

Craig A. Monson. *Nuns Behaving Badly: Tales of Music, Magic, Art, and Arson in the Convents of Italy*.

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010. xvi + 242 pp. index. illus. \$35. ISBN: 978-0-226-53461-9.

This enjoyable book offers stories of nuns who ran afoul of Roman authorities while in search of art, music, romance, or escape from a miserable convent existence. Five disciplinary investigations between 1584 and 1735 reveal piquant or sad scenes from convent life in Bologna, Pavia, and Reggio Calabria. Monson, a musicologist whose earlier archival work on nun singers led him to discover these cases, knows his way around the archives of the Roman Congregation of Bishops and Regulars, the body responsible after Trent for enforcing monastic observance.

The cases he found there offer fascinating evidence of nuns pursuing patronage and artistic opportunities through textiles, art commissions, and music. Yet most of these women failed to achieve their objectives. The cardinals of the Congregation

returned unhappy escapees to their convents, or dispatched them to an even worse fate elsewhere. They exiled offending music teachers, restricted polyphony in convents repeatedly if unsuccessfully, and censured nuns who cast spells to find lost things or foretell the outcome of convent elections. The enterprising Bolognese nun who snuck out of her convent in 1735, disguised as an abbot, to go to the opera — not once, but three times — was imprisoned in-house for ten years before being shunted to another convent. There she held high office for a time but eventually was shipped back. Monson is sensitive to the local political worlds that so often conditioned conflict within monastic walls: a dispute between two nuns over sponsorship of church tapestries, for example (chapter 4), turns out to have roots in longstanding resentment of a ruling faction's power. The Roman cardinals were merely unwilling accessories in the struggle.

Beyond this, it is hard to know how to evaluate the book for readers of this journal. Lacking full scholarly documentation, historiographical context, firmly drawn conclusions, and any real discussion of method, its utility for the scholar is limited. The very loose translations of lengthy passages from the investigations could be forgiven if full transcriptions of the original were provided in the notes, but they are not. Translations cannot be checked, and scholars interested in using these materials will have to repeat the archival work. The extensive literature on female religious is undiscussed here though Monson clearly knows it well and does provide a "Further Reading" section. The book's narrowly focused narrative form — an aspiring microhistory, or conglomerate of such — cries out for some methodological discussion but receives only an almost-talismanic mention of Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg in the prologue, where Monson nods to the book's various lacunae.

To be sure, the author's stated goal is not scholarly, and he names Boccaccio, not Ginzburg, as his model. The hope is that the book will be "deposited on bedside tables, atop toilet tanks, or, particularly, inside a travel bag" of a tourist en route to Italy (23). For this purpose, these spirited yarns will serve admirably.

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