This volume provides a valuable contribution to our knowledge of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century intellectual life inside and outside Germany.

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This elegant collection of essays ranges across eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought, covering philosophy, science, literature and religion in the 'Age of Goethe.' A recognised authority in the field, Nisbet grapples with the major voices of the Enlightenment and gives pride of place to the figures of Lessing, Herder, Goethe and Schiller.

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The story of the widow of Ephesus is recorded in innumerable versions, from Europe to China and from antiquity to the present day. But the most familiar version, at least in European literature, is that in the *Satyricon* of Petronius. A young widow, renowned for her fidelity, vows to starve herself to death in her husband’s tomb. One night, a soldier on guard nearby over the corpses of some crucified thieves notices a light in the tomb and discovers the widow, with her maidservant in attendance. Encouraged by the maidservant, he prevails upon the widow first to share his meal, and subsequently to respond to his amorous advances. Meanwhile, a relative of one of the crucified thieves removes the unattended corpse and takes it away for burial. The soldier, on discovering the loss, resolves to commit suicide rather than face execution for neglecting his duty. But the widow proves equal to the emergency: reluctant to lose her lover, she offers her husband’s body as a substitute for the one stolen from the cross.

My aim in this essay is to examine Lessing’s unfinished comedy on this subject, *Die Matrone von Ephesus*, and in particular to explain why he abandoned it when it was almost completed. This question has been

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discussed before, but none of the explanations so far advanced strikes me as satisfactory. Before I turn to the fragment itself, however, I should like to say something about the misogynistic associations of the story and Lessing’s attitude to them, for this will have a bearing on my later attempt to explain why the play remained a fragment.

The attitude of misogyny is closely associated with the story of the widow, but its scope and expression vary considerably from one version to another. Over the centuries, these versions move along a scale between two extreme positions: between misogynistic condemnation of female infidelity on the one hand, and good-humoured tolerance, or even approval, of the widow’s change of heart on the other. Lessing described Petronius’s story as ‘undoubtedly the most bitter satire ever written on female frivolity’, and it certainly does imply a cynical and negative judgement on womanhood (which is hardly surprising in the context of a work in which most of the male characters are paederasts). Nevertheless, Petronius’s version is a long way from the extreme of misogyny. This extreme is reached in the versions of monkish compilers in the Middle Ages, some of whom conclude with diatribes on female depravity, and even aggravate the widow’s offence by having her mutilate her husband’s body to make it more closely resemble the corpse of the crucified thief. But in modern times, the movement is all in the opposite direction. In La Fontaine’s influential verse-tale La Matrone d’Éphèse of 1682, the humorous element is predominant, as it is in almost all versions written in the eighteenth century, when the story achieved its greatest popularity. Most writers are, of course, aware of the misogynistic potential of the tale; but they generally qualify it or tone it down considerably, even to the extent of making the main figure a man instead of a woman. In short, a more tolerant attitude than ever

4 Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Sämtliche Schriften, ed. by Karl Lachmann and Franz Muncker, 23 vols (Stuttgart, Leipzig and Berlin: Göschen, 1886–1924), IX, 333; for the text of Lessing’s (incomplete) dramatic version, see ibid., III, 439–66. Subsequent references to this edition are identified by the abbreviation LM.

5 See, for example, Ure, p. 2 and Elisabeth Frenzel, Stoffe der Weltliteratur (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1962), pp. 666–69.


before is taken towards the widow’s lapse. In so far as her return to life
is prompted by natural feelings—and in the age of sensibility, the voice
of the heart has great moral authority—it merits approval rather than
condemnation.\(^9\) Nevertheless, her abrupt conversion from obsession
with the dead to passion for the living becomes a frequent object of
satire prose and verse narrative, fable, comedy, farce, and even opera.

Such good-humoured satire on female fickleness is prominent in
the dramatic versions with which Lessing was most familiar, namely
Houdar de La Motte’s *La Matrone d’Éphèse*\(^{10}\) and Christian Felix Weisse’s
*Die Matrone von Ephesus*.\(^{11}\) The idiom of these comedies, unlike that of
Lessing’s own fragment, is not yet that of the age of sensibility, but the
robust and more cynical humour of the Rococo period. The cruder
of the two plays, La Motte’s prose comedy, in fact contains a good deal
of knockabout farce, with servants blundering into each other in the
darkness of the tomb, and the widow subjected to the advances not only
of the soldier, but also of the soldier’s seventy-year-old father. There is,
admittedly, a virulent denunciation of female perfidy towards the end;\(^{12}\)
but it cannot be taken seriously, since it comes from the jealous old man
when he discovers that his son has beaten him in the competition for the
widow’s affections. In fact, this same old man pleads with the widow
soon afterwards to substitute her husband’s body for the missing corpse
and to marry his son to save him from suicide. And this, of course, helps
to diminish the widow’s responsibility for the gruesome act which
follows.

The comedy of Lessing’s friend Weisse is very much in the Anacreontic
mode. Its morality is that stylised and ironic hedonism which is typical
of Rococo poetry and the widow is easily won over by the conventional *carpe diem* arguments of the soldier and the maidservant. Within these

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\(^9\) See Runte, pp. 363 and 367; also Wilhelm Heinse’s remark of 1773, quoted in
in the position of the widow! You will find nothing unnatural about her.’

\(^{10}\) Houdar de La Motte, *Oeuvres*, 10 vols (Paris: Prault, 1753–54), V, 463–510; though
not published until 1754, the play was first performed in 1702 (see Metzger, *Lessing and the Language of Comedy*, p. 167).

\(^{11}\) Christian Felix Weisse, *Weissens Lustspiele*, 3 vols (Karlsruhe: Schmieder, 1778), I,
209–60; rev. edn, in Weisse, *Lustspiele* 3 vols (Leipzig: Dykische Buchhandlung,
1783), I, 365–422.

\(^{12}\) La Motte, *Oeuvres*, V, 505: ‘Henceforth, all women are for me so many monsters that
I abhor! They are nothing but frivolity, inconstancy, dissimulation, perfidy, and all
the vices in the world together.’
Rococo conventions, women are, of course, primarily a source of erotic pleasure, and the institution of marriage tends to elicit misogynistic comments, as in Weisse’s lines ‘I know that many would gladly pay double the fare/ If Charon would take the wife away promptly.’\textsuperscript{13} When the subject of corpses is mentioned in this play, it is treated quite literally with gallows humour as in the maidservant’s remark on the removal of the thief’s body: ‘Oh you accursed thief, who stole the thief away/ May the devil take you and the corpse along with you!’\textsuperscript{14} But here, as in the widow’s own suggestion concerning her husband’s body, the black humour has no undertones of moral criticism, and the play’s Anacreontic frivolity gives it an unreality which takes the edge off its satire on the heroine.

The misogynistic humour which sometimes occurs in these dramas is also to be found in Lessing’s works, especially in his early years. It appears most often in his epigrams, many of which are modelled on those of Martial, and which are frequently directed at the institution of marriage. The following are typical:\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{quote}
\begin{flushleft}
The world contains at most a single evil wife:  
It’s sad that every man thinks his one fits the role.
\end{flushleft}
\begin{flushleft}
A wife—God spare me this!—is useful only twice—
Once in the marriage bed, and once when she is dead.
\end{flushleft}
\end{quote}

There are numerous other examples of acerbic wit at the expense of women in Lessing’s early poems, many of them in the Anacreontic idiom,\textsuperscript{16} and the early comedy \textit{The Old Maid} contains only slightly less virulent satire on an old maid who is desperate to catch her man.\textsuperscript{17} (Such satire, it must be added, is not directed solely and specifically at women: in the same year as \textit{The Old Maid}, Lessing wrote another satirical comedy, \textit{The Misogynist}, this time at the expense of men.)

It is against this background that we must assess Lessing’s interest in the story of the widow of Ephesus, which began during his friendship with Weisse when the two were students in Leipzig, and continued at least until the end of his Hamburg period. We do not know what his

\begin{flushleft}\textsuperscript{13} Weisse, \textit{Lustspiele} (1783), I, 369. \textsuperscript{14} Weise’s \textit{Lustspiele} (1778), I, 258. \textsuperscript{15} LM I, 12 and 43. \textsuperscript{16} See, for example, LM I, 161f. \textsuperscript{17} LM III, 201–34.\end{flushleft}
earliest sketches were like. But when he did most of his work on the play—namely in Hamburg—he was concerned above all to modify or neutralise the misogynistic element in the story, and there is little sign in the surviving fragments of the venomous satire on women which we find in his early poetry. Indeed, with Lessing’s version of the story, we reach the opposite extreme to that of the medieval misogynists: it marks the culmination of the eighteenth-century tendency to depict the widow in as favourable a light as possible. Lessing makes every effort to retain our sympathy for the widow, and to present her change of heart as fully understandable. His main reason for doing so, as he indicates in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, is to bring the play into line with his own theory of comedy as it had now developed—that is, as a realistic form of drama which evokes sympathetic laughter at human weakness, without forfeiting the audience’s respect for the comic hero.

As Lessing puts it, anyone who attempts to dramatise the story faces a peculiar difficulty, a difficulty which previous dramatisations, such as La Motte’s, had failed to overcome. The problem is that, in a dramatic version, it is much more difficult to take a tolerant view of the widow’s behaviour than it is in the narrative form. For in the narrative version, our distance from the events and our delight at the story’s ironic twists make us able to accept, or even excuse, the widow’s final stratagem to save her lover, namely the surrender of her husband’s body: ‘her weakness seems to us to be the weakness of the entire sex; [...] what she does, we believe almost any woman would have done’. But on the stage—especially if the characters are realistically drawn—it is difficult to make the widow’s act, when we experience it at first hand, seem anything other than a revolting crime, and the widow herself as meriting anything less than the death penalty: ‘And the less artistry the poet employs in her seduction, the more she seems to us to merit this

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18 They may well have differed considerably from the surviving fragments, as a letter from Weisse to Karl Wilhelm Ramler on 21 July 1768 suggests. Weisse writes: ‘He [Lessing] showed me the plan of his Widow of Ephesus several years ago: in his version, if I remember rightly, the widow’s husband comes to life again’ (cited in Waldemar Oehlke, *Lessing und seine Zeit*, 2 vols (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1919), I, 438). This suggests that Lessing intended to diminish the widow’s guilt by revealing at the end that the husband was not after all dead—a device employed in various versions before his time (cf. Ure, ‘The Widow of Ephesus’, p. 4 and Runte, ‘The Matron of Ephesus’, p. 364).
19 See LM IX, 333f. and 302ff. (*Hamburg Dramaturgy*, §§36 and 28f.).
20 LM IX, 334
punishment; for we then condemn in her not women’s frailty in general, but a preeminently frivolous and dissolute female in particular.\footnote{Ibid.} In other words, what Lessing objects to most of all in the earlier dramatisations of the story is their failure to retain our sympathy and respect for the widow. And he blames this shortcoming on the dramatists’ failure to motivate her change of heart convincingly, and to eliminate the offensive aspects of the ending: ‘In short, if Petronius’s tale is to be transferred successfully to the theatre, it must both retain the same ending and not retain it; the widow must go so far and not go so far. The explanation of this on another occasion!’ He is clearly alluding here to the solution he adopted in his own uncompleted play: he makes the report of the stolen corpse an invention of the soldier’s servant, thus obviating the need for the substitution to be carried out at all.\footnote{LM III, 443.} Nevertheless, the widow still has to go so far as to agree to the substitution before it is shown to be unnecessary; and it is shortly before this point is reached that Lessing’s final draft of \textit{The Widow of Ephesus} breaks off. As a result, most critics have concluded that he abandoned the work because he was unable to present the widow’s agreement to the substitution convincingly or acceptably—that is, to avoid making her seem vicious or depraved.\footnote{See, for example, F. J. Lamport, \textit{Lessing and the Drama} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 156: ‘after the seriousness with which Antiphila and her grief are portrayed it is hard to imagine her being convincingly cured to the point even of agreeing to such a scheme’, and T. C. van Stockum, ‘Lessings Dramenentwurf \textit{Die Matrone von Ephesus}’, \textit{Neophilologus}, 46 (1962), 125–34, (p. 131): ‘we may well assume that Lessing finally gave up the experiment as psychologically impossible’; see also Robert Petsch, ‘\textit{Die Matrone von Ephesus}. Ein dramatisches Bruchstück von Lessing’, \textit{Dichtung und Volkstum}, 41 (1941), 87–95 (p. 88); Jürgen Schröder, \textit{Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Sprache und Drama} (Munich: Fink, 1972), p. 303; and Peter Pütz, \textit{Die Leistung der Form. Lessings Dramen} (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 72.}

I do not believe that this is the reason why he failed to complete the play. But in order to prove my point, I must first ask what measures he adopted to solve the problem he himself identified—that of motivating the widow’s final actions convincingly and presenting them so as not to forfeit our sympathy. To accomplish this end, he employed two distinct strategies: he set about raising the level of the principal characters and their dialogue, making them more refined and sophisticated than in any previous version of the story and eliminating the coarser elements almost completely; and he worked out the widow’s motivation to the last
detail, building up a series of pressures which leave her little alternative but to act as she does, and render her behaviour wholly understandable.

In the first of these strategies, Lessing was merely carrying further the tendency of his age to portray the widow in an increasingly sympathetic light. Thus, La Fontaine, La Motte, and others had made the suggestion concerning the substitution of the corpse come not from the widow, as in Petronius, but from her servant, and, as a concession to religious sensibilities, they described the thief as hanged rather than crucified. Besides, the widow’s admission of love for the soldier now usually came after his threat of suicide instead of before. Lessing’s draft for the ending of the play shows that he planned not only to adopt such earlier mitigations of the widow’s conduct, but also—as already mentioned—to add the significant new device of making the report of the stolen corpse an invention of the soldier’s servant, thereby eliminating the grisly ending altogether. The soldier himself has also become an officer and—at least in some respects—a gentleman. Furthermore, as critics have noticed, Lessing’s efforts to raise the tone of the play from farce to more serious comedy can be detected even from one draft of his play to the next. For example, in the earlier of the two longer fragments, the first thought of the widow Antiphila on waking from her sleep is food; in the final version, it is of her departed husband. And whereas the officer Philokrates, in the earlier version, invents the story of an ambiguous oracle which had prophesied that ‘he would find the best woman among the dead’, this misogynistic joke is deleted in the later version. In fact, all the coarser and misogynistic humour that remains is relegated to Philokrates’s servant Dromo, as when he declares that he believes in women’s fidelity just as he believes in ghosts, or when he echoes the earlier promise of the widow’s maidservant Mysis that they will witness ‘an example of marital love [...] such as [...] the world sees every day’. 

24 See La Fontaine, Contes et Nouvelles, p. 345 and La Motte, Oeuvres, V, 509.
27 LM III, 444. This rejoinder appears only in the penultimate version of the fragment; but since the initial cue for it is retained in the final version (LM III, 450), it is clear
It is, however, going too far to suggest that Lessing has so ennobled the main characters as to remove the element of satire entirely. The jokes of the servant Dromo are aimed at female weakness in general; but they are also a commentary on the widow’s weakness in particular. Besides, the widow Antiphila herself swears the superbly ironic oath never to leave the tomb ‘without my soul’s beloved’. But this delightful touch does not merely ironise her own supposed fidelity; it is also an ingenious device to prevent her from committing perjury, and thus helps to temper the force of the satire. Her very name ‘Antiphila’ (which Lessing takes over from Weisse, although he adopts no other names from the latter’s play) casts an ironic light on her chastity, since it means ‘returner of love’. What Lessing has done, then, is to strike a balance between refining the widow’s character on the one hand to make her more sympathetic, and retaining an element of satire—albeit mild and good-humoured satire—on her weakness on the other.

But it is to the second of his strategies—that of providing a flawless motivation for the widow’s conduct—that Lessing devotes most attention. As he had pointed out in the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*, her culpability increases ‘the less art the poet has employed on her seduction’. Accordingly, he develops the widow’s psychology in far greater detail than any previous writer, and employs every conceivable device to make her seduction plausible and convincing.

For example, we are told by her servant near the beginning that she has been convulsed with grief for forty-eight hours, and has finally fallen asleep through exhaustion. There can thus be no doubt about her affliction; but is it also clear that its most critical phase is over. Tears, as Kant points out in his *Anthropology*, have a restorative effect in such situations: ‘A widow who, as they say, will not let herself be comforted (i.e. will not let her tears be prevented), looks after her health without knowing or actually wishing it.’ And sleep doubtless
plays its part too. For although, when the widow awakens, she launches into despairing tirades and takes her solemn oath never to leave the tomb without her beloved, she is at least able to talk about her situation now without breaking down. And when she suddenly learns from her servant that a soldier has been there while she slept and is about to return with his commanding officer, it is clear that her consciousness of her femininity has also returned. For although she is forced to feign sleep again to escape the officer’s attentions, the stage-direction tells us that she throws herself on her husband’s coffin ‘in a negligent but alluring posture’.\[31\] Forcing her to feign sleep is one of Lessing’s most ingenious additions to the plot: for the widow is thereby compelled to listen to the enraptured officer’s praises of her beauty, delivered with passionate eloquence, whereas this would have been out of the question if she admitted to being awake. When she is eventually obliged, by the ardent officer’s touching her hand, to abandon her pretence, his abject plea for shelter from the storm outside, followed by respectful praise for her fortitude and resolution, is not easy to dismiss. But even so—and despite the maidservant’s growing intervention on behalf of the officer—she resolves to flee the tomb as soon as he goes off to fetch provisions (thereby revealing an impulsive tendency which casts doubt on the seriousness of her oath). She is prevented from leaving only by the officer’s immediate return. When, on realising her intention, he suddenly and nobly capitulates and agrees to leave himself, she is momentarily caught off balance; this allows him to regain the initiative, which he promptly does by claiming, at the mention of her husband, to have been her husband’s bosom friend and comrade-in-arms in earlier days. This ruse is Lessing’s second major innovation, and it is as ingenious as the previous one of forcing the widow to feign sleep. For the officer is now able to gain the widow’s confidence, and to appear to share her grief; and she, very understandably, now retreats from her insistence that he leave at once. The more he commiserates with her and magnifies their common loss, the more she likes it—and him—until he suddenly remembers his duty.

This is where Lessing’s final fragment breaks off. The widow’s motivation up to this point is complete. All that remained to be written

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31 An earlier draft is more explicit: ‘in a not unpractised posture’.
was one short scene with the false report concerning the stolen corpse, followed by the officer’s suicidal despair and the widow’s agreement to save him. With the widow now facing a new catastrophe which she must associate intimately with the first—the loss of her husband’s friend and the sharer of her grief—it is not straining credibility unduly to suppose that she is not likely to resist for long her servant’s insistence that, as a matter of life and death, the only way to save the officer is by surrendering her husband’s corpse. This grim prospect would have been removed immediately, however, by the confession of the officer’s servant that he had invented the story of the theft to further his master’s designs; and after the officer’s stern rebuke, the comic atmosphere would have returned with the final scene, essentially complete in draft, between the two servants.

One further device should be mentioned which Lessing employs in order to make the widow’s change of heart acceptable. Although he was able, by the ambiguous wording of the widow’s oath, to prevent her committing perjury, this does not excuse her morally from breaking the vow she believed she was making. But even here, he retains our sympathy for her by making this vow the product of extreme, indeed excessive grief, which has plunged her into religious despair and caused her to question providence and even to denounce the gods.\(^{32}\) We know, however, from the crises of faith of Tellheim in Minna von Barnhelm and the hero of Nathan the Wise that such doubts of providence are, for Lessing, signs of temporary emotional imbalance in people who have reached the end of their tether. It is incumbent on the dramatist to counteract such doubts and to reaffirm the worldview of theodicy, of metaphysical optimism.\(^{33}\) The widow’s denial of the gods, and the oath she swears in her state of despair, are a sign that her grief has gone too far. If there is a providence—and its existence is axiomatic for Lessing—she will surely, and rightly, be prevented from carrying out the oath she thought she was making. In short, this oath itself was an aberration; and conversely, her violation of it will confirm that she has returned to normality.\(^{34}\)

\(^{32}\) LM III, 452.
\(^{33}\) See LM, X, 120f. (Hamburg Dramaturgy, §79).
\(^{34}\) Cf. Lamport, Lessing and the Drama, p. 156 and Metzger, Lessing and the Language of Comedy, p. 173.
Never was what Friedrich Schlegel described as Lessing’s ‘dramatic algebra’ put to more rigorous use than it is in *The Widow of Ephesus* to make the heroine’s motivation comprehensible in terms of realistic psychology. Never before had so diverse, subtle and devastating an accumulation of pressures been brought to bear so tellingly against the widow’s resistance, or her capitulation been made to seem so inevitable. Some measure of Lessing’s success can be obtained if we compare it with his attempts shortly afterwards to solve the related problem of motivation in *Emilia Galotti*, in which the heroine has to confess, immediately after her bridegroom’s murder, that she may not be able to resist the advances of a seducer—a seducer whom she has every reason to suspect of complicity in the murder. In *The Widow of Ephesus*, we witness in detail how the widow’s seduction is put into effect and her resistance overcome. In *Emilia Galotti*, on the other hand, our knowledge of the heroine’s psychology depends largely on hearsay and on her own concluding statements, for we have not seen enough of her behaviour at first hand to form an independent assessment of her motives. But this is too familiar to need elaboration. All I wish to point out is that Emilia’s motivation is much less transparent, and much more problematic, than the widow’s motivation for her change of heart towards the officer. And if this is so, it must seem improbable that Lessing’s dissatisfaction with the widow’s motivation was the reason why he failed to complete *The Widow of Ephesus*, as several critics maintain, although he successfully completed *Emilia Galotti* soon afterwards.

It has also been suggested that the widow’s final action—her agreement to surrender her husband’s corpse—was potentially too offensive for Lessing to be able to complete the play. He had, of course,

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35 The affinities between the two plays, including verbal echoes of *The Widow of Ephesus* in the later play, have often been noticed: compare, for example, the maid servant’s words at the end of Lessing’s draft of the eighth scene of his comedy (LM III, 444) and the closing words of the prince at the end of *Emilia Galotti*; also the officer’s enumeration of the identifying traits of the widow’s late husband (LM III, 463) and the dialogue between the prince and Marinelli in Act I, Scene 6 of *Emilia Galotti*.

36 This point is well made by G. A. Wells, ‘What is Wrong with *Emilia Galotti*?’, *German Life and Letters*, 37 (1983–84), 163–73.

37 See note 23 above.

already eliminated the most offensive aspect of the traditional ending by making the substitution of the corpse unnecessary. And there is a further factor which helps to make the widow’s consent to this proposal acceptable, as comparison with Emilia Galotti will again confirm. Both plays are based on prose narratives of classical antiquity. But Emilia Galotti is given a modern, contemporary setting, whereas The Widow of Ephesus retains its setting in ancient times. The change of setting created serious problems with the former play, whose tragic ending—the father’s killing of his daughter to save her virtue—became much less plausible in a modern context than in the context of family honour and threatened enslavement in ancient Rome.\textsuperscript{39} Such problems do not arise in The Widow of Ephesus, however, for it presupposes a society in which a widow can publicly decide to starve herself to death in her husband’s tomb and in which a soldier can face execution for allowing a dead man’s body to be removed by his relatives for burial. But once we have accepted such customs as these, the need for the substitution of a corpse, and the widow’s consent to this under extreme pressure also become easier to accept than they would have been in a modern setting. As in Nathan the Wise, the psychology is realistic, but the setting gives us a certain distance from the events depicted.

Besides, one must not exaggerate the eighteenth century’s squeamishness over such matters as references to corpses on stage.\textsuperscript{40} The sheer number of dramatisations of the story suggests that the subject-matter in itself was not considered unacceptable,\textsuperscript{41} and the positive reception of Lessing’s fragment when it appeared posthumously in 1784 indicates that its content as such was not regarded as offensive.\textsuperscript{42}

This is hardly surprising, when we consider that much more gruesome

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{40} Erich Schmidt’s reaction to this question (see note 38 above) is more characteristic of his own times than of Lessing’s (his Lessing biography was first published in 1884–92).
\bibitem{41} Oehlke, \textit{Lessing und seine Zeit}, I, 468, cites the Bibliothèque des Théâtres of 1784 as stating ‘Chaque théâtre a sa Matrone d’Éphèse’; see also Ure, ‘The Widow of Ephesus’, pp. 5f.
\bibitem{42} See, for example, the review in the \textit{Litteratur- und Theaterzeitung} of 1784 cited in G. E. Lessing, \textit{Werke und Briefe}, ed. by Wilfried Barner and other hands, 12 vols (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2003), VI, 791f.: ‘A marvellous, marvellous play!’ [etc.].
\end{thebibliography}
material than this was currently appearing on the German stage. In Gerstenberg’s *Ugolino* of 1768, which was successfully performed in Berlin in 1769 and sympathetically received by Lessing and Herder, two coffins are brought on to the stage, one containing Ugolino’s dying son and the other his dead wife; another of the sons subsequently has to be restrained from making a cannibalistic attack on his mother’s corpse. There is nothing remotely like this in *The Widow of Ephesus*, whose potentially gruesome aspects are eliminated entirely or reduced to an absolute minimum. Their presence therefore does not explain why Lessing left the work unfinished.

It has also been suggested that he failed to complete the play for reasons of time or pressure of work on *Emilia Galotti*. But this play in particular, which is by far the most complete of his dramatic fragments, needed very little work indeed to finish it: the final scene was complete in draft, and only the penultimate scene, whose outlines had also been established, remained to be written. And to say that his interest shifted to *Emilia Galotti* is to state the consequence, not the cause, of his loss of interest in the earlier play. Some reports in fact suggest that he actually did complete it. For example, Boie claims on 28 May 1771, after a visit to Lessing, that the play was complete but that Lessing refused to show it to him, and Eschenburg reports in 1785 that a complete text of the play was among the box of papers which Lessing lost in 1775 in Leipzig. But even if the play was complete in 1771, we still have to explain why Lessing did not publish it or show it to anyone in the following years, although he had no such inhibitions about *Emilia Galotti*, which he published as soon as it was completed.

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43 See Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, XI/1, 470 and 503–07, Lessing to Nicolai, 4 August 1767 and Lessing to Gerstenberg, 25 February 1768. The widow’s dream, as recounted in the penultimate fragment of Lessing’s play (LM III, 441), is in fact modelled on Gaddo’s dream in *Ugolino*, as Schröder, *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*, p. 298, points out.


46 See the respective editors’ remarks in Lessing, *Werke und Briefe*, VI, 792 and LM III, p. xiii.

47 See *Lessing im Gespräch*, ed. by Richard Daunicht (Munich: Fink, 1971), pp. 303 and 392; see also the report of Johann Anton Leisewitz on p. 574 of the same volume. Lessing was, however, in the habit of declaring that he had completed a play as soon as he had drafted a complete scenario, as C. F. Weisse reports (Daunicht, *Lessing im Gespräch*, p. 29).
Thus, none of the explanations advanced for Lessing’s failure to complete or publish *The Widow of Ephesus*—the problem of the widow’s motivation, the difficulty of coping in a dramatic version with the coarser and potentially distasteful aspects of the story, lack of time, or the pressure of other work—is wholly adequate. The decisive factor is altogether more obvious—so much so that this may explain why no one, so far as I can see, has suggested it before.

We do not know precisely when Lessing abandoned his fragment, but it is generally agreed that he must have done so at some time between 1769 and 1771.48 During this time, a series of events occurred which decisively affected his personal life, and which had an unforeseen bearing on the play he was working on. The first of these was the death of a friend. In December 1769, his friend Engelbert König died in Venice in the course of a business trip to Italy, and the news reached Lessing in January 1770 in Hamburg.49 In April of that year, Lessing moved to Wolfenbüttel; and in June, he began an affectionate correspondence with Eva König, the widow of his deceased friend and his own wife-to-be. Life had suddenly caught up with art: the courtship of a widow had become the centre of Lessing’s own emotional existence.

But is there any evidence of more specific parallels between the real-life situation and that in the play, and if so, of whether Lessing was ever aware of them? Such evidence does indeed exist, and it is to be found in his correspondence with Eva König.

On 21 September 1770, on her way from Hamburg to Vienna to settle her late husband’s affairs in that city, Eva wrote to Lessing from Salzburg. Although she had experienced bouts of grief and depression over her recent bereavement during earlier stages of her journey, there is no trace of it in this letter: she has had a busy week, her health has improved, she has met numerous friendly people, she has been sightseeing, and she gives Lessing news of the local theatre. But she also tells him of an


unfortunate incident with her maidservant which has deprived her of sleep on the night before her journey is due to resume.\textsuperscript{50}

My maid, in the company of the valet of a count whose lodging is opposite mine, has got so terribly drunk that she has done nothing all night but vomit. I am her attendant [...] A pleasant occupation!—given that there is in any case nothing in the world that I find more repulsive than a drunkard. She has just fallen asleep, and I only wish that, when she awakens, she will be in a state that allows us to depart.

Her next letter, written nine days later from Vienna, is very different in tone. Suddenly plunged into her late husband’s business affairs, she can no longer suppress her grief, and writes: ‘Whenever someone speaks to me, I have tears in my eyes: [...] But how can it be otherwise? Everything reminds me of my past happiness’.

Lessing replies to both of these letters on 25 October. And the remarkable thing about his reply is that it rolls the situations in Eva’s two separate letters into one. He writes:\textsuperscript{51}

Your maid was as good as no maid at all, if not worse than none. But who knows? In the end it was probably better that the miserable creature had her own activities, that she loved and drank the best available wine with the best available fellow—than if she had been a good and sensitive soul who did not let her mistress out of her sight and wept no less than she did. In the former case, you were forced to abandon your own thoughts; in the latter, your grief would have been intensified. You will say that I have a particular gift for discovering something good in something bad. I do indeed have this gift, and I am prouder of it than of anything I know or can do.

The situation, as Lessing imagines it, has become that of the widow of Ephesus, whose maidservant’s flirtation with the officer’s servant was the first step in the widow’s return to life and love. And instead of blaming the maid for keeping Eva, who was in precarious health, up all night, he commends her for helping to distract her from her grief and restore her to life. He is applying the psychology of his drama to the real-life situation, and echoing his own attempts to portray the widow’s recall to life in a favourable, even providential

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., pp. 32f.
manner. But once these connections had been made, it would have been unthinkable for him to resume work on the incomplete play, or to publish it if he had already completed it; for in it, the widow’s recall to life is coupled with a betrayal of her deceased husband’s memory, and her suitor’s claim to have been her late husband’s friend is shown up as a calculated falsehood. For different reasons, it would have seemed to both Eva and Lessing like a sick joke. Instead, Lessing abandoned the play for another long-standing dramatic project, namely *Emilia Galotti*, which he could complete with an easier conscience. For although its view of female psychology is akin to that of *The Widow of Ephesus*—for the heroine confesses to the same kind of weakness as that to which the widow succumbs—Emilia does not betray the memory of her deceased fiancé, but chooses to die instead.

Although Eva may have known of Lessing’s interest in the theme in his Hamburg years, it is unlikely that he ever showed her the dramatic fragment. For she was only too ready to look for connections between his writings and his personal life. For example, a few weeks before their engagement in September 1771, she writes urging him to join her in Hamburg, and mentions that she has just been reading his recently reprinted epigrams, with their biting misogynistic humour:

> I have just put down your *epigrams*, and am now confirmed in my long-held opinion—that you are an arch-*misogynist*. But is it not quite godless of you to put us down in this way at every opportunity? You must have come up against some desperately wicked women. If this is the case, I forgive you; but otherwise, you must really be punished for all the malice you treat us to.

Her tone is teasing and light-hearted, but she has clearly been taken aback. It is not difficult to imagine how she would have reacted to the far more subtle satire on feminine weakness, with its embarrassing closeness to her own situation, which Lessing had just come so near to completing.

I therefore believe that it was primarily external circumstances, rather than failure to solve the internal problems he had identified in the story, which prevented Lessing from completing or publishing *The Widow of Ephesus*. And I could end this discussion here, were it not that I have

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52 Ibid., p. 82 (10 August 1771).
so far said nothing about the feminist perspective and what it can tell us about the play. So far as I can see, the feminists have not yet turned their attention to this work, although there has been a fair amount of feminist criticism of other dramas by Lessing, and one feminist essay has been written on the theme of the widow of Ephesus in eighteenth-century France. The line taken in these accounts is predictable: women are inherently good, and any shortcomings they display are the result of their oppressed position in a male-dominated society. The essay on the widow of Ephesus is no exception: it argues that most French versions of the theme after 1700 glorify the widow as a champion of natural feeling over social injustice and an inequitable custom. This line of interpretation certainly fits Lessing’s fragment too, inasmuch as Lessing does not condemn the widow, but portrays her change of allegiance as understandable and excusable. There is, however, no suggestion in Lessing’s fragment that the widow is a victim of social injustice or an unjust custom, for her decision to starve herself to death, though not resisted by her fellow-citizens, is not encouraged by them either. Nevertheless, there is an element of male egotism and male injustice in Lessing’s play. And I should be sorry if this element were not given due recognition. For firstly, the officer Philokrates is an unabashed male chauvinist, as his dialogue with the widow’s maidservant Mysis reveals when he announces that he has come to comfort the widow:

Philokrates: I come to comfort her.
[...] Mysis: She is sleeping.
[...] Philokrates: So much the better! Then I can see whether she’s worth comforting [...] I’ll gladly let her go back to sleep if she disappoints my expectations.

His pity, in other words, is entirely dependent on the widow’s sexual attractiveness. And secondly, Philokrates’s story that he was a close friend of her late husband is an unscrupulous invention, designed merely to further his ulterior end. In short, if the widow’s return to life and love is a positive step, we must not forget that it is made possible

53 See note 7 above.
54 Runte, ‘The Matron of Ephesus in Eighteenth-Century France’, p. 367; see also p. 369: ‘She [the widow] rose from the depths of mysogenic [sic] satire [...] to the heights of goodness (when Good is equated with Natural).’
55 LM III, 455.
by the relentless pressure of a predatory male who avails himself of all the seducer’s arts. It would therefore seem that, on some occasions at least, even the male chauvinist has his uses.

But this brings me to what I think is the real internal weakness of Lessing’s play, a weakness exacerbated by his very success in overcoming the problem he had set out to solve, namely that of the widow’s motivation. Lessing’s widow is subjected, at her most vulnerable moments, to an overwhelming series of pressures, beginning with flattery she cannot escape, appeals to her pity, praise of her fortitude, apparent compliance with her wishes, professed friendship for her late husband, and feigned commiseration, culminating in an all-too-genuine threat of suicide. These pressures are so great, and they are applied with such finesse and timing, that her momentary consent to the macabre proposition that was to have been put to her would have been both understandable and excusable. But the very magnitude of these pressures means that her decision to abandon her oath cannot be wholly free. She overcomes the tyranny of her husband’s memory only by surrendering to another dominant male; whereas only a free decision to return to life, taken without external harassment, could fully restore her dignity. Yet such a decision is not possible within the framework of the traditional story—not, at least, if it is to remain credible in terms of realistic psychology. For the story itself contains an element of misogyny which no amount of manipulation on Lessing’s part could expunge. The problem is that, the freer an agent the widow is, the more vicious she will appear; and the less free she is, the more she will appear a passive victim of male domination. The story, in other words, can be varied to emphasise either the widow’s fickleness or her weakness; but in neither case will she appear in a favourable light. Lessing chose to retain our sympathy for her by diminishing her responsibility. But as her responsibility diminishes, so too does her moral autonomy. And even if he found this view of female psychology more acceptable than most of us would do today, it is doubtful whether he could have been entirely happy, after writing Minna von Barnhelm, with a heroine as passive as his widow eventually

56 Compare his remark in the Hamburg Dramaturgy (LM IX, 334) on the widow’s seduction in Petronius’s story: ‘her weakness seems to us the weakness of her entire sex; [...] what she does, we think just about any woman would have done’.
became. The fact that he went on to complete *Emilia Galotti* is perhaps significant; for Emilia asserts her moral autonomy to avoid falling victim to the weakness to which she confesses herself susceptible.

There is in Lessing a streak of cynical humour which at times assumes misogynistic or even misanthropic forms—although he was certainly no misogynist in his personal views, as his letters and conversations amply testify. It was, I suspect, to this side of his humour that the story of the widow of Ephesus first appealed in his student days in Leipzig. And although he did all he could to mitigate the morally offensive aspects of the story, and although his version stands historically at the opposite extreme to the misogynistic diatribes of the medieval monks, he could not eliminate its misogynistic content entirely without destroying the story’s structure, and with it the main source of its humour. Whether or not he had such considerations in mind when he decided to abandon his comedy, it is impossible to say. But it is certain that, around the time at which he stopped work on it, he was confronted with a real-life situation which must have shown up the play’s latent misogyny in all its harshness. And that was enough to ensure that it would never be published in his lifetime.

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57 See, for example, the searing witticisms in his famous letter on the death of his son to Eschenburg (31 December 1777, in LM XVIII, 259), at which Eschenburg was understandably horrified, and Lessing’s subsequent explanation (7 January 1778, in LM XVIII, 261): ‘And my fault is not despair, but rather levity, which at times only expresses itself in a somewhat bitter and misanthropic manner’.

58 See, for example, his letter of 29 November 1770 to Eva König (*Meine liebste Madam*, p. 39) in which he takes exception to a recently published play with the title *Die Hausplage* (*The Domestic Plague*: feminine) on the grounds that a domestic plague could just as easily be a man as a woman; see also Daunicht, *Lessing im Gespräch*, p. 440 for his defence of a prostitute on whose death dismissive remarks had been made.