Corrections and Additions for “Maria Gaetana Agnesi”

C. TRUESDELL

This *Archive*, Volume 40, 1989, 113–142

Corrections

1. P. 113, l. 3, delete: “means ‘the turner’”.
2. Footnote 1. Preserve the first sentence; delete the rest on p. 113.
3. Page 114, l. 8 of Footnote 2. Replace “the page” by “the number of the page”.
4. Page 132, Footnote 43. Replace the last line by the following text:
Footnote (b) on p. 51 of *Vita di Jacopo Riccati* informs us that RICCATI in a letter dated 1 February 1747 to RAMPINELLI offered MARIA GAETANA AGNESI for insertion into her book his “method of polynomials”. The *Vita* has been reprinted with introduction and notes by M. L. SOPPELSA, Castelfranco Veneto, 1990.
5. Page 135, Footnote 48, add “, Napoli, 1754.”

Addition 1. “La versiera” for Italians

LORIA states that FERMAT (1601–1665) concerned himself with squaring the area under the curve. In 1703, from quadratures of conics, GUIDO GRANDI (1671–1742)^a found incidentally a construction of the immortal curve. The dotted line in his Figure 5 represents the locus. In 1718 GRANDI named it^b:

Quando poi le forze fussero reciproche de’ quadrati delle distanze, sarebbe la scala *AGFH* un iperbola quadratica fra gli stessi asintoti; e la scala delle velocità *ACV* sarebbe quella curva, che io descrivo nel mio libro delle quadratura alla prop. 4. nata da’ seni versi, che da me suole chiamarsi la *Versiera* in latino però *Versoria*

^a GUIDO GRANDI, *Quadratura circuli, et hyperbolae per infinitas hyperbolas, & parabolas geometricae exhibita* ..., Pisa, Franciscus Bindus, 1703. See Proposition IV, pp. 24–25. There is a copy of this book in the Library of Congress.

^b *Opere di Galileo*, Volume 3, Firenze, G. G. Tartini & S. Franchi, 1718, p. 393.

Thus GRANDI creates the Italian “versiera” from the Latin “versoria” (Lewis & Short, not in the Oxford Latin Dictionary), which means “rope that turns a sail” and is a derivate of “vertere”, to turn, and of “sinus”, among the meanings of which are “breast”, “hollow”, and “bellying of a sail”. He illustrates the curve more clearly than he had done in 1703.

MARIA GAETANA AGNESI in her treatment of it (§ 238, pp. 380–382) wrote “la curva ... dicesi la *Versiera*.”

So much for Italian, so much for clarity. The story, dull, should have stopped here, and for readers of Italian it did so, but for Anglo-Saxons it does not.

Addition 2. Trivia for Anglo-Saxonia

“Anglo-Saxon” here isolates two classes of beings: indwellers of an isle, and indwellers of a distant, separate, continental mass. Some wit — I remember him not — claimed that those denizens were “divided by a common language”. The fabrication called “the witch of Agnesi” began, as is fitting, with an islander but did not stop there.

In COLSON’s English translation (before 1761) of AGNESI’s book, “now first printed from the translator’s manuscript, under the inspection of Rev. JOHN HELLINS, B.D. F.R.S. and vicar of Potter’s Pury”^c, we find on p. 222 “the curve ..., which is vulgarly called the *Witch*.” In the turgid, costive style of COLSON and HELLINS, the meaning of “vulgarly” seems to be “in the vernacular” (*OED* vulgarly 1 b).

COLSON, whose only fame is to have studied Italian just so as to translate AGNESI’s book, did not get far into the vocabulary or syntax; among other errors of translation, he apparently confused her “la versiera” with “l’aversiera”, which latter means “the witch” or “the she-devil” (*v.* Cambridge Italian Dictionary).

That is not all. The *OED* in the article “Witch sb2 4e” attributes the first usage of “the witch of Agnesi” to a British schoolbook of 1875.

Worse to come, and from the thither shore of the sea, D. J. STRUIK (see the end of Footnote 1) states that the ever-famous curve “is type 63 in Newton’s classification” of cubics. Nearly everything else that STRUIK writes about AGNESI is mere trash. At least he knows that the word which keeps AGNESI’s fame alive is a mistranslation:

Some wit in England translated it ‘witch’, and the silly pun is lovingly preserved in most of our textbooks in the English language.

Whether COLSON was a wit may be doubted.

Should anyone care to sense my emotions after wasting the time to search out and collect the foregoing, he could well listen to the concerto in *D* minor for harpsichord by K. P. E. BACH.

I thank D. H. FOWLER and J. A. SAMPSON for their criticism of Footnote 1 of my *Maria Gaetana Agnesi* and their help by locating scarce publications.

^c *Analytical Institutions* ..., London, Taylor and Wilks (printers), 1801.