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Review of: Stephanie Fink De Backer, *Widowhood in early modern Spain: protectors, proprietors, and patrons*

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Stephanie Fink De Backer. *Widowhood in early modern Spain: protectors, proprietors, and patrons*. The medieval and early modern Iberian world, v. 40. Leiden: Brill, 2010. 331pp.

According to the sixteenth-century poet and theologian Fray Luis de León, “. . . Nature made women to stay closed up inside the house.” While enclosure may have been the ideal for Spanish women, especially widows, Stephanie Fink De Backer’s fine new study reveals that the reality was very different. Widows in early modern Castile drew upon legal statutes and accepted practices to advance their interests and the interests of their families through activities that took them outside the boundaries of the home. Far from being seen as a threat to patriarchal norms, Fink De Backer argues, widows’ exercise of autonomy and authority was understood as maintaining a social order founded upon the family.

Over the course of eight thoroughly researched and well written chapters, Fink De Backer explores multiple dimensions of widowhood in sixteenth-century Castile, highlighting the disjunctures between the image of widows as they appear in literature and in prescriptive tracts and the lives of real women as preserved in a rich array of archival sources. While her focus is primarily upon the widows of the city of Toledo, one of Castile’s most important cities, her observations are important for our understanding of women throughout the kingdom, and, potentially, for women in the rest of Iberia as well. The first two chapters move away from the local context of Toledo to examine women in theory rather than practice. Fink De Backer offers careful readings of the discourses of “good” and “bad” widowhood as developed in the writings of a range of moralists, preachers, poets, novelists, and playwrights. Though each writer has his own emphases and themes, religious and secular writers alike reveal considerable anxiety about women’s sexuality and a stress on enclosing and controlling women’s bodies. The third chapter returns to Toledo to test image against reality through an examination of legal cases in which women (or their children) accused of sexual crimes like bigamy or procuring used the discourse of “good” widowhood in their own defense and justification. “This strategic or pragmatic deployment of idealized widowhood to subvert, challenge, or evade its mandates,” argues Fink De Backer, “highlights the presence of gaps in the strictures of female enclosure...” (108)

Most widows, however, did not aim to subvert or challenge social and sexual expectations, and it is to them that Fink De Backer turns the rest of the volume. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore Toledan widows’ actions as heads of

household, property owners, guardians, and economic participants, through careful readings of an impressive collection of documentary materials that ranges from marriage agreements, testaments, and estate records to bills of sale, apprenticeship contracts, payroll lists, and lawsuits, all gathered at a host of local and national archives. Both in law and in practice, Castilian women enjoyed substantial rights to personal property and powers over minor children, and employed both to foster the interests of their families and, by extension, “hierarchies more concerned with social status than with gender.” (175) Due to the nature of the sources, elite women tend to dominate the discussion, but the author successfully shows that middling and poor widows too commonly engaged in activities that, in advancing the needs of their families, necessarily brought them into contact with the wider world. Perhaps most interesting in this regard is Chapter 6, which examines widows and the world of work. Fink De Backer finds little evidence in Toledo of the marginalization and exclusion of women from skilled craft production found in other areas in early modern Europe, nor does she find that widows were disproportionately the focus of prosecutorial interest. Rather, widows engaged in marginal or criminal economic activities called upon their marital status and their social connectedness in their defense. The final two chapters explore widows as donors and recipients of charity, and as testators and sponsors of commemorative patronage. The author argues that changes in poor relief over the course of the sixteenth century suggests that increasing institutionalization of assistance did not wholly eclipse other forms of charity, and that forms of charity that maintained widows in their homes reveals an emphasis not on enclosure, but on shoring up the foundations of the family.

This book is an important contribution to a growing body of scholarship on women and gender in early modern Spain that reconsiders women’s capacity for agency within a society that favored male authority. Fink De Backer’s careful analysis gives much needed nuance to the supposed enclosure of widows and to early modern Spain’s patriarchal order, as her findings raise some pressing questions about attitudes toward and practices regulating the activities of all married women in Castilian society. *Widowhood in early modern Spain* will find a wide audience of students and specialists interested not just in women in Castile, but in early modern women more broadly.

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