Sample Paper 1

Grade: A

Sonya Lancaster

ENGL 320

October 22, 2008

The Widow On The Pew

In his *The Diary of Samuel Sewall*, Samuel Sewall gives modern readers insight into several aspects of Puritan life in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century America. From Sewall's observations of every-day events we are able not only to glean the values, morals, and logic of the Puritan society in which Sewall wrote, but also to compare and contrast the Puritan reaction to universal experiences, such as birth, death, marriage, crime, and sickness, with what our own might be. Within such a catalog of daily happenings, there is an episode that seemed to me especially worthy of consideration against modern thought and customs–Sewall's failed courtship of widow Katherine Winthrop. In this particular portion of the diary, Sewall, a widower, confides that he is considering whether or not to remarry. Shortly thereafter, he receives a notice from the widow's family that they wished for him to court her, and then he goes on to mention his first meeting with Winthrop. (Lauter, 500) Until this point, the narrative had, I assumed, proceeded "normally," and Sewall's courtship of a widow was what I expected for the time. But it was upon reading the topic of conversation during the second meeting between Sewall and Winthrop that the courtship became something that I wanted to question. In this encounter with Winthrop, Sewall first makes his intentions known to the widow and then proceeds to discuss with Winthrop the "7 Single persons sitting in the Foreseat" (Lauter, 500), which a footnote informed me is where the widows usually sat in the churches of the time, and where, Sewall says, Winthrop encouraged him to look for his next wife. This image of women,

which were it seemed to me, lined up at the front of the church for men to choose from, was shocking. I knew that women had little control of their lives during the early eighteenth century, especially where marriage was concerned, but I was also under the impression that widowhood was different. And in any case, the comparisons of cattle auctions that crept into my mind compelled me to question just what the rights of women were at the time—did marriage status actually make a difference in the status of a woman? Would a widow prefer to remain single or to remarry? What bearing would other factors have on her decision? How much of a decision did she even have?

After reading the rest of Sewall's account of his courtship, which ultimately failed, it would seem that widows did enjoy certain privileges. Not only does Winthrop accept gifts from Sewall, but the decision to terminate the courtship also seems to lie solely with her. Seemingly contradictory to the image of the women in the front pew of the church, this display of agency coincides with what I first thought of when I thought of widow. In considering Winthrop's status as a widow in eighteenth-century Puritan society, and the subject of widows in general, my thoughts jumped to—and only to—Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath. For me, the association of widows with the Wife of Bath also linked widows to boldness, sexuality, dominance, and pursuit. I became conscious therefore, that it was the Wife of Bath that provided a contrast to the widow in the pew and caused me to stumble over this part of Sewall's narrative. Upon further investigation, I discovered that many other people have thought the same way. With a simple Google search, I encountered a wealth of information on the "lusty widow," a stereotype whose existence has been handed down to us from Chaucer's Wife of Bath, and, as I found, largely from early modern English comedy. (Panek 2) It was in fact, prominent playwrights such as William Shakespeare, Thomas Middleton, and Ben Johnson who created comedies around

courtships of widows, characters who at first seem the ideal of feminine power but are usually coded, as Jennifer Panek, author of *Widows and Suitors in Early English Modern Comedy* puts it, as "rapacious, irrational, bestial, destructive" (124). In her book, Panek deduces that it is the remarriage of such a character that symbolizes the conquering of a woman who is "a general threat to the rational male order of things, and a private threat to the honor of individual men" (124). With this perspective on the lusty widow then, I returned to Winthrop, who eventually turns down Sewall's offers for marriage. I began to wonder if Sewall felt his honor was threatened, as well as what, if anything, was at risk for him as he proposed to Sewall, and likewise, what was at stake for Winthrop as she decided whether to accept or reject Sewall.

Because Winthrop's potential threat to Sewall and the order of the society in which she lived rested on her freedom to accept or reject Sewall's marriage offers, I returned to the notion of "choice" and what that might mean for a woman in colonial America. From several texts it became clear that I must first examine English Common Law, which Marylynn Salmon states in her book *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*, "was adopted in its basic form by all colonies and states" (141). According to Linda Grant De Pauw in her book *Founding Mothers*, under English common law a woman's freedom was virtually eliminated when she was married—and actually, so was her existence. Upon marriage, De Pauw says, "a woman was considered legally dead...She ceased to exist because marriage made her one person with her husband and he was that person" (47). This loss of legal life translates into the loss of the bride's freedom to "control her earnings, choose where she would live, or control her property" (47). A widow on the other hand, according to De Pauw, enjoyed a kinder side of common law and was not only allowed to maintain control over property, but could also "acquire as much social and political power as a man" (48). It is here however, that De Pauw is sure to point out that the

freedom had by a widow is limitless—but only "so long as she did not take a husband" (48). From this particular explanation, I learned that the death of a woman's husband in colonial America did not merely give her money and therefore freedom, but it almost literally gave her life. And while it began to make sense to me why a patriarchal society would feel threatened by widows—essentially women becoming men—and also why, with not merely financial security, but also her very existence at stake, Winthrop, or any widow for that matter, would choose to remain unmarried, it also became unbelievable that any widow would choose remarriage. What still did not make sense to me then, was Winthrop's pew seat with the other widows, a position that is related in conversation as a resource for Sewall's next wife. To me, Winthrop's presence on the pew became one of her choosing—if she could choose how to spend her money or whether or not to remarry, she could indeed choose where she sat in church and thus whether or not she appeared available for remarriage—and the possibility that Winthrop might want to remarry, given its consequences on her legal and symbolic existence, seemed absurd. It is here then, that my questions turned to the society surrounding the women in the pew, and just what conditions or circumstances might lead them to seat themselves there.

Because my initial impression of the widows in Sewall's diary evolved from images of cattle lining up for purchase to those of human beings presenting themselves for marriage in spite of its implications, and because the agent in the situation changed from man to woman, I began to consider some less tangible influences on a woman's decision to remarry. My research thus far seemed to indicate that the main difference between a widow and a wife under the law was manifested in the ability to control her property, so I looked again to *Women and the Law of Property in Early America*, and I found it was true— lack of financial inheritance led many women whose first husbands died to seek second husbands. A widow's independence hinged on

the property she inherited from her husband, and since the greater part of men did not leave wills, the law determined the status of the majority of early American widows. Under common law, whether or not a husband left his wife a will, his widow had at least a right to a dower. The dower, a woman's "minimal right to her husband's estate" (141), translated to one-third of her husband's property, and one-half if the couple had no children. While the dower represented the basic requirement in the care of widows, and while widows were free to use their dower to make more money for example, a third of her husband's property was not enough to provide the immediate financial support many widows might have needed. (141) Thus, it was the possession of property that became the first major factor in a widow's decision to remarry. As I thought about the dower however, I realized economic reasons did not entirely answer the question of Winthrop's seat on the pew. Although there is no way to know Winthrop's financial status as a widow from Sewall's diary, and although my investigation of her place on the pew could have ended here—she could not afford to be independent, so she sought remarriage—in my research on the economics of being a widow, I found a greater, more pervasive reason for widows to remarry that in fact, seemed to serve as a source for the economic reasons.

Assuming Winthrop's dower was adequate to support her, or that her first husband sufficiently exceeded the dower in his will to support her, it seemed that Winthrop might still have had reason to remarry. Her presenting herself for remarriage then could have been a result of social pressures that themselves resulted from a patriarchal society's fear of being subverted. Returning to De Pauw, it was confirmed, "there was a great social pressure on both men and women in colonial America to marry" (48). For a man, the lack of a wife prohibited him from rising in social status because "Men without families were thought to be evading their responsibilities to society" (48). Women on the other hand, were "viewed with horror and

contempt" (48) if they refused to marry because, as it was believed, "Woman was created to be a helpmate to her husband" (48). A widow therefore, was not only considered "an unnatural woman" (48) because she was not fulfilling the purpose for which she existed—helping a husband—but she was also considered a hindrance to male advancement in society. With attitudes much like those towards Old Maids for example, who were often represented as bitter, temperamental, and ugly, it is, as De Pauw says, "no wonder that few women voluntarily chose to be single" (49). Thus, in reaching beyond economic pressures for reasons that might have compelled a widow to remarry, it seemed that my research had come back around to choice, although now it was clearer to me that all the ways in which a widow's choice might be influenced or inhibited came down to power, and male fear of losing that power.

The widows on the pew in Sewall's diary finally seemed to come full circle for me, in that they were still women being controlled by men. The images and impressions of the widows however, had deepened and put itself in context of the intricacies of an early American patriarchy. From individual items being specifically directed to the pew, the widows in Sewall's narrative transformed in my mind into a single entity that, threatening to the patriarchy, was being pushed to the pew by various social forces. From my research, I realized the importance of marital status for women, and my question to whether or not it mattered was answered—yes, it did. But I also learned the relative superficiality of its importance. Although widows enjoyed freedom upon their husbands' deaths, it was merely freedom that was surrounded by, and therefore depended on, male choice. Thus, while it is true that Winthrop had legal independence and could immediately whether or not to remarry, the choice was ultimately not hers. It is not surprising therefore, that we find her on a pew, with other single women, or in a parlor taking suitors like Sewall, when the society in which she existed, and the legal system from which it

sprang forth, was constructed on every level to preserve male sovereignty.

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