The Widow's Predicament:
Imperatives of Fidelity and Prayer in the *Commedia*

In his letter to Furia, a recently widowed woman considering the prospect of remarriage, St. Jerome counsels her in no uncertain terms against remarriage, elaborating upon its many evils:

> Young widows, of whom some … wish to marry, generally make such excuses as these. 'My little patrimony is daily decreasing, the property which I have inherited is being squandered, a servant has spoken insultingly to me, a maid has neglected my orders. Who will appear for me before the authorities? Who will be responsible for the rents of my estates? Who will see to the education of my children, and to the bringing up of my slaves?' Thus, shameful to say, they put that forward as a reason for marrying again, which alone should deter them from doing so. For by marrying again a mother places over her sons not a guardian but a foe, not a father but a tyrant. Inflamed by her passions she forgets the fruit of her womb, and among the children who know nothing of their sad fate the lately weeping widow dresses herself once more as a bride. Why these excuses about your property …? Confess the shameful truth. No woman marries to avoid cohabiting with a husband. At least, if passion is not your motive, it is mere madness to play the harlot just to increase wealth. You do but purchase a paltry and passing gain at the price of a grace which is precious and eternal! If you have children already, why do you want to marry? If you have none, why do you not fear a recurrence of your former sterility? Why do you put an uncertain gain before a certain loss of self-respect?[1]

This church father's scathing rebuke of widows wishing to remarry provides a clear example of the stereotype of the lustful and avaricious widow, a misogynist trope that persisted in the Western imagination for centuries. While Jerome's letter naturally illustrates the Christian imperative of chastity, this excerpt grants insight not so much into the theological issues of remarriage, but rather into the social concerns surrounding a widow's fate. Furia ultimately followed Jerome's counsel, shunning remarriage in favor of caring for her elderly father and young children. Women in the centuries to follow would face her same dilemma, yet many would face a very different outcome.

Almost a millennium after Jerome's letter, Dante would evoke the major themes of the church father's message – the supposed lustfulness of widows, their materialistic desires, their urge to remarry – in his *Commedia,* granting them a crucial function within the overarching structure of his *oltremondo*. The widows of the *Commedia* do not occupy much textual space, yet the role they play is of great significance, as Dante links the actions of these living women to the fates of their deceased husbands; their behavior on earth directly impacts the experience of their spouses in the afterlife. By examining the function widows serve in Dante's afterlife, one inevitably encounters a striking discrepancy between the position he fashions for them and the realities within which they lived. The unflagging faithfulness Dante requires of widows is in direct contrast to the social pressures these women faced in order to survive after the death of their husbands, and in this paradox there exists a compelling narrative tension. Little work has been done to examine the role of widows in the *Commedia;* this essay fills this lacuna by providing a theological and historical context within which to place widows. In turn, this essay seeks to nuance readers' perceptions of this subset of women in the *Commedia*.

The most notable depictions of widows occur in *Purgatorio* 8 and *Purgatorio* 23, which I will briefly sketch here and return to in greater detail later. In *Purg.* 8, Dante encounters Nino Visconti, who inveighs against female inconstancy by presenting his widow, Beatrice d'Este, as the prime example of womanly lust and impulsivity. Later, in *Purg*. 23, Dante finds his dear friend Forese Donati, who has a completely different attitude about his widow, Nella, whom he credits for his speedy passage through the realm's rehabilitating terraces. These two cases provide a stark contrast and thus present the key concerns surrounding widowhood: if widows should remarry, and to what extent they were expected to dwell upon the memory of their dead husbands. In order to better understand the opposing examples that Dante depicts, one must consider not only the expectations placed upon widows but also the historical realities of their situation.

A widow in Dante's time had several concrete duties: to mourn her husband's death, to recall his memory, to continue to raise their children (if they had any), and – most importantly for Dante – to pray for her husband's soul. Mourning played an important social function, as it served both to commemorate the deceased person and to emphasize the loss felt not only by the family but also by the community. Grieving in particular sheds light on the functions of

women in medieval Italian society, as women were assigned a unique role in funerary rituals of the period. In the twelfth century, public funerals verged on theatrical, and while both men and women grieved loudly and openly, it was the responsibility of women to "learn, enact, and transmit to others the standard techniques of mourning, which included physical gestures, loud laments, and often dramatic, self-inflicted injuries" (Strocchia 11). The dramatic displays of grief, which served as a sign of respect and loyalty to the deceased, were indeed enacted by both sexes, yet by the thirteenth century, one finds municipal legislation banning excessive performances of emotion among men.[2] While the mourning of men was subject to legal interventions designed to sublimate their grief into more socially acceptable practices, the grieving of women was shaped not by laws, but by strong cultural and social imperatives, which ultimately placed their bereavement rituals squarely within the public arena. Citing Franco Sacchetti, Sharon Strocchia notes:

> The late Trecento novelist Franco Sacchetti, for example, anticipated that a new widow would have the following response to the death of her husband. To signify her loss, Sacchetti wrote, the widow "cuts her hair… dresses in black… and places her husband in the [public] room on a crude bed on the ground;" over his body she makes "laments and prayers" along with the other female kin and neighbors. This behavior was intended not only to demonstrate women's personal loss but to legitimate the collective grief of family and community. (Strocchia 12)

A widow was thus charged with engaging in mourning that was simultaneously personal and collective, as her behavior served to symbolize the sentiments of the greater community. Widows would ultimately set the tone for an entire community of mourners seeking to grieve and commemorate the life of the deceased.

Even more important than the public displays of grief were the ongoing prayers for the soul of the departed. If a woman was given the public task of mourning her husband's death, it is not surprising that she would also be expected to take on the private and internal role of prayerful intercessor. Prayer for the dead was a common practice among Christians even before the notion of Purgatory became culturally and religiously codified in the thirteenth century, but once Purgatory came to be formally recognized as a realm of the

afterlife, prayer for the dead took on an even greater importance. Indeed, prayer was built into its very structure, as Purgatory was, in essence, "an intermediary other world in which some of the dead were subjected to a trial that could be shortened by the prayers, by the spiritual aid, of the living" (Le Goff 4). As early as *Purg*. 6 Dante stages the issue of prayer's efficacy when he has the pilgrim ask Vergil if, in direct contradiction to what he wrote in the *Aeneid*, it is possible for prayer to bend the decree of heaven:

> io cominciai: «El par che tu mi nieghi,
> o luce mia, espresso in alcun testo
> che decreto del cielo orazion pieghi;
> e questa gente prega pur di questo:
> sarebbe dunque loro speme vana,
> o non m'è 'l detto tuo ben manifesto?»
>
> [I began: "O my light, it seems to me
> that in one passage you explicitly deny
> that prayer can bend decrees of Heaven
> and yet these people pray for that alone.
> Will this their hope, then, be in vain,
> or are your words not really clear to me?"]
> (*Purg*. 6.28-33)[3]

The pilgrim's question to Vergil demonstrates an issue that was both cultural and theological: to what degree could the interventions of the living impact the purgation of the souls of the deceased?

While the notion of Purgatory had begun to take shape in the fourth century, it was not truly solidified until the thirteenth century, when the Council of Lyons (1274) granted it official doctrinal status. This major development was a direct result of the rise of scholasticism, and one finds many of the thirteenth century's most accomplished theologians engaging in spirited debates on the nature of Purgatory. Thomas Aquinas wrote extensively on Purgatory in various works, but most notably by elaborating upon Peter Lombard's *Sententiae* in the *Scriptum* (a commentary dedicated entirely to the *Sententiae*), in the *Summa theologica,* and in the *Supplement*, a posthumous addendum – written most likely by Aquinas's companion, Fra Rainaldo da Piperno — to complete his unfinished *Summa.* The *Supplement* addresses the impact of prayer on souls in Purgatory in great detail in questions 70 and 71, and the answers to

these particular questions link almost seamlessly to Dante's question to Vergil on the efficacy of prayer.

Firstly, the *Supplement* states in no uncertain terms that prayer is useful to the souls of the departed, and this claim rests upon two key considerations; it begins with a citation of Maccabees:

> [In] the words of 2 Macc. 12:46: "It is… a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from sins." But this would not be profitable unless it were a help to them. Therefore the suffrages of the living profit the dead.
> (*Suppl.*71.2)

Then, in a poignant elaboration upon 1 Corinthians, it continues:

> Charity, which is the bond uniting the members of the Church, extends not only to the living, but also to the dead who die in charity. For charity which is the life of the soul, even as the soul is the life of the body, has no end: "Charity never falleth away" (1 Cor. 13:8). Moreover, the dead live in the memory of the living: wherefore the intention of the living can be directed to them. Hence the suffrages of the living profit the dead in two ways even as they profit the living, both on account of the bond of charity and on account of the intention being directed to them. (*Suppl.*71.2)

Ultimately, the assertions of the *Supplement* – along with various others theological writings of the thirteenth century – confirmed that Purgatory existed, and that it was incumbent upon the living to aid the souls in Purgatory through prayer, alms, and mass.[4] And while anyone could contribute to this salvatory effort,[5] it was the obligation mainly of the relatives and spouse of the deceased.[6] Therefore when Dante portrays Forese's speedy progress through Purgatory, he is not engaging simply in literary invention but is rather demonstrating his conformity to a distinct theological principle: prayer was a crucial tools for the advancement of souls through Purgatory.

This examination of the expectations placed upon widows has not yet touched upon the complex and pressing social realities they faced, remarriage chief among them. Technically speaking, there were no rules – neither in canon law nor in medieval society more generally – that explicitly forbade widows from remarrying,[7] yet to conclude the discussion there would be to grossly oversimplify the situation of

widows in Dante's time. The ambiguous status of the widow is reflected in a wide array of sources from the period, both literary and historical, which oscillate between depicting the widow's liberated state, her insatiable sexual appetite, her financial and legal vulnerability, and her ability to achieve a level of spiritual grace rivaled only by virgins, to name only a few major stereotypes.[8] Medieval representations of the widow could evoke a woman brimming with wantonness or piety, a woman of poverty or privilege, a woman enjoying total freedom or suffering complete subjugation. But what was the widow's situation, really?

Study of historical sources paints a dire picture. The social and financial pressures facing widows were significant, and while her relative socioeconomic status would certainly impact the degree of hardship a widow faced, it could never truly repair a system that ultimately made her liberation an impossibility. A woman of the lower classes faced almost certain destitution after the death of her husband,[9] as both private and public sources of charitable aid provided only occasional and modest assistance at best.[10] The challenges of women in the upper echelon of medieval Italian society – the kind of women Dante depicts through Nella Donati and Beatrice d'Este – were altogether different.

In the patrilineal society of Dante's time, widows posed a unique problem; unmarried women (with the exception of cloistered nuns) were monitored very closely, as they were considered incapable of resisting sexual temptation. It thus fell to their male relatives to protect and vouch for their virtue. Given these concerns, it was of crucial importance for families to have strategies in place to ensure that women would not be left to their own devices upon the death of their husbands. So what options were available to a medieval Florentine widow?

> Theoretically, a widow had some choice in the matter. She could live in her husband's family, by her children's side; she could live independently without remarrying, but near her children; or, finally, she could remarry and leave the first family that had received her. But in practice a widow, if young, was barred from the second option and found herself subjected to contradictory pressures that prevented her from quietly choosing between the other two possibilities. (Klapisch-Zuber 120)

Each of these options brought with them unique problems and considerations. The dowries of wealthier women made it possible for them – at least in theory – to live on their own.[11] A dowry would, by default, revert to the widow upon her husband's death, and she was legally entitled to use it to support herself and her children. Nonetheless, the widow who chose never to remarry and to live in her own household was relatively uncommon.[12]

A woman's dying husband could try to convince her to remain in his household and keep her dowry within the family. In other words, he would try to dissuade her from remarrying so that the financial resources of her dowry could combine with those of his estate, making it possible for her to live comfortably, support their heirs, and leave behind an inheritance for said heirs.[13] If her prospects for remarriage were slim, this could indeed be an attractive option. Alternatively, if their heirs – who, let us not forget, were not necessarily her own children but may have been from her husband's previous marriage – did not wish for her to remain in her husband's household, she could always fall back on the *tornata*,[14] the right to return to her family of birth.

Yet it was an indisputable fact that women were considered most valuable when they could be deployed to advance or solidify the interests of her family. A widow could thus serve as a boon to her family; in remarrying her, her family could forge an alliance with another clan and be spared from the financial burden of having their daughter under their roof once again. Young widows afforded their natal families a special opportunity:

> Early widowhood revived the claims of the widow's family of birth on the goods brought as a dowry. As these were irrevocably attached, by law, to the physical person of the woman for the duration of her life, widowhood forced her own kin to use her as a pawn, forcing her to 'come out' of her husband's family. When she remarried, her family could join a new circle of affines. By the remarriage of a widow of their blood, Florentines affirmed that they had never totally relinquished control over the dowries that they had given their daughters or their sisters […] When the widow returned to her family of birth and once again became part of its matrimonial strategies, the family took back cards it had already played, with every intention of making the most of a second deal of social prestige bought by the conclusion of a new alliance. (Klapisch-Zuber 123)[15]

The pressures placed upon a young widow by her birth family would ultimately make it difficult – if not impossible – for her to live up to the lofty standards of chastity extolled by church teachings. Remarriage, while not a perfect outcome,[16] was indeed the most likely one for a young and eligible widow.

All of these historical considerations bring us back to the *Commedia,* to these two opposing examples of Nella Donati and Beatrice d'Este. The widow who pursues a new marriage is depicted negatively as one who "breaks faith" with her husband (as Dante says of Dido in *Inferno* 5). In *Purgatorio* 8, Nino Visconti bitterly laments how quickly his wife moved on after his death, effectively renouncing her widowly duties of mourning and prayer, which he now hopes will be assumed by his daughter, Giovanna:

> «dì a Giovanna mia che per me chiami
> là dove a li 'nnocenti si risponde.
> Non credo che la sua madre più m'ami,
> poscia che trasmutò le bianche bende,
> le quai convien che, misera!, ancor brami»
>
> ["ask my Giovanna to direct her prayers for me
> to where the innocent are heard.
> I think her mother has not loved me
> since she stopped wearing her white wimple,
> which, in her coming misery, she may long for"]
> (*Purg*. 8.71-75)

Furthermore, she is proof, he says, of the fleeting nature of women's affections:

> «Per lei assai di lieve si comprende
> quanto in femmina foco d'amor dura
> se l'occhio o 'l tatto spesso non l'accende»
>
> ["There is an easy lesson in her conduct:
> how short a time the fire of love endures in woman
> if frequent sight and touch do not rekindle it"]
> (*Purg*. 8.76-78)

She may be considered emblematic of the womanly lust that Jerome condemns in his letter. Linked to the accusations of her supposed wantonness are Nino Visconti's concerns for the purgatorial journey that lies ahead of him, and so he hopes that his daughter will pray for him, thereby taking on the salvific role that ought to be played by his wife.

The theme of women's immodesty appears again when Dante encounters Forese in *Purg*. 23. He credits Nella for his quick passage though Purgatory and praises her for her goodness:

> «Tanto è a Dio più cara e più diletta
> la vedovella mia, che molto amai,
> quanto in bene operare è più soletta»
>
> ["So much more precious and beloved of God
> is my dear widow, whom I greatly loved,
> the more she is alone in her good works"]
> (*Purg*. 23.91-93)

Yet he also makes it a point to highlight just how different her attitude is from the multitudes of "brazen women of Florence" (line 101). Thus Nella – in stark contrast to Beatrice d'Este – embodies the ideal widow: through her "flooding tears," her "devoted prayers," and her "sighs" she has done the work necessary to support her husband in his purgation.

Not only does Dante's treatment of these widows contradict what we know of the actual possibilities available to widows, but it is also a source of intratextual conflict, as Dante makes reference to cultural and theological issues that demonstrate that he would have been aware of the flaws in his argument against remarriage.

One notable theological principle that serves to weaken his position on widows comes in *Purg*. 19, when Dante encounters Pope Adrian V. Upon realizing that he is addressing a pope, Dante sinks to his knees, but Adrian urges him to stand, saying:

> «non errar: conservo sono
> teco e con li altri ad una podestate.
> Se mai quel santo evangelico suono
> che dice 'Neque nubent' intendesti,
> ben puoi veder perch' io così ragiono»

[“make no mistake. I am a fellow-servant
with you, and with the others, of a single Power.
If ever you did understand the holy passage
in the Gospel where it says ‘Neque nubent,’
you may well perceive just why I say this”]
(*Purg*. 19.134-138)

Adrian is here referring to the Gospel of Matthew, to a time when Jesus is asked a hypothetical question by the Sadducees: if a woman had had seven husbands during her lifetime, which one of them would be her husband in the afterlife? Jesus responds by saying that no one shall marry or be given in marriage at the time of the resurrection (in Latin: “neque nubent, neque nubentur”). This passage ultimately signifies the temporality of the vocations of marriage and holy orders; in other words, they are vows that expire at the end of one’s life on earth. Such a theological principle stands in direct opposition to the notion that a widow must behave as though she is still married to her deceased husband, as the vow of matrimony is indeed dissolved by death.

Leaving aside for a moment the theological contradiction I’ve just highlighted, Dante furthermore demonstrates within the *Commedia* that he is aware of the financial and societal factors that could leave widows little choice but to remarry. Dante uses the pilgrim’s encounter with Cacciaguida in *Paradiso* 15 to reminisce about the virtues of Florence before its corruption, and he makes a pointed reference to the current financial burdens of Florentine families:

«Non faceva, nascendo, ancor paura
la figlia al padre, ché ‘l tempo e la dote
non fuggien quinci e quindi la misura»

[“Nor did a new-born daughter make her father fear,
for marriage age and dowry were not yet extreme,
the one too low, the other one too high”]
(*Par*. 15.103-105)

Dante here acknowledges two important historical realities: the imperative to marry off daughters at an exceedingly young age (which made widowhood an inevitable predicament for a staggering number of women),[17] and the monetary pressures placed upon families because of dowry inflation (which, as I have shown, made

remarriage an attractive avenue for families otherwise burdened by a young, widowed daughter). These points – which one could go as far as to say contradict the standards he proposes for widows – illustrate that Dante was perfectly cognizant of the impediments to these ideals he extolled.[18]

The widows we encounter ultimately create tension in the *Commedia*, as they play a crucial yet complicated role in the afterlives of their husbands. They are meant to mourn and pray for their spouses, and they are meant also to remain unmarried. In light of the teachings of the church and the emphasis placed upon feminine chastity, Dante's depiction of these widows may initially seem uncontroversial, yet when one historicizes the realities of widows in Dante's time, the situation becomes quite muddy. Dante expects these women to disregard the social imperative to seek out new husbands and to instead remain chaste and faithful to their deceased husbands. What he suggests would have been exceptionally difficult for these women to achieve – after all, it was typically not up to them to decide for themselves what they would do upon their husbands' death. Dante's proposal is radical: for a widow to defy both the expectations of her family and the social and financial pressures of her community more generally in order to honor the memory of her late husband.

Ultimately the feminine lust and inconstancy that Jerome denounces – and that Nino Visconti and Forese Donati similarly lament – serve as the explanation for women's questionable desire to remarry. The allegation of lasciviousness, so prevalent in medieval perspectives on women, would smoothly obscure the real reasons women chose to remarry. Yet Dante's portrayal of widows, while very much at odds with the social realities of his time, still aligns with *Commedia*'s central theme of the salvific potentialities of women. The prayers of Beatrice (a dead woman) save Dante (a living man). The dead thus advocate for the living in a striking inversion of the role Dante creates for widows in the *Commedia;* her intercessions are the very reason for which the pilgrim is permitted to make this journey through the afterlife and toward salvation. From the Virgin Mary on high down to the lowly widow on Earth, the *Commedia* illustrates time and again the redemptive powers of women.

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NOTES

[1] "Solent adolescentulae viduae, quarum nonnullae abierunt retro post Satanam, cum luxuriatae fuerint in Christo nubentes dicere: Patrimoniolum meum quotidie perit: majorum haereditas dissipatur: servus contumeliose locutus est: imperium ancilla neglexit. Quis procedet ad publicum? quis respondebit pro agrorum tributis? Parvulos meos qui erudiet, et vernulas quis educabit? Et hanc proh nefas, causam opponunt matrimonii, quae vel sola debuit nuptias impedire. Superducit mater filiis, non nutritium, sed hostem; non parentem, sed tyrannum. Inflammata libidine, obliviscitur uteri sui: et inter parvulos suas miserias nescientes, lugens dudum, nova nupta componitur. Quid obtendis patrimonium? quid superbiam servulorum? Confitere turpitudinem. Nulla idcirco maritum ducit, ut cum marito non dormiat. Aut si certe libido non stimulat, quae tanta insania est, in morem scortorum prostituere castitatem, ut augeantur divitiae; et propter rem vilem atque perituram, pudicitia, quae et pretiosa et aeterna est, polluatur? Si habes liberos, nuptias quid requiris? si non habes, quare expertam non metuis sterilitatem; et rem incertam, certo praefers pudori?" (Jerome, "Letter 54" par. 15).

[2] The grieving of men and women was treated differently, as various statutes were created and implemented in order to suppress dramatic displays of mourning by men specifically; this is one of the many topics of historical inquiry in Lansing.

[3] All subsequent citations of the *Commedia* in Italian come from the Petrocchi edition, while all English translations are taken from the Hollander edition.

[4] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3.71.9.

[5] There are numerous examples of souls Dante encounters in Purgatory who, rather than seeking the aid of their living relatives, simply hope that someone – anyone – will pray for them. For instance, Belacqua laments his slow progress through Purgatory, wishing that someone could offer up prayers on his behalf: ("Prima convien che tanto il ciel m'aggiri / di fuor da essa, quanto fece in vita, / perch'io 'ndugiai al fine i buon sospiri, / se orazïone in prima non m'aita / che surga sù di cuor che in grazia viva" ["I must wait outside as long as in my lifetime / the heavens wheeled around me / while I put off my sighs of penance to the end, / unless I'm helped by prayers that rise / from a heart that lives in grace"] (*Purg.* 4.130-134).

[6] There are various examples of souls who hope their family will pray for them; notable instances include Manfredi beseeching his daughter, Constance to pray for him (*Purg*. 3.145) and Buonconte wishing his wife would pray for him (*Purg*. 5.89-90).

[7] It must be noted that the Church generally recommended that widows decline remarriage but, if a widow ultimately chose to remarry, she would be required to wait at least one year before doing so; violating this waiting period could result in civil penalties. See Brundage.

[8] Louise Mirrer's book provides an extensive overview of the literary and historical depictions of widows in the Middle Ages; see: *Upon My Husband's Death: Widows in the Literature and Histories of Medieval Europe* (ibid.).

[9] Isabelle Chabot argues that the impoverishment of widows of various socioeconomic classes was due in large part to the dowry system, and she underlines in particular the inefficacy of the dowry in lower class families. While wealthier women with sizeable dowries could potentially use them to defray expenses after the death of their husbands, the dowries of poorer women were typically so modest that they would provide little help in the wake of a husband's death. Their plight was singularly difficult: "These women were almost inevitably destined to misery

following their husband's death […] For those families dependent for their survival on the contribution of all members of the household capable of working, the loss of the father's wage could not be compensated for by the work of his widow. For young widows, remarriage must have appeared the most pressing solution to the misery into which they would otherwise have fallen. However, because remarriage opportunities for women lessened with age, this was an option open only to a minority of them" (302).

[10] Chabot (304) also discusses the financial assistance available to destitute widows, reiterating that sources of public welfare were scant; whatever aid these widows did receive typically came from confraternities, hospitals, and neighborhood associations.

[11] While it was true that the dowry belonged to a widow upon her husband's death and could grant her a degree of financial stability, the situation was often much more complicated in practice, since the entire sum of the dowry may not have actually been available to the widow: "By law, the husband was designated master of the dowry and was required to apply it for the benefit of the married couple and their children, yet his ability to employ the dowry for this purpose was stymied by delayed and partial payments. As the size of dowries increased, it became increasingly more difficult for the bride's family to pay the full amount in a timely lump sum. The evidence from *ricordanze* reveals that while the bride's trousseau was usually conveyed to the husband on the day of the wedding, with an initial cash payment around the time of the consummation of the marriage, the major portion of the dowry (in cash or from Florence's *Monte delle doti*) was paid in installments, 'sometimes occurring many years after the wedding'" (Kirshner 9-10).

[12] The trope of the independent, wealthy widow is well known to any reader of Boccaccio, for instance, yet this was not at all commonplace. Citing data from the *catasto*, Klapisch-Zuber states: "…among wealthy Florentines the probability of a widow's living alone collapses: 2 percent of the 472 wealthiest households (which represent less than 5 percent of all Florentine households) were headed by a woman (an even lower percentage than in the country), and rich widows who lived really autonomously were the exception at the upper echelons of urban society" (Klapisch-Zuber 121).

[13] Klapisch-Zuber 120-121.

[14] Klapisch-Zuber 121.

[15] Klapisch-Zuber 123.

[16] One particularly knotty issue revolved around the fate of the widow's children. Once she remarried, the children from her previous marriage became something of a liability; children were considered part of their father's lineage, which meant that it was the responsibility of their paternal relatives to care for them. As a result, it was not uncommon for children to be abandoned by their mothers once they remarried (in which case their care would fall to their paternal family). Here it is useful to recall Jerome's letter, specifically his criticisms of widows for their superficial concerns about rents and properties, and their neglect of their children in their pursuit of new relationships. The church father's indictments indeed rang true in the Middle Ages, though not because of women's alleged lust or greed, but rather as a result of societal pressures that made it exceptionally difficult for widows to live the chaste existence Jerome extols. Klapisch-Zuber sheds light on this issue, as well as the resulting stereotype of the "cruel mother" that occurs frequently in literature of the period (Klapisch-Zuber 124-131).

[17] The age gap between couples was significant: girls were anywhere from eight to fifteen years younger than their husbands (Klapisch-Zuber, p. 20). This difference in age made widowhood a virtual inevitability for many women, and records indicate that roughly 25 percent of Florence's population were widows (see again Klapisch-Zuber (120), citing the *catasto*).
[18] Deborah Parker focuses exclusively on Dante's harsh treatment of Beatrice d'Este in her essay, "Ideology and Cultural Practice: The Case of Dante's Treatment of Beatrice d'Este." Parker uses the responses made in commentaries by Franco Sacchetti, Benvenuto da Imola, and Giovanni Serravalle as evidence that his depiction of Beatrice d'Este was unorthodox and out of sync with the ideologies of his contemporaries, all of whom "resist [his] formulations of women's nature and who predicate this resistance on current social practices" (Parker 143).

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