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# On the Life of Galileo. Viviani's *Historical Account* and Other Early Biographies

Edited by Stefano Gattei

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REVIEWED BY OSMO PEKONEN



In our 2015 spring issue, the Italian historian of science Stefano Gattei reviewed John L. Heilbron's major biography of Galileo Galilei, which he called "by far the richest account of Galileo's achievements yet produced." Now comes Gattei's own *magnum opus* in Galileo studies: a compendium of the fourteen earliest biographies devoted to the "father of modern science." The authors are Vincenzo Viviani (1654, 1659, 1674, 1702), Girolamo Ghilini (ca. 1633), Leo Allatius (1633), Gian Vittorio Rossi (1643), Vittorio Siri (1647), Vincenzo Galilei (ca. 1654), Niccolò Gherardini (1654), Lorenzo Crasso (1666), Isaac Bullart (1682), Joachim von Sandrart (1683), and Paul Freher (1688). Among these names, a layman (like me) is likely to recognize, besides Vincenzo Galilei, the astronomer's son, only the mathematician Vincenzo Viviani (1622–1703), Galileo's most devoted student, whose influential *Racconto storico* was drafted in 1654 but published only in 1717.

Together these texts form an important corpus of source material shedding light on the beginnings of the Promethean myth of Galileo as a champion of freedom of thought against dogmatic authority. Each of the early accounts has its peculiar way of dealing with the most dramatic episode of Galileo's life, his condemnation by the Roman Inquisition in 1633, so this book allows us to discover the origins of the "Galileo affair" with its Europe-wide implications. As usual, one needs to access the very roots of a myth in order to achieve a reasonable deconstruction.

These first testimonies include discordant voices by Galileo's pupils, friends, and critics, not all of whom possessed the prerequisites to understand his science. Depending on their personal attitude toward the most important institution of the day, the Church, they sought either to perpetuate Galileo's memory, to appropriate him, or to downplay his importance. Viviani, whose influence proved to be the most durable, felt the need to compromise with the Church, to consign the clash of faith and science to the past, and to move forward. He created, in 1702, the first public monument to his teacher: a bust and a lengthy inscription in Latin on the facade of his palazzo in Florence.

All the texts are given both in their original language (Italian, Latin, or French) and on facing pages in English, painstakingly translated and meticulously annotated by Gattei. The more laudatory texts contain poems by people such as Francesco Stelluti, Giovan Battista Marino (a sonnet in Italian), and Guillaume Colletet (a sonnet in French), among others. All the authors are carefully introduced, and their initial intentions and later influence properly discussed. Many of the prevailing misconceptions about Galileo can be traced to the earliest texts, including those by the well-meaning Viviani.

Aiming at absolute comprehensiveness, Gattei also discusses some failed biographical projects by other seventeenth-century authors such as Martin Vogel and Antonio Baldigiani. Then there is the elusive case of the Englishman Thomas Salusbury (c. 1625–c. 1665), who wrote the first substantial Galileo biography to appear in print in any language. A single copy seems to have survived the Great Fire of London in 1666; it briefly resurfaced when it was auctioned in London, at Sotheby's, on October 26, 2005, but it has remained inaccessible to scholars ever since.

The present volume also contains dozens of illustrations related to the persons, manuscripts, and monuments under discussion. As an appendix, it presents in its entirety the often-quoted early poem *Adulatio perniciosa* (first published in 1620) written in Alcaic stanzas by Cardinal Maffeo Barberini, who was later to become Pope Urban VIII and Galileo's prosecutor. The poem is a moral warning against "pernicious adulation" and the blinding effect of power and achievement; it famously includes a passage celebrating Galileo's discoveries. Gattei concludes his study by observing how the Pope "was himself blinded by too much adulation and was prevented from seeing what was happening in front of his eyes. He fell victim to the dangers Cardinal Barberini had poetically described years earlier."

There is no end in sight for the Galileo affair. The Museo Galileo in Florence maintains a Galileo bibliography that by now contains some 24,000 entries of books, theses, and articles in all languages devoted to his troubled story. The fourteen early biographies made available by Gattei for the first time in English will undoubtedly generate considerable additional debate. Meanwhile, the controversial scientist himself rests in peace, as we hope, in the Florentine Basilica di Santa Croce, where Machiavelli, Michelangelo, and Rossini, among other famous sons of Italy, keep him company.

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