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1/13/10

Honors 104 (H03)

The way to a father's heart is through his daughter

We do not live in a world of absolutes, but in a world painted with shades of grey. People's motives are the same, neither black nor white but grey. It's a lot easier to understand a person when you can simultaneously see them through their own minds as well as the minds of the people they love most. This is the approach that Dava Sobel took with Galileo. Instead of painting the story of Galileo in the form of a droll encyclopedia article, she looked at Galileo the man, exposing both his huge sense of ego and self-infallibility through his interactions with the important people in his life.

Galileo was an extremely egotistical and self-important man. When one compares the title of the book with the actual contents, you can see the subtle brilliance of the choice. The title is Galileo's Daughter, but the book itself is about Galileo, only tangentially talking about Suor Maria Celeste through her letters, and only then when it relates to Galileo and his actions. When Galileo sired children, he didn't marry his lover because she was below his social status and that would harm his prospects for fame. Throughout his whole career, when someone would publish a disagreement to an idea of his, he would often resort to ad-hominem and trash the counter-idea as worthless instead of taking the time to defend his ideas. It was as if Galileo couldn't stand the thought that he could be wrong, and instead of contemplating this he discredited his enemies instead. In his Dialogue, the name of the character that holds to the Aristotelian mindset is the root of the modern day word simpleton. Even when looking at one of his predecessor's work, Tycho Brahe, he dismissed his comet discovery because he had not seen it himself. The only reason he got himself into so much trouble with the Church with his Dialogue is that he had to prove to the world that he was right. The author portrayed this aspect of Galileo very well.

While Galileo was very much a selfish egomaniac who quells all disagreement, he still managed to have a good relationship with a few people. Out of those few people, by far the most important relationship was with his daughter Suor Maria Celeste. While the book's premise serves as a subtle nod to the grand presence of Galileo that left little room for his daughter, it does also explore their relationship. His relationship with her is an odd mix of father-daughter love and an almost business like relationship with Galileo as the provider of money and Maria doing her job as a nun and being caring and compassionate. The book and Maria's letters show an element of care and tenderness to them unique to parent-child relationships. Maria is constantly worried about his health and does everything possible to make sure he is happy and healthy. Galileo also shows care for his daughter, though not necessarily in the same open and emotional ways that she does. His love for her really shines through though when he does not receive letters from her for long periods of time, and in the end when she dies and he just deflates inside and prepares to die himself.

Even though they do love each other, there is still a businesslike element to their relationship. Many of the times that she writes to him, at least one of the reasons is to ask him for money for one thing or another. Very rarely is it for selfish reasons though, in fact there is really only one main time she asked for money for purely selfish reason. The rest of the time, she asks for money on behalf of someone else, whether that is for her brother or the convent or whoever. Galileo, being the good doting father, always gives what she asks for. The question arises though, how much of Maria's love and compassion is because she is his daughter, and how much of it is because she is a nun and that is her duty? There is one big contrast in Galileo and Maria's relationship. Maria is a servant of God, and Galileo is at the forefront of challenging Church authority. Maria owes loyalty to both the Church and to her father, and she balances this well. Galileo also manages well, he manages to dote on and love his daughter and at the same time fighting for what he believes is right.

In Galileo's Daughter, the author explored Galileo the man as well as his story, going into his relationships and into his egotistical mindset. After reading, one can gain a much better understanding of why Galileo did the things he did and how he laid the foundations for modern scientific inquiry. Studying history through studying the people behind events instead of the events themselves can lead to a greater understanding of why things happened and why they will happen in the future.