

ARCHIVES

Lesbian Sexuality in Renaissance Italy: The Case of Sister Benedetta Carlini

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The archival discovery of an ecclesiastical investigation containing what is probably the earliest detailed account of a sexual relationship between two nuns is a tale of serendipity. Several years ago, when I was revising a book manuscript on the economic and social history of Renaissance Pescia,¹ I looked through the inventory of a collection entitled *Miscellanea Medicea* at the Archivio di Stato of Florence. One entry in the inventory immediately caught my eye. It read: "The case of a nun from Pescia who claimed to be the object of miraculous events but who upon further investigation turned out to be a woman of ill repute."² I thought the case would probably involve the sexual affairs of a nun with some of the local priests. There are hundreds of such documented examples. Renaissance convents were notorious for their loose moral standards and their sexual license, which is not surprising since they were largely warehouses for middle- and upper-class women sent there by parents who were unwilling or unable to raise a dowry large enough to find a suitable husband.³

What I found instead was much more interesting. The document, consisting of roughly one hundred unnumbered pages, included a de-

1. Judith C. Brown, *In the Shadow of Florence: Provincial Society in Renaissance Pescia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

2. Florence, Archivio di Stato, *Miscellanea Medicea*, 376, ins. 28. The translation of this material is mine.

3. Brown, pp. 42–43. The moral problems of Renaissance convents and other religious institutions are outlined in Arnaldo D'Addario, *Aspetti della controriforma a Firenze* (Rome: Pubblicazioni degli Archivi di Stato, 1972), pp. 107–14.

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tailed account of the sexual relationship between two nuns. What I originally thought might be a footnote in a larger history has now developed into a separate book on a woman whose sexual, emotional, and intellectual experiences shed new light on the life of women in early modern times.⁴

The ecclesiastical investigation into the case of Benedetta Carlini, Abbess of the Convent of the Mother of God, dates from the years 1619–23. The records of the inquiry tell of the tragic life of a woman whose parents brought her to the convent in 1599, at age nine, to fulfill a vow they made at her birth. Since information about her early years is scant, her social background, relationship to her family, and adjustment to convent life can be reconstructed only with slow and painstaking care. Benedetta belonged to a relatively well-to-do family in a small mountain town near Pescia. She appears to have had a close relationship with her father. She was literate and obviously very intelligent and persuasive—so much so that she became an abbess before she reached the age of thirty and was able to convince many both inside and outside her convent that she was the recipient of special divine favors. She asserted, among other things, that Christ and several male angels spoke through her and that she had received the stigmata. These extraordinary mystical claims brought her to the attention of the authorities, who launched an investigation. The details of her sexual life that were brought to light during the inquiry make the document unique for this period.

Among the hundreds if not thousands of cases of homosexuality tried by lay and ecclesiastical authorities in medieval and early modern Europe, there are almost none involving sexual relations between women.⁵ The Venetian archives, for instance, which are replete with prosecutions against clergy and laymen for sodomy as well as for sexual relations with nuns, have not turned up a single case of sexual relations between women.⁶ Thus far records from Spain have also yielded little. One ambiguous reference by the sixteenth-century jurist Antonio Gomez discusses two nuns who were burned for using “material instruments.” Another report on prison conditions states that some female inmates are tough and manly and make artificial male genitalia. In France, four cases are mentioned by various sixteenth-century writers, but two of these ended in acquittal for insufficient evidence and the other two are simply mentioned in passing by authors who did not dwell on the details.⁷ The

4. A more detailed account than that provided here will appear in my forthcoming book (New York: Oxford University Press, in press.)

5. John Boswell points out the absence of women in many legal sources concerned with homosexuality in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 290.

6. I would like to thank Carlo Ginzburg and Guido Ruggiero, both of whom have had extensive experience with the inquisitorial and criminal records of Venice, for informing me of this. See Guido Ruggiero, “Sexual Criminality in the Early Renaissance: Venice 1338–1358,” *Journal of Social History* 8 (Summer 1975): 18–37.

7. Cited in Louis Crompton, “The Myth of Lesbian Impunity: Capital Laws from 1270 to 1791,” *Journal of Homosexuality*, no. 1–2 (Fall 1980–Winter 1981): 17–20; also Mary

first record for Germany dates to 1721.⁸ And Swiss sources reveal one case in sixteenth-century Geneva in which the rarity of the accusation is underscored both by the authorities' appeal to the well-known jurist Germain Colladon for advice on how to proceed and by the secrecy with which the case was disposed. In the opinion of the authorities, "A crime so horrible and against nature is so detestable and because of the horror of it, it cannot be named."⁹

Crimes that cannot be named, not surprisingly, leave few traces in the historical records. While this enhances the importance of the document that describes Benedetta's sexual relations with another nun, it also raises a number of difficult historical problems, some of which I would briefly like to discuss here.

First, when such records do turn up, they are usually judicial or inquisitorial documents of some sort. This means that they often veil the truth in various ways. What is said and what is recorded will have been filtered through the minds of the authorities, always male, who conduct the proceedings. Moreover, those accused of sexual crimes are likely to say things in ways that minimized or excused their own misconduct. Both of these factors enter into the record of Benedetta's relationship. The information is circumscribed by the questions asked, most of which do not survive and must be surmised from the answers. The responses are also conditioned by what the witnesses believed the male judges wanted to hear and by what they thought would be least damaging to themselves. Hence, for example, the account of Benedetta's sexual acts is related by her lover as if the lover had been an unwilling participant who was forced into the relationship. The historian's task is to disentangle the complex web of motives that influenced the form of the narrative. This can be accomplished by cultivating an awareness of the circumstances that led to the creation of the historical record and by conducting a close and sensitive reading of the documents themselves. As any lawyer knows, it is very difficult for witnesses to sustain a lengthy fiction without falling into contradictions. Sometimes the truth is revealed by an unguarded word spoken in a different context.

A second problem facing the historian involves determining the extent of sexual relations between women. How common were they? Is the paucity of historical evidence related to the ways in which the male world dealt with such relations? Or did women engage less extensively than men in sexual activities with one another? Satisfactory answers are difficult to come by, although a number of reasonable observations can be

Elizabeth Perry, *Crime and Society in Early Modern Seville* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1980), p. 84.

8. Brigitte Erikson, "A Lesbian Execution in Germany, 1721: The Trial Records," *Journal of Homosexuality*, no. 1-2 (Fall 1980-Winter 1981), pp. 27-40.

9. E. William Monter, "La Sodomie à l'époque moderne en Suisse romande," *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 29 (1974): 1023-33. The nineteenth-century court case of two Scottish school mistresses accused of sexual relations reveals a similar concern about not divulging the details of the case for fear of giving ideas to otherwise innocent female minds. See Lillian Faderman, *Scotch Verdict* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1983).

made. Undoubtedly, sexual relations between women existed in medieval and Renaissance Europe, especially, though not exclusively, within the world of the convent. It was there, where at times close to 10 percent of the adult female population lived, that such relations had the most opportunity to flourish. To imagine that sexual relationships were absent from these all-female communities strains the limits of credulity. But to move from the probable to the realm of evidence, the discussion in several medieval and Renaissance penitentials of penances for women who engaged in "vice against nature" implicitly acknowledges that such relations existed.¹⁰ The paucity of historical evidence regarding these relations must therefore be related in some measure to the ways in which the masculine world perceived the bonds between women.

Although medieval theologians and other learned men were not totally unaware of sexual relations between women, they for the most part ignored them. The world of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance was not prudish. It was a world that was fully cognizant of human sexuality, but it was also phallogentric. The thought that women could bring sexual pleasure to each other without the aid of a man occurred to very few theologians and physicians. For the millennium that followed the decline of Rome, many laws and commentaries that deal with male homosexuality survive; only a handful, however, mention sexual relations between women. So little was written on the subject that the few authors who discussed it were often uninformed about what others had written and therefore disagreed on what this "unnatural" vice was and how it should be punished. Ignorance about sexual relations between women was so pervasive that one Italian cleric in the eighteenth century, Lodovico Maria Sinistrari, decided to write a treatise on "female sodomy." While moralists claimed that sodomy among women existed, none, he lamented, explained how such a thing could occur. After exploring the subject at great length, he concluded that, except in rare instances, it could not.¹¹

What women did with each other is precisely the topic that the document appended below illuminated for Benedetta's male superiors. Yet because they lacked an imaginative schema to incorporate the sexual behavior described, they had a rather difficult time assimilating the account. So disturbed was the scribe writing down what had been said that the heretofore neat and legible handwriting of the report totally breaks down in the section covering Benedetta's sexual relations with another nun. The words are illegible, crossed out, and rewritten.

If the scribe had difficulties comprehending what was taking place, he was not the only one. That Benedetta herself could not easily fit her

10. Some of these penitentials and other medieval literature dealing with lesbianism are cited in Derrick S. Bailey, *Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1955); Boswell; and Crompton.

11. Lodovico Maria Sinistrari, *De sodomia: Tractatus in quo exponitur doctrina nova de sodomia foeminarum a tribadismo distincta* (Paris, 1843), excerpted from his larger work, *De delictis et poenis* (Rome, 1700). This conclusion had to do with Sinistrari's narrow definition of sodomy rather than the belief, more common in the nineteenth century (see Faderman), that women had no sexual desires.

sexual behavior into a mold that was acceptable to her raises the larger issue of labeling and sexual identity. Do the terms "lesbian" and "lesbianism" best describe the person and activities outlined in the investigators' report? Recent studies of sexual identity and sexual preference have stressed the difficulties inherent in definitions. Human sexual behavior, like other aspects of human activity, defies easy or stereotypical categorizations. Women who have had fulfilling sexual and emotional relationships with other women do not necessarily view themselves as lesbian. Conversely, there are those who have never had sexual relationships with other women who consider themselves lesbians nonetheless. The range of sexual experience and self-identification is immensely varied and operates to a large extent within socially defined categories that influence both identity and behavior.¹²

This problem of labeling becomes particularly acute when dealing with sexual behavior and identity in past times. Although considerable legislation and concern about homosexual practices arose prior to the nineteenth century, the concept of the homosexual, as we know it today, did not exist.¹³ This was all the more true for the notion of the lesbian.¹⁴ Adrienne Rich has attempted to surmount this difficulty by positing a lesbian continuum in which lesbian identity is tied not so much to a self-conscious identity or even to sexual relations or attractions as to the emotional bonds that emerge between women in the midst of patriarchal society. While such an approach has the merit of emphasizing the complexity of ties among women and the resistance to oppression implicit in so many of their actions, it is also too encompassing and at heart ahistorical. Closer to the mark is Ann Ferguson's argument that, while some women can be described as sexually deviant in that they departed from the norm, the term "lesbian" cannot accurately be applied to women who

12. See, among others, Allan P. Bell, Martin S. Weinberg, and Sue K. Hammersmith, *Sexual Preference: Its Development in Men and Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981); Sherry Ortner and Harriet Whitehead, eds., *Sexual Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

13. There has been considerable debate about whether the category of homosexual can be applied to premodern periods. Among the most clearly articulated arguments against employing the category anachronistically are those of Jeffrey Weeks in *Coming Out: Homosexual Politics in Britain from the Nineteenth Century to the Present* (London: Quartet Books, 1977). Opposing this view is John Boswell, "Towards the Long View: Revolutions, Universals and Sexual Categories," *Salmagundi*, no. 58-59 (Fall 1982-Winter 1981), pp. 89-113. There is even disagreement over when the homosexual role emerged within the modern period. While Mary McIntosh argues for the late seventeenth century, Jeffrey Weeks and John Marshall, among others, favor the late nineteenth century. See their respective essays in Kenneth Plummer, ed., *The Making of the Modern Homosexual* (London: Hutchinson Publishing Group, 1981).

14. Even if there is some merit to Boswell's argument that the concept of the homosexual, albeit in altered form, existed prior to the modern age, his claim cannot readily be extended to the concept of the lesbian since women's restricted cultural and social roles precluded the development of the types of communities that he analyzes for males. For a discussion of some of these problems, see Annabel Faraday, "Liberating Lesbian Research," in Plummer, ed., pp. 112-32.

lived before its emergence as a cultural category in the late nineteenth century.¹⁵

Benedetta Carlini's case illustrates the complexity of these issues. Benedetta engaged in sexual acts that today would be labeled lesbian. Furthermore, she entered into a sexual relationship with another female even though she could have secured male partners without much difficulty. Her apparent preference for a relationship with a woman is not, however, indicative of a clearly articulated choice. When she made love to Bartolomea Crivelli, she imagined herself to be a male angel. Her voice and even her appearance became more like a man's when she assumed the guise of the angel Splendidiello. Since male-female sexual relations were the only ones she seemed to recognize, her male identity allowed her to have sexual and emotional relations that she could not conceive between women. Attaining the object of her sexual desires required a complete reversal of her own gender and sexual roles.¹⁶ But because Benedetta was a nun for whom *all* sexual activities were prohibited, she could not pass for an ordinary male; she required an angelic disguise to preclude the possibility of sin. In this double role, as male and as angel, Benedetta absolved herself from any possible wrongdoing.

Equally important, the ecclesiastical authorities who heard the case also lacked the terms of sexual identification that would be used in a twentieth-century context. Although an extended discussion of medieval and Renaissance notions of female sexuality is not feasible within the narrow confines of an archival note, suffice it to say that on a scale of sinful sexual acts Benedetta's behavior at worst would have been labeled sodomy (that is, engaging in coitus in an unnatural vessel), which was punishable by burning at the stake. Some theologians and lawyers of her time, however, might have viewed her actions merely as pollution brought on by the rubbing together of the pudenda. Still others might have called them mutual masturbation. Both of these sinful acts were of a lesser degree than sodomy. But no matter how grave the sin or the secular crime that her contemporaries thought Benedetta had committed, they would not have applied the term "lesbian" as a discrete category of female sexual identification. This is not to argue that Benedetta's relationship with her lover was not emotionally or sexually fulfilling but simply to say what is after all rather obvious: sexuality and culture are intertwined, and Benedetta's and the authorities' interpretations of her behavior while different from each other are also necessarily different from our own.

15. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (Summer 1980): 631-60; Ann Ferguson, "Patriarchy, Sexual Identity, and the Sexual Revolution," *Signs* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 158-66.

16. In this respect, Benedetta's perceptions coincide with Victorian notions of sexual inversion even though the latter originated in quite different conceptions of female gender and sexuality. See George Chauncey, Jr., "From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality: Medicine and the Changing Conceptualization of Female Deviance," *Salmagundi*, no. 58-59 (Fall 1982-Winter 1983), pp. 114-45.

How the authorities ultimately disposed of the case is a complex story that cannot be recounted here. The immediate task of the investigators was simply to ascertain the facts and if need be to restore order by their very presence. Having accomplished this to their satisfaction after the initial stages of the investigation, they refrained for the moment from taking any other action. For all their measured and deliberate procedures, however, the investigators' horror at what they heard of the relationship between Benedetta and Bartolomea comes through very clearly in the following account. Yet theirs is not the only voice that emerges from the text. Though refracted through the perceptions of other participants—the clerics, who wrote down what they heard or thought they heard, and Bartolomea, who told them what happened or what she thought would implicate her the least—the voice and the longings of Benedetta Carlini can still be heard.

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For two continuous years, two or three times a week, in the evening after disrobing and going to bed and waiting for her companion, who serves her, to disrobe also, she would force her into the bed, and kissing her as if she were a man she would stir herself on top of her so much that both of them corrupted themselves because she held her by force sometimes for one, sometimes for two, sometimes for three hours. And [she did these things] during the most solemn hours, especially in the morning, at dawn. Pretending that she had some need, she would call her, and taking her by force she sinned with her as was said above. Benedetta, in order to have greater pleasure, put her face between the other's breasts and kissed them, and wanted always to be thus on her. And six or eight times, when the other nun did not want to sleep with her in order to avoid sin, Benedetta went to find her in her bed and, climbing on top, sinned with her by force. Also at that time, during the day, pretending to be sick and showing that she had some need, she grabbed her companion's hand by force, and putting it under herself, she would have her put her finger in her genitals, and holding it there she stirred herself so much that she corrupted herself. And she would kiss her and also by force would put her own hand under her companion and her finger into her genitals and corrupted her. And when the latter would flee, she would do the same with her own hands. Many times she locked her companion in the study, and making her sit down in front of her, by force she put her hands under her and corrupted her; she wanted her companion to do the same to her, and while she was doing this she would kiss her. She always appeared to be in a trance while doing this. Her Angel, Splendidiello, did these things, appearing as a boy of eight or nine years of age. This Angel Splendidiello,

through the mouth and hands of Benedetta, taught her companion to read and write, making her be near her on her knees and kissing her and putting her hands on her breasts. . . .

This Splendidiello called her his beloved; he asked her to swear to be his beloved always and promised that after Benedetta's death he would always be with her and would make himself visible. He said I want you to promise me not to confess these things that we do together, I assure you that there is no sin in it; and while we did these things he said many times: give yourself to me with all your heart and soul and then let me do as I wish. . . .

The same Angel managed it so that neither Benedetta nor her companion did the usual [spiritual] exercises that the nuns did prior to general confession. He made the sign of the cross all over his companion's body after having committed with her many dishonest acts; [he also said] many words that she couldn't understand and when she asked him why he was doing this, he said that he did this for her own good. Jesus spoke to her companion [through Benedetta] three times, twice before doing these dishonest things. The first time he said he wanted her to be his bride and he was content that she give him her hand, and she did this thinking it was Jesus. The second time it was in the choir at 40 hours, holding her hands together and telling her that he forgave her all her sins. The third time it was after she was disturbed by these affairs and he told her that there was no sin involved whatsoever and that Benedetta while doing these things had no awareness of them. All these things her companion confessed with very great shame.