



September 2022

Benedetta

Richard S. Ascough

Queen's University - Queen's Theological College, rsa@queensu.ca

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Recommended Citation

Ascough, Richard S. (2022) "Benedetta," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 26: Iss. 2, Article 16.

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.26.02.16>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol26/iss2/16>

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Benedetta

Abstract

This is a film review of *Benedetta* (2021), directed by Paul Verhoeven.

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It seems that Paul Verhoeven has finally made the Jesus movie he has long talked about. It is not the one he initially intended, nor is it one that is explicitly focused on the man from Nazareth.¹ And although the risen Christ appears in Verhoeven's most recent film, he is not the center of the story. Instead, the protagonist of the film that bears her name, *Benedetta*, embodies the life of Jesus. The screenplay itself is based on historical events as reconstructed in Judith C. Brown's *Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy* (Oxford: OUP, 1986), although adapted by Verhoeven and David Birke, who also collaborated on Verhoeven's only other French language film, *Elle* (2016).

Turned over to God by her parents at the age of eight, Benedetta is already a precocious child whose piety and devotion to Mary, mother of God, shines through. We first encounter her enroute to the Theatine Convent of the Mother of God in Pescia, Italy, when the family stops at a roadside shrine so Benedetta can express her devotion. There, her confidence in the Blessed Virgin seemingly wards off would-be thieves.

Set against the broad backdrop of the Black Plague in 17th century Tuscany, Benedetta's first night at the convent gives a portent of the special role she is to play when a statue of Mary falls upon her as she prays, yet miraculously leaves her unscathed. Eighteen years later, Sister Benedetta (Virginie Efira) is living out her vows when an abused young woman, Bartolomea (Daphne Patakia), is brought into the convent at the reluctant behest of Benedetta's father. As the plot unfolds, we find Benedetta doing all the things we would expect of a nun: taking care of the sick, serving her sisters, caring for the poor, all the while mentoring Bartolomea.

The sexual tension between the sister and the novice is immediately apparent, but at first the effect is an intensification of Benedetta's visions of her true lover, the risen Jesus. Already in her first vision, Jesus greets her with the words: "Benedetta, you are my wife. Come to me." This

theme of weddedness to Jesus is woven throughout the film. And indeed, the two do become one flesh, or at least they become embodied in Benedetta's flesh as she bears the marks of Jesus—the stigmata—on her body. At one point, Benedetta announces, “This is not my flesh alone. It is his also.”

Despite the misgivings of the Abbess, Sister Felicita (Charlotte Rampling), Benedetta's popularity within the convent rises with the external evidence of her inner piety. Yet behind the curtains the intensity of her passion for Jesus finds physical expression in her desire for Bartolomea, who introduces her to the wonders of her sexuality. Although it might seem that, unlike Jesus, Benedetta gives into temptation of a sexual nature, she sees it not as a sin since her lesbian lover convinces her of the beauty and wonder of orgasm. The overturning of social mores as a provocation is the point, both of Jesus' encounters with sinners in the Gospel narratives and in the sexuality depicted in Verhoeven's film.

Although she receives direction from God, Benedetta struggles with her calling, not unlike Jesus' struggles prior to his crucifixion. Early on she is tempted by the Abbess to deny her calling and must endure the skepticism of some of those around her. The miracle of the stigmata, however, results in her being promoted to Abbess, thus displacing, but also displeasing, the woman who will become her main adversary.

As Benedetta's power within the convent increases, the former Abbess turns against her and, much like Judas betrayed Jesus, hands her over to the church authorities in Florence. When the Nuncio arrives at the convent it appears that Benedetta has died, yet in another miracle she rises, more akin to Lazarus in this scene than to Jesus, for Benedetta's true Passion is just beginning. It is a task to which she is called, and, only after praying Gethsemane-like “My Jesus no. Don't ask that of me, please” does she come to accept her fate.

Benedetta is put on trial by the Nuncio, an elite dignitary of the ruling class, here fulfilling the role of Pontius Pilate. Her lover is asked three times to confess her collusion with Benedetta, resisting twice but finally succumbing to her torturer on the third round. Like Peter, however, Bartolomea is full of remorse and seeks forgiveness and reconciliation with Benedetta. Finally, although Jesus faced his crucifixion with seeming confidence in its necessity, Benedetta moves to the pyre that is to be her execution with aplomb, taking on the stature more akin to Joan of Arc than Jesus.

For those who know his work, that Verhoeven's film includes liberal amounts of violence, blood, nudity, and sex will come as no surprise. Yet as is always the case, it is not gratuitous but integrates well into the movement of the plot. And to say that a film about nuns is religious is obvious, but this is at the same time a deeply spiritual film, exploring themes not only of piety and devotion but of truth and justice, gender and power, and authentic and inauthentic responses to a perception of divine calling. The Jesus-figure depictions noted above only scratch the surface of the deeper motifs that run through the film, and the dénouement is not what one might expect given the obvious links to the Jesus story.

Despite the sometimes cringeworthy graphics—the beheading of snakes is just too obviously Freudian not to elicit giggles—the film presents a compelling narrative that is more provocative than it is blasphemous. It is controversial, to be sure, but like the other Verhoeven films that have been banned and panned, *Benedetta* is sure to stand the test of time and once again demonstrate the skills of a director whose films not only tell an absorbing story but force audiences to confront pressing issues of their own time.

¹ Verhoeven was a long-time member of the Jesus Seminar during their heyday of casting votes in the form of color-coded beads to determine the degree of authenticity of the sayings and deeds of Jesus in the four canonical gospels and the *Gospel of Thomas*. His intention has been to direct a film based directly on this work, which was also the impetus for his historical book *Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2010).