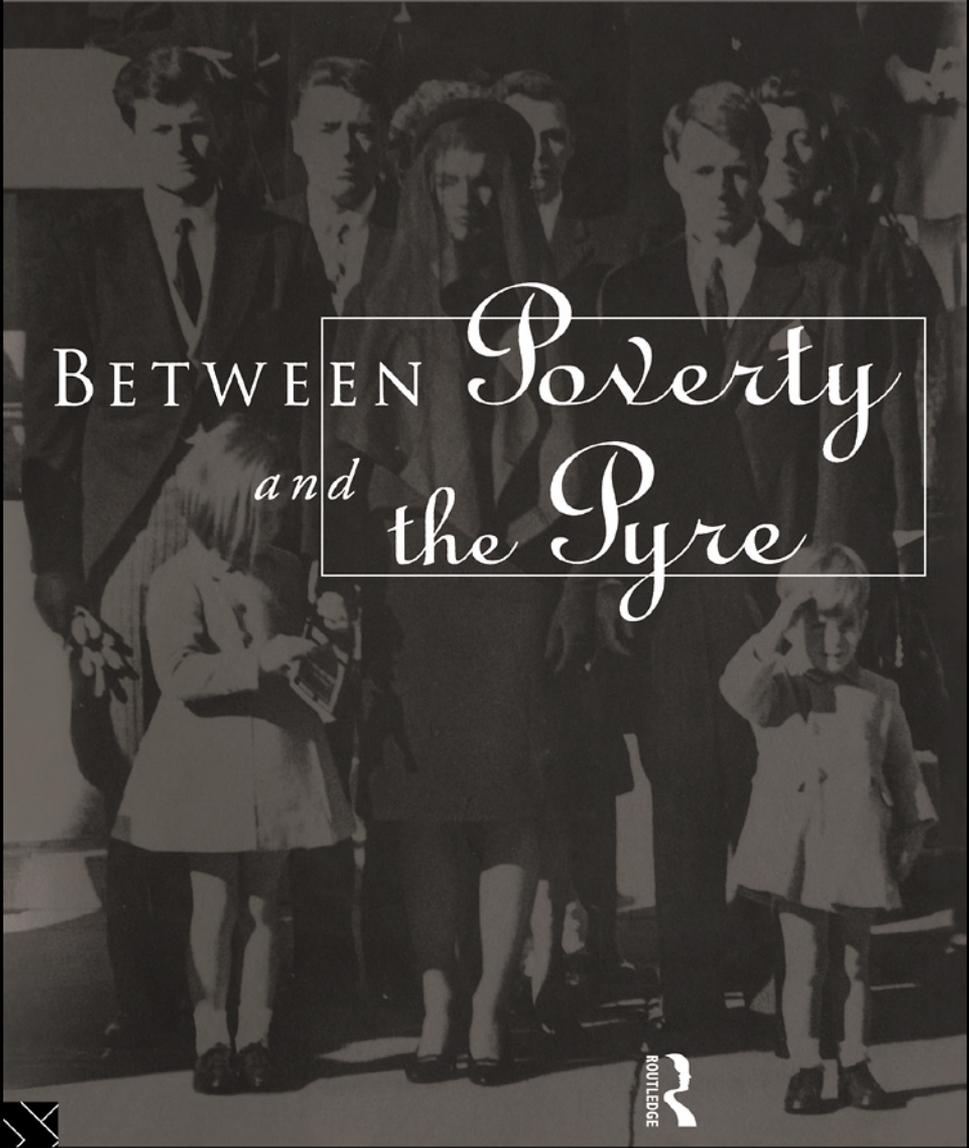


EDITED BY JAN BREMMER AND  
LOURENS VAN DEN BOSCH

moments in the history of widowhood



BETWEEN *Poverty*  
*and* *the Pyre*

ROUTLEDGE

**Also available as a printed book  
see title verso for ISBN details**

BETWEEN POVERTY  
AND THE PYRE



BETWEEN  
POVERTY AND  
THE PYRE

Moments in the history of  
widowhood

*Edited by Jan Bremmer and  
Lourens van den Bosch*



London and New York

First published 1995  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2002.

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Selection and editorial matter  
© 1995 Jan Bremmer and Lourens van den Bosch  
Individual chapters © 1995 the contributors

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Between poverty and the pyre: moments in the history of  
widowhood/edited by Jan Bremmer and  
Lourens van den Bosch

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Widowhood—History—Cross-cultural studies.

I. Bremmer, Jan N. II. Bosch, Lourens P. van den

HQ1058.B48 1995

305.48'9654'09—dc20 94—27018

ISBN 0-415-08370-2 (Print Edition)  
ISBN 0-203-03698-0 Master e-book ISBN  
ISBN 0-203-20120-5 (Glassbook Format)

# CONTENTS

<i>List of illustrations</i>	vii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	viii
<i>Preface</i>	x
<i>Editors' note</i>	xi
1 WIDOWS' WORLDS	1
Representations and realities	
<i>Marjo Buitelaar</i>	
2 THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF THE WIDOW IN ANCIENT ISRAEL	19
<i>Karel van der Toorn</i>	
3 PAUPER OR PATRONESS	31
The widow in the Early Christian Church	
<i>Jan N.Bremmer</i>	
4 WIDOWS IN ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND	58
<i>Rolf H.Bremmer Jr</i>	
5 WIDOWS AND THE LAW	89
The legal position of widows in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries	
<i>Dieneke Hempenius-van Dijk</i>	
6 'EUROPEAN' WIDOWS IN THE DUTCH EAST INDIES	103
Their legal and social position	
<i>Heleen C.Gall</i>	

CONTENTS

7	WOMEN WITHOUT MEN Widows and spinsters in Britain and France in the eighteenth century <i>Olwen Hufton</i>	122
8	NOBLE WIDOWS BETWEEN FORTUNE AND FAMILY <i>Yme Kuiper</i>	152
9	THE ULTIMATE JOURNEY Sati and widowhood in India <i>Lourens P. van den Bosch</i>	171
10	WIDOWS IN ISLAM <i>Willy Jansen</i>	204
11	WIDOWS HIDDEN FROM VIEW The disappearance of mourning dress among Dutch widows in the twentieth century <i>Geertje van Os</i>	230
12	WIDOWS IN WESTERN HISTORY A select bibliography <i>Frouke Veenstra and Kirsten van der Ploeg</i> <i>Index</i>	247 252

# ILLUSTRATIONS

Between pp. 102–3

## CHAPTER 8

- 1 Adriana ('Jeanne') Wilhelmina, Lady van Andringa de Kempenaer (1858–1926)
- 2 The castle of Wychen, near Nimwegen: aristocratic grandeur
- 3 Onno Zwier van Haren (1713–79): a question of incest

## CHAPTER 9

- 4 The *sati* jumps onto the pyre
- 5 The funeral cortège of an Indian *raja*
- 6 A living *sati*, village in Sekhavati district, Rajasthan
- 7 Interior of a local Rani Sati temple, Bombay
- 8 A wall poster, Benares, eulogizing a heroic deed
- 9 *Sati caura* (mould) near Sanskrit University, Benares

## CHAPTER 11

- 10 A recently widowed woman stopping a typical Dutch clock
- 11 French widows in various stages of fashionable mourning

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Lourens P. van den Bosch** b. 1944, is Associate Professor of History of Religion at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. He is the author of *Atharvaveda-parisista: Chapters 21–29, Introduction, Translation and Notes* (1978) and *Inleiding in het hindoeïsme* (1990).

**Jan N. Bremmer** b. 1944, is Professor of History of Religion at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. He is the author of *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul* (1983) and *Greek Religion* (1994), co-author of *Roman Myth and Mythography* (1987), editor of *Interpretations of Greek Mythology* (1987), *From Sappho to de Sade: Moments in the History of Sexuality* (1989) and *A Dictionary of Ancient Religions* (1995), and co-editor of *A Cultural History of Gesture* (1991).

**Rolf H. Bremmer Jr** b. 1950, is Associate Professor of Medieval English at the Rijksuniversiteit Leiden. He is the author of *The Fyve Wyttes* (1987) and *A Bibliographical Guide to Old Frisian Studies* (1992), editor of *Franciscus Junius and His Circle* (1995), and co-editor of *Aspects of Old Frisian Philology* (1990), *P.J. Cosijn: Notes on Beowulf* (1991), *Zur Phonologie und Morphologie des Altniederländischen* (1992), *Current Trends in West Germanic Etymological Lexicography* (1993) and *Companion to Old English Poetry* (1994).

**Marjo Buitelaar** b. 1958, is Associate Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. She is the author of *Fasting and Feasting in Morocco: Women's Participation in Ramadan* (1993), and co-editor of *De Koran: Ontstaan, interpretatie en praktijk* (1993).

**Heleen C. Gall** b. 1946, is Associate Professor of Legal History at the Rijksuniversiteit Leiden. She is the author of *Bronnen van de Nederlandse codificatie: Personen- en familierecht 1798–1820* (1980) and *Willem Bilderdijk en het privatissimum van Professor D.G. van*

*der Keessel* (1986), and co-author of *Catalogue of Legal Codes Published Before 1800 at the National Library of Indonesia* (1992).

**Dieneke Hempenius-van Dijk** b. 1947, is Associate Professor of Legal History at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. She is the author of *De weeskamer van de stad Groningen 1613–1811* (1991).

**Olwen Hufton** b. 1938, is Professor of History at the European University Institute, Florence and formerly William Keenan Professor of History and of Women's History, Harvard University. She is the author of *Bayeux in the Late Eighteenth Century* (1967), *The Poor of Eighteenth-Century France* (1974), *Europe: Privilege and Protest* (1981) and *Women and the Limits of Citizenship in the French Revolution* (1992).

**Willy Jansen** b. 1950, is Professor of Women's Studies at the Katholieke Universiteit of Nijmegen. She is the author of *Women Without Men* (1987) and *Mythen van het fundament* (1993), editor of *Lokale Islam* (1985), and co-editor of *Islamitische Pelgrimstochten* (1991).

**Yme Kuiper** b. 1949, is Associate Professor of History of Religion and Cultural Anthropology at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. He is the author of *Adel in Friesland 1780–1880* (1993) and co-editor of *Feest en ritueel in Europa* (1983), *Struggles of Gods* (1984), *Antropologie tussen wetenschap en kunst: Essays over Clifford Geertz* (1987) and *Concepts of Person in Religion and Thought* (1990).

**Geertje van Os** b. 1964, is a member of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research and is preparing a dissertation on widowhood in modern Spain. She is the author of 'Als de bisschop een priester wijdt, wijdt de duvel een pastoorsmeid', *Volkskundig Bulletin* 18 (1992).

**Kirsten van der Ploeg** b. 1963, was Assistant Librarian of the Faculty of Theology of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

**Karel van der Toorn** b. 1956, is Professor of Ancient Religions at the Rijksuniversiteit Leiden. He is the author of *Sin and Sanction in Israel and Mesopotamia* (1985) and *Van haar wieg tot haar graf: De rol van de godsdienst in het leven van de Israëlitische en de Babylonische vrouw* (1987), and co-editor of *Dictionary of Demons and Deities in the Bible* (1995).

**Frouke Veenstra** b. 1953, is Librarian of the Faculty of Theology of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.

## PREFACE

Since time immemorial widows have been associated with notions of ambiguity. They often represented a marginal group and, unlike widowers, their lives were controlled by many rules. This marginality may explain the small amount of attention which they receive in scholarly research. This lack of interest induced us to organize a colloquium on the position of widows throughout the centuries in the Mediterranean and western Europe and in those great religious traditions, Islam and Hinduism, which more and more are becoming a part of our own culture. We felt that the subject should be looked at from as many angles as possible and therefore invited historians, jurists, philologists, anthropologists, and theologians. The conference, which was held in Groningen in February 1992, was a great success and its proceedings will provide a basis for further historical and anthropological research into widowhood.

We thank all those who made the event possible. The Faculty of Theology of the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen and the Groninger Universiteits Fonds supported the conference with generous contributions. Mirjam Buigel-de Witte, secretary of the Centre for Religious Studies, proved to be of great assistance both before and during the conference. Ken Dowden was (as he so often is) very helpful and revised the English text of various contributions. We are grateful to Annemiek Boonstra for her assistance in compiling the index.

Finally, we thank the contributors for their enthusiasm and for their interest in the colloquium. Without them we would have been unable to offer the reader this volume with its various studies on widowhood past and present. These studies, we hope, may enable us to take a fresh look at the power relations between men and women, which are often at the basis of the many restrictions connected with widowhood.

Lourens P. van den Bosch, Jan N. Bremmer  
Centre for Religious Studies, Groningen, The Netherlands

## EDITORS' NOTE

In biblical quotations, the King James version is used unless indicated otherwise. A difference in verse sequence is indicated when the English sequence differs from the original Hebrew one.

A few quotations are taken from *The Living Bible*.



# WIDOWS' WORLDS

## Representations and realities

*Marjo Buitelaar*

What is a widow?<sup>1</sup> The shortest answer to this question seems to be 'a woman who has outlived her husband'. But this definition is not as straightforward as it may at first appear. How to describe, for instance, a woman who has outlived her spouse and subsequently remarries? Is she still a widow or has she left widowhood behind her? In social terms, a remarrying woman will usually no longer be considered a widow, but in legal terms she may still have rights pertaining to widowhood, such as a widow's pension. If the term 'widow' is restricted to women who do not remarry after their husband is deceased, it appears that although this definition may apply to contemporary western widows, historically and cross-culturally speaking it would be more correct to say that the death of her spouse is only one prerequisite for a woman to be called a 'widow'. In his contribution to this book Van der Toorn tells us that in Assyria the term widow was only associated with a woman 'if her husband and father-in-law were dead and she had no son' (see p. 23). A widow, therefore, was not just any woman who had outlived her husband. The term was reserved for formerly married women who had neither male protection nor means of financial support and who were thus in need of special legal protection, although this may have been a question of association rather than strict definition. Also, as Kuiper remarks in his discussion of widowhood in Dutch society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a small group of widows belonging to the nobility, *douarières*, were distinguished from the majority of widows.

The Latin term for 'widow', *vidua*, is related to a root meaning 'to place apart'.<sup>2</sup> As will become clear in the chapters which follow, in most cases widows are, in fact, placed apart from much more than just their husbands. In addressing the question 'what is a widow?'

the contributors to this book discuss various implications of the separations that occur upon the death of a husband. Sometimes they focus on the image of the widow that exists in a specific cultural and historical context. They may do so by discussing images of widows which serve as role models for other women, like the Hindu ideal of the *sati*, the 'widow' who, as Van den Bosch tells us, joins her deceased husband on his funeral pyre. There is Israel's 'ideal widow' Judith, who 'feared God with great devotion' and was praised for her wisdom and chastity. At other times the images of the widows that are presented are descriptive rather than prescriptive, as for example the widow-witch in Anglo-Saxon England discussed by Rolf Bremmer, or the changing image of the widow-in-mourning in Dutch society, whose black garments, as Van Os argues, expressed her dignity but could also have an erotic connotation. Most essays not only present us with different images of the widow, but also analyse the social reality of widows. Sometimes they are concerned with their economic situation, as in Hufton's sketch of the limited occupational options for most widows in eighteenth-century Britain and France. At other times they investigate legal aspects of widowhood, such as Gall's study of the legal positions of 'European' widows in the seventeenth-century Dutch East Indies, and Hempenius-van Dijk's description of the rights of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century widows from the Dutch provinces of Groningen and Friesland to widows' pensions, inheritance and guardianship over children. Other essays focus primarily on the social position of specific widows, such as Jansen's depiction of Amina, an Algerian widow who, despite her financial independence, lacked the power to guarantee her daughter respectable marriage arrangements. Closely related to the legal and social position of widows is the issue of the religious activities of widows, which is yet another focus of attention in several of the chapters that follow. It has been noted that widows are in general more involved in religious activities than widowers or married women. Jan Bremmer, for example, notes the great number of widows among the first followers of Jesus and discusses the changing views of early Christian societies on the issue of remarriage by widows. On the other hand, widows may be excluded from religious ceremonies, as the Brahmin widows in India were.

We meet a few famous widows in this book. Two early Muslim widows, Khadija and Aisha, are, indeed, exceptional. Khadija, first wife of the prophet Muhammed and his first convert to Islam, was a rich and powerful widow when she proposed to him; while Aisha,

the youngest widow left behind by Muhammed after his death, played an important role in the transmission of religious knowledge and, as a consequence, the development of the Islamic doctrine. There is also, of course, the already-mentioned Jewish heroine Judith, who saved her people by using her charms and eloquence in order to enter the enemy's camp and behead General Holofernes. Unlike her Muslim counterparts, Judith is less a historical than a literary figure, and has been a source of inspiration to western artists through the centuries. In this respect she may be likened to other famous literary widows, such as Gertrude of Denmark, who traumatized her son Hamlet by marrying her deceased husband's brother; or Jocasta, who had an even more disruptive influence by unknowingly marrying her son Oedipus.<sup>3</sup> No one who has heard 'Penelope's Lament' by the Italian composer Monteverdi will ever forget the grief of this Homeric grass widow, whose faithfulness to her missing husband Odysseus was eventually rewarded by his return.

This volume is an interdisciplinary presentation of various ways in which widowhood is embedded in different historical and cultural contexts. It diverges from the vast body of scholarship on literary widows,<sup>4</sup> and from recent studies by social psychologists who focus on mourning processes of widows in western cultures.<sup>5</sup> In the field of anthropology, we find an ethnographic interest in the participation of widows in mortuary rituals. As might be expected, the literature on Brahmin 'widow-burning' or *sutti'ism* is over-represented. As Van den Bosch remarks in his contribution to this volume, this can partly be explained by the fact that in our confrontation with other cultures, we tend to become fascinated by the fanciful and the bizarre rather than the plain and ordinary. Activities of widows who on first appearance seem less extraordinary can also supply us with original insights, as is demonstrated convincingly in Danforth's poetic mono-graph on death rituals in rural Greece.<sup>6</sup> Strangely enough, widowhood, as distinct from the participation of widows in mortuary ritual, has so far received little attention from anthropologists. Two interesting exceptions are the studies by Lopata and Potash.<sup>7</sup> The essays in Potash's volume investigate the socioeconomic position of widows in Africa. They reveal that, contrary to commonly held views, most African widows do not enjoy communal support, but head their own households and are self-reliant, only to be supported by their children in old age. Lopata's cross-cultural survey focuses on the different 'support systems' that widows may or may not have at their disposal: economic, social, emotional and service systems

that determine their position as widows to a considerable extent. In the studies of Lopata and Potash we search in vain for more than incidental references to the meaning of widowhood as a cultural construction of female identity.

The contributors to this volume do not restrict themselves to interpretations of a specific aspect of widowhood. Rather, they are concerned with both representations and social realities of widows. Their chapters provide us with materials which offer suggestions and directions for a discussion on cultural constructions and meanings of widowhood. By way of a preliminary exploration, I will touch upon some of the recurrent themes that cross-culturally and cross-historically, in various combinations and with different degrees of emphasis, are the foci of attention in the construction of the widow as a separate(d) social category.

As no one category in patterns of gender classification can be fully understood without examining other categories of the system in which it is embedded,<sup>8</sup> a first step is to pose the question as to what other social categories the widow is compared to in the various chapters. Strikingly, in most texts widows are rarely compared to a seemingly obvious social category: widowers. Granted that the authors did not receive suggestions to do so, it must be noted that they did make comparisons between widows and other social categories. Indeed, the conspicuous absence of widowers indicates that, as a variation on a theme studied by Ortner, it is not true to say that 'widow is to woman as widower is to man'.<sup>9</sup> In fact, widowerhood as a social category seems to be a historical latecomer. In Latin and Greek there is no masculine form to match the term 'widow', while in the Anglo-Saxon language a masculine form only appeared in the late fourteenth century. Apparently, in most societies widowerhood affects male identity to a much lesser extent than widowhood affects female identity. In the remainder of this chapter the question will be addressed as to how this difference can be understood.

Comparison between absolute figures of widows and widowers suggests asymmetries in the two categories. In the United States there are four widows to every widower.<sup>10</sup> In this volume, it is noted that in nineteenth-century Dutch society there were three times as many widows as widowers, while in eighteenth-century France 80 per cent of the widowers between the ages of 20 and 29 remarried as compared to 60 per cent of the widows of the same age. This difference increased to 52 per cent remarriage for widowers as compared to only 20 per cent of the widows between the ages of

40 and 49. It could be argued that the discrepancy between remarrying widowers and widows must be explained by the fact that women tend to marry at a younger age than men and tend to live longer, resulting in a surplus of widowed women. While this may be true for Asian and Middle Eastern societies, it should be noted that except for aristocratic circles, where girls were sometimes married off at very young ages, in western Europe discrepancies in age at the time of marriage have never been dramatic. Moreover, it is only since the beginning of the twentieth century that women in western Europe have tended to live longer than men.<sup>11</sup> Even where discrepancies between the numbers of widows and widowers are due to differences in age between marriage partners, ideas about female and male identity and the power relations that lie behind such age differences influence views on the propriety of remarriage after the death of one's spouse. Different kinds of dependencies that result from the sexual division of labour, for instance, may affect the occurrence of remarriage. As Stirling remarks about rural Turkey: 'The loss of a wife is a serious blow to a man. He cannot himself look after small children, or cook. He cannot even decently fetch himself water'.<sup>12</sup> In any event, the importance of discrepancies between figures of widows and widowers to this argument is that they reveal that widowhood is less often a permanent position for men than widowhood is for women.

How this relates to notions of female and male identity can be assessed by examining the categories to which widows are in fact likened or opposed. In most of the chapters contained in this book we find comparisons of widows with orphans, on the one hand; and with virgins, nuns, spinsters and ascetics on the other. In one way or another, all these categories share the absence of an individual male's legitimate guardianship, although the implications of this lack of male control and protection vary for the different categories. A closer examination of instances where the various texts mention orphans and unmarried women reveals two different concerns: in comparisons with orphans the problem is the widow's socioeconomic position, while with unmarried women it is her sexuality.

There are references in several chapters to the vulnerability of widows and orphans, usually concerning religious admonishments and legal provisions that are made to protect them. For example, Job claimed 'that he freely gave food to the poor, the widow and the orphan'. Similarly, in the laws of the Anglo-Saxon King Æthelred the clergy were instructed 'not to vex the widows and orphans too

often, but to gladden them eagerly'. Some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch widows received certain benefits because they were placed in the category of the so-called *personae miserabiles*, a status they shared with orphans, the chronically sick and other 'unfortunate persons'. These references suggest an image of the widow as a poor and helpless woman, emphasizing her vulnerability. In the world view of Near Eastern societies and early Judaism, for example, widows and orphans were considered prototypes of the socially underprivileged: to speak of a 'poor widow' was considered a tautology. Indeed, many of the widows mentioned in this study lived in circumstances of extreme poverty. Anglo-Saxon widows and their children could be bonded into slavery when unable to pay debts, while many widows in eighteenth-century France and Britain were found in judicial records concerning theft and prostitution. As the position of Dutch *douarières* demonstrates, however, poverty does not necessarily adhere to widowhood. Roman upper-class widows provide another example. They lived comfortably enough to uphold the status of *univira*, a woman who has had only one husband. Her status as a war-widow means that the Algerian woman Amina is financially better off than many of her fellow-countrywomen. It is interesting to note that in most public imagery of widows only the extremely poor and the lavishly rich are represented, whereas in reality we find widows among all social strata. Moreover, from the proverbial poor widow in the Ancient Near East, 'whose ass is fit (only) for breaking wind', to Franz Léhar's *Lustige Witwe* ('Merry Widow'), whose family worries that she will squander her late husband's fortune while enjoying herself in Paris, the views on these women are not without ridicule.

At the conceptual level, then, the category of the widow is characterized by contrasting extremes: she may be either lavishly rich or utterly poor and she appeals either to compassion or mockery, in some cases even to both. This dichotomous stereotyping is related to the fact that as a woman without direct male guardianship, the widow is an anomaly. As Van der Toorn characterizes it: 'On the one hand, she has neither male support nor protection, but on the other, she is free to live her life as it pleases her' (see p. 28). The dichotomous representations of widows can be just as compelling and stirring to the imagination as those of the orphan. Orphans can be both more vulnerable and more empowered than 'ordinary' children. Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* presents us with images of extreme pathos and vulnerability, juxtaposed against the accomplished pick-pocketing of

the street 'toughs'. Likewise, widows are represented as both more vulnerable and more empowered than 'ordinary' women.

Where widows and orphans do part company, however, is with regard to sexuality. As becomes clear when widows are compared to other social categories, it is her potentially unfettered sexual longing that makes the widow a source of such cultural anxiety. In several chapters, we find comparisons or relations between widows and other adult women who (supposedly) have no sexual relations with men. In eighteenth-century French cities, for instance, widows and spinsters often lived together. Sharing the costs of rent, heating and lighting and household chores obviously had economic benefits for these women, but more affluent widows and spinsters could also be found living together, such groupings providing them with the only alternative to family life besides the convent. Widows and other women without men are also mentioned in Van Os's discussion of changing meanings of the mourning dress, when she notes a parallel between the attire of early Christian nuns and widows, neither of whom took an interest in elegant and stylish garments, both hiding their feminine figure underneath shapeless habits. In Anglo-Saxon England, King Æthelred's laws concerning the abduction of women for marriage mentioned widows and nuns in the same breath. Similarly, according to the rules of the Old English Penitential, rapists of either a virgin or a widow faced excommunication.

To understand why virgins—including nuns and spinsters—and widows may be mentioned in the same breath, Ardener's argument on sexual mismatches may be elucidating.<sup>13</sup> She observes that when the classificatory pair 'woman:man', as it features in the universe of 'adults', is compared with its occurrence in the universe of 'fecund persons', in most cultures the category of man tends to match in both universes, while the category of woman in the universe of adults meets with two mismatches in the universe of fecund persons, i.e. virgins and post-menopausal women. Following Douglas, Ardener goes on to argue that such mismatches or 'empty slots' on either side of a category, in this case the category of fecund persons, help to define it. Thus, attention may be concentrated upon virginity so that sexually experienced or fully adult women may be more clearly defined. Constituting the boundary area, the mismatches themselves are ambiguous categories, 'points of danger' in Douglas's terms, that can only be controlled by surrounding them with powerful symbolism.<sup>14</sup>