Introduction

Fame's Values

On 13 March 1610, Sir Henry Wotton, diplomat in Venice, sent a short letter home to England. Wotton's juiciest piece of news concerned the publication of a curious new scholarly work, hot off the press, that had sold out within a day of its appearance. This book, Wotton held, contained such novelties that it had the potential to "overthrow all former astronomy." Yet he did not dare say whether the book's claims were true, especially as they were made with a relatively new instrument whose reliability he could not confirm. So high were the stakes, and so unpredictable the outcome, Wotton observed, that the book's author "runneth a fortune to be either exceeding famous or exceeding ridiculous."[1]

More than four hundred years later, the author of that curious little book, Galileo Galilei, firmly occupies a stellar place in our cultural firmament. He has become "exceeding famous." Nowhere is this clearer than in Florence, where the many museums hold an enormous number of portraits, statues, and busts depicting Galileo with a serious expression, a hefty beard, and an upward gaze and perhaps holding a telescope or book to signal his achievements. Visitors may stroll along the Arno to spot Galileo on the arches besides the Galleria degli Uffizi, wander along the lush, meandering Viale Galileo all the way up to the villa in Arcetri, where Galileo spent his final years, or catch his cheeky gaze in the Casa Buonarroti, where Galileo appears next to a personification of the ancient goddess of fame, Pheme or Fama, in the *studio* Michelangelo the Younger designed shortly after Galileo's condemnation in 1633 (see figs. I.1 and I.2).[2] But Galileo's presence is not limited to

Fig. I.1. Cecco Bravo, *Fama*, 1636–1637. Michelangelo Buonarotti the Younger designed the *studio* between 1633 and 1637—shortly after Galileo's conviction in 1633—and enlisted the painter Francesco Montelatici, also known as Cecco Bravo, to execute it. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Florence or even to the other cities, such as Padua, Pisa, and Rome, that he roamed during his lifetime. His name reaches far beyond Italy, all the way to towns he never once visited, and transcends the realm of institutionalized fame, communicated through busts and street names, to appear in street art, music, comic books, and historical thrillers. Galileo has recently even been given his proper place in space: when NASA sent a spacecraft to Jupiter in 2016, on board were little LEGO figures depicting the ancient god and goddess Jupiter and Juno, accompanied by a tiny Galileo holding a globe and a telescope.[3]

The frequency and the versatility with which Galileo's image and name pop up show that the story of his achievements and trials still, more than four hundred years after his first telescopic discoveries, captivates and inspires audiences. In many cases, Galileo's name is invoked to remind people of great achievements

Fig. I.2. Cecco Bravo, *I Matematici*, 1636–1637. Galileo is portrayed amid poets, writers, geometers, discoverers, and mathematicians and holds a telescope in one hand while resting his head on the other. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

and inspire future generations to strive for similar greatness, such as when NASA and LEGO sent the Galileo figurine into space as part of an educational campaign to entice children to pursue science.[4] And then there are monuments—material or otherwise—that celebrate Galileo for his perseverance. These monuments refer implicitly or explicitly to the trial of 1633, in which the Catholic Church convicted him on the charge of "vehement suspicion of heresy." Again, Galileo's story is seen as inspirational and has been put to use in a surprisingly broad array of situations.

Still, that Galileo is so widely known and celebrated today is not self-evident. Galileo's fame did not develop organically as a result of his admittedly impressive achievements, nor because he was so apt at self-promotion. Instead, his worldwide renown is the result of a long and intense fight over his fame that involved Italian and European artists, poets, courtiers, mathematicians, astronomers, philosophers, ambassadors, diplomats, noblemen, friars, priests, and cardinals and started during his lifetime. The trial is of course the prime example of the intensity of this fight. Galileo barely

escaped *damnatio memoriae* in 1633, when the formal and informal measures imposed by the Catholic Church significantly shaped the way his own contemporaries and later generations remembered him. Shortly after his death in 1642, one of his students, the mathematician Evangelista Torricelli, lamented that posthumous glory turned out to be worth very little, as Galileo had already almost been forgotten, and even now it is almost impossible to think about Galileo without also discussing the trial. However, the trial did not initiate as much as aggravate existing doubts and feelings of unease regarding Galileo and his works. Galileo, his discoveries, and his method of discovery were controversial well before 1633, as Wotton's words remind us. His 1610 discoveries of Jupiter's satellites and the moon's rugged surface went against the traditional body of knowledge, and even before that, from the earliest beginning of his career, Galileo had been involved in scholarly polemics. Strikingly, Galileo was also not the first to turn his telescope to the night sky, nor did controversies regarding his discoveries cease after the publication of his *Sidereus Nuncius*.[5] And yet, Galileo *did* achieve widespread fame—defined here as being known by people he did not know—during his lifetime. How, then, did this come about? Who shaped it, through what means and for what reasons, and what impact did it have?

This book tells the story of Galileo's fame as it developed and changed during his lifetime. It argues that his fame was not merely the direct result of his personal merit, strategic planning, and scientific achievements but the consequence of direct, conscious intervention by diverse groups of people, including many who are not immediately associated with the pursuit of knowledge. This was a period of rapid change in how knowledge was produced and disseminated, as scholars all over Europe turned their gaze to the natural world around them and compared their findings and observations about bodies, plants, and stars to what they had previously held to be true. Eager to contrast and collate their findings with other scholars, they not only sent a flurry of letters across the continent but also increasingly turned to print. Meanwhile, the marvelous nature of their findings captured the attention of audiences outside the world of academic learning. The result was not just a new appetite for learning but also the enhanced visibility of scholars as figures of public interest. While we know much about

the people, places, and practices shaping the changes in knowledge production and dissemination, we do not yet fully understand the role played by local, regional, and international communities of scholars, artists, poets, and clerics in shaping the increased public recognition for new scholarly achievements and their discoverers, as well as the impact this had on the type of scholars who were held up as paragons of exemplary scholarship.

We also have not realized how intimately the concept of fame, which emerged in this period as a category connecting local reputation to later, international celebrity, was intertwined with ideas about truth and value, falsity and danger, reliability and untrustworthiness. The concept of fame, this book shows, was directly related to reputation, glory, and legal credibility but also to rumor, hearsay, and talk shared among large, mostly anonymous groups of people. Such groups were still highly suspicious and associated with rebellious intent, even as signs of public recognition increasingly came to be seen as positive. Fame thrived on this ambiguity, as the discussions it evoked spurred ever more talk, leading to more attention, visibility, and exposure. But it also meant fame was a highly ambiguous, volatile asset, especially when—as in Galileo's case—the ambiguities inherent to fame became entangled with the hopes, doubts, and anxieties surrounding new knowledge, new forms of knowledge production and communication, and new strategies for knowing at a distance. Galileo's fame became at once a focal point for people aiming to advance novel ways of knowing and a serious sign of danger for people aiming to defend established authorities. The interplay between these different views crucially shaped his life and his career. But Galileo's fame also acted as a catalyst for these wider recalibrations shaping the new culture of learning. The unprecedented public visibility of his work and his person invited engagement, controversies, and debate, and even rejections of his work, published in print or hurled from the pulpit, though meant to limit the impact of Galileo's work, further increased the public presence of scientific discoveries and practitioners.

This book follows Galileo and his supporters, opponents, and competitors from his earliest years as an aspiring young mathematician trying to find a university position, to his breakthrough in 1610, when he suddenly became one of the most famous men in

Europe, all the way to his death while exiled and semiforgotten in his villa in Arcetri. This journey takes us to universities in Padua, Bologna, and Pisa; to academies, palaces, and Inquisition rooms in Rome; and to courtly institutions and scholars' residences all over Europe, as well as to the courts of law, churches, streets, and squares of Florence and Venice. In tracing how Galileo's fame was shaped and discussed in each of these spaces, this book reveals how debates over the value of public recognition were informed by cultural, legal, and religious ways of thinking.

Early Modern Fame and Its Brokers

Galileo first became famous in the relatively short period after the publication of his *Sidereus Nuncius*. The book came out in March 1610, and in the following months news of his discoveries traveled fast throughout Europe, with early newsletters (*avvisi*) and personal letters playing an especially important part in its dissemination. These sources were particularly efficient in reaching the political and intellectual elite at courts and universities, and most European princes had become familiar with Galileo and his discoveries by the winter of 1610–1611. But Galileo's fame was not strictly confined to Europe's courts and universities. Various contemporaries reported that the streets and squares of Italian towns were rife with talk about him, he was repeatedly discussed in sermons (an early modern mass medium), and his name and telescopic discoveries were, with some regularity, used as a manner of speaking, as when the Venetian ambassador in Paris wrote that "France does not require the glasses of Galileo to see into the intentions of others."[6] His contemporaries also discussed his fame frequently, explicitly, and vigorously. At the center of their discussions, as in broader debates on fame, were questions of profit, worth, and value—in the monetary but especially in the moral sense.

For most people, fame was at once something to aspire to and to be wary of, for several reasons. First of all, fame had been widely recognized since antiquity to be a very unstable asset. Although it sometimes grew slowly and steadily and lasted for centuries, fame could also be amassed quickly and lost just as speedily. The ancient, medieval, and early modern personification of fame, the powerful goddess Fama, perfectly exemplified this duality. Her wings could

Fig. I.3. Johann Sadeler, *Allegory of Fame*, late sixteenth century. Fame transcends the earthly realm, making her way to the heavens; below on left is the moon and above on the right, the sun. Source: Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.