PART ONE

WIDOWS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION
CHAPTER ONE

SUBJECTS OF COUNSEL

Early modern moralists concerned with the independence widows exercised attempted to confine them by penning prescriptive treatises and proffering a short-list of ecclesiastical values that mirrored those of the monastery. Lauing the value of recogimiento, or a withdrawal from the material world, moralists commended widows to take up a life of reflection and introspection. This renunciation of worldliness, with its enclosure, solitude, prayer, penitence, and sobriety, comprised the preferred recipe for widows as delimited by their pens. Steeped in the language of patristic literature, fixated on a predictable series of biblical passages, and attuned to a jumbled selection of classical texts, churchmen wrote in a symbolic arena of their own creation and perpetuation, which often had little to do with the reality of women’s lives, even for the elite to whom this literature was purportedly directed. Nevertheless, the urgency and insistence of their rhetorical flourishes, especially in the crop of works sprouting at the end of the sixteenth-century, signal the apprehension with which moralists weighed the clear presence of women’s autonomy. Cloaked in an authority summoned from the weighty sources they referenced, Castilian moralists proposed to instruct widows on proper comportment as part of the post-Tridentine push to catechize the populace.

Moralists summoned numerous exemplars drawn from a wide variety of learned sources in the quest to map out the parameters of good widowhood, both to show off their education and lend substance to the recommendations they made. Regular citations of Pauline scripture found enhancement by calls upon such influential church fathers

18 Mary Elizabeth Perry, Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 9: “The fact that women and men did not always behave according to gender beliefs did not prevent lay and secular officials from repeatedly invoking these beliefs. Nor did they hesitate even when their gender ideals seemed completely incongruous with actual living conditions.” See also Allyson Poska, Women and Authority, 7: “with increasing frequency historians have exposed significant differences between the ideal woman championed by men like Vives and Fray Luis and the lives of actual Spanish women.”