BOOK REVIEWS

A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY FLORENTINE


Historians of the exact sciences can perhaps be excused for supposing that the Biblioteca Riccardiana in Florence is the personal reference library of the redoubtable bibliographer of Italian mathematical sciences, Pietro Riccardi. On the contrary, it is an old foundation that began in the sixteenth century with a wealthy Florentine collector of books and art, and was significantly enlarged in the last decades of the seventeenth century through the dowry of Cassandra Capponi, daughter of Vincenzo, an erudite man of letters closely connected with the Galileo circle.

This biography of Marquis Vincenzo Capponi (1605–82), a prominent member of the Accademia della Crusca, describes him as an open man, opposed to any kind of dogmatism, especially that of the Church. But he was also suspicious of Galileo’s claim that reason could be capable of explaining the inner workings of nature. His philosophical interests were surely influenced by a realization of the insufficiency of the dogmatic approach of the Aristotelian school, dominant at that time. But he always stopped short of antagonizing the Inquisition. In fact, Capponi was clearly an insider, a man with many connections within the hierarchy of the Church.

As Consolo and later Arciconsole of the Accademia della Crusca, Capponi tried to keep the academy open to philosophical debates. His intention seems to have been to make the Accademia a bridge between philosophers and scientists on the one side and scholars and theologians on the other, a difficult task during the intellectually chilling period that followed Galileo’s trial.

One of the most valuable features of this biography is an extensive list of the books in Capponi’s library, together with the shelf marks in the Biblioteca Riccardiana. His holdings included Copernicus’s De revolutionibus (1566, which Capponi had censored according to the Vatican decree), Kepler’s Astronomia nova (here listed under Tycho Brahe), Regiomontanus’s De triangulis (1533 and also 1561) and Epytoma in Almagestum Ptolemei (Bologna, 1505), and Galileo’s Sidereus nuncius. Capponi’s library contained many works by Galileo and Kepler, as well as books by Torricelli, Descartes, Huwens, Magini and Riccioli, among others. In fact, the collection contains books that were on the Index, such as Kepler’s Epitome astronomiae Copernicane, but not Galileo’s Dialogo. Given his ties with the establishment, Capponi could have easily obtained the required special dispensation from the Church to own such books.

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