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Constructions of Widowhood and Virginity (in St. Martin's Press's "New Middle Ages" Series) investigates female experience through examining the social categories--in this case widowhood and virginity--that ordered women's lives. As editors Carlson and Weisl note, widows and virgins in the Middle Ages were linked through socially constructed models of abstinence. Scholars have long been aware of the social 'orders' of medieval women denoted by their sexual activity: virgins, wives, and widows. However, in addition to the social roles fulfilled by widows and virgins, each of these states has its own history within medieval culture established through theological treatises, sermons, hagiography, and law as well as in poetry and fiction.

As a collection, the essays remedy a notable lacuna in medieval women's scholarship concerning the ideals and nature of widowhood and the paradigmatic connections in medieval thought between widowhood and virginity. While there have been several anthologies dedicated to medieval widows in recent years, and many more on religious women in general, this anthology is among the first to draw attention to the ways that widowhood and virginity represent more than membership in a category; rather, the authors explore the multivalence of these categories widowhood and virginity in their broad arrays of meaning.

Constructions of widowhood and virginity in medieval society had their origins in Late Antique literary and theological traditions. In the Middle Ages, these conventions were invoked and reenacted in both religious writings and secular literatures. Drawing on a fairly consistent core of texts (especially Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine for religious models of widowhood and virginity) medieval authors created and re-created images of widows and virgins that were remarkably consistent across time and place in medieval culture. One theme that runs through many of the essays is the paradoxical and unstable nature of widowhood and virginity as categories.

Several authors writing on virgins in medieval hagiography note the irony that virgin saints, whose example was supposed to serve as an exhortation to chastity, become eroticized through emplotments that feature repeated assaults on their physical and spiritual purity. This is particularly true of the lives of female martyr-saints of the early Church, who became familiar figures to later medieval audiences as well-experienced instances of torture, disfigurement, and near-rape. These acts of violence generated a shadow discourse that inescapably invoked sexuality, even though the repression of sexual desire through perfect chastity was the supposed lesson of these texts. Likewise, widowhood was also an unstable category. According to Christian teachings on widowhood, the widow's mourning dress and demonstrated grief for the deceased spouse were appropriate signifiers of her state. However, these attributes also signaled the widow's potential availability for remarriage, or worse, illicit fornication. In the 'real life' economy of the marriage market, moreover, propertied widows were not only denoted as sexually available by their mourning, but also as viable 'goods' in a competitive economic environment. Widowed and virginal figures, therefore, were constantly compromised by the double discourse of ideal chastity and the sexuality that their chastity sought to repress, but could not entirely eliminate.

The first section of the book, "Widows and Virgins," addresses the structures that bound chaste women of these two states together in social and theological relationships. In "Helpful Widows, Virgins in Distress," Anna Roberts explores the relationship between widows and virgins in French vernacular romances of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Roberts probes the social nature of widowhood by expanding the term "widow" to indicate any woman who is socially isolated. Although she does not explicitly discuss the theological commonplace of widows as mentors to virgins, Roberts identifies this pattern in French romances as a system of women who form financial and social networks as alternate means of support to the male systems

from which they have been alienated.

Continuing with the theme of solitude, Angela Weisl's article "The Widow as Virgin: Desexualized Narrative in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cite des Dames*" focuses on one specific author, Christine de Pizan. Weisl shows how in Christine's widowhood, her singularity and celibacy afford her critical distance, an access to traditionally male literary authority, and, finally, to divine knowledge. Christine as 'desexualized' narrator achieves a veracity and divine inspiration that allow her to critique the misogyny she detects within her own society.

The final essay in this section, "Closed Doors: an Epithalamium for Queen Edith, Widow and Virgin," by Monika Otter, examines further the paradoxical conflation of widowhood and virginity within the same person. Otter examines the representation of Edith's queenship in the *Vita Edwardi* and the "thematic associations between the queen's chastity, her fertility, her power, and the prosperity of the land". (63) Edith, whose idealized image must necessarily precede from real-life events, is a difficult subject for her anonymous hagiographer, but emerges from the pages of the *Vita Edwardi* as fertile through her spiritual marriage to Edward and her chaste widowhood following his death. Transformed into an honorary chaste virgin, Edith is lauded for the "fruits" of her chastity rather than for her production of physical heirs.

In the second section of the anthology, "The Varieties of Virginity," the contributors' articles resonate particularly well in their shared investigations of how virginity is performed, tested, and proved. In "Performing Virginity: Sex and Violence in the Katherine Group," Sarah Salih compellingly marshals recent theoretical work on sanctity and the body to study the particular case of the virgin anchoress. Just as Judith Butler's theoretical framework describes gender as "discursively produced" (97-98) so too is virginity "constituted performatively and read onto the body". (100)

Salih argues that the constantly tested and proved virginity of the female martyrs in the Katherine Group do not represent a case of sexual subordination, but rather empowerment; acts of violence against virgin martyrs highlight their sanctity rather than eroticize their bodies. In "Useful Virgins in Medieval Hagiography," Kathleen Coyne Kelly offers a contrasting interpretation to this position. Both Salih and Kelly highlight the double discourse of virgin-martyrs' sanctity: the reader is repeatedly exposed to the physicality and sexuality of the subject even as the supposed exemplary message is the celebration of chastity and suppression of the body's temptations. Kelly is more pessimistic about the possibilities for feminine empowerment than Salih; she contends that the 'menaced virgin' of medieval hagiography is not altogether empowered as her sanctity is proved through violence. Rather than viewing the experience of the 'menaced virgin' as an either/or questions of debasement vs. empowerment, however, Kelly argues that virginity in the lives of the early female martyrs is emplotted in a complicated representational scheme. Because hagiography "privileges meaning over event and the general and exemplary over the specific" (136), the tortured virgin functions as a cultural artifact that preserves the memory of the early Church--frequently personified as a widowed Ecclesia. The resilience of the ecclesiastical body under the pagan persecutions (a homologous counterpart to the menaced virgin's body), proves its divinity. As in the near-rapes of God's sainted virgins, the integrity of the virginal Church is protected by divine intervention.

Kelly's article is particularly ambitious because she works with a number of different texts and genres to illustrate her argument. She compares hagiographical representations of rape (or near-rape) to historical, legal, and theological works from Late Antiquity to determine the potential of actual rape as a component of Christian persecution. Kelly notes that edicts of Diocletian decreed that candidates for execution could be remanded to brothels and raped. If these edicts were in fact enforced, scholars must then read the martyr legends with an eye to the very real historical basis for the 'menaced virgin' literary tradition. This interpretation would also support the particular nature of female Christian martyrdom in comparison to male saints' martyrdom. Female bodily chastity, imperiled by defilement and violence, would create a particularly vital analogy to the feminized symbol of the Church that male martyrdom could not. A problem that arises with this line of argument, however, is that many of the documents Kelly cites to establish the historical environment for potential rapes in early Christian persecutions were written after-the-fact. Authors Kelly cites, such as Eusebius, Ambrose, and Augustine, are not eyewitnesses to the era of persecutions; rather their writings represent efforts to record the persecutions generations later as an episode of institutional history. Like the popularity of virgin-martyr tales in later medieval Europe, the fourth-century accounts of the persecutions functioned to keep the memory of the young, imperiled church alive in an era where Christianity now constituted the dominant religious culture.

Continuing the discussion of virgins' submission or empowerment through the infliction of pain and torture, Susannah Mary Chewning investigates the dynamic of suffering in "The Paradox of Virginity Within the Anchoritic Tradition." Examining texts in the Wohunge Group, Chewning concludes that this group of anchoritic literatures deliberately situates the anchoress on the margins of her culture. By complicating the distinctions between pure religious love and solipsistic libidinal love, between Christ as masculine and feminine, and between the anchoress as empowered and abject, the texts create a trajectory through suffering toward divinity. In the anchoresses' journey toward union with Christ, they begin as "sinful, fallen feminine bodies" who achieve perfection through their "knowledge and understanding of their physical and earthly abjection". (130)

The last three articles in "The Varieties of Virginity" section focus on the transmission of virginal images in late medieval English literature. In "Virginity and Sacrifice in Chaucer's Physician's Tale," Sandra Pierson Prior continues the discussion of

the "problems and inconsistencies that characterize the medieval valorization of virginity" (165) within the context of Chaucer's Physician's Tale. Chaucer retells an episode from Livy, in which a father sacrifices his virginal daughter at the whim of a corrupt Roman magistrate. Chaucer's version of the tale blends three separate traditions of virginity into one *exemplum*: the Roman patriarchal view of virginity as essential for the making of a good marriage, the Christian monastic attitude of cloistered perfection, and the ancient cultic tradition that valued virgins as ideal victims for ritual sacrifice. Although virginity--especially the example of perfect, intact virginity--is the main theme of the tale, Chaucer places particular emphasis on the unjust sacrifice of the innocent virgin, and thereby draws critical attention to the violence inherent in Christian as well as pagan sacrifice. By associating virginal sacrifice with injustice, Chaucer implicitly "raises questions about why his culture valued virginity in particular and innocence and purity in general". (176)

Kathleen M. Hobbs's article, "Blood and Rosaries: Virginity, Violence, and Desire in Chaucer's Prioress' Tale," also links issues of ritual purity and violence. Hobbs argues that the opposition (and thus inherent connection) between the Virgin Mary's purity and Jews' perfidy in the Prioress's Tale results in an implicit (and negative) association between Jews and women. At the center of the tale is the Prioress, whose hyper-femininity and motto of 'Amor vincit omnia' contrast sharply with the gruesome retelling of the blood-libel tale of the Jews' slaughter of a holy innocent. She is "firmly caught in the middle of the Madonna/whore dichotomy" (189) that glorifies the desexualized and disembodied Virgin at the expense of ordinary, corporeal women. Although the Prioress identifies herself with Mary and the innocent clergeon, her own feminine foibles imply that the hopelessly compromised female state always ends up distant from Mary's perfection, and implicitly, close to the imperfections and impurities of the Jews who form Mary's antithesis in the tale. Hence, anti-Semitism "doubles as antifeminism consistently and openly leveled at women--even (or perhaps especially) at women of the Prioress's standing--by the Church." (185)

Concluding this section, Cindy Carlson's article "Like a Virgin: Mary and her Doubters in the N-Town Cycle" explores connections between the virginal body and the body social, this time in arena of Early English drama. Carlson argues that the Mary plays emphasize how "verifications of the virginity of Mary, complaints about its loss, [and] scandal contrived by detractors all become tests for doubters." (199) The plays incorporate a double aspect of performance, i.e. the literal performance of the drama and the textual tradition of proving virginity in medieval literature. Carlson's attention to popular drama highlights avenues by which images of virginity were transmitted to and interpreted for a broader lay community (as opposed to remaining within the discursive community of clerics writing to and about women). The viewing and acceptance of the miracle of Mary's perfect virginity "becomes a sign of inclusion in the portion of forgiven and redeemed humanity" for true Christians, and its rejection "a sign of faction and doom". (199) Through this process, the plays enact an externalizing the interior doubts of the individual, which are typified in the stock characters of the disbelieving midwife or the Jew. At the end of the dramas, not only is the integrity of Christian belief affirmed, but also societal authorities, such as judges and governors, are confirmed as the appropriate arbiters of that belief.

The final section of the anthology, "Constructing Widowhood", turns our attention to expectations of medieval widows' conduct in medieval romance literature. Rebecca Hayward argues in "Between the Living and the Dead: Widows as Heroines of Medieval Romance" that the widowed heroines of the twelfth-century *Roman de Thebes* and Chretien de Troyes' *Yvain* were constructed in opposition to a long-standing literary tradition of the bawdy or 'misogynistic' widow. At the same time, conventions of pious Christian widowhood circumscribed the range of emplotments afforded to more typical heroines. Therefore, the (rather rare) representations of widowed heroines in medieval romance functioned within the narrow space between these two types, with the result that the widow's 'proper' grief itself became an eroticized phenomenon. Not only did the widow's (socially correct) mourning activity suggest her as an appropriate object of admiration, it also signaled her availability for the next suitor, however much she displayed grief for her dead husband. Likewise, in "The Widow's Tears: The Pedagogy of Grief in Medieval France and the Image of the Grieving Widow," Leslie Abend Callahan discusses the paradox of the widow's grief, which in moderation constitutes appropriate conduct, but in excess suggests a lack of sincere feeling, and might even disguise the widow's desire for (or engagement in) sexual transgression.

As in any anthology, some contributions to the volume are stronger than others. The collection explores the formation and transmission of images of widows and virgins primarily from the perspective of literary studies; voices offering perspectives from history, religious studies, philosophy, or anthropology are largely absent. Several of the articles locate the literary images of chaste women under examination within their broader social context, and extend their analysis to the religious treatises, advice literature, and legal traditions that provide insight into societal expectations of widows and virgins. Individually, the articles that cross disciplinary boundaries are the most effective at demonstrating the process of "constructed" virginity and widowhood. However, within the context of the collection, the readings of individual texts enhance our understanding of how these social categories were transmitted in medieval culture.

With respect to method, many of the contributors elect to engage gender performance theory and images of the body to investigate widowhood and virginity, and this approach seems especially valid in their analyses of how the categories of widow and virgin are constructed. Generally speaking, all of the texts (fictional and otherwise) that convey the ideals and social norms of widowhood and virginity are of clerical authorship, or, at the very least, their authors (with the possible exceptions of Christine de Pizan and Chaucer) tend to be males immersed in the sexual pessimism of the clerics who dominated medieval

learned culture. Representations of widowhood and virginity in prescriptive and fictional texts, therefore, arise from the Church attempting to 'speak' itself on matters of chastity. The performative analysis of virginity utilized at length in the collection provides a convincing argument that Christian authors consistently attempted to establish ecclesiastical purity through the ambiguous, often problematic language of the female body.

Like virginity, widowhood also required a performative celibacy and pious demeanor. Moreover widows, like virgins, had a symbolic function for the Christian body social as the 'widowed' Ecclesia, the worldly church waiting for spiritual reunion with Christ, her true bridegroom. However, widowhood, though like virginity contradictory and multivalent in its representations, seems less abstracted than virginity in the texts chosen for examination here. Unlike consecrated virginity, widowhood was an extremely common social experience for women and their families. Hence, the theological implications for widowhood and the social role of the pious widow seem, at least in fiction, to take a backseat to widows' roles as 'trophy wives' and attainable objects of male desire.