Daughter’s Letters Tell of Mutual Devotion and Support

Book Review by Marge Murray, Virginia Tech

Galileo’s Daughter
by Dava Sobel
420+ix (paper)

In the year 1633, the astronomer Galileo was tried and convicted by the Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church for the crime of having defended the idea that the sun is the center of the universe around which the earth and planets revolve. As punishment he was placed under house arrest, ordered to publicly affirm his belief in the earth-centered universe, and effectively barred from scholarly teaching and publication for the rest of his life.

In the four centuries since Galileo first promulgated his heresies, his story has become the stuff of legend, immortalized in histories and philosophies of science, plays, and — most recently — in a popular song by the Indigo Girls. Yet none of these popular renderings makes reference to the woman who, during his time of greatest trial, stood as his greatest supporter, rock, refuge, and friend: Suor Maria Celeste, a member of the order of Poor Clares in the Convent of San Matteo in Arcetri. The eldest of Galileo’s three illegitimate children, Maria Celeste — born Virginia Galilei — lived in abject poverty and isolation within the cloistered walls of San Matteo from the age of thirteen until her untimely death.
just twenty years later. Her years of seclusion stand in striking counterpoint to Galileo’s very public life of teaching, research, and invention.

In *Galileo’s Daughter*, Dava Sobel skillfully interweaves the saga of Galileo with the even more fascinating tale of his eldest daughter, as revealed in her own startlingly literary letters to her father. From what was almost certainly a lively two-way correspondence, only Maria Celeste’s letters remain, preserved among the profusion of Galileo’s personal papers. Galileo’s letters to Maria Celeste were probably destroyed upon her death, as it would have been far too dangerous for a Roman Catholic convent to preserve them. Thus, says Sobel, “the correspondence between father and daughter was long ago reduced to a monologue” (p. 10).

In these pages, Maria Celeste is revealed as lively, insightful, ingenious. In the convent, she served as an apothecary, having learned the trade from “the nuns and visiting doctors who staffed the convent’s infirmary” (p. 325). Sobel speculates, however, that she learned to read and write in Latin and Italian under her father’s tutelage. Indeed, “no one at San Matteo surpassed her in language skills. Even the abbesses sought her out to write important letters of official business” (p. 325). In Sobel’s view, it is Suor Maria Celeste — far more than her cloistered younger sister or her wayward, undisciplined brother — who met Galileo’s match in intelligence, insight, devotion, and wit.

Sobel’s book emphasizes the deep affection between father and daughter. From the seclusion of the cloister, Suor Maria Celeste served as helpmeet and sounding board to Galileo, who never married. For his many physical ills, she prepared pills and potions; she took in his mending and sewing, and at times cooked and baked for him behind the convent walls. In return Galileo was a most generous benefactor of the convent, providing alms, food, and supplies.

In reading about the warmth and intimacy of their relationship, it is easy to forget the tremendous physical barriers that separated them:

The Convent of San Matteo...maintained a separate parlor where a sister’s family members might properly be received. They could bring their own food, too, and share it with her. Thus the dishes themselves, whether cooked in the convent or carried in by the guests, could be eaten with impunity, so long as everyone ate in his or her proper place. A black iron grate, or grille, separated the parlor from the nun’s quarters, and all exchanges passed through the lattice of its bars. (p. 116)

Moreover, conditions of life in the convent stand in stark contrast to Galileo’s comparatively opulent lifestyle. In November of 1623, immediately following the publication of Galileo’s book *The Assayer*, Maria Celeste writes to her father — in a letter apparently accompanied by newly-sewn linens and freshly baked cakes — about the circumstances of life at the convent:

Since I do not have a room where I can sleep through the night, Suor Diamanta, by her kindness, lets me stay in hers, depriving her
own sister of that hospitality in order to take me in; but the room is terribly cold now, and with my head so infected, I cannot see how I will be able to stand it there, Sire, unless you help me by lending me one of your bed hangings, one of the white ones that you will not need to use now while you are away.

Yet, despite her desperate pleas, she is quick to add: “And another thing I ask of you, please, is to send me your book, the one that has just been published, so that I may read it, as I am longing to see what it says.” And finally, in a postscript, she directs him: “If you have collars to be bleached, Sire, you may send them to us” (pp. 120-121).

When we think of monastic or cloistered life nowadays, we tend to think of it as a noble calling, a life of poverty and prayer entered into willingly by a spiritual disciple. While Sobel makes clear that Maria Celeste entered cloistered life involuntarily, she tends to gloss over the circumstances under which Galileo’s daughter came to live at the Convent of San Matteo.

In seventeenth century Italy, women were still largely viewed as commodities to be bought and sold in marriage — in the case of Suor Maria Celeste and her younger sister, Suor Arcangela, as Brides of Christ, with a dowry to be paid to the convent. Sobel makes clear that his daughters, being illegitimate, were considered by him to be unmarriageable. Viewed in this context, sending his daughters to a convent seems a reasonable way for Galileo to have secured their future, though one wonders why they could not simply have continued to live with him. As it happens, there is a far darker side to the story, which Sobel fails to fully reveal.

In the year 1611, while visiting in Rome, Galileo was invited to join the prestigious Lyncean Academy by one of its founders, Federico Cesi. Sobel describes the academy in admiring terms as one of the first serious scientific societies, devoted to open and unfettered inquiry into philosophy, science, and literature, and describes Galileo as one “who embodied the Lynceans’ organizing principles” (p. 42). For a different perspective, however, one may turn to the work of David F. Noble, as recorded in his remarkable book, *A World Without Women: The Christian Clerical Culture of Western Science* (Oxford, 1992). Noble describes the Lyncean Academy as a scientific community modelled on monastic life and in direct competition with the culture of the Jesuits. The Lynceans, more than simply an all-male club, regarded women as an encumbrance, a danger to the scientific life. Quoting the Italian historian Ada Alessandrini, Noble writes, “Marriage was for [the Lynceans] a ‘trap,’ a ‘feminine bond’ which deterred scientific activity and limited the liberty of the studious,” and adds, in his own words,

> the indelible imprint of a world without women, having been passed outward from the monasteries to the church, and then later from the cathedral schools to the universities, now manifested itself yet again in the nascent institutions of modern science (Noble, p. 215).

Just two years after Galileo’s initiation into the Lyncean Academy, Galileo
placed his daughters at San Matteo. He sought and obtained a special dispensation which made it possible for Livia (Maria Arcangela) and Virginia (Maria Celeste) to enter the cloister at the ages of twelve and thirteen, respectively — well before they turned sixteen, the ‘canonical age’ for admission. In contrast to Sobel, Noble is outraged by Galileo’s behavior and asserts baldly that “Virginia [Galilei] had been imprisoned for life by an ambition” — Galileo’s scientific career — “that excluded the presence of women.” Indeed, he characterizes the daughters as “innocent little victims of science” (Noble, p. 218).

It is therefore not surprising that, at times, Maria Celeste’s letters include images of incarceration. Poignantly, in one of her last letters to her father, then in detention in Siena, Suor Maria Celeste writes: “had I been able to substitute myself in the rest of your punishment, most willingly would I elect a prison even straiter that this one in which I dwell, if by so doing I could set you at liberty” (p. 313). In reality, Galileo, even under detention by the Inquisition, never suffered the privation that Maria Celeste endured at San Matteo. The story of Galileo’s daughter is, sadly, the tale of a repression still greater than the one that Galileo himself faced.

While Sobel is to be commended for her compassionate understanding of the Roman Catholic culture of Renaissance Italy, one comes away from her book with a sense of horror at the appalling sacrifice made by Suor Maria Celeste, not merely at the altar of religion, but at the altar of science as well. Furthermore, despite the promise of its title, Sobel’s book leaves Maria Celeste in her father’s shadow, as it is the life of Galileo which gives shape and substance to the narrative. Perhaps appropriately, the book concludes with the revelation that, although it has been known for over three centuries that the body of Suor Maria Celeste is buried with that of her father in his tomb, there is as yet no inscription which reveals that simple fact.

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