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Bertolt Brecht

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Writing a Biography for a Purpose – *The Life of Galileo* by Brecht

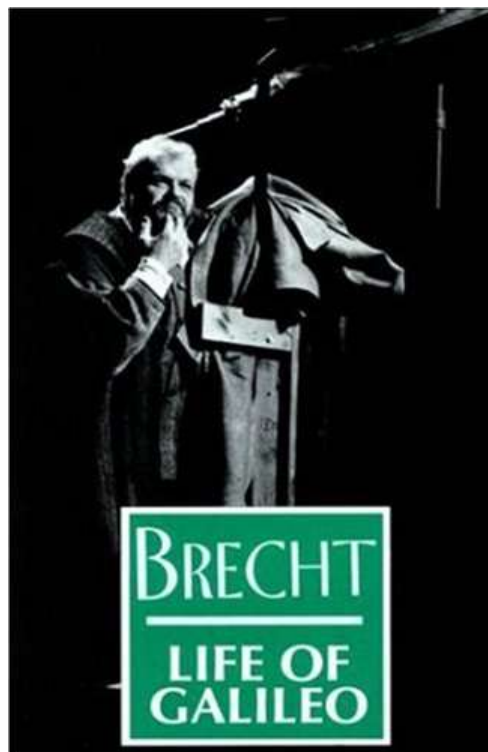
Writing a biography is a great art. The term ‘biography’ was first used by Dryden in 1683. He defined it as ‘the history of particular men’s lives’. The format of biographical writing is still indeterminate. *The Oxford Dictionary* defines it as ‘history of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature’.

Many people have given their own definition to biography. The German dramatist Bertolt Brecht first wrote his biographical play, *The Life of Galileo*, on the eve of the Second World War, as concerns over authoritarianism were rife among the German Left. But Brecht significantly rewrote the play two more times as the War raised questions not only about the dangers of authority, but also the human cost of scientific knowledge in the wake of the atomic bomb.

The Life of Galileo is the first of major plays Brecht wrote in the hope of securing performances in important theatres of the western world. It is a historical play, which deals with the problem of the scientist’s social responsibility.

The writer of this article has relied on the translation of the play by Desmond I. Vesey, which is edited for students by A. G. Stock.

Back ground of the play



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The play stays generally faithful to Galileo's science and timeline, but takes significant liberties with his personal life. Galileo Galilei is one of the great virtuosos of science. He made pioneering observations in astronomy, physics, mathematics, and scientific philosophy. But in the centuries since his death in 1642, Galileo has become a symbol of heroism and heresy – the very archetype of the struggle between science and faith, and the dangers inherent in the pursuit of truth.

Galileo used a telescope, observed the moons of Jupiter, advocated for the heliocentric model, observed sun spots, investigated buoyancy, and wrote on physics. He visited the Vatican twice to defend his work, the second time being made to recant his views, and being confined to house arrest thereafter.

Freedom with the Life Story

One significant liberty that is taken is the treatment of Galileo's daughter Virginia Gamba, who, rather than becoming engaged, was considered unmarriageable by her father and confined to a convent from the age of thirteen, and, further she died of dysentery shortly after her father's recantation. However, Galileo was close with Virginia, and they corresponded extensively.

Condemnation of Scientific Evidence – Subversive Ideas Spread!

Galileo, the sixteenth Century astronomer uses the telescope to establish Copernicus's heliocentric model of the universe. The philosophers at the Medici court refuse to accept his evidence; so do the monks at the *Collegium Romanum*. However, Clavius, the papal astronomer has to admit its truth. Yet the Holy Office denounces the idea of a solar system as heretical on the fear of a collapse in the existing socio, economic and religious orders. So Galileo is forced to keep off astronomy for eight years. His subversive ideas begin to spread.

In 1633, the Medici delivers Galileo to the Inquisition. Pope Urban VIII, himself a mathematician, refuses to protect him. Consequently, Galileo is scared into publicly recanting his theories. For the rest of his life, Galileo lives privately with his daughter, writing the *Discorsi* under the watchful eye of the Church. Nevertheless, he keeps back a copy, and Andrea, his former pupil is able to smuggle it out of the country.

Brecht's Views on Religion

Brecht holds the view that “Each man is free to embrace and profess the religion he would judge to be true according to the light of reason” (De Laubier, 1989: 34). One of the cardinal assertions of Christianity is that *Truth shall free you* (John 8:32). Brecht's play *The Life of Galileo* is about the condemnation of a scientific truth of Galileo's astronomical findings. The Inquisitor cautions the Pope, “what would happen if all these people, so weak in the flesh and

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inclined towards every excess were to believe only in their own common sense which this mad man declares to be the sole court of appeal!” (LG, 1964: p.76).

The questions related to faith are always in conflict with Brecht’s outlook on the religion. He finds religious tension in the society that causes unnecessary conflict and leads even to war among men and nations. Brecht observes that the institutionalized religion is so powerful that it overpowers the individual’s faith and freedom. It also shakes hand with the rich and the ruling class, neglecting the weak and the poor. His approach is a sarcastic appraisal of how the church fails the society.

Galileo’s Commitment to Knowledge

Galileo, with his improved telescope, went to Rome and showed it to the dignitaries of the Catholic Church with great success and honour. Though he had accepted the Copernican theory years earlier, he kept quiet about it for fear of ridicule rather than persecution. He published a treatise in Rome on the spots on the sun, which the Church found dangerous. Yet “the Church hesitated to give a decision, all the more because its official astronomer agreed with Galileo” (LG, 1964: p.105). The Church warned Galileo this time.

The Church declared the doctrine of Copernicus an anti-religion in 1616. Galileo was asked to promise not to hold, teach, or defend it. Nevertheless, Galileo, realizing the social responsibility of himself as a scientist published *A dialogue on the two Principal systems of the Universe* in a debate form, in 1632. In fact, he defended Copernican theory, which gained for him a widespread feeling that the Church has gone too far in hampering the advance of knowledge.

The Church authority suppressed Galileo’s book and Inquisition called him to Rome in 1633. He was warned of being tortured and burned alive if he persisted in his view. This is what the Church has done to those convicted as heretics in the history. However, Galileo gained international acceptance, which made the Church authorities too reluctant to make a decision on him. Hence, they showed him the instruments of torture to make him recant.

Relationship between the Man of Science and the Public: Compulsion to Survive

Looking back, Brecht brings out the relation between man of science and the public through Galileo’s action. The Catholic Church is the most powerful authority of both civil and religious in the history. In those days, the Church alone can decide what is to be made known as truth to the people, even in a scientist’s research findings. Thus, Brecht explains the power of the church and its interference in every sphere of life.

Brecht presents Galileo, a man who struggles between the scientist’s passion for truth and his compulsion to survive. This is a tension created by the church interfering in individual’s freedom. Brecht’s presentation of his characters, especially Galileo, is plausible and according to his reading of human nature.

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In scene 6, there is a significant dialogue between Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmin, which suggests that Galileo may go on working if he agrees that what is true in physics should not be called true in fact:

Galileo: That means that all further scientific research ...
Bellarmin: Is well assured, Signor Galilei. And that in conformity with the Church's view that we cannot know, but we may research. You are at liberty to expound even this teaching through mathematical hypothesis (LG, 1964:50).

This is a robbery of a scientist's work and its practical meaning by the authority of the Church. It limits any research findings in conformity with the Church's view and if one does not agree; must not work. Brecht condemns such an attitude of the church in the words of Andrea in scene 11: "he who does not know the truth is merely an idiot, but he who knows it a lie, is a criminal" (LG, 1964: p.97).

Truth and Falsehood

Brecht wants to make it clear to his audience that the truth is with Galileo and the Church, which has to propagate the truth and goodness, is on the side of falsehood. Brecht's intention is that his audience must understand that the power of the opponent lies in the people's faith. Because people believe, what the church says, as the truth. As long as people have such a blind faith, they may not find the truth. Hence, he makes mockery of it as, "Speak, Speak! The habit, you wear, gives you the right to say whatever you wish" (LG, 1964: p.53). When someone like Galileo contradicts the accepted belief system or comments like Andrea in scene 11, "I cannot wait any longer they are killing the truth" (LG, 1964: p.81) the conflict arises.

Power to Control

Brecht reasons out that truth can stand alone; and falsehood is dependent (sc 10). The Inquisitor finds various reasons to convince the Pope to punish Galileo, lest those who are with their childlike faith in the word of God should go astray. He brings in the theories of scepticism and barbarianism, and affirms his fear of people reposing faith in science and machines instead of in God. This is the magnitude of the disturbances caused by Galileo's new knowledge.

In the words of the Inquisitor lies the fear of the Church authority losing its control over the people. Due to the conflict within the Church authorities, they take a long time for making a decision. The Inquisitor in his long speech in scene 10 refers to Galileo as "mad man", "wicked man" and "worm" (p.77). This shows his personal anger towards Galileo and the unrest within himself.

Despise of Common Man's Language – A Sign of Deep Malady

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Galileo is despised for using common people's language: "This wicked man knows what he is doing when he writes his astronomical works, not in Latin, but in the language of the fishwives and wool merchants" (LG, 1964: p.77). It is ironical of the Inquisitor speaking for the sake of the simple people's faith and despising their own language. Brecht uses it to show that Jesus had chosen his disciples among the common rustic people from the seashore and countryside (Mt 10:2-4, Lk 6: 14-16). However, the Church is not on their side.

Brecht gives Signora Sarti and Galileo's own daughter Virginia as examples of what power the Church exercises over simple devout minds. Other such touches fill in the picture of a changing world and explain the Church's fear of change. Brecht makes it clear that the Church, which is the most powerful authority in the world in Galileo's time, is wrong in its principles of astronomy. It is interested in keeping the people submissive and content with the social order and thereby suppressing the *subversive* ideas.

Interpreting a Religious Text in the Light of Discoveries of Science

Brecht gives a picture of Galileo right from the beginning. His theory of *heliocentric cosmos* (sun-centred universe) does not contradict the Bible or Christian dogma, but the way it is being interpreted at the time. Galileo distinguishes between science and the Bible, which is essential to his theories. His letter to Christina, the Grand Duchess explains the need of the Church to interpret the Bible in the light of the discoveries based on Copernican theories. The life of Galileo teaches a lesson to the church or any religion that works for the salvation of humankind must interpret the word of God according to the signs of the times.

Views on War

The nature of war in *The Life of Galileo* is the conflict between the world of science and the world of faith. The astronomical findings of Galileo create a tension in the scientific certainties of his time, which reflects in the religious sphere too. Hence, Galileo as an individual is forced to face the opposing systems of science, religion and the politics that is linked with religion.

The Life of Galileo takes into account the conflicting war of science with religion and society. This war of conflict lasted for centuries starting from Aristarchus of Somos, a great astronomer of the third century B.C. He pointed out that the pattern would be much simpler if the sun were the fixed centre and the earth, one of the planets going round it (LG, 1964: p.100). However, Aristotle's view of earth-centred universe was accepted and established. After Aristotle, Ptolemy of Alexandria wrote an account of the completely earth-centred design, which was known as the Ptolemaic Universe.

Nicolas Copernicus (1473-1543), a devout Catholic priest and astronomer, made an accurate calendar by calculating the planets whirling round a fixed sun. The Church adopted this calendar in 1582. Later in 1616, while the Church declared it was against religion to profess that

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the sun stood still and the earth moved, it still used the new calendar based on Copernican calculations.

Conflict between Theories

The conflict arose between two different theories: the Ptolemaic theory of Earth-centred Universe and Copernican theory of Sun-centred Universe. Brecht takes his play back to a time when everyone accepted the Ptolemaic theory, and the Copernican theory was beginning to penetrate a few minds. The conflict was with the learned and the people in established positions in society. They were not able to accept the new idea that made nonsense of their qualifications and questioned the social order.

The play reflects Brecht's Marxist view of every individual working for the good of all humanity. However, it is far more a study of history's course depending on individual responsibility. Galileo fully devoted himself to the search for truth at any cost. He pursued research without fully examining its implications on the general humanity. Brecht found this idea relevant to his own age.

Galileo – The Ultimate Reason for Atomic Bomb? The Tragedy of Knowledge for Knowledge's Sake

Brecht ultimately portrays Galileo as the initial instigator of the horrors associated with the atomic bomb. Galileo denounces himself in the play's final scenes because he has pursued knowledge for its own sake, not for the good of humanity. Pursuing truth outside the realm of human needs led to the split between science and society that according to Brecht culminated in the dropping of the bomb. Brecht, as is his style, does not answer the problem completely but leaves that to the reader.

In the original version of Galileo, Brecht portrayed him as a man who cunningly outwits Inquisition in order to pursue his research. However, in 1945, a modern tragedy occurred because of scientific progress and forced Brecht to rethink the theme of his work. He revised the play's ending after the bombing of Hiroshima. Brecht transforms Galileo into a weak man, who recants the truth at the mere sight of the torture instruments.

Surrender to Capitalism – Oppressive Structures

In *The Life of Galileo*, the Marxist theory and Communist practice are not referred to explicitly, though messages about the inequalities of the Capitalist world are intended. The institutions of oppressors, torturers, police, and guards are seen as the phenomena of fascism, while Galileo is presented as a role model for an oppositional scientist in Nazi Germany. He does not allow the compromises made with the authorities paralyze his research. Brecht makes an implicit dramatization of the new knowledge to stand for Marxism and Soviet Communism and the opposing elements of vested interests to the progressive social force of the time, which is Capitalism.

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The oppressive structures stand hand in hand to victimize the common people. In scene 8, Ludovico betrothed to Virginia breaks off the engagement because Galileo does not renounce his subversive studies. "Ludovico is a landlord and counts on the authority of religion to keep his peasants submissive" (LG, 1964: p.110). Brecht makes it clear how the oppressor - the Church - has used direct and indirect means to make Galileo submissive. It is also an indication that the Church is with the landowners who exploit the peasants by keeping them in perpetual submission.

Galileo's discoveries challenge both the scientific and religious certainties of his time. Therefore, the men of learning found it making nonsense of their qualifications, which they mastered from the universities. Their social status and the existing social order stood challenged. A number of unobtrusive touches keep one reminded of the common peoples' interests. For example, the price of milk turns into a symbol of the hard life of the poor under their rulers. Brecht suggests, "Milk would be cheaper if the people were less submissive" (LG, 1964: p.110).

Andrea's reminder to Galileo that the milkman has to be paid (LG, 1964: p.1) is simultaneously a reminder to the Marxist that characteristically human preoccupations are not in the habit of creating wealth but rather the driving forces of life. To Galileo it meant food and books. Galileo seems quite aware of his inability to pay the milkman. His dependence upon the powers for milk and money will eventually cost him his freedom. Galileo retorts that freedom seems to be good business.

The Church resembles the Nazi Government in Germany, which suppresses free comment and drives scientists and scholars to emigrate. All his life Brecht was against authorities who tried to control the people's freedom of opinion.

Observations

The title of the play may be slightly misleading, for the play, in fact, is not a biography of Galileo at all. It is a play that looks at the conflicts between dogma and the scientific method, using the story of Galileo as a starting point. Originally, the play had fifteen scenes, but the 1947 English version has only thirteen scenes. Brecht translated the verses for the 1957 Berlin production.

Brecht's writings show a profound influence from many diverse sources. He was influenced by the modern literary, dramatic, scientific, and philosophic trends of the time. He adopted elements of Greek tragedy in this play. He found inspiration in other German playwrights, notably Buchner and Wedekind, and enjoyed the Bavarian folk play. He had a phenomenal ability to take elements from these seemingly incompatible sources, combine them and convert them into his own works.

Brecht was very much influenced by Marxist ideology since 1926. He supported in his writings the political views of Karl Marx. His Epic theatre was essentially 'Marxian Theatre'.

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One may find evidence to this fact in many of his works during exile from Germany. His anti-Nazi views deprived Brecht of his German citizenship. Brecht showed great interest in *The Life of Galileo* as a case study pertaining to his own modern world. The play reflects his Marxist views in its theme of working for the good of all humanity.

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