Rumour and Renown

The Latin word *fama* means ‘rumour’, ‘report’, ‘tradition’, as well as modern English ‘fame’ or ‘renown’. This magisterial and groundbreaking study in the literary and cultural history of rumour and renown, by one of the most influential living critics of Latin poetry, examines the intricate dynamics of their representations from Homer to Alexander Pope, with a focus on the power struggles played out within attempts to control the word, both spoken and written. Central are the personifications of *Fama* in Virgil and Ovid and the rich progeny spawned by them, but the book focuses on a wide range of genres other than epic, and on a variety of modes of narrating, dramatizing, critiquing and illustrating *fama*. Authors given detailed readings include Livy, Tacitus, Petrarch, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson and Milton.

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Rumour and Renown

Representations of Fama in Western Literature

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Preface and acknowledgements

On one of the Roman writing tablets from Vindolanda, a fort on Hadrian’s Wall, can be read the words INTEREA PAVIDAM VOLITANS PINNATA . . ., a writing exercise, it may be, that took for its text Aeneid 9.473–4 Interea pauidam uolitans pennata per urbern | nuntia Fama ruit . . . ‘Meanwhile the messenger winged Rumour rushed in flight through the panic-stricken city.’ Virgil’s Fama has winged her way from the centre of Rome to the remote northern borders of the Empire, in keeping with Fama’s unstoppable power of spreading and proliferating. As the subject of scholarly study she is also impossible to pin down and delimit, and this book, long though it is, offers only a sample of what could be said about Fama’s manifestations and mutations. My own starting point, many years ago, was the major personification of Fama in Book 4 of the Aeneid, and the Virgilian and Ovidian tradition has remained central amidst the ramifications into genres other than epic. Virgil’s and Ovid’s – Fama is encyclopaedic in her pretensions, like the genre of epic itself, of which in one of her guises Fama may be considered a personification, and the workings of Fama in epic offer ready vantage points on to the structures and dynamics of rumour and renown, report and tradition, across a wide range of literary and non-literary contexts in antiquity and later. This is a book about a network of themes and images in classical antiquity, and the reception thereof, and it has little to say about Fama’s more recent and explosive transmutation into fame-as-celebrity. Modern celebrity has clear continuities with older forms of fame and renown, but ‘the celebrity’ is largely a creation of the technologies of mass circulation that have grown at an increasing rate of acceleration over the last two centuries, although even in this true to the propensity for monstrous growth and bewildering speed that Virgil identified in his Fama.

The long gestation of this book has meant that I have repeatedly been able to profit from the work of those quicker to publish than myself. Of the many works that touch on Fama either centrally or in the course of other matters, I would single out the remarkable Lille thesis by Séverine

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1 Bowman and Thomas 1994: no. 118.
2 On the earlier history of modern celebrity culture see e.g. Mole 2007 and 2009; for more recent developments e.g. Rojek 2001. For an attempt to draw links between antiquity and modern celebrity see Payne 2009.
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Clément-Tarantino (2006), which for the first time reveals the full scale of the intertextualities woven into the Virgilian Fama, and in so doing provides a detailed anatomy of important aspects of fama in the Greco-Roman tradition. Drafts of various parts of the book have benefited from the comments of audiences in many parts of the world. A full list of those who have offered me leads and insights would include most of my friends and colleagues in classics and other disciplines, and to all of them I am grateful. Those to whom I remember particular debts include Bill Allan, Alessandro Barchiesi, Katerina Carvounis, Helen Cooney, Martin Dinter, Denis Feeney, William Fitzgerald, Mary Flannery, Don Fowler, Peta Fowler, Simon Goldhill, Emily Gowers, Judith Hallett, Stephen Harrison, John Henderson, Luke Houghton, Richard Hunter, Maggie Kilgour, Helen Lovatt, Carol Magner, Jay MacPherson, Peter Mack, Simon Malloch, Victoria Moul, Stephen Oakley, David Quint, Michael Reeve, Alessandro Schiesaro, Rob Shorrock, Joe Trapp, Tony Woodman; where fama is failed by memory I hope that I shall not incur inuidia. I am also grateful to the two readers for Cambridge University Press, and to my editor Michael Sharp for his forbearance in allowing the book to expand to a length far greater than that for which it was originally contracted. Iveta Adams, my exceptionally sharp-sighted copy-editor, has saved me from many errors and infelicities. The Classics Faculty of Cambridge University kindly invited me to publish the book in the relaunched series ‘Cambridge Classical Studies’. Over the last four years I have enjoyed the luxury of uninterrupted reading and writing as a Senior Research Fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge, a beacon of enlightened generosity in a turbulent world.


I am grateful to Hackett Publishing Company, Inc. and to Tony Woodman for permission to use the latter’s translation of Tacitus’ Annals.
Abbreviations

CIL Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (Berlin, 1863–).
FGrH F. Jacoby Fragmente der griechischen Historiker (Berlin, 1923–).
LdfE Lexikon des frühgriechischen Epos (Göttingen, 1955–).
OED Oxford English Dictionary.
TLL Thesaurus Linguae Latinae (Leipzig, 1900–).