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# Accrediting loss : the Woful Widow in Medieval literature

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Accrediting Loss:  
The Woful Widow  
in Medieval  
Literature

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Accrediting Loss: The *Woful Widow* in Medieval Literature

by

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A Thesis

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## Abstract

Medieval society was constantly attempting to negotiate the loss associated with a society centered on warfare and military campaigns. Since women had little active role to play in military campaigns, it is not surprising that widowhood is likely to have been a significant occurrence both statistically and economically in medieval society.

The depiction of widows and their extreme melancholia in many medieval narratives raises a number of important questions about the actual conception of widowhood in medieval culture. The treatment of loss (be it political, economic, social, psychological, whatnot.) is a central concern of these narratives, and the widow is the central figure from which these narratives explore its expression. Through a close historical analysis of *Yvain's* poignantly dramatic widow, Laudine, and the ways she and her community react to her loss, we can perhaps gain a better understanding of why these narratives seem both fascinated and threatened by the widow. Furthermore, several other important elements in the treatment of widows and the gender power dynamics at work in these narratives come more sharply into focus when we include a psychoanalytic perspective of *Yvain* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Both of these texts raise unique concerns about issues of gender and loss in medieval society.

One of the most constant features of life in medieval England was the presence of war, with its attendant costs in human life and material goods. When we include common soldiers along with their captains and the well-publicized and highly mortal peers, even minor skirmishes left dead and disabled hundreds, and, in the occasional pitched battle, totals that ran into the thousands (Neville 101). Since women had little active role to play in military campaigns, it is not surprising that widowhood is likely to have been a significant occurrence both statistically and economically in medieval society. In light of the significance of widows in medieval society, the presence of widows in medieval romances should also not be all that striking.

The depiction of widows and their extreme melancholia in many medieval narratives raises a number of important questions about the actual conception of widowhood in medieval culture. The treatment of loss (be it political, economic, social, psychological, whatnot.) is a central concern of these narratives, and the widow is the central figure from which these narratives explore its expression. Through a close historical analysis of *Yvain's* poignantly dramatic widow, Laudine, and the ways she and her community react to her loss, we can perhaps gain a better understanding of why these narratives seem both fascinated and threatened by the widow. Furthermore, several other important elements in the treatment of widows and the gender power dynamics at work in these narratives come more sharply into focus when we include a psychoanalytic perspective of *Yvain* and the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*. Both of these texts raise unique concerns about issues of gender and loss in medieval society.

In a large number of texts, widowed women are almost always presented in dramatic scenes of excessive grieving and mourning. In Chretien's *Yvain*, the Lady of the Fountain's sorrow over the death of her husband is one of its most memorable scenes:

Her grief was so intense  
She seemed ready to take her own life.  
And then she cried out so loudly  
That she seemed to have exhausted herself  
And dropped to the ground, unconscious.  
And when they lifted her up  
She began to tear at her clothes  
Like a woman gone mad...  
(1150-57)

And...

She stayed alone, often  
Clutching at her throat, wringing  
Her hands, beating her palms,  
Reading psalms from a prayerbook  
Illumined in letters of gold.  
(1411-15)

As do various widows described in these tales, Laudine performs traditional gestures of grief: she wrings her hands, clutches her throat, tears at her clothes, etc. She is described as a woman without reason: "Like a woman gone mad." The texts also shows how isolated Laudine is made because of her mourning. After grieving for their dead king, "her people were so tired that they'd given up, in weariness." The lady, however, "stays alone" and prolongs her grief in isolation.

In accordance with *Yvain*, the lady's chambermaid, Lunette<sup>1</sup>, serves to remind Laudine the consequences of her incessant mourning:

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<sup>1</sup> It's quite appropriate for the narrative to have a woman advise the lady on her position. The narrative allows Lunette to serve as a mediator in adherence to the societal norms of the knightly chivalric code. Lunette is often portrayed early in the narrative as a type of "sidekick" to the pursuits of Yvain. Her position allows her the freedom to articulate the demands of the society in a manner that appears in the best interests of Laudine.

“Oh, my lady! Is it fitting  
To kill yourself with grief?  
By God! Get control of yourself,  
Stop it, if only for shame.  
No highborn lady ought  
To keep up her mourning so long.  
Remember your honor, think  
Of your high and noble birth.”  
(1665-1675)

The use of the word “ought” suggests the expected ideal behavior of a widow. The articulation of grief and loss was likely to be confined, in outward voice, to a lesser range of expressions and behaviors. Beyond this range (and the period of behavioral dispensation during which it can be freely indulged) unchecked outbursts were read as indications of a failure to reintegrate, as excessive and self-indulgent. The excessiveness of her grief and Lunette’s reaction to it shows that so long as she is “masterless,” she must be taught to “Get control of [her]self”

The idea of reintegration is central to understanding the role of the widow in medieval culture. The loneliness felt by Laudine in her state of mourning serves as a reflection of the marginal position that often characterized widowhood. A fundamental idea of early modern social theory was that all women were to be under the headship and control of men, living in obedience within a family unit. Seen as unanswerable to traditional male control, any women who moved outside of the defined space threatened the ideology expressed by both secular and church authority. The patriarchal family formed the basis of society, and this basis seemed jeopardized by the imbalance created by the phenomena of women not directly within a man's control (Crick 24). Thus, the widow could be seen as destabilizing to the marital and reproductive order.

The fact is that for some women (taking into consideration issues of race and class which served to define their experiences), widowhood was sometimes actually seen as liberatory. Some critics argue that there was an actual life cycle to a noble woman's authority in the medieval period: In general her power grew with the inheritance of land as a maid. As a wife, this power waned when the husband became complete proprietor of all assets and her lands and legal status went to her husband. As a widow, it increased again by becoming the head of the household and enjoying some distinct rights that this position granted her (Callahan 73).

Joel Rosenthal, argues that widowhood could actually be seen as a “gateway of opportunity:” for at least some widows (36). Widows, owed suit to court, were able to answer complaints and pursue litigation without the intervention of a man. Many women had alternatives for the first time in their lives. Widows were sought after for marriage: If a man could convince a widow to marry him, it could mean an increase in power and wealth among influential families for himself and his family. Once widowed, she was responsible for her own lands until she remarried. Widows could trade, exchange and sell their property and were considered legally liable for their actions. In courts they could appear without a man to pursue litigation, and answer complaints.

Families and social institutions attempted alternating strategies to cope with the problem of widowed women, sometimes seeking to recontain them within marriage or monasticism. When the surviving partner is a woman, their is the question of her particular future—usually in a social framework wherein men hold the purse, the sword, and the plow handle—and of the general phenomenon of widowhood, of women free of direct male control. Perceived threats to lineage, property or other patrilineal

prerogatives provoked attempts by families and officials to reintegrate widows into institutions of patriarchal control (Crick 28). These attempts were often facilitated by the inability of authorities to imagine a natural social role for autonomous adult women. As Barbara Hanawalt asserts, "Widows were an object of concern in medieval society. On the one hand, they could be vulnerable, but on the other hand, they were potentially independent, powerful individuals" (145).

These narratives, in which widows are often portrayed as incapable and weak serve to subvert the widow's potential as an autonomous member of society. *Yvain's* Laudine, for example, is depicted as a vulnerable victim in the narrative who is counseled to remarry immediately to insure the safety of her kingdom:

They'd agreed, and it didn't take long!  
And the lady, who had already spoken  
To her barons and all her men,  
Said: "From here we shall go  
To the hall where my soldiers are gathered,  
Who all have advised and counseled  
That because of the need we all see  
I ought to marry again.  
And because of that need I will.  
I give myself to you.  
I cannot refuse so good  
A knight, the son of a king."  
(2037-2049)

Not only is her choice a very public affair, there is also a sense of urgency to deal with the matter, since it is important to note that "it didn't take long" to settle the problem. In this passage is also evident the many contradictions inherent in the matter of Laudine's choice. It seems that it is important that it is her voice which expresses her consent to the marriage, at the same time that she relays that it is because of the counsel of the men that there is really no choice for her. The narrative is dangling on a very precarious balance

between needing Laudine's voice to express her own consent, while the message coming from her voice makes clear that she "cannot refuse."

Besides raising questions about the consent of Laudine, this passage suggests that Laudine's inclination towards marriage is driven by her need for a protector: "because of that need I will." It is interesting how focused the narrative is in proving how much the Lady and her kingdom needs a defender and confirming how helpless she is without a knight to care for her:

"What a shame he was here so short  
A time. But a woman can't carry  
A shield, she can't use a spear.  
Better for her, much better,  
To marry some worthy knight.  
And the need was never greater!  
Advise her, all of you, to take  
A husband, so the customs of this castle  
And this town, in force for more  
Than sixty years, can go on."  
(2095-2104)

The customs that are being preserved are really the familiar societal norms, which are threatened by a female head of state. The narrative's insistence on depicting this widow as helpless and in need of protection is a way to cope with the threat of the widow who now holds all sovereignty over the kingdom.

Note how little credit the narrative is able to denote to Laudine as ruler of her kingdom. She is initially presented as being absorbed completely by her emotional pain, rather than by her concern over her kingdom. Only after being constantly advised and counseled is she able to do what she "ought" to do. Her excessive mourning serves as a reminder of the frailty and infirmity of women. The representation of a widow's excessive grief is stigmatized as marking her as unstable and unreasonable. Focusing on

Laudine's private angst keeps the narrative away from her public role as possibly a powerful, independent sovereign.

Laudine married Yvain because not doing so would leave her without a protector, and, paradoxically, would demonstrate that perhaps she did not need one. The urgency in the narrative to have the widow remarried immediately demonstrates the threat her independent status causes to her community. The narrative does not even allow the possibility of the Lady of the Fountain being conceptualized as empowered by her position.

Subsequently, Yvain marries her and becomes the protector of the property of the Lady of the Fountain:

And so the girl has done  
Everything she wanted to do.  
And lord Yvain was more  
The master than words could describe.  
(2049-53)

Note that use of the word *master* to describe the position of Yvain in relation to Laudine, "the girl," and her kingdom. The kingdom is no longer "masterless," and the widow has now become contained and re-integrated into the patriarchal order.

Yet Yvain did not fulfill his duty as master for very long. In fact, he leaves his kingdom to "joust" with his knights for an extended period of time soon after marrying the widow. The fact that Yvain did not at first prove to be a very effective protector and that Laudine must have had to develop a certain autonomy, and basically had to function as a woman alone, lends Chretien's work its subtlety and complexity. At the same time that the narrative functions as a method of containing the threat that widowhood holds by thrusting the widow into marriage, it also presents a woman who sustains a kingdom for

an extended period of time independently. There is no indication of troubles in her kingdom until the end of the tale when Yvain hastily resurfaces to assume his role as husband once again.

The reunion of Yvain and Laudine is fraught with tensions and is difficult to completely accept, especially after Laudine's cold reaction to Yvain:

The lady trembled at these words,  
And said: "May God save me!  
You've hooked me beautifully, haven't you?  
You'll make me love him in spite  
Of myself, though he neither loves  
Nor respects me. A fine bit of business!  
(6759-6764)

The tone of this excerpt suggests the widow would have been happier in her independent status than with the husband she is manipulated into union with. There is no final genuine expression of love and mutual respect, just another assertion that she has been "hooked" and forced to love him "in spite of [her]self." The ending is irregularly tagged on to the narrative, suggesting the reader to once again call into question Laudine's consent. Thus, what the narrative may be doing is illustrating the ways in which institutions and communities try to manage the threat widows personify, but ultimately discounting these methods of containment by subtly presenting a widow who gains a certain autonomy, and is not necessarily pleased to lose it.

Underlying this discussion of the power dynamics involved in the treatment of loss is the question about why this excessive grief in women is presented as such a disempowering phenomenon to begin with. After all, every member of society experiences a sense of loss, regardless of his or her gender.

In Lacanian theory, all subjects undergo the “aphanasis of being” that comes through the loss and separation from the mother. Yet, as Schiesari suggests:

Loss and lack- those transcendent Lacanian concepts through which a subject comes to recognize her/his imbrications within the social—are subjected to a cultural determination in terms of who has the most privileged access to the display of loss. (31)

In other words, once women and men have entered into the symbolic, a symbolic understood as dominated by a masculine culture ideal, men and women find themselves in utterly different relations to loss. Although we all experience loss, differences in gender mark which expressions of lack are accredited or not and how and in whom lack is viewed as something enabling, rather than as a deficiency. True, all of us have felt the loss that comes from separation from the mother, but not all of us receive the same social accreditation for that loss, or any loss for that matter.

A second look at the earlier example of the discussion of the Lady of the Fountain and Lunette is useful in illustrating this point. In line 1668, the chambermaid advises the Lady to seize her mourning: “Stop! If only for shame.” The mourning of the female is clearly associated her with shame and humiliation. The honor of this noble lady is jeopardized by the extent of her grief.

The cultural expression of women’s losses is not given the same representational value as those of men. When Yvain mourns for his Lady, the tone expressed in the narrative toward his grief is starkly different than for widow. Although Yvain’s mourning also serves to isolate him, the reaction towards his excessiveness is much less shamed and ostracized. The girl that finds Yvain shows her sympathy and support when she says.

My lady! I've found  
Yvain, the most famous knight  
In the world, and the best. But what sin  
Has stricken this noble man  
I haven't the faintest idea.  
I expect he's experienced some sorrow,  
And it's brought him to this. It's easy  
For grief to drive you mad.  
And anyone can see it, and know it  
(2919-2929)

Unlike the widow's weeping which is "shamed" and "dishonored," Yvain's mourning is seen as a symptom of his extreme noble nature: "But what sin/Has stricken this noble man." The literary representation of Yvain is analyzed in terms of the morality behind his affliction. Whereas women weep because they cannot control themselves, men weep because they are inspired and driven by a higher purpose. Because he has done wrong, Yvain's inherent morality drives him to weep in this excessive manner. In other words, "It's easy/For grief to drive you mad," when you are of such a noble moral stature.

"This implicitly empowered display of loss and disempowerment," argues Schiesari, "converts the personal sorrow of some men into the cultural prestige of inspired artistry and genius" (114). Such an impressive translation of lack seems persistently denied to women, whose association with loss or grief is expressed by less flattering allusions to widow's weeds, inarticulate weeping, or other signs of ritualistic (but intellectually and artistically unaccredited) mourning.

Accordingly, depression for "qualified" men becomes a sign of spiritual greatness which allows men to capitalize on difference by making it a difference that counts. This is especially evident in texts concerned with the death of Arthur where the king's downfall has to be presented in a way that still leaves him as a dignified and moral figure.

As prime representative of the chivalric code, the King is ideally expected to embody the greatest noble moral stature of all. To these texts falls the demanding task of ultimately saving the great King as a future salvation by denoting him with a tragic greatness that may be in tension with his acts in the rest of the narrative.

In the case of the *Alliterative Morte Arthure*, Arthur is chiefly portrayed as a warrior king. This Arthur is constantly shifting troops to different locations, sending out skirmishers, and always ready to seek conquest. As stated in the introduction to the text:

This is primarily a poem of battles, and there are no better accounts of late medieval warfare than we find in this poem. Nor are there any more sobering reminders that all was not heroic and romantic in this age. The poet's account of the siege of Metz (lines 3032-43), with his description of the results of a medieval bombardment, reminds us all too sharply of more recent horrors. (1)

Within this epic romance come unexpected moral revelations about the harsh realities and cruelties of war:

Ministeres and masondewes they mall to the erthe,  
Churches and chapels chalk-white blaunched,  
Stone steeples full stiff in the street liggis,  
Chambers with chimnees and many chef inns,  
Paiced and pelled down plastered walles;  
The pine of the pople was pitee for to here!  
(3038-43)

Specifically using words like *hammered*, *battered* and *beat down* in describing the destruction of churches and hospitals, who house societies most innocent victims, places directly into question the virtuousness of King Arthur and his court. When interpreting Arthur's second dream, the philosopher declares to Arthur that his demise is near because Fortune has said it will be so, but also because.

“Thou has shed much blood and shalkes destroyed,  
Sakeles, in surquidrie, in sere kinges landes;  
(3398-99)

The King Arthur depicted in this narrative is made responsible for the immoral consequences of his militant activities, and therefore the narrative must somehow exalt him from blame to turn him into a sympathetic character.

The shift in the tone the narrative takes towards the King occurs in the moment Gawain is killed. The excessive mourning of the King for his most beloved and trusted knight is what changes the narrative from a critical view of Arthur, to a sympathetic and compassionate treatment of the king:

Then swetes the sweet king and in swoon falles,  
Sawfres up swiftly and sweetly him kisses  
Til his burlich berde was bloody berunnen,  
Als he had bestes brittened and brought out of life;

“Blinn,” says these bold me, “thou blunders thyselfen!  
This is bootless bale, for better besit never!  
It is no worship, iwis, to wring thine handes;  
To weep als a woman it is no wit holden!  
Be knightly of countenance, als a king sholde,  
And leve such clamour, for christes love of heven!”

“For blood,” sys the bold king, “blinn shall I never  
Ere my brain to-brist or my breste other!  
Was never sorrow so soft that sank to my herte;  
It is full sib to myself; my sorrow is the more.  
Was never so sorrowful a sight seen with mine eye!  
(3969-3986)

The king is now a “sweet king” in his state of mourning. As expressed by the knights, there is an anxiety that he could find himself defined by the dominantly feminine meanings of widowhood which is dangerous, since “To weep als a woman it is no wit holden!” Feminine mourning in this passage is presented in opposition to the “knightly

countenance,” and therefore again as an unaccredited expression of loss. Yet the king continues his lament, and is now referred as a “bold king” in his suffering. In his privileged position, he is capable of expressing his mourning in a way that inspires sympathy and “sweetness,” but also asserts his “boldness” and moral righteousness.

Mourning as a gendered category can, therefore, subvert women’s own claims to loss by making women unable to legitimize and translate these claims into something empowering (Schiesari 55). Not only does the King’s display of loss convert it into gain, but the “loss” displayed is one whose expression is derived from the devalued cultural form of women’s mourning as expressed by the knights.

Appropriating the qualities of innocence and victim associated with the feminine mourner allows the masculine access to the compassion and sympathy that are tied with those qualities. Yet, at the same time, the king is empowered, made “bold” by his mourning. He is capable of recuperating that loss (whose sense is ascribed to moral superiority) as a privileged form of male expression, if not as an expression of male privilege. In turn, that recuperation legitimates the male in his “excessive” suffering, even in his “femininity,” but leaves women as an oppressed and disempowered other. Far from being stigmatized, his grief is idealized and noble.

As a result, after his best knights are demolished and he is left dying, Arthur is able to morally redeem himself from all of his wrongdoing. His desire for power is masked as a necessity and his fall is blamed on his traitors rather than on his pride:

In a teenful time this torfer was rered,  
That for a traitour has tint all my trew lordes!  
Here restes the rich blood of the Round Table,  
Rebuked with a rebaud. and rewth is the more!  
I may helpless on hethe house by mine one.

Als a woful widow that wantes her berne!  
I may werye and weep and wring mine handes,  
For my wit and my worship away is forever!

(4280-87)

In associating himself with a “woful widow,” Arthur is made into a “helpless” victim of circumstances, rather than an active player in his own destruction. In his new “sweetly bold” state, the King is restored to a figure of sympathetic nobility.

This is not to say that this society does not attribute importance to the mourning of women, its pervasiveness in the narratives is emblematic of the need for its expression. Indeed these weeping widows serve a vital role in establishing the order that has been lost by bloodshed. As men shed their blood, women’s shedding of tears becomes a multifaceted manifestation which human experience struggles to define. To these women falls the burden of holding the anguish caused by the atrocities of “civilized” societies, while allowing history access to its heroes and making sense of the horrors of the battlefield.

Yet when the loser is female, loss becomes but a contingent circumstance in an essentialized and undervalued depression. The question still remains as to what exactly is the means of changing our society’s conception of loss as a gendered principle. It must be acknowledge that the stereotypical depressive and hysteric is still a female. Isn’t facing loss difficult enough without having to confront a world that doesn’t allow you a legitimate claim to your expression of it? Noting our recent tragic historical events, it is clear that it is imperative for the ultimate mental health of any society that every individual have a means of obtaining a sense of agency and self-actualization from their grieving process. Society ideally should allow a method of dealing with melancholy that

leads to restoration and personal growth from tragedy to all. When feminine mourning becomes a tool of a masculine symbolic order that continues to organize the world we live in, there is a societal need for a restructuring of the feminine symbolic that allows for an accrediting and legitimate expression of loss.

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## Vita

Silvia Diaz was born to Nurys Diaz on October 17, 1980 in New York City. Her family moved to Jersey City, New Jersey where she graduated from William L. Dickinson High School in June 1998. She attended Lehigh University where she majored in English, and Economics, with a concentration in Public Policy. She graduated with a B.A. in May 2002 and became a Presidential Scholar at Lehigh University. As a Presidential Scholar, she worked towards a Masters in English, where she developed an interest in Feminist Theory and Colonialism. She is a Teach For America Corps member teaching in a Middle School in Harlem in New York City.

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