CHAPTER 6

Science and Rhetoric: From Giordano Bruno’s Cena de le Ceneri to Galileo’s Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems

Ingrid D. Rowland

The year 1610, as Floris Cohen has noted, marked a signal moment in the history of science.¹ In that year, Galileo Galilei, Professor of Mathematics at the University of Padua, announced his discoveries with the telescope, including the craters of the Moon, several clouds of stars, and the moons of Jupiter, in a book he called the Sidereus nuncius (‘The Starry Messenger’).² He wrote in a limpid Latin to reach an international community of readers; such was the importance of his message. The book was published in Venice, not only because Venice was the center of Italy’s printing industry, but also because Galileo’s home institution, the University of Padua, was that city’s de facto university, chartered by the Venetian Republic rather than a Pope or a monarch.³ The title page of the Starry Messenger reveals, however, that Galileo harbored ulterior plans for his own career, for it records the fact that he has named the moons of Jupiter the Medicean Stars, paying homage to the sons of Cosimo II de’ Medici, the Grand Duke of Tuscany.⁴ A Tuscan himself and a restless soul by nature, Galileo was hoping for an appointment to the University of Pisa, at a much higher salary and with greater prestige than Padua was willing to provide. The naming of the stars may have played a smaller role than the magnitude of Galileo’s achievement in furthering his career, but he was certainly summoned shortly thereafter to join the faculty at Pisa, the shining star in that university’s academic firmament.⁵

In early seventeenth-century Tuscany, the language of choice, from lofty diplomatic correspondence to exchanges on the street, was Tuscan vernacular. Galileo, of course, would feel perfectly at home; other professors, like Paganino Gaudenzio, born in an Alpine valley of what is now Switzerland, were put at

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¹ Floris Cohen, in this volume, esp. p. 150.
² Galileo Galilei, Sidereus nuncius, 1610.
⁴ Biagioli, Galileo Courtier, passim.
a distinct disadvantage, and Gaudenzio, at least, would continue to publish in Latin. For Galileo, with his international stature guaranteed, writing in Tuscan was a luxury he could easily permit himself. Ever since the fifteenth century, patriotic Tuscans had enjoyed drawing an invidious contrast between their Etruscan tradition of small independent city-states and the iron fist of Imperial Rome. From the halls of the Vatican, in turn, Lorenzo Valla launched eloquent invectives against that ‘Etruscan shit’ Poggio Bracciolini. By the mid-sixteenth century, a whole school of thought had developed in Tuscany that traced local volgare directly back to the language of Etruria, despite the fact that every effort to read surviving Etruscan inscriptions had fallen short of total—or even minor—success. With implicit faith, these Tuscan loyalists believed that there was no nuance of human experience, no arcane technical, legal, or theological term, no glimmer of poetry for which the volgare of Dante and Petrarch could not match or surpass Latin; never mind that Grand Duke Cosimo I and his successors were not exactly republican freedom fighters in the grand Etruscan tradition, or that various members of that Florentine dynasty had come down as brutally on Volterra and Siena as any Roman legion ever came down on a barbarian horde.

From Pisa, accordingly, and with great gusto, Galileo would write in vernacular, from his work on floating bodies, Il Saggiatore (‘The Assayer’, 1622), to his supremely ambitious Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems of 1632. Floris Cohen has shown how Galileo’s Two New Sciences of 1638 incorporates Latin material written during his time in Padua into a dialogue written in Tuscan.

Galileo’s choice to write in Tuscan flattered not only the Grand Duke. The papal conclave of 1623 crowned the Tuscan prelate Maffeo Barberini as Urban VIII. The new pope had been born outside Florence in the little town of Barberino Val d’Elsa, with a coat of arms that bore three horseflies, tafani; the family name was, in fact, Barberini de’ Tafani. At a certain point in his career, the ambitious Maffeo decided that his heraldic horseflies might eventually

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7 Cipriani, Il mito etrusco.
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9 For the siege of Volterra, see Fiumi, L’impresa di Lorenzo de’ Medici contro Volterra. For the siege of Siena, see Cantagalli, La guerra di Siena.
10 Cohen, in this volume, pp. 150–51.