Introduction

On the night of the nineteenth of November in 1628, a young widow by the name of Elizabeth Bennett was asleep in her house in the London parish of St. Olave. Only seven months earlier, the Widow Bennett had lost her husband Richard, a wealthy Mercer who had made his wife sole executrix of his estate and heir to two-thirds of it, including their fine house in the Old Jewry and a coach with four horses. As a widow worth £20,000, Elizabeth was already besieged by suitors. On that November night, however, one of them – a physician named John Raven – figured he would get the jump on the others. He bribed Elizabeth's servants to let him into her bedchamber, whereupon, in the words of the diarist John Rous, the widow awoke to find Dr. Raven "put[ting] his legge into the bedde" (34). It appears, though, that not much more of Dr. Raven than his "legge" made it into the widow's bed, for when she realized who it was, she cried out "Thieves!" and "Murder!" and proceeded to have her over-eager suitor hauled off to the constable.[1] Perhaps the doctor's medical training had something to do with why he thought the widow would respond to his methods: "what shall we say," writes Nicholas Fontanus in *The Woman's Doctor* (1652),

> concerning Widowes, who lye fallow, and live sequestered from these *Venerous* conjunctions? we must conclude, that if they be young, of a black complexion, and hairie, and are likewise somewhat discoloured in their cheeks, that they have a spirit of salacity, and feele within themselves a frequent titillation, their seed being hot and prurient, doth irritate and inflame them to *Venery*. (6)

The Elizabethan composer and serial widow-wooer Thomas Whythorne reveals in his memoirs (c. 1576) that any learned assumptions about a widow's "hot and prurient" seed merely complemented conventional wisdom. As a young music teacher and servingman to a widowed gentlewoman, Whythorne seems to have inhabited the opposite end of the spectrum from Raven as far as audacious courtship went; in fact, he confesses that "if it came to making of love by word, sign, or deed, especially in deed . . . I had

no more face to do that than a sheep" (24). However, he came to the same conclusions as the doctor did about what catches a widow's fancy. Though offended by the gentlewoman's witticisms about how she "would fain have [her] man to be in love with [her]" (29), he records that he prudently kept himself in her "good will," intending to "make the most of her that I could to serve my turn" (33–34):

> I . . . was very serviceable to please her; and also would sometimes be pleasant and merry, and also somewhat bold with her. After the which times, she would sometimes tell me in a scoffing manner that I was but a huddypick, and lacked audacity. But I, not construing those words so then, as they did proceed from one who did know her game, or else had learned that, as he that wooeth a maid must be brave in apparel and outward show, so he that wooeth a widow must not carry quick eels in his codpiece, but show some proof that he is stiff before, did think her show of love and liberality bestowed upon me was but to feed her humour. . . (43)

When Whythorne was later rebuffed by another widow, one whom he courted in earnest, he wondered again whether she would have treated him differently had he heeded the proverb advising that "he that wooeth a maid must go trick and trim and in fine apparel; but he that wooeth a widow must go stiff before" (156). "I promise you," he adds hastily, "so was I stiff. But yet, considering that the time was not like to be long to the wedding day . . . and I, loving her, meant not to attempt any dishonesty unto her, for a sinful fact it had been, till we had been married" (156). Ultimately, the circumspect Whythorne had no more success than the presumptuous Raven, for the second widow took exception to his plan to wait three weeks between betrothal and wedding, and called off the match; Raven's widow Bennett, for her part, found a far more illustrious second husband in Sir Heneage Finch, the Recorder of London – the very man, incidentally, before whom Raven had appeared in court to answer for his nocturnal visit.

The unsuccessful romantic escapades of a Caroline doctor and an Elizabethan music teacher provide a useful starting point for a study of the remarrying widow in early modern English comedy, if only for the fact that both men evidently took seriously the stereotype of the lusty widow,[2] that familiar figure who can be traced back through Chaucer's Wife of Bath to Classical literature, most famously Petronius's tale of the Ephesian widow who succumbs to a soldier in her husband's tomb. Widespread and persistent as the "lusty widow" may be, though, she is neither static nor ahistorical. While sexual appetite provides a common thread, Chaucer's affectionately satirized Alisoun of Bath, five-times married fourteenth-century Englishwoman, is obviously not the same as La Veuve, her vicious and

unsavoury French counterpart in Gautier Le Leu's fabliau; both differ from the young widow Doña Endrina, heroine of a lasciviously comic episode in the Medieval Castilian *Libro de Buen Amor*, who in turn bears little resemblance to the vile, sexually rapacious old women who crop up in Roman invective or Aristophanic comedy. The widely re-told story of the widow of Ephesus fulfills one function in the erotic free-for-all context of Petronius's *Satyricon*, where all women – and most men – are equally debauched, and another in the moralized fourteenth-century French version by Jehan Le Fèvre, which concludes with the soldier reviling the widow for her treatment of her husband's corpse; the Jacobean audience of *The Widow's Tears* (1604),[3] George Chapman's dramatization of the same tale, encountered a decidedly different widow than the Restoration readers of John Ogilby's narrative poem *The Ephesian Matron* (1688), a royalist allegory in which the widow represents Britain and her dead husband – Oliver Cromwell – gets what he deserves.[4] The lusty widow, for all her apparent timelessness and universality, is culturally contingent.

One might note then, that Raven and Whythorne did not merely assume that the widows they courted had heightened sexual appetites: they incorporated that assumption – or worried about their failure to incorporate it – into their courtship tactics. And one might also note that in doing so, they resemble a league of fictional suitors on the early modern English stage – characters like Tharsalio in Chapman's *The Widow's Tears*, Bould in Nathan Field's *Amends for Ladies* (1611), or Ricardo in Thomas Middleton's *The Widow* (1616) – who accost the widows they wish to marry with bawdy insinuations, frank sexual boasts, and on more than one occasion, physical aggression. The wealthy widow, the bevy of suitors, the courtships tinged with lust, aggression, and trickery, and the triumph of one man – usually young, virile, and poor – over his rivals, are stock characters and situations in early seventeenth-century comedy, with a popularity that suggests they offered at least a segment of contemporary playgoers some particular satisfaction. Part of my project, then, is to ask a deceptively simple question – why is the early modern widow assumed to be lusty? – and to ignore the seemingly obvious biological (and tautological) explanation furnished by Fontanus. This question's relevance, I might add, becomes all too clear when one realizes that a modern social historian can still draw on the lusty widow stereotype to explain a higher bridal pregnancy rate among eighteenth-century French widows than among first-time brides, claiming 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" (Stone 609). Starting from my own more cautious assumption that the actual sexual desires of real-life early modern widows must have varied beyond the power of generalization, I want to explore the ideological work that this stereotype performed for the men who constructed it. When a woman emerged, at her husband's death, from the patriarchal control of coverture, why did men find it in their interest to deploy the fiction of her inordinate sexual appetite? As the comedies of the period invite us to pay as much attention to the widow's suitors as to the widow herself, what can we learn about early modern constructions of masculinity through the desires, fantasies, and anxieties of the men who sought to replace under coverture a woman with sexual and marital experience, their independent legal equal, and, frequently, their financial superior?

To answer these questions, and to uncover what was at stake in theatrical representations of the remarrying widow and her suitors, it is necessary to go beyond two standards which have conventionally governed critical inquiry on this topic: social history and Shakespeare. While the work of historians such as Jeremy Boulton, Vivian Brodsky Elliott, Amy Erickson, and Barbara Todd is invaluable for grounding the literary scholar in the facts of remarriage – rates and intervals, husbands' wills and widows' property, the kinds of men widows chose to marry, and the premarital settlements they contracted with them – the use of social history to explore dramatic representations of widows has frequently given rise to the kind of literary criticism which seeks to compare stage widows to their real-life counterparts, usually with the scope of examining the playwright's "accuracy" or "sympathy."[5] But there are limits on the value of judging saleable dramatic fantasies by how well they measure up to real-life situations (or rather, to the remaining textual traces of those situations). Moreover, social historians pursue a discipline that does not necessarily include an avid interest in what Catherine Belsey has termed "history at the level of the signifier" or "cultural history": the kind of history in which the theatre participates and by which it is informed. "Cultural history," writes Belsey,

> records meanings and values, which is to say that its concern is not so much what individuals actually did, but more what people wanted to do, wished they had done, what they cared about and deplored. . . . Where practices feature in cultural history, they do so primarily in terms of their meanings – as customs or habits, for example, which demonstrate the values a culture subscribes to. (6)

Where the remarrying widow and her suitors feature most prominently in this "decisively textual" kind of history is in the drama – one of the many

genres of fiction which contribute to "the signifying practices of a society" (Belsey, 8) – but the meaning of these staged courtships and marriages is inseparable from the representation of remarriage in other contemporary texts: popular fictions such as ballads, poems, jests, or prose tales; instructive literature like conduct books, sermons, or legal manuals; and a wide variety of genres which problematize the very distinction between fiction and non-fiction: memoirs and autobiographies, books of "characters," didactic anecdotes, satires, court depositions. If it is axiomatic that any reconstruction of the past is necessarily situated in the present, that we cannot know how early modern women and men would have actually responded to these texts, and that what is extant and accessible provides a mere sliver of the culture they inhabited, it is nonetheless both possible and practical to base our interpretations – of widow-wooing comedies, of the lusty widow stereotype, of playgoers' tastes and suitors' behavior – upon as wide a range of texts and as full an understanding of the culture as possible.

To do otherwise is to risk misinterpretation, or to represent only part of the story as the whole. A range of texts, however, necessarily includes a range of playwrights, and the story of the remarrying widow is one to which new historicist and cultural materialist criticism's predilection for Shakespeare has not done justice.[6] Nearly all the well-known theatrical names of the first quarter of the seventeenth century produced at least one comic remarrying-widow plot: Chapman, Jonson, and Rowley wrote two apiece; Beaumont and Fletcher, two, and Fletcher, alone, one; Middleton turned out an astonishing seven; Dekker, Massinger, Brome, Field, Cooke, and Barry all tried their hands at one, and Haughton contributed a widow subplot to the collaborative *Patient Grissil* (1600).[7] Despite this wealth of plays, though, critical attention to the remarrying widow has been extremely limited; comic plots of remarriage do not seem to have interested Shakespeare, and the best-known remarrying widows, accordingly, are the tragic figure of Gertrude in *Hamlet* (c. 1600) and, perhaps by generic association, Webster's Duchess of Malfi.[8] Under the influence of these two tragedies, a certain set of scholarly assumptions about the early modern widow and a particular interpretation of the lusty widow stereotype have become current. The problem is that these assumptions render the non-Shakespearean comedies – not to mention the behavior of those contemporary gentlemen, Raven and Whythorne – downright mystifying.

To begin with, there is a prevailing notion among both literary critics and social historians that men who courted widows were trying to persuade these women to take a step that contravened their society's ideas of virtue:

widespread moral opposition to the posthumous infidelity of female remarriage is generally assumed to be a facet of the culture's overall patriarchal suppression of women's sexuality and freedom of choice. While a few critics, notably Frank Wadsworth and Lila Geller, have pointed out that after the Reformation, remarriage for widows was sanctioned by Protestant doctrine and was therefore far from universally condemned, 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). Some recent criticism, moreover, has countered that Protestant doctrinal orthodoxies were not necessarily coherent with popular beliefs and practices. Dorothea Kehler, for instance, 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).[9]

When social historians discuss early modern English attitudes towards the remarriage of widows, they paint a similar picture. Again, there are a few voices of dissent, which describe a culture which tolerated and even encouraged remarriage for both sexes,[10] but they are outnumbered by those who claim that widows were enjoined to celibacy and remarriage was condemned. Antonia Fraser, while admitting that remarriage was a very common occurrence, writes that there was "general agreement, except by a few generous-minded or realistic spirits, that a second marriage for women was to be avoided" (84); such marriages, she reports, were often seen as a form of bigamy or cuckoldry (82). Todd cites Vives's *The Instruction of a Christian Woman* (trans. 1529), Erasmus's *De Vidua Christiana* (1529),

St. Paul, and a 1620 English manuscript treatise titled "The Widdowe Indeed" to prove that the seventeenth-century English widow faced both doctrinal opposition to remarriage and "a barrage of propaganda discouraging her from remarrying" ("Demographic," 430). Other historians claim that "attitudes towards the remarriage of widows were increasingly negative during the early modern period" (Mendelson and Crawford, 69); that widows labored under the contradiction of being "expected to remain unmarried and respect the memory of their husbands" even though their lack of a male head "threatened the perceived social order" (Stretton, 10); and that societal disapproval of widow's remarriage was strong enough to erupt in the ritualized hostility of charivari (Chaytor, 43; J. Thompson, 37). The most recent book on widows, *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (1999)[11] deals with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England in chapters by Todd and Elizabeth Foyster: the former reiterates how "remarriage of widows was strongly discouraged," ("Virtuous Widow," 66–67), while the latter claims that remarriage, though common, was "subject to suspicion and disapproval" as shown by "a wealth of English literary material, ranging from advice books to ballads, plays, and medical tracts, which mocks and condemns widows and widowers who remarry" ("Experienced Widow," 109).

If we follow scholarly opinion about the remarrying widow somewhat further, we might conclude that Dr. Raven and his stage counterparts were not only urging widows to incur their society's displeasure by remarrying, but that, in making straightforward appeals to the widows' supposedly heightened sexual appetite, they were going about it in a peculiarly misguided way. The lusty widow stereotype, which Foyster considers to be some of the "harshest criticism" that male authors directed at widows ("Experienced Widow," 110), and Todd describes as "negative" and "deleterious" ("Virtuous Widow," 67), is widely interpreted by critics as an ideological weapon used to enforce a widow's continued celibacy. Consensus holds that the power of this insulting stereotype, so aptly summarized by Middleton's Duke, was that it coerced the widow, at the risk of her reputation, to eschew any kind of behavior – 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). Men feared that widows' sexuality would "disrupt the social order" (Carlton, 127), and "the literary convention of the insatiate widow" was thus "a reflection of societal fear," an attempt "to control her sexuality so that she produce[d] no more children to become competing heirs" (Geller, 288). A similar explanation for why widows were slandered with a reputation for "hypersexuality" suggests 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" (Jankowski, 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 husbande but to the intente that she will lie with him, nor except her lust pricke her" (sig. Dd6v). 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).

Remarriage for widows, then, according to the prevailing scholarly opinion, was generally disapproved of, except in some Protestant theological polemics; 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. These views certainly present a plausible account of how a patriarchal society might work to contain women as they emerged out of wifely subordination and coverture. Plausible as they are, however, they make little sense of the behavior of Raven, Whythorne, and over two decades' worth of widow-wooers on the comic stage. If the lusty widow stereotype was a terrible slander which any normal widow would seek 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 allegedly rapacious sexuality which they could only perceive as overt insults? Why would Chapman's Tharsalio, courting the countess he used to serve as a page, brazenly counter her objection to marrying "one that waited on [her] board" by assuring her that his service "was only a preparation to [his] weight on [her] bed" (*The Widow's Tears*, 1.2.72–73)? Why would the young prodigal Spendall in J. Cooke's *Greene's Tu Quoque* (1611) barge into the bedchamber of a rich and virtuous citizen widow to inform her that he "has both youth and livelihood upon him; / And can at midnight quicken and refresh / Pleasures decayed in [her]" (2538–40)? To reply that men wooed widows with sexual forwardness because they believed that widows were lusty only returns us to a central question: why did men believe widows were lusty? To reply that such wooing reveals "misogyny" (Juneja, "Widow," 9–10), or men's contempt for widows, is perhaps true but equally problematic: a suitor 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. My starting point, then, is the discrepancy between the accepted formulation that male anxiety about a widow's unrestrained sexuality led to the deployment of the stereotype of the lusty widow as a scare tactic to discourage remarriage, and the use to which this stereotype is put in so many comedies of the period. The notion of the widow's inordinate sexual appetite, which dominated early modern discourse on a female "estate" through which a significant proportion of women would pass at one time in their lives, gave rise to stock theatrical characters and situations that have yet to be examined in their full cultural context. There is far more to discover about early modern English attitudes to female remarriage than can be gleaned from the usual suspects: Vives's chapter on widows in *The Instruction of a Christian Woman*, the satirical portrait in Sir Thomas Overbury's *Characters* (1614), and Alexander Niccholes's *A Discourse of Marriage and Wiving* (1615). Going beyond these critical standbys reveals a rich variety of theatrical and non-theatrical texts which concern themselves with the remarrying widow, texts which do not leave her trapped in a paradox, but rather prove mutually illuminating in suggesting an alternate deployment for the prevalent trope of her sexual susceptibility. For while there are indeed certain figures, historical or fictional, who use what Woodbridge terms "charges of lust" as a threat to keep widows celibate – Vives obviously does so, as does Duke Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi*; neither, we might note, is English – in most cases the lusty widow of early modern England appears 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.

In the pages that follow, I will make a case for how this alternate deployment of the stereotype of the lustful widow worked as an enabler rather than a preventer of remarriage, tracing its roots in masculine insecurities, its failure to fully or permanently compensate for those insecurities, and, above all, the integral part it plays in a fantasy which evidently appealed to at least a portion of the theatre patrons of early modern London. The early modern theatre 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" (69), Stephen Greenblatt gives an example of the extent to which the theatre normalized the widow as the center of this fantasy: in his early seventeenth-century summary of *Twelfth Night* (1600), John Manningham is struck by Malvolio's attempt to rise in the world by marrying his mistress, observing that the play had "A good practise in it to make the Steward beleeve his Lady widdowe was in love with him" (176 n.4; Manningham, 18). Manningham's mistaken assumption that the maiden heiress Olivia, in mourning for her brother, is in fact a remarrying widow shows a mind already moving along paths that would become even more well-trodden over the next two decades, while Shakespeare's abbreviated, almost emblematic sketch in *The Taming of the Shrew* (c. 1592) of "a lusty widow . . . / That shall be wooed and wedded in a day" (4.2.50–51) suggests that such plots may have also had a history on the stage prior to 1600. The scenario of the steward, or some equally lowly young man, finding favor with the "Lady widdowe" may not be specific to comedy (Antonio and the Duchess of Malfi immediately come to mind), but it is only in comedy that we find remarriage uncomplicated by state concerns and dynastic maneuvering, more amenable to be read in terms of common English ideology rather than contemporary perceptions of foreign politics. My focus on comedy, then, not only redresses the imbalance in current criticism, and recognizes the fact that in the early modern theatre, remarriage *is* primarily a comic, not a tragic subject, but also seeks to investigate a facet of urban, middle-class English culture through the genre most frequently adapted to represent it.

The arguments of this book are underlaid by the premises of its first chapter: that the remarriage of widows was not only a common fact of life