CHAPTER THREE

SEX IN THE CITY

Literary output, both sacred and secular, points to the tensions produced by the gender transfiguration provoked upon widowhood; however, the suppression of the widow’s unfettered body in these texts did not necessarily correspond to the autonomy of her daily life. Women in Castile could and often did engage moralistic discourse about the “good widow,” despite the ostensible regulation they faced. This model allowed for an expansive definition of widowhood, one which offered possibilities for comportment beyond strict enclosure. Women might justify their actions in order to further their own and their families’ best interests by calling on multiple facets of acceptable widowhood. Beyond seeing to the material well-being of her kin, the widow had to defend not only her own personal reputation, but also that of her family and its members. In Toledo, this job regularly fell to widows, who sought to minimize scandal and maximize their image as guardians of virtue. Secular literature might intimate that widows shamelessly manipulated the ideals of moralistic discourse for unwholesome personal gain. Yet widows still tested and contested prescriptive boundaries to their own advantage by means of invoking them.

111 See Scott Taylor, “Women, Honor, and Violence in a Castilian Town, 1600–1650,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 35, no. 4 (2004): 1079–1097. He notes that public reputation included factors beyond sexual conduct, including a person’s economic, familial and legal roles. Taylor proposes that the concept of “reputation” is more valuable than that of honor with respect to gendered patterns of behavior. For example, in the instance of women, it incorporates elements beyond mere considerations of sexual purity and passivity.

112 This proposition is reinforced by the observations of Lisa Vollendorf, “Good Sex, Bad Sex: Women and Intimacy in Early Modern Spain,” *Hispania* 87, no. 1 (March, 2004), 2: “Notably, early modern women relied on cultural ideologies related to motherhood, menstruation, and sexuality to gain legitimacy in numerous contexts. The repetition of such legitimizing strategies in fictional texts, spiritual biographies, and Inquisition cases confirms the link between sexuality and authority, showing that women appropriated dominant beliefs about their sex and used them for personal and political advantage.”
The case of the patroness of the Toledan convent where El Greco painted his first major altar commission provides a notable example of a widow capable of conforming to prescriptive demands as a means of expressing her agency. María de Silva embraced enclosure and with it the renunciation of her sexuality as she took up residence at Santo Domingo el Antiguo, a choice in close accordance with moralizing instruction. Her confessor, Diego de Castilla, praised her piety in his 1583 eulogy on her exemplary life of devotion and extolled her provision for the re-edification of the convent. This portrait of María confirms that suppression of the widow’s sexuality ensured her spiritual and social place in a way that accorded with sacred and secular values. A closer examination of María’s thirty-eight years at the convent, however, reveals a more complex picture than that suggested by her confessor’s accolades. Widows could and did negotiate moralistic discourse to evade censure as they sought both spiritual and physical remedy. María de Silva employed a strategy of outwardly conforming to prescriptive mandates in order to mitigate their transgression.

María de Silva, the daughter of a royal overseer, Juan de Saldaña, started on her path to Toledo in 1526. At the age of thirteen, she journeyed to Spain as a lady-in-waiting in the company of the Empress Isabel of Portugal (1503–1539). Within two years of arrival at court, María wed Pedro González de Mendoza, who served as majordomo and chief accountant of revenues for the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Castile, Charles V (1500–1558), as recorded in a royal cedula of April 1528. Pedro’s father was Honorato de Mendoza, the third lord of Cañete. His mother, Francisca de Silva y Ribera, was a daughter of the first count of Cifuentes, Juan de Silva, and his second wife, Inés de Ribera. María moved with her husband to Cuenca, close to a Mendoza

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113 See Jesús González Martín, “Doña María de Silva, Fundadora de la Iglesia y Capilla Mayor del Monasterio de Santo Domingo el Antiguo de Toledo,” Anales toledanos 29 (1992), 32. Diego de Castilla’s laud of María de Silva is also noted by Verardo García Rey, “El Deán Don Diego de Castilla y la reconstrucción de Santo Domingo el Antiguo de Toledo. Segunda parte. Reconstrucción e Historia del Monasterio de Santo Domingo el Antiguo,” Boletín de la Real Academia de Bellas Artes y Ciencias Históricas de Toledo 18–19 (Jan.–June, 1924), 31.