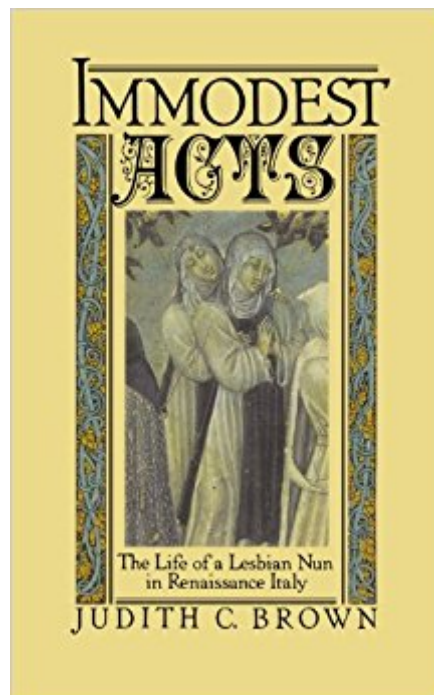




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# **Immodest Acts: The Life Of A Lesbian Nun In Renaissance Italy (Studies In The History Of Sexuality)**



## Synopsis

The discovery of the fascinating and richly documented story of Sister Benedetta Carlini, Abbess of the Convent of the Mother of God, by Judith C. Brown was an event of major historical importance. Not only is the story revealed in *Immodest Acts* that of the rise and fall of a powerful woman in a church community and a record of the life of a religious visionary, it is also the earliest documentation of lesbianism in modern Western history. Born of well-to-do parents, Benedetta Carlini entered the convent at the age of nine. At twenty-three, she began to have visions of both a religious and erotic nature. Benedetta was elected abbess due largely to these visions, but later aroused suspicions by claiming to have had supernatural contacts with Christ. During the course of an investigation, church authorities not only found that she had faked her visions and stigmata, but uncovered evidence of a lesbian affair with another nun, Bartolomeo. The story of the relationship between the two nuns and of Benedetta's fall from an abbess to an outcast is revealed in surprisingly candid archival documents and retold here with a fine sense of drama.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Discovered in the State Archive of Florence, ecclesiastical papers concerning a homosexual nun shed interesting light on a subject for which there is seldom documentation. Benedetta Carlini was elected abbess of a northern Italian convent in 1620, an achievement for a woman only 30 years old. This honor was largely due to the mystical visions that had made her famous: visitations from the Virgin Mary, a guardian angel and Christ himself, who "married" Carlini in a ceremony that

caused much talk in the convent and prompted the investigations that led to her downfall. Not only did the authorities discover that the abbess had faked the stigmata she claimed were miraculously induced, they uncovered evidence of her lesbian affair with another nun. Carlini lost her position and was imprisoned for 35 years, but this was light punishment for what were considered serious crimes; apparently it was decided that she had been deluded by the devil and hence was not entirely responsible for her sins. The author, a Stanford historian, provides the historical background necessary to fully understand Carlini's story; Brown has written a book for the general reader rather than the scholar, a book already making news. November 14 Copyright 1985 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Brown (History, Stanford University), has written a scholarly but highly readable account of the life of a 16th-century Italian nun. Benedetta Carlini was born in 1590 in the countryside around Pescia, became Abbess of the Theatine Convent of the Mother of God, was tried and sentenced to imprisonment within the convent for various theological as well as sexual infractions, but was finally given not only a Christian but also a quasi-saintly burial. The narrative reveals much about medieval sexual views; patriarchal society; and religious power, including the popular power of so-called visionaries. Brown skillfully uses the effects of hierarchy within church, society, and convent as illustrations of the functioning of ambition and pride. Highly recommended for religious and feminist collections as well as for those of medieval history. Carolyn M. Craft, English, Philosophy & Foreign Languages Dept., Longwood Coll., Farmville, Va. Copyright 1985 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I read this entire book in less than 12 hours; this isn't just great for a scholarly work, this is a fascinating story told well by the author. In some ways, the relationship between the two nuns is less interesting than the story of Sister Benedetta herself and how, for a short time, she came to hold not only an entire convent, but an entire town, in thrall with her visions and stigmata. Is she truly experiencing these things? Is she fabricating holiness to exert influence for personal gain? Is she unconsciously manipulating all those around her? The author masterfully paces the information so that it isn't clear until well into the book what might actually be going on, and even then, she is careful to moderate her opinion so as to not overshadow factual information, thus leaving it to the reader to ultimately interpret events and come to their own conclusions. This isn't just a work that offers historical insight into the life of one woman at a specific period of time; this is also a psychological drama that at times is jaw-dropping. In one particular scene Sister Benedetta turns

the tables on a fellow nun who is about to accuse her of deception and the outcome is shocking. At times I felt as if I were reading about a potential female David Koresh. Most of the book is concerned with Sister Benedetta's life and rise to power and isn't until the end that a real discussion of the relationship between her and Sister Bartolomea occurs. The recounting of their relationship comes solely from the testimony of Sister Bartolomea to a tribunal of men who ultimately hold her life in their hands, so what she reveals must be considered in this light. However, there are things she says in her testimony that do seem to indicate that at some point the relationship was no longer consensual. While she always maintains that she was an unwilling participant I think the truth is more complex: that what began as a mutual attraction over time, as Sister Bartolomea began to suspect Sister Benedetta might be faking holiness, became coercion on the part of Sister Benedetta. As abbess she did have a tremendous amount of power over Sister Bartolomea and this must also be taken into consideration. My only real complaint regards several typos early on that make the timeline confusing, but this doesn't detract from the overall interest of narrative flow. The power of this particular book is the author's ability to take historical texts and weave them into a compelling narrative that never strays from being scholarly, but reads like a novel. I've read a number of scholarly works and while informative they are often difficult to get through (Medieval English Nunneries – comes to mind immediately), but not this book. An easy read that also has a treasure trove of interesting information in the introduction regarding pre-Modern European attitudes towards women and sexuality that will surely surprise you if you are new to this area of history. Highly recommend.

Very interesting play about Benedetta Carlini and life in the Medieval age at that time. The women portrayed in the play had the misfortune of living when corruption in the Catholic Church and the misogynistic culture of the time resulted in their own ill-treatment and lack of options in life. The relationship between Benedetta and Bartolomea is intriguing and quite alluring! I recommend reading the play, *Vile Affections*, if this book is of interest!

This book was an interesting study in human sexuality. It is the documented story of Sister Benedetta Carlini, Abbess of the Convent of the Mother of God. The discovery of this story was considered a major historical breakthrough. I could only imagine because it was actually documented and not because it actually happened. It is a record of religious life that most were not privy to at the time or perhaps even today. Given the circumstances that many women were forced into religious life, it is no wonder that they should only act like other human beings. It was an interesting story but not

totally fascinating in my opinion.

Beautifully crafted story that allows you to see the world in medieval times. Many implications for how we view religion and spirituality..fascinating commentary on sexuality too.

Interesting story and premise.

I got this as a gift and it was received with joy and enthusiasm. To me, that makes it a great buy!

I read a lot about this period in history so this book was a bit out of the ordinary but interesting.

Book needed for class. Delivered as promised

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