

heroines to oppose the misogynistic concept of femineity” (137). These, she asserts, are important changes in the catalog tradition. This chapter is M<sup>c</sup>Leod’s best, perhaps because de Pizan’s goal may well have been the one that M<sup>c</sup>Leod claims for all the authors — the redefinition of “femineity by the location of women in history.”

*Pamela Benson, Rhode Island College*

Louise Mirrer, ed. *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in Literature & Histories of Medieval Europe*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992. Pp 351.

Recent interest in medieval widowhood (another collection of essays on the topic is forthcoming from Hambledon Press) perhaps springs from the remarkable polarities which characterize this state. On the one hand, widowhood has been presented as a period of heightened opportunity, a time when the degree of freedom and control enjoyed by women might approach that of men. On the other hand, the notable range and variety of medieval misogyny never shows more clearly than in the depiction of widows, whose sexual instability is sometimes presented as barely human. No wonder, then, that contemporary scholars are eager to explore the realities of this state, and in particular, to ask just what possibilities widowhood afforded women, and in what societal nerves its presence touched.

If the goal of explorations such as this is to understand more accurately the social realities of women’s lives, that goal is achieved with particular fullness in the work of Ann Crabb, Linda Mitchell, Barbara Hanawalt, Judith Bennett, and Harry Miskimin, all of whom present archival material of great freshness and interest. It sometimes seems, in fact, that the exploration of practice rather than precept in medieval women’s lives might yield the most illuminating results. Crabb points out, for instance, that in her husband’s absence, Alessandra Macinghi Strozzi invested capital as a passive partner in relatives’ companies, executed sharecropping contracts with her peasant workers, sold land, and made legal contracts, circumventing the required male facilitator in the last instance by using a court-appointed stranger merely as a formality.

This degree of scope is, of course, a function of male absence, as is the female assumption of the baronial role which Mitchell describes. Such English noble widows appointed bailiffs, controlled wardships, paid debts, argued in court, received royal grants of wood, furnished men-at-arms, and were even imprisoned as politically dangerous. In short, they “lived the life of a baron, with all of its responsibilities and usually with few of the rewards.”

Both Mitchell and Hanawalt treat the important subject of dower litigation — women’s suits to regain their marital status. Hanawalt’s sample of 299 mostly fourteenth-century cases from the London court of Husting reveals that widows won slightly more than half the time (53%), most commonly through default. The desirability of these propertied women, who retained their dower rights for life, as second-marriage partners is clear. Of the widows with children in Hanawalt’s sample, about two-thirds remarried before the registration of their children as orphans, suggesting the strong

pressures to wed again which widows sustained. (Documentation here contains some errors; the same manuscript is first labelled "Guildhall Library Consistory Court Wills 9051/1" and then "Archdeacon's Court 9051/1.")

Bennett's account of widows' life on an English manor, reprinted from her 1987 *Women in the Medieval English Countryside*, is particularly satisfying because of the thoroughness with which she has pressed her sources. The mass of detail available here makes possible this complex analysis of widows' life in its wide variety. (Like Crabb, Bennett notes the circumvention of custom by women in many ways which increased personal advantage: her examples revolve around women's sale of dower lands, though forbidden.)

Finally, Miskimin's essay goes beyond even these boundary-expanding contributions to provide instances of French widows' legal actions which, he suggests, substantially influenced the evolution of legal thought-strengthening, for instance, the role of the royal courts as a source of law, rather than its interpreter.

Of the remaining historical essays, Joel Rosenthal's witty and humane treatment of English noble war widows 1450-1500, reprinted from a 1987 *History* article, is most useful for the sophisticated procedural *caveats* which it offers the scholar attempting reconstruction of such sparsely-documented female lives. Particularly apt is its concluding caution that such women might participate more fully in class realities than in gender ones. Clara Estow summarizes the chroniclers' treatments of three Castilian ruling widows: the vicissitudes of these lives are difficult to follow and the conclusion, that these women are not afforded the complex judgment which a male ruler would receive, is somewhat predictable. Estow's observation, however, that this reductive treatment is due to widows' anomalous possession of authority is a recurring idea in the volume's essays.

In contrast with these investigations of quotidian realities, James Brundage's illuminating discussion of the canonists' view of widows as *miserabiles personae*, or disadvantaged persons, is an entirely theoretical one. He demonstrates Gratian's endorsement of economic support for widows, based on a suggested quarter of the 10% tithes. If unable to receive justice in secular courts, widows could appeal through church courts, and advocates were urged to offer their legal services to poor widows. Cheryl Tallan's survey of *responsa* literature (rabbinical rulings on offered questions) likewise looks at theory rather than actuality to see how much public life Jewish widows were allowed. Tallan's essay summarizes printed sources: while welcome because of the obscurity of this area, it would have profited from a firmer description of the literature it surveys. Languages, dates, countries, archives are indicated too sketchily, and the large question is not addressed: to what extent are these documents from various countries and centuries reflective of a Jewish culture which transcended national culture?

All the preceding essays attempt to enlarge our notions about what widows *did*. (It is certainly not clear that they responded consistently in any particular fashion: Bennett's peasant widows divide neatly into a group who became more active publically and a group who retired into traceless domesticity.) The remaining essays ask a different question: how was widowhood understood by contemporaries and what emotions did it evoke?

Particularly fascinating here is Louise Vasvari's wide-ranging survey of Spanish

literary and folk treatment of widows (focusing on the *Libro de Buen Amor*) which concludes that “as surely as doctors always kill, and millers always rob ... so widows are both faithless and [oversexed].” Philip Gericke’s treatment of the medieval Spanish ballad “Fonte Frida” presents the opposite convention, the sorrowing widows as faithful turtledoves. Liliane Dulac’s comparison of advice to widows by Francesco da Barberino and Christine de Pizan, reprinted from a 1980 *festshrift* and gracefully translated by Thelma Fenster, allows us to see the practical, historically-located, secular nature of Christine’s work. Dulac’s comparison of the verbs each author employs is especially ingenious, Christine’s *come, visit, receive* contrasted with Barberino’s less active *choose, place, create, find*. (Since the essay’s first sentence indicates that these two works were written a century apart and resemble each other, dates might well have been provided here, rather than sending the reader to notes to discover when they were composed and which was first.)

The volume concludes with Montserrat Piera and Donna Rogers’ stimulating presentation of the widow as heroine. They argue that in the Catalan novel *Curial e Güelfa*, the widow Güelfa’s identification with the powerful goddess Fortuna reveals the extensive dispositive authority afforded late medieval widows. Perhaps the most suggestive essay in this section, however, is Heather Arden’s exploration of five French widow tales, all of which see female sexuality, rather than female variability, as the cause of female vice. These amusements thus take on a fearsome aspect when, as Arden says, we move from a denial of a stable female identity (fickleness) to an identification of women with positive evil — since it is female sexuality which powerfully resists and threatens male control.

The volume has not been particularly well-served by its copyeditor: *punicitia* for *puccitia*, p. 2; *principle* of the loan, p. 121; *somewhat unique*, p.161; *discreet* areas, p. 163; the *principle* opposing parties, p. 211; *bawdy* for *bawdry*, p. 283; and *dowry* is spelled *dowery* throughout Miskimin’s essay. Its many fresh and thoughtful contributions, however, which testify to editor Louise Mirrer’s acute judgment, make it an invaluable resource for the study of medieval women.

Mary Erler, *Fordham University*

Karen Swenson, *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature*. Studies in Scandinavian Literature and Culture, 3. Columbia, SC: Cadmen House, 1991. Pp xiii + 149.

*Performing Definitions* is a welcome and thought-provoking analysis of two Old Norse genres of verbal contest and the ways in which scholars have tended to re-enact those contests in the course of writing about them. Swenson’s structuralist examination of the *senna*, the *mannjafnaðr*, and their location within a “grammar” of genres displays a post-modern self-consciousness that is all the more refreshing for its rarity in studies of Old Norse. Unfortunately, for all the non-Scandinavianists who would certainly find *Performing Definitions* relevant to their own work in anthropology, comparative