

**The Character of Galileo Galilei in
Bertolt Brecht's *Leben des Galilei***

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June 8, 2003

Deutsche Zusammenfassung

In diesem Aufsatz geht es um die Hauptfigur in dem Stück *Leben des Galilei*. Die Hauptfigur, die Galileo Galilei heisst, ist ein interessanter Wissenschaftler. Er glaubt an das kopernische System, das die Bewegung der Erde um die Sonne beschreibt. Die katholische Kirche ist gegen diese neue Idee, weil es gegen die Schriften der Kirche verstosst. Diese Kirche benutzt alle ihre zur Verfügung stehenden Mittel, um Galileo zu Schweigen zu bringen.

Der Aufsatz fängt mit einer Zusammenfassung der Handlung an. Diese Zusammenfassung beschreibt das Leben von Galileo, der ein erfolgreicher Wissenschaftler war. Er war wahrscheinlich der erste Mensch, der ein Fernrohr verwendet hat, die Himmel zu beobachten.

Galileo Galilei

This paper will be looking at the role of Galileo Galilei in Bertolt Brecht's play, *Leben des Galilei*. Perhaps what is most interesting about this play and the main character is that most of the play's storyline was actually based on the life of the Italian astronomer Galileo Galilei, who lived between 1564 and 1642. The story of his life is very well known, especially the fact that the Catholic Church used their authority to silence his ideas of planetary motion and support of the Copernican system. His life is representative of the competing forces at that time, both in Italy, and across much of the rest of Europe. On one side there was the slowly, but constantly developing scientific movement, which felt that the best way to explain the world was through science. On the other side was the Catholic Church, which felt that religion had all the answers and that science should not be allowed to question their asserted religious truths, and the Catholic Church in Italy

during the time of Galileo Galilei was an institution that had an enormous amount of political power

The Plot

The play *Leben des Galilei* starts off in the year 1609 in Padua in the Venetian Republic, which was considered to be free from the oversight of the Catholic Church. In the opening scene of the play, we see Galileo attempting to convince Andrea, the son of his housekeeper, that his ideas regarding the movement of planetary bodies are correct. This critical scene sets the plot for the rest of the book. The scene demonstrates that Galileo is a scientist, and that he believes in Copernicus' concept of heliocentric orbit, i.e. the sun is the center point and the earth revolves around it, as compared to the accepted Ptolemaic concept of a geocentric orbit, which stated that the earth was the center of the universe. Despite Galileo's belief in the Copernican system, he does not have the means to prove it. This all changes when a young student by the name of Ludovico Marsili enters the scene. He has come from Holland and desires to take physics lessons from Galileo. With him from Holland, he has brought a telescope, which had recently been invented. It is still a rather primitive object, but immediately Galileo recognizes the potential it has, both as sellable good and as a scientific research tool.

Shortly thereafter, we see that Galileo has sold the telescope to the Republic of Venice, particularly for the purpose of military reconnaissance, and for which he receives the money that he had wanted from the state. This money helps Galileo to continue to study the nature of the heavenly bodies, and in January of 1610 he shows his friend Sagredo that he has discovered that there are mountains on the moon and that the moon is not self-illuminating. The implications of this discovery are potentially devastating for

the claims of the divinity and uniqueness of the earth by the Catholic Church, as Galileo states, “Was du siehst, ist, daß es keinen Unterschied zwischen Himmel und Erde gibt.”¹ His friend warns him of the dangers, but Galileo believes that the fact that he can prove his discovery will shield him from harm.

In the next scene in the play, we learn that Galileo has moved to Florence and continues his studies and observations there. Despite the fact that he can prove that his observations are correct, many people still continue to doubt him. During this stay in Florence, one also sees just how important he considers his research to be. The town becomes afflicted by the plague, so Galileo sends everyone off to the countryside, yet he himself refuses to leave. His housekeeper elects to stay with him, but she falls ill to the plague, and her son Andreas returns shortly after he was sent away.

After these events, one begins to see an increase in the resistance to Galileo’s ideas. Galileo has named the visible moons of Jupiter after the Medicis, and has secured a position as a physicist in Florence. A particularly interesting exchange occurs when Galileo attempts to show the young Grand Duke. The mathematician and philosopher that he has brought with him obviously hold a great deal of contempt for Galileo, and they even claim that perhaps the moons he has named after the Medicis are fictitious. Galileo continues to work there for several years, until in 1616 the Cardinal Inquisitor convinces Galileo to stop advocating the Copernican system, which Galileo does for the next eight years of his life.

The next couple of sections take place eight years after Galileo’s meeting with the Cardinal Inquisitor. During the time that he had remained silent, Galileo had contented himself with investigating various phenomena of physics, such as water displacement

¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Leben des Galilei* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955), 28.

compared to the density of an object. But, at this time a new Pope is elected, and Galileo believes that this Pope will remove the restrictions that had been placed on advocating the Copernican system. Galileo is able to resume and publish his work, which begins to gain widespread popularity with the common people of Italy. The progress that had seemingly been made by Galileo in gaining acceptance of his research by the Church leaders disappears almost overnight in 1633.

It is in 1633 that the Inquisition summons Galileo to Rome. It is at this time that we see that Galileo is no longer just considered an astronomer with interesting ideas regarding planetary motion. Among some he is now viewed as symbol of freedom, such as the manufacturer Vanni, who while visiting Galileo states “Ich bin nicht ein Mann, der viel von den Bewegungen der Sterne weiß, aber für mich sind Sie der Mann, der für die Freiheit kämpft, neue Dinge lernen zu dürfen.”² Unfortunately, the support that Galileo has gained over the years is not enough to protect from prosecution by the Inquisition, and he is forced to accompany them to a hearing in Rome.

It is during this trial by the Inquisition that Galileo is forced to renounce his research and his statements supporting the Copernican system. The Inquisition is ordered by the Pope to show the instruments of torture to Galileo, but to not do any harm to him whatsoever. The display of the torture instruments suffices, and Galileo recants. He is sentenced to house arrest for the rest of his life, and is subsequently abandoned by his friends, who had strongly believed that Galileo would never, under any amount of duress, forsake his research. Confined to his home, Galileo grows to be an old man, and the only one who remains by his side is his daughter, Virginia.

² Ibid. 100.

At this time it appears that Galileo has completely given in and that the Catholic Church has won in suppressing the continued spread of the Copernican system. In the next section of the play, during his house arrest, one sees that he has actually been writing a new book, which looks at two new branches of sciences, the science of motion and mechanical physics. Andrea stops by for the first time on his way to Holland to pursue scientific research there, and one sees that he is still bitter about Galileo's decision to recant. This changes when Galileo reveals to Andrea that he has been secretly making a second copy of his book, which he gives to Andrea. Andrea then takes it with him across the border so that he reveal Galileo's work to the rest of the world.

The Character of Galileo

As was already touched upon above, Galileo is obviously the central figure in Brecht's play. Certainly, Galileo Galilei is very intelligent and a rather successful scientist, but as far as his interactions with the world go he is a seemingly normal person. Perhaps he likes to eat a little too much and purchase things that are a little too extravagant, but that just further shows his humanness. One of his most important qualities in the beginning of the book is that he believes that reason will prevail in mankind. Throughout his career as a scientist, his main goal was the pursuit of the truth, so long as that truth was provable, and he believed that those tangible proofs would be widely accepted, but the truths that he did discover, regarding the movement and position of planetary bodies, were considered dangerous to the ruling Catholic Church, because these truths directly contradicted the assertions that were found in the Church scriptures. Because of this, the Church uses its power in the play to silence him and to keep his ideas from spreading.

Throughout the play one can see the continuous evolution of the character as he achieves further success and runs into greater barriers in his attempts to have the truth of Earth's orbit recognized. In the beginning, Galileo cannot prove that the Copernican theory is correct, but he truly believes that it accurately describes the position of the earth with relation to the sun. Although another man, Giordano Bruno, had been burned for promoting the Copernican system, Galileo, perhaps naively, believed that the provability of his assertion was imperative, and the fact that he could prove the Copernican system would lead to it being accepted. He also believed strongly that reason would ultimately prevail in the face of proof, and for him, his belief in the reasoning capability of mankind was incredibly important, as this quote exemplifies, "Allen Unterschied! Sieh her, Sagredo! Ich glaube an den Menschen, und das heißt, ich glaube an seine Vernunft! Ohne diesen Glauben würde ich nicht die Kraft haben, am Morgen aus meinem Bett aufzustehen."³ This optimism is a central part of Galileo's character, and helps in understanding how he continues to change throughout the play.

As one begins to progress through the play, it becomes apparent that the reason Galileo so strongly believed in is not as widespread as he thought. He begins to become frustrated at the shortsightedness of his peers and their refusal to accept the truth. Though, the lower classes did begin to accept the results of his research, due largely in part to the fact that Galileo published his research in the "common" language, but many of the people who were in a position of power refused to accept Galileo's findings. This is perhaps best exemplified in scene four, in which Galileo is trying to convince the mathematician and the philosopher that the moons of Jupiter he named after the Medici family do exist. These two men avoid looking through the telescope, even insinuating

³ Ibid. 34.

that Galileo had manipulated the telescope to show something not there, telling him “daß, was in Ihrem Rohr ist und was am Himmel ist, zwierlei sein kann.”⁴ Instead of even attempting to discern the actual truth, they engage in a useless argument about Aristotle and his system of explaining the planets as immovable, which they hold to be the absolute truth. This scene is really just the beginning of greater resistance by those in power to the results of Galileo’s observations.

We can see that Galileo’s hope was temporarily bolstered by the fact that findings were verified by the monk, Clavius, who worked in the research institute of the Vatican. This disappeared shortly afterwards when the Cardinal Inquisitor met with him and attempted to convince him to stay quiet about the Copernican system, and the Church issued a religious decree that stated that the earth is the center of the universe and that it was forbidden to say anything against that. For eight years, Galileo was willing to stay quiet, but that finally changed with the election of the new Pope. He believed this Pope would listen to him, and perhaps even embrace the Copernican system, because this Pope had also been a scientist. It is at this point that Galileo makes an important statement regarding his opinion on truth and the acceptance of truth: “Ich sage Ihnen: Wer die Wahrheit nicht weiß, der ist bloß ein Dummkopf. Aber wer sie weiß und sie eine Lüge nennt, der ist ein Verbrecher!”⁵ This statement is particularly important because it represents Galileo’s opinion of those who would sacrifice the truth to continue perpetrating a lie, which becomes even more important with regards to Galileo’s actions later on in the play.

⁴ Ibid. 46.

⁵ Ibid. 81.

The character of Galileo changes when he is called before the Inquisition. For all his life he had been an advocate of the truth, and had called anyone who would deny that truth a criminal. At this point, one sees that Galileo himself becomes a criminal, as when he is faced with the instruments of torture used by the Inquisition, he decides to publicly admit that he was incorrect and to renounce his statements regarding the nature of heavenly bodies. The act of getting Galileo to renounce this was rather skillful. The new Pope understood Galileo, and understood his weaknesses, especially with regards to his sensitivity to the concepts of pleasure and pain. An excellent example of this is when the Pope is discussing the method to use on Galileo and remarks, “Er kennt mehr Genüsse als irgendein Mann, den ich getroffen habe. Er denkt aus Sinnlichkeit. Zu einem alten Wein oder einem neuen Gedanken könnte er nicht nein sagen.”⁶

From this point on, Galileo seems to be a defeated man. He no longer seems to praise the virtues of reason in people. Instead, he seems content to live his life under house arrest. Though he continues to write his book, it does not appear to be done so out of desire to bring reason to the world, but instead is done out of habit. Even when he reveals the second copy that he had made in secret to Andrea, he still seems very reserved and uncaring as to whether it actually makes it to the outside world.

The biggest problem that Galileo faced in his quest for the truth and his belief in human reason was the Catholic Church. They had almost complete power over the individuals based on their assertion of divine right. This concept of rule was based on the idea that the earth is the prized creation of God, and as such is individual and unique and is placed in the center of the universe, and that the Church was divinely sanctioned to rule over the people in the name of God. The Church feared losing their power. Galileo’s proof

⁶ Ibid. 108.

contradicted the idea that the earth was the center of the universe, and in doing so it threatened the position of the church. The Catholic Church claimed that it was an absolute truth that the earth was placed at the center of the universe, and as such was the word of God, which was supposed to be infallible. If this claim were to be proved wrong, the Catholic Church feared that people would begin doubting the truth of the Church's claims, as it is the one that is supposed to possess the absolute truths that can explain life itself.

Interpretation by the Secondary Source

In *Oldenbourg Interpretationen*, one of the major aspects that the author, Wolfgang Hallet, focuses on is the *Sinnlichkeit* and *Rationalität* of Galileo.⁷ These characteristics stem from Galileo's enjoyment of sensual pleasures, and culminate in what the author terms a *Forschungstrieb*. The author sees Galileo's devotion to reason is a result of being able to produce demonstrable proof, as Galileo is able to feel joy from the hands on experience of doing so. With the Catholic Church's explanation of the state of the heavens, it is intangible and cannot be proved scientifically, so therefore that way of explaining the universe really does not appeal to Galileo. One example that the author uses to demonstrate the satisfaction Galileo is able to gain from concrete science is the beginning of the play in which he uses both a chair and an apple to physically demonstrate how the Copernican system functions.⁸ The telescope can be seen as the point at which Galileo begins to delve even further, almost obsessively into scientific research. When one considers Galileo's attraction to the tool, this makes sense, as a telescope is essentially a tool to strongly amplify the senses. The author also sees the

⁷ Wolfgang Hallet, *Oldenbourg Interpretationen: Bertolt Brecht – Leben des Galilei*, (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1991), 29.

⁸ *Ibid.* 32.

overall sensuality and attraction to the scientific discoveries as not just being unique to Galileo, but also representing a symbol of human seduction, which the author uses a quote from the book, “Verführung der Beweise,”⁹ to describe.¹⁰

I feel one area that the author did not look at, but could have discussed was Galileo’s strong enjoyment of materialistic/sensual pleasures in comparison to the position of the Church. On one hand, one could see Galileo as a representation of the extreme indulgence of the human senses. On the other side exists the Catholic Church, which has always considered such indulgence to be a sin, and do whatever they can to stop this sin. When one views it from this angle, the struggle is no longer just about the truth of how the planets are situated in the heavens, but it is now about the individual being able to enjoy the sensations that exist in life and the Church’s attempt to repress this as “immoral” or being against God.

The Concept of Galileo as a Hero

Galileo Galilei fits well into the discussion of the hero that has been the focus of the class. As is consistent with the main characters in the literature that we have read, it is very obvious that Galileo is not modeled after the concept of a classical hero, i.e. a glistening muscular man who is a highly accomplished warrior. Instead, Galileo is an old man—a scientist who enjoys the satisfaction of a rich meal and fine wine. What sets him apart from other people is that he has discovered the truth of the placement of the earth in the heavens and he has a means to prove it, and throughout the play he constantly attempts to uncover this truth to the outside world. From this discovery, Galileo not only becomes a prominent/almost heroic figure in science, but he also becomes a symbol of

⁹ Brecht 38.

¹⁰ Hallet 32.

social change who sees the progress of astronomy as a new era.¹¹ There exists a constant struggle between him and the church, and a struggle that rages between his moral convictions and his desire for self-preservation. The first struggle, between him and the church, is a result of his ideas conflicting with those of the Catholic Church. One could say that Galileo represented the ideals of Enlightenment, in that he believed that reason would ultimately triumph, and that the world could be explained through the constant evolution and application of scientific methods.

Galileo's actions do raise a difficult question. How can he be considered a hero if he was willing to quickly abandon the truth that he had for so long advocated, and becoming in his own words a *Verbrecher* because of his denial of the truth? One must wonder if Brecht even intended for him to truly be a hero, as is shown by Galileo himself when he proclaims, "Unglücklich das Land, das Helden nötig hat."¹² I think that Galileo could be considered a hero, but not in the old sense. Instead, Galileo is a hero because he was essentially the leader of both a scientific, and a social revolution. Even though he renounced what he had believed in, he had already spearheaded both social and scientific movements which continued to gain power. I think that for Brecht, Galileo was an attractive character because he represented both a powerful figure who was a victim of social repression, and who, despite his repression still, in the end, managed to contribute to the spread of truth and societal change. Perhaps it could even be said that he was a martyr for social change, whose repression only served to further the discontent that had been slowly growing and speed up the pace of change.

¹¹ Ibid. 43.

¹² Brecht 114.

Works Cited

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