Savonarola's Widows
Chastity and Piety in Quattrocento Florence

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Medieval and Renaissance Studies

Jean Chapman
April 15, 2011

Prof. David Peterson
Prof. George Bent
Table of Contents:

Acknowledgements........................................................................................................... ii

Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1

Chapter One: Girolamo Savonarola.................................................................................. 3
    The Preacher, the Prophet, and the Pamphleteer

Chapter Two: Marriage and Widowhood........................................................................ 9
    Women's Marital Options in Quattrocento Florence

Chapter Three: Savonarola's Book on the Life of the Widow....................................... 23
    Book One......................................................................................................................... 26
    Book Two......................................................................................................................... 38
    Book Three...................................................................................................................... 47

Conclusion......................................................................................................................... 53

Bibliography..................................................................................................................... 56
Acknowledgements:

First and foremost, I would like to thank Professor David Peterson for his invaluable advice and expertise in the process of writing this thesis. I would also like to thank my parents, Mary Ann and Edward Chapman, for instilling in me a love of the Renaissance and all things Italian at a very young age, and for continuing to support me when I decided to turn that passion into the crux of my college academic career. All of those trips to Ferrara and Florence clearly paid off.
Introduction

Widowhood was a common occurrence within Renaissance Florence. Due to marriage practices which matched young women with older men, approximately one fourth of all women in the city were widows, yet society was ill-equipped to accommodate women within this state. Societal values of Quattrocento Florence dictated that women remain under the control of a male relative, yet widowed women belonged clearly to no kin group, torn between loyalties to their husband's family and to their natal family. Families, in turn, would fight for control of the widow, but more specifically of her dowry. Within this tangled web of family alliances and spheres of influence, widows were occasionally able to exercise a certain amount of agency by choosing where they would turn after their husbands' deaths. This autonomy was greatly feared by society, since an independent widow without anyone to safeguard her chastity was a threat to the honor of two families.

As a means of exercising some measure of control over the one-fourth of the female population who were without masculine oversight, many clerics and other officials produced sermons and treatises providing advice to these women. Advice from all parties urged widows to remain chaste, and society generally rewarded women who remained faithful to their husbands' memories by not remarrying. However, many women had no choice in the matter, and were forced to remarry either out of financial necessity or in capitulation to their natal
families' demands. Many advice-givers condemned these women, yet others, such as Fra Girolamo Savonarola, sought a way to advise women as best as possible with an eye toward the realities that widows faced at the time.

In his *Book on the Life of the Widow*, written in 1491, Savonarola takes into account the realities of a widow's situation, and categorizes women based upon their desires and their options. He does not condemn those who choose to marry for legitimate reasons, though he constantly promotes the ideal of the "true widow." The beauty of the state of widowhood, according to Savonarola, lies in the woman's freedom, though not her freedom to do whatever she wills or to become an independent woman within society. Rather, widows are particularly fortunate individuals, since by their husbands' deaths they have been liberated from the requirements of marriage and all the trappings of worldly life that would keep them from God. They are now free to serve God entirely. For Savonarola, this type of freedom takes the form of solitude. A widowed woman must embrace her freedom by freeing herself from the world and fully devoting herself to God—this is the aim of the life of the "true widow."
Chapter One

Girolamo Savonarola: 
The Preacher, the Prophet, and the Pamphleteer

Within the historical context of the Renaissance, Fra Girolamo Savonarola (1452-1498) typically appears as something of a villainous character. Amidst the burgeoning humanism and classicism of Renaissance Florence, in an era of luxury and artistic achievement, Savonarola emerged as a fiery preacher, denouncing the immorality of the times and urging repentance from usury and luxury. He is perhaps best remembered in history for the Bonfire of the Vanities, in which literature, art, and other “sinful” luxuries were destroyed. He rapidly ascended within the world of Florentine religious and civic politics, becoming a leader for the city of Florence during a time of crisis and gaining fame for his prowess in preaching and his prophesies for the city’s future renewal as a New Jerusalem. While these activities may have led to his fame and eventually to his death, like many other clerics and preachers of his era, Savonarola authored numerous treatises and advice manuals for the general public and for specific individuals. Furthermore, he corresponded frequently by letter with friends and associates, but also with individuals seeking his advice, including some women. Savonarola distinguished himself from other mendicant preachers through his groundbreaking use of the printing press as a means to disseminate his ideas throughout the Italian peninsula; his writings
were very popular during his lifetime and even after his execution. Works such as The Book of the Life of the Widow, which were published years before Savonarola’s ascendancy to the political arena of Florence, provide interesting insight into the figure of Savonarola, revealing an alternate side of the fiery preacher and apocalyptic prophet more generally known to history.

Girolamo Savonarola was born on the 21 September, 1452 in Ferrara into a relatively wealthy family. His grandfather Michele held the honored position of court physician to the Este lords of Ferrara, and as such Savonarola grew up amidst the wealth, luxury, and excesses of the Este court. Despite the close connections between the Savonarola family and the Este court, or perhaps due to them, young Girolamo began to reject materialism and the cult of pleasure that surrounded this court, even from an early age. From all accounts, Girolamo was particularly favored by his grandfather Michele, who in all likelihood recognized Girolamo’s exceptional intellect, and it appears that his grandfather tutored the young boy in Latin and other subjects. Girolamo’s early religious devotion and rejection of court luxury may also have been influenced by his grandfather, who was a man of deep religious convictions and who was also repelled by the immorality of the Este court.

For whatever reason, either through the influence of his grandfather or, as some legends claim, as a result of a romantic refusal, by the age of twenty Savonarola had clearly begun his rejection of the “base pleasures” of life, which would later lead him to preach his fiery sermons against luxury and sensuality. At this point, Savonarola channeled his moral convictions into poetry, ironically enough into the same verse form which had been pioneered by Petrarch for

---

1 Tamar Herzig, Savonarola’s Women: Visions and Reform in Renaissance Italy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 4.
3 Ibid., 9.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., 10.
the purpose of love. In 1475, Girolamo joined the order of Friars Preachers, somewhat to the
dismay of his family. Given the acuity of his mind, his family no doubt hoped that Girolamo
would choose a profitable career, particularly since the family had fallen on hard times since the
death of Michele Savonarola, Girolamo’s grandfather. Given his religious and ascetic
sentiments, already so clearly expressed, his decision to take religious orders was likely
inevitable.

Savonarola enrolled in the Dominican Studium Generale in Bologna to study theology,
and completed his studies in 1479, at which point he was sent for further training at the
university in his home city of Ferrara. Despite his later fame, Savonarola’s career as a preacher
of the Dominican order did not begin particularly well. He first arrived in Florence in 1482 as a
lecturer in theology and scripture at the convent of San Marco. During his tenure there, he was
also invited to deliver the Lenten sermons of 1484 in the church of San Lorenzo, the lavish
parish church of the Medici family. Savonarola, however, was unprepared for the critical,
well-educated congregations in Florence, and his first sermon series was a complete failure. The
citizens of Florence expected a performance in their homilies, and they felt no qualms about
criticizing, or even leaving, sermons they deemed inadequate.

After this failure, Savonarola departed from Florence and travelled throughout Tuscany
preaching and practicing, perfecting his homiletic skills. At some point during his travels, he
seems to have encountered Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, the renowned young

---

7 Ibid., 11.
9 Martines, 11.
10 Weinstein, 82-83.
11 Martines, 17.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
humanist philosopher-prince. Savonarola and Pico would later become close friends, as evidenced by Savonarola’s frequent correspondence with the count and with the count’s family, including to his female relatives Giovanna Carafa Pico and Eleonora Pico della Mirandola. The friar’s connection to the Pico family continued to manifest itself with Gianfrancesco Pico, the nephew of the famous Count Giovanni. Gianfrancesco would later become a staunch political supporter of Savonarola, writing numerous polemical tracts in his defense and eventually writing his biography in 1530.

Count Giovanni Pico della Mirandola arrived in the city of Florence in 1488, quickly becoming a crucial mind among the philosophers of the Medici court, and later paving the way for his friend Savonarola’s return to the city. In the spring of 1490, Savonarola returned to Florence, largely through the influence of the count and of Lorenzo de’Medici (il Magnifico). The choice on the part of Lorenzo to bring Savonarola to the convent of San Marco seems somewhat ironic in retrospect. While Lorenzo likely sympathized with Savonarola’s attacks on the corruption of the institutional Church, since Lorenzo himself had a rocky political history with this organization, Savonarola’s rhetoric readily expanded to attack the luxuries of the wealthy within the city, which naturally included the Medici themselves.

Despite the conflict of interests between the two, Savonarola wisely did not engage in outright attacks on Lorenzo or the Medici rule, and as a result the ruler felt no need to have the friar punished or exiled, as he had other antagonistic preachers in the past. Despite his occasional conflicts with the Medici, Savonarola rose rapidly within the spheres of political and

14 Weinstein, 100.
15 For correspondence with these ladies, see A Guide to Righteous Living and Other Works, edited by Konrad Eisenbichler.
17 Ibid., 101.
18 Martines, 19.
19 Weinstein, 102.
20 Ibid., 103-104.
religious influence in Florence. In 1491 he was elected Prior of the convent of San Marco, and instituted reforms within the convent, bringing it into line with the Observant branch of the Dominicans. The Observant movement rejected the ownership of personal property, and took the rules of prayer, poverty, and obedience far more strictly than the more liberal Conventionals. Savonarola could not instate all the reforms he would have liked, however, due to the ties between San Marco and the Medici family. Savonarola planned to remove the brothers of San Marco from the city of Florence, abandoning the elegant cloisters of the convent in exchange for the forests of Motecavo outside of the city of Florence. Needless to say, this did not meet with much support, and the older brothers of the convent, more loyal to the luxurious ways of the past than the increasingly stringent reforms instituted by Savonarola, successfully blocked him. Several years later, however, Savonarola successfully separated the convent of San Marco from the oversight of the Lombard Congregation, with the support of Piero de' Medici (the son and successor of Lorenzo after the latter's death in 1492). In doing so, Savonarola became the Vicar General of the newly formed Tuscan Congregation, heading the Dominican houses within the city of Florence and the neighboring towns of Pisa, Prato, Fiesole, and Siena.

Savonarola's fame as a preacher also quickly grew within the city of Florence after his return. His skilled and passionate delivery garnered him a large following, but audiences were also enthralled by his subject matter. He criticized most vehemently the clergy of the era, their laxity, and corruption. These charges were not new by any stretch of the imagination, since the corruption of the Church during this time was a well-known and oft-criticized theme. Savonarola also fearlessly attacked some of the most important and, in his opinion, sinful,
institutions of the city of Florence: namely banking (usury) and the overall veneration of money and prosperity which characterized the Renaissance in Florence. In particular, Savonarola attacked the practices of usury, the tendency to honor rich men simply because of their money, and the religious practices such as multiple benefices, simony, and even the donation of family burial chapels which, as he put it, had turned the houses of God into dens of thieves (paraphrasing the Gospel of Matthew).

By the year 1494, Savonarola had achieved a great deal of religious but also political power: he had become the prior of the influential convent of San Marco; he was the Vicar General of the Tuscan Congregation of the Dominican order; he could count amongst his friends and supporters many of the leaders in Florentine intellectual and artistic life, such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola. Eventually he would become transformed into the prophetic and apocalyptic preacher best known to history, the leader of the Florentine Republic who would later be executed in 1498. Before 1494, when King Charles VIII invaded Florence and the Medici fled, leaving a power vacuum perfect for Savonarola to fill, Fra Girolamo was an important man within Florence, but a different man than the one who later took power.

Savonarola’s written letters and his treatises, such as the Book on the Life of the Widow, written in 1491, take a tone markedly different from that of his sermons. While he still fervently urges his audience to heed his advice in order to secure salvation, his tone is much gentler and much more reasonable than one might expect from the famous apocalyptic preacher. He replaces the fiery rhetoric of his sermons with reason and explanation, better fitting the setting of a religious treatise and surely more effective in reaching his audience. Particularly in writing to women, either in the form of letters or via treatise, Savonarola takes care to write clearly and calmly, although still elegantly and persuasively communicating his spiritual advice.

26 Ibid., 110.
Chapter Two

Marriage and Widowhood:
Women's Marital Options in Quattrocento Florence

Throughout Quattrocento Florence, a woman's identity was defined entirely through her relationship to men. Kinship and lineage were almost purely masculine in orientation: women therefore had to be defined by their male kin, either their fathers or husbands, even if they were dead. Therefore, their identity, as well as their social and legal standing, was almost entirely dependent upon their marital status. A woman’s status could fall into one of three basic categories, namely virgin, married, or widowed. Very strict cultural expectations governed each one of these categories: virgins were expected to remain either under the supervision of their father or brothers, or in a convent, while married women served and obeyed their husbands. The widow’s status, however, was the most difficult to define, and therefore the most difficult to control. A widow occupied a grey area within society, curiously absent of masculine authority. Since she no longer fell under the provenance of her father or her husband, a widow could theoretically live alone, exercising a certain amount of financial and

28 Ibid., 118.
personal independence that her married and unmarried counterparts could not. This status created a significant amount of social anxiety, however, since society considered unmarried women incapable of living alone. The Renaissance patriarchy believed that without masculine oversight, independent women would invariably fall into sin and dishonor their kin. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the Church sought to provide widows with guidance and to exert some type of masculine control over these otherwise uncontrolled and uncontrollable women. This intervention came to women in the form of sermons, correspondence and instruction manuals from clerics and Church leaders, such as Savonarola’s Book of the Life of the Widow.

In order to understand the status of the widow in Quattrocento Florence, one must first understand the marriage “scene” of the time. Crucial to this understanding is the concept of the dowry, the money and property that a woman would bring with her to her husband when she married. A woman’s dowry, in many ways, could determine a woman’s fortunes both in marriage and after. The dowry featured prominently in the negotiation process between families, and without a sufficient dowry a woman either could not marry or would be forced to marry beneath her station. Competition amongst families to marry off their daughters led to the gradual increase of dowry prices, to the point where they reached exorbitant levels. The burden of these prices, particularly for families with multiple daughters of marriageable age, became so extreme that in 1425 the Republic of Florence instituted a dowry fund which allowed families to invest in their daughter’s dowry at very low risk and with guaranteed returns. Much like creating a college fund for children in the modern era, a family member (typically the

---

31 Ibid.
32 Klapisch-Zuber, 119.
33 Ibid.
34 Evangelisti, 789.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
father) of a girl would deposit money into the Florentine dowry fund when the child was still rather young (on average between the ages of five and ten). After a pre-determined period of time, a maximum of fifteen years later, the investment would reach its full value and the family would receive a substantially larger dowry, paid in full by the Florentine government. The rates set in the year 1433 provided that for every 60 florins a father deposited for his daughter, he would receive 500 florins after a fifteen-year period. Rates varied over time and depending upon the desired duration of the investment, but nonetheless these figures provide perspective on the efficacy of the dowry fund established by the city of Florence and also provide a glimpse into the high prices of dowries overall. The higher the value of the dowry which a young woman’s family could offer, the better the chance of having her marry well and into a proper social situation.

The records of the Florentine dowry fund also provide information regarding women who entered into religious life. Of the women whose families enrolled them in the dowry fund, 77% eventually married, 20% died before they reached marriageable age, and 3% entered a convent or other religious institution. In the case of this 3%, the Florentine government would provide payment to the convent in the form of the initial deposit made by the girl’s family. This amount served then as the “spiritual dowry” for the girl, which paid for her entry into the convent as she became a bride of Christ. Women who entered the religious life apparently did so at approximately the same age that most women married, or only slightly later. This suggests that, contrary to

38 Ibid., 406.
39 Ibid., 408.
40 Ibid., 403.
41 Ibid., 413.
42 Ibid., 410.
43 Ibid., 413.
popular preconceptions, families did not single out from birth the daughters who would marry and the daughters who would enter a convent. Rather, it appears that they waited to see if their daughters could find suitable husbands and, barring that eventuality, they entered into the religious life. The records of the Florentine Catasto, tax records dating from the mid-fifteenth century, confirm that the overwhelming majority of young women married, reinforcing the idea that those who entered the convent did so mostly for lack of another option: 92% of Florentine women aged 20-24 were married, and the proportion is even higher for women of the upper classes.

Florentine societal values at the time considered marriage the most desirable state for women, though indeed for men as well. Although the Church would always praise the decision of any individual to remain celibate, Quattrocento secular society held an idea of marriage as a means by which to guarantee social order. Marriage, essentially, became a patriotic act that, through the production of children, would ensure the continuance of a thriving state. Furthermore, for men the affairs of the home represented a microcosm of the state and an example of leadership. Politics and marriage frequently intertwined, since marriage alliances frequently, if not almost always, doubled as means by which to cement political and social alliances. The Roman legend of the Rape of the Sabines, which featured prominently on wedding chests (cassone) during the fifteenth century, encapsulated the role of marriage. According to legend, the founders of Rome forcibly abducted women from the neighboring Sabine

---

41 Ibid., 428.
42 Klapisch-Zuber, 119, note 11.
43 Evangelisti, 234.
44 Ibid.
tribe to be their wives and to bear them children for the creation of the state of Rome. Although marriage by no means resembled the violent kidnapping associated with the Rape of the Sabines, the story nonetheless represented the transformation of abduction into a civilized social alliance sanctioned by the marriage bond.49 It is important to remember that, after the Sabine women had been carried off by the Romans, they decided to remain and marry in order to become the mothers of free men, just as Quattrocento women fulfilled a political and civic duty by marrying and providing heirs for the state.

Also within the records of the Catasto and the dowry fund lies information regarding marriage practices of Quattrocento Florence, including the average age of marriage. These records reveal that women on average married around the age of seventeen, whereas the average for men was significantly higher at thirty-three years old.50 This age disparity guaranteed two things: first, it allowed men the necessary time to establish themselves professionally and financially to provide for a family, and secondly it ensured that women were at the ideal age at which to bear children. However, this gap (which in the upper classes reached an average of 15 years) created numerous difficulties.51 First, it defined a great deal of the relations between husband and wife, who were as far apart in age as a mother and her children. Consequently, the woman became the mediator between the generations, between a father and his children, yet it also increased the demand for her submissiveness, and the lack of communication (and consequently affection) between spouses.52 This discrepancy in the ages of men and women within marriages partially explains the frequency with which widowhood

49 Ibid.
50 Kirshner and Molho, 413, 432.
51 Klapisch-Zuber, 119.
52 Ibid.
occurred in Quattrocento Florence: nearly one in four women was widowed.\textsuperscript{53} Even though young women died in childbirth at much higher rates during this time, many still outlived their husbands who were significantly older than them.

Once a woman’s husband died, she suddenly entered the marital limbo that was the widowed state. At this point the widow was faced with three paths: she could remain within her husband’s house in seclusion or in the capacity of raising children; she could leave her husband’s family to remarry; or she could leave to live independently or in a religious community.\textsuperscript{54} Although the widow could theoretically choose a path for herself, lacking direct male control in the form of a husband or father, in reality she was devoid of satisfactory options; any path she chose would in some way conflict with the overlapping and interwoven influences of her natal and marital families.\textsuperscript{55} These powerful forces in a widow’s life struggled for control of her dowry, a substantial sum of money which followed a woman throughout her life. This large amount was worth struggling for: to the family of a widow’s husband it meant a degree of financial stability that would be needed in the absence of the husband himself, and for a widow’s natal family it meant another political alliance which could be formed through remarriage.\textsuperscript{56}

Widows very seldom lived on their own, since secular society did not set much store by her chances of remaining chaste.\textsuperscript{57} All widows living independently were viewed with suspicion, since they lacked the oversight of a male relative or some other sort of institutional construct to ensure their chastity, and their actions could threaten

\textsuperscript{53} Kirshner and Molho, 420.
\textsuperscript{54} Baernstein, 789.
\textsuperscript{55} Samuel K. Cohn, Women in the Streets: Essays on Sex and Power in Renaissance Italy (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 13.
\textsuperscript{56} Baernstein, 789.
\textsuperscript{57} Klapisch-Zuber, 119.
the honor of not just one family, but two.58 Florentine society would assume that any widow who remained so completely autonomous from masculine control was engaged in the foolish and licentious behavior stereotypical of women.59 Admonitory stories of lusty widows abound in medieval and Renaissance literature, most notably in Boccaccio with the tales of Elena in the *Decameron* and the merry widow of the *Corbaccio*.60 Even older widows, who had tasted the pleasures of the flesh, were believed to be prone to fall into debauchery, and consequently widows very seldom lived alone, bowing to the pressures of society and their kin.61

A widow’s need to navigate the various pressures of her family depended somewhat upon age; older widows with grown children had perhaps the most agency regarding their future, since they were past childbearing age and no longer had to concern themselves with raising children. Fewer pressures remained on them, since they were no longer valuable pawns in the marriage game for any of their male relatives.62 Older widows frequently became the type of live-in grandmothers or unofficial matriarchs that remained within their former husband’s family, or they joined a religious house either as a full member or a secular visitor in order to enjoy the company of other women, yet still retreat from society.63

If a widow chose to live outside her husband’s household, however, she must take into consideration numerous societal expectations and concerns regarding propriety and the

---

58 Ibid.
60 Ibid, and Klapisch-Zuber, 123.
61 Klapisch-Zuber, 123.
62 Baernstein, 791.
63 Ibid., 787.
protection of her chastity. If she lived outside of their husband’s household, she must live in a community of women, such as a convent or group of other widowed women, or with family members such as a son or daughter. Convents offered additional forms of comfort and aid to women whom marriage had failed in other ways. Convents could provide shelter to beaten or abandoned wives, or to women facing poverty, and particularly to widows. A widow could choose to enter a convent after her husband’s death, however she could do so with or without taking vows. Many convents allowed women to live within the convent, although separate from the nuns who had taken vows, thereby allowing them to retain their secular identity while providing them with female companionship, a sort of replacement family. Joining a convent provided with them the added benefits of resources such as legal help in withdrawing their dowry, occasionally a concern for women whose marital families did not want to relinquish the wife’s dowry. Generally, however, fewer pressures remained for older women since they had passed a marriageable age, and the choice mostly remained with her as to where to live.

On the other hand, young women were often forced by their natal families to remarry, but older women past childbearing age were unlikely to find new husbands. According to the Catasto records, two-thirds of women who were widowed before age 20 remarried, one-third of women widowed between ages 20-29 remarried, and a mere 11% of women aged 30-39 found second husbands. Rates were generally slightly lower for patrician women; perhaps fewer remarried because they could afford to live on their dowries, or perhaps men of the same class had stronger preferences for unmarried women than men in other classes, or perhaps both.

---

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 788.
63 Ibid., 791.
64 Klapisch-Zuber, 120.
65 Ibid.
In any case, a young widow provided a sore temptation for her family of birth (usually her father or brothers) who would see her husband’s death as an opportunity to forge new political or social alliances through remarriage.\textsuperscript{70} In such situations, a young widow had very little choice but to accede to the demands of her father or brothers and return to her former home. Etiquette of the time demanded that a widow could be claimed by her family as soon as her husband had been buried and the funeral ceremonies had ended; it was less than honorable for the widow to leave before the ceremony.\textsuperscript{71}

If a widow had young children, by bowing to the pressures of her natal family she also became subject to the negative judgment of society, which rewarded women who remained faithful to their dead husbands' memories, and subject to the contempt of her husband’s family, including her children.\textsuperscript{72} By remarrying, a widow withdrew her dowry from her husband’s family, and from her children, potentially leaving them without financial stability.\textsuperscript{73} Husbands would often attempt to avoid this eventuality and provide for the security of their heirs even after death by providing incentives for their widow within their wills.\textsuperscript{74} Within his last testament, a husband might specify an inheritance for his wife, which usually came in the form of a piece of his estate or an annual income, as long as she continued living within his family’s home and behaved in a chaste and honorable fashion.\textsuperscript{75} Nonetheless, women were often forced to leave to remarry, forcing them into the role of the “cruel mother” who orphaned the children twice, once with the death of their father, and a second time with abandonment by their mother, leaving them without even the comfort of the dowry.\textsuperscript{76} She was stigmatized by society not so

\textsuperscript{70} Baernstein, 789.  
\textsuperscript{71} Klapisch-Zuber, 123.  
\textsuperscript{72} Baernstein, 789.  
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{76} Klapisch-Zuber, 126.
much because she left her children, but because she placed the interests of her own lineage and
her own family above her children’s interests by leaving them without money.77

A “good mother,” on the other hand, refused to remarry, no matter how young she was
and in spite of the objections of her family, so as not to abandon her children, becoming
both father and mother for her children.78 For such women, an active ideal role existed
for them as widowed matrons. The Florentine bookseller Vespasiano da Bisticci
expresses several times in his memoirs his society’s and his own admiration for those
widows who refused re-marriage so as to dedicate themselves completely to their
children and to their souls, that is, to motherhood and religion.79 Both San Bernardino of
Siena and San Antonino of Florence preached that women left to raise their children
alone must become both father and mother to their children.80 Most widows in this
situation expanded their activities by taking over many of their former husbands’ duties
within the private sphere of the family.81 Entering the public world would prove more
difficult, however, since women could not participate in politics or business and
therefore could not assume their husband’s role in a company or trade, for example,
after his death.82 However, a widow could enter the fringes of the public sphere in order
to accomplish private goals, such as negotiating tax payments.83 The ideal of the
widowed mother in Florence coexisted with the ideal of the patrilineal family: she
ensured the continuance of her husband’s family by remaining religious and chaste

77 Ibid., 128.
78 Ibid.
79 Eisenbichler, 26.
80 Crabb. 50.
81 Ibid.
82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 57.
while devoting all of her energy to establishing her children in the world by acting as both a father and a mother to them.\textsuperscript{84}

Throughout the Quattrocento in Florence, society viewed the widow with ambivalence and suspicion.\textsuperscript{85} Unlike most women, well supervised by their male relatives, widows held a great deal of potential power. If a widow exercised her rights and withdrew her dowry from her husband’s family, she became a largely independent property owner not tied to any particular family or institution.\textsuperscript{86} She could act in many autonomous ways that her married, single, or religious counterparts could not. Not surprisingly, then, the genre of advice literature aimed at women increased exponentially during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Male authorities, particularly those within the Church, sought to curtail the disruptive potential of these widowed women though sermons addressed to widows and through the dissemination of written advice manuals.

Advice manuals typically focused on the three “states of life” of laywomen, namely virgin, wife, and widow, or focused solely on one of these states, outlining a specific set of responsibilities and appropriate behavior.\textsuperscript{87} As one might expect, advice for widows proved a particularly rich field, and numerous clerical writers addressed this subject. These writers, including Savonarola and his \textit{Book of the Life of the Widow}, concurred that a widow should remain celibate, though they disagreed as to whether she should engage in an active domestic life (including raising children) if she could possibly avoid it.\textsuperscript{88} St. Bernardino of Siena (1380-
1444), however, argued on behalf of the active mother. According to him, the widow must be pious, helpful to her neighbors, and resist evil and the temptations of the flesh. She should concern herself with raising children if she had them, so that by using her freedom well she could become both virile and saintly, acting as both father and mother to her children while remaining chaste and morally irreproachable. Unlike many who disparaged the capabilities of women, Bernardino argued that they could raise children successfully on their own, if careful: “it’s possible that a son brought up by a good widow could then govern a city or a province, and also the contrary, that he could ruin a province if badly brought up.”

In any case, all writers argued that the widowed state provided the widow with the singular opportunity to devote herself to religious exercises and charitable works, a “freedom” not enjoyed by any other group of women. Religious writers held the opinion that because of this freedom widows had been blessed by God and that they should take the opportunity given to them and their life should become an example for other women. Bernardino urged women to follow the example of St. Anna, the prophetess of the temple in the New Testament, sentiments that Savonarola would later echo. According to Bernardino, a widow should, “think of nothing else save serving God and her children, if she has any,” and if she is lucky enough no longer to need to care for children, and can support herself in a life of seclusion and devotion, “the widow... is half a saint.”

St. Antoninus, Savonarola’s predecessor as prior of the convent of San Marco in Florence, considered widowhood to be a “spiritual state” and therefore expected “true” widows

---

90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Baernstein, 790.
93 Rogers and Tinagli, 188.
94 Ibid.
to behave accordingly.\textsuperscript{95} This concept of a “true” widow is one that Savonarola would later expand upon, though in a more compassionate fashion. Whereas Savonarola makes exceptions for widows who, due to their particular family situations, were unable to be “true” spiritual widows, Antoninus finds this unacceptable. A true widow, according to him, is a “devout soul for whom the world and sensual appetite are dead.”\textsuperscript{96} As a result, a widow should seclude herself from society, particularly the society of men. Even if these men are members of her family or the clergy, a widow should avoid contact with them, “for disordinate affections often arise from this.”\textsuperscript{97}

For the most part, advice to widows focused on ideals of feminine behavior, rather than actualities, for they frequently failed to take a woman’s familial situation into account. However as we shall see, Savonarola’s \textit{Book of the Life of the Widow} is somewhat more forgiving: Savonarola makes allowances for women who want to remarry for sexual reasons, or for financial security (though not for financial greed).\textsuperscript{98} In his \textit{Book on the Life of the Widow}, Savonarola expands upon the tradition of Bernardino and Antoninus, becoming both more liberal, in that he is ready to allow sexually active or economically disadvantaged women to remarry, but also much more strict, in that he expects true widows not only to give up physical pleasures, but also to give up their families and all worldly activities in order to dedicate themselves completely to prayer.\textsuperscript{99} Savonarola preaches a unique type of freedom for widows in his treatise, which tempts the modern reader to view his teachings in a proto-feminist light. Indeed, his relations with women during his political career would seem to support this in many ways, since at one point he proposed legislation which would have allowed women to be

\textsuperscript{95} Eisenbichler, 27.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 28.
\textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 30.
\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 31.
involved in the process of reform, and later garnered a great deal of female support in general during his career.\textsuperscript{100} Although he later retracted the provisions of this suggestion, Savonarola originally intended for the women of Florence to select representatives from amongst themselves who would meet to provide recommendations on reforms to be made for the women of the city.\textsuperscript{101} Despite these seemingly pro-feminine actions, the freedom which Savonarola espoused was not a modern type of freedom, encouraging women to become independent and choose their own paths. Rather, Savonarola encouraged widows to exercise the freedom they have been given by their liberation from the responsibilities of home and family life in order to serve God. According to Savonarola (and Antoninus before him), there was only one correct choice for what a widow could do with her freedom: devote herself to her soul. Savonarola seems just to be more aware and understanding of the social climate at the time and the various pressures imposed upon a newly widowed woman.

\textsuperscript{100} Herzig, 6.
\textsuperscript{101} Lorenzo Polizzotto, "When Saints Fall Out: Women and the Savonarolan Reform in Early Sixteenth-Century Florence" \textit{Renaissance Quarterly} 46, No. 3 (Autumn, 1993), 487.
Chapter Three

Savonarola’s Book on the Life of the Widow

Savonarola’s treatise on the Life of the Widow, published in 1491, is divided up into three books, each of which addresses a specific aspect of a widow’s life: Book One describes the condition of the “true widow;” Book Two describes how such a widow should live her life; and Book Three describes how a widow should teach her neighbors. Each of these books is divided further into three separate sections, which typically outline more specific points within each of the three aforementioned themes. This structured organization reflects not only the writing style of a well-organized mind, but rather calls to mind the methods of scholastic preachers such as Savonarola himself, who used this type of format in order to convey most clearly and logically their message to the general populace.

The exact audience for the Book on the Life of the Widow is somewhat difficult to determine, since no dedication or correspondence exists to indicate a specific recipient. Clearly, given the written format of this treatise, his audience was literate and therefore likely somewhat wealthy. Also, given the subject matter of the book, one could fairly safely assume that Savonarola intended his work to be read by widows, though they may not have been the only audience. Though this treatise provides advice and guidance specifically for widows, a few small details seem to indicate that there may have been other, possibly male, readers. For
example, when addressing the "dearly beloved," to whom he writes, Savonarola uses the masculine plural form of the adjective "diletissimi." Now, this could simply be a mistake, a grammatical or spelling error signifying nothing, or it could indicate that the treatise was, in fact, intended to reach a male, or dually male and female, audience. Though it cannot be substantiated, it would be interesting if the Book on the Life of the Widow was, in fact, requested ('commissioned' would be too strong a word) by a man on behalf of his female relatives, or possibly directed towards a widow and her male family members.

Savonarola's motivations for writing this treatise are equally difficult to infer from his writings. By way of explanation, Savonarola merely states that he writes out of a desire to "do something very pleasing to" God, who "takes very special care of" widows. Judging from the way in which he opens this treatise, it appears that he wrote the Book on the Life of the Widow in response to some sort of demand. As he says, "[e]ven through I feel inadequate to write about widowhood, my dearly beloved in Christ Jesus, nonetheless, obliged by your prayers, I will... write." Since he corresponded regularly with a variety of people, including women from all states of life (single, married, and religious), it is likely that he chose to write this treatise in response to a request made by one of these women. Given the use of the adjective "diletissimi" as discussed previously, however, it is not unlikely that a male correspondent or friend of Savonarola's may have requested such a treatise on behalf of a widowed family member. Whoever made such a request of Savonarola must have been sufficiently influential

---

103 Ibid., 192.
104 Ibid., 191.
105 Ibid.
for Savonarola to choose to respond, however, since in other letters he complains of a lack of
time in which to provide lengthy advice to his correspondents.\textsuperscript{106}

In order to explain why he has chosen to devote such a great deal of time and effort in
outlining his treatise on the \textit{Life of the Widow}, Savonarola emphasizes the importance of the
widow throughout Scripture and, more importantly, in the eyes of God. Savonarola emphasizes
that everyone, as servants of God, should take particular care of widows, and this in turn has
motivated him to “bring to completion this little treatise of ours.”\textsuperscript{107} Even beyond his stated
motives, Savonarola addresses a legitimate need within the city of Florence, then something of
an epidemic of widowhood throughout the fifteenth century. For Savonarola, the \textit{Book on the Life
of the Widow} becomes something of an extension of his moral teachings in his public preaching
practice. Through this treatise, he addresses a large sector of the populace who, in his eyes, are
in great need of advice, since widows lack the concrete societal expectations and male oversight
they had experienced before and during their marriages.

The status of widowhood within Renaissance Florence brought a woman unprecedented
levels of self-determination, accompanied by several dueling forces which fought to influence
her decisions. Pressures from her family of birth and marital family sought to limit or control
her yet again, or at the very least manipulate her in order to control her dowry. In the \textit{Book on
the Life of the Widow}, however, Savonarola presents a different view of widowhood, one which
celebrates widowhood as freedom for a woman. This freedom which Savonarola describes
should not be evaluated through a modern or feminist lens, which would celebrate a different
type of freedom altogether; rather, for Savonarola a widow’s freedom meant her freedom to
serve God. With the death of her husband, a widow was freed from societal expectations and
from the sins of the flesh, which could all lead to her moral ruination. As a true widow, she then

\textsuperscript{106} See “To the nuns of Annalena instructing them on how to read sacred texts” in \textit{A Guide to Righteous
Living and Other Works}, 53.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 192.
had the liberty to live away from corrupt society and give herself fully to the service and
devotion of God.

Book One: The Nature of the True Widow

In Savonarola’s view, not all women whose husbands have died can be considered true
widows. Only a specific type of woman can be considered a “true” widow, and it is to these
women alone that he writes his treatise. Within this category of widowhood, however,
Savonarola acknowledges that there may be some women who in their hearts are true widows,
but are prevented from acting as such by some outside force or extenuating circumstances.
Conversely, he also chastises women who outwardly appear to be true widows but in their
hearts would prefer to act differently. Nonetheless, according to him there is only one manner
in which to be a “true” widow, both in mind and action.

For Savonarola, the biblical figure St. Anna represents the pinnacle of widowhood, and
embodies everything to which a true widow should aspire.108 Anna (not to be confused with
Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary) appears in the New Testament during Christ’s
presentation as an infant at the temple.109 By the time of Christ’s presentation at the temple, she
“had lived with her husband for seven years and, after the death of her husband, she had
persevered in widowhood until her eighty-fourth year.”110 Savonarola states that from the story
of St. Anna’s life one can draw “what a widow should be,” “how she should live,” and “how
she should teach others, so that she may gain a precious crown in heaven.”111

108 Ibid., 192.
109 She appears only briefly in the Bible: Luke 2:36-38.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
Before expanding upon these topics and the life of the widow St. Anna, Savonarola exhorts his readers (widows) to make the choice to live as true widows. In doing so, he uses some rather strange rhetoric. Instead of portraying the death of a woman’s husband as a tragedy, Savonarola depicts it as an opportunity, as an event in which “a woman is freed from her husband by his death.” In fact, Savonarola is quite critical of the institution of marriage as a whole. Under the contract of marriage “it is necessary for a married woman to serve not only God, but also her husband, and in this manner she is torn between the two.” This first part of Savonarola’s argument against marriage can be summed up in the passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, which he cites as evidence: “A married woman must think about the things of this world and how she can please her husband; but she who has no husband must think of nothing else but God.” Savonarola concludes that “a widow can serve God better than a married woman” because she will not have the distractions of a husband, or worse, the burden of an “irksome or...wicked” husband who might lead her to commit sinful actions. As if this argument were not enough to discourage widows from remarrying, Savonarola states that “most of the time, those women who remarry find this kind of husband,” that is, one who is wicked or sinful. Although many women may have come upon less than desirable second husbands, since respectable patrician men tend to marry only virgins and many men may desire to take advantage of a wealthier woman’s dowry, Savonarola’s rhetoric hyperbolizes the situation, making it appear far more dangerous to a widow than reality likely reflected. His inclusion of this argument further shows his distaste for the institution as a whole, indicating that he would prefer women to remain free from their husband’s influence and therefore freer to serve God.

---

112 Ibid.
113 Ibid., 193.
114 1 Corinthians 7:34, qtd in Savonarola, 193.
115 Savonarola, 193.
116 Ibid.
It is noteworthy in itself that Savonarola seems to argue on behalf of the freedom of women. He paints marriage and family as undesirable and burdensome for women, not as just punishment for their participation in original sin (a common concept of the era). He argues that it is better for a woman to remain a widow in order to “be freer from the prickings of the flesh,” not because women are naturally sexually voracious (as many antifeminist writers of his time would argue), but rather because “a married woman does not have power over her body, but it is in the power of her husband.” Furthermore, widowed women are free from the burden of raising children and of keeping a household. Throughout these arguments, Savonarola consistently places himself on the side of freedom for his female readers through their status as widows.

In the context of Quattrocento Florence, and amidst the myriad misogynist treatises and tracts that had been circulating since antiquity, Savonarola’s words seem surprisingly favorable to the rights and agency of women. Indeed, it might be tempting to argue that Savonarola was, in his own way, a proto-feminist, arguing for greater rights and equality for women, and from these first few arguments which he outlines in the Book of the Life of the Widow, it would not be difficult to support such an argument. It is important to keep in mind, however, that Savonarola was, in fact, writing a treatise for which women were intended to be the primary audience. It is highly unlikely that as a gifted preacher and an intelligent man, Savonarola would have been so utterly unaware of his audience as to include misogynist themes in a work intended to persuade women. He cleverly gears his argument towards the women who would have been recipients of this treatise, and who very well may have seen marriage, children, and householding as burdensome. At any rate, the image of Savonarola as women’s liberator (as

---

117 Savonarola, 193.
118 1 Corinthians 7:4, qtd in Savonarola, 194.
119 Savonarola, 194
interesting as that concept might seem) quickly crumbles upon examination of his further arguments.

The freedom for women for which Savonarola argues is not the sort of freedom which a modern feminist would embrace, yet it is a sort of freedom nonetheless. Savonarola not once attempts to remove a woman's agency in determining her path after widowhood. Although he recommends a certain type of widowhood, he readily acknowledges the necessities which sometimes prevent widows from acting upon their more virtuous desires. Likewise, he recognizes that for many it is better to marry than to burn, and refrains from condemning such women or criticizing them too intensely. Although certainly not entirely devoid of self-serving sentiments, Savonarola promotes the state of widowhood within this treatise through the sincere belief that widowhood provides women with the greatest opportunity to do good for themselves and for their neighbors. Widowhood, to Savonarola, does present a type of freedom for women, namely freedom from the sins and pressures to which society would otherwise subject them.

His later arguments in favor of widowhood extend his theme of avoiding sin, apparently with a view to the moral wellbeing of his advisees. However, whereas his previous arguments had involved eschewing the sins of the flesh and the burden of serving two masters, he proceeds to argue against the sins of avarice and pride particularly as evident in dressing lavishly and fashionably, and the sins that result from social events such as talking with men, walking through the streets, and sitting at a window (a form of self-display).\(^ {120} \) None of these arguments seems likely to appeal to the average woman, who must well have enjoyed the ability to dress fashionably and attend social events like marriages and feasts, as well as to walk through the streets freely. His arguments against dressing lavishly are unsurprising, since

\(^ {120} \) Ibid., 195.
Savonarola was one of the greatest proponents of sumptuary legislation, which regulated the amount and type of luxury that individuals could display through their clothing. His other arguments, against the occasional sins that may occur when a woman appears in public, are a bit more interesting. As Savonarola points out, "freedom is the cause for many sins." These arguments reinforce the fact that Savonarola was only a proponent of women's freedom in the ways in which "a widow is freer than a married woman to do what is good." Freedom in this case is not defined as the ability to act without constraint, but rather as the opportunity for a widow to engage independently in virtuous tasks, and remove her from the constraints of sin (such as interaction with men and displays of wealth) which society would force upon her as a married or single woman.

Savonarola, however, projects a woman's joy at the freedom of widowhood by providing the example of St. Melania (the Elder), who, when she found that her husband and two children had died on the same day, "ran to the feet of a crucifix and said, 'Lord, I thank you that you have freed me from such a burden and such servitude; now I will be able to serve you more expeditiously and with greater freedom.'" Again he returns to the themes which emphasized the liberation that he associates with widowhood. He may be using this theme in order to appeal to his readers, appealing to the understandable and predictable emotions of wives who might consider their family life and duty to their husband an affliction and an encumbrance. However, his repeated expression of such adamantly anti-marriage sentiments speaks more deeply to a belief that the best way of life and the only way to achieve freedom is through utter dedication and servitude to God.

"True Widows," by Savonarola's definition, therefore, are women who embrace this same mentality. They have made the choice to dedicate themselves to God alone, eschewing all

121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
of the responsibilities and distractions of married lives. Savonarola is careful to distinguish, however, between those who may be physically widowed and those who are true "widows in their mind."\textsuperscript{124} Those who are widowed yet desire to be married are not wicked, however, according to Savonarola, nor is this desire of theirs sinful, particularly in the case of younger women. Rather, it "can be good...when they cannot live in widowhood, or because they are in the flower of their youth and have no vocation to enter the religious life, and to remain [widows] would be dangerous for them."\textsuperscript{125} Essentially he paraphrases the famous Pauline expression "it is better to marry than to burn."\textsuperscript{126} He also acknowledges that it is good for a widow to remarry if "she cannot live otherwise," for want of an income, or "she were to recognize that she cannot live chastely."\textsuperscript{127} These are all legitimate reasons for a widow to remarry, and though, according to Savonarola, they are not sinful reasons, it is still best that a woman should remain a widow. If, however, she should remarry "for lust or for avarice, or in order to go where she knows there is wealth, or for pride, or when she is sought after by a man of high degree, or because she has fallen in love, or for some other depraved and perverse reason, without a doubt this...would be a sin."\textsuperscript{128}

Not all women who do not wish to remarry can be considered "true widows," according to Savonarola. For, "there are many widows who do not want a husband, either because they do not have a dowry, or because they fear a bad marriage or because they do not see a way for them to remarry, or for other hidden or evident reasons."\textsuperscript{129} But they are not true widows because their behavior is not that of true widows. Widows who "do not maintain chastity in their hearts...appear in public...dress neatly and in tight-fitting garments...with their eyes

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 196.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} I Corinthians 7:9
\textsuperscript{127} Savonarola, 196.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 196-197.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 197.
shamelessly raised... and eagerly linger in the company of youths, and they laugh with them, and jest, and even speak of matters that are not religious"¹³⁰ are not true widows, and indeed "one must flee from these women and one must not in any way talk with them."¹³¹ Therefore, these women "are not the type of widow to whom we address our treatise."¹³²

Motive is particularly important to Savonarola in describing the nature of the true widow. Some widows decide to live chastely and not remarry; "however, they do not do this for love of God, but rather for some sort of social respectability, or for love of their children, or for love of material goods, or in order not to find themselves with a second husband who is worse than their first."¹³³ In other words, such women cannot be considered "true widows" because their motives are not pious. Therefore, though in the "opinion of the world they live honestly and are considered to be venerable," they "know little of divine matters,"¹³⁴ and do not live up to the model of St. Anna. They choose to act rightly, which is unto itself a good thing, but they do not choose to do so for the right reasons. Social respectability is valuable, but not equivalent to a genuine love of God and a choice to live virtuously for virtue's own sake. Such women do not love God; they love themselves and their own concerns, and have chosen to receive earthly honors instead of receiving their reward in heaven.¹³⁵

In short, according to Savonarola, a "true widow" is one who does not wish to be remarried and acts appropriately as befits her state, but who chooses moreover to remain a widow in order to devote herself wholeheartedly to God. However, as strict as Savonarola may be in judging the motives of widows and their actions, he makes allowances for women who,
though widowed, cannot leave their family responsibilities and devote themselves wholly to
God.

Those widows who “cannot separate themselves either from their sons or their
daughters or from their relatives because of their youth” or “cannot separate themselves from
the family because of some other necessity or charitable obligation,” are not true widows,
though they are not without their own merit. For everything they do within their family,
“when they do it for the love of God, and in the knowledge that they have been forced by God
to do it, they will be rewarded in eternal life.” Later, he comments that it is important that if
“widows who want to serve God do not have the ability to do so, like St. Anna, they should,
nonetheless, strive to follow her as much as they can.” Indeed, Savonarola seems to have a
particular sympathy for these women and applauds them for shouldering these difficult
responsibilities, advising them that they should not “in any way remove themselves from these
responsibilities of theirs,” because they have been given them by God.

The last degree of widow outside that of the “true widow” is the woman who desires to
serve God, and is not constrained by family obligations, but does not do so “because they are
faint-hearted, or because of compassion, or because of some other reason.” Despite their good
motives, the choice of these widows not to act on their freedom is inexcusable to Savonarola,
since they lack only the necessary courage to become true widows and therefore more perfect in
the eyes of God.

Finally, Savonarola reaches his description of the “true widow” based upon the model of
St. Anna. These ideal women are widows who have “withdrawn from every bother and

136 Ibid.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
disturbance of the world, [and] serve God in contemplation day and night.”

By doing so, these women have placed themselves “in a state that is more quiet and better able to earn them greater perfection.”

Savonarola concludes his argument by summarizing the state of the “true widow”: she is “someone who not only maintains her chastity and intends to maintain it, but someone who is also completely dedicated to the service of God.”

A widow’s intentions are still more integral to Savonarola’s definition of the “true widow.” Those widows whose intent is not to maintain chastity, such as the first types of widow he described (those who wish to remarry and those who act immodestly), are in no ways “true” widows by Savonarola’s standards. Those women whose intent is pure, but who are prevented by forces outside of their control, cannot be considered true widows. However, these women are morally pure and, should circumstances change to allow their complete devotion to God, could then be considered “true widows.”

Having gone to these great lengths to describe the nature of the “true widow,” Savonarola then addresses himself to these women (and these women alone) to describe the life of the true widow. He outlines “what the aim of this life of hers might be, so that she might know how to direct her works and regulate her conduct appropriately.” Ultimately, the goal of a widow should be to “reap a spiritual profit” through a life of dedication to God. In order to do so, according to Savonarola, all Christians, including widows, should make their primary concern to live uprightly in order to protect “God’s honor, which one must love more than one’s own health.”

He argues that every human act reflects honor or dishonor upon God, “and this applies to widows more than to many other persons because they should be humble and lead a

---

140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.
144 Ibid., 202.
145 Ibid., 199-200.
very chaste life” because, having lost their earthly husbands, they should seek Jesus Christ as their groom.\textsuperscript{146} Sins such as gossip, to which Savonarola implies that widows would be particularly prone, will “lead to the dishonor of God, to their own dishonor, and to scandal among one’s neighbors.”\textsuperscript{147} A true widow, therefore, must avoid these sins and “inflame her heart with zeal for the honor of God and commit herself to die rather than to dishonor her Creator.”\textsuperscript{148}

A true widow’s primary concern, then, must be the honor of God, and her secondary concern her own salvation. Savonarola seems to repeat himself somewhat here, since he previously noted that protecting the honor of God by avoiding sinful actions would also lead to the salvation of one’s soul. If that is the case, why then would he repeat himself by urging widows to care for their own salvation? The answer again lies in the importance of intent. Living rightly with only the intent of saving one’s soul is, essentially, a selfish act. It is the same as that of the widows who live virtuously only for the accolades of their peers during their lifetimes. The end result may be the same, but the intent which drives these widows is impure. If, however, the primary intent in avoiding sin is a concern for the honor of God, then and only then can virtuous actions bear their full merit.

However, as Savonarola points out, many do not know how to do the right thing, and thus may accidentally commit sins. In order to avoid this pitfall, one must first and foremost have a pure heart. Purity of heart “consists first in the cleansing of one’s conscience through a true confession that proceeds from a contrite heart, a confession of all mortal sins, and when it is also possible, of all venial sins.”\textsuperscript{149} Implied here is the fact that a true confession can only be administered by an agent of the Church. Since Savonarola himself was a cleric he would

\textsuperscript{146} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{147} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 201.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 201.
naturally be concerned with maintaining the monopoly of authority that the Church held over all spiritual matters, particularly in providing absolution for the confession of sins. Confession, however, is not the only key to a pure heart. "In order to have purity of heart, one must also withdraw one's affection from all earthly things and strive instead to value the glory of heaven" above earthly honors.\textsuperscript{150} Since "the extent to which that someone is fond of created things, to that extent one does not love God,"\textsuperscript{151} a widow must therefore remove herself from the love of all earthly things in order to devote herself fully to God, and "if she love anything else she should do it only inasmuch as it is an indication of Him."\textsuperscript{152}

Purification of heart and thereby the acquisition of a state of grace with God are to be the ultimate goal of widows who devote themselves to God. In order to achieve this, they must keep their eyes constantly on the goal of purity. This process includes "fasts, vigils, prayers, alms, lessons, and all preaching," in which they must participate. A state of grace can be manifested through delight in reading Scripture, willingly hearing the word of God, enjoyment in reciting prayers, feeling moved by an "internal inspiration, and... other suggestions of grace which are nearly infinite and known only by those saintly souls who practice divine contemplation, through which they feel in many ways something like the assurance that they are in the grace of God."\textsuperscript{153} In this grace-like state, widows can become like to Saint Anna, who must be their constant source of inspiration.

Having come to this conclusion, Savonarola embarks upon an extended metaphor on the Saint and how she is to be an inspiration for widows. First, all widows must bear the name of Anna, "not so much in the literal sense of the word, but in its meaning, for Anna means

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 203.
Second, all widows must be the "daughter of Phanuel," as was Anna, because the name Phanuel means "the face of God." To be the child of the face of God is to await the "father's inheritance, which is the eternal bliss that comes from seeing and knowing God," in eternal life. Third, Phanuel was descended from the tribe of Asher, whose name means "blessed." This is fitting because "all the blessed are from the tribe of Asher, for they are all blessed by the face of the blessed God. Thus it is necessary that a widow be regenerated through grace by the grace of God, so that she may come to look upon the face of the blessed God." These three things, then, must always be the focus of the thoughts of all Christians, but particularly "in the thoughts of those widows who have decided to serve God with all their heart."

Savonarola recapitulates his argument neatly at the end of Book I, repeating his main points that a widow must model herself after St. Anna, confess her sins, and remove herself from worldly temptations. He goes farther, however, by adding a prayer that he suggests a widow should say to confirm her choice to dedicate herself to God:

My Lord, I intend to serve you and to live a good life, first for your praise and glory; then for the salvation of my soul: therefore, I will force myself to show my heart to you, so clean that you will deign to fill it with grace and charity, so that I may achieve the glory of the blessed, who praise you with joy for ever and ever.

Book Two: How a True Widow Should Conduct Her Life

154 Ibid., 204.
155 Ibid.
156 Ibid.
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid., 204-205.
159 Ibid., 205.
160 Ibid.
In Book Two, Savonarola sets out to describe how a widow should live her life after she has made the choice to become a “true widow” and made the appropriate preparations for her life of contemplation and devotion. According to Savonarola, the life of the widow, as based upon the example of St. Anna, must consist of solitude, fasting, and constant prayer.\textsuperscript{161}

Savonarola connects the life of solitude that a widow must observe with the life of St. Anna, who reportedly “did not leave the temple day or night,” but also to the turtle dove. The turtle-dove “is a chaste animal who, when she loses her mate, never again mates with another, but goes about the rest of her life lamenting alone.”\textsuperscript{162} This behavior conforms perfectly with that of the “true widow,” who resolves not to remarry after the loss of her husband and dedicates herself to God.

Furthermore, the solitude of the widow is not intended to be a joyful solitude, or even a peaceful one of contemplation and retirement. According to Savonarola, a widow must “live always in tears and wailing.”\textsuperscript{163} He emphasizes that having lost her husband, a widow “has lost all the consolation of the world” and “amusements are no longer allowed to her.”\textsuperscript{164} So she must withdraw within herself and separate herself completely from worldly conversations and “renew herself internally.”\textsuperscript{165} The concept of a widow’s liberation has completely disappeared at this stage, and the limitations which accompany the life of the true widow begin to emerge.

Savonarola’s more interesting argument, aside from this somewhat predictable exhortation to solemnity and modesty, is the concept that a widow should not only mourn because she is a widow on earth, but that she should consider herself “a widow both corporeally and spiritually: corporeally, because she has lost her carnal husband, spiritually,
because she is still separated from Christ her spiritual husband."166 Since she has lost forever her carnal husband to death, she must do her utmost not to lose her spiritual husband. Through prayer and dedication she can achieve heaven and find him there. Part of her perpetual mourning, therefore, should be for the fact that she is "widowed of her true spouse Jesus Christ, with the danger of perhaps never finding Him should she pursue sin."167

The language which Savonarola uses to describe the behavior in which a widow should engage is strikingly similar to descriptions of the devotions made by nuns and other women living in religious communities. Urging women to consider themselves widows of Christ while on earth implies that they are, in some way, spouses of Christ, common language with nuns and other members of religious communities. Savonarola’s injunctions towards seclusion and solitude are continually vague, however: nowhere does he state that a widow ought or ought not join a religious community, nor make any other suggestions as to how a widow should achieve the type of isolation he recommends.

Though he is vague as to where a widow should seclude herself, Savonarola is adamant that she should cut herself off from "the conversation and from the company of extraneous men who are not related to her,"168 as well as from "conversation and familiarity with all her relatives, and especially from those on her husband’s side."169 One must speak with family and kin "only as much as is necessary, about matters dealing with the household, or about spiritual matters, or other necessities, and one must speak rather less than too much,"170 so that lust is not stirred up through talking to too many men, and no desire to return to family life emerges through close association with relatives.

166 Ibid., 206.
167 Ibid., 207.
168 Ibid
169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
In avoiding contact with family members, Savonarola takes particular care to warn women against associating with men from her husband’s side of her family, such as brothers-in-law, cousins, and brothers, particularly the young men. Though this would initially appear to be no more than a repetition of his injunction to solitude, his warning that familiarity in this case may breed lust, and a widow might remarry within the kinsmen of her husband. Savonarola bemoans the fact that “even today there are not a few who, because of such familiarity...have immersed themselves like donkeys and mules in the filth of their own blood, even in very close degree.” Savonarola’s expression of distaste at this practice of widows remarrying into their husbands’ family suggests that it was, at the very least, not an uncommon practice. Such a practice would make a great deal of sense, also, since it would ensure the consolidation of wealth and the protection of any heirs that might have been produced by the first marriage. Marrying again within the same family would also make life for the widow easier, since she would not have either to return to her own family or to remain as an unwanted guest within her husband’s family. However, under contemporary concepts of marriage and family, remarrying in such a fashion would be considered incest, since the widow was considered a full member of that family (hence Savonarola’s dismay). Even if a woman were “so old that she is free from this danger” she is still forbidden from the familiarity with male family members that could breed such licentiousness, since it “is a bad example for young women, [and] it distracts her mind from her contemplations and prayers.”

Savonarola also warns against close association with other women, whose vain behavior and “light words” might distract the widow from her contemplation, but he also warns against “conversation with those men who call themselves spiritual, but are, however,

171 Ibid. Since young men are “trained by the devil” they should be particularly avoided.
172 Ibid.
173 Ibid.
174 Ibid., 208.
175 Ibid.
secular."  Here Savonarola warns against the commonplace practice of confessors or spiritual advisors being in too close association with women who have devoted themselves to God. Doubtless he would prefer that other confessors, like himself, conduct their correspondence via letters or treatises. "Men who are truly spiritual flee from women," so any man who claims to be religious yet desires close association must be treated with suspicion. With her confessor or any other spiritual advisor, a widow must "speak little and only of godly matters, and in no way should there be conversation or familiarity," because "frequent visits and gifts often change spiritual love into carnal love." Widows are therefore forbidden to "be familiar with either priests or friars of whatever type," because Savonarola views all such conversations with suspicion. Instead, widows ought to hold these men of God "in such reverence that you will think yourself unworthy to speak to them."

Savonarola's warnings about the potentially evil influence of spiritual men are quite extensive, and it would appear from the depth of his admonition that he considers this to be the most severe threat to a widow's religious state. Since a woman "cannot live without the company of men on account of their imperfect nature," she is very likely to follow her spiritual adviser since she no longer has a husband and is forbidden to converse with lay men. A widow must carefully choose a confessor who "leads a holy life and has a good reputation, one who is either very old or of a good age," though age cannot be a full guarantee, since "the fire of lust remains in us as long as there is flesh on our body." Therefore, a widow must not be familiar with her confessor, and must not allow him to visit her at home. Once she has chosen a

---

176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
180 Ibid.
181 Ibid.
182 Ibid.
183 Ibid.
confessor, she must never “speak with him of anything else but confession and matters pertaining to confession, that is, of matters of conscience, and that you should do briefly and rarely.”

Savonarola warns against association with men, family, unmarried women, spiritual women, priests, and friars, and in turn concludes that “grave widows remain alone and keep themselves from any type of conversation, knowing that Jesus is not found except in solitude.” Once a widow has achieved this solitude, however, she must then embark upon further types of meditation and prayer, including fasting, Savonarola’s next topic of discussion. He advises that any woman who wishes to live righteously should “be so discreet in her fasts as not to exceed by mortifying her body too much, and also not be so negligent that she allows the thorns of the flesh to grow and suffocate the spirit.” The practice of fasting, then, is a precarious balance between the needs of the flesh and the spirit which must always be exercised with discretion and caution.

Savonarola acknowledges that “it is very difficult to advise in this matter” since the needs and habits of individuals vary so greatly. He does, however, set out some basic rules and guidelines for all widows to follow. All widows who are healthy must “observe devoutly all the fasts ordained by the Church,” and should fast at least once a week on Fridays, though as a general rule they should “live with temperance and... take food as necessary, in quantities according to the needs of nature.” In other words, aside from the mandatory fasting they should eat modestly and not indulge. It is a delicate balance to strike, as Savonarola

184 Ibid., 211.
185 Ibid.
186 Ibid., 212.
187 Ibid.
188 Ibid.
189 Ibid.
190 Ibid., 213.
acknowledges, but “if, having to deviate towards one of the extremes, one should deviate towards the little rather than towards the much.”\textsuperscript{191}

Fasting, for widows, must not only include the bodily deprivations of food and sustenance but should include “all superfluous bodily pleasures.”\textsuperscript{192} A widow must make all of her external senses fast: she must “make her ears fast from all pernicious and useless words,”\textsuperscript{193} and avoid gossip and unchaste conversations; she must fast with her sense of smell and “not delight in lustful smells” such as perfumes and ointments which increase sensual thoughts; she must also “fast with her sense of taste from sensual things that are not necessary to nature” such as “salads, relishes, and fruits” which are “made in order to satisfy gluttony rather than necessity.”\textsuperscript{194} A widow must also fast with her sense of touch, “because the temptation of touching is most passionate and sudden and it envelops our reason.”\textsuperscript{195} A widow in particular must be very careful to guard against assaults on her chastity in the form of touch, since “having already experienced such pleasure and now finding it is forbidden to her, that fire could flare up more readily in her than in a woman who has not experienced it.”\textsuperscript{196}

Not only must a widow fast in her external senses but also in her internal ones. She must “detach and distance herself from all things delightful to the senses,” which will be made easier by removing herself from company and living in solitude. She must “ensure that all her thoughts be on God, if at all possible,” and keep her mind pure and free of all fantasies and vain thoughts.\textsuperscript{197} Fasting totally in this way can only be achieved through solitude and isolation, and only by fasting can a widow properly devote herself to prayer, which Savonarola discusses in

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{192} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 214.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 215.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 216.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 216-217.
his next chapter. Each element of a widow’s life is dependent upon the other, and without full
devotion to each element, the full devotion of a widow’s life could not be complete.

"Prayer is so necessary to spiritual life that to want to be saved without it is a useless
effort," particularly for widows. "All widows must be intent," on prayer, since it is the way in
which one’s soul becomes “intimate with Christ,” and it “enlightens our intellect and inflames
our affection for divine and holy things.” Savonarola laments the state of prayer among many
men and women of his time. Not only the prayers of the laity are uninspired, but even the
religious “do nearly nothing else but recite Our Fathers and psalms, and yet they hardly ever
pray.” Savonarola does not consider the recitation of prayers to be the same thing as truly
praying. For prayer to be sincere, one’s heart must be with God. Leaving aside doctrinal
matters in order to avoid tediousness, Savonarola then outlines what is necessary to achieve
true prayer.

First of all, prayer requires “a mind that is tranquil and raised to God.” Such a state of
mind can be achieved by removing “as much as possible from themselves all those things that
disturb the mind and first of all sin, confessing themselves often and guarding themselves
against falling even into venial sin.” Sin blocks the mind from truly communicating with God
and therefore prevents an individual from praying correctly. Though not inherently sinful,
speech also impedes one’s ability to pray. Since “the father of prayer is silence and its mother is
solitude,” one must avoid talking too much, because of course “in conversation one cannot
pray.” In fact, silence and solitude practically force a soul to “gather unto itself and rise above
itself and pray.” To engage God in prayer, one must be alone and silent, and then one must

\^198 Ibid., 217.
\^199 Ibid.
\^200 Ibid.
\^201 Ibid., 218.
\^202 Ibid.
\^203 Ibid.
\^204 Ibid.
“gather together one’s thoughts and feelings, and drive away any other fantasy, and make God present.”

God ought to be present in prayer, and in the hearts of those who pray, because “God is in all things...and especially in the hearts of those who love him.”

As to the content of prayer, Savonarola adheres to the general formula of the Lord’s Prayer, with which Jesus taught the apostles how to pray. This format begins with thanks and praise to God, thanking “him for all the benefits one has received, briefly recalling them, that is, the gifts of creation and redemption, of baptism and all the other infinite specific gifts, and...all the other good deeds that God has wrought in that individual.” Next, one must ask “forgiveness for one’s sins, gathering them up...in one’s mind,” and then asking for God’s mercy. One should then ask for “perseverance in one’s love” of God, followed by any other requests for divine aid. Most importantly, prayer should be “repeated many times with one’s heart rather than with one’s tongue,” because as Savonarola emphasized earlier, the simple repetition of prayers does not comprise true prayer.

While the type of prayer is certainly important, Savonarola also places great importance on the frequency and length of prayer. Frequency is important: it is best to pray often since “often we wane cold, and thus we must often return to the fire,” of divine love achieved through prayer. He also points out that “it is better to recite short prayers with fervor and often, rather than long ones rarely.” Undivided attention during prayer, of course, is not only integral in true prayer, but can also be fostered by the frequent repetition of short prayers, since one prayer “recited with attention generates fervor and spirit, but a thousand recited without
devotion generate bother and tedium."²¹² Savonarola also recommends frequent prayer as a means of passing the time, as something to be done any time "when you can separate yourself easily from people’s company and go in some room or private place."²¹³ Mental prayers are even better than spoken ones, "for this is the prayer of those who are perfect and it is an angelic thing."²¹⁴ Mental prayer, then, is a sign of a pure heart and mind which can unite and devote itself wholly to God, whereas spoken prayer is often a sign of routine and insincere prayer.

Book Three: How a Widow Should Teach Her Neighbors

Having outlined the way in which a widow should lead her life through solitude, fasting, and prayer, Savonarola embarks upon book three of his treatise, describing "how widows should teach their neighbors."²¹⁵ Here, Savonarola’s treatise reaches its pinnacle; everything he has outlined until this point, on how a widow should behave and how she should live, comes together in the true purpose of his treatise, that is, the goal of a widow’s life. Up until now Savonarola has been silent on the goal of a widow’s life of seclusion, other than achieving her own salvation. Just as St. Anna was an example to those she encountered in the temple, so should a widow teach her neighbors. This teaching ought to come through good example, through speech, and through good life.

Most importantly, widows should teach by example, since "examples move better than words, and therefore those who do not do what they preach bear no fruit."²¹⁶ If a widow "wants to be the cause of other people’s salvation" through the example of her life of seclusion and

²¹² Ibid.
²¹³ Ibid.
²¹⁴ Ibid., 220.
²¹⁵ Ibid.
²¹⁶ Ibid., 221.
devotion, "she must first of all guard herself against being a bad example in exterior matters."217

Namely, she must dress appropriately, and she must not "gather in groups," behave greedily, or otherwise behave dishonorably.218 In order to become an example that may lead others to salvation, the widow must "show herself completely detached from this world."219 She must concentrate completely on the next world and on God, and not seek "the glory of this world" for herself or her family.220

The dress and comportment of a widow are particularly important to Savonarola, and he emphasizes that a widow's dress should "not be too sumptuous... but also not too humble and cheap."221 Either of these modes would provide a bad example, since "one and the other extreme gives rise to vainglory within oneself,"222 as either taking pride in earthly goods or taking pride in one's own humility. To avoid such ostentation, a widow's garb should be "of medium worth and ornamented according to her status" though if she must lean towards an extreme, "she must rather lean to the least rather than the most."223

A widow must take great care to retain her position of authority with other women, so that she will be respected and listened to. In order to do this, she must "not be too prone to conversation, for if she talks too much she will not have so much authority."224 She must likewise avoid wrathful behavior, since this is "a great cause for scandal," in those who hear.225 She must also "show great humility of heart," in order to be accepted as an example worth following, since the teachings that come "from a humble spirit are accepted, but those that come

217 Ibid.
218 Ibid.
219 Ibid.
220 Ibid.
221 Ibid., 222.
222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
from a haughty spirit are scorned."226 Reflecting his concern for how a widow comports herself and how she will be received, Savonarola recommends that a widow “must also show herself to be sweet and mild and similar to other women,” since those who act haughty and austere do not garner the same respect as sympathetic women.227 Therefore, a widow should show care and compassion for those to whom she speaks, and constantly “have words about God, all sweet and sugary” on her tongue, “for such words draw people to divine love.”228 A sweet manner, modest dress, and a respectful disposition such as this provide a proper example for other women. This is the first level of teaching a widow must do. The second level comes in the form of “teaching with the tongue.”229

Savonarola is quick to clarify that by “teaching with the tongue” he certainly does not mean that women should preach in public, since this is forbidden by the Apostle Paul.230 However, “they are not forbidden from exhorting someone privately when there is need to do so.”231 Although women’s “duty is...to remain silent and to learn with humility,” and they “should not be quick to teach,” widows ought to teach their inferiors as much as they can.232 A widow may teach her “inferiors, such as small sons and daughters, or their grandchildren and servants,” though she may not teach her superiors or equals unless she has been “asked to do so, and nearly forced to do it...so that it does not seem to others that she speaks out of vainglory.”233

A widow may not teach those things that she does not know, and therefore she must ensure that she is educated in the ways of God, and that she knows “by heart the articles of

---

226 Ibid.
227 Ibid.
228 Ibid.
229 Ibid., 223.
230 Ibid.
231 Ibid.
232 Ibid.
233 Ibid.
faith, the ten commandments, good counsels,” and other lessons from her own experience, this is much better “for the knowledge that comes from experience is expressed with better and greater effectiveness than the knowledge that comes out of someone else’s mouth.” This experiential knowledge derived from prayer and contemplation is the best kind of knowledge, though a widow should be wary of “giving great faith to visions, because the devil is subtle and has deceived many women.” If a widow does, in fact receive visions, Savonarola insists that she must reveal them to her confessor, and not publicize them. Here Savonarola seems to be responding to the general mistrust of female mysticism at this time, and seeks to ensure that women (particularly mystics) remain within the control of the Church through reliance on a confessor, and not become the type of spiritual celebrity that Savonarola claims only seek their own glory.

A widow should also be instructed in “the governance of the house and in good and genteel manners,” so that she may instruct and teach her entire household. However, not every widow, nor every woman, will be instructed in either of these manners. It is best, therefore, that they not teach those subjects that they do not know well. For young widows in particular, “it is more appropriate to learn rather than to want to teach.” Such widows, whether young in experience or age, must “learn and... become old in judgment,” so that they may be instructed in these two matters and “be able to reap great benefit even for the souls of others and announce Christ to many people, as did Saint Anna.”

Nonetheless, even if a widow has learned much and is old in both age and judgment, she must exercise discretion in ministering her teaching. Savonarola repeats his admonitions that a widow must never teach her superiors, with two exceptions: first, a widow may teach

---

234 Ibid.
235 Ibid., 224.
236 Ibid.
237 Ibid.
238 Ibid.
“through the preaching that is one’s good example, which can move more than words;” and, second, “when the inferior person should see that his superior is wandering off the path of salvation, because in this case the inferior is superior.” When a widow finds herself obligated to teach those who are superior to her, she must “do it humbly and skillfully” so as not to create scandal.

A widow can teach her equals with much greater freedom, teaching not only through prayer and example but also with “exhortations and some reproofs, not by using authority or superiority over them, but by showing charity.” Widows must not take pride in themselves, though, or act overly ostentatious and “search out all...the women in town, nor find out and examine other people’s lives in order to correct them and direct them.” Such scolding behavior would be “tantamount to abandoning oneself for the sake of others,” and an unnecessary display of pridefulness.

Inferiors ought to be taught just as superiors and equals, yet with them a widow may show some superiority, though still “keeping holy humility in our hearts.” With inferiors, however, a widow may teach and correct “with harshness,” though she must always do so with discretion, adjusting according to her audience. She must “teach little ones in one way, youths in another, adults in yet another; similarly, one must correct the proud in one way, the meek in another, the melancholic in one way, the joyous in another, gluttons in one way, the moderate in another, the envious in one way, the charitable in another” and so on.

Generally speaking, when teaching the widow must guard herself “against doing it for vainglory or for pride or for wrath.” Rather she must do it “out of charity and out of a desire to

---

239 Ibid., 225.
240 Ibid.
241 Ibid.
242 Ibid.
243 Ibid.
244 Ibid., 226.
245 Ibid.
save your neighbor’s soul." Such a widow will follow in the footsteps of Saint Anna by announcing Christ “only to those who were waiting for the redemption of Israel.” Likewise, Savonarola concludes his treatise by saying that if a woman follows “this saintly widow,” (St. Anna), she will “have with her the glory of Paradise in the pleasures of the eternal spouse of Christ Jesus.”

246 Ibid.
247 Ibid.
248 Ibid.
249 Ibid. Interestingly enough, Savonarola here promises salvation to women who follow his advice, much like the questionable spiritual men he warns widows against earlier in his treatise.
Conclusion

In many ways the widow in Quattrocento Florentine society had access to the most freedom that any woman of the day could achieve. She was no longer answerable to a husband, and she had continual use of her dowry money with which to support herself. At the same time, however, the widow faced even greater pressure and expectations from society and family than did her married or single counterparts. A young widow faced pressures from her family of birth to remarry, whether or not she wished to, in order to construct new alliances amongst families. While older widows did not face this sort of pressure from their natal family, their husbands’ families often pressured them to remain within their household in order to retain control of their dowry. Particularly if a widow had children in her husband’s family, she would be compelled to remain in their household in order to support these children with money from her dowry. Florentine society, moreover, praised women who remained faithful to their husbands’ memories by not remarrying and by becoming both mother and father to her children. At the same time, the Church preached chastity above all else, and encouraged widowed women to seclude themselves from society as much as possible in order to safeguard their honor. Yet as an unmarried virgin or a married woman, a woman had previously been constrained within strict societal constructs and kept under the careful watch of a male guardian, as a widow she found herself in a perilous grey area. Without male guardians she had no means to truly establish
independence, since she could not own property, participate in courts of law, or engage in business. Moreover her behavior was now answerable for the honor of two families. The alleged freedom of a widow was, in reality, constrained by overlapping societal and familial pressures which leveled expectations but provided no real outlet for any true independence.

Within this framework, Fra Girolamo Savonarola seems to offer widows a type of freedom as well. Naturally, given the source of the advice, this freedom manifests itself in a purely religious framework. Savonarola encourages women to embrace their widowhood by removing themselves from the world as much as possible and devoting themselves entirely to God. While he acknowledges various types of women from different walks of life and, without condemnation, acknowledges that they may not all be willing or able to devote themselves to such a life, he nonetheless posits the ideal model of the “true widow.” The “true widow” should model herself of the Biblical St. Anna, and thereby make the most use of her freedom.

The “true widow,” based on the model of St. Anna, is one who remains chaste in both body and mind, and chooses to do so not for the glory and recognition of the world, but rather out of genuine devotion and sincere intention. The “true widow,” moreover, must cleanse her heart through confession, and remove herself from any sort of temptation. This last step requires that a widow not only seek to avoid temptation in her extant routine, but that she remove herself as much as possible from society as a whole. Savonarola warns against contact with nearly every group of people, men in particular, yet he also warns against contact with other women and even spiritual advisors. Curiously, however, he does not recommend that a widow enter a convent or other religious institution.

Rather, a widow’s life must occupy yet another precariously balanced grey area. As a spiritual woman, she must avoid unnecessary contact with sin and temptation at all cost, yet at
the same time as a lay woman, she must remain within the world so that her life may become an example to others, just like St. Anna. Within this dual seclusion from and involvement within the world lies the true freedom of the widow. The widow alone is free to move within society yet also serve God entirely. She has been freed from the responsibilities of matrimony, and no longer has to serve the two gods of her husband and her Heavenly Father. She is no longer in charge of a household or forced to interact with men. Yet, by remaining a member of society, by not secluding herself in a convent where she would become dead to society (for all intents and purposes), her life as an expression of chastity, piety, and obedience to God may serve as an example for others, particularly for other younger women who themselves could very likely become widows at some point in their lives. This freedom, the freedom to move betwixt the worlds of religious and secular society, is the freedom offered by Savonarola to widows through his Book on the Life of the Widow. Though perhaps not an enviable sort of freedom by modern standards, for Savonarola this lifestyle represented the most desirable and virtuous status a woman could achieve.
Bibliography:

Primary Sources:


Secondary Sources:


