Chapter 4

Effaced: Failing Widows

Allison Levy

This surface functions as a kind of “black hole” in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible.

Slavoj Žižek

Up Against a Wall

After years of thinking and writing about widowhood and representation, I am up against a wall. Much like Botticelli’s Portrait of a Young Woman of c. 1481–82 (Fig. 4.1), I am faced with a block but determined to stare it down. If this late-fifteenth-century profile portrait of a woman dressed in a simple black dress with a transparent white veil appears to fit neatly within the category of widow portraiture, much as the sitter herself is convincingly situated in an austere interior without distraction, this seemingly straightforward portrayal of a widow also occupies an uncomfortable position within that genre, complicating both it and all that that socio-pictorial designation implies.¹

That is, I see right through her and yet I see nothing at all. If the dark, flat surface of her gown marks her as one man’s mourner, that same identifying abstraction ironically erases her. Or does it? If we come face to face with a dark void, so does she. What is signified upon her body – an empty hollow? a black hole? – is also right there in front of her. In other words, if she comes to stand for her better half, what we find here is a double void and, with that, a visual prompt to re-view the (w)hole project.²

The story told here attempts to answer what Peggy Phelan asks: “To what end are we seeking an escape from bodies? What are we mourning when we flee the catastrophe and exhilaration of embodiment?”³ I share Phelan’s interest in what she calls “the deep relationship between bodies and holes, and between performance and the phantasmatical.”⁴ In the following pages, I begin to re-think the dialogue between the mnemonic body and the incorporeal, between the widow and the one she is

² This essay draws upon my book, Re-Membering Masculinity in Early Modern Florence: Widowed Bodies, Mourning and Portraiture (Aldershot, 2006). I am grateful to Andrea Pearson for providing this opportunity to re-visit that project and to offer, in a more concise, reflective format, these additional thoughts on widowhood and representation.
⁴ Phelan, Mourning Sex.
meant to remember. Productively complicating my subject, I wish to suggest that the early modern memorial project fails both mourner and mourned. In other words, this chapter explores the possibilities as well as impossibilities of portraiture or what Andrea Pearson so astutely refers to as the ‘social anxieties of portraiture.’

A Matter of Bodies

‘Even in our own times, it could be argued, we do not find ourselves in a more comfortable or more favorable situation than that in which Florentines found themselves during the Renaissance.’ With this caveat, the historian Alberto Tenenti begins his late-twentieth-century attempt to historicize early modern death, an especially ambitious and challenging task that has haunted generations of writers from a variety of disciplines – myself and the history of art included. And so, recognizing and sharing that timelessly uncomfortable position, I proceed with my own set of provisos as I position my project among those discourses that have enabled and disabled the account that follows.

There are multiple historiographies of death on which this essay is predicated yet does not belong. There are the foundational studies of the French historians; those, such as Philippe Ariès, whose agenda has been to identify collective attitudes toward death using an ecletic and wide-reaching array of documents, and those less awesome, more quantitative projects that make use of select archival sources to better understand cultural continuities yet also cleavages. And then there is the growing body of scholarship on dying, death and the dead that successfully shifts the focus from attitudes to associations, from beliefs to bodies, from statistics to sex. I have in mind those recent interdisciplinary investigations that interrogate the role of gender within the death ritual, a critical stance first assumed by Sharon Strocchia in her groundbreaking work on funerals in Renaissance Florence.


8. See Sharon Strocchia, Death and Ritual in Renaissance Florence (Baltimore, 1992); see more recently Patricia Phillippy, Women, Death, and Literature in Post-Reformation
Mine is most closely aligned with this latter category, which, recognizing death as a gendered experience, is concerned with the socio-cultural and political practices and experiences surrounding the corpse. Yet my queries might also be understood as disconnected from those newest death studies for the simple reason that my subject is still alive, or so we are led to believe. That is, my focus is on corporeity, the quality of having a physical body or existence, as opposed to the corpse, that body recognized as dead. In other words, I am concerned with bodies — even dead ones — but not corpses.

Another subtle difference is my concentration on pre-mortuary or, more precisely, pre-emptive mourning practice. To expand, I recognize a socio-cultural phenomenon — the fear not merely of death but, rather, of being forgotten — and identify a set of pictorial, literary and theoretical strategies consequently formulated to ensure memory. I am specifically concerned with the construction and maintenance of what I call masculine memory: the memory not merely of an individual — of a dead man — but more so of a collective identity — of manhood and masculinity. Still, even though my primary queries revolve around issues of masculinity, I maintain that the role of women and the female experience of death are of signal importance. To explain, I stress the role of the woman not as caregiver, who cleanses and prepares the corpse for death, but as memory giver, or ‘memory specialist,’ whose presence may serve to prolong life. Thus, I am less interested in how women mourn than in how they remember. Moreover, I am interested in the image and memory of ‘Man’ before death — a picture, I propose, dependent upon the image and memorial work of the female body.

This phrase, ‘man before death,’ calls to mind the classic work of Ariès, which offers up a strikingly different view from the one presented here. As Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin have already pointed out, the very title of his book assumes several problematic binary oppositions, namely the positioning of man/life before woman/death, prompting them to caution, ‘part of historicizing


11 See n. 6 above.
death, we are beginning to see, will entail looking at the history of gender."\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, as this overview suggests, that work is now being done from a variety of critical perspectives. In the present poststructuralist account, my objective is not to privilege one body over another but, rather, to call attention to the precarious position of both male and female bodies – and their representations – within the early modern memorial process.

My argument works with the premise that early modern masculinity was inherently anxious, but this borrowing, too, must be qualified. Writing on the situation in early modern England, Mark Breitenberg understands anxiety, ‘so endemic to patriarchy that the issue becomes not so much its identification but rather an analysis of the discourses that respond to it,’ as ‘an instrument (once properly contained, appropriated or returned) of [patriarchy’s] perpetuation.’\textsuperscript{13} Along these lines, I, like many others in recent scholarship, read the male body as a locus of crisis and fragmentation yet, in its dependency, simultaneously as a site of presence and wholeness, and I read masculinity as continually threatened though also continuous.\textsuperscript{14} But I also subscribe to the idea, convincingly put forth by William J. Bouwsma, that ‘in the background of anxiety lurked the fear of death, the ultimate unknown.’\textsuperscript{15} I wish to foreground that anxiety – what I would nuance as \textit{memorial} anxiety – within early modern visual culture and gender studies, uncovering what, perhaps, has been lurking all along.

Necessarily, then, I also understand there to be a strained relationship between man and widow, what might be read as a metaphor for the productive tension between history and memory, the former ‘perpetually suspicious’ of the latter, according to Pierre Nora:

\begin{quote}
Memory is life ... It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer ... History is perpetually suspicious of memory.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{12} Elisabeth Bronfen and Sarah Webster Goodwin, eds, \textit{Death and Representation} (Baltimore, 1993), 5.
\textsuperscript{13} Mark Breitenberg, \textit{Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England} (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 2.
\textsuperscript{14} Two works, in particular, on masculine anxiety deserve special mention here: Valeria Finucci, \textit{The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance} (Durham, NC, 2003); and Kathleen P. Long, ed., \textit{High Anxiety: Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France} (Kirksville, MO, 2001).
We might now better situate the early modern widow within this ‘dialectic of remembering and forgetting,’ insofar as her memorial and memorable body enables an afterlife even before the end of life. Indeed, as Nora continues, ‘the most fundamental purpose of the lieu de mémoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting … [yet] lieux de mémoire only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.’

The tension between history and memory, distance and desire, calls to mind another strained relationship – that between history and psychoanalysis. My analyses of memory and mourning in early modern Florence come face to face with a variety of critical theorists, echoing Juliana Schiesari’s gendered tempering of Freudian and Lacanian theories of mourning and melancholia in the context of Renaissance literature. These dialogues enable the interpretations that follow, such as my reliance upon Jacques Derrida and Slavoj Žižek on death and (female) objects of desire, which seek to better locate the early modern widow among anxious men.

Collapsing Bodies

Historically, strategies of deferral or transcendence have been consciously devised as a response to what Henry Staten calls thanato-erotic anxiety – the fear, within the dialectic of mourning, not of loss of object but of loss of self. The fear of one’s own death, and the subsequent fear of being forgotten, could and did result in auto-mourning – a premature and self-inflicted process of grieving. But much more than just an act of benign self-preservation, this initial compensatory strategy is eventually and vengefully transferred onto the bodies of women, an idea Staten refers to as ‘thanatoerophobic misogyny.’

Let me turn, then, to the body that is both overworked and yet does not work. Within the Western tradition of grieving, women have been designated – and remain – primary mourners. The widow, in particular, plays a critical cultural role in maintaining her husband’s memory; standing in for the one she mourns, her presence marks his absence. Yet the widow also occupies a precarious position within the memorial discourse insofar as she is simultaneously representative of commemoration and of death itself. In light of this dualism, I wish to address the performativity, or drama, of mourning, suggesting the traumatic repercussions of her dichotomous memorial role for an already anxious audience.

17 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History,’ 19.
21 Staten, Eros in Mourning, particularly 108.
The death ritual stands as a cultural mechanism designed and performed in order to reaffirm social order after a rupture in the natural order of things. As the ritual process unfolds, social structures and hierarchies, including gender roles, are re-asserted. Thus, the culturally designated primary mourners assume the greater part of public grieving, reminding the living of their duties to the dead. Yet ritual, though certainly authoritative, is, by its very nature, artificial. As carefully scripted as ritual must be and as well concealed as the subtext of this cultural maintenance program might be, it is precisely that basic, underlying element of constructedness and the inevitability of interpretation that leads to ritual failure.22

In short, bodies have problems. Kathy Lavezzo has recognized queerish aims, specifically female–female identification and desire, in the excessive emotional display of women’s mourning practice; concerned with late medieval Europe, she argues that ‘the female homoeroticism produced at the site of female lamentation constitutes a disruptive act in which the proper turns improper, and the pious strays into the perverse.’23 Indeed, the body that acts up also breaks down. I take up a similar position on early modern widowhood, speculating that identification boundaries, despite early modern reconfigurations of female mourning beginning with Petrarch, continue to be collapsed.24

Consider the widow post-ritual whose presence in the community poses a new set of problems.25 In other words, what will she do the mourning after? That is, the widow may appear mournful, but does she remember? Sexually experienced and, again, available, will she continue to mourn her husband or take a lover? Does the widow ever switch to celibacy, or is she forever insatiable? But this is not simply a matter of playing naughty or nice; indeed, there are larger concerns — from cross-dressing to cross-identification — that signal sexual transgression(s), from transvestism to lesbianism. From here, it is possible to offer up a queer reading of early modern widowhood within, and especially, beyond mourning practice.

Valerie R. Hotchkiss, writing on the abandoned wife in medieval literature, observes that ‘without a husband, the woman is no longer a wife ... the absence of the husband literally results in a loss of sexual identity.’26 In order to exist in a man’s world, the deserted woman re-defines her female role, acting — even dressing — like a man, until her husband reappears, at which point she reverts to her normative socio-sexual identity. This gender inversion was usually short-lived, but it opened

24 See especially Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia*.
up the possibility of prolonged gender transgression – and scandal. Beyond the literary tradition, wives who were not just ambiguously abandoned but were simply widowed could also assume another sexual identity, exchanging convention for non-conformity.

San Bernardino of Siena and Sant’Antonino of Florence, among others, advised that widows should be ‘both mother and father’ to their children, conflating social roles for the good of the family. Giovanni Giorgio Trissino even opined, in his Epistola [...] de la vita che dee tenere una donna vedova of 1524, ‘that first of all you ought to consider yourself born a man [nata homo], in spirit and in body.’ But some widows took this permission to perform as an opportunity to extend the transgression and, in so doing, tested the tolerance of a patriarchal society tempted to fill a (male) void. For example, Kevin Brownlee observes that ‘widowhood transforms [Christine de Pizan] from a woman into a man.’ And Fra Filippo da Bergamo’s De Plurimis claris selectibus mulieribus novissime congestum praises Caterina Sforza, that warrior-widow who reconfigured behavioral boundaries immediately upon her widowhood, on these terms: ‘Like a man she cast away those womanly tears and took care to show her prudence and her greatness of spirit.’

This reconfiguration of boundaries calls to mind the hermaphrodite, the conflated body that would come to stand for sexual ambiguity of all sorts. Moreover, that surplus body can prompt us to re-think the ways in which the deficient body makes up for absence. Yet, insofar as bodies – no longer read as segregated but as surrogates, no longer considered irreducible but objects to be exchanged – can be permuted ad infinitum, we must also re-think the (w)hole project:

For if the Renaissance hermaphrodite suggests that categorical fixity is inevitably unstable ... he/she equally embodies the fact that there was no absolute categorical fixity to begin with. All attempts to fix gender are thus revealed as prosthetic: that is, they suggest the attempt to supply an imagined deficiency by the exchange of male clothes for female clothes or of female clothes for male clothes; by displacement from male to female space or from female to male space; by the replacement of male with female tasks or of female with male tasks. But each elaboration of the prosthesis which will supply the ‘deficiency’ can secure no gender essence ... he/she articulates gender itself as a fetish.

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In her attempt to fill the male void, the widow takes on an alternative socio-sexual identity, becoming ‘both mother and father,’ both absent husband and abandoned wife. In this way, the widow, in her indeterminateness, might be read as hermaphroditic. And her performance, a reversal of normative behavior, not only underscores the arbitrariness of gender but, in so doing, also reveals her to be – like the one she impersonates – nothing but a fraud.

But more than simply transgressing gender roles, the widow also blurs the boundaries of sexual difference, continuing to slip in and out of categorization. Ironically, if the early modern widow is expected to fill a void, she herself falls right through the cracks, flirting with her very own fiction. Insofar as she may be said to occupy a liminal space, this ‘sex which is not one’ is, in her double Otherness, what Judith M. Bennett calls ‘lesbian-like,’ enabling a more nuanced understanding of early modern widowhood: ‘the “like” in “lesbian-like” decenters “lesbian,” introducing into historical research a productive uncertainty born of likeness and resemblance, not identity.’33 Indeed, as Valerie Traub proposes, ‘If there are good reasons to resist applying the modern terms “lesbian” and “queer” to early modern women, there are equally good reasons to pursue the range of alternatives that both “lesbian-like” and “queer” are meant to invoke.’34 To be sure, these readings allow us to recognize the widow – marginal, though hardly invisible – as co-defining while simultaneously single-handedly undermining the patriarchal, heteronormative project. In other words, the widow both legitimates and threatens the gender hierarchy; she does not merely subvert it, she also collapses it; no longer content to be even the ‘woman on top,’ the widow readily assumes both positions – or perhaps none at all.

Text Messaging

If the precariousness – if not perversion – of widowhood, as I have suggested, both remedies and aggravates the memorial situation, how will the early modern subject ensure his memory? I have argued elsewhere that widow portraiture – insofar as representation fixes the ambiguous role of the primary mourner – plays an obvious


key role in recording masculine memory. But I am now suggesting that even that pictorial project – the perpetuation of the mediated mnemonic body – fails.

Fusing the disjecta membra of the female mnemonic body and the man for whom she is the ‘Other’ object of desire, the double portrait may be read as a pictorial attempt at reconciliation. In what might be considered a consciously conflated diptych, Portrait of a Man and His Wife by Tomasso di Stefano Lunetti(?) or Andrea del Sarto(?) (Fig. 4.2) literally points to the merging of the memorial task. An emotionally distanced husband manages to remain attached to his wife, his right arm stretching to rest uncomfortably on her right shoulder. With his left arm he gestures towards that which she holds – a single sheet of paper, unfolded as though containing something to be read, yet the page is (now) blank. Whatever may have appeared there must have referred back to him, if we follow the direction of her pointing finger. But, clearly, something else is missing here.

Indeed, this is a dysfunctional relationship, discriminatory at best, for it is the woman’s culturally inscribed role to maintain her husband’s memory, even if he is still in the picture. Thus, this double portrait may be read as illustrating the issuing of a decree – the delegation of the work of mourning – as well as the difficulties inherent in such ordering – namely, this woman’s calculated yet unconvincing compliancy with that cultural dictate. To put it simply, seemingly co-dependent, this couple is decidedly disconnected.

Moreover, this is a demanding portrait insofar as there is a determined duplicity here, deceptive in its doubleness. This craftily conflated diptych may appear to reconcile the seeming incompatibility of man and widow – that awkward conversation between memory and memory loss – and yet the relationship between remembering and forgetting remains estranged. In other words, the inclusion of the woman as widow might contribute to a recuperative narrative, but her presence also betrays that regulatory fiction insofar as widowhood presumes male absence. If the projection of the desiring self onto the Other results in nothing but a blank slate, inevitably, the male subject and his corporeal subtext remain not just abbreviated but altogether absent. The memorial narrative, then, already erased, will have to be re-inscribed.

I am guided here by Jeffrey Masten, who has stressed ‘that texts are produced within a particular sex/gender context and that gender and sexuality are themselves in part produced in and by texts.’ If the marking of masculine memory becomes or, rather, always has been, a project of re-inscription, the voice that has been silenced by Petrarchan policy finds its calling, again, in écriture féminine. That is, writing the male body will require writing on the female body. Though still marginal, her presence remains signal to the memorial task at hand. She may not be able to laugh

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out loud but she surely can crack a smile, as does Andrea del Sarto’s *Lady with a Book of Petrarch’s Verses*, painted between 1515 and 1525 (Fig. 4.3). Coyly looking out toward the viewer, she holds open a book, displaying Petrarch’s sonnets 153 and 154 on the right-hand page; however, she points to the left-hand page, which is, significantly, not seen by the viewer but should only display sonnet 152, including the line, ‘she makes uncertain my every state.’

Indeed, her *différence* disrupts the normative narrative. Yet she remains the object of desire, playing muse to Petrarch’s verse, ‘a silent ... simulacrum’ of his lost beloved. But what else does she wear/we read upon her body? In performing the body/performing the text, the body of mourning, I suggest, becomes a book of memory – but with a few pages ripped out.

### Black Holes

In the preceding pages, I have begun to re-think the dialogue between the mnemonic body and the incorporeal, between the widow and the one she is meant to remember. But if these are the ‘bodies that matter,’ these are merely black holes. That is, if the open wound – the trauma of memorial deficiency – is temporarily closed by the widow’s suture, that performative and pictorial promise of corporeal reconciliation and wholeness will soon again rupture.

As prescribed and as portrayed, both bodies become sites of mourning and memory, but who and/or what is remembered? Whose identity is being constructed, whose is being served and whose, in turn, is ruined?

Deprived of every real substance, [the widow] functions as a mirror on to which the subject projects his narcissistic ideal ... She stands for the man’s narcissistic projection which involves the mortification of the flesh-and-blood woman ... That is to say, if men are to project on to the mirror their narcissistic ideal, the mute mirror-surface must already be there. This surface functions as a kind of ‘black hole’ in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible.

Substituting the early modern widow for Slavoj Žižek’s idealized Lady of the Middle Ages, she becomes an empty screen, an effigy-in-waiting. The widow is both Death and Death contained, a cipher of masculinity. Put simply, it is she who is ruined in one fell Derridean stroke: ‘In the beginning, at the origin, there was ruin. At the

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42 The phrase at the start of this sentence is borrowed from Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, eds, *Performing the Body/Performing the Text* (New York, 1999).

43 Žižek, ‘Courtly Love, or, Woman as Thing,’ 90–1.
origin comes ruin; ruin comes to the origin, it is what first comes and happens to the origin, in the beginning. With no promise of restoration.44

And yet, hers is not the only hole in this story. As Baudrillard notes, the trace of the self is, perhaps, far more haunting than the erasure of the widow:

Of all the prostheses that mark the history of the body, the double is doubtless the oldest. But the double is precisely not a prosthesis: it is an imaginary figure, which, just like the soul, the shadow, the mirror image, haunts the subject like his other, which makes it so that the subject is simultaneously itself and never resembles itself again, which haunts the subject like a subtle and always averted death. This is not always the case, however: when the double materializes, when it becomes visible, it signifies imminent death.45

Indeed, this project is not a total loss insofar as the re-inscribed body continues to mark its creator. And I, like Botticelli’s Portrait of a Young Woman (Fig. 4.1), am better off up against a wall than dead and buried.

4.1 Sandro Botticelli, *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1481–82. Art market
4.2 Tomasso di Stefano Lunetti(?) or Andrea del Sarto(?), *Portrait of a Man and His Wife*, n.d. Florence, Palazzo Pitti. Su concessione del Ministero per i Beni e le Attivita. Photo: Scala/Art Resource, NY