



The Pope's Daughter: The Extraordinary Life of Felice Della Rovere

Caroline P. Murphy

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The illegitimate daughter of Pope Julius II, Felice della Rovere became one of the most powerful and accomplished women of the Italian Renaissance. Now, Caroline Murphy vividly captures the untold story of a rare woman who moved with confidence through a world of popes and princes.

Using a wide variety of sources, including Felice's personal correspondence, as well as diaries, account books, and chronicles of Renaissance Rome, Murphy skillfully weaves a compelling portrait of this remarkable woman. Felice della Rovere was to witness Michelangelo paint the Sistine Chapel, watch her father Pope Julius II lay the foundation stone for the new Saint Peter's, and saw herself immortalized by Raphael in his Vatican frescos. With her marriage to Gian Giordano Orsini—arranged, though not attended, by her father the Pope—she came to possess great wealth and power, assets which she used to her advantage. While her father lived, Felice exercised much influence in the affairs of Rome, even negotiating for peace with the Queen of France. After his death, Felice persevered, making allies of the cardinals and clerics of St. Peter's and maintaining her control of the Orsini land through tenacity, ingenuity, and carefully cultivated political savvy. She survived the Sack of Rome in 1527, but her greatest enemy proved to be her own stepson Napoleone, whose rivalry with his stepbrother Girolamo ended suddenly and violently, and brought her perilously close to losing everything she had spent her life acquiring.

With a marvelous cast of characters, **The Pope's Daughter** is a spellbinding biography set against the brilliant backdrop of Renaissance Rome.

The Pope's Daughter: The Extraordinary Life of Felice Della Rovere Details

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From Reader Review *The Pope's Daughter: The Extraordinary Life of Felice Della Rovere* for online ebook

Craig Monson says

Murphy elucidates another extraordinary early modern woman, likely to be less familiar to general readers than Pope Joan, other pope's daughters such as Lucrezia Borgia, or the stable of Henry VIII's wives. Felice Della Rovere's fascinating story, meticulously documented, unfolds in Murphy's customary style, which speaks well to scholars and those seriously interested in women in history.

Louise says

This is the second book I've read by this author. I hope Caroline Murphy keeps researching Renaissance women and writing books.

In both this book and "Murder of a Medici Princess" the author assembles a lot of information and presents it in a way the lay reader can really enjoy. Chapters in both books are chronological which helps the lay reader understand the complexity of the historical setting. Some chapters describe the episodes of the subjects' lives, in others there are lifestyle descriptions. The famous persons of the time are covered as they relate to the principle, and not used as a crutch to fill in a story.

While the books are chronological, my reading of them wasn't. Felice della Rovere is the grandmother to the spouse of Isabella de Medici, the subject of the newer book.

Both books appear to be the only full length biographies that exist for these women, which, beyond rescuing these women from obscurity, makes this an achievement for the author. Both of Murphy's subjects were important women of their times. While they led lives that transcended contemporary gender roles, their stories, as presented by Murphy, help the modern reader to better understand the social structure of Renaissance Italy.

If you, like me, know little about this period, the Murphy biographies give you the context to understand the times through the people. Being the only full bios on these women, there is also plenty for those who are more knowledgeable about this period.

Grace Tjan says

This book is about that other papal bastard, not the infamous Lucrezia Borgia, of whom numerous biographies --- some more salacious than others --- have been written in the last five hundred years. Apparently, this book is also the only biography of Felice della Rovere that has ever seen print. It's easy to discern why --- compared to Lucrezia, who (among other things) is accused by some of having an incestuous relationship with her father, Pope Alexander VI, Felice lived the relatively dull, virtuous life of a Renaissance clan matron. She was married twice, both arranged by her father for dynastic/political purposes, the second one to a scion of the powerful Orsini family, whose continuing street brawls with the Collonnas make the Capulets/Montagues feud looks like a schoolyard fight. In fact, their everlasting vendetta against

each other drove the Papacy away from Rome for a while, and Julius II, Felice's father, was desperate to engineer peace between the two clans. Marrying his bastard daughter into the troublesome, warlike family would ensure that they toed the papal line.

Unlike his predecessor (and arch-enemy) Alexander VI, who had numerous illegitimate children from several different mistresses, Julius was actually considered quite chaste --- the 'Warrior Pope' was more interested in making war than love. His having a daughter was nothing strange in an age when the preferred vice for a Catholic priest was not pedophilia but plain old-fashioned fornication with women, preferably aristocratic ones. The children that issued from such relationships became valuable pawns in their fathers' political games and were mated with the sons of the powerful families that effectively ruled Italy. Their relatives, in turn, were given cardinals' hats through blatant acts of nepotism (non-relatives were expected to engage in simony --- the Vatican did not believe in freebies for strangers).

Felice, despite having an unblemished reputation, was an adept of all the aristocratic arts of the day, which included everything that Macchiavelli advocated short of murder. Apparently, had she been born a man she would have been a formidable player, but being female, she had to be contented with being the dynastic brood mare of the Orsinis. When her mercenary husband died, she became the regent for her small sons and the de-facto ruler of the Orsini fiefdom. She spent the rest of her life managing the vast estates and outwitting the clan enemies, as well as envious, even murderous in-laws. She not only survived, but was able to hand over the family patrimony largely intact to her sons (who turned out to be totally undeserving, but that's another story). To her credit, she was also piously charitable, ever ready to listen to sob stories and share her estate's bounty with hard-luck tenant farmers and loyal retainers.

The story of her life, although not as piquant as Lucrezia's, is an interesting glimpse into a fascinating period in Italian history; it was during her father's reign that St. Peter was built and the Sistine Chapel painted by Michelangelo. Raphael preserved her likeness in frescoes commissioned by the pope. She survived the sack of Rome by paying an enormous ransom, fleeing the city in a disguise.

Not much is known about her private thoughts, save for a few hints gleaned from official correspondences, and it seems that the author had to form quite a number of conjectures about them. It's hard to know which are hard facts and which are mere inferences as there is a dearth of footnotes about them. It makes her story reads more smoothly, but is it really an accurate portrait?

Jess says

3.5 stars

A lot has been written and said of Lucrezia Borgia, the most unfairly maligned daughter of Pope Alexander VI. Almost five centuries after her death, biographers and writers of fiction continue to revisit her story in an effort to pick apart or embroider upon the many rumours and legends surrounding her life. Far fewer talk about the daughter of Alexander's successor; many do not even know of her existence. But though Felice della Rovere did not attract the same scandal as Lucrezia, her life story is no less fascinating. She is a woman who defied many of the limitations and expectations of her time: she was born a cardinal's bastard, grew up a bureaucrat's stepdaughter, found prestige as Pope Julius II's daughter and ultimately reached the heights of *gubernatrix* of the powerful Orsini family. Along the way, she brokered business deals that made her independently wealthy, accumulated influence in the Vatican that lasted well beyond her father's death, and

proved herself a capable political player.

Caroline Murphy brings much-deserved light to Felice's story in this fascinating though imperfect biography. She does an admirable job of bringing Felice and the world of sixteenth century Rome to life, and her extensive study of primary documents makes for some fascinating and sometimes unexpected insights.

For the most part, the book reads easily, although at certain points the narrative flow falters as Murphy digresses into somewhat tedious analyses of inventories, correspondences with servants, or the minutiae of business dealings. In these chapters, the writing tips over into dry, academic speak, and though the discussions do serve to provide insights into Felice's character, it's a shame they weren't delivered in a more accessible way.

This occasional unevenness in tone could be seen as one of a few symptoms of what seems to be rather lax editorial oversight. In short, for a book published by Oxford University Press, *The Pope's Daughter* is not very well-edited. Small typos and a handful of awkwardly-worded sentences are suggestive of inadequate proofreading and copyediting, and as another reviewer has pointed out, there are some mistakes in the indexing.

More frustratingly, there's a scattering of factual errors: Ferrante d'Este is incorrectly referred to as Ercole's youngest son, the Emperor Claudius' wife Messalina is incorrectly named Methelusa, and some Latin words are misspelt or mistranslated. They're little things, yes, but such mistakes reflect poorly on Murphy and cause the reader to doubt her authority. I only wish she had been as rigorous in her checking of such minor facts as she was in studying the intricate details of Felice's life.

Murphy freely admits that the information on some periods of Felice's life, particularly her early years, is sparse, and there is no way of filling in some of these gaps beyond supposition. For the most part, the theories she presents on Felice's activities during these missing periods are well-considered and logical, although at certain points I did feel that she might be reaching. Nonetheless, her conjecture is clearly labelled as such, allowing the reader to make up his or her own mind.

For all of these issues -- the occasional tl;dr chapter, the odd typo, the minor mistakes -- I found I really did enjoy this book. Felice is, as I said, not somebody who is spoken of often, and I consider that a shame because she was such an incredible woman. At a time when aristocratic girls married according to the whims of their fathers, she refused a match to Julius II's face. At a time when few women owned property, let alone in their own name, she bought herself a castle and made herself a fortune by selling its grain. Whatever situation she was forced into, she found a way to turn it around to her favour, as is exemplified by her signature style of dress: forced by circumstances (namely widowhood, and then the whims of her new husband) to wear black -- surely a drab and unexciting colour for any young woman, particularly one aspiring to courtly circles -- Felice made the colour her signature, often adding to it a crimson red, the colour of the cardinals and a visual reminder of her powerful parentage.

It's just a shame that this book doesn't have the editorial polish it deserves. With a little more work to iron out the typographical and factual errors, maybe trim some of the unnecessary content and even out a bit of the overly-dry bits, *The Pope's Daughter* could really shine. As it is, it's still a very worthwhile read for anybody who's interested in learning more about the Italian Renaissance and one of the more interesting women to inhabit it.

Harry Allagree says

If anyone should've been made a cardinal in the 16th century Catholic Church, it should've been Felice della Rovere, bastard daughter of Cardinal Giuliano della Rovere, later Pope Julius II ! Caroline Murphy's portrait of this remarkable woman is well-written, well-documented & fascinating enough to keep me up until 2AM reading it! I would love to have known Felice, a truly "self-made" woman who defied the tremendous societal odds against her and rose to be the most powerful woman, or at least one of the most powerful, in her era. She knew Vatican & Roman politics like the back of her hand, and used it, not only to her & her children's advantage, but to that of the whole Orsini clan. It was surprising & comforting to know that when I was in Rome in 1998, I'd been at (probably looking at) the palace on Piazza Navona where she lived, & at or near other places of interest to her there (Trinità dei Monti; Campo de Fiore, Trastevere, etc.). I also learned a lot about the sack of Rome in 1527 which I'd either missed or forgotten about, & gained some insight into the history which has enabled Roman cardinals to become entrenched as "princes", up to the present.

MBG says

Book group Aug 2018. I expected a fascinating historical novel and was disappointed in the simpler historical narrative of dates and events. The writer tells of Felice but does not give her personality to be savored. She does not come alive as I had hoped. My expectations were based on a review in the New York Times.

Xole says

Another fascinating bit of renaissance Italian history. The author kept my interest throughout, with a combination of fact, carefully explained supposition, and delightfully readable prose. I continue to be in love with female historians writing about women of the past, and Caroline Murphy is now on my list of authors to watch.

Cheryl says

When I read some of the reviews of this book, many people assailed the author/editor for mistakes with dates as well as typos. I can't attest to the dates, but I did find a number of typos. In an ARC, this is understandable. In a finished published piece, less so.

My knowledge of Italy is essentially limited to some basic art history. What I know of how the Vatican works, even less stellar. Especially in the beginning, I got very confused with names and roles.

Having said that, once I was into it, I enjoyed it more. She was a woman way ahead of her time. Very smart and she clearly cared about making sure she was giving her children the best future she could.

Erika Williams says

There are many things I could say about this book. Unfortunately, not all of them are good. Let's start with the good things. She is obviously very passionate about her subject matter, in this case Felice della Rovere. Another impressive aspect about this book is Caroline Murphy strives to bring to life an important Renaissance figure who has faded into obscurity despite being fairly prominent during her day. While she was not as infamous as Caterina Sforza or the other pope's daughter, Lucrezia Borgia, Felice della Rovere accomplished the same things they did. She carved out a spot for herself in a man's world; however, Felice went about it in a completely different manner. While Caterina Sforza strove to be mistress of her own estate, Felice did so mainly to ensure the future of her children, children who would ultimately let her down. She seemed to do whatever she could to distance herself from Lucrezia by acting in a supportive capacity for her father and future popes instead of drawing attention to herself. Because she did so much in the background, there are some points where the author has to use her imagination to fill in the gaps of her life. This would have worked extraordinarily well in a novel, but this was not a novel. Not to mention, I find it difficult to believe that had Felice been alive, she would have somehow been able to prevent the death of her daughter. They lived in southern Italy, far away from her mother, and her husband strangled her for being unable to bear him sons. I think it is a stretch to imagine that if he was driven by such passion to kill his wife that respect for her living mother would have stopped him.

Now, here's the downside to this book. For an Oxford Press book, I was surprised to find it was riddled with errors, some editorial, but also some factual. When I first picked up the book, I flipped through the index out of curiosity to see if Ferrante d'Este was mentioned at all. He was, but the index also listed instances of Ferrante Gonzaga, and seemed to be confused as to which Ferrante the text was referring to. Pages marked for d'Este were actually about Gonzaga and vice-versa. That is the fault of whoever compiled the index, not the author, but I wish I could say that the errors ended there. At one point, her husband was stated as being born in 1560, despite the fact that she died in 1536. That was a relatively simple error that any editor should have been able to catch before it went to print. There was another typographical error later on that spelled 'too' as 'ttoo.' These errors, however, while mildly annoying, are forgivable.

The factual errors, or in this case the one that I found, make it difficult to trust the rest of her research. At one point, she talks about Felice's marriage options into the Este family which apparently were being negotiated. At that time, she refers to Ferrante d'Este as Ercole's youngest son. A simple google search will tell you that he was born in 1477, several years before some of his brothers, so unless she has access to some super secret birth records that completely change the birth order of the Este family... Another review on a different website remarked that Caroline Murphy's Latin was frequently mistranslated, errors that I would not have been able to catch not knowing Latin myself. I just wonder how much of her research I can actually trust when she had something as simple as the Este birth order wrong.

The other problem I had with this book was that since so much of Felice's life is a mystery, a lot of detail was presented on the histories of the families she interacted with and the places she frequented. About a fourth of the book could be trimmed if we decide to focus only on the information that was directly pertinent to Felice's life.

Despite its flaws, I still need to give the author credit for focusing so intently on a project she was passionate about and bringing to life the other Pope's daughter, the one who while intuitive and resourceful for her time, unfortunately faded into obscurity.

Martyn Lovell says

This history book tells the life story of a woman who grew from unusual origins to positions of power and influence in an era when that was tough for a woman.

The fundamental subject matter is interesting. It gives a view into life in the 1500s, into the relationship between religion and politics in the era, and into the role of women in society at that time. In addition, the character at the center of the novel is without doubt fascinating.

The style of writing is quite dry. This is more of a history book than it is a compelling story. In some ways this is preferable - the book avoids all the frustrating fictionalisation that can make one sceptical of what really is true. However, the author is at pains to report some facts that might have been better left unreported. Too much time is given to enumerating lists of stuff bought, sold or used and prices and details.

A related problem is that lots of the most interesting questions about this woman aren't answered by any available source material. Which make some parts of the story frustratingly lacking in detail. It is clear that the author has worked hard to fill in many of the gaps, but there is much left unsatisfyingly open.

I didn't love reading this, but I did really enjoy the information I got about the period. Somewhat recommended.

Marita says

The Pope's daughter in this instance is Felice della Rovere, the illegitimate daughter of Giuliano della Rovere, Pope Julius II.

Pope Julius was intent on not being seen in the same light as his infamous predecessor, Alexander VI, known as the Borgia Pope. What Julius did not want was to flaunt his illegitimate offspring, but preferred to have her brought up away from her parental home, and when she was eventually brought to Rome she lived separately from the Pope's household.

However, the rather clever and astute Felice managed to become very wealthy and famous in her own right. She had an acute business acumen, and managed to buy a castle and obtain a suitable business partner for the sale and export of goods produced on her property.

Felice was well read, and not only did she possess magnificently bound volumes by authors such as Pliny and Suetonius, but also numerous books bound in simple velum, a sure sign of an avid reader.

She created her own style in a time known for its excesses, and generally wore black, sometimes accentuated with a touch of crimson. Whilst blonde hair was very fashionable, she did not seem to attempt to colour her dark mane of hair.

She was well regarded, and with Anne of Brittany, Queen of France, entered into peace negotiations between

France and the Pope. She also brokered peace between the rival families Orsini and Savelli. In addition she worked towards preventing the Orsini family from entering into a dangerous alliance with the Venetian Republic.

In my opinion it is an interesting book about a remarkable woman, BUT that too much was assumed about what the Pope or Felice thought, or why the Pope treated her in any particular manner. Of necessity some assumptions need to be made, but for me there were not only too many, but some were unsupported.

Patricia says

Well if you want a book that is saturated in details this is the one! It was slow and kind of painful to get through this one.

Rachel Adiyah says

If there is a more depressing book about an Italian woman who was treated like Cinderella, but who did not receive a rescue, I haven't found it and I hope I never do. In large part, Felice started out life a lot like Lucrezia Borgia; both were the illegitimate daughters of Catholic Cardinals in Rome. But unlike Lucrezia, who was immensely valued by her father and family and treated with deep affection, Felice was sent away from her loving, supportive mother by her cold, distant father because he regarded her as a liability to him. She was sent to his family in a rural area, and they regarded her illegitimate status with shame, and her being a girl as being saddled with a totally worthless child.

It doesn't get any better. As a matter of fact, mainly because of the way Pope Alexander treated his beloved daughter Lucrezia, her father vowed to treat her the exact opposite when he became Pope. I read on, hoping that there would be a light somewhere, but this woman never got a break. I realize that this was a true story, but I've read enough for "edification" and education in school; when I read the biography of a highly ranked woman from Renaissance Europe, I do it for entertainment. This was not entertaining; I came away feeling depressed and ripped off.

It's your choice; but I'd skip it if I couldn't get it for free at the library.

Connie Johnson says

This book is a cross between a PhD dissertation and biography, but still a very enjoyable read...it is very well documented with multiple citations. An amazing story of Felice Della Rovere, a pope's daughter. Excellent historical perspective on a Renaissance Rome, which I particularly enjoyed having just returned from a visit there.

Lisa says

Really well written, very interesting! I enjoyed this very much

