# IMMODEST ACTS

The Life of a Lesbian Nun
in Renaissance Italy

JUDITH C. BROWN

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STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF SEXUALITY

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TO SIMONA

# Acknowledgments

When I first encountered the materials for this story, I thought I would be writing a footnote to another book. Many pages and many years later the footnote has become a book of its own. This transformation was possible because of the aid I received from many scholars and institutions along the way.

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*Stanford, California* J.C.B.
*May 1985*

# Contents

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# Introduction

I FOUND BENEDETTA CARLINI by chance, while leafing through an inventory of nearly forgotten documents in the State Archive of Florence. The entry in the inventory read: "Papers relating to a trial against Sister Benedetta Carlini of Vellano, abbess of the Theatine nuns of Pescia, who pretended to be a mystic, but who was discovered to be a woman of ill repute."[1] What prompted me to look at that book of entries is something I shall never know for certain. Perhaps it was the title that intrigued me more than anything else: *Miscellanea Medicea*—what odd and fascinating documents might be found there? The State Archive, I knew, was filled with some of the richest historical treasures in all of Europe and a collection of miscellaneous documents belonging to the Medici period was sure to contain interesting materials, especially for a historian about to embark on a study of the first Medici grand duke. My curiosity was piqued further because no one in the archive or in the books I consulted seemed to know who had gathered these particular documents into a collection or what purpose they might have had. I thought then that if I failed to look at what the *Miscellanea* contained, I would always wonder what I had missed.

The entry about Benedetta immediately caught my attention for several reasons. Her place of origin was of interest because I was finishing revisions on a manuscript about Renaissance Pescia. Any additional information on the town or its people could be incorporated into the text. But there was also something else that was striking about the entry. What had this nun done to merit such harsh words from the twentieth-century archivist who had read and inventoried the document?

My first conjecture was that she had probably had some sexual encounters with the priests who visited her convent. Such affairs were commonplace in the Renaissance. Convents were notorious for their loose moral standards and for their sexual license, which is not surprising because they were less often the homes of women with a strong religious vocation than warehouses for the discarded women of middle-class and patrician families.

Instead of such affairs, however, what I found was something quite different and totally unexpected. The document, roughly one hundred unnumbered pages, consisted of a series of ecclesiastical investigations that took place from 1619 to 1623 into the visions and miraculous claims of Benedetta Carlini, Abbess of the Convent of the Mother of God. The investigations contained, among other things, a detailed description of her sexual relations with another nun. This makes the document unique for premodern Europe and invaluable for analyzing hitherto unexplored areas of women's sexual lives as well as Renaissance views of female sexuality.

Had the material belonged to a later epoch, the sexual allegations against Benedetta would not have been all that rare. Indeed, in Protestant countries and in those intellectual circles in Catholic countries that placed themselves in opposition to the Church, the love of nuns for one another became a literary topos—yet one more nasty charge against a corrupt institution.[2] But such accusations of

homosexual relations behind convent walls were meant to elicit a smirk. Like many such slanders, they may have contained a grain of truth, but even in the eighteenth century they were unsubstantiated.

I wondered, therefore, as I read about Benedetta whether the account of her life written by the ecclesiastical officials might not be equally spurious. Having come to their attention through the extraordinary mystical claims she made and the popular following she was beginning to acquire, Benedetta may have posed a threat to the authority of the church. False charges about her sexual purity might silence her more effectively than simple attempts to discredit her claims to divine favors. In pre-modern Europe, women were thought to be much more lustful than men and easily given to debauchery. Vast quantities of literature—medical, legal, and theological—going back to Aristotle and the Bible had demonstrated the point to the satisfaction of contemporary opinion.[3] As a result, accusations against women on the grounds of sexual misconduct were rather frequent. Women accused of witchcraft, for instance, were often said to have been seduced by the devil because they enjoyed sexual intercourse with him. So pervasive was this notion that even some of the victims of these charges voluntarily came forth with detailed accounts of what it was like to make love to the devil.[4]

But if such instances made me ponder the authenticity of the charges against Benedetta, the fact that in almost all cases the object of women's sexual desires were said to be men lends credence to the veracity of the allegations against her. If the authorities had sought merely to taint her reputation for chastity, it would have been simpler for them both, from a circumstancial as well as an intellectual point of view, to elaborate a story of sexual misconduct involving a particular priest with whom Benedetta had occasionally been seen in compromising situations.

For Europeans had long found it difficult to accept that women could actually be attracted to other women. Their view of human sexuality was phallocentric—women might be attracted to men and men might be attracted to men but there was nothing in a woman that could long sustain the sexual desires of another woman. In law, in medicine, and in the public mind, sexual relations between women were therefore ignored. Among the hundreds if not thousands of cases of homosexuality tried by lay and ecclesiastical courts in medieval and early modern Europe, there are almost none involving sexual relations between women. References to a few prosecutions have turned up in Spain. There are four sketchily known cases in France, two in Germany, one in Switzerland, one in the Netherlands, and none, until now, in Italy.[5]

This obliteration of a significant aspect of female sexuality from contemporary consciousness is all the more curious because at some level of knowledge, people were well aware that it existed. In his epistle to the Romans, St. Paul, referring to pagans who rejected the one true God, had stated: "God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature" (Romans 1:26). Exactly what Paul had in mind is not clear, but from the earliest days of the church, his words were interpreted by many as a reference to sexual relations between women. Explaining this passage in the fourth century, St. Ambrose (d. 397) stated: "He testifies that, God being angry with the human race because of their idolatry, it came about that a woman would desire a woman for the use of foul lust."[6] To which St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) added that "it is even more shameful that the women should seek this type of intercourse, since they ought to have more modesty than men."[7]

Similar interpretations were still to be found several hundred years later. St. Anselm's twelfth-century commentary on Romans 1:26 was: "Thus women changed

their natural use into that which is against nature, because the women themselves committed shameful deeds with women."[8] And his younger contemporary, Peter Abelard, making sure the meaning was perfectly clear, glossed further, "Against nature, that is, against the order of nature, which created women's genitals for the use of men, and conversely, and not so women could cohabit with women."[9]

Because sexual relations between women offended the laws of God and nature, a number of early medieval manuals of penance include them in the catalogue of sins that clergy might find among their parishioners. In the seventh century, Theodore of Tarsus told clergy what to do "if a woman practices vice with a woman." The Venerable Bede also mentions sexual relations between women, as does Pope Gregory III in his eighth-century penitential.[10]

But without doubt the most widely influential book to guide Christian thought on the subject was St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae*, which under the rubric of lust, subsumed four categories of vice against nature: masturbation, bestiality, coitus in an unnatural position, and "copulation with an undue sex, male with male and female with female."[11] Later theologians took their cue from St. Thomas, often citing him in their own work, as did, for example, Sylvester Prierias in his confessional manual and Jean Gerson, the fifteenth-century rector of the University of Paris, who included sex between women, along with "semination in a vessel not ordained for it," in his list of crimes against nature.[12] Similarly, the Archbishop of Florence, St. Antoninus (1363–1451), included lesbian sexuality as the eighth of nine categories of lustful sins, although in a rather odd twist for a writer of his time, he differentiated it from sins against nature, which were comprised of lustful acts between a man and a woman "outside of the natural place where children are made." Finally, St. Charles Borromeo's penitential, written in the late sixteenth century, included sex between women: "If

a woman fornicates by herself or with another woman she will do two years' penance."[13]

Awareness of lesbian sexuality among a few ecclesiastical leaders led to some efforts to curb it in monastic communities. As early as 423, St. Augustine had warned his sister, who had taken holy vows, that "The love which you bear one another ought not to be carnal, but spiritual: for those things which are practiced by immodest women, even with other females, in shameful jesting and playing, ought not to be done even by married women or by girls who are about to marry, much less by widows or chaste virgins dedicated by a holy vow to be handmaidens of Christ."[14] To remove temptation, the councils of Paris (1212) and Rouen (1214) prohibited nuns from sleeping together and required a lamp to burn all night in dormitories. From the thirteenth century on, monastic rules usually called for nuns to stay out of each others' cells, to leave their doors unlocked so that the abbess might check on them, and to avoid special ties of friendship within the convent. The reasons for the rules were, of course, always implicit. No details were given of what practices the nuns might fall into if their cells were locked, although it is obvious from the evidence of a surviving poem sent by one nun to another, that the subjects of the legislation did not lack imagination.[15]

In the secular world there were also occasional references to lesbian sexuality. A few jurists concerned with civil law, for example, discussed the issue. In the early fourteenth century, Cino da Pistoia erroneously believed that the *lex foedissimam,* a Roman imperial edict of 287 A.D., referred to relations between women. "This law," which actually was meant to protect the rights of rape victims, according to Cino, "can be understood in two ways: first, when a woman suffers defilement by surrendering to a male; the other way is when a woman suffers defilement in surrendering to another woman. For there

are certain women, inclined to foul wickedness, who exercise their lust on other women and pursue them like men." This interpretation was followed by Bartholomaeus de Saliceto (1400), whose glosses were widely used in the next few centuries.[16] Yet despite these writings, there appears to be little civil legislation that took up the issue. Among the scant mentions of lesbian sexuality in secular laws are a provision in the Constitution of the Holy Roman Empire, promulgated by Charles V in 1532, and a statute adopted in Treviso in 1574. Most civil laws against same sex relations, including the English act of 1533, which made buggery punishable by death, did not specifically mention women. Yet they were quite explicit about the acts committed by males and the penalties that should be imposed on them.[17]

In light of the knowledge that Europeans had about the possibility of lesbian sexuality, their neglect of the subject in law, theology, and literature suggests an almost active willingness to *dis*believe. A characteristic remark is that attributed to Anastasius with reference to Romans 1:26—"Clearly [the women] do not mount each other but, rather, offer themselves to the men."[18] Compared to the frequency with which male homosexuality is mentioned, especially after the thirteenth century, in canon and civil law, in penitentials and confessional manuals, and in popular sermons and literature, the handful of documents citing the love of women for one another is truly scant.[19] In a period of roughly fifteen hundred years, they amount to no more than a dozen or so scattered references. Even Peter Damian's *Book of Gomorrah* (ca. 1051), a long and detailed diatribe against homosexual acts, confines itself to the misdeeds of men.[20] One looks in vain for the hellfire, and brimstone condemnations of the sort that popular preachers hurled against what they called "the clerical vice."[21] And a search of secular literature for the kinds of homosexual relations commonly attributed to men yields

virtually nothing about women until mid-seventeenth century. Dante, whose harrowing journey takes him past all the known varieties of human sins, does not include female sodomites either in Hell or Purgatory. Indeed, the male gender of the sodomites is implicit in the remarks he attributes to Brunetto Latino: "We all were clerks and men of youth, great men of letters, scholars of renown; all by the one same crime defiled on earth."[22]

Similarly, Boccaccio, who was not averse to exposing the sexual misdeeds of men and women, did not even hint that this variety of sexual conduct existed. And Ariosto, who comes closest to depicting erotic feelings between women, ultimately dismisses the possibility. In his *Orlando Furioso*, Fiordispina's love for Bradamanete goes unfulfilled when the latter reveals that she is a woman. After bewailing her fate, which she believes is unprecedented in the annals of history, Fiordispina remains chaste, despite sleeping in a bed shared with Bradamante. Her difficulties are not solved until Ricciardeto, Bradamante's twin brother, appears on the scene and consummates the relationship.[23]

Why sexual relations between women were either ignored or dismissed in this way is amply clear from the few authors who did write about them. In his *Ragionamenti amorosi*, the sixteenth-century Italian writer, Agnolo Firenzuola, sets his female characters to debating why it would not be better for a woman to love another woman since she would thus avoid any risk to her chastity. After a lengthy argument, he comes to the conclusion that this kind of love would not be preferable because the beauty of men, by a decree of nature, inspires greater desire in a woman than does the beauty of other women. The same kind of attraction to the opposite sex holds true for men. As proof, he observed that no man can see a beautiful woman without feeling a natural desire to please her and so it is with a woman at the sight of a beautiful man.[24]

More eager to admit the existence of erotic attractions between women, Brantôme, the late-sixteenth century commentator on the sexual antics of French courtiers, observed that lately, after "the fashion was brought from Italy by a lady of quality who I will not name," sexual relations between women have become very common. Some of these were young girls and widows who preferred to make love to each other than "to go to a man and thus become pregnant and lose their honor or their virginity. . . ."[25] Others were women who used other women to enhance their lovemaking with men: "Because this little exercise, as I have heard say, is nothing but an apprenticeship to come to the greater [love] of men; because after they are heated up and well on their way with one another, their heat does not diminish unless they bathe in a livelier and more active current. . . . Because in the end, as I have heard many ladies tell, there is nothing like a man; and what they get from other women is nothing but enticements to go and satisfy themselves with men."[26]

In short, whether common or rare, sexual relations between women could have only one purpose, to enhance and glorify real sex, i.e., sex with a man. This is one of the reasons why some contemporaries may have felt they could safely ignore lesbian sexuality. "Let us excuse the young girls and widows," wrote Brantôme, "for loving these frivolous and vain pleasures."[27] For him, as for many other men of his time, the attraction of women for each other was not to be taken seriously.

Another reason for ignoring lesbian sexuality was the belief that women, who were thought to be naturally inferior to men, were merely trying to emulate them: "it is better that a woman give herself over to a libidinous desire to do as a man, than that a man make himself effeminate; which makes him out to be less courageous and noble. The woman, accordingly, who thus imitates a

man, can have a reputation for being more valiant and courageous than another."[28] While such reasoning did not condone sex between women, it placed it within a long Western tradition in which women, like all other creatures, tried to ascend to a more perfect state of nature. Paradoxically, such relations tended to reaffirm, rather than subvert, the assumed biological hierarchy, in which "the body of a man is as superior to that of a woman as the soul is to the body."[29]

These notions were supported further by the observations and writings of physicians. Some had noted that in a few cases women did not just imitate men, but actually became men. These sex changes wrought by nature always worked in one direction, from female to male. There were no recorded instances of reverse transformations. Perfection was not likely to degenerate into imperfection.

The findings of physicians and antomists with regard to female reproductive organs also influenced views of lesbian sexuality in another way. Although it was commonly believed that women had testes (what later came to be called ovaries), which produced semen, their semen was thought to be colder, less active, and in most respects less important in human reproduction than that of men. The notion that they could pollute each other like men through the spilling of seed in the wrong vessel was therefore generally dismissed. In a society that had such imperfect knowledge of human biology and that in the process of procreation valued the male sperm above all else, the waste of male seed was thought a worse offense against the laws of God and nature than was the misuse of the seed or reproductive organs of women.[30]

Thus, for a number of reasons, most of the writers concerned with establishing penalties for lesbian acts tended to be more lenient toward them than toward male homosexuality. Theodore of Tarsus, for example, prescribed a penance of three years for any woman who "practices