To the City of the Virgin, what is a widow? Widows—pitiful, pious, and profligate—appear often in sources from the Christian Middle Ages. Rich and poor, young and old, in medieval society widows were everywhere. Whereas widowhood as a status is often treated as a theme in women’s history, or examined as a social construction from the approach of comparative gender history, recent scholarship from the perspective of postmodern gender theory has recognized that meanings of widowhood were produced on the bodies of women and men from a shifting matrix of gender-specific laws, customs, and religious practices. I focus here on the Christian widow from thirteenth-century Siena, the central Tuscan town on the Italian peninsula known as the City of the Virgin. How was the Christian widow key to Siena as a site for the production of knowledge? What did representations of these bodies signify in the prosperous city-state, where saints and sinners graciously paid their taxes? In the light of growing academic interest in Siena’s artistic, religious, and cultural history, this paper asks the question: as Siena reframes its glorious past, how do representations of the Christian widow from the thirteenth century communicate with audiences today?

Throughout the Middle Ages, representations of the Christian widow variously formed from the Biblical *vere vidua* [true or real, in the sense of deserving or respectable, widow]. The real widow, as Katherine Clark’s work in “Pious Widowhood in the Middle Ages” shows, functioned rhetorically as “a symbol for the church, a poor figure commanding human pity and divine protection, a person able to redeem her chastity that had been lost through marriage, and a real-life woman requiring pastoral care.” By contrast, representations of widowed Christian men were not formed from, as Thomas McGinn terms it, “a double typology.” They were, however, framed by a moral system that directed both women and men away from remarriage and towards service to the Church. By locating these spiritual directives as a discourse, Clark interprets the Christian widow as an embodied performance
of chastity, charity, and asceticism, and demonstrates how the ambiguous, or unstable, human sign *vere vidua* functioned in historical contexts to stabilize Christian society. Here I take up this idea and—by reading across widely diverse textual representations—I try to show how this unstable sign worked to stabilize the City of the Virgin.

One measure of how medieval feminist scholarship has changed over the past two decades is the increased diffusion of research from archival collections in Italy on forms and meanings of women in medieval society. Many scholars have contributed affirmatively to this development. Here I emphasize the most recent relevant studies, and therefore references to fundamental sources will be found in the notes and bibliographies of those works.

THE WIDOW IN BLACK AND WHITE

My first example, which concerns the conversion of a young widow to a form of lay religious life widely popular in the central Middle Ages, features AmbroseSansedoni, a Dominican of Siena who lived from 1220-1287, and his contemporary, Recupero of Arezzo, who is both author and narrator. It reveals perhaps better than any other narrative of comparable length, the challenge of reconstructing the manner of living of a (presumably) sexually experienced woman to an idealized life of sexual renunciation. In order that the effectiveness of his word be especially evident, Mrs. Mante, of Lucignano in the Florentine district, a woman connected to him by blood, religious in her clothing, customs and devotion, reported to me that when in her youth she was deprived of the solace of a husband, this father visited her as though she were a blood relative in a condition of sorrow: He told her, among other things, an exemplum which St. Gregory [the Great] reports in his book of *Dialogues* concerning a certain woman by the name of Galla, who during the time of adolescence was given to a husband and in a short interval of time she was bereaved of this husband by death: when he was dead, many encouraged her to remarry, but soon she gave herself to a monastery. By these words he incited the aforesaid kinswoman to a similar contempt for the world and placed his hand upon her: she was inflamed...
This independent religious laywoman cloaked in the Dominican colors of black and white is drawn from a late thirteenth-century text that was intended for the Church hierarchy. The approbation of Mrs. Mante’s peers reported by Brother Recupero in the concluding sentence appears consistent with the revisionist view that Dominican penitent women were pious laywomen only loosely associated with the Order of Preachers until the fifteenth century. Ambrose mediates between the Word of God and the widow’s body: as a divine messenger, he performs the Word of God, and the site of his performance is the body of the young widow. Her tears do not represent grief or despair. Instead, they signify her conversion to lay penitential life, and thus demonstrate the efficacy of his words. In this manner, the widow authenticates the preacher. When a black mantle and white veil of the Dominican lay habit cover her body and legitimize her choice, her weeping stops. The text/body relationship is delineated here as a closed semiotic circle that contains old relationships even while establishing new boundaries for the widow’s body.

THE WIDOWS OF AGNES STREET

New boundaries for the widow’s body often touch on, in the words of Barbara Hanawalt, “the spiritual bargain between the rich and poor in the salvation of the rich men’s and women’s souls and care for poorer neighbors.” In this frame are the widows of Agnes Street. There is a small street in Siena today, Via Monna Agnese [(the lady) Agnes Street], located in the oldest section of town, a few steps away from the city’s spectacular gothic cathedral. The name of the street is a modern medievalism, but Agnes d’Affretatto was indeed a real person, who, between 1270 and 1274, established a hospital at this location and governed it herself with public and private support. While maintaining close ties to
both sacerdotal and secular authorities, this small hospital for the poor, with its mixed community of women and men, remained an independent organization for more than two centuries, always under the direction and management of women. Historians have traditionally identified the hospital of Monna Agnese as serving “poor widows in childbirth,” but this was not the case, as Lucia Brunetti’s meticulously detailed archival information shows. Of the seventeen women who governed the hospital in succession following Agnes’ death, more than half were widows. The real widows on Agnes Street, in other words, were not in childbirth: they were in charge.

Real Widows/Real Knights

Bindo Bonichi (ca. 1260–1338) was not a knight. Merchant, writer, and member of Siena’s “patriciate of public service,” as William Bowsky terms it, Bonichi knew, as the following excerpt from one of his satirical poems shows, that real widows signify real knights.

Widows and orphans are very safe
on account of the oaths knights take,
but everyone makes sure they lock their doors.
For, though knights swear before friars
not to touch women and to live pure lives,
woe betide whoever trusts an old soldier.

Bonichi, of course, was aware of the reality in his time behind the stereotypical poor widow. He was, after all, among the compilers of a new constitution for Siena’s charitable society, Misericordia, established in 1250. He writes about the knight as a form of “dominant masculinity,” as Judith Halberstam puts it. The satire depends on a medieval social truism: the Christian knight has a duty “to protect the weak, women, widows and orphans.” The body of a real widow here signifies the knight’s (dubious) authenticity.

Similarly, Florentine Franco Sacchetti (ca. 1378–1395), in a poem cited by Chiara Frugoni to illustrate the use of eyeglasses as a male prerogative in the Middle Ages, “deplores the decadence of the knightly class, because in his time even people of low condition had crept into it, ‘astute traders, wearing glasses, with pens behind their ears, doing sums in their books, making deceptive
transactions, buying and selling, trading and lending, seizing and grabbing, robbing the widows and orphans.”

We hear the echoes of Mark (12:38-44); (12:41-44) and Luke (20:45-47); (21:1-4), passages joined, as Biblical scholars have observed, by “widow” to demonstrate the authenticity of the Christian social order in protecting society’s weakest members.

**The Black Widow, or Please Don’t Show Me the Money**

Money looms large in Cecco Angiolieri’s (c. 1260-1312) sonnets, providing the underlying text, for example, in an exchange between the character Cecco and “figura diaboli,” Becchina, about their different perceptions of the past (Sonnet LIV). Since Becchina married another, Cecco calculates that, in sum, the two years that have elapsed are a hundred because of his suffering and misery. Becchina responds with a “black-widow question,” as Selby Wynn Schwartz rightly terms it, “perche non hai chi mi ti tolse spento?” [why didn’t you kill the man who took me away from you?] In this hilarious power inversion, the idea of the profligate, or “false,” widow signifies the “false” Cecco, who is surely a Christian figuration of, as Fabian Alfie puts it, “a small, pitiful, selfish man,” with all “the incorrect priorities of the worldly person.” Without an understanding of the Christian widow as a great deal more than a recognizable type, or a modern independent woman, the social meaning of this sonnet is entirely lost. Why else would the poet conclude with Becchina reducing Cecco, the man made weak by desire, to less than zero?

“Cecco, s’una città come fu Troja
oggima’ mi donassi, a lo ver dire,
non la vorre’ per cavarti di noia.”

[Cecco, all the riches of Troy couldn’t make me want to make you happy.]

**Widows in Color**

Aghina, widow of Lamberto di Alberto, and Olliente, widow of Ildibrandino Signorucoli, are represented in an archival document from 1243 that appears as a full-page, color reproduction in *Palazzo S珊sedoni*, a recent publication documenting the history
This archival document forms a “portrait” of the two widows. Aghina and Olliente are not depicted as holy women or patrons of architecture. Instead, they are depicted in the process of clearing up some unfinished financial transactions involving the devolution of family resources. Historical coincidence places them in front of us now, because this particular document links, however cautiously, the father of Blessed Ambrose Sansedoni to the famous building. The Christian widow from thirteenth-century Siena, then, does communicate with audiences today. Are the widows Aghina and Olliente typical for thirteenth-century Siena? Based on my comparison of this document with thirty similar records located in Archivio di Stato di Siena (ASS), I believe that they are indeed typical. For the purposes of this paper, one image from this collection will serve to illustrate the model.

**A Fire and the Protected Widow**

One evening in 1250, in the terzo [section] of Camollia in Siena, a small cabin burned to the ground. The remaining pile of waste had once been home for a family of three, headed by Bonamico di Sinibaldo. On December 3, the widow of Bonamico, Stefania, now guardian of their son, Orlandus, was indemnified for all the household goods consumed by flames. In a document that runs approximately 300 words in Latin, the notary carefully itemizes the household goods according to the sworn testimony of Stefania. The document is not unlike a list one might prepare today for an insurance agent. For Stefania, however, producing such a list involved her sworn testimony and two witnesses “secundum constitutum senensem” [according to the Constitution of Siena].

Nothing extraordinary appears on Stefania’s list, which includes stores of grain, oil, wine, olives, dried legumes, and one hen. In addition are items of clothing such as a shirt, two pair of shoes, a purse containing a few coins, and one bendìa [a cloth headband]. The cost of indemnification was divided equally between the communities of Siena and Massa, Stefania’s hometown.

To return to the question I asked at the beginning: to the City of the Virgin, what is a widow? One bendìa? One hen? In short,
yes. The details that usually can only be found in unedited archival documents create a picture of everyday justice in a self-governing community. Long before Justice appears as a (female) figure in the famous Lorenzetti murals in Siena’s town hall, justice was figured in the body of the Christian widow. For various regimes in the City of the Virgin, therefore, the widow signified authenticity.

New York University

End Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the 41st International Congress on Medieval Studies, 4-7 May 2006, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, as part of an “SMFS at Twenty” panel on “Archives.”

New York University

End Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the 41st International Congress on Medieval Studies, 4-7 May 2006, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, as part of an “SMFS at Twenty” panel on “Archives.”


6. For an overview of recent projects and publications, see the collection of essays by Mario Ascheri in his Siena e la città-Stato del Medioevo Italiano (Siena: Betti, 2003), pp. 291.


Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Erdmans, 2004).
10. On conversi [converts] and penitenti [penitents] in the communal era, see “From Conversion to Community,” in Thompson, Cities of God, pp. 69–102.
Domestic Relations in Medieval Canon Law (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Erdmans, 2004).
10. On conversi [converts] and penitenti [penitents] in the communal era, see “From Conversion to Community,” in Thompson, Cities of God, pp. 69–102.
22. Paolo Nardi, “*Origini e sviluppo della Casa della Misericordia nei secoli XIII e XIV*,” in Ascheri and Turrini, *La Misericordia*, pp. 64-93, p. 75.
30. Selby Wynn Schwartz, *Rogue Poetry: Cecco Angiolieri and the Troubadour Tradition*. PhD Diss. University of California, Berkeley, 2005, p. 72. Schwartz’s translation reads, “Why didn’t you knock off the guy who took me away from you?” I have followed Stanghellini’s modern Italian translation, which reads, “perché non hai ammazzato chi mi ha portato via a te?” This literally translates as, “Why didn’t you kill who took me away from you?” The translation hinges on the various verb conjugations: “ammazzare” is the root verb meaning “to kill,” and “ammazzato” is the past participle. The tenses are somewhat obscured in Schwartz’s colloquial translation, but highlighted in the modern Italian version.
31. Alfie, *Comedy and Culture*, p.36.
33. My translation. I realize it is not poetic, but I wanted to underscore my point, and a prose translation allows for bluntness not readily apparent in poetry.
36. See here especially the studies by Giuliodori, Brizio, and Lumia-Ostinelli listed in n. 3 above.
37. For an archival study of Siena’s urban development during this period, see Guglielmo Villa, Siena medievale: La costruzione della città nell’età “ghibellina” 1200–1270 (Rome: Bonsignori, 2004).
38. ASS, Diplomatico, Archivio Generale, 31 dicembre 1250; transcription by Filippo Pozzi.
39. On sources and meanings of these murals, see Alberto Colli, ed., Ambrogio Lorenzetti: La vita del trecento in Siena e nel contado senese nelle committenze istoriate pubbliche e private, Guida al Buongoverno (Siena, 2004).