Life of Galileo

Bertolt Brecht
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**CHARACTER MAP**

**Galileo Galilei**
Physicist; uses telescope and discovers evidence to support the Copernican model of the universe.

- Supports & warns Sagredo
- Offers to help Vanni
- Sympathetic to but ultimately opposes The little monk
- Supports Mr Priuli
- Engaged Ludovico Marsili
- Cares for Federzoni
- Son of Andrea Sarti
- Feels betrayed by Mrs Sarti
- Son of Cardinal Barberini

**Federzoni**
Lens-grinder and Galileo's assistant; practical and committed to reason over superstition.

- Supports Galileo
- Feels betrayed by Andrea Sarti

**Andrea Sarti**
A keen pupil and devoted follower of Galileo.

- Cares for Federzoni
- Son of Cardinal Barberini

**Cardinal Barberini**
Has studied astronomy; becomes Pope and agrees that Galileo should be coerced into recanting.

- Offers to help Vanni
- Refuses to give pay rise to Mr Priuli
- Refuses to give pay rise to Vanni

**Vanni**
Industrialist; offers help and protection which Galileo refuses.

- Spies on Galileo
- Sympathetic to but ultimately opposes The little monk

**The little monk**
Caught between religion and science; returns to the Church when Galileo recants.

- Admires Ludovico Marsili
- Seeks tutelage from Ludovico Marsili

**Ludovico Marsili**
A wealthy landowner.

- Admires Virginia
- Prototype of Cardinal Barberini

**Virginia**
Earnest, dutiful but naive; a faithful daughter of the Church.

- Engaged Ludovico Marsili
- Daughter of Virginia

**Mr Priuli**
Procurator of Padua University.

- Refuses to give pay rise to Vanni

**Sagredo**
Friend to Galileo.

- Supports Mr Priuli
- Offers to help Galileo

**Mrs Sarti**
Galileo's loyal housekeeper.

- Engaged Ludovico Marsili
- Daughter of Virginia

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Physicist; uses telescope and discovers evidence to support the Copernican model of the universe.

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**The Cardinal Inquisitor**
Convinces the Pope that Galileo’s recantation is necessary.
OVERVIEW

About the author

Bertolt Brecht is an historically significant playwright, so much so that the term ‘Brechtian theatre’ has been coined in connection with his work. Indeed, he is arguably one of the most influential forces in Western theatre since World War II. Brecht’s theory of, and experiments with, epic theatre sought to dismantle the illusion of naturalistic theatre by drawing attention to its artifice: the so-called ‘fourth wall’. (For further information about epic theatre, see the ‘Genre’ section of this guide.) In many ways, Brecht’s concern with critical seeing (the interrogation of what lies beneath appearances) can be largely attributed to the times in which he lived.

Born Eugen Berthold Friedrich Brecht in Germany in 1898, he attended Augsburg Grammar School. He was not an especially notable student, apart from the anti-establishment ideas he was already forming. Biographical synopses of Brecht’s life often make note of his near expulsion after he wrote an essay disputing the patriotic line ‘It is a sweet and honourable thing to die for one’s country’ (Rorrison 1986, p.v). In 1918 (the year following the Russian Revolution), Brecht, by this time a medical student, was conscripted and served as a medical orderly during World War I.

By 1927 Brecht was becoming a recognisable force in the theatre. He maintained his interest in politics and began studying Marx in the 1920s. These two interests intersected so that his plays often reflected overtly political agendas, themes and ideas. When the Nazis won power in 1933, Brecht was forced to flee Germany. While living in exile in Denmark, Sweden and Finland, Brecht wrote his teaching or ‘parable’ plays in which he portrayed abstract political and moral themes in historically and geographically distant contexts. In settings carefully removed from their immediate environments, his audiences were forced to confront moral questions relevant to their own times. Life of Galileo
is one of these ‘epic masterpieces’ (Stanton and Banham 1996, p.43). Originally written in 1938, the play was revised three times to reflect Brecht’s changing views on science and politics – especially the social responsibility of the scientist. (For further information on this revision process, see the ‘Different Interpretations’ section of this guide.)

In 1941 Brecht emigrated to the United States and in 1945 he completed an English version of Life of Galileo with American actor Charles Laughton. At this time, Brecht’s original characterisation of Galileo, in which Galileo was a flawed yet positive figure who outsmarted an authoritarian regime, underwent a fairly radical reimagining. Galileo was subsequently presented as a weak and self-serving symbol of scientific hubris. Of course, such a revision of the central character was directly connected to Brecht’s experiences of World War II, especially the atrocities committed under the guise of scientific research in Nazi Germany. The arrival of the atomic age and the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki gave rise to yet another revision.

In a parallel with Galileo’s experiences before the Inquisition, Brecht was called to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Before he had the chance to see the American version of Life of Galileo on stage in New York, Brecht left America due to his concern about the pervasive anti-Communist sentiment gripping the country. In 1948 Brecht returned to East Berlin, establishing the Berliner Ensemble in the following year with his wife, Helene Weigel. The ensemble was very successful, and was pivotal in firmly establishing Brecht’s influence on contemporary theatre. Brecht died in 1956 before seeing Life of Galileo open at the Berliner Ensemble in 1957.

**Synopsis**

With the help of a Dutch invention, the telescope, the central character, Galileo, finds evidence to support the Copernican system. Galileo wants to share this knowledge but does not recognise (or refuses to acknowledge) how this might affect the teachings and authority of the Catholic Church,
a powerful institution and, indeed, the ideological arm of the ruling class. Despite warnings to the contrary, Galileo goes to Florence and thence to Rome to share his discoveries and to secure funding for further research.

Although the Church representatives at the Collegium Romanum the apex of Jesuit education agree that Galileo is right in his observations, they do not wish this to become public knowledge. Galileo agrees to research less-threatening propositions and does not publicise his findings about the system of the universe.

When a mathematician is made pope, Galileo optimistically believes that his discoveries will now be welcome. He publishes *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*, but things do not turn out as Galileo imagines and the Church gives him a choice: face torture or recant.

The Cardinal Inquisitor has merely to show Galileo the torture instruments to induce him to make a public statement disavowing his earlier theories. However, unbeknownst to the Church, while under house arrest he secretly copies his research so that it can be disseminated among the scientific community. When his former student Andrea comes to visit, Galileo gives him the *Discorsi* to smuggle out of the country.

**Character summaries**

*Life of Galileo* calls for a large cast of characters. Rather than summarising every character in the play, as some are so minor as to be inconsequential, the following list includes the key players.

**Galileo Galilei**

Central character; self-centred, brilliant mathematician who likes the good things in life. For Galileo, the pursuit of new knowledge is an addiction. He sees the new model of the universe as the dawn of a new age, both for science and society. Initially presented in a sympathetic light, Galileo is condemned when he falls far short of his ideals. Ultimately, Galileo is an ambiguous figure.
Andrea Sarti
Son of Galileo’s housekeeper; a bright student, his respect for his hero is shattered when Galileo recants. However, when Galileo commissions him to smuggle the *Discorsi* across the border, Andrea’s faith in his mentor is restored.

Mrs Sarti
Galileo’s housekeeper and mother of Andrea; sensible, loyal and honest, she cares about Galileo, but does not approve of his new theories. Exits the play at the end of Scene 9.

Ludovico Marsili
Member of the wealthy and powerful landowning class; when Galileo refuses to drop his research, Ludovico breaks off his engagement to Galileo’s daughter, Virginia.

The Procurator (Mr Priuli)
Bursar; sees everything according to business principles; agrees to a pay increase for Galileo in exchange for the telescope; is angry when similar Dutch instruments flood the market.

Sagredo
Friend of Galileo; loyal and honest; warns Galileo about leaving the safety of independent Venice for monk-run Florence.

Virginia
Galileo’s daughter; superstitious and prayerful; often overlooked, especially by her father; doomed when he destroys her engagement; ends up an old maid and her father’s gaoler.

Federzoni
Lens-grinder and Galileo’s assistant; man of science and reason; one of Galileo’s disciples.

The Doge
Elected leader of the Republic of Venice; makes a minor appearance in Scene 2 to tell Galileo that the city rewards scholars who contribute to its prosperity.
Senators
Representatives of the self-interest of the ruling class (Scene 2).

Cosimo de Medici
The Grand Duke of Florence; in Scene 4, aged nine, isn’t allowed to look through the telescope; reappears in Scene 11 when he refuses to accept Galileo’s book.

The court chamberlain
Court official; officious, superficial; concerned only with getting Cosimo back in time for the court ball.

The theologian
One of the short-sighted Florentine scholars who visits Galileo’s house.

The philosopher
Supercilious; refuses to see the evidence before his eyes; frightened about where the truth might lead.

The mathematician
Like the philosopher, refuses to look through the telescope; horrified that Galileo dares to question the foundational science and philosophy of Aristotle.

Two nuns
Embody the antithesis of charity and kindness; hurry away from Galileo when they realise he has been in contact with the plague.

Two soldiers
Indifferent to human suffering; just doing their jobs.

The old woman
Sympathetic; defends the city officials who are ‘powerless’ in the face of the plague.

A fat prelate
Mocks Galileo and his ideas.

Two scholars
Cheapen and sensationalise Galileo’s theories, for laughs.
Two monks
Like the others in the Collegium Romanum, they belittle Galileo.

Two astronomers
Resistant to new ideas and change; happy to accept that humans cannot understand everything.

A very thin monk
Fanatical, takes the Scriptures literally.

The very old cardinal
Fundamentalist; subscribes to an anthropocentric (human-centred) view of the universe.

Father Christopher Clavius
Church expert in astronomy; confirms Galileo’s findings; so arrogant and powerful that he doesn’t look at anyone as he passes through the hall.

The little monk
Conflicted; torn between reason and faith. Studies with and admires Galileo but returns to the Church when Galileo recants.

The Cardinal Inquisitor
Suspicious, controlling; views Galileo as dangerous and his book a heresy; convinces the Pope he must show Galileo instruments of torture to make him recant.

Cardinal Barberini, subsequently Pope Urban VIII
Mathematician; sympathetic to Galileo’s thirst for knowledge. Ultimately, a man of the Church, not science.

Cardinal Bellarmin
Elegant, sophisticated and powerful; embodies qualities of the ruling classes.

Two clerical secretaries
Uphold the old order, as illustrated by the way they play chess and by their records of Galileo’s conversations for the Inquisitor.
Filippo Mucius
Galileo’s former student; publishes work refuting the Copernican system.

Mr Gaffone
Rector of the University of Pisa.

The ballad singer and his wife
Appear in the carnival scene; sing about the upside down world caused by Galileo’s Copernican research.

Vanni
Member of the rising manufacturing classes; rational-minded; offers Galileo safety and protection.

An official; a high official
Demonstrate Galileo’s fall from favour by their rude treatment of Virginia and Galileo; announce that the Florentine court cannot protect Galileo.

An individual
Secret policeman of the Inquisition.

A frontier guard
Permits Andrea to leave Italy with Galileo’s Discorsi.

A clerk
Superficially checks Andrea’s books and writings at the border; sees nothing of concern.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Galileo Galilei and the scientific revolution

The play is based on the life of Galileo Galilei (1564–1642) who was a key figure in the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. Through modifications of the telescope, Galileo was able to make observations that demonstrated that the earth and other planets revolve around the sun, thus confirming the Copernican system of astronomy. Such a system did not correspond to the Bible’s description of the origins of the universe.

This proof was a significant challenge to accepted thinking, particularly in connection with the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. Before the Copernican system was posited, the Church and its believers understood that the universe was geocentric. In other words, the sun was supposed to revolve around the earth. The original proponent of this view, Aristotle (384–322 BCE), was an ancient Greek scientist and philosopher. Aristotle conceived an ordered universe divided into two chief parts: the earth (a place of change and corruption) and the heavens (unchanging perfection). Importantly, Aristotle’s cosmos was finite; nothing existed beyond the known universe. In the cosmology described by Aristotle a series of spherical shells neatly fitted inside each other. Each spherical shell contained a heavenly body or bodies – the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn and the fixed stars. As these shells or spheres turned, so too did the body within it.

However, the universe described by Aristotle did not always correlate with the observable movement of the planets. Clearly, this presented a significant problem for astronomy. Even though the spherical cosmology described by Aristotle survived until the seventeenth century, mathematicians had to create a complicated system of geometrical models to accommodate the ways in which the planets actually moved. To this end, Claudius Ptolemy (c. 150 CE) developed the Ptolemaic system. Even