Maria Gaetana Agnesi Essay, Research Paper

Amanda Muller October 31, 2001

Historical Sketch 3 Math Concepts MW 1050

Maria Gaetana Agnesi

Maria Agnesi was born in Milan, Italy on May 16, 1718. During her lifetime she accomplished quite a bit. She was the first woman in the western part of the world to be officially and accurately referred to as a Mathematician. Her largest accomplishment and publication was published when Sir Isaac Newton was still alive and his studies most likely contributed to her own. Nevertheless, Agnesi deserves recognition not only for her mathematical publications but for all she contributed to math, science, and the western world as a whole.

She began her studies of mathematics a very early age. In fact, she began studying all subject matters at the tender age of four years old. This was due to many factors. For one, her father, Pietro Agnesi and mother, Anna Brivio were learned people. Pietro was a professor at the University of Bologna and encouraged Maria’s interest in scientific matters. He made sure she was tutored at home by a string of distinguished professors. They challenged her by having her come up with her own theses. She was then to discuss and defend them among leading scholars. She eventually gained their respect, and according to historians, their admiration as well.

Mathematics was not her only strong subject matter. She was considered to be a “genius linguist”. Her native language is Italian, but by age five, Agnesi learned to speak French fluently. By the time she was nine, she was able to speak, write, and read Latin. Finally, by age eleven, she could translate Greek, German, Spanish, and even Hebrew. During her years of tutor, a scholar would ask her a question is his native tongue and she would answer him in his language–whatever that may have been. She also covered subjects such as ontology, botany, zoology, mineralogy and many more. At age seventeen, Maria composed her first manuscript and even though her tutors considered it to be excellent work, it was never published.

In addition to encouraging her to study science, Maria’s father was constantly inviting fellow scholars to his home and putting Maria and her musically talented sister on display. He would have them both display their skills and talents for the guests. Historians write that Agnesi was a modest woman and disliked being put on display. She took her work very seriously. Eventually, she became so tired of being a display or show that she decided to join the local convent. Historians state that she decided to omit herself from all social activity, including that of the family, and concentrate solely on her mathematical studies. Father Ramiro Rampinelli was her mentor. He guided her during the writing of her most accomplished publication, Istituzioni analytic. These two volumes of over 1000 pages each took ten years to complete. The long and hard work paid off. This publication, which was dedicated to Empress Maria Theresa, “won immediate acclaim”(p.76) and essentially gave Agnesi the recognition as a mathematician. The French Academy of Sciences was even quoted in 1749 stating, “…We consider this work the best written work of its kind”.

Pope Benedict XIV gave her superior recognition, which was very important and appreciated by Agnesi mainly because The Pope was someone that Agnesi held in deep regard and respect.1(p.77) Maria Agnesi continued to publish manuscripts and she continued to gain recognition of important, learned people from all around the world. Agnesi also continued to serve in the convent for the rest of her years. The sources never gave any inclination as to whether or not she ever saw her family, however they do state that she was happy being at work. That was who she was and what she loved. She died in Milan on January 9, 1799–she was eighty-one years old.

Works Cited

Dictionary of Scientific Biography; vol. 1, pp. 75-76; Charles Scribner’s Sons, NY, 1981.

Encarta Online Delux; keyword Agnesi; Article 1(Encarta original): pp.1&2.

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