

Introduction

Most medievalists writing on the theme of women begin their volumes by emphasizing the ‘insignificance of women as historical subjects during the period and hence the insurmountable difficulties of recovering their lost lives’.¹ In 1990, Georges Duby and Michelle Perrot remarked in their *History of Women* that ‘women were long relegated to the shadows of history’, an idea which the English version of the volume dedicated to the Middle Ages reinforced with the subtitle ‘Silences of the Middle Ages’.² In 1995, Henrietta Leyser evoked her undergraduate years and the Victorian Syllabus that ‘had little place for women. Concentrating as it did on public life and constitutional developments there seemed to its framers barely an occasion to mention them’. In 2000, Noël James Menuge warned her readers: ‘Cherchez la femme’. That is the problem that so frequently confronts the medievalist. Women are not notable for their visibility in historical records, even in a later medieval context. Women exercising agency or giving voice to their own will are still more rarely observed. One should be tempted to conclude that women were in a minority in medieval societies and that they played little part in those societies’.³ The invisibility of women had two origins: the fact that medieval texts were mostly written by men and the time it took for historians (who were mainly men) to find some interest in non-military and non-political issues. Historians have now, for a long time, had a different approach to the past – probably ever since Marc Bloch who was one of the first to view history differently and to lend credibility to social history. History was then enriched through an interdisciplinary ap-

- 1 L.A. Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, London, New York: Longman, 1999, p.2.
- 2 C. Klapisch-Zuber, ed., *A History of Women in the West, II. Silences of the Middle Ages*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992, p.ix.
- 3 N.J. Menuge, ed., *Medieval Women and the Law*, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2000, p.ix.

proach with the use of anthropological, geographical or literary perspectives. The study of women, both by male and female historians, rapidly burgeoned and has virtually rocketed over the last three decades. There remained the silences of women in the medieval sources.

Widows, however, do not pose the same problem as other women. Contrary to young maidens, they were not a favoured subject among medieval writers – except for moralists. On the other hand, contrary to maidens and wives, they appear very often in non-literary documents such as law codes, wills, charters, court records and the like so that Barbara A. Hanawalt has even stated that ‘widows were ubiquitous in medieval Europe’.⁴ Overnight they found themselves women with men’s duties and powers. Sweeping away traditional divisions between the sexes, they completely disrupted traditional, well-established categories. Gender studies have rightly taught us that human divisions are more cultural constructions than purely biologically-based tendencies. Apart from the great Christine de Pizan, not many widows of the Middle Ages have voiced their feelings. The primary sources at our disposal, because of their essentially administrative character, do not deal with emotions, with the state of mind of these bereaved women. They only concern the settlement of the deceased’s inheritance, the transfer of ownership of his lands and other goods. They say nothing about mourning and grief. Death, admittedly, was then a familiar fact of life and was not a forbidden subject as it often is today. One should not jump to the conclusion that resignation was the norm but rather that the (few) evocations of hardship are not to be found in public records but elsewhere in romances, chronicles, Saints’ Lives or visual representations. Public records, on the other hand, give many elements and details of the everyday experiences of widows. This volume, consequently, is based on both literary and more conventional historical sources. The former tell us how widows were viewed by medieval society, how they were expected to live and behave while the latter give a more objective account of their lives.

4 C. Dinshaw & D. Wallace, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Women’s Writing*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p.58.

It goes without saying that widows did not make a homogeneous group in medieval society. Age, class, character, period of time, place, occupation, economic circumstances, were identity markers that made each widow different. Yet they shared certain preoccupations specific to their status: should they choose to remain single, should (or could) they have custody of their children, did they (according to their social background) feel able to manage their estates, farm the tenement or run their deceased husband's business? Because of these common issues, we have chosen to present this study both in a chronological and a thematic way by dividing it into two main parts: before and after the Conquest. Within each great period the thematic approach rules out needless repetitions while, as the book covers the whole of the Middle Ages, the division of time into Anglo-Saxon and medieval England allows for evolution and changes to be taken into account. The two parts deal with the same varied topics: the fundamental role played by the Church in the doctrine of marriage and in the gradual making of the couple the basic unit of society. The no less fundamental part it played in the dominant male discourse about widows – the obsession with the control of these experienced women's sexuality coming first. A second common theme is that of law: among women, widows had a specific legal status that gave them special rights. These rights deeply affected their lives and their relationships with their children and other relatives. This is why so much space is devoted to family structures (parents-children relations, relations between natal and marital kin-groups) and to the legal and social aspects of inheritance in both parts of this volume. The third main topic concerns the various options widowhood offered (remarriage, withdrawal from society into a monastery, lifelong widowhood, etc.) and the degree of independence widows had in their life choices. Widowhood might initially seem a limited subject. It is, in reality, a position in women's lives that brings all sorts of family, social, economic, emotional, psychological or religious considerations into play. Some may wonder why widowhood should only be studied from the female point of view: widowers, after all, did exist in the Middle Ages. Contrary to widows, however, widowers did not make up a group of their own, their legal status or social position were not modified and many of them remarried quickly.

While there are a great many books on medieval women, those on widows are not that numerous. Both *Upon my Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* edited by Louise Mirrer (Ann Arbor, 1992) and *Widowhood in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* edited by Sandra Cavallo and Lyndan Warner (London, 1999) deal with Europe as a whole. Cindy Carlson and Angela Weisl's *Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke, 1998) treats of widows (and maidens) in French and English medieval literature mainly. *Wife and Widow in Medieval England* edited by Sue Sheridan Walker (Ann Arbor, 1993) focuses, as its title shows, on Britain but leaves aside the Early and most of the High Middle Ages. Conversely Caroline Barron and Anne Sutton's *Medieval London Widows 1300–1500* (London, 1994) is concerned with the late Middle Ages only. All five volumes are collections of essays. This book is a study that brings together documents from the 7th to the 15th century aiming at providing a thorough account of widows' place and everyday lives in medieval England. It makes extensive and direct use of primary sources – through translations for Latin or Old English writings – in order faithfully to capture and render what being a widow meant and implied in those bygone centuries.