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**Sobel, Dava. *Galileo's Daughter: A Historical Memoir of Science, Faith, and Love*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000. Pp. ix + 420; illus. CDN\$22.50 (paper). ISBN: 0-1402-8055-3**

**Reviewed by Thomas Cohen, York University**

Let me begin this review by staking out my own position. I am a social historian, not a historian of science or ideas. I work on sixteenth-century Italy. My central interests are the language and culture of the everyday and my method, not rarely, is the closest possible reading of vernacular texts, often trials, sometimes letters, with an eye to their social meanings and implicit artistry. I often cast my own work in literary form. My own scholarly experience and practices bear on my comments below in several ways, but most especially in what I have to say about how best to interpret Galileo's daughter's letters.

Dava Sobel's is a handsome book; it has a light touch with language and a knack for story-line that has won it both popular acclaim and ample sales. Its subject, despite the title, is less the daughter than the father; it tells a well-known story of his discoveries, controversies, trial, condemnation, and confinement till death in lingering house arrest. As for the daughter, the author weaves her in, so that, against the public strivings, we meet the private life and letters of the nun, Maria Celeste, housed in a monastery perched just outside Florence. As his trial goes badly, the daughter's letters strive mightily to buoy the astronomer's spirits, with heartfelt wishes and with news of the neighbours, the garden, the unruly wine that turned out badly, and with promises of sweets and edible songbirds to beguile his exile. To readers unfamiliar with the Galileo story, this pleasing tale of domestic affection and filial solicitude helps humanize the great man and adds poignancy to his awful persecution. A deft book draws readers along and guides them not badly through complex matters of science, theology, religious practice, politics, and law.

But, if one is a scholar, where is the news? Certainly, not in the father's tale, except that one learns he had a loving daughter. In the daughter then? Perhaps. For Galileo's eldest, Maria Celeste, to use her convent name, turns out to have been a bright, adroit, subtle epistolary artist and a lively observer of persons and of her surroundings, so her letters can show us something of how nuns wrote, how they attached to families, and how, despite confinement in monastic

walls, they still observed and acted upon their surroundings. But one learns these lessons largely on one's own, without Sobel's help.

In the wake of her success with Galileo's daughter, Dava Sobel brought out an edition of Maria Celeste's complete surviving letters, *Letters to Father* (2001). The edition is bilingual. I have looked carefully at the Italian originals of all the letters translated in full in *Galileo's Daughter*. Though Sobel's renditions are pretty and mostly correct, almost every letter contains at least one translator's error. Some of the slips are major. Scholars should therefore never quote the English versions without first checking the Italian original. There is one nagging oddity: the daughter, in English, addresses the father with great formality, throughout, as "Sire," as if he were royal. The original is just plain "V.S.," literally "your lordship" but in fact an automatic courtesy a bit like its close cousin, "Usted" (originally, *Vuestra Merced*, "your mercy") in early-modern and later Spanish. Both terms are just baroque-age formalities for "You," and not expressions of awe or deep filial piety.

Intellectual historians will find this book distinctly pre-postmodern. It lacks our latter-day self-consciousness, our sense of the ambiguities of readership, authorship, and text, and of the many ties of text to the varieties of discourse on the scene. To Sobel, the daughter's letters present the daughter, nicely unveiled. A postmodern reading as gracious as Sobel's, if such were possible, might make a delightful book. But it would be a harder book to write, and, probably, to read. For the daughter's letters, in fact, are a skein of veils. There was the veil of discretion; Maria Celeste chose her words very cautiously and judiciously, especially when danger waxed. But there were other veils of rhetoric, both epistolary and monastic. Moreover, social life itself, both family and community, had its conventions of feeling and expression. The semantic, social, intellectual, and devotional range of "love" was, for instance, huge. The same holds for the rest of the language of feeling that seems at first glance to speak so directly to modern hearts. The charm of the letters, for us, if we are canny, should lie not in their directness but in their artful blend of clarity, allusion, and evasion. The author herself is present, but, far more often than Sobel would have her readers believe, her exact nature and state of heart and mind elude us. One postmodern response to the tyranny of text is just to quit pursuing the author. A higher game well worth the candle is to keep on seeking, but to see the quest as subtle, and astute.

In parallel, the most recent historians of science will find the Galileo tale itself quite old-fashioned and Whiggish, a narrative of heroic rationalism struggling against ignorance and bigotry. Like the daughter, Sobel's father is a free agent, transparent to himself, to his reasons, and to us. The old history of science to which she adheres made for easy heroes. As with Maria Celeste, so, with Galileo himself, more recent ambiguities might make story lines less crisp, pathos less facile, and moral lessons and literary dramas less stark. But none of that argues against striving for handsome history. In sum, this is a pretty book, deftly done, but most rewarding if one reads not with it but against it.

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### Works Cited

Galilei, Maria Celeste. *Letters to Father: Suor Maria Celeste to Galileo, 1623–1633*. Translated and annotated by Dava Sobel. New York: Walker, 2001.