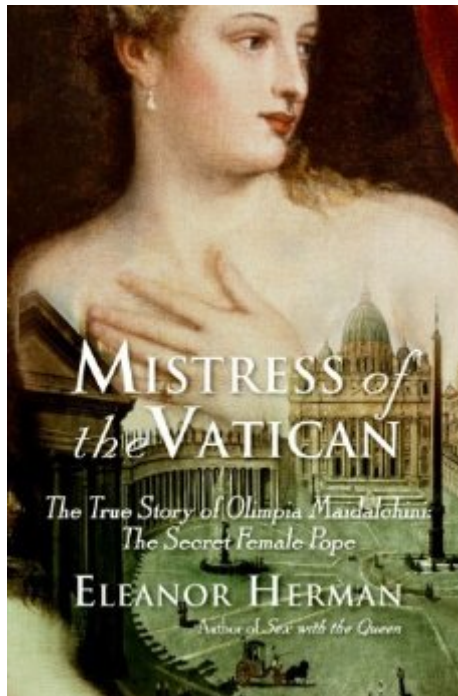


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# Mistress Of The Vatican: The True Story Of Olimpia Maidalchini: The Secret Female Pope



## Synopsis

Eleanor Herman, the talented author of the New York Times bestselling *Sex with Kings* and *Sex with the Queen* goes behind the sacred doors of the Catholic Church in *Mistress of the Vatican*, a scintillating biography of a powerful yet little-known woman whose remarkable story is ripe with secrets, sex, passion, and ambition. For almost four centuries this astonishing story of a woman's absolute power over the Vatican has been successfully buried until now.

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## Customer Reviews

In her biography of Olimpia Maidalchini, Ms. Herman refers to her as "the secret female pope." This is a line meant to provoke and it does its job. Frankly, however, it is a bit of a stretch considering Ms. Herman's own descriptions of Olimpia's exile and near-catastrophic over-reaching. And let's not forget the fact that Olimpia's power was no secret. Still, given the Catholic Church's history of patriarchy and often sinful misogyny, it is wonderful to have reminders of the fact that, throughout its history, women have played important roles and wielded great power in the Church. In some ways, Olimpia's story is a great one for any age: a young woman defies the odds and works her way up to

the pinnacles of power and wealth in her society. The fact that she does so in the Papal States of the seventeenth century when women were often less than second-class citizens is all the more impressive. Of course, Olimpia is no saint--but few were in Rome at the time--and her path to power is paved with the bodies of those who stood in her way, but it is a fascinating story nonetheless. Nearly forced into a convent by her father, she ends up marrying above her station in her native Viterbo. Soon after, she marries Pamphilio Pamphili, a nobleman of Rome and begins her quest for power there. She ultimately achieves this through her brother-in-law, Gianbattista Pamphili. Likely his mistress, she guides the shy canon into the intrigues of Vatican politics, to a cardinal's hat, and, ultimately, to elevation as Pope Innocent X. Through her vacillating lover, she controls everything from the purse-strings to cardinal appointments. At times, she truly did wield the power of the papacy and people knew it; at least, when she wasn't in disfavor with the pope.

I have to disagree with A. Jones' review. He/she claims that Eleanor Herman's work is short on scholarly research. This is preposterous. As someone who has worked in primary source researching - manuscripts at the Library of Congress in Washington - I have to say that the work is absolutely painstaking, and those who are able to do it, and do it successfully, are the true scholars amongst us - they are not simply regurgitating some secondary sources. It is a huge mistake to discard this book as non-scholarly when the exact opposite is true. You can work for days on end combing through Senators' and Presidents' letters in the manuscript division at the Library of Congress and only come up with one or two sentences actually useful for your thesis. The letters are written on horribly deteriorated paper (or paper similar to that of tissue used to keep outgoing letters) in a cursive that is hard to decipher in ink that has run over the years. And I'm only talking about 19th century manuscripts written in American English. Herman did her research in manuscripts from 16th century Italy in medieval Italian (and being someone who speaks Italian, I also assume it was 16th century Romanesco Italian, the Roman dialect of the time) - and she collects a vast fount of these sources. Her research is a wonder. The story that she has been able to uncover from this research is simply astonishing. Yes, Herman does use terminology like "We can imagine/picture..." but it is clear from her writing that she is only extrapolating from the research that she has done and the knowledge of social customs of the time.

Author Herman has written a compelling book about a period that the Vatican would like to forget. Her prose is excellent and the color and her depiction of the times is fascinating. Unfortunately Vatican history is not my specialty, and I am unable to vouch for the accuracy of the author's many

statements of fact or supposition. Even if only one-half of this is true, the graft, corruption, immorality and pettiness of the Pope and cardinals of that age are astounding. One must remember that this was a century after Luther had nailed his ninety-five theses on the door at Wittenburg, and apparently the Vatican had learned little from the protestant reformers. The depiction of Innocent X's election is priceless, with cardinals rushing to vote so they could escape the unhealthy environment. The veneration of relics is almost shocking with various Italian churches boasting of sacred relics like drops of the Virgin Mary's breast milk, the foreskin of Jesus' penis, and his umbilical cord. Yep, this was an age of faith coupled with pedestrian greed and venality, so please excuse me if I voice some skepticism. The story centers around Olimpia Maidalchini, a brilliant lady who manipulated her brother-in-law into the papacy, then took over and ran the Pope's business for him. This was not the first time a female or females controlled the Papacy, but it was the first time it was so well documented. The author also clearly depicts the Italian and especially Roman dominance of the Papacy in spite of important financial support from the Catholic states of France and Spain. For several of the families in Italy, the Papacy was essentially their family business.

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