



The World of Maria Gaetana Agnesi, Mathematician of God

By Massimo Mazzotti

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She is best known for her curve, the witch of Agnesi, which appears in almost all high school and undergraduate math books. She was a child prodigy who frequented the salon circuit, discussing mathematics, philosophy, history, and music in multiple languages. She wrote one of the first vernacular textbooks on calculus and was appointed chair of mathematics at the university in Bologna. In later years, however, she became a prominent figure within the Catholic Enlightenment, gave up the academic world, and devoted herself to the poor, the sick, the hungry, and the homeless. Indeed, the life of Maria Agnesi reveals a complex and enigmatic figure—one of the most fascinating characters in the history of mathematics.

Using newly discovered archival documents, Massimo Mazzotti reconstructs the wide spectrum of Agnesi's social experience and examines her relationships to various traditions—religious, political, social, and mathematical. This meticulous study shows how she and her fellow Enlightenment Catholics modified tradition in an effort to reconcile aspects of modern philosophy and science with traditional morality and theology.

Mazzotti's original and provocative investigation is also the first targeted study of the Catholic Enlightenment and its influence on modern science. He argues that Agnesi's life is the perfect lens through which we can gain a greater understanding of mid-eighteenth-century cultural trends in continental Europe.

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- Sales Rank: #2254103 in eBooks
- Published on: 2007-11-02
- Released on: 2007-11-02
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Review

The overall result is micro-history at its best, and a history of mathematics that is narrated, as it always should be, through the broader history of the people and places that made this particular science what it is.

(J.B. Shank *The Mathematical Intelligencer*)

Mazzotti's text is many things: well written, historically detailed, and descriptive. What stands out is his depiction of Maria Gaetana Agnesi as humble, kind, and mathematically talented.

(Kathleen A. Acker, Ph.D. *Convergence*)

A welcome contribution to both an understanding of Maria Agnesi and life in the 1700s.

(*Choice*)

A nuanced and well-documented historical narrative that restores to us a key personage in eighteenth-century science and spirituality, combining cultural and political history with the history of the family.

(Brendan Dooley *Catholic Historical Review*)

Mazzotti's book succeeds admirably in pushing beyond this summary judgment?the same that judges her curve 'insignificant'?to find in Agnesi's approach to mathematics a way to open a whole world of eighteenth-century life and thought that supported her choices.

(Joan L. Richards *Isis*)

Mazzotti's account of the rise and fall of a relatively non-gendered intellectual environment in the early eighteenth century thus sheds light on a rare instance in which the Catholic Church actually advocated women's equality. The strangeness of that phenomenon alone renders his work an interesting addition to the history of science.

(Josipa G. Petrunic *British Journal for the History of Science*)

This book is both a life and a times; it will have many readers.

(Dorinda Outram *American Historical Review*)

Mazzotti's treatment of her is by far the most sophisticated biography that we have of this fascinating woman... His book is a cultural history of mathematics at its best.

(Paula Findlen *Historia Mathematica*)

About the Author

Massimo Mazzotti teaches history of science at the University of California, Berkeley, where he is also the director of the Office for History of Science and Technology. He is editor of *Knowledge as Social Order: Rethinking the Sociology of Barry Barnes*.

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