep an eye on
the payment—“How now, lady, paying away money so fast?” (5.1.98)—Quomodo has
already signed the receipt with his own name, thinking it a playful way to reveal himself
to his wife. What he has signed, however, is a memorandum stating “that I have received
of Richard Easy all my due I can claim here i’th’ house, or any hereafter for me”
(5.1.104-06). Critics have faulted Middleton for Quomodo’s “sudden attack of stupidity”
(Levin, *Multiple Plot* 177) in signing the receipt (one might counter that although
Quomodo would be unlikely to sign anything blindly, signing a receipt drawn up by a
trusted wife and servant for money he is not owed but has in hand anyway is hardly the
height of bad judgment); however, the main ironic point here is not that Quomodo
suddenly becomes gullible, but that he and all his wiles are defeated by the plain,
everyday honesty that governs this new London household.

The crowning touch of Easy’s good fortune is that he gains all the benefits of
marrying the widow—a position of knowledge and power in City society, London
property, and other wealth, as well as the return of his own lands—without being tied for
life to a wife he has married for wholly material reasons. While Jack of Newbury is obliged to live with his widow for an unspecified number of years until her death makes him a free and wealthy man, a judge relieves Easy of his wife a mere day after his marriage but confirms his permanent legal right to the Quomodo family property. Thomasine is upset and even defiant at being returned to her old husband—when Lethe addresses her as “Mistress Quomodo,” she snaps “inquire my right name / Again next time” (5.3.139-41)—but Easy does not seem much perturbed:

Quomodo: Your Lordship yet will grant she is my wife?  
Thomasine: Oh, heaven!  
Judge: After some penance, and the dues of law,  
I must acknowledge that.  
Quomodo: I scarce like  
Those dues of law.  
Easy: My lord,  
Although the law too gently ’lot his wife,  
The wealth he left behind he cannot challenge.  

(5.3.55-61)

While not without sympathy for Thomasine’s plight, Easy is far more concerned with keeping hold of his financial gains than with keeping her. The judge upholds the signed memorandum, and Easy ends the play the way Quomodo had hoped to, as a prosperous landowner with a house and shop in London.

If this all seems a bit too good to be true, though, the audience has more than the usual gap between theatre and reality available to remind them that Easy and Thomasine are but figures in a fantasy. The fantasy of a sexually frustrated, rich widow eager to give
herself to the young man most in need is implied to be indeed "fantastical" when Middleton picks up the elements of the traditional morality play that have lain more or less dormant since Michaelmas Term’s opening scenes, and puts them to parodic use in portraying the relationship between Thomasine and Easy. At the start of the play, as I have described earlier, the morality elements help to align the audience’s sympathies with Easy, to indicate that the play will be about the temptation and fall of a naïve youth, and to suggest that the trickery of Quomodo and his "spirits" is of a more sinister and potentially harmful variety than the conventional amoral gullings of city comedy. The exchange between Quomodo and Shortyard (1.1.74-132) initiates the morality pattern, but apart from scattered references to Shortyard and Falselight as "spirits," the pattern does not become as explicit again until Thomasine falls in love with Easy. This time, however, the discrepancy between the action itself and the morality tags that crop up in the dialogue creates a rather different effect from the moral pointing that operates in the first act. Thomasine the pitying observer who comments from her “heavenly” position on balcony during the swindling scenes may be perceptible to the seasoned viewer as the traditional Good Angel, but it is Thomasine the lustful widow, about to remarry with truly unseemly haste, who is overtly referred to as such in Easy’s exclamation, “The angels have provided for me” (4.4.79). The comical discrepancy between a figure of divine grace and a newly-widowed wife out to “do herself a pleasure” with a young man calls attention to the morality allusion and to the conventional theatrical formula of redemption it describes, momentarily illuminating the notion of redemption-by-widow as a similar theatrical formula. Easy’s line about being provided for by angels also suggests that such a rescue may be in the same realm of wish-fulfillment as direct divine intervention into ordinary human affairs.
The play’s next morality reference, which is even more overtly parodic, works in the same way, while pointing up the valorization of property which lies at the heart of the lusty widow fantasy. Although the main plot of *Michaelmas Term* as a whole resembles the conventional temptation-fall-redemption structure of a morality play like *Mankind* and not that of the atypical *Everyman*, one of Easy’s speeches appears to make a specific allusion to the latter play. Just as Everyman is guided by Knowledge as to how he may redeemed through his Good Deeds, Easy learns from Thomasine’s knowledge how he too may be saved by his good deeds:

Here’s good deeds and bad deeds, the writings that keep  
my lands to me, and the bonds that gave it away from me.  
These, my good deeds, shall to more safety turn,  
And these, my bad, have their deserts and burn. (5.1.52-55)

Spiritual salvation is replaced by the financial variety, virtuous acts with valid legal papers. The humorous punning hardly invites serious moral consideration along these lines, but once again, the discrepancy between source and allusion draws attention to itself and to the fact that Easy and Thomasine are merely acting out a comforting formula.

The gentle mocking of the lusty widow fantasy that punctuates Easy’s rescue by Thomasine does not, on the whole, seriously undermine the audience’s enjoyment of the young man’s successful initiation into the world of the City. It does suggest, though, that Middleton had little taste for presenting in a wholly non-critical way the fantasy of an easily-won widow exchanging her money for sexual satisfaction, as Chapman had already done in *The Widow’s Tears* and as Barry, Cook, Field and others would do shortly. *Michaelmas Term*, which offers up the fantasy more straightforwardly than any
other play of his career, nevertheless does so with tongue in cheek, and marks the
beginning of a series of comedies that will undermine and subvert it, along with other
comic conventions, in varying ways. The next two plays, A Trick to Catch the Old One
and No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s, go beyond Michaelmas Term in holding the
fantasy up to laughter, and begin to expose the male anxieties and desires that construct
it.
Chapter Four

Written around 1605 for the Paul’s Boys company, *A Trick to Catch the Old One* fits squarely among Middleton’s early, satiric city comedies; *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s*, performed by an adult company (*Annals of English Drama* tentatively assigns it to Lady Elizabeth’s Men) some six years later, is best described as a transitional play between the city comedies and Middleton’s “middle” period of romances and tragicomedies. *No Wit* still displays all the elements of city comedy, as it features the wooing of a city widow in a London setting populated by the usual crew of merchants, knights, and gallants, but the play also has a subplot of mistaken identity and threatened incest lifted from Giambattista Della Porta’s *La Sorella* (1604), an Italian *commedia erudita*, and shows the influence of Fletcherian romance in the disguised heroine of the main plot (Johnson xiii-xiv, xviii).1 It is this disguised heroine, however, who places *No Wit* in a mutually illuminating relationship with *A Trick*, which features a courtesan disguised as a rich widow. The main plot of *No Wit* is the story of Kate Low-water’s successful endeavour to transform herself into the ideal widow-wooing suitor, to win the hand of the widowed Lady Goldenfleece, and through a series of stratagems to claim back the fortune which had been defrauded from her and her husband by the late Sir Avarice Goldenfleece. For the purposes of her trick, Kate not only creates the perfect suitor based on societal assumptions of what a widow desires but also enacts a “script” of sexually aggressive courtship and anxiety-ridden marriage which relies heavily on the stereotypes of the widow as sexually eager before marriage and insatiate, insubordinate,

1 For a comparison of the plot and style of Della Porta’s play with Middleton’s, see Lepage. Lepage refers to the widow-plot in *No Wit* as the “minor plot” (345), but as the intrigue of Lady Goldenfleece, Kate Low-water, and the widow’s suitors (to which the play’s title refers) constitutes over half of the action, I am following Johnson’s lead in calling it the main plot and calling the story of the Twilights and the Sunsets (based on *La Sorella*) the subplot.
and financially controlling afterwards. This script interacts with the convention of transvestite disguise to suggest that a feared lack or loss of masculinity lies beneath the stereotypes of the lustful widow and the domineering widow-as-wife. While *A Trick* does not disrupt the conventions of the lusty widow fantasy to the extent that *No Wit* does, it offers a counterpart to Kate’s constructed suitor in its presentation of an equally constructed widow. To help the prodigal Witgood wrest back his mortgaged estate from his uncle Pecunious Lucre, Witgood’s courtesan poses as the wealthy Widow Medler, inviting the resultant crowd of suitors to mould the “widow” into whatever image each man’s respective desires dictate. For an investigation of a theatrical motif that is based on a fantasy, Middleton’s two plays in which the widow or her suitor are explicitly no more than fantasies furnish some of the more penetrating insights that the theatre of the period has to offer into how men construct the widow according to their own desires.

**A Trick to Catch the Old One** (1605, Paul’s Boys)

The stereotype of the sexually susceptible widow masquerades as a true description of a woman who has become accustomed to being satisfied by a man and is then deprived of her pleasure. Her cravings, as explained by the ballad “A Proverb old, yet nere forgot,” are easily translated into profit by any young man who promises satisfactory performance:

Now is the Wooing time or never,

Widowes now will love Young-men,

Death them from their mates did sever,

Now they long to match aget . . . .
The widows of the ballad are so eager to find themselves a young husband that "they will not stand / for House or Land" and will gladly marry a youth "not worth a groat" (Rollins, *Garland* 230). The "widow" of *A Trick*, however, seems to be quite different—not only does she insist on having evidence of young Witgood's property before she marries him, but she eventually abandons him for the elderly, wealthy Hoard instead. There is indeed a "trick," though, to this apparent contradiction of widow-like behaviour, for this rich widow is not really a widow at all, but a courtesan in disguise. Since other contemporary comedies which deal with a widow's remarriage—such as *The Widow's Tears*, which probably dates from the same year as *A Trick*—portray a "real" widow (real, that is, within the fiction of the plot) who conforms to the construct of the widow eager to remarry for pleasure and thus enables the fantasy of the sex-for-money exchange, *A Trick* is of particular interest to an investigation of this fantasy, for it stages a character who within the play's fiction explicitly constructs herself, and is constructed by others, to be a marriageable, wealthy widow. Broke, and desperate to regain the property that he has mortgaged away to his uncle to finance his earlier prodigality, Witgood persuades his courtesan to "take the name and form upon [her] of a rich country widow, four hundred a year valiant, in woods, in bullocks, in barns and in rye-stacks" (1.1.59-61), and the pair heads to London, in the hope that "the name of a rich widow and four hundred a year in good earth," will provoke "a kind of usurer's love" in Lucre and induce him to restore Witgood's property (1.1.83-85). The Courtesan assumes the basic elements of this persona—widowhood and wealth—and manoeuvres her way through the trick by reflecting back and embodying whatever desires the play's men project on to her. For Witgood's purposes, she becomes a widow infatuated with his youth and virility who nonetheless desires proof of his financial assets before she makes the marriage sure. For
old Hoard, she becomes a "wise widow" willing to value a shrewd property match over sexual attraction. To the assorted minor characters who pick up the scent of the widow-hunt and join the chase, she is whatever they imagine her to be. As Swapan Chakravorty observes, the widow in *A Trick* is but "a projection of the gallants' and citizens' erotic and economic fetish" (59).

The success of the trick, together with the absence of any "real" widow beneath it results in a comedy which, in one sense, makes the traditional fantasy of marrying a wealthy, lustful widow available to the audience, for Witgood is rewarded for his construction of a widow driven by sexual appetite, while Hoard is punished for constructing one driven by greed. Yet, as I will argue, the play proceeds to build up the fantasy of a rich widow's easy availability so precariously that it constantly threatens to topple over into exposing itself as a mere fantasy created out of self-interest. While Middleton's extended play on the points of comparison between a courtesan and a widow may help to perpetuate the notion that a widow is eager to hand over her property in a marriage for sexual satisfaction, the explicit constructedness of the fantasy figure and the sheer accumulation of imaginary widows and fantasizing suitors over the course of the play leave open the possibility that the absence of the desired widow at the heart of the trick has implications that go beyond simple deception. A spectator who clings to conventional assumptions about a widow's nature may simply observe that the Courtesan acts in an un-widow-like way and marries an old man because she is only impersonating a widow, but the play may also be seen as undermining those assumptions themselves.

Perhaps because there is no "real" widow in *A Trick*, the play's focus on widow-wooing and remarriage has received very little critical attention. Most critics instead have pondered the play's moral viewpoint, with special attention to whether the three scenes
featuring the drunken usurer Dampit are designed to deflect moral condemnation from the lesser sins of Witgood, Lucre, and Hoard, or conversely, to remind the audience of the warped values inherent in the seemingly amoral fun of the main plot. Whether *A Trick* has a moral message and what that message may be is not especially relevant to what the play has to tell us about the remarrying widow and her suitors, for *all* the marriages in this play are based in financial concerns: as far as money goes, Hoard’s desire for the “widow” is essentially not very different from Witgood’s plan to hold on to “a virgin’s love, her portion and her virtues” (1.1.20-1). Joyce, the virgin in question, with “a thousand good pound” to her portion (1.1.134), functions as a token of wealth and success as much as the imaginary widow does, and is a far less developed character than the Courtesan or even the Courtesan’s persona of “Widow Medler.” As I am confining my analysis of *A Trick* to the construction and courting of the supposed widow, I do not mean to enter the debate (which seems to me inherently inconclusive) on the extent to which Middleton intended his audience to condemn the whole property-obsessed society he depicts. Instead, I simply wish to observe that within the terms of the play the approval accorded to any particular marriage is based less on whether the prospective spouses have an eye out for each other’s monetary worth than on whether they are fit, attractive, and otherwise deserving in themselves. Witgood, like countless other attractive young prodigals in city comedy, is entitled to pursue a wealthy match; the elderly, avaricious Hoard is not. Ironically, in the critical preoccupation with the play’s moral structure, the

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2 The first view is held by Levin, who argues that Dampit exists in the play to “draw off to himself the audience’s detestation of usury, and its apprehensions,” leaving them “freer to regard Lucre and Hoard simply as ridiculous butts who represent no moral threat and so can be let off at the end with relatively mild comic discomfits” (*Multiple Plot* 132). See also Covatta 102-03, who agrees with Levin but adds that the play’s moralizing is not confined to the Dampit scenes. A related view is found in Parker 188 and Leggatt 58, who see Dampit as a safety-valve for the playwright’s own disgust. For the argument that Dampit is but a part of the play’s pervasive moral disorder on which Middleton passes judgement, see Rowe 80-91 and Mount 260. Messina and Shershow offer readings that mediate between the two extremes.
significance of having the entire plot centre on a courtesan disguised as a widow has been largely ignored. Most readers of the play uncritically accept the “rich widow” as a kind of metonymy for “property,” thus unintentionally reproducing the very viewpoint they condemn: that of a Lucre or a Hoard, who sees the widow as primarily the sum of her material parts. Some critics do focus on the Courtesan as a character, commenting on her intelligence, affection, frankness, and dignity (Covatta 114-15; Farr 20) or on Middleton’s thoughtful treatment of her development from whore to respectable wife (Cherry 100; Farr 21). No one as yet, however, has given the widow-hunt as widow-hunt—not just as the scrambling after a disembodied mass of property—the attention that its centrality to the play requires.

Before examining how A Trick eventually undermines the lusty widow fantasy, it is necessary to look at how the play first builds up the idea that a rich widow can be won by virility in the absence of any actual widow through which to “prove” the stereotype. To begin with, the main premise of Witgood’s trick effectively removes the fantasy of profiting from a widow further from the anxieties attendant upon a permanent marriage than even Michaelmas Term does. Thomasine believes herself to be a widow, Easy believes himself to be contracting a valid marriage, and although the audience knows that Quomodo is still alive, it is not certain until the end whether he has in fact tricked himself out of legal existence. Only through the fortuitous decision of a fifth-act judge does Easy find himself in the enviable position of keeping the wealth and discarding the widow. The opening scene of A Trick makes it clear, however, as it introduces Witgood’s scheme, that this young protagonist is not about to risk his manhood to repair his fortune by marrying a widow, but will instead use the known proclivities of widows in a more indirect and far safer way. In a sense, Witgood profits from all the genuine remarrying
widows of his society, for the success of the trick depends on Lucre’s knowledge that rich widows do tend to marry young men for their virility. But Witgood is clever enough to reap the benefits of such a match without even approaching its dangers: while the restoration of Easy’s property is mediated by a temporary marriage to a widow, Witgood invents a wholly non-threatening false widow to win him back his estate and to ensure his marriage to a very passive, silent, and well-dowered virgin. As Rowe points out, A Trick integrates the traditions of both Prodigal Son comedy and Roman New Comedy, depicting a reformed prodigal who must resort to trickery to redeem his fortune (72-73). In the absence of any “real” widow, however, the play avoids what I have described earlier as the tension between conquest and submission created when the prodigal marks his return to respectability by marrying a wealthy widow.

It may justly be objected that the widow whom Witgood constructs to deceive Lucre is in fact not the typical lustful widow who lets her desires drive her into marriage with a penniless young man, because she supposedly requires assurance of Witgood’s lands and living before she will make the match sure. Indeed, her desire to verify his claim to wealth is an integral part of the trick, which hinges on the assumption that once Lucre hears of the widow he will repair his nephew’s fortunes so that the couple will marry and put the widow’s property within Lucre’s grasp (2.1.167-72). However, this aspect of the widow’s character is handled so that the requirements of the plot are fulfilled with very little damage done to the traditional fantasy of a widow eager to marry a young man for his sexual, not financial, attributes. The “widow” whom Witgood constructs, the Host presents, and Lucre believes in is one whose financial prudence is so intertwined with sexual interests that she sees Witgood’s (supposed or potential) wealth almost as an extension of his virility. The notion of the widow’s carnal desire pervades
Witgood’s description of his success to the Host. (The Host, employed to act the part of her servingman, is aware of the plan to get money out of Lucre, but not aware that the widow is a fake.) Bringing the Host “report of a widow of four hundred a year” (1.2.19), Witgood adds credibility to his tale by embellishing it with hints of how his own masculine prowess won his bride-to-be:

I ha’ brought her from her friends, turned back the horses by a sleight; not so much as one amongst her six men, goodly large yeomanly fellows, will she trust with this her purpose: by this light, all unmanned, regardless of her state, neglectful of vainglorious ceremony, all for my love; oh ’tis a fine little voluble tongue, mine host, that wins a widow. (1.2.23-28)

Evidently catching the intended sexual implication of the widow’s forsaking her six “goodly large yeomanly fellows” to follow, “all unmanned,” after Witgood’s love, the Host replies salaciously, “No, ’tis a tongue with a great T, my boy, that wins a widow” (1.2.29). Having convinced the Host that the widow is smitten with him, and that their potential match presents a fine opportunity to “draw some goodness” from his uncle (1.2.37), Witgood mentions his need to regain his estate as a matter of confirming, not inciting, the widow’s attachment to him. He does not wish to be found “untrue”: “I have put her in hope already of some estate that I have either in land or money: now, if I be found true in neither, what may I expect but a sudden breach of our love, utter dissolution of the match, and confusion of my fortunes for ever?” (1.2.37-41).

When the Host goes to unfold the news to Lucre, the widow’s sexual susceptibility is emphasized over her concern for Witgood’s estate. She has now acquired a suggestive name—Widow Medler—and comes from Staffordshire, probably for the
sake of a phallic double-entendre on “staff.” And like all good fantasy widows, she is willing to overlook her favoured suitor’s youthful prodigality for the sake of her “love.” As the Host describes it, the “bachelor” she is “fairly promised to” is one who “h’as spent some few follies in his youth, but marriage, by my faith, begins to call him home, my mistress loves him, sir, and love covers faults, you know” (2.1.43-48). The match will take place soon, he assures Lucre, for “I know my mistress will be married ere she go downe; nay, I’ll swear that, for she’s none of those widows that will go down first, and be married after; she hates that, I can tell you, sir” (2.1.62-65). Eager to get married and “go down,” by this point the widow is no longer portrayed as looking out for her own financial interests. Instead, the Host claims that he is concerned for his mistress:

Since your worship has so much knowledge in him [Witgood], can you resolve me, sir, what his living might be? My duty binds me, sir, to have a care of my mistress’s estate; she has been ever a good mistress to me, though I say it. Many wealthy suitors has she non-suited for his sake; yet, though her love be so fixed, a man cannot tell whether his non-performance may help to remove it, sir; he makes us believe he has lands and living. (2.1.86-93)

Witgood’s “non-performance” would literally be his failure to provide the property he has promised, but the Host is careful to couch the suggestion in sexual innuendo, so as not to undermine the notion that the widow is primarily interested in Witgood’s physical attributes. It is important that Hoard see the match as being as probable as possible, and also that he not perceive that Witgood is asking him for money. The Host thus manages

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3 See Williams’ citations for “Medler” and “Staff”; one also suspects that the widow is not a “Country Gentlewoman” purely for the sake of her lands.

4 Williams glosses “perform” as “copulate” (1012); the euphemism is commonplace.
to make it sound as if fulfillment of Witgood's promise regarding "lands and living" is somehow confirmation that his "performance" in other areas will also live up to the advance billing. The aim of the trick is purely to obtain money, but in order to play convincingly upon Lucre's assumptions, the supposed widow's sexuality is kept to the forefront.

The idea that wealth is but a symbol of sexual potency for the widow is taken up eagerly by Lucre, as he hunts about for a gift to "hearten her on well": "I have a very fair standing cup, and a good high standing cup will please a widow above all other pieces" (2.1.344-46). Lucre sends Witgood to show the widow through the rooms of his house, telling her that "this house and all comes to him" (2.1.321-22), but his real reason for having his nephew "carry her into all the rooms and bid her welcome" (2.1.326-27) is purely sexual—whether or not the widow is impressed with his rooms is quite irrelevant compared to Witgood's opportunity to consummate the relationship in one of them.

"Nephew, strike all sure above an thou beest a good boy" instructs Lucre, convinced that the widow will take such advances "the right way" (2.1.328-30). Lucre has thoroughly accepted the construct of the lustful widow offered by Witgood and the Host, and Witgood makes sure to keep the old man's mind on the widow's sexual requirements, downplaying any monetary concerns: he jokes freely about how "there's nothing like the bringing of a widow to one's uncle's house" (2.1.231-32), but dismisses his pre-nuptial financial needs as a mere "trifle of a forty pound matter toward the setting of me forth; my friends should never have known on't; I meant to make shift for that myself" (2.1.263-65).

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5 There is a specifically bawdy innuendo on "uncle's house" in these lines; an "aunt" is a prostitute or, more likely, a bawd, and as Williams points out, there is a play on Witgood's uncle's house "as if it is that of an aunt" (48).
Were the Courtesan really a widow and not merely a scripted imposter, Witgood’s conventional construct of the lustful widow would in fact be proved wrong by the events of the play itself, for Widow Medler soon goes against all rules of the fantasy and abandons Witgood’s youthful virility in favour of the substantial estate offered by the elderly Hoard. As the Courtesan is a courtesan, however, the plot of A Trick does nothing to damage the fantasy that a real wealthy widow is made available by her desires. Hoard thinks that he has overcome the usual predilection of rich widows for poor but attractive young men when he convinces Widow Medler to choose him and his wealth instead, but the joke is that in agreeing to marry Hoard the Courtesan is just doing what a courtesan does—trading her sexual favours (this time, in marriage) for a man’s money. As soon as Hoard hears of the “rich country widow... Four hundred a year landed” (2.2.13-14), he begins to build up fantasies of his own of a widow who will not only enrich him, but who is available to be bought rather than wooed:

I have not only the means laid before me, extremely to cross my adversary, and confound the last hopes of his nephew, but thereby to enrich my state, augment my revenues, and build mine owne fortunes greater;

.................................

Why, I am able

To buy three of Lucre, thrice outbid him,

Let my out-monies be reckoned and all. (2.2.42-52)

Confident in the knowledge that he “can estate her fairly” (2.2.71), Hoard sets out to “bid” for the widow, accompanied by two gentlemen to back up his claims that Witgood is “a riotous, undone man, / Imperfect both in fame and in estate” (3.1.169-70), and that
he, Hoard, is “grave, kind, and rich, / A match worthy yourself; esteeming him, / You do regard your state” (3.1.194-96). Hoard entices the widow with promises of a generous jointure—“He can join land to land, and will possess you of what you can desire” (the humourous subtext here may be that Hoard cannot satisfy the widow’s desires in that other kind of “joining”)—and, belying his avowedly mercenary motives, portrays the match as a simple exchange of her “love” for his wealth, the exact reverse of the traditional widow-marrying:

Courtesan: Alas, you love not widows but for wealth!
I promise you I ha’ nothing, sir.

Hoard: Well said, widow,
Well said, thy love is all I seek, before
These Gentlemen. (3.1.209-12)

When the Courtesan feigns hesitation, one of Hoard’s spokesmen urges her on with a derogatory reference to the stereotyped widow’s preference for youth over wealth: “Come, you widows are ever most backward when you should do yourselves most good; but were it to marry a chin not worth a hair now, then you would be forward enough!” (3.1.203-05). Such contempt for the traditional fantasy-widow is echoed by another of the play’s sterile money-men, Witgood’s First Creditor, who fully approves Widow Medler’s choice of Hoard: “A’ my troth, she’s the wiser; she has made the happier choice; and I wonder of what stuff those widow’s hearts are made of, that will marry unfledged boys before comely thrum-chinned gentlemen” (4.3.4-7). This attitude, expressed in even stronger terms, was not an unfamiliar one in contemporary society. Surviving texts suggest it was considerably outweighed by the celebration of “unfledged boys” who do marry rich widows, but the story of Dame Annis a Clere, whose name was given to the
Shoreditch spring in which she supposedly drowned herself after a ruinous remarriage with a younger man, was also apparently well known: Niccholes, one of the period’s few harsh critics of female remarriage, relates it in his *Discourse of Marriage and Wiving* (18), and Dekker’s Captain Tucca uses it to insult an elderly widow in *Satromastix* (3.1.180). Two ballads, “The Cunning Age” (Rollins, *Garland* 239-43) and “A merry new Song of a rich Widdowes wooing, / That married a young man to her owne undoing” (Rollins, *Pepys* 257-61) similarly warn widows that youthful husbands are not the “happier choice,” while Widow Medler herself makes reference to such tales when she refuses to follow the example of “thousands of our wealthy undone widows” (4.1.47) who impoverished themselves for love. Hoard, his friends, and the creditors—men who have only money to attract a widow—fantasize exactly such a “wiser” widow who has heeded these warnings and will sacrifice sexual pleasure to cupidity. Witgood makes it clear, however, that the Courtesan marries Hoard and his money precisely because she is a courtesan, disqualified by her lost virginity from meritng a more attractive husband and therefore willing to “do [her]self a good turn” by grasping respectability and comfort in marriage to an old man (3.1.109-10). Witgood—but not Hoard and his cronies—understands that the kind of marriage that represents a “good turn” to a penniless courtesan is not the same as that by which rich widows “do [them]selves most good” (3.1.204), for the former is seeking monetary good and the latter, sexual.

Part of the humour of *A Trick* thus derives from its extended play on the similarities and differences between a widow and a whore. How much discrepancy is there between the Courtesan and her persona of “Widow Medler”? Both are known to be easily accessible to men, more or less there for the taking; both have strong sexual appetites, and are also interested in a man’s wealth. The play’s recurrent joke about the
“Dutch widow” is only the most obvious manifestation of this theme. Arriving at a tavern to elope with the widow, Hoard is informed by the Drawer that his “gentlewoman” has not arrived, and that there is no one there but a “Dutch widow,” which he obligingly translates as “an English drab, sir” (3.3.13-15). And a few scenes later, Hoard’s exchange with the drunk and delirious Dampit is an obscene reminder of the shared sexual openness of widow and whore:

Dampit: Who’s this? Master Hoard? Who hast thou married, in the name of foolery?

Hoard: A rich widow.

Dampit: A Dutch widow?

Hoard: A rich widow; one Widow Medler.

Dampit: Medler? She keeps open house.

Hoard: She did, I can tell you, in her tother husband’s days; open house for all comers; horse and man was welcome, and room enough for ’em all.

Dampit: There’s too much for thee, then; thou may’st let out some to thy neighbours. (4.5.137-47)

While both Hoard and Dampit are unaware that the “Widow Medler” indeed “keeps open house” in the way that Dampit rudely suggests, Witgood plays ironically on the widow/whore analogy with his remark to Lucre, quoted above, about the “uncle’s house,” and his insistence on the fact that the Courtesan has only had sexual experience with one man—“Excepting but myself, I dare swear she’s a virgin” (5.2.148-49)—drives home the similarity by making this particular whore especially like a widow. The play’s real virgin,
Joyce Hoard, unsurprisingly considers both to be inferior to herself, as she chides herself for loving a man "that for a widow's bed, / Neglects thy purer love" (3.2.10-11).

However, the ultimate joke of the widow/whore analogy lies not in these amusing similarities but in the fact that Hoard forgets that there is one crucial difference: a widow exchanges her money for sexual services, but a courtesan exchanges her sexual services for money. Blinded with greed for her non-existent "manors, manor houses, parks, groves, meadow-grounds . . . cattle, money, plate, jewels" (4.4.243-46), Hoard overlooks the basic rule of the widow-fantasy—rich widows are won by youth and virility, not by age and wealth. In seeking to buy a widow, he gets exactly what he deserves, namely, the kind of woman who can be bought. The Courtesan's disguise and the conventional fantasy of a widow won through lust—which this joke upholds—operate together here to defeat Hoard through a kind of comic syllogism:

All rich widows prefer virile young men over rich old ones.

The Widow Medler prefers a rich old man over a virile young one.

Therefore the Widow Medler is not a rich widow.

Hoard tries to "hoard" away to himself the widow's wealth that should, according to the fantasy, be used to set up an impoverished youth, and his name, descriptive of his crime, comes to signify his retribution as well. Hoard finds himself "Whored."

The Courtesan, for her part, takes an active role in reflecting back the fantasies that the men project onto the temptingly blank character of the unknown widow Medler. She is relatively silent in her first meeting with Lucre, quietly encouraging his effusions about Witgood's desirability and allowing herself to be led passively up to the rooms where Lucre hopes his nephew will "strike all sure" (2.1.328). Then when Hoard and his
gentlemen appear to plead his case, Widow Medler becomes just the kind of weak, pliable widow that they can most easily work on:

I cannot tell

How my affections may dispose of me,

But surely if they find him so desertless.

They'll have that reason to withdraw themselves.

I am a widow and, alas, you know,

Soon overthrown; 'tis a very small thing

That we withstand, our weakness is so great. (3.1.150-59)

Whether or not Hoard perceives the last line’s double entendre and applies it to himself, the audience is able to see Widow Medler shifting from the sexually susceptible widow who had been won by Witgood’s phallic “tongue with a great T” (1.2.29) to one who is willing to overlook virile prowess in favour of wealth. Since “'tis a very small thing” that this weak widow withstands, even Hoard’s “thing,” small as it might be, ought to be sufficient to “overthrow” her when coupled with the assurance of a good estate. Upon Lucre’s remonstrance, however, insinuations of sexual desire begin to creep back into her speech, even as she explains that Witgood’s poverty made her break off the match:

Coming to touch his wealth and state indeed,

It appears dross; I find him not the man,

Imperfect, mean, scarce furnished of his needs;

In words, faire lordships, in performance, hovels:

Can any woman love the thing that is not? (4.1.53-57)
By couching her desire for “wealth and state” in sexual terms (it is something that can be “touched”: it makes one “the man”; without it, one is a kind of eunuch, imperfect, unfurnished, lacking in performance, “the thing that is not”), Widow Medler gives Lucre hope that her real desire is still for Witgood and that she can easily be lured back into their clutches. As she adds in confirmation, the return of the mortgage could have “contained / Me in my first desires: do you think i’faith, / That I could twine such a dry oak as this. / Had promise in your nephew took effect?” (4.1.64-67).

While “Widow Medler” herself remains pliable, indefinite, a shifting façade on which one can project different images of what a widow desires, the Courtesan’s allusions to “real” widows contribute to the building up of the fantasy that widows customarily disregard financial prudence and marry for pleasure. Defending to Lucre her choice of Hoard over Witgood, she asks;

Why, what would you wish me do, sir?
I must not overthrow my state for love:
We have too many precedents for that;
From thousands of our wealthy undone widows
One may derive some wit. (4.1.44-48)

The existence of “thousands of . . . wealthy undone widows” who have married into poverty for love—apparently a well-known and undisputed fact in the society of the play, though perhaps more noted than common in the audience’s London—corroborates the joke against Hoard. Hoard thinks he has found an exception to these “thousands,” that is, a rich widow who will sacrifice her sexual needs to obtain more money, but he is proved wrong. When the one and only mercenary widow is unmasked as (naturally) a whore, the stereotyped lustful widow is upheld by default.
I have focussed up to this point on how the structure of *A Trick* builds up the lusty widow fantasy upon what is essentially an absence. As I have shown, the play makes it possible to imagine that that absence—the default value—stands for a “real” lustful widow, not present among the play’s characters on stage, but real enough in the fictionalized London society they inhabit and probably in the actual London beyond the theatre walls as well. But the play also offers an alternate possibility, for layered over the play’s basic plot of Witgood’s triumph and Hoard’s discomfiture is a host of other incidents and references regarding widows and widow-hunting. These details, which centre not only on the Courtesan but on other imaginary widows as well, reveal the on-stage society as one in which the fantasy of making one’s fortune through a widow is built to such precarious heights that it threatens at any moment to topple over into absurdity. In short, when almost everyone in the play begins to construct a widow who serves his or her self-interested purposes, it becomes increasingly possible to see the absence on which these constructions are built as filled by nothing *except* self-interest and dreams of personal profit.

Witgood, Lucre, and Hoard only begin the list of characters who project their desires against the non-existent Widow Medler and her four hundred pounds. The “happy rumour of a rich country widow” (2.2.12) ignites the imagination of nearly everyone it reaches, and each imagines her as pliable to his or her own needs. The characters of *A Trick* would certainly see the ballad refrain “For Maydens are wanton / and often times coy: / But Widdowes be wilfull / and never say nay” (Rollins, *Garland* 264) as words to live by, as they abandon the virgin heiress Joyce Hoard for the more promising Widow Medler. First, Lucre’s wife Jinny (herself a remarried widow) sees in the widow an opportunity for helping her foolish citizen son, Sam Freedom, to more money and a
measure of prestige. Lucre taunts her with how “your son there goes a-wooing to a poor gentlewoman but of a thousand portion; see my nephew, a lad of less hope, strikes at four hundred a year in good rubbish” (2.1.336-39), and Jinny immediately instructs her son to change the object of his pursuit. The country widow, in Jinny’s imagination, will be impressed with Sam’s London credentials—“nay, I have a reach; I can tell you thou art known what thou art, son. among the right worshipful, all the twelve companies” (2.1.357-59)—as well as with gifts of jewelry⁶ and with Sam’s own “proper person” (2.1.362-63), in which she herself displays a rather unmaternal interest. Like the other suitors, Jinny constructs the Widow Medler along the lines of her desires—“If I were a widow, I could find it in my heart to have thee myself, son; ay, from ’em all” (2.1.363-64)—and Sam, accordingly, goes off to woo the widow in a “violent fashion” (2.1.366-67).

Next, the aptly-named Moneylove, who has suffered “great loss of time” (2.2.7-8) fruitlessly pursuing Joyce, dreams of finding a more accessible and willing target in the rich widow: a few words to discredit Witgood, and he can “drive a fair way . . . to the widow’s affections” (2.2.36-37). Moneylove has barely left the stage when Witgood’s three creditors enter, and in their glee at the thought that “Young Witgood will be a gallant again now” (2.2.55), they wishfully construct their own extremely wealthy widow, inflating her revenues beyond even the annual four hundred invented by the tricksters—“Nay, take’t of my word, if you believe that, you believe the least” (2.2.61-62). Within two short scenes, Witgood’s feigned pursuit of the widow has snowballed to include the genuine pursuits of Sam and his mother, Moneylove, Hoard, and the creditors

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⁶ As Jinny gives Sam the gold chain and diamond with the instructions to “at thy best opportunity fasten ’em both upon her” (2.1.356-57), the jewelry may be intended more to seal a hasty or fraudulent contract between Sam and the Widow, by forcing her to accept tokens of betrothal, than to impress her with riches.
who pursue Witgood for their share of the widow's wealth. Middleton can hardly bring any more suitors on stage without weakening the momentum of his tightly-knit plot, but he further builds their ranks up to a ludicrous number by creating the impression of a clamouring crowd of widow-wooers just beyond the bounds of the stage. After Witgood buys time with his creditors, the Courtesan re-enters to declare herself "so haunted with suitors... I know not which to dispatch first" (3.1.94-95). Witgood thus may well be telling the truth when he pressures Lucre with tales of his competition:

Here comes one old gentleman, and he'll make her a jointure of three hundred a year, forsooth; another wealthy suitor will estate his son in his lifetime, and make him weigh down the widow; here a merchant's son will possess her with no less than three goodly lordships at once, which were all pawns to his father. (3.1.253-58)

"Peace, nephew, let me hear no more of 'em" (3.1.259) begs Lucre, but even at this point the weight of desire attached to one non-existent widow has already pushed the very notion of widow-hunting towards the absurd.

Middleton, however, keeps at it, piling purely imaginary widows on top of the characters' multiple constructions of the endlessly pliable Widow Medler. Lucre, wanting to paint his nephew as a desirable catch, suddenly invents an entire horde of widows who supposedly chase after Witgood, conjuring up the image of a London absolutely teeming with them:

jolly rich widows have been offered him here i'th' city, great merchants wives, and do you think he would once look upon 'em?

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7 Paster points out that A Trick is thickly populated by "nameless people we hear about but never see," including the widow-hunters of 3.1.253-58 and the widows whom Lucre imagines at 2.1.318-21, a technique which has the effect of implying "that what Middleton dramatizes has been selected almost at random from an urban abundance of comic material" (City 170).
Forsooth, he'll none. You are beholding to him i’th’ country, then, ere we could be; nay, I’ll hold a wager, widow, if he were once known to be in town, he would be presently sought after; nay, and happy were they that could catch him first. . . . Oh, there would be such running to and fro, widow, he should not pass the streets for 'em; he'd be took up in one great house or another presently. Fah! they know he has it, and must have it. (2.1.310-21)

Witgood’s ambiguous “it” that drives widows wild is likely not only Lucre’s legacy—“this house and all comes to him” (2.1.321-22)—but also his more personal, physical charms. And in a truly transparent instance of men constructing widows which serve their own interests, Witgood’s creditors persuade him to relinquish his supposed precontract with Widow Medler in exchange for Hoard paying his debts by inventing yet another rich widow, pliable, accessible, and wholly in their power to offer to Witgood in consolation for his loss. From the First Creditor’s spur of the moment suggestion that he could help Witgood “to a widow myself worth ten of her,” this imaginary widow rapidly acquires a name—“Mass, partner, and now you remember me on’t, there’s Master Mulligrub’s sister newly fallen a widow”—is endowed with specific property—“Cuds me, as pat as can be! There’s a widow left for you, ten thousand in money, beside plate, jewels, et cetera”—and is apparently quite without volition of her own. “I warrant it a match,” declares the First Creditor, “we can do all in all with her. Prithee dispatch; we’ll carry thee to her presently” (4.4.198-205). Once Witgood has signed the release, the ten thousand pound widow has served her turn and evaporates as readily as she had appeared.

Although the plot of A Trick is based on the conventional notion that a rich old man cannot win a widow away from one who is young and sexually vigorous, however
poor and disreputable he may be, Middleton does not permit his audience to fall quite as comfortably into the corollary assumption—that a rich widow is inherently lustful, easily won. and willing to overlook a young man’s defects in quest of his physical assets. Instead, he begins with a hollow core—the non-existent Widow Medler—and shows how this “widow” is progressively constructed out of the self-interest of others: Witgood and the Courtesan’s plan to redeem his fortune, Lucre’s wish to discomfit his enemy and to swindle a new gull, Hoard’s desire to trip up Lucre and to augment his own wealth, Moneylove’s desire to marry money without the unprofitable delay of wooing a virgin, and the assorted aspirations of Jinny Lucre, Sam Freedom, and the three creditors, not to mention the implied mercenary urges of the suitors who wait offstage. When other, equally imaginary widows begin popping up out of thin air—Master Mulligrub’s newly bereaved sister, and the importunate women who practically threaten Witgood with rape—they build the whole fantastic edifice of widows and wooers to a point where it becomes difficult to take seriously. A Trick goes beyond the simple dichotomy of truth and deception, where the Courtesan stands in for a “real” but absent widow; rather, the widow-fantasy in this play threatens to crumble under the sheer weight of its own over-constructedness to reveal that there is nothing at its centre but the suitor’s desires.

Before I leave A Trick, I wish to point out a passage in the play that takes a puncturing jab at the lusty widow fantasy from a rather different angle. Near the end of act one, scene two, the Host tells Witgood to trust him with “the managing of thy business” about Widow Medler, and Witgood responds enthusiastically “With thee? Why, will I desire to thrive in my purpose? Will I hug four hundred a year, I that know the misery of nothing? Will that man wish a rich widow, that has never a hole to put his head in?” (1.2.43-46). With Witgood’s words (the implications of which he may or may
not be aware), a fact which must remain unspoken if the fantasy is to be kept intact rises momentarily to the surface, a fact which is, in effect, inherent but generally invisible within the trick itself: the fantasy of winning a rich widow by appealing to her lust is a fantasy of male prostitution. A Trick’s original audience, members of a society where the friends of men like Thomas Whythorne and Sir John Eliot acquainted them with a widow’s net worth before introducing them to the woman herself, would no doubt have accepted the necessity of weighing a potential spouse’s monetary value. But the play’s use of a courtesan casts an unaccustomed light on what might otherwise be viewed as merely another property-match, for one can see that the trick simply turns the relationship between Witgood and his Courtesan inside-out. As Witgood’s whore, the Courtesan gives him sex and consumes his estate; as the smitten Widow Medler, she will give him her estate for sex, neatly reversing the genders of whore and client. Witgood, so poor that he has “never a hole to put his head in,” will “hug four hundred a year” and get “a hole to put his head in”—that is, a house—by putting his other “head” in a different kind of “hole.” The difference between a widow and a whore—the source of so much hilarity in the play—is at bottom a dirty joke against any young man who dreams of winning a widow with his virility.

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8 The resemblance between male prostitution and the sex-for-money exchange with a rich widow shows up more explicitly in a much later comedy, Richard Brome’s A Mad Couple Well Match’d (1639). The play begins with the servingman Wat advising his master, Carelesse, to pay off his debts by becoming a “common He-whore” in “a Male bawdy house” catering to women (1.1.97-107); Carelesse, who objects that a gentleman is too weak for such an occupation, ends the play married to the rich Widow Crostill instead. The “Male bawdy house” scheme, which the two men discuss at length, is so unexpected within its context that it is difficult not to connect it with the later action.

9 The widows’ portions are discussed in Whythorne 150-51 and Eliot 14-23.
No Wit, No Help Like A Woman’s (1613, Lady Elizabeth’s Men?)

No Wit, No Help Like A Woman’s is the culmination of a series of Middletonian comedies in which the protagonist manages to profit from his relationship with a widow while escaping a permanent match and its attendant anxieties. These anxieties are twofold, as I have explained earlier: first, it is feared that the widow’s age, marital experience, and disproportionate wealth, will lead her to usurp authority over her husband. “A Batchelor’s Resolution” (1629) puts this fear into a succinct ballad verse:

But yet if I my choice should have
A mayde should be my wife,
I would not be a widdowe’s slave.
I’d rather lose my life:
If I should wed a Widdow old,
I had better take a younger,
For Widdowes will not be contrould,
Yet I can stay no longer.

And as Daniel Tuvil writes in Asylum Veneris (1616), “... rich wives are but bils of charge. She that hath no such addition to make her weigh will be continually readie to conforme herselfe in all things to her Husbands will; but she that hath the start in that, will have it in all things else, or the whole house shall perish in her Furie” (157). Second, and linked to both the widow’s expected insubordination and her imagined lust, is the anxiety that she may be more likely than a first-time wife to cuckold her husband.

Niccholes’ lament that widows’ easy sexual accessibility is a boon for suitors and a curse for husbands—“The best is, though the worse for thee, they are navigable without difficulty, more passable than Virginia, and lye at an easier Rode, as unsatiate as the sea,
or rather the grave" (25)—expresses a stereotype which receives much play in *No Wit*, where the disguised Kate Low-water uses it to initiate her “escape” from the widow. The motif of escape goes back to Middleton’s earliest portrayal of a remarrying widow, with the Captain fleeing his marriage to Castiza in *The Phoenix* (as a villain, not a hero of that comedy, the Captain profits far less than he had hoped). After *The Phoenix*, *The Puritan’s* Captain Idle, *Easy in Michaelmas Term*, and Witgood in *A Trick* all win themselves progressively larger hauls from their respective encounters with Lady Plus, Thomasine, and the fictitious Widow Medler, but exit the stage single and free, or, in Witgood’s case, happily wed to the wealthy virgin of his choice. Inclined from the start to dwell on the problematic aspects of marrying a widow, and then to make fun of the fantasy of an easy, profitable widow-marriage even as he offered it for consumption in *Michaelmas Term*, Middleton creates a wooing scenario in *No Wit* that continues *A Trick’s* exploration of how that fantasy itself is constructed. Having opened up the possibility in *A Trick* that the sought-after remarrying widow is but a customized projection of male self-interest, in *No Wit* he turns his attention to the suitor, using parody to suggest that the suitor’s fantasy of obtaining a widow’s money through her lust—and then, as the theatre can improve upon real life, getting rid of her—is based in fears about his own lack or loss of masculinity in the relationship. For just as there is no “real” widow beneath the accumulation of desires that makes up the Widow Medler, there is a very significant “lack” at the centre of the successful suitor for the hand of the widowed Lady Goldenfleece: “he” is a woman. With Kate Low-water’s trick to win the Low-water family fortune back from Lady Goldenfleece (whose late husband, a usurer, defrauded it from the Low-waters), the play presents a scenario which moves through the usual script of the aggressive courtship and hasty marriage of a widow, and on to the problems of
financial control and potential cuckoldry which, as the writers quoted above suggest, conventionally plague the new husband once the wedding is over. While Kate plays out both parts of the scenario for reasons inherent in her trick, her behaviour as the suitor interacts at times with the literal lack of masculinity beneath her disguise, and with the widow’s failure to adhere to the stereotype, to parody the suitor who constructs a widow as lustful in compensation for the threat she poses to his masculine power and authority.

Kate, a virtuous “distressed gentlewoman” (1.2.2) has been described by Kenneth Muir as “an almost Shakespearian heroine transported from the world of Arden or Illyria to the corrupt realities of Jacobean London” (156). Chastely married to an appreciative husband who assists her throughout the plot, Kate is the familiar cross-dressed heroine who resourcefully manoeuvres her way through a very complex trick of her own design. She disguises herself to join the ranks of the widow’s suitors, defeats them with a combination of wit, bravado and sexually aggressive wooing, and then avoids consummating her marriage to Lady Goldenfleece by feigning anxiety over the widow’s supposed “cunning” (5.1.59) in regard to both her money and her sexual insatiability. Kate then arranges for Lady Goldenfleece to be caught in a compromising position with her (Kate’s) brother Beveril, demands a separation in which she can keep the widow’s wealth, and reveals her true identity only when the widow contracts herself to Beveril, who will share his gains with his sister. Since Lady Goldenfleece is introduced as “the late wife / To the deceas’d Sir Avarice Goldenfleece, / Second to none for usury and extortion” (1.1.160-62), she seems hardly an undeserving target of such a scheme. If Middleton is to treat this situation, as I believe he does, as a parody of wooing and wedding a widow and not solely as a celebration of Kate’s successful wit, the audience must be allowed a certain intellectual and emotional distance from this potentially very
engaging heroine. Before I examine the parodic elements themselves, then, I wish to show how the play complicates the audience’s response to Kate and to Lady Goldenfleece. I do not mean to imply that the play reverses the expected response and invites the audience to side with the widow against Kate; rather, this complication enables the audience to detach themselves from both characters and to enjoy the revealing irony in the fact that this swaggeringly masculine, sexually aggressive, yet obviously anxious widow-wooer is in fact a woman.

The initial contrast between the usurer’s stately widow, enjoying her suitors’ attentions, and the poor but resolute young woman who introduces herself with an eloquent speech defending her chastity and objecting that it is “injustice that a widow laughs / And lays her mourning part upon a wife” (1.2.16-17) may build expectations of the kind of plot which Muir describes, in which “the virtuous have to out-smart the wicked” (157). But the audience’s potential identification with Kate is in fact problematized from the moment she conceives her scheme. Leinwand observes “an implicit parallel between the thoroughly self-centred and degenerate Lambston and Kate,” adding that “Both plan to ‘marry’ Lady Goldenfleece that they may put her money to use” (163). If we pursue this parallel further, it becomes evident that Lambston’s repugnant little plan is in fact Kate’s inspiration for her trick. Lambston, as he explains in his letter (1.2.82-94), wants to enter into the marital sex-for-money exchange with the widow so he may use the widow’s money to buy his own sexual pleasure with Kate. “Only consent to my desires,” he writes, “and the widow’s notch shall lie open to you” (1.2.91-92). Upon reading the letter, Kate immediately conceives the disguise trick. Dressed as a desirable youth, Kate will access the widow’s “notch” herself, winning herself the gains that Lambston has promised but dispensing with his proposed role as the
middle man. The audience does not know at this point what Kate means to do, but it will soon become apparent that her “pity” for the widow is as self-interested as Lambston’s offer to “comfort” (1.2.83) Kate in her poverty:

So foul a monster does this wrong appear
That I give pity to mine enemy here.
What a most fearful love reigns in some hearts
That dare oppose all judgment to get means,
And wed rich widows only to keep queans.

This letter is most welcome; I repent now
That my last anger threw thee at my feet;
My bosom shall receive thee. (1.2.97-107)

Though Kate is full of moral indignation at Lambston’s proposal, she takes his plan into her bosom in more than the strictly literal sense.

If the parallel between Kate and Lambston were to end here, it could easily go unnoticed because, as I have mentioned, the audience does not find out until two scenes later that Kate plans to follow the knight’s lead and woo the widow herself. However, the pattern of Kate’s imitating Lambston’s techniques is repeated at a crucial point in the trick itself: both plot to revenge themselves on the widow by slandering her. After Lady Goldenfleece chooses Kate as her husband, Lambston advises the other defeated suitors, Weatherwise, Overdon, and Pepperton, to be “sland’rous in every place, / And in all companies, to disgrace the widow” (3.1.36-37), hoping that their lies “May grow so general, as disgrace will spread, / That wild dissension may divide the bed” (3.1.48-49). The slander, as might be expected, is to be sexual: Weatherwise’s first suggestion is to
“give it out abroad that I have lain with the widow myself” (3.1.59-60). But when the defeated suitors eventually put their plans into action by hijacking the widow’s wedding masque, their defamation is immediately juxtaposed with sexual slander of a more serious kind. This time of Kate’s design. Having tricked Beveril into the widow’s bedroom, Kate assembles the wedding guests to witness the widow’s supposed adultery:

Pardon my rude disturbance, my wrongs urge it;
I did but try the plainness of her mind,
Suspecting she dealt cunningly with my youth,
And told her the first night, I would not know her;
But minding to return, I found the door
Warded suspiciously, and I heard a noise,
Such as fear makes, and guiltiness at th’approaching
Of an unlook’d-for husband. (5.1.140-47)

The guests (with the exception of the four defeated suitors) side with Lady Goldenfleece, apparently believing her protest that she has been “wrongfully sham’d” (5.1.161), but the slander she suffers in the process of Kate’s trick bears an unsettling resemblance to that instigated by the degenerate Lambston. In Middleton’s comedies, the morality of a trick like Kate’s is not usually an issue (no one is invited to question the rights and wrongs of Witgood or Pyeboord), but by aligning the trick with the behaviour of the play’s most obvious villain, the play creates a certain critical distance from the amoral fun Kate’s trick would otherwise provide.

The second and perhaps more important technique by which the play complicates audience identification with Kate is not moral but structural. The usual theatrical pleasure to be had from a “trickster” plot consists in watching the trickster’s well thought out plan
being put into action, enjoying his moments of success and sharing his suspense when things go awry. This pleasure depends largely on the trickster's providing the audience with advance knowledge of the trick's desired outcome and how it will be obtained: Witgood will claim to be in a rich widow's favour so his uncle will give him his mortgage back; Pyeboord and Captain Idle will pose as cunning-men so that Sir Godfrey will pay them to find his missing gold chain. Regarding Kate's plan to win her fortune back from Lady Goldenfleece, however, *No Wit* continuously keeps its audience in the dark. When, after her encounter with Lambston and his letter, Kate suddenly switches from despondency to optimism about her fortunes and asks her husband to "second / The purpose I intend" (1.2.157-58), she provides no inkling of what that purpose might be. Instead, she gives a cryptic speech about clear-sightedness (1.2.142-48), an ironic keynote on which to begin a series of machinations that will be anything but clear to the audience. At her next appearance, she is disguised as a gentleman, with her husband in tow as a servant, and invites herself to a banquet given by Weatherwise in Lady Goldenfleece's honour. It is still unclear what she means to do. She produces Lambston's incriminating letter, with a tale of how it fell into the hands of a kinsman of hers, and the widow duly banishes Lambston and thanks Kate, but as Kate neither requests nor receives payment for the favour, her intentions remain mysterious. Her husband is evidently pleased with her progress—"Now, now! The suitors flatter; hold on, Kate; / The hen may pick the meat, while the cocks prate" (2.1.399-400)—but the audience does not discover until act two, scene three, that Kate means to woo the widow herself.

This revelation, however, raises a far greater question than it resolves: once Kate woos, wins, and weds the widow, *then* what will she do with her? How does she plan to get her hands on the money and lands, when the wedding night will make clear that she is
unable to provide what the widow married her for? Kate seems to have worked herself into a thoroughly untenable situation, for her legal title to the widow’s property through marriage depends on a disguise which the marriage itself will render difficult, if not impossible to maintain: besides, no trick worthy of the name is ever based on the permanent relinquishment of one’s identity. But Kate appears unperturbed by these concerns, and her untroubled joy at the match—expressed without the least hint of how she intends to profit from it—merely makes the audience more aware that they are not in her confidence:

Oh my blessing!
I feel a hand of mercy lift me up
Out of a world of waters, and now sets me
Upon a mountain, where the sun plays most,
To cheer my heart ev’n as it dries my limbs. (2.3.246-50)

Although Kate continues in this vein for twelve more lines, her original plans for herself and the widow are never revealed, for the trick as it unfolds from here on is dependent upon a string of coincidences which keeps the audience in uncertainty to the very end. Kate’s brother Beveril unexpectedly shows up, but this in itself solves nothing; Kate overhears Beveril say that he loves the widow (3.1.313) and she decides to “provide” for him (3.1.319), but she has no way of knowing that Lady Goldenfleece will choose Beveril for her husband after Kate uses him to procure her separation. The dramatic interest generated by a trickster trying to pull off a trick that seemingly leads into a dead end, and about whose plans the audience is kept guessing, is a quite adequate substitute for the more conventional pleasure of being let in on all the trick’s secrets. The play itself does not suffer from Kate’s inscrutability; the audience, however, kept in a state of
perpetual uncertainty, would likely find themselves more detached from her character than her engaging position as cross-dressed heroine and trickster would otherwise allow.

Prevented from following Kate’s behaviour as it works through the pre-explained moves of a plan, the audience may be left with a clearer awareness of the familiar pattern it imitates: the poor young suitor who courts his widow aggressively, marries her hastily, and then, like Deloney’s Jack of Newbury, repents his bargain amid a power struggle over his government of her money, independence, and sexuality. I have argued that the prospect of marrying an older, wealthier widow who is likely to continue to dominate her household is a threat to a young man’s masculinity, for which he attempts to compensate by constructing the widow as conquerable through her desire. When a play which depicts this scenario supports the suitor’s fantasy, the mechanism of anxiety and compensation is submerged beneath the widow’s lustful “proof” that the suitor’s assumptions are correct; furthermore, such a play generally ends with the wedding, stopping short of depicting the domestic situation which gives rise to the original anxiety, and leaving the impression that the suitor has prevailed. The Widow’s Tears, which does follow its couple a little beyond the wedding, is an excellent example of such submersion. Eudora’s aroused longings effectively overcome her disdain for the man she regards as her “vassal” (2.4.162), making Tharsalio’s audacious sexual advances appear shrewd rather than anxious, and he ultimately demonstrates his new domestic mastery by arranging her daughter’s marriage. No Wit, however, presents a situation in which the widow’s lust cannot compensate for the suitor’s feared masculine inadequacy, but instead points it up hilariously, for Kate is not only without the attributes of manhood that a widow’s young suitor conventionally lacks—money, property, a household, and social status to match the widow’s own—but as a woman in male disguise, she fundamentally lacks any manhood
at all. The cross-dressed Kate—male on the outside, (fictionally) female on the inside—
going through the usual moves of courting a widow presents a visual pun suggesting that
the masculine audacity and sexual aggression of the typical widow-wooer conceals an
anxiety over whether he is "man" enough to handle the threat she poses. And
Middleton's depiction of the marriage between the widow and the woman/youth brings
the parody into sharper focus: whereas the young man conventionally fears that the
remarried widow will subordinate andemasculate him in the battle for financial and
sexual control, Kate fears, quite literally, that her marriage to the widow will
"emasculate" her—that is, it will reveal that she is not a man—and so she accuses Lady
Goldenfleece of the whole gamut of a remarried widow's traditional vices in order to
forestall consummation and preserve her "masculinity."

Poverty-stricken, powerless but for her wit, and literally lacking any kind of
manhood, Kate exceeds the widow's two other main suitors, Lambston and Weatherwise,
in sexually aggressive wooing. The three suitors form a scale in which their social and
financial markers of manhood (and in Kate's case, parodying the conventional situation,
the physical marker as well) stand in inverse proportion to the extent to which each suitor
bolsters himself with assumptions of the widow's lust and courts her accordingly. At the
top of the social and financial scale is Lambston, who is not only young and sexually
attractive, but also a wealthy knight, and so has the least reason to be threatened by the

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10 The parody described here may be complicated by the fact that Kate would have been played by a boy
actor. I have to this point avoided the implications of the women's roles being taken by boys, primarily
because critical speculation on how this convention affected early modern spectators' views of female
characters has been largely (and inevitably) inconclusive. I am assuming that contemporary theatre-goers
would have accepted, at least on one level of consciousness, the convention as simply a convention and
would have understood "Kate" to be a "woman." The frequent (and otherwise rather superfluous) presence
of Master Low-water and repeated references to Kate's womanhood (eg. 2.3.20-25; 2.3.77-78) may help to
remind the audience that the boy actor dressed as a male gallant is in fact a "woman." For a reading of Kate
that emphasizes the gender destabilization created by the layers of actor, character, and disguise, see
Zimmerman 48-50.
widow's wealth and status. Assured of his own worth—"I have the least fear, / And the most firmness; nothing can shake me" (2.1.156-57)—Lambston woos Lady Goldenfleece with merely a smattering of sexual suggestiveness, kissing her once and reading a bawdy innuendo into one of the couplets at Weatherwise's astrological banquet (2.1.72-73). Pepperton and Overdon, the widow's two elderly suitors, may snipe at the knight's "saucy courting" (2.1.40), but they are critical only because their age disqualifies them from any sexual advances whatsoever. As Weatherwise puts it, "they have shot two arrows without heads; / They cannot stick i'th' butt yet" (2.1.23-24).

Weatherwise himself, however, is clearly poorer and less powerful than Lambston and there is, accordingly, a harder sexual edge to his courtship of the widow. Despite his attempt to impress Lady Goldenfleece with a banquet, Weatherwise's poverty shows through his munificence when he orders his tenants to "eat but little" (2.1.131) at his table: "spare the meat, I charge you as you hope for new leases. I must make my signs draw out a month yet, with a bit every morning to breakfast" (2.1.126-28). And when he realizes that all the expense of his entertainment has failed to win him the match, he vents his spleen at

Widows that falsify their faith to suitors,

Come to the poor men's houses, eat their banquet,

And at night with a boy toss'd in a blanket. (4.3.86-90)

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11 The text indicates Lambston's wealth when Lady Goldenfleece, having discovered his plans to betray her, exclaims, "for thy sake / I'll never covet titles and more riches, / To fall into a gulf of hate and laughter" (2.1.376-78); he himself merely wants the widow to increase what he already has, to "strengthen my estate and make me able / To set off all thy [Kate's] kisses with rewards" (1.2.129-30). In performance, the relative wealth and status of the suitors would be readily conveyed by costume.

12 Rowe assumes throughout his reading of No Wit that Weatherwise is an old man (see, for instance 119-20), but I find nothing in the play to indicate his age. Heinemann, more pertinently, refers to him as a member of the "semi-bankrupt gentry" (100).
From his first decision to court the widow, Weatherwise’s sexually suggestive remarks are linked with evidence of his insecurity over his worth as a suitor and his resultant need to insist on his ability to master and dominate his domestic subordinates. Weatherwise suffers a blow to his pride when Sir Oliver Twilight dismisses his suit to marry his daughter Jane, and his immediate response is to remind himself with a graphic double entendre that Lady Goldenfleece, like all widows, is sexually experienced and thus easily available:

I’ll never leave the love of an open-hearted widow for a narrow-ey’d maid again; go out of the road way like an ass to leap over hedge and ditch; I’ll fall into the beaten path again and invite the widow home to a banquet. Let who list seek out new ways, I’ll be at my journey’s end before him. (1.1.291-97)

As a contemporary proverb would have it, “He that wives a maid must fain, lie, and flatter / But he that wives a widow must down with his breeches and at her” (Fletcher 7). Nonetheless, Weatherwise worries about his inferiority to his wealthy, titled rival—“nay, and Sir Gilbert strike, my weapon falls; / I fear no thrust but his” (2.1.21-22). Fittingly, then, his attempts at bawdy wit with the widow—the kind of wooing he imagines the “beaten path” will respond to—are frequently mingled with an anxious desire to assert his authority. As he welcomes the widow to his house, he hints at his potency by joking about having seduced his maidservants. Sexual mastery, he assures himself, goes hand in hand with domestic authority:

Weatherwise: Welcome, sweet widow, to a bachelor’s house here; a single man I, but for two or three maids that I
keep . . . You must think, sweet widow, if a man keep maids, they’re under his subjection.

Lady Goldenfleece: That’s most true, sir.

Weatherwise: They have no reason to have a lock but the master must have a key to’t. (2.1.9-18)

A little later, he applies this conflation of sexual and domestic authority to the widow herself:

Weatherwise: Sweet widow, take your place at Aries here; That’s the head sign. A widow is the head Till she be married.

Lady Goldenfleece: What is she then?

Weatherwise: The middle.

Lady Goldenfleece: ‘Tis happy she’s no worse. (2.1.99-102)

Faced with the prospect of marrying a woman accustomed to being the head of her own household, the suitor trusts that her need for his sexual attentions—as implied by the sexual connotations of “the middle”—will enable her to accept peaceably her demotion from the top of the domestic hierarchy. As Weatherwise is foolish enough to state explicitly his hope to master the widow—a cleverer wooer, like Chapman’s Tharsalio, keeps to himself any fantasies of effecting domestic control through sexual mastery (Widow’s Tears 1.1.178-80)—it is little wonder that Lady Goldenfleece does not even consider marrying him.

If Weatherwise has little to offer the widow, Kate has nothing, and no-thing as well. Weatherwise depends on the widow’s lust to bolster the inadequacy of his socially and financially defined manhood; Kate, impoverished and a woman to boot, pushes the
inverse relation between fragile manhood and bawdy wooing to the point of absurdity. Once she has disposed of Lambston with the letter, her flimsy male persona must rely absolutely on the stereotype of the lustful widow in order to woo Lady Goldenfleece. And in an amusing paradox, her persona faces its greatest threat from the lust on which it relies: “But soft ye, Kate,” cautions Master Low-water, “how and she should accept of your bold kindness?” “A chief point to be thought on, by my faith,” she admits, and arranges for her husband to rescue her from the widow’s amorous response (2.3.94-96). In Kate’s parodic case, the sexually aggressive wooing traditionally practiced by the impoverished young suitor masks not only social and financial inferiority but a physical lack of masculinity as well. She is, as her husband jokingly reminds her, “a bad pricker” (2.3.78). but she reassures herself that sexual bravado is all she needs:

I am to begin the world like a younger brother;
I know that a bold face and a good spirit
Is all the jointure he can make a widow.
An’t shall go hard, but I’ll be as rich as he,
Or at least seem to, and that’s wealth enough;
For nothing kills a widow’s heart so much
As a faint bashful wooer; though he have thousands,
And come with a poor water-gruel spirit
And a fish-market face, he shall ne’er speed. (2.3.82-90)

Accordingly, she accosts the widow with outrageous sexual advances, meeting her polite apology for being late with the rejoinder that “you shall make me amends for that then, with a quickness in your bed” (2.3.108-09), and seizing her with a forthright declaration, “Come make but short service, widow, a kiss and to bed, I’m very hungry, i’faith,
wench” (2.3.125-26). Kate even transforms her poverty into an advertisement for her “virility”:

Oh, a younger brother has an excellent stomach, madam, worth a hundred of your sons and heirs that stay their wedding stomachs with a hot bit of common mistress, and then come to a widow’s bed like a flash of lightning. Y’are sure of the first of me, not of the five hundredth of them. (2.3.128-33)

Although it momentarily appears as if Kate has offended Lady Goldenfleece with this approach—“there’s but two paths that lead to widow’s beds,” she laments, “that’s wealth or forwardness, and I’ve took the wrong one” (2.3.178-79)—the widow soon agrees to the match. But while the lusty widow stereotype would seem to have triumphed again, Kate’s insistence on her virile virginity in fact has the effect of complicating Lady Goldenfleece’s motives for accepting the proposal. Having narrowly escaped marriage to a whore-master like Lambston, the widow seems attracted to Kate’s male chastity for reasons more serious than the mere promise of reserved sexual energy. While Kate boasts of her “excellent stomach” for sex, the widow declares herself “moved” by the young gallant’s “purity” and “good portion of chastity” (2.3.146, 156). “There comes few such to market among women” (2.3.175), she admires, and calls in the rejected suitors to witness her betrothal. Lady Goldenfleece has a healthy sexual appetite, as her wedding night shall prove, but the moral considerations that share in her desire to marry Kate remove her a step from a stock lustful widow like Eudora of The Widow’s Tears, who is incited to marry Tharsalio by tales of how many women his impressive sexual capacity has worn out. By 1613, such lascivious prototypes as Eudora and Taffata have been joined by the pre-maritally chaste figures of Lady Bright (Amends for Ladies) and Widow
Raysby (*Tu Quoque*), but even these widows are desirous enough to ignore the moral dubiousness of suitors who trick them into contracts or threaten them with daggers. Between Lady Goldenfleece’s failure to conform fully to the stereotype on which Kate so heavily relies, and the sexually aggressive wooing that masks Kate’s utter lack of masculinity, the play hints that what the lusty widow stereotype really conceals is not a truth about widows but the suitor’s sense of his fragile manhood unequal to the widow’s power.

Once Kate has wooed and won her widow, the play moves on to a very funny look at the power struggle which supposedly plagues such marriages. Lady Goldenfleece’s rejected suitors, angry at her for throwing them over for a “boy,” await the marital battle with relish, hoping that the widow will get the worst of it. Kate first makes use of their assumptions to convince them, even before she proposes, that the match has been clapped up. She swaggeres around the widow’s house, berates the servants, and disrespectfully refers to the widow by her first name, prompting Weatherwise to exclaim with satisfaction,

> She’s fitted, i’faith; a proud surly sir here, he domineers already; one that will shake her bones and go to dice with her money, or I have no skill in a calendar. Life! He that can be so saucy to call her Bess already, will call her prating-quean a month hence.

(2.3.70-75)

In the vengeful masque that the suitors present on the couple’s wedding day, they imply that the widow has chosen to marry an effeminate sex toy, an insignificant and unmanly spouse whom she can reduce to the status of a wife:

Rich widows, that were wont to choose by gravity
Their second husbands, not by tricks of blood
Are now so taken with loose Aretine flames
Of nimble wantonness and high-fed pride,
They marry now but the third part of husbands,
Boys, smooth-fac’d catamites, to fulfill their bed,
As if a woman should a woman wed. (4.3.64-70)

Besides reminding the audience of Kate’s disguise and slandering Lady Goldenfleece
with perverse sexual tastes,\(^\text{13}\) the last line suggests that the rich widow will seek to master
her “husband.” Tuvil, returning to the hazards of moneyed brides at the end of *Asylum
Veneris*, uses the same metaphor as he translates Martial’s epigrammatic refusal to marry
a “wealthie Widow”:

\[
\text{Demand you why, with one that’s rich}
\text{to marrie I denide?}
\text{The reason was, unto my wife}
\text{I would not be the bride. (160-61)}
\]

Lady Goldenfleece’s rejected suitors hope, however, that she will instead live in discord
with a husband who will dominate *her*: “The fourth day a great storm, lightning and
thunder; / A bolt strikes the suitor, a boy keeps her under” (4.3.99-100).

What poor Lady Goldenfleece gets, much to her bewilderment, is a husband who,
without any provocation, proceeds to act out the conflict that marriage to a rich widow is
conventionally believed to create. As I have argued in chapter one with reference to *Jack
of Newbury* and “Nobody his Counsaile to Chuse a Wife,” the compensating fantasy of
the widow’s lust and accessibility merely sets up the suitor to suffer a new anxiety when

\(^{13}\) For a discussion of the match’s homoerotic undertones, see DiGangi 94-95.
he becomes the husband of the woman whom he has so constructed: the lustful widow becomes the insatiable wife, posing a further threat to his masculinity with her ability to cuckold him. Parodying the young husband who fears emasculation at the hands of the remarried widow’s rampant sexuality, Kate too is anxious that the widow’s sexual appetite will emasculate her—literally, for the physical consummation that Lady Goldenfleece desires threatens to divest Kate of her male disguise. To preserve her “masculinity.” she launches a pre-emptive strike against the widow’s supposed adulterous tendencies. Needing to keep herself out of Lady Goldenfleece’s bed and to keep her disguise intact, Kate first feigns preoccupation with the moral questions of the widow’s ill-gotten estate, and then when the Lady presses for her wedding-night dues, Kate turns accusatory:

I like you worse

For this fond heat, and drink in more suspicion of you,
You high-fed widows are too cunning people
For a poor gentleman to come simply to.

You may make a youth on him.
'Tis at your courtesy, and that’s ill trusted;
You could not want a friend, beside a suitor,
To sit in your husband’s gown, and look over your writings.

(5.1.57-64)

The image of “a friend . . . to sit in your husband’s gown, and look over your writings,” hinting simultaneously at the wife’s financial trickery and her sexual misbehaviour,
neatly conflates the two main areas in which the young husband traditionally fears being reduced to a powerless "youth" rather than respected as a man.

The widow, however, scarcely fits into the script that Kate has written for their marriage. Not only is she innocent of any unfaithfulness, but she shows no signs of denying her new husband control over her money: "As for wealth now," she reassures him, "you know that's got to your hands" (5.1.42). And in her bewildered dismay after Kate's refusal to consummate the match she not only confirms her willingness to relinquish her estate, but speaks with a kind of pathos that again sets her apart from the stock figure of the lustful widow.14 The word "love," for her—in contrast to, say, Widow Taffata of Ram Alley—is not merely a euphemism for sex:

Have I yet married poverty and miss'd love?
What fortune has my heart? That's all I crav'd,
And that lies now a-dying; it has took
A speeding poison, and I'm ignorant how;
I never knew what beggary was till now.
My wealth yields no comfort in this plight;
Had want but brought me love, I'd happen'd right.

(5.1.77-83)

Even after Kate slanders her with adultery and demands a separation, the widow offers her half of her "wealth within doors" (5.1.214) to depart in charity.15 As with the lustful

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14 Leinwand observes "something poignant about the widow's desire to fill her bed," but ascribes it to Middleton's "uncertain treatment" of the character as he "strugg[]es with the stereotype of the sex-craved [sic] widow" (185-6).

15 In Kate's insistence on her ownership of the widow's entire estate and her attempts to turn the widow out of her own house, the play might well be commencing on the illogic of marital property laws which instantly pauperize even the wealthiest of women to enrich even the most undeserving of husbands. As Sir Oliver reasonably objects, "The wealth comes all by her!" (5.1.227).
widow, the stereotype of the remarried widow who “makes a youth” of her husband financially and sexually is revealed as one which serves Kate better than it fits Lady Goldenfleece, and which is created specifically out of Kate’s anxiety over literally not being “man” enough to handle the widow. While Kate’s “masculine inadequacies” are amusingly literal, quite different from those that worry the usual young husband of a widow, and her construction of the stereotype is a deliberate part of her trick, the transvestite “suitor” and “husband” is an emblem of the threatened masculinity behind the image of the insatiable and uncontrollable remarried widow.

Kate, like Middleton’s young widow-suitors before her, ends the play with the widow’s money in hand and the marriage evaded. Here, however, the final scene explicitly draws attention to the bizarre improbability of this kind of happy ending. In its adaptation of Della Porta’s La Sorella, on which the subplot of Philip Twilight is based, and to a lesser extent in the main plot as well, No Wit employs a number of the romance motifs made fashionable at the time by the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher: the threat of incest, kidnapping and ransom, children switched in infancy, a cross-dressed heroine, the unexpected reappearance of long-lost relatives, and a number of other surprising or fortuitous coincidences. In No Wit, however, all of these strange and marvelous happenings are set not against the exotic foreign backdrops favoured by Beaumont and Fletcher but in the commonplace streets and houses of contemporary middle-class London, peopled with the familiar faces of city comedy: the remarrying widow and her grasping suitors, the titled would-be seducer and the citizen wife, the stingy father, the clever servant, the “humours” character of Weatherwise. As Chakravorty observes of the play, “the city comedy material seeks collision rather than compromise with the conventions of romance” (108), but this collision, as I see it, does not produce the serious
moral judgements that Chakravorty and Rowe ascribe to No Wit. Rather, Middleton displays his typical taste for undermining theatrical conventions by having fun with the stage’s current vogue for wildly improbable fictions, planting them in the most mundane of settings and sending them up here and there with a well timed deflationary remark.

Una Ellis-Fermor describes how in the Fletcherian world,

... the characters themselves are affected by the atmosphere in which they move, so that they do not necessarily act like those of everyday life, and the rare and strange events that befall them beget emotions and motives that are themselves a little strange, a little unaccountable. They do not do what ordinary people in such circumstances, illuminated by the light of common day, would do, but, more happily for the author (and for the reader if he be of like mind) what he would, in a kind of dream-world, have them do, in order that such and such further situations might arise. (206)

The above is an apt description of Lady Twilight, who unexpectedly returns from a ten-year stint as the victim of piratical kidnapping to discover that her son has reported her dead after having spent her ransom money on a wench whom he now passes off as his sister. Miraculously, not only does she forgive him, but she agrees to support him in his

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16 Rowe sees the play as a “judgment of comedy” which “den[ies] New Comedy some of its most important values” and “indicates that the comic resolution, with its emphasis on reconciliation and inclusiveness, is an unnatural fiction” (129); Chakravorty agrees, adding that No Wit teaches the “lesson . . . that New Comedy and tragicomic romance both need to suppress the moral cost of its [sic] rescue-swerves” (108).

17 In seeing Middleton’s use of romantic conventions as parodic, I agree with McElroy’s view of Middleton’s tragicomedies (1-34). While No Wit is not a tragicomedy, and is not included among the plays which he studies, he provides a brief and apt description of the play as “a tour de force in Fletcherian plot complication, a wild burlesque, whose antiromantic tone prevents rather than invites serious judgment” (107). With regards to the tragicomedies, McElroy comments on Middleton’s use of romantic events in prosaic settings (18-19), the deflation of exaggerated characters (19-20), and deliberately ludicrous denouements (23), observations equally applicable to No Wit. Middleton here also disrupts the comic conventions, as described earlier, of the idealized cross-dressed heroine and the audience’s awareness of the trickster’s plans.
deception. But Middleton’s audience is periodically roused from the “dream-world” where such delightful things happen. No sooner has Lady Twilight finished expressing how her “bounty shall flow over your demand” (2.2.165) than Savourwit draws attention to the fantastic unlikeness of the situation—and perhaps even to the playwright behind it, working out the exigencies of his plot—by interjecting in an aside, “Why, here’s a woman made as a man would wish to have her” (2.2.168).\textsuperscript{18}

A similar pattern—the build-up of fantastic events and improbable reactions, punctured by an incredulous remark—marks the resolution of the main plot, where Kate’s situation parodies the fantasy of keeping the money and losing the widow. Of course, in terms of everyday realism, there is nothing especially probable about the ways in which Witgood, Easy, or Captain Idle are granted the same escape, but the earlier plays treat Witgood’s clever trick, Easy’s sympathetic judge, and Idle’s disgruntled accomplices as logical and unquestioned developments of the plot. Not so in No Wit. The fact that Kate is a woman in male disguise ensures from the start the eventual discarding of the widow (although it is uncertain up to a rather late point exactly how long Kate plans to stay “married”). Her ability, however, to profit from the venture depends not on a well-planned trick but on a whole string of lucky coincidences: the unforeseen arrival of her brother Beveril who, amusingly enough, enters in the company of that other fantastically accommodating character, Lady Twilight; Beveril’s sudden passion for Lady Goldenfleece, and Kate’s fortunate chance to overhear him talking to himself about it; Lady Goldenfleece’s decision, after Kate slanders her, to contract herself to Beveril in order to spite Kate. Having been blessed by coincidence after coincidence, Kate strips off

\textsuperscript{18} For a different view of this incident see Holmes, who views Lady Twilight as part of “the development of Middleton’s ideal of womanhood” (89).
her disguise and points up the sheer improbability of it all by taking credit for developments she could never have foreseen when she embarked on her scheme:

You wish’d for love, and, faith, I have bestow’d you
Upon a gentleman that does dearly love you;
That recompense I’ve made you; and you must think, madam,
I lov’d you well, though I could never ease you,
When I fetch’d in my brother thus to please you. (5.1.366-70)

Beveril and the widow then reward Kate for this extraordinary turn of events by placing their entire estate at her disposal. And in case anyone is still caught up in these dream-like events, Sir Oliver’s astonished exclamation—“Here’s unity forever strangely wrought!” (5.1.371)—reminds the audience, as Savourwit’s remark did earlier, that this fiction is a good deal stranger than truth.

Finally, the motif of escape is subverted when the play explicitly presents Kate’s “escape” from the widow as the widow’s escape from Kate. Lady Goldenfleece’s friends, whom Kate has gathered to witness her separation from the supposedly adulterous widow, instead take the widow’s part, trying to persuade Kate to “some agreement reasonable and honest” (5.1.232), and pressing her to reveal how she might give the widow “free liberty to marry again” (5.1.281). When Kate declares herself “married to another,” the others rejoice in Lady Goldenfleece’s escape: “Hoyda! There’s a release with a witness! / Thou’rt free, sweet wench!” (5.1.307-09). And although the widow’s selection of Beveril for her new husband contributes to Kate’s success, the match is one which grants her a truly desirable mate: a scholarly gentleman, sincerely in love with her and apparently quite uninterested in her wealth. In contrast to the parallel situation in The Puritan, in which Lady Plus is removed from Idle and bestowed upon Muckhill, the
resolution of *No Wit* takes as much account of the widow’s future happiness as it does of the suitor’s. And such a conclusion is necessary, for *No Wit*, unlike any of Middleton’s previous plays, pays as much attention to the widow’s desires and disappointments as it does to the suitor’s. “Sympathy” is less the issue here than focus: *Castiza*, in *The Phoenix*, is a more sympathetic character than the Captain, while *Michaelmas Term*’s Thomasine matches Easy on a scale of virtues and follies, but each play is more engaged with its men, what they want, what they suffer, how they ultimately fare in their plans. In *No Wit*, however—and perhaps it is because there is no successful male suitor to follow—Lady Goldenfleece is laid open to the audience’s understanding in ways that Kate is not. While Kate pursues her impenetrable scheme, the widow’s desires and motivations are all revealed, her character developed and particularized through a host of small details: her initial desire to marry Lambston for “titles and more riches” (2.1.377), her distaste for fickleness, her horror at Lambston’s true intentions, her admiration of male chastity, her gentle, witty mocking of the foolish Weatherwise, her moral blind spot as to her ill-got inheritance and her eventual realization of the price it carries, her ability to laugh at the slanderous masque and to forgive the petty jealousy of her suitors. Despite being the victim of Kate’s trick, she is not silenced, effaced, nor made a laughingstock, but ends the play with enough dignity to serve as the key figure in the subplot’s denouement, the only character with knowledge of the true identities of Philip Twilight’s wife and sister. This new focus on a widow who is as much the centre of dramatic interest as her suitor is, and is not merely his threat or his prize, anticipates the two final widow-comedies of Middleton’s career—*More Dissemblers Besides Women*, with its Duchess of Milan, and *The Widow*, the title of which indicates the play’s central concern.
Chapter Five

By the time Middleton writes his last two comedies featuring widows, the fantasy of a young man winning a widow by appealing to her sexual desire has been offered on the stage for at least fifteen years. The tricky, aggressive suitors of *Ram Alley, Tu Quoque*, and *Amends for Ladies* are fairly recent theatrical memories, as is the easily-won widow of *The Scornful Lady* in her role as a natural foil to the main plot’s coy maiden. The dubious marital choices of Jonson’s Lovewit and Quarlous have parodied the convention of handing out rich widows as rewards, but *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair* merely mock the idea of a widow-marriage as a prize by playing on the widow’s typical vices of sexual insatiability and financial control. Middleton’s *More Dissemblers Besides Women* and *The Widow* break with the widow-as-prize convention without relying on such equally stereotyped images of the widow as an undesirable wife. The two plays were likely written within a relatively short time of one another, in the middle of the century’s second decade, and they resemble each other in a number of ways. In both, Middleton continues his closer focus on the character of the widow herself, begun in *No Wit* with Lady Goldenfleece; no longer a figure to be merely profited from and then discarded, like Thomasine, Lady Plus, or the fictional Widow Medler, Middleton’s final two comic widows, the Duchess and Valeria, are the fully developed protagonists of their respective plays. While the two plays have very different settings (the middle-class, urban milieu of *The Widow* gives it a city comedy atmosphere quite unlike the atmosphere of the Milanese court of *More Dissemblers*), they stage similar material: cross-dressed runaway daughters seeking to avoid the old men their fathers would marry them to; the sexual misbehaviour of young men whom fatherly older men trust to be chaste and virtuous; an adulterous wife and a gang of wandering thieves in *The Widow*, and an
unfaithful maiden and a band of thieving gypsies in *More Dissemblers*. Most importantly, the central figure in each play is a widow whose choices as to continued widowhood or remarriage are being coerced by a man. In *More Dissemblers* the Cardinal has assumed control over the Duchess’s widowhood and, when the play opens, has spent seven years pressuring her into celibacy for his own glorification, while Ricardo in *The Widow* attempts to exert not moral but legal control over Valeria, entrapping her in a promise to marry him and then battling to uphold it in court. In both plays the widow seemingly escapes from the man’s coercion—the Duchess manipulates the Cardinal into urging her remarriage instead, Valeria wins the lawsuit against Ricardo—but both plays have a problematic resolution in which the widow, seemingly by her free choice, submits to the life—celibacy in the one play, marriage to Ricardo in the other—into which the man had originally sought to force her.

*The Widow*, as I will show, continues and perhaps completes an examination of the themes that have surfaced throughout this study, providing Middleton’s most thorough exposure of the threatened masculinity which underlies the fantasy of making a rich widow accessible through her lust and the theatrical conventions which pander to it. *More Dissemblers*, however, has little to say about masculinity and the courtship of a powerful widow, for it does not present the stock situation of a widow surrounded by her suitors. Rather than presenting a wealthy, independent English widow in her (at least theatrically) usual state of beseigement by an assortment of men among whom she must choose, the play explores a different culture: an Italian, Roman Catholic court where widows are expected not to entertain suitors and select a husband but rather to seclude themselves from men and make a moral virtue of permanent chastity. What ultimately emerges from the Duchess’s story, though, is the same concept that takes centre stage
throughout *The Widow* and, as I will argue, asserts itself emphatically in its absence at that play’s end—the simple acknowledgement of a widow’s right to choose for herself whether to remarry and whom to remarry. Simple and seemingly obvious as it is, the widow’s choice is an issue which the conventional fantasy scenario of the widow won through her lust falsifies and obscures. Unable, by definition, to resist the boldest, most youthful, and most virile man who steps forward to stir her desires, the lustful widow is passively there for the taking, a woman fundamentally without choice. And yet the plays which offer the fantasy are constructed so that the widow’s lack of volition is either submerged beneath declarations of love and her apparent “selection” of the successful suitor above his rivals, or, in the case of more crudely drawn widows like Barry’s Widow Taffata or Mistress Miniver of *Satiromastix*, is simply irrelevant. *More Dissemblers*, like *The Widow*, brings the matter of a widow’s choice out in the open, exposing the injustice and self-interest behind the prescriptions for a widow’s behaviour that men promulgate as morality.

While it is a common critical practice to claim that the foreign settings of many Jacobean plays are merely nominal, and the issues and attitudes they deal with representative of contemporary English ones, *More Dissemblers* and *The Widow* provide a useful reminder that such assumptions should be made on a play-by-play basis. *The Widow*, as we are told rather late in the play, takes place in Istria (3.2.129), but apart from the characters’ Italianate names, there is nothing noticeably Italian about the society depicted, and much that is specifically English, including references to Michaelmas term (1.1.56), the Inns of Court (1.1.231), Christ’s Hospital (2.1.236), and London prisons (2.2.73) (Levine 138 n.56). In *More Dissemblers*, however, the pervasive presence of the obviously Catholic Cardinal—whose red robes would have made a more eye-catching
visual statement of his religion than those of a simple priest—and his recognizably Italian dictum of female seclusion mark this theatrical version of Milan as the exotic “other,” a society where people—especially women—suffer under strictures that do not apply in everyday London life.

**More Dissemblers Besides Women (1615, King’s Men)**

Although *More Dissemblers* was labeled a comedy when first published in 1657, several critics have since treated it as a tragicomedy,¹ a classification which, as Geller points out, stems partly from the view that the Duchess’s “fall” from chaste widowhood is a moral catastrophe (289). Even some of the critics who describe the play as tragicomedy, however, acknowledge that Middleton’s tragicomedies as a group display a “scepticism” towards the “theatrical forms and conventions” of the genre (Ewbank 156), or that they are “not . . . radically different from his early comedies” (Rowe 154). McElroy, moreover, points out that *More Dissemblers* itself is “significantly unlike Middleton’s other tragicomedies—and not merely because it eschews the threat of death” (107). Compared to the fantastic terrors of the true tragicomedies (*The Witch* [1615], *A Fair Quarrel* [1617], and *The Old Law* [1618]) the threats of *More Dissemblers* are very minor indeed—nothing, in fact, that is not common territory in the city comedies. Once we have discounted Schoenbaum’s view that a Jacobean audience would have necessarily seen a widow’s decision to remarry as a terrible fall from an “exalted” and “lofty” ideal (13), we are left with the (unfulfilled) threat that a fickle young woman will be forced to marry an old man, and the (fulfilled) threat that two young men will marry a pair of

¹ See Barker 96-100; Schoenbaum 13-16; Rowe 153-75; Ewbank 161-70; McElroy 106-8. Ewbank and McElroy, however, stress how *More Dissemblers* parodies and undercuts the tragicomic mode. Chakravorty includes very brief analyses of both *The Widow* and *More Dissemblers* in his chapter on tragicomedy without commenting on the generic classification of either play (117).
whores—one his own, and the other somebody else’s. There is, admittedly, a certain amount of “tonal difference” between More Dissemblers and the earlier comedies, the later play inviting “involvement in the characters’ moral lapses rather than preserving the more purely detached cynicism about expected lust and greed that [Middleton’s] earlier plays evoke” (Geller 289). The play allows, for instance, an awareness of Lactantio’s cruelty as it evokes pity for his pregnant, cast-off mistress, the Page; it also invites condemnation of the Cardinal as it creates sympathy for the Duchess. This difference in tone, however, places the play closer to Muir’s description of it as a “black comedy” (148) than to tragicomedy.²

More Dissemblers is unusual among Middleton’s comedies featuring widows for another reason: it is his only comedy in which the widow’s suitors—a lively and obtrusive crew, from The Puritan up through No Wit, and scheduled to appear again in The Widow—remain in the background while the widow herself stands in the spotlight. For the Duchess of Milan is, in effect, a widow without suitors, and the play is not the familiar narrative of a widow’s courtship and remarriage but the story of a woman who tries and eventually fails to break free of her society’s fixation on widowed chastity. This fixation is not an English one, and the audience of Jacobean Londoners, men and women, may well have watched the play with a pleasant sense of the superiority of their own mores and freedoms. Some may have also observed, however, that while the play takes its broadest jabs at the safe target of Catholic celibacy, it subtly undermines local, Protestant prescriptions for a widow’s remarriage as well. Skeptical of all moralizing dictation of a widow’s behaviour, More Dissemblers Besides Women (the title itself

² Geller argues that the comedy of More Dissemblers is not “so drastically subverted that only dark comedy results” (289), but I differ from her view that “The resolution of the plots fits comfortably with comic expectations” (304). As I will explain, the “deserving” characters do indeed all get to choose what they want, but their choices are revealed to be either misguided or constrained.
draws attention to the lies of men) upholds a widow's right to choose for herself. Taking the reasonable position that sexual desire is inherent in the human condition and is not merely the pronounced failing of the lustful widow, the play undercuts men's attempts to repress or manipulate a widow's desires for their own profit, showing the damage that such self-seeking manipulation can do when elevated to a moral and social code. A product of the Catholic, remarriage-prohibiting version of this code, the Duchess nonetheless briefly defies it to claim the man she loves. The fact that the ending, which denies him to her, evokes a certain amount of dissatisfaction with his "escape" reveals how far removed More Dissemblers is from an early play like The Puritan, in which the widow who willfully chooses herself a husband is seen as a threat to be contained.

The opening of More Dissemblers introduces the kind of constraints that Milanese society imposes on widows, particularly on those who, as members of the nobility, are expected to set an example for their female subjects. The first lines of dialogue are preceded by a sung paean to widowed chastity:

_To be chaste is woman's glory_

'_Tis her fame and honour's story_

_Here sits she in funeral weeds,

_Only bright in virtuous deeds;

_Come and read her life and praise,

_That singing weeps and sighing plays._

(1.1.1-6, original italics)

The singer is unseen, unidentifiable. Floating free of context, motive, or dramatic action, the song from "within" evokes the atmosphere of a society where virtue is cloistered and celibacy is glorified. It is soon revealed that the object of this praise is the Duchess,
That strange great widow, that has vow'd so stiffly
Ne'er to know love's heat in a second husband:
And she has kept the fort most valiantly,
To th' wonder of her sex, this seven year's day,
And that's no sorry trial. (1.1.9-13)

Lactantio, the speaker, is himself an unprincipled rake, but he complacently subscribes to
his society's ideal of proper behaviour for a widow, describing the Duchess as "a rare
example for our wives" (1.1.16), and pointedly asking Aurelia, his betrothed, what she
would do if he were to die (1.1.19-21). But the unseen singer and Lactantio are merely a
preamble to the play's most prolific moralizer and, at least initially, the greatest opponent
of remarriage for widows, the Cardinal of Milan. Focussing on a Cardinal and a Duchess,
the play satirizes an attitude which evidently pervades Milanese society from the top
down.

Although the play's critics have always recognized that the Cardinal is a
“hypocrite” (Barker 96), “a great egotist” (Rowe 158) and weak enough to sacrifice “his
religion to his family ambitions” (Schoenbaum 14), the prevailing opinion for a
considerable time was that the play upholds as an ideal the Cardinal's original
prescriptions of widowed chastity, despite the man's prideful view of the Duchess as his
own "triumph" (1.2.64) and his eventual self-interested recantation of his principles.
Schoenbaum, for instance, cites Overbury's character of the "virtuous Widdow" as
evidence that "In Middleton's age the concept of the perfect [ie, celibate] widow was
especially exalted" (13); Rowe, more recently, singles out the late Duke of Milan—he
who demands the vow of chastity from his young wife—for praise as "an ideal figure," a
man who passed away to eternal peace "warning the Cardinal against guile and his wife
against inconstancy" (157). Geller, however convincingly dispels the notion that a Jacobean audience would have admired the celibate Duchess and her moralizing mentor as paragons of virtue who undergo a serious fall in abandoning their opposition to remarriage. Rather, as she shows, contemporary Protestant beliefs would have painted the Duchess's vow as invalid and sinfully presumptuous, and the Cardinal's extreme stance against remarriage as unmistakably Catholic and therefore to be regarded with suspicion (298-99). The Cardinal has a monkish aversion to women—he “not endures the sight of womenkind / About his lodgings” (1.1.50-51)—and, like any good Catholic, he considers celibacy the most virtuous estate (1.1.54-58). Regarding the Duchess’s chastity as evidence of “grace confirm’d” (1.2.16), he has counseled her to a life of seclusion to safeguard both mind and body:

Sh’as kept her vow as strictly, and as chaste
As everlasting life is kept for virtue,
Even from the sight of men; to make her oath
As uncorrupt as th’ honour of a virgin,
That must be strict in thought, or else that title,
Like one of frailty’s ruins, shrinks to dust:
No longer she’s a virgin than she’s just. (1.2.21-27)

As Geller notes, the Duchess’s isolation from men is fully in keeping with Vives' instructions for a widow’s behaviour in The Instruction of A Christian Woman (299), the work of Catholic prescriptive literature which probably would have been best known to Middleton’s contemporaries.³ In fact, Vives explicitly recommends the kind of relationship that the Cardinal and the Duchess seem to share at the start of the play:

³ Vives’ conduct book was first translated in 1529 and went through nine English editions from 1529 to 1592.
If a Widowe would aske any counsaile, lette her chuse some aged man, that is past the lust of the worlde, nor is infected with vices nor is set upon covetousnes, nor will sette his mind on flattery for hope of advantage of lucre of money, & that is well learned, and by much experience hath gathered great wisdome, that he neither keepe her mind straiter than need is, not let hir have over much the bridle of liberty, nor doth count nothing more pretious, nor deare, than truth and vertue: . . . For in courts & resort of men, and gathering of people, a widow should not meddle. In the which places there is great jeoperdy of those things, that a widowe ought to set most by. (D2v-D3r)

Although Catholic doctrine did not forbid a widow’s remarriage, it did strongly dissuade widows from taking second husbands and upheld a life of perpetual chastity, spiritual contemplation, and good works as by far the morally superior choice. Moreover, it taught that any widow who remarried after having made a vow of chastity was damned (Geller 293), a belief voiced by both the Duchess (2.1.22-24) and the Cardinal (2.1.100-08).

While it is difficult to separate cultural stereotypes from religious ones when it comes to contemporary English concepts of Italian behaviour and customs, it seems likely that a Jacobean audience would have seen the pressures imposed on the Duchess as Italian as well as Catholic. For instance, the Duchess’s seclusion “Even from the sight of men” plays into one of the commonest of such cultural stereotypes—that the chastity of an Italian woman was policed to the point of physical sequestration within her home.

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4 See, for instance, Vives chapter 7; Lessius 228-37.
Peter Heylyn, describing Italian customs in his *Cosmographie* (1652), praises the “civil carriage and behaviour” of the men, but adds: “Onely in strictness to their wives they exceed all reason, of whom they are so extremely jealous, that they shut them up all day from the common view, and permit them liberty of discourse with few or none” (53). A French traveler, Maximilian Misson (trans. 1695), compares the confinement of Italian women to the liberty of the English and French. At Venice, Misson reports, “the Women of Quality are shut up so close, that you can scarcely see their Faces; not even in the churches which are the only places where they appear in Publick,” while even “the ordinary Women . . . go abroad but rarely, because the Men make provision, and take care of all Business without Doors” (vol. 1, 186). “I will not aggravate their slavery,” he adds, “by the opposition of that entire Liberty which is enjoy’d by our English and French Ladies, their Walks, Visits, Meetings, and all the other Divertisements which are allow’d to them without the least constraint or limitation of Time; for it would be altogether needless to insist on this Parallel” (vol. 2, 12-13, original italics). Catholicism provides Misson with an explanation for “the perpetual confinement of the poor Italian ladies,” as a local inhabitant justifies it to him as a necessary precaution against a large population of sex-starved, predatory priests (vol. 2, 37, original italics). Heylyn, on the other hand, views it as a manifestation of the “Southern” temperament, common to Italians and Spaniards alike. He concludes his remarks about the seclusion of Italian women with the promise that “touching the predominancie of this jealous humor in most

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Although the extant seventeenth-century texts describing southern European customs date from fairly late in the period, I use them on the premise that Italian attitudes towards women are unlikely to have been much more liberal several decades previously, and that Middleton’s contemporaries were equally unlikely to have held a less stereotyped view of such customs than did the Englishmen of a generation later. I am also assuming that early seventeenth-century Londoners would have been aware of such customs; Heylyn’s remarks, quoted below, about the Elizabethan Mendoza’s disapproval of “promiscuous” English habits would suggest that they were.
Southern Nations, we shall speak more hereafter when we come to Spain” (53). Spanish men, he later informs the reader, are “hot and dry, which makes them much given to women,” an inclination which, logically enough, leads them jealously to lock up their wives: “Mendoza, an Ambassadour from Spain, in Queen Elizabeths time, used to find fault with the promiscuous sitting of men and women in the Church, used here in England, accounting it to be a great incentive unto lasciviousness” (208, original italics). In More Dissemblers the Duchess’s seclusion stems from the dying Duke of Milan’s ludicrous anticipation of being plagued by jealousy in heaven—an exaggerated example of the “frenzie which much rageth in most Southern people” (Heylyn 208, original italics):

  thou’rt so precious,

  I should depart in everlasting envy

  Unto the man that ever should enjoy thee:

  O, a new torment strikes his force into me

  When I but think on’t! I am rack’d and torn;

  Pity me in thy virtues. (2.1.64-69, original italics)

Once freed by death from the jealous care of a husband, the Italian widow faced societal pressures that would have been quite foreign to a seventeenth-century Londoner. The life of nun-like retirement within the palace that the Duchess leads in fulfillment of her vow would likely have contrasted sharply with what Middleton’s audience might have known of the English Catholic norm for a widowhood of vowed chastity, such as exemplified by pre-Reformation English vowesses who apparently took their vows in order to continue unhindered in their economic activities (Erler 179-80). Unhampered by marriage and dowry customs like those in Italy, which gave family members an
expensive stake in a widow’s remarriage or continued chastity, the English widow—both pre- and post-Reformation—appears to have been more autonomous and less under the control of male kinfolk than her Italian counterpart. Moreover, as indicated by the early sixteenth-century Italian ambassador who was scandalized at the “corrupt practice” of English women choosing second husbands, female remarriage in Italy—above all, remarriage to a man of one’s own choice—was considered a “discredit” to a widow (Sneyd 27). I have explained earlier that there is no evidence of a tradition of organized derision towards second marriages in England; however, civil statutes seeking to prohibit insulting *mattinate* (rough music) directed at remarrying widows are well documented throughout central and northern Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries (Klapisch-Zuber 262-63). Even if these statutes quickly succeeded in their aim—which seems unlikely—remarriage in Italy was clearly not the sanctioned “ancient custom” (Sneyd 27) that it was in England. As I will show, the Duchess has ordered her life so as not to suffer the contempt her society reserves for the widow who takes a second husband.

Although the Duchess of *More Dissemblers* has no kin to control her choices, the Cardinal and his sycophants, the Lords of the palace, perform the same function. And while the Cardinal’s control of the Duchess is fully in keeping with the Italian, Catholic moral code, the play undermines this “morality” by suggesting that its very origins are tainted with the interests of men. The Cardinal’s original antipathy to remarriage, and his subsequent attempts (while deceived by the Duchess’s ruse) to manipulate a marriage that would benefit his own family, would have resonated, for Middleton’s audience, with another play about a beleaguered Italian widow—*The Duchess of Malfi*—which was performed by the same company that staged *More Dissemblers*, the King’s Men,
probably a year or so before Middleton’s play was produced. Although the Cardinal changes his tune and becomes in favour of remarriage when the Duchess proposes a match with his nephew, and the Duchess of Malfi’s brothers remain tragically opposed to it when their sister marries her steward, the men in both plays use a similar method of control. Here—unlike in the “English” comedies I have examined so far—the concept of the “lusty widow” is indeed used as a threat to prevent the women from choosing whether and whom to remarry. It is uncertain whether the Duchess’s brothers in Webster’s play truly plan to marry her to “The great Count Malatesta” (3.1.41), but they take pains to construe any decision to remarry she may make as driven by lust, and their own decisions for her as filled with “honour”:

Ferdinand: You are a widow:

You know already what man is: and therefore

Let not youth; high promotion, eloquence,--

Cardinal: No, nor anything without the addition, Honour,

Sway your high blood.

Ferdinand: Marry? They are most luxurious

Will wed twice.

Cardinal: O fie!

Ferdinand: Their livers are more spotted

Than Laban’s sheep. (1.2.214-19)

By painting remarriage as a manifestation of “luxuriousness,” the brothers try to ensure that the Duchess will not “flatter [herself] / And take [her] own choice” (1.2.235-36).

6 Middleton evidently knew and admired Webster’s tragedy; his comendatory verse for The Duchess of Malfi is reprinted in Brennan’s edition of the play (5).
Similarly, for as long as it serves his own purposes of “religious triumph” (1.2.64), the Cardinal of More Dissemblers upholds the Duke’s warning that

...once to marry

Is honorable in woman, and her ignorance
Stands for a virtue, coming new and fresh;
But second marriage shows desire in flesh;
Thence lust, and heat, and common custom grows;
But she’s part virgin who but one man knows. (2.1.76-81)

The lines resemble one of the arguments that Vives makes against remarriage:

Confesse thine owne vitiousnes. For none of you taketh a husbande but to the intente that she will lie with him, nor except her lust pricke her. What a ragiousnes is it, to set thy chastitie common like an harlot, that thou maiest gather riches; And for a vile, and a thing that shall soone passe awaye, to file thy chastitie that is a thinge most preitious and everlastinge. (D6v)

Earlier, though, Vives makes room for a widow’s obedience to her family’s demands by noting that “a good woman” will only marry “sore against her will, and compelled to the second marriage” (C5r). By revealing the self-glorification that the Cardinal extracts from the Duchess’s vow, his later willingness to deconstruct his own moral stance when spurred by ambition, and the Duke’s irrational jealousy that sits at the centre of the whole system of upholding perpetual widowhood as a virtue, More Dissemblers cuts through the moral rhetoric of prescriptions like Vives’ to show the self-serving urge for control over both women and property that motivates them in practice.
Although the play’s satiric focus is mainly on the Catholic Italian disapproval of the remarrying widow, it does not simplistically uphold the Protestant encouragement of remarriage that would have been the familiar doctrinal fare of its contemporary London audience. As Geller points out, the Duchess’s ruse of pretending love to Lactantio causes the Cardinal to deconstruct his Catholic insistence on chaste widowhood and to mouth instead all the standard Protestant arguments for remarriage, such as the honour of married chastity and the value of bearing children (303). Insisting now that remarriage is “knowing but one man’s bed,” he points out that

... fruitfulness

Is part of the salvation of your sex;

And the true use of wedlock’s time and space

Is woman’s exercise for faith and grace. (4.2.30-34)

Instead of sounding like Vives, he now sounds more like Becon, who advises the “young widow” to “take unto her a husband, by whom she may have children, and godly to bring them up”:

Nothing therefore is better for young widows than to marry again, so that it be done in the Lord. By this means they shall answer to their age, live honestly with their husbands, be free from all suspicion of uncleanness, and pass over their time among their neighbours in good name and fame. (365-66)

But it is not only the personal hypocrisy of the Cardinal that comes in for satiric treatment here, for in the Cardinal’s mouth, the familiar Protestant arguments themselves appear in a new light. They too are revealed in terms of how usefully they serve self-interest and ambition under the guise of disinterested morality. While the Catholic
injunction against remarriage seeks to suppress a widow's sexuality, the Protestant stance seeks to suppress a widow's will to control her own destiny. As the Cardinal concludes after he sees that the Duchess’s marriage is in his own interests, she has evidently remained single for so long only because it pleases her "will":

What have we done, my lords? I fear we've sinn'd
In too much strictness to uphold her in't,
In cherishing her will; for woman's goodness
Takes counsel of that first, and then determines;
She cannot truly be call'd constant now,
If she persever, rather obstinate. . . (3.1.297-302)

Middleton thus suggests that all moralizing regulation of a widow’s behaviour is suspect, for rules written by men for widows serve—unsurprisingly—men. While the play has no gibe at specifically Protestant prescriptive literature as clear as the Cardinal’s earlier boast that he has written “Whole volumes . . . in zealous praise / Of her eternal vow” (1.2.6-7), the Protestant-sounding “knots of arguments” (3.1.310) he knits to command remarriage are exposed to be equally empty of true morality or genuine concern for the widow’s well-being. It could be objected that the play is merely satirizing the Cardinal and his self-seeking use of Protestant doctrine, without impugning the doctrine itself. But the play’s exposure of how the Catholic “virtuous widow” is constructed—leading us inward, step by step, from the abstract chastity celebrated in the opening song, through the Cardinal’s suspect uses of that chastity, to the deathbed scene, engraved in memory, where this esteemed chastity is revealed as a function of the dying Duke’s irrational jealousy—is so explicit that when the Cardinal switches to his new Protestant dictum, the
play’s earlier debunking of prescriptions invites a similar scrutiny of his latest pronouncements.

If the play’s depiction of the Cardinal exposes the greed and the desire for self-aggrandizing control that underlies both of his constructions of virtuous widowhood, its portrait of the Duchess shows the effect that such control has on the woman who is subjected to it. Unlike the Duchess of Malfi, who puts her play’s tragic machinery into action when she disputes her brothers’ insinuations and defiantly asserts her right to remarry (1.2.260-62), the Duchess of Milan has completely internalized her society’s derision of the widow’s sexual appetite and is as cowed by the prospect of such slander as its perpetrators could wish. While Geller clears the Duchess of the charge of moral degradation that other critics bring against her for falling from chastity into desire, and notes that she has “been well socialized” to believe in the equation of remarriage with culpable lust (303), she accuses her nonetheless of being “competitive” and “prideful, much concerned with reputation, for her thoughts have little to do with her feelings for her dead husband or for God, and a great deal to do with what ‘male enemies’ would make of any wavering on her part” (301). But the Duchess’s speeches reveal that her pride has grown out of a pathetic anxiousness to avoid the contempt and moral condemnation that her society inflicts on the widow who would remarry:

What a contented rest rewards my mind
For faithfulness! I give it constancy,
And it gives me peace. How happily
Might woman live, methinks, confin’d within
The knowledge of one husband!
What comes of more rather proclaims desire
Prince of affections than religious love,

Brings frailty and our weakness into question

'Mongst our male enemies, makes widows’ tears

Rather the cup of laughter than of pity:

What credit can our sorrows have with men,

When in some months’ space they turn light ajen,

Feast, dance, and go in colours? If my vow

Were yet to make, I would not sleep without it . . . . (1.3.1-14)

Although she does speak at a later point of the “glory” that her constancy earns her (1.3.52-57), and is certainly not without self-satisfaction in her virtue, her opening lines, quoted above, primarily give the impression of a woman who has conformed herself to the male-designed image of virtuous widowhood so that she can live in peace. Having internalized the beliefs of her “male enemies” (an interesting choice of word, for the values she ascribes to them are the same as those held by the men—the late Duke and the Cardinal—who have insisted on her celibate seclusion), she eschews remarriage both to give her own conscience “rest” and “peace” and to escape men’s mockery and their pronouncements about female frailty. The probable allusion to Chapman’s play in the line about “widows’ tears” hints that she will eventually break her vow as surely as Eudora and Cynthia broke theirs, but it also suggests her difference from those “laughable” widows. The Duchess has become the paragon of chastity which Cynthia wished to be, but she has been driven less by Cynthia’s egotism than by social constraints and fear of mockery. Where Cynthia willfully sets herself up as an “extraordinary” (Widow’s Tears 4.1.7) example to women, the Duchess has been pressured into this role by the two men with the most power over her, the Duke and the Cardinal. Her response to
the Cardinal’s announcement that she must undergo the “Temptations” (1.3.42) of mingling with men holds at least as much weariness as it does arrogance:

Is there a doubt found yet? is it so hard
For women to recover, with all diligence,
And a true fasting faith from sensual pleasure
What many of her sex has so long lost?
Can you believe that any sight of man,
Held he the worth of millions in one spirit
Had power to alter me? (1.3.45-51)

The Duchess is proud of her ability to surpass male expectations of female virtue, but her speeches clearly reveal that she, as a woman and a widow, is at the mercy of men’s prescriptions for her behaviour and men’s punishments if she deviates from them. As a result, the pride she takes in avoiding censure is far less reprehensible than the Cardinal’s pride in moulding her for his own glorification. The Cardinal and men like him, not the Duchess, have made the rules.

The play emphasizes, however, that perpetual chastity for a young widow—indeed, for anyone—is not virtuous but unnatural. Only her close confinement has kept the Duchess from the natural human experiences of love and desire; once she emerges from seclusion, she is smitten by Andrugio, the first man she sees. Middleton handles the Duchess’s awakening to desire in a way that effectively prevents moral condemnation, ridicule, or even the salacious, slightly contemptuous pleasure of seeing a widow fall prey to her sexual needs. Although the Duchess, like many a theatrical widow before her, is taken with the sight of a virile young man, her experience of falling in love is elevated and universalized by means of a masque. The masque is staged to welcome home
Andrugio, the Duchess’s general, after his military victories. As the Duchess watches, a song of praise gives way to “a Cupid descending,” who sings of his own might as a “conqueror,” concluding, “it is not power in you, fair beauties; / If I command love, ’tis your duties” (1.3.86-87). During the masque, men and women are shown to be equally subject to love’s power: careless of his own victory celebration, Andrugio unhappily reads a letter from Aurelia, his absent and faithless beloved. “When he miss’d her whom his eye greedily sought for,” observes a sympathetic lord, “His welcome seem’d so poor, he took no joy in’t” (1.3.92-93). The Duchess, then, is not susceptible to love and desire because she is a widow, because she is a woman, or because she is frail or lacking in virtue. Such susceptibility, as she recognizes in the first flash of emotion, is merely part of being human:

I confess I’m mortal;

There’s no defending on’t; ’tis cruel flattery

To make a lady believe otherwise.

Is this not flesh? can you drive heat from fire?

So may you love from this . . . (1.3.107-11)

The Duchess’s love is further dignified by the fact that Andrugio is undoubtedly the worthiest man in the play—the virile connotations of his military profession are emphasized less than his loyalty, courage, and generosity. (In fact, Aurelia deserts him for Lactantio partly from fear that a war-wound might detract from his sexual performance [2.3.97-104].) And the highly artificial device of the masque ensures, paradoxically, that the Duchess’s desires appear wholly natural, inevitable to mortal men and women alike, and not merely the personal and amusing weakness of a lustful widow.
The play’s explicitness about the inevitability of passion throws into relief the level to which the Duchess has been socialized to feel that these natural desires are shameful and sinful. After her first, shocked admission that it is but “mortal” to fall in love—a word which in the mouth of the Catholic Duchess may have connotations of sin as well as of humanity—she begins to view her love for Andrugio as a grave lapse from virtue. She sees herself as “lost / Utterly lost” (1.3.117-18), and as may be expected, given her earlier explanation of why she values her vow, she is terrified by the thought of how men will now regard her:

My faith is gone forever;
My reputation with the cardinal,
My fame, my praise, my liberty, my peace,
Chang’d for a restless passion: O hard spite,
To lose my seven years’ victory at one sight! (1.3.124-28)

The dissembling that she is driven to by her fear of the Cardinal’s disapproval is among the least morally problematic of the numerous deceptions that make up the play, for her “victims,” Lactantio and the Cardinal, thoroughly deserve what they get. Nonetheless, her gnawing guilt over the ends to which she employs her deception—breaking her vow to give rein to her desires—leads her to view her little scheme with an exaggerated sense of wrongdoing:

O, an ill cause had need of many helps,
Much art, and many friends, ay, and those mighty,
Or else it sets in shame! A faith once lost
Requires great cunning ere’t be entertain’d
Into the breast of a belief again;
There's no condition so unfortunate,
Poor, miserable, to any creature given,
As hers that breaks in vow; she breaks with heaven. (2.1.17-24)

Even as she misleads the Cardinal as to which man she loves, she speaks ashamedly of her “frailty,” her “ill,” her “desires . . . sicken’d / Beyond recovery of good counsel” (2.1.91-98). And when he at first refuses to take the bait and storms out vowing to banish Lactantio to Rome, the Duchess sadly considers herself to have received the just deserts of her “ill cause”:

Now my condition's worse than e'er 'twas yet;
My cunning takes not with him; has broke through
The net that with all art was set for him,
And left the snarer here herself entangled
With her own toils. (2.1.132-36)

Secluded for seven years, indoctrinated to feel that remarriage is sinful, and even now—after the Cardinal reconsiders—deprived of the choice of whom to remarry, the Duchess proceeds to enact an inversion of the usual widow-wooing scenario which is at once amusing and a little sad. Instead of being surrounded, as the English stage widow typically is, by a bevy of suitors from which to make a selection, the Duchess has spent her widowhood secluded from men. (The First Lord, who would have liked to have courted her but was prevented by her vow and, apparently, by the political expediency of siding with the Cardinal, stands as a reminder of the possibilities she has been denied.) With no suitors who might embolden themselves against her rank and wealth by constructing her as desirous, she is driven to an odd do-it-yourself version of the same enterprise: using the despicable Lactantio as her instrument, she dictates a letter that
constructs Andrugio as a suitor who, in his turn, constructs her as a desirous widow. The letter, which she has Lactantio write in Andrugio's hand and sign with Andrugio's signature, informs the Duchess that "The report of your vow shall not fear me . . . I know you're but a woman . . . And what a woman is, a wise man knows," and continues with both the boldness and the bawdiness customary to a young widow-wooer (3.2.95-109, original italics). She then has Andrugio arrested and brought before her, and obliges him to read the letter to her, quite literally putting her words into his mouth. Only after he has read the words that no man has been allowed to speak to her of his own accord does she "accept" his love and offer him her "true constant heart forever" (4.2.182). Swept away by her own daring, she apparently takes what he means as the start of a polite protest—"madam, the service of whole life is yours" (4.2.198)—as his assay, and resumes the pretense of having him arrested before he can make himself clear. Geller likens the scene to that in which the Duchess of Malfi promotes Antonio to husband (304), and it is in fact an even more explicit illustration than Webster's of how a society which seeks to suppress a widow's will and control over her own destiny succeeds in perpetuating its own fears. Denied the right to govern their own actions, the Duchesses of Malfi and of Milan are driven to claim their desires in startling manifestations of will.

In seizing the man she wants to marry without waiting to be wooed, the Duchess is reminiscent of another Middletonian widow, Lady Plus of The Puritan. The difference in his treatment of the two characters, however, shows how far Middleton has come from the conventional view of the widow as a dubious prize to be either subdued and wed or, better yet, exploited and escaped. For despite what Holmes describes as the Duchess's "almost savage determination" (74) to have the man she wants, the play makes clear that Andrugio's ultimate evasion of her claim is not as fortunate—for him—as Captain Idle's
escape from Lady Plus. Andrugio chooses Aurelia over the Duchess, and while there is no reason to doubt his word that he does so out of constancy to his first love (4.2.196), in marrying Aurelia he rejects the widow for the conventionally preferable maiden bride, a girl who, as the Duchess points out, is "younger" and "fairer" than herself (5.2.128). But in marrying Aurelia he also takes upon himself the kind of bride that Middleton usually reserves as a punishment for foolish or despicable characters like Lethe (Michaelmas Term), Hoard (A Trick), or Sim (Chaste Maid). Aurelia, quite simply, is a whore: not just mistress to Lactantio but also the willing "doxy" of his servant Dondolo during her sojourn with the gypsies. Just how much Andrugio realizes himself to be forgiving when he announces his "love / That covers all thy faults" (5.2.170-71) is unclear, but given that he may not know the extent of Aurelia's promiscuity, he may well come across as more foolish than admirable. The widow whom he rejects, on the other hand, has been revealed by this point to be a surprisingly attractive character—witty in her treatment of Lactantio, clear-sighted in her recognition of the Cardinal's hypocrisy (4.2.51-52), and kind and generous in her plans to have Lactantio's mistreated Page "well brought up / As a youth apt for good things" (4.2.75-76).

McElroy rightly notes that Andrugio's choice of Aurelia and the Duchess's commendation of his judgement parody the Fletcherian and Petrarchan romance convention of equating beauty with inner worth (136-41), but the Duchess's speech betrays more than adherence to an invalid romantic code, as she describes the younger woman as

\[
\ldots \text{a just cross led in by a temptation,} \\
\text{For offering but to part from my dear vow,} \\
\text{And I'll embrace it cheerfully. (5.2.131-33)}
\]
McElroy's comment that these lines indict the Duchess for "egotism," "self-obsession," and utter indifference "to all considerations save her own honour, and her society, which makes a religion of the false gospel of reputation" (141) casts an unwarrantedly negative light on a state of mind that is more likely to arouse pity than condemnation. Having been conditioned to believe that a desire for remarriage is sinful, and unable to escape the guilt and shame that have plagued her since her first stirrings of passion towards Andrugio, the Duchess inevitably perceives the woman who thwarts her desires as God's punishment for attempting to break with chaste widowhood. The Duchess has seen through the Cardinal's personal hypocrisy but she is still in thrall to the internal constraints in which he and the culture he represents have bound her:

Return I humbly now from whence I fell.
All you bless'd powers that register the vows
Of virgins and chaste matrons, look on me
With eyes of mercy, seal forgiveness to me
By signs of inward peace! and to be surer
That I will never fail your good hopes of me,
I bind myself more strictly; all my riches
I'll speedily commend to holy uses,
This temple to some religious sanctuary,
Where all my time to come I will allow
For fruitful thoughts; so knit I up my vow. (5.2.194-204)

Geller describes the end of More Dissemblers as conforming comfortably to comic expectations, for the deserving characters, Andrugio and the Page, are granted what they want, while the Duchess's renewed vow is a "reasonable" and "unconstrained" choice.
But all three characters, I propose, make “choices” that are deeply unsatisfactory and that are fundamentally not choices at all, as Middleton undercuts the comic convention of joyful fifth-act marriages. Andrugio marries the sexually promiscuous Aurelia, perhaps without even being aware of the extent of her unfaithfulness. The long-suffering Page gets to marry the father of her child, but this is more of a desperate remedy than a choice, and the happiness of her future can be measured by Lactantio’s curses at being forced to “marry a quean” (5.2.257). In light of these two marriages, it is tempting to wonder if Middleton completes the unlucky threesome by marrying off the Duchess—whose lines suggest that she means to enter a nunnery—to the most notable “harlot” of all, the Roman Catholic Church, which was commonly imaged as a whore in early modern Protestant discourse. (For example, part of the extended subtitle of Andrew Willet’s anti-Catholic Synopsis Papismi, which went through five editions between 1592 and 1634, promises “an antidotum or counterpoysen out of Scripture against the Whore of Babylon’s filthy cup of abominations.”) Whether or not Middleton had such a pattern in mind, the play is so explicit about the Duchess’s subjection to her culture’s mores that her final decision to “bind [her]self more strictly” to widowed celibacy can hardly appear a genuinely free choice. The result is an unsettling ending in keeping with the darkly comic tone of the play. And although the wrongs inflicted on a Catholic Italian widow may be an easy target for an English Jacobean playwright, the dissatisfaction that More Dissemblers raises over its widow’s lack of choice figures again in The Widow, in which Middleton takes on the more strenuous task of exposing the theatre’s complicity in the limiting widow-fantasies of his own culture.
The Widow (1616, King’s Men)

Of Middleton’s six canonical plays examined in this study, The Widow is the one most neglected by critics. The neglect is perhaps unsurprising—what, after all, is one to make of the main plot, which contravenes comic expectations and poetic justice so bizarrely? Middleton pits a sensible, witty, and unusually un-lustful widow against a thoroughly mercenary and unethical young man, has her battle him throughout the play in a lawsuit for illegal entrapment into a marriage contract, and then, when she finally wins, the playwright unexpectedly concocts a “happy ending” out of having the widow accept her adversary, against overwhelming evidence to the contrary, as a husband who loves her for herself and not her money. If Ricardo, the suitor, sounds much like any number of his aggressive and mercenary widow-wooing predecessors—Tharsalio, Bould, or William Smalshankes—the widow, Valeria, differs from her evidently desirous counterparts (Eudora, Lady Bright, Taffata) in a way that makes The Widow a play thoroughly unlike The Widow’s Tears, Amends for Ladies, or Ram Alley. While the above widows are either obviously moved by lust for their young suitors, or, in the virtuous Lady Bright’s case, declare their love unequivocally, Valeria does not dignify Ricardo’s aggressive tactics by the smallest admission of love, lust, or even attraction towards him, apart from a single, ambiguous line in the final scene. And while Ricardo, like Spendall in Tu Quoque, passes a token fifth-act test of his “love,” his speeches both before and afterwards stress that his main interest is in Valeria’s wealth. In the little that has been written about the play, critics tend to respond with confusion, evasion, or an attempt to rehabilitate Ricardo into a less jarring match for the likeable Valeria. Cherry, for instance, registers dissatisfaction with the fact that “it seems that the one she has chosen has pursued her only for her wealth,” but adds in the next line that Valeria, through her “spirit
and cunning” obtains herself a love-match (94-95). Friedenreich, who provides perhaps the longest sustained discussion of the play, avoids the issue of Valeria’s choice altogether, confining himself to plot summary and analysis of Middleton’s language (4-13). Barker focuses exclusively on the subplot (88), while Chakravorty dismisses *The Widow* in just over eleven lines, justifying his silence with the assertion that “psychological and moral readings make heavy weather of the token motives and reformations” (117). The effort to rehabilitate Ricardo begins with Holmes, who claims “he has qualities that militate against his faults and look forward to his improvement,” but he only comes up with three: the fact that Ricardo does not conceal his poverty (few widow-wooers do), his dislike of artificiality (though he apparently has no trouble with deceit), and the virtue of being “not indifferent to the interests of his friends” (141-42), a statement which the friends whom he forgets to bail at 2.2.116-39 might find debatable.

Farr, without going into further detail, simply states that Ricardo “for all his recklessness is sound at heart” and is directed by his “better nature” in the play’s closing scenes (13). But the obstacles which the Ricardo-rehabilitators are up against are perhaps best measured by Robert Levine’s introduction to his edition of the play. Worried by “inconsistencies in theme and characterization,” Levine suggests that such inconsistencies “can be softened or eliminated by careful stage directing”:

Ricardo’s coarseness should not prevent his being liked by the audience. He should look lovingly at the widow whenever they encounter, so as to emphasize his interest in her person. This would make up for his never referring to Valeria by her given name, only by “the rich widow” or “the widow.” Moreover, his
loving looks would distinguish him from the First Suiter, whose philosophy—

Thers two words to a bargain ever
All the world over, and if love be one
I'm sure mony's the other. (V.1.377-379)

—might otherwise associate him too closely with Ricardo. (xlix)

That an editor would feel the need to make such suggestions indicates the distance between The Widow and, say, The Widow's Tears: Tharsalio, for all his coarseness and mercenariness, does not have to resort to "loving looks" to win an audience over. Unlike Ricardo, he is justified by his exuberant self-confidence (no traps or lawsuits for him) and above all, by the fact that he is right. Eudora is everything he claims she is. A more recent editor of The Widow, Gary Taylor, is rather more apt when he notes that "the comic principle behind The Widow is not poetic justice but poetic grace," and that the undeserving Ricardo is "saved" through no virtue of his own ("Critical Introduction"). Taylor sees this "poetic grace" as an echo of God's grace, appropriate to the Christmas season in which the play was originally produced, but we might also remember that Middleton explicitly poked fun at the notion of a rich widow as a vehicle of divine grace back in Michaelmas Term. Ricardo is certainly blessed at the end by some beneficent power, but what kind of power is it and how might his good fortune be seen in the context of what has come before?

Juneja, who treats the story of Ricardo and Valeria as a realistic representation of "the heat of some contemporary chases for a widow's wealth" ("Widow" 6), makes an observation about the play's ending which is worth taking further: "[Valeria] finds a proper match in Ricardo when he renounces her wealth—but only, one suspects, because
comic conventions demand a successful resolution” (“Widow” 8). It is, as I will argue, not divine grace but the grace of widow-plot convention that shines upon Ricardo in the last scene: the young suitor who most needs her money gets the widow, declaring his ability to give her “love” in exchange. And more importantly, what makes this last-minute application of convention noteworthy is that everything about the plot which it concludes works to make it possible for the audience to be wiser than the convention, exposing to laughter the machinations of the playwright who manipulates his characters to produce the fantasy match of widow and wastrel. Through plot, through language, and through characterization, Middleton does all he can to undermine the pattern of audience identification with the suitor that typically works in a widow-wooing scenario, and to make a match between Valeria and Ricardo seem as undesirable as possible. He exposes, quite explicitly, the lusty widow stereotype as a male construction that compensates for a suitor’s anxiety over entering an economic relationship which threatens his masculinity. He mocks this anxiety itself, and even justifies a widow’s right to produce it, for Valeria clearly deserves to control her wealth and herself, and Ricardo does not conquer her by sexuality, by wit, or by any of the ways in which the suitor traditionally demonstrates his superior “right” to the widow’s property. Middleton also draws attention to the theatre in its role as pander to an audience’s desires, and when the play ultimately goes through the theatrical motions of providing the match which the fantasy demands, he invites the audience to see exactly what is happening and to realize that they, like Valeria, have been coerced by convention—this time, the ubiquitous theatrical obligation of applause at the end of a play—into accepting a thoroughly dubious match. By the time Valeria embraces Ricardo as her husband, it is clear that she is revealing nothing about the nature or
inclinations of widows, and much about a stage-play world constructed wholly by men and frequently for men.

From the outset, the play denies Ricardo the attractive characteristics that generally mark the successful young suitor of a rich widow. He is young, bankrupt, and aggressive, but has none of the traits that are useful for getting a young bankrupt on an audience's good side: Spendall's naïve goodheartedness and prodigal generosity (*Tu Quoque*), Tharsalio's unerring clear-sightedness into human behaviour (*Widow's Tears*), the elaborate, hilarious schemes of disguise and impersonation cooked up by the ready wits of Bould or William Smalshankes (*Amends, Ram Alley*). Ricardo, rather, is the kind of man who rejoices at being bailed out of arrest but never thinks to request bail for his friends as well, and when they remind him, does it so reluctantly and half-heartedly that it is no surprise he is refused (2.2.116-39). As for clear-sightedness, he entirely misjudges the widow's susceptibility to sexual innuendo, while his trick to entrap her into marriage is simple and underhanded rather than entertainingly witty: he has two hidden witnesses overhear her give her "hand and faith" to marry a man who loves her for herself, and then insists the statement constitutes a promise to marry him (2.1.70-83). Instead of winning the widow by his own resources, or enlisting aid from a witty young companion, Ricardo seeks to uphold his trap through a prolonged lawsuit, in which he is backed by the rich and elderly Second Suitor. Any number of earlier widow-wooing plots would have shown Middleton ways to make Ricardo attractive while still playing up his aggression, audacity, taste for obscene innuendo, and obsession with the widow's money. He elects, however, not to use them, instead letting those same characteristics appear quite unattractive.
The first scene in which Ricardo appears thus works less to endear him to the audience than it does to set up what may be seen as two important lenses through which one may view the action to come. First, the scene lays bare the relationship between the image of the rich, lustful widow, sexually aggressive wooing, and a suitor’s insecurity about seeking to marry a woman socially and financially his superior. While Ricardo would be the last man to give heed to moralists, he is uncomfortably aware of the dangers which Gouge warns of as awaiting the man who marries in disregard of “equalitie in outward estate and wealth”: “if a rich woman mary a poore man, she will looke to be the master, and to rule him: so as the order which God hath established will be cleane perverted: and the honour of mariage laid in the dust” (190). This particular kind of disorder, needless to say, had no more appeai to the worldly man than to the pious. Secondly, the scene explicitly draws attention to itself and to the plot it initiates as a piece of theatre determined by theatrical conventions.

To return to the first point, Ricardo’s opening speech reveals, beneath its apparently confident tone, a certain uneasiness about his financial dependence on the widow he plans to marry:

Nay mark, mark it Francisco: It was the naturalest curtesie that ever was ordain’d; A yong Gentleman being spent, to have a rich widow set him up agen: to see how fortune has provided for all mortalities ruins; your College for your old standing Scholer, your Hospital for your lame creeping Souldier, your Baud for your mangled Rorer, your open house for your Beggar, and your Widow for your Gentleman. (1.2.1-7)
To begin with, the sexual quibble of “spent . . . set up” strikes the keynote for what Ricardo will continue to do—with escalating insistence—throughout the rest of this scene: that is, he compensates for his discomfort over the wealth and social status he lacks by shifting the focus to his sexual capacities. Ricardo is “spent”—bankrupt—and needs the widow to “set him up” by repairing his fortunes, but to maintain his bravado such a statement must be couched in terms that depict the widow as taking sexual pleasure in both his “spendings” and his “setting up.” All but the first of the analogies which follow, however, suggest that he approaches the widow’s “curtesie” with a certain amount of reluctance and distaste, for a “Baud,” a “Hospital” (with its contemporary connotations of poverty and charity), or an open house for beggars are all remedies of last resort, scarcely more agreeable than the griefs they assuage. A similar analogy, with even more uneasy undertones of financial dependence, appears a few lines later:

And as at a Sheriff’s table, O blest custome,
A poor indebted Gentleman may dine,
Feed well, and without fear, and depart so,
So to her lips, fearless I come and go? (1.2.43-46)

Again Ricardo puts a sexual spin on the notion of his “feeding” off the widow’s substance, but Middleton’s audience would also have known that the indebted gentlemen who fed at the Sheriff’s table—that is, on his leftovers—were men living on charity in debtors’ prison (Levine 143 n. 43). To Ricardo’s anxious mind, the widow’s household offers an equivocal haven—a place where his material needs are met, but where he is also faced with the imprisonment of marriage and threatened with subjection to the ruling power.
Faced with this potential threat to his masculine authority, Ricardo seeks reassurance from another facet of his masculinity, his sexual prowess. The compensatory technique is made particularly explicit in one exchange:

Francisco: I protest Sir, I should not have the face, though, to come to a rich Widow with nothing.

Ricardo: Why, art thou so simple, as thou mak’st thy self? do’st think y’faith I come to a rich Widow with nothing?

Francisco: I mean with state not answerable to hers. (1.2.23-27)

Ricardo knows very well that Francisco is talking about the inequality between his “state” and Valeria’s—the word is suggestive of not only “estate” or property, but of a respectable manner of living, and of “status” or position among one’s peers—but he insists that his virility, his “thing,” is a satisfactory substitute for the “state” he lacks, cancelling out the ignominy of coming to a rich widow with “nothing.”

Having established how Ricardo relies on his virility to bolster his courage in approaching the widow, Middleton goes on to show exactly how this sexual compensation translates into the kind of sexually aggressive, even violent courtship with which a young suitor conventionally wins a rich widow. The scene sets up a little play within the play as Ricardo (who boasts of having bedded a thousand women) invites the inexperienced Francisco to “make me your woman” (1.2.78) and to practise on him the speeches with which he wishes to seduce Philippa, the wife of an old Justice. It is an extremely funny episode, and I do not mean to suggest that it (or indeed, any of the play) needs to be taken “seriously” for the compensation I describe to be visible. Rather, it seems probable that an audience familiar with the violent courtship of a widow from plays like Ram Alley and Tu Quoque would have been able to thoroughly enjoy the scene
as a hilarious, revealing parody of aggressive widow-wooing. The play-acting begins with Ricardo in the female role, but when Francisco objects that the woman he portrays is unrealistically accommodating (a point to which I shall return shortly) the two men switch roles, with Francisco playing the kind of aloof and inaccessible lady that answers better to his experience. At first, Ricardo is able to keep his sense of reality separate from Francisco's impersonation—"A scornefull Gom, and at the first dash too: / My Widow never gave me such an answer" (1.2.115-16)—but he is rapidly sucked into the fiction, first identifying Francisco's generic scornful lady with the widow, and eventually crossing the boundary between make-believe and reality to the extent that he perceives Francisco as Valeria herself. Growing steadily angrier and more determined to succeed as Francisco politely rebuffs him, Ricardo is pushed over the edge into sexual aggression when Francisco reminds him of the "woman's" superiority, insulting his poverty and lack of social prestige—"Hang thee base fellow" (1.2.124). Touched on his sore point, Ricardo erupts:

[Aside] Now by this light, he thinks he do'st indeed, nay then have at your plumb-tree faith, ile not be foild. [Aloud] Though you seem to be careless Madam, as you have enough wherwithall to be, yet I doe, must, and will love you. (1.2.125-28)

Anxiously aware that Valeria's "wherwithall" entitles her to treat him with contempt, he reacts by physically forcing his "love" on her, constructing her as a "Quean," someone he can "have much adoe with," a mere woman who can be kissed into submission, all images which bring her down from the pedestal of social superiority and endow him with sexual power:
Ricardo:  
[Aside] What a pestilent Quean’s this? I shall have much adoe with her I see that; [Aloud] tell me as y’ar a woman lady, what serve kisses for? But to stop all your mouths.

[Kisses Francisco violently, falling to the ground on top of Francisco.]

Francisco:  
Hold, hold Ricardo.

Ricardo:  
Disgrace me Widow.

Francisco:  
Art mad, I’m Francisco?

Attilio:  
Signior Ricardo, up, up.

Ricardo:  
Who is’t? Francisco?

Francisco:  
Francisco, quoth’a? what, are you mad Sir?

Ricardo:  
A bots on thee, thou do’st not know what injury thou hast done me, I was i’th’ fairest dream, this is your way now, and you can follow it.

Francisco:  
’Tis a strange way me thinks. (1.2.130-42)

Ricardo’s “fairest dream,” from which he is loathe to be wakened, is precisely the dream, or fantasy, which the theatre has conventionally promulgated: that a rich widow is easily caught by the suitor whose sexual aggression can most stir her lust.

But here, even within the fiction of *The Widow*, this dream does not pass for reality. It takes place, instead, within an explicit piece of play-acting, complete with a young male “actor” who, at least to Ricardo’s active imagination, plays a woman so convincingly that even a costume is unnecessary. Moreover, the entire scene is full of meta-theatrical allusions, repeated reminders to the audience that what they are watching is written by a playwright, performed by a company of actors, and marketed by a theatre
to a paying public. Ricardo refers to Francisco as “as likely a fellow as any is in the company” (1.2.10-11), and jokes that the young man would be tongue-tied with bashfulness if he, Ricardo, were to change his costume and “put on a Farthingale” (1.2.82). Stating that he will modulate his female impersonation so as not to make Francisco forget his lines in confusion or arousal—“I shall put him out at first else . . . . If he be not out now ile be hang’d” (1.2.92, 100-01)—Ricardo draws attention to the actors, the script and its author. The dialogue thus prepares the audience for a point towards the end of the scene where Middleton lays bare The Widow’s approach to the fantasy of profiting from a widow’s lust. Having been pulled off Francisco and brought out of his “fairest dream” of sexual conquest, Ricardo grumbles

Learn you to play a woman not so scornfully then,
For I am like the Actor that you spoke on,
I must have the part that overcomes the Lady,
I never like the Play else.—Now your friendship,
But to assist a subtle trick I ha’ thought on,
And the rich Widow’s mine within these three hours. (1.2.143-48)

Ricardo is speaking about actors, but when he says “I never like the play else” the implication of these lines shifts suddenly to the audience, for the audience, far more than the actors, are the ones whom it is crucial to have like the play. As the prologue insists, “to make you merry, / Is all th’ambition ’t has; and fullest aym / Bent at your smiles, to win it self a name” (2-4). If a playwright is to cater to conventional tastes, Ricardo’s lines imply, the widow must be more accommodating than Francisco’s “scornful” impersonation, and the young suitor must “have the part that overcomes the Lady.” The

7 The allusions are listed in Taylor’s notes to The Widow at 1.2.14; 1.2.95; 1.2.103; 1.2.111; 1.2.149; 1.2.153.
play suggests that it will provide *its* audience all this before they leave the theatre—"the rich Widow's mine within these three hours"—but by breaking open the illusion to show the conventions at work, it lifts the audience above the fantasy, above those who would accept it as a truth about widows and above the plays which purvey it as such.

The scene contains yet another meta-theatrical reference to satisfying an audience, which has a similar effect of laying open the fantasy. Observing Valeria's egalitarian reception of suitors both rich and poor, Ricardo is pleased by the thought of the widow as pliable and without volition, a "gift" willing to be bestowed by fortune on whomever fortune chooses:

Sh'as told him [the second Suitor] those that profess love to her
Shall have the libertie to come and goe,
Or else get him gone first; she knows not yet
Where fortune may bestow her, she's her gift,
Therefore to all will shew a kind respect. (1.2.37-41)\(^8\)

Valeria, as the play will shortly reveal, is very far from the kind of widow who will passively allow herself to be seized by whomever is neediest and most virile. But even before we meet Valeria the scene adds a comment on where such images of the yielding widow come from, for shortly after making this speech Ricardo himself begins to play exactly the kind of easily-wooed woman he spoke of. When Francisco objects that his portrayal is unrealistic—"one shall seldom meet with a Lady so kind, as thou playdst her" (1.2.104-05)—Ricardo replies "Not altogether perhaps: he that draws their pictures must flatter 'em a little, they'l look he that plays 'em should doo't a great deal then"

\(^8\) It is difficult to tell whether "she knows not ... a kind respect" continues Valeria's words to the Second Suitor, or whether it is Ricardo's interpretation of her preceding statement ("those that profess ... get him gone first"). However, even if Valeria does declare herself to be "fortune's gift," she is merely doing what she describes at 2.1.25-27—telling the suitors what they want to hear.
(1.2.106-08). The joke here is that what Ricardo believes women in the audience would consider a flattering depiction of their sex is in fact what he thinks women ought to be like. His ideal woman is sexually “kind” and acquiescent to her suitor’s desires, whereas the women of the audience would be more likely to consider such a woman to be both unwary and unchaste, hardly the way they would wish to be thought of. And it is a joke which draws attention to the fact that “women” on stage may be drawn without reference to or understanding of actual women’s perceptions of their sex’s behaviour. Instead, female characters such as Valeria and the stage widows before her are crafted, acted, and manipulated by men—“he that plays ’em” and he that writes them or “draws their pictures” in a playscript. Indeed, the spectacle of Ricardo and Francisco impersonating ladies draws attention to the boy actors beneath all the play’s “women.” The accuracy with which men can portray women is made fun of in Ricardo’s self-interested misunderstanding of what should “flatter ’em”; but men, as comically exaggerated by Ricardo’s all-too-thorough suspension of disbelief when Francisco plays a woman, are also liable to take these male theatrical constructions of women for true representations of the real thing. By bringing these issues out in the open, The Widow ensures that its audience does not make Ricardo’s mistake.

When Valeria first appears on stage, however, she is very much as a woman may wish to be played. Her first speech shows her to be witty and straightforward, mixing sound moral sense with a healthy, humourous cynicism about men. Amused and disgusted by a “spic’d Coxcomb” who came to court her with “his right worshipfull idolatrous face / . . . most fearfully painted” (2.1.6-8), she reveals her own refusal to wear makeup as an attractive mixture of Christian virtue and a self-assured integrity that scorns to cater to men’s desires:
I'm a woman
Yet I praise heaven, I never had the ambition
To goe about to mend a better Workman,
She ever shames her self i' th' end, that do's it.
He that likes me not now, as heaven made me,
I will never hazard hell to doe him pleasure;
Nor lye every night like a Woodcock in paste
To please some gaudy Goose i' th' morning.

(2.1.13-20)

She reveals, moreover, that there is a shrewd reason and a good dose of suspicion behind the behaviour that has led Ricardo to view her as passive and yielding:

Heaven send me one that loves me, and I'm happy,
Of whom ile make great tryall ere I have him,
Though I speak all men fair, and promise sweetly,
I learn that of my Suitors, 'tis their own,
Therefore injustice 'twere to keep it from 'em.

(2.1.23-27)

What is most remarkable about Valeria as a stage widow, though, is that despite her avowed intention to remarry with "one that loves [her]," she does not at any time betray the least amount of sexual appetite. Her speech throughout the play is free from a widow's usual bawdy double entendres that imply unconscious desires; she does not express admiration for comely men, nor state that she finds any of her suitors attractive, nor utter a single "beshrew my blood!" or any other remark suggestive of sexual longing. Her wish to remarry is presented as an unremarkable fact, and her only criteria are that
her husband be loving and not mercenary, not that he fill the usual requirements of the youngest, the handsomest, and the most promising in bed.

As Valeria in no way takes a moral stance against sexuality, her complete lack of the signs of lust does not work to suggest that a “good” widow is without appetite, but rather to throw into relief Ricardo’s insistence on imagining her as desirous. Where he believes himself to be playing on her susceptibilities, he is in fact addressing himself to a lustful widow who does not exist. He enters to Valeria with an elaborate and gratuitous double entendre, beginning his greeting in mid-sentence for the purpose of adding, “I alwaies desire when I come to a Widow, to begin i’th’ middle of a sentence, for I presume she has a bad memory of a woman that cannot remember what goes before” (2.1.30-32). He again tries to draw her attention to his genitals when he assures her that having me, y’have the truth of a man, all that you see of me is full mine own, and what you see, or not see, shall be yours: I ever hated to be beholding to art, or to borrow anything but money.

(2.1.55-58)

And to accentuate his own virility, he threatens to castrate his painted rival, swearing “doe but show him me Widow, and let me never hope for comfort, if I doe not immediately gueld him, and grind his face upon one o’th’ stones” (2.1.46-48). Valeria, in keeping with her characterization at the start of the scene, tolerates him with a kind of mocking amusement, teasing him with insinuations of effeminacy—“Stay, stay Sir, let me look upon you well, / Are not you painted too?” (2.1.33-34)—and deflecting his

9 Oakes makes the same point about Ricardo’s construction of Valeria, observing that “the male perceives desire where restraint prevails. Playwrights seem to have been acutely aware of this peculiar sort of projection. In fact, the impecunious man’s lustification of the rich widow is the fulcrum on which Middleton’s The Widow rests” (258).
outrageous boast with the dry rejoinder, “suffices y’have exprest me your love and valour, and manly hate against that unmanly pride” (2.1.49-50).

In Valeria’s presence, as in his earlier scene with Francisco, Ricardo turns to sexual innuendo as a crutch to support him against the threat of the widow’s financial superiority and independence. When she remarks on his unpaid debts, he boldly invites her to do herself a favour and pay them (by marrying him), conflating her supposed “will” to help him out of debt with “will” in its carnal sense:

Ricardo: What matter is’t? if you be pleas’d to do’t for me, I hold it as good.

Valeria: Oh, soft you Sir I pray.

Ricardo: Why y’faith you may and you will.

Valeria: I know that Sir.

Ricardo: Troth, and I would have my will then if I were as you.

Ther’s few women else but has. (2.1.60-66)

As Valeria reminds him that her “will” is to marry a man who loves her for herself and not for her wealth (a position from which the little exchange about debts has just disqualified him), she unwittingly falls into his trap, pledging her “hand and faith” to marry “him that do’s the thing you wish for” (2.1.72-75). Francisco and Attilio then emerge from hiding to uphold Ricardo’s claim that her words constitute a betrothal to him, leaving Valeria no choice but to fight them in court. An independent, knowledgeable woman with enough means to support her case, she has no trouble standing up for what is rightfully hers to control:

As for you Gentlemen, ile take course against you;

You came into my house without my leave;
Your practices are cunning, and deceitful;
I know you not, and I hope law will right me. (2.1.105-08)

Faced with the widow at her most assertive and threatening, Ricardo tries to undermine her with yet another jab at her sexuality:

It is sufficient that your husband knows 'em
'Tis not your business to know every man,
An honest wife contents her self with one. (2.1.109-11)

His lines turn Valeria's indignation lewdly against her in an attempt to reduce her to a wife for whom "knowledge" of men is sexually suspect. Here as before, Ricardo's insistence on sexualizing the widow reveals itself as a tactic to counteract the threat of her power. It is not surprising that he is too proud to sue her "under forma pauperis" (2.1.103-04) and would rather rob to pay his lawyers than marry Valeria in the humiliating position of a man dependent on the charity of the court.\(^\text{10}\)

That Ricardo feels the need to trap Valeria into marriage rather than wooing her in the usual way reveals in itself the fragility of his masculine self-confidence. But what of Valeria's treatment of Ricardo? I have stated that the play does everything it can to support Valeria's rejection of her avowedly mercenary suitor, and so it is necessary to understand how much of her behaviour is straightforward resistance and how much is a shrewd test of his intent. While Valeria's lines, "Heaven send me one that loves me, and I'm happy, / Of whom ile make great tryall ere I have him" (2.1.23-24) might conceivably be understood to motivate her actions throughout the rest of the plot, it is hardly possible that an audience would perceive her resistance to Ricardo as an extended

\(^{10}\) "Forma Pauperis" is a legal term meaning 'in the state of a pauper,' where pauper is defined as 'one allowed, on account of poverty, to sue or defend in a court of law without paying costs.' (See OED, 'pauper,' entry 1a) (Levine, "Middleton's The Widow" 19).
test. In fact, all opportunity—even all necessity—of testing Ricardo effectively vanishes when he springs his trap. Not only does Valeria rightly conclude then that Ricardo does *not* love her for herself—"Am I betraid to this then? then I see / 'Tis for my wealth, a womans wealth's her Traitour" (2.1.85-86)—but she is now forced to play by *his* rules, defending herself in court rather than administering any "great tryall" of her own. Valeria’s attempts, midway through the lawsuit, to settle out of court by paying Ricardo “a thousand dollars” (4.1.102) or by giving him the well-dowered Violetta as a bride (4.1.140-44), are thus most logically seen as motivated by an honest desire to get rid of him and to put an end to a suit that might well conclude by forcing the marriage upon her. Only after Valeria wins the lawsuit does she begin any test of her suitors’ mercenariness, and she performs it by conveying her property in trust to her brother Brandino. I will return to Valeria’s test in relation to the play’s ending, but for now I wish to make clear that there is no reason to believe that her attitude throughout most of the play—an angry determination to be quit of Ricardo—is feigned.

Although the play never takes us inside the courtroom where the lawsuit is being fought, the skirmishes that erupt as the combatants come and go from it are indicative of the disharmony that would plague the match Ricardo is suing for, a loveless union of economic unequals. By this point, Ricardo’s legal fees are being paid by the Second Suitor who, annoyed at the First Suitor’s apparent advantage with Valeria, decides to find his "venery" (4.1.30) in wrangling instead of wiving. Ricardo and the Second Suitor (who is also Ricardo’s creditor) enjoy an odd little relationship, part homoerotic and part filial—the older man addresses the younger as both "sweet honey" (2.2.114) and “my adoption, / My chosen child” (4.1.24-25)\footnote{The erotic implications of the Second Suitor’s endearments are suggested when he states “I have no other venery but vexation, / That’s all my honey now” (4.1.30).}—and Ricardo’s confidence is sufficiently
bolstered by his wealthy patron’s support for him to attack Valeria on the financial issues he previously insisted on deflecting into sexual innuendo. Informing her that she is the woman he has “reserv’d for wife,” Ricardo scolds Valeria,

    Now before conscience, y’ar a wilfull housewife.

Valeria: How?
Ricardo: I, and I fear you spend my goods lavishly.
Valeria: Your goods?
Ricardo: I shall miss much I doubt me,
When I come to look over the Inventorie.
Valeria: Ile give you my word you shall sir.
Ricardo: Look too’t Widow,
A night may come will call you to accompt for’t.

    (4.1.53-61)

Ricardo’s casual appropriation of the widow’s property and Valeria’s indignation provide a foretaste of the conventional conflict between a rich remarried widow and her poor young husband over who will control the household wealth. Swetnam describes the classic scenario: “if thou make provision to fare well in thy house she will bid thee spend that which thou broughtest thy selfe. If thou shewe thy selfe sparing she will say thou shalt not pinch her of that which is her owne” (60). But here, contrary to the usual portrayal of such conflicts, the widow cannot be dismissed as either an unreasonable old shrew or the deserving victim of her own poor choice. Instead, Middleton shows Valeria to have every right to control her wealth as she sees fit—it is honestly her own and not, like many a comedy-widow’s money, the ill-gotten profits of an unethical first husband, and she is obviously capable of governing it wisely. Unlike the avaricious Zilia in A
_Discourse of the Great Crueltie of a Widow_, Valeria is in no way condemned for her tenacious refusal to yield her estate to Ricardo in marriage, and Ricardo’s presumption to seize it by coercion comes off as the height of injustice, not as a right he has won by superior wit or by overwhelming the widow with desire.

A marriage between this pair, the play suggests, would be a constant battle for sexual and financial mastery, with Ricardo trying to sexually muscle his way to authority over Valeria’s property and Valeria, not at all susceptible to this approach, firmly aware of what is hers. While Ricardo thinks a widow should be amenable to settling financial disagreements in bed—“A night may come will call you to accompt for’t”—Valeria does not subscribe to the opinion of the contemporary jest-book widow who insisted that she “wolde not wedde for bodily pleasure” but then refused a husband who “lacketh his privy members” with the explanation “I wyile that myne husbande shall have that, where with we may be reconciled, if we falle at variance” (Hazlitt 95). In _The Widow_, there is little evidence of love on either side—Valeria expresses not the slightest affection for her suitor before the final scene, while Ricardo’s declarations of love are highly suspect.\(^\text{12}\) The Second Suitor’s prediction of what their marriage would be like if embittered by poverty (for he sees money as the key to happiness) may well also apply to a couple torn apart by disputes over wealth, only with more “household-stuffe” as ammunition:

> Then will they nev’r agree; that’s a sure point,

> He’l give her a black eye within these three daies,

\(^{12}\) For example, when he claims to love the widow “not for her wealth but for her person too” (1.2.161), he is responding to Francisco’s reluctance to participate in the trap unless Ricardo loves Valeria (Oakes 261); he also proclaims his love in an attempt to soothe Valeria’s anger after she realizes she is trapped (2.1.87, 104). Elsewhere, any non-mercenary inclination he shows towards Valeria is a mixture of crude sexual appetite (4.1.118-9) and a determination to pursue his course in the face of the widow’s opposition (2.2.54-6).
Beat half her teeth out by Alhallontide,
And break the little household-stuffe they have
With throwing at one another: O sweet sport.

(5.1.427-31)

The audience is thus quite unprepared for the play’s last scene, where the only logic governing the plot’s resolution is the kind which Ricardo invokes back in the first act:

For I am like the Actor that you spoke on,
I must have the part that overcomes the Lady,
I never like the Play else. (1.2.144-46)

Having for the duration of the play allowed Valeria to break free from the stereotype of the stage widow, Middleton suddenly plugs in all the features of a conventionally happy ending, throwing Valeria into the arms of the man she has fought in court to avoid for the past four and a half acts. Valeria in fact wins the lawsuit, and at first seems as relieved as one would expect, sternly informing Ricardo that even if the Law had “unfortunately put you upon me, / You had lost your labour” (5.1.355-56), because she has conveyed her property to Brandino in a deed of gift. The First and Second Suitors then refuse to marry Valeria without her money and lands, but Ricardo, incredibly, agrees to take her in her new state of poverty. For a moment, the old, mercenary Ricardo is replaced by a tender, self-sacrificing lover:

Ricardo: I swore too much
        To be believed so little.

Valeria: Was it you then?
        Beshrew my heart for wronging of you.
Ricardo: Welcome blessing,
Are you mine faithfully now?

Valeria: As love can make one.¹³

First Suitor: Why this fills the Common-wealth so full of beggars,
Marrying for love, which none of mine shall doe.

(5.1.398-406)

While the audience is still probably blinking in wonderment, Ricardo is miraculously forgiven his debts by the Second Suitor (Valeria refuses to marry if Ricardo is in debt, and the Second Suitor maliciously wishes to further what he believes will be a violently miserable marriage), and Valeria reveals that the supposed deed of gift was but a test of Ricardo’s love: “’twas but a deed in trust, / And all to prove thee, whom I have found most just” (5.1.451-52). The erased debts are reminiscent of William Smalshankes’s fortunes in Ram Alley, Spendall’s in Tu Quoque, or Witgood’s in A Trick, but are more purely coincidental than any of these; the love test recalls Wit Without Money, where Lady Heartwell tests Vallentine by announcing she has sold her lands, or Widow Raysby’s equally token test of Spendall, but Ricardo has so thoroughly proved—through the entrapment and the lawsuit, if nothing else—that he is after the widow’s money that the convention of the love test is rendered utterly absurd. By plugging in the conventional ending after spending the play mocking, exposing, and refuting the lusty widow fantasy, Middleton satirically offers up the fantasy to an audience which may no longer want it and which is now enabled to see how it distorts the multiplicity of widows’ desires and choices into a single mould created out of the interests and anxieties of men. Valeria

¹³ This is the “ambiguous” admission of love to which I referred earlier. Does Valeria mean that her love for Ricardo makes her his, or that she will be his “faithfully” to the extent that his love—if he continues to prove it—makes her so?
marries Ricardo not because she is the experienced, unimpassioned, intelligent woman with whom the audience has become acquainted, but because she is a stage widow, faced with a self-proclaimed stage hero who must “overcome” her, and subject to the manipulations of any playwright who, as Middleton implies with this jarring introduction of convention, can push her into a profitable fantasy ending. If Middleton had ended the play with Valeria’s rejection of Ricardo, she would merely have proved an exception to the rule. But by marrying her to him, he draws attention to the playwright’s hand behind the scene and exposes the coercive conventions that have made the stage widow a flattened, predictable figure destined to repeatedly fulfil a male fantasy.

To point up the play’s final joke of foisting convention upon a now-enlightened audience, Ricardo steps forward with the epilogue:

Hee that without your likings, leaves this place,
Is like one falls to meat, and forgets grace.
And that’s not handsome trust me, no,
Our rights being paid, and your loves understood,
My Widow and my meat, then do’s me good;
[To Valeria, who steps forward to join him]
I ha’ no money Wench, I told thee true,
[To the audience] For my report, pray let her hear’t from you.

(5-11)

Reminding everyone, with his unsavoury allusion to feeding off the widow, that he is still as mercenary as he ever was, Ricardo uses theatrical convention to coerce the audience into showing approval of him, just as convention forced the transformation of Valeria from his adversary to his bride. Obliged by the custom of the theatre to clap when the
play is over, the audience finds their applause suborned as a recommendation of Ricardo to Valeria. And while some of them, oblivious or resistant to Middleton’s sleight of hand, may willingly applaud Ricardo, others will laugh at the joke on themselves, applauding the cleverness of a play which pokes fun at the anxieties behind the lusty widow fantasy and at the conventions which pander to them.
Conclusion

The outright parody of *The Widow* is the final and fullest expression of Middleton’s skeptical, mocking attitude towards the theatrical convention which, with Ricardo, declares that “It was the naturalest curtesie that ever was ordain’d; A young Gentleman being spent, to have a rich Widow set him up agen” (*The Widow* 1.2.1-3).

Inclined from the start, as *The Phoenix* and *The Puritan* indicate, to portray the wealthy remarrying widow as more of a threat than a prize, Middleton moves from *Michaelmas Term*’s gentle send-up of the rescue-by-widow convention, through the subversive subtexts which follow the non-existent widow and the transvestite suitor through *A Trick* and *No Wit*, to ultimately focus on the embattled widows of *More Dissemblers* and *The Widow*, a focus which throws into relief the self-interested delusions of the men around them. Although Middleton’s first use of the remarrying widow motif may well be an attempt to incorporate into one of his earliest comedies his own experience of what a marriage between a well-off, respectable widow and a bankrupt adventurer could be like, one can only speculate whether his early life in the middle of his mother and stepfather’s legal battles gave him unusual insight into the dynamics of such situations and led him back repeatedly to the scenario of the widow and her suitors as his understanding of those dynamics developed and matured. It is equally likely, perhaps, that the playwright’s predilection for playing with audience expectations and undermining stage conventions led him to take on—along with other conventions, such as fifth-act redemptions and Fletcherian reversals of fortune—the fantasy of a rich widow whose desires lower her into the grasp of a poor but virile young man. As he staged and re-staged versions of the fantasy, watching the plays of his rivals through a parodist’s keen eye, and revising old patterns to keep his own comedies fresh and appealing to the widest possible audience
over a decade and a half, Middleton may not have needed any proto-feminist sympathy for the widow's plight to recognize—and to expose to laughter—the anxious suitor fantasizing a lustful widow to bolster his masculinity in compensation for the threat her wealth and power posed to his future authority as a husband. His sleight of hand with this particular convention resulted nonetheless in comedies which offered an alternative to the common and degrading belief that a woman's passion outweighed her reason and subjected her to the demands of her sexual needs—a myth neatly embodied by the widow whose financial or ethical scruples about a suitor could be rapidly overcome with sexual audacity.

While Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*, with its thorough anatomization of two lustful widows, set the benchmark for this stock figure in 1605, Middleton's last three comic widows—Lady Goldenfleece, the Duchess, and Valeria—follow a period early in the century's second decade in which lascivious widows like Taffata of *Ram Alley* shared the stage with such spirited but irreproachably chaste characters as Lady Bright (*Amends for Ladies*) and Widow Raysby (*Tu Quoque*). But as my discussion of *Tu Quoque* has suggested, the practice of dressing up the lustful widow in a little pre-marital chastity merely gave the fantasy of winning her and her wealth an enhanced appeal by managing the anxiety that the remarried widow will prove insatiable and cuckold her husband. And while it may be quite obvious in the context of this study that Vallentine's threats of how he will give Lady Heartwell "such proofe" of his manhood (*Wit Without Money* 5.5.22), and Spendall's violent and sexually explicit demands that Widow Raysby, his benefactor, be "obedient" to his suit (*Tu Quoque* 2527), are manifestations of the anxious compensation which the rich widow provokes in the young men who court her, such aggression as it appears in the above plays and others is naturalized and justified by the
widow's eventual desirous acquiescence in her suitor's demands. Even when the widow insists on postponing consummation until after marriage, her avowed desire for the sexually aggressive young man makes his aggression look like a clever tactic to access a widow's weakness rather than a symptom of the weakness—the emasculation—he fears in and for himself. Middleton's later comedies go further, however, than simply presenting a "virtuous" widow of this type. Whether his widows are slightly unconventional, like Lady Goldenfleece, resolutely un-lustful, like Valeria, or even non-existent, like "Widow Medler," he rings parodic changes on the traditional widow-wooing plot that call attention to the discrepancy between the widow and what the suitor fears and desires her to be. The aggressive posturings and stereotyping assumptions of Ricardo, of the cross-dressed Kate, and of the horde of mercenary suitors who pursue "Widow Medler" become transparent, absurd, a reflection on them rather than on any fixed image of a widow's "nature."

It does not appear that Middleton's progressive undermining of the lusty widow fantasy was rooted in any noticeable shift in societal mores over the period in which he wrote. While Middleton's theatrical career was a long and durable one, the thirteen or so years spanned by his comedies containing widows, or even the quarter-century of the playwright's professional life, is a very short time when it comes to the exceedingly slow change in the cultural attitudes towards marriage, sex, and domestic relations which underlie the fantasy of using a widow's desires to neutralize the threat of her power as a wife. As Kathleen M. Davies has shown, theoretical advice on marriage and domestic government displayed far more continuity than change over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and as the evidence (reaching approximately from the 1560s to the 1630s) collected in my first chapter suggests, there is little reason to believe that popular notions
or actual practice changed significantly either. The factors which play a part in the fantasy—the longing for the wealth and prestige that a widow and her established household can provide; the acceptance of a man’s right to authority over his wife; the fear that a richer, older, more experienced wife will place her husband in emasculating subjection: the belief in a sexually experienced woman’s heightened susceptibility to carnal desire; the stigma of cuckoldry and the threat of a wife’s insatiability—were as relevant in 1625 as in 1600 and spanned, it would seem, a wide range of social classes. In 1586 the debt-ridden grocer and “sea captain” Thomas Harvey was attracted to the modest funds and middle-class comforts of the Widow Middleton but found himself with a wife wisely determined to control his access to her money. Writing in 1609, in much grander circumstances, Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland, recalled a similar situation and advised his son not to repeat his father’s mistakes. Percy, wanting a wife that “should bring with her meat in her mouth to maintain her expense” (94), married the widowed Lady Dorothy Perrot, holder of certain profitable leases. But the remarried widow, as he bitterly recorded, used her property to struggle for the upper hand in the marriage: “though I married her within small time of her husband’s decease, these leases were made over to her daughter . . . so as it was used as a curb to me afterwards, not yielding to that allowance she required” (94-95). She appears to have also subjected her husband to another “curb,” for directly after he tells the story of the leases, Percy counsels his son on what to do when a wife “threaten[s] cuckoldry, either out of seeming or in deed—a stratagem sometimes used to impone in awe” (95). But if Lady Dorothy embodied what men feared from widows, the 1628 courtship of Elizabeth Bennett reveals what some of them continued to hope. The widow of a prosperous London merchant, Elizabeth awoke one night to find that one of her suitors, a Dr. Raven, had made his way into her bedroom
and was putting "his legge into the bedde" (Rous 34). Dr. Raven (having seen too many plays?) had bribed the Widow Bennett’s servants for his access, evidently under the impression that a widow’s hand was best won between the sheets. He was, as it happens, wrong—when the startled widow realized who it was, she screamed "Thieves!" and "Murder!", had him arrested, and eventually made a prudent match with his more illustrious rival, Sir Heneage Finch (Fraser 89-92).¹ The Widow Bennett and her resistance stand for one of the underlying assumptions of my work—that the fantasy of a widow’s lust sprang from causes having little to do with the multiplicity of reasons that motivated actual seventeenth-century London widows towards remarriage.

Although most of the contemporary comedies which feature a widow wooed by a young man exaggerate the financial gap between them, the dynamics of anxiety and sexual compensation I have argued for throughout this study require only a relative imbalance of wealth (and secondarily, age and marital experience) to be set in motion. At its core, the lusty widow fantasy was about that perennial object of desire, money. Constructing the rich widow as sexually susceptible gave the less "worthy" suitor the courage to court her in hope that her need for his virility would allow him not only initial access but also the proper measure of financial power in their marriage. As the practice of primogeniture among the upper and upper middle classes² confined the flow of inherited wealth within fairly rigid parameters, for younger brothers—whether riotous like Younger Loveless in The Scornful Lady or not—marrying a widow promised an alternate way of transferring money from the older to the younger generation, one that was not dependent on the passive chance of birth order but on action and merit.

¹ Details of Elizabeth Bennett’s story are found in Larking xiv-xxxiv and Rous 34.
² As Houlbrooke explains, primogeniture was strongest in the upper levels of society, but a strong sentiment in its favour was also found among the "ambitious middling sort" (234).
and journeymen, who ranged from the gentry downwards, marrying a widow could be a short cut through years of hard work. Since a husband’s status generally determined his wife’s and not vice versa, radical social climbing seems to have been less of a goal—at least in the theatrical presentation of the fantasy—than simply obtaining enough money to improve or regain one’s position in the class to which one belonged. The status of a gentleman, for example, was hard to maintain without sufficient funds. As Rappaport observes, “The declining gentleman clung to his status because he possessed an attribute—gentility—which was in some measure immaterial, but ultimately he would lose his grip without the material wealth required to maintain his gentle station in life” (82). Ricardo in The Widow is desperate for Valeria’s money for exactly this reason: in his bankruptcy, his much-cherished gentility has become a joke. “Ricardo?” sneers the Second Suitor, “... he’s a Gentleman beggar, he’ll be hang’d before he be whipt” (2.1.142-43). Further down the social scale, the apprentice Spendall in Tu Quoque is restored to solid merchant prosperity by a wealthy citizen widow; even Tharsalio, whose promotion from the Countess’s former page to her husband in The Widow’s Tears may seem like a dizzying leap up the social ladder, points out that with a “descent ... as honourable” (2.4.177) as that of her more monied suitors, he is merely trying to keep his “sinking” house from being “buried quick in ruin” (2.3.85). The rescue-by-widow scenario is generally respectful of class boundaries.

With its inoffensive approach to matters of class and its apparently ethical pattern of reclaiming the “prodigal son” while disparaging greed (the successful suitor typically beats out a number of older, wealthier men who merely wish to augment their estates), the fantasy of making one’s fortune by offering “love” to a widow could appeal to a wide

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3 On the varying social backgrounds of London apprentices, see Rappaport 305-08.
audience. Versions of it were marketed to the whole spectrum of Londoners. The Blackfriars Boys company, cultivating a high-paying, better educated audience with a taste for satire and sexual cynicism, offered the racy wit of *The Widow's Tears*; apprentices and other Londoners with less disposable income and more mainstream values could enjoy the fortunes of Spendall at the Red Bull. How audience members who may have had interests quite different from those of the heroes of these plays—widows or older married men, for example—would have responded to the spectacle of a widow won by lust remains an open question. They may have viewed it as a conventionally enjoyable rags-to-riches tale, or have seen it as escapism catering to the young (like certain film genres today), or may have been troubled by what they perceived as insulting or unsettling stereotypes. The inclusion, however, of a remarrying widow with a healthy sexual appetite and a passion for a much younger man in a play explicitly designed to be popular with women—*Amends For Ladies*—suggests that the appeal of this stock scenario was not limited to the young bachelors who might be assumed to be its target audience.

It is perhaps, then, a measure of Middleton’s skill as a playwright and as a keen judge of his market that the plays in which he undercuts the fantasy of winning a widow’s wealth are for the most part hilariously parodic, never didactic or heavy-handed in their exposure of the male anxieties underlying the stereotype of the lustful widow. While I have focussed on the methods Middleton uses to undermine this reassuring fantasy, the fact remains that on a certain level, by those who so desired, his comedies could be enjoyed as a simple perpetuation of it: the parodic morality play echoes which undercut Easy’s rescue by Thomasine may be ignored or taken at face value; *A Trick*’s central joke against Hoard—that a *real* widow would have never chosen him over Witgood—may
counterbalance the play’s mocking of how men imagine widows according to their own desires; Lady Goldenfleece and Valeria, whatever else happens in their respective plays, do choose to marry sexually importunate young men, and the Duchess certainly would like to. But the playgoer with an eye and an ear for Middletonian parody—and by the time The Widow appeared on stage, there must have been quite a few who appreciated his brand of wit—would have found him or herself laughing not with the suitor at the widow’s sexual susceptibility but with the playwright at the suitor himself and his anxious, self-serving fantasies that construct the “lusty widow.”
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