**Brief Biography of Bertolt Brecht**

Bertolt Brecht is known for his work in the theater, both as a playwright and director, as well as a theoretician. He was also an accomplished poet. Like all Europeans coming of age in the early twentieth century, the course of his life was drastically altered by World War I (which began when Brecht was just 16 and ended four years later) and by World War II (which Germany started in 1939). Brecht avoided being drafted into WWI by registering as a medical student at Munich University, where he first began working in theater. In the two decades between the wars, Brecht wrote multiple plays (including his most famous, [*The Three penny Opera*](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-threepenny-opera)), established a theater company, and became wildly influential. When Hitler came to power, signaling the beginning of the second World War, Brecht (a socialist) fled the country, fearing political persecution. He ultimately landed in America, where he had a short-lived career in Hollywood, prior to being questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee and subsequently blackballed in movies. He moved to East Berlin shortly after the war, where he worked on refining his theory of “epic theater.” Today these theories of Brecht’s are his strongest influence. Most serious theater directors must, in some way, respond to them in their productions, and his impact can even be seen in the works of movie directors such as Lars von Trier and Michael Haneke.

**Historical Context of *The Life of Galileo***

*Life of Galileo*can be said to take place at two times. The first is the time in which the play is set (Galileo’s Italy in the 1600s), and the second is the time in which the play was written (Brecht’s Europe in the 1930s). The two hold striking similarities. In Galileo’s time, new scientific ideas were emerging that challenged centuries of religious understanding of the world. In Brecht’s time, new political systems were coming to power in the form of fascism and communism. Like the scientific knowledge of Galileo’s day, the political changes in Brecht’s day were met with extreme resistance. Two facets of sixteenth-century Italy are important to understanding *Life of Galileo*. The first is the omnipresence of the Inquisition, a kind of religious police force first founded in medieval times to investigate charges of witchcraft and reestablished in Galileo’s day to protect against the rise of Protestantism. The Inquisition had extensive power in the Church and could bring people to trial (and punish them) at will. The second facet, not unrelated, is the importance of Aristotle to scientific knowledge at the time. Aristotle believed in a universe where the Sun and all other heavenly bodies revolved around the Earth. In turn, the Church accepted and promoted this belief. Others, most importantly Copernicus, had promoted the heliocentric model (of the Earth revolving around the Sun) with virtually no success, and sometimes at the risk of their own lives. Challenging Aristotle became a type of heresy: something the Inquisition would be very much involved in. Indeed, the trial of Galileo is likely the most famous of the Inquisition’s undertakings. The rise of fascism alluded to above specifically refers to the ascension of Hitler to the chancellorship of Germany just prior to World War II as well as the coming to power of fascist leaders in Italy and Japan. With Hitler’s rise the ability to speak out against the government became increasingly difficult, indeed illegal. At the same time, it became clear that a Europe already badly wearied by the events of World War I would soon be plunged into another global conflict. Some world leaders, such as Neville Chamberlain, attempted to stave this off by appeasing Hitler, but to no avail. It was a time of tumultuous change.

**Other Books Related to *The Life of Galileo***

Using historical events to draw parallels with modern politics was a tool Brecht used in many of his plays, such as *Mother Courage and her Children* and [*The Three penny Opera*](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-threepenny-opera), Brecht’s most famous works. This has also been done by many other playwrights, including Arthur Miller with [*The Crucible*](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-crucible)and Jean Anouilh with *Becket*. Brecht’s ideas on “epic theater” (which can be seen in an early stage of development within *Life of Galileo*) were a direct response to Aristotle’s [*Poetics*](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/poetics). They inspired multiple playwrights and stage directors, such as Dario Fo and Augusto Boal, as well as film directors such as Jean-Luc Godard and Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

**Key Facts about *The Life of Galileo***

* Full Title: Life of Galileo
* When Written: 1938
* Where Written: Denmark
* When Published: 1940
* Literary Period: Modernism
* Genre: Play, Agitprop (Political Propaganda), Epic Theater
* Setting: Venice, Florence, and Rome
* Climax: Galileo (who appears to have abandoned his commitment to science) manages to secretly write a new scientific treatise and smuggle it out of Italy with the help of his former student.
* Antagonist: The Roman Catholic Church
* Point of View: (Play)

 *The Life of Galileo* (versions)

Constant Revision. Brecht wrote three separate editions of *Life of Galileo*, each of which he saw onstage in his lifetime. The first (the Danish version) is the original text. The second, the “American edition,” was produced during Brecht’s exile in the United States with the help of actor Charles Laughton. During the Cold War, Brecht again revised the play: the “Berlin version,” as it was called, incorporates elements of both the Danish and American texts.

True Story. *Life of Galileo* adheres closely to what is known about Galileo Galilei’s intellectual conflict with the Roman Catholic Church.

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| The Life of Galileo: An overview | [Next](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/scene-1)[Scene 1](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/scene-1) |

*Life of Galileo* opens on [Galileo Galilei](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei), a professor of mathematics at Padua University. He’s talking to [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti) (his housekeeper’s young son), who has just brought him breakfast. They’re discussing the solar system and how it works. Galileo shows Andrea a wooden model that illustrates the current, generally accepted understanding of the planets. In it, the Earth is in the middle of the universe and is surrounded by eight crystal spheres. These spheres represent the moon, the sun, and all the planets. People have believed this model for two-thousand years, Galileo says, but as mankind progresses in technology and knowledge, he suspects they won’t believe it for much longer. He teaches the ideas of Nicolaus Copernicus to Andrea (who calls Copernicus “Copper Knickers”). The new ideas place the Sun at the center of the solar system, with the Earth and planets revolving around it. All the other stars in the night sky are at the center of their own systems. Galileo uses the wooden model as well as a series of common-sense demonstrations with an [apple](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/symbols/apples) to show Andrea how Copernicus’ theory could be true. Andrea believes him somewhat, but also questions Galileo whenever an argument seems weak. When Andrea’s mother, [Mrs. Sarti](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/mrs-sarti), arrives, she expresses serious concerns about what Galileo is teaching Andrea, since it goes against the Church’s approved model and could therefore get Andrea into trouble at school.

Throughout all of this, another concern repeatedly appears: money. Galileo doesn’t have any, but he needs it—not just to continue his research and buy books—but also to do simple tasks like pay the milkman. So when [Ludovico](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/ludovico-marsili) arrives, hoping to hire Galileo on as a tutor, Mrs. Sarti insists that Galileo accept the offer. He does, though not happily. Shortly afterwards, Galileo’s supervisor at Padua University (the [Procurator](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/the-procurator)) arrives to tell Galileo that his recent request for a raise has been denied. The Procurator suggests that, if the mathematician needs more money than his teaching job provides, he should invent something useful. He reminds Galileo that, while Padua (and more broadly, Venice) might not pay much, it at least offers freedom from persecution by the Church, which he might experience in other, better funded places (like Florence). Galileo responds that such freedom of thought may be nice, but it is meaningless if he spends all of his free time working to make ends meet instead of thinking.

Ludovico, however, provides a possible solution to Galileo’s problem: a new invention by the Dutch called the telescope. It’s still unheard of in Italy, but Ludovico has seen it put to wondrous uses abroad. Galileo instantly understands the mechanics behind the device and quickly replicates one, pawning it off as his own original invention. The Procurator, seeing the great many uses that the telescope could be put to, guarantees Galileo his raise. Shortly thereafter, however, a Dutch merchant arrives in Venice with a boatload of telescopes and Galileo’s deception is revealed. It doesn’t matter, though. He’s already used the telescope to empirically prove Copernicus’ theory (which he’d previously only been able to prove theoretically using mathematics). He excitedly tries to show this proof to his friend [Sagredo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/sagredo), but Sagredo only reminds him that a man was burned at the stake for quoting Copernicus only a few months before. Undeterred, Galileo remains confident that the Church will be unable to avoid the truth when it’s right before their eyes. This confidence causes him to move to Florence where, despite being under strict religious censure, he believes he will have the time and money to explore his new findings.

With Galileo newly settled in, Cosimo Medici, the Grand Duke of Florence (who is still just a child), is brought by his counsellors to see the telescope at work. Among Cosimo’s party are a theologian, a mathematician, and a philosopher. All of them are wholly skeptical of Galileo’s latest findings and, after some heated debate with him, they decide that he’s a waste of time at best if not an outright lunatic. In the end, they won’t even look through the telescope to see the simple, observable evidence that Galileo presents as proof, though they do agree (in a way that seems less than sincere) to present Galileo’s information to the Church’s chief scientist, [Clavius](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/father-christopher-clavius). Shortly thereafter, a deadly plague rips through Florence. Galileo, his daughter [Virginia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/virginia), Mrs. Sarti, and Andrea are given the chance to flee, but Galileo declines it, citing his need to work. Mrs. Sarti decides to stay behind with him, but they send Virginia and Andrea away. Andrea, however, opts to return despite the danger so that he can continue assisting Galileo.

All manage to avoid the plague and Galileo soon finds himself at the Vatican awaiting Clavius’ review of his work. The scene plays out in much the same way that the confrontation in Florence did: the Church’s scholars are simply too dedicated to the Church’s existing understanding of the universe to entertain alternatives. They all feel that Galileo’s telescope is a dangerous object and that his questioning of age-old wisdom is even more dangerous. A kind of fever overtakes the discussion and at one point an older cardinal faints while berating Galileo. Nevertheless, the scene ends with Clavius confirming that Galileo is correct. His words are followed up by “deadly silence.”

Though Galileo understandably feels that his work has been vindicated by Clavius, he soon discovers that the Inquisition has other ideas. They’ve decided that Copernicus remains heretical and cannot be taught. Paradoxically, though, they’ve accepted Galileo’s findings. What this means is that the Church has decided to allow Galileo to continue his research but not to publish it to the outside world. Galileo is upset by this, but also slightly overwhelmed—he is, after all, a devout Catholic who doesn’t wish to go against his Church, and these orders come from the highest levels of authority.

In the following scene, the Little Monk visits Galileo. He has looked through a telescope and observed the same things Galileo has. The discovery has shaken his faith, and in order to recover that faith, he has decided to abandon astronomy. He visits Galileo to explain why—perhaps in an effort to convince Galileo to do the same. Their long conversation doesn’t go quite as planned, however, and Galileo ends up converting the Little Monk into one of his students by offering him his manuscripts. Galileo compares these to “an [apple](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/symbols/apples) from the tree of knowledge,” something he knows the Little Monk won’t be able to resist. Kept from publishing, Galileo has instead spread his knowledge to his students, who now include the Little Monk, Andrea, and Galileo’s telescope lens manufacturer, [Federzoni](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/federzoni).

Meanwhile, the Pope is dying and it seems likely that his successor will be Cardinal Barberini, a mathematician with whom Galileo has had favorable interactions in the past. Assuming that Barberini will be far more receptive to his work than the previous Pope, Galileo resumes publication. His ideas spread far and wide, seemingly overnight: he even becomes the subject of ballads sung at public fairs and carnivals. Naturally, this catches the eye of the Inquisition, who summon Galileo to the Vatican. While Barberini does indeed agree with Galileo, the politics behind supporting him are just too risky and complicated. Therefore, the new Pope has given the Inquisition the right to imprison Galileo, and even to threaten him with torture, in order to force him to renounce his work. Their plan succeeds, and Galileo recants his doctrine. His students can hardly believe it, and they turn their backs on him. They feel that Galileo has abandoned their hard and important work to save his own skin.

Nearly a decade passes. Galileo has been imprisoned in his home by the Inquisition and will remain so for the rest of his life. He’s forced to write dissertations approving the Church’s opinion on a number of banal matters, all of them below his abilities. These texts are carefully checked by a monk for any heresies they might contain, and any other writing is forbidden. Nevertheless, Galileo has, in secret, finished his magnum opus, *The Discourses and Mathematical Demonstrations Relating to Two New Sciences*. One day, Andrea comes to visit (the first of his old pupils to do so). At first, Andrea is cold towards his old mentor. Galileo reveals, however, that he did not recant his work in order to save his life. Rather, he recanted it so that he could continue it in secret. With Andrea’s help, Galileo manages to sneak *The Discourse* out of the country and into Holland, where it is published without censure.

**Themes**

**Progress vs. Tradition**

Both Brecht and [Galileo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei) lived in societies that were characterized by the desire to do things differently than they’d been done in the past. In Galileo’s time, science introduced knowledge and ideas that were at odds with centuries of religious teachings about the nature of the world. In Brecht’s day, this desire for change was political. People were tired of wars and the political systems that caused them: they wanted change and some believed that communism could provide it. By staging a play about Galileo’s life in the era of communism’s ascendance, Brecht suggests that history will view the struggle for communism in the same favorable light that contemporary people see Galileo’s struggle for scientific knowledge against a repressive religious hierarchy.

Brecht suggests that people tend to view favorably what aligns with reason. Therefore, he believes that even ideas that are at odds with centuries of tradition and “common sense” will ultimately be accepted if those ideas are more rational than the ones they strive to replace. For Galileo, whom Brecht endows with the same belief, proof of this inclination toward rationality can be seen in the ability of simple demonstrations, made with [apples](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/symbols/apples) and wooden models, to teach complex ideas. [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti), who initially lacked the education necessary to understand the mathematics behind Galileo’s ideas, was easily convinced by Galileo’s models that the Aristotelean concept of the universe made less sense than Copernicus’ system. That basic inclination toward reason, Galileo says, is found everywhere from “the horny-handed old woman who gives her mule an extra bundle of hay on the eve of a journey” to “the sea captain who allows for storms and doldrums when laying in stores,” and it is an irresistible power that will eventually persuade even the most stubborn people of the truth.

Building on this, *Life of Galileo*suggests that technological advancement and an increasing trust in empiricism means that human reason can be more easily directed. When Copernicus confronted the ideas of Aristotle, he did so on purely mathematical grounds. If one couldn’t understand the mathematics behind his proofs, then one simply had to take his arguments on faith—precisely what had been done for centuries with Aristotle. Without *observable* proof, Copernicus’ arguments remained just a theory. Thanks to the telescope, however, Galileo could provide visible proof of phenomena that could otherwise only be described mathematically. While his demonstrations and models were convincing to some, the incontrovertible evidence of the eyes, in the end, was sufficient to persuade all. For Brecht, who sought to prove Marx’s theories to his audience, observable proof of communism’s viability was found not in a technological advancement, but rather through experiment. The Soviet Union had recently turned the theories of Karl Marx into proof of the viability of communism, and countries throughout the world sought to replicate their findings.

Brecht makes this parallel concrete when he has Galileo equate politics and science in an odd speech to a former student. In it, he says that “the poverty of the many is as old as the hills, and from pulpit and lecture platform we hear that it is as hard as the hills to get rid of.” But the “new art of doubting” that reason has created has caused people to train their telescopes not just on the stars, but also on “their tormentors, the princes, landlords and priests.” And just as ordinary people had used their reason to see the flaws of Aristotle’s time-honored models, so too would they use reason to see the flaws in the systems of power which had long oppressed them. Those systems, Brecht believed, would in turn be replaced by ones that made more sense for everyone, just as Galileo’s system replaced Aristotle’s.

For Galileo, then, knowledge really was a power that anyone could wield in the pursuit of a better world. In this way, Brecht uses Galileo as a stand-in for himself: both men present themselves as iconoclasts, standing against centuries of inherited wisdom. Both men make that stand in the name of the common man, whom they understand would benefit the most from this emancipation of ideas. And, perhaps most importantly, both men speak directly towards that audience of ordinary people. Brecht’s fictional Galileo writes all of his scientific tracts in Italian, rather than in Latin, so that people from a variety of backgrounds can read them (the real Galileo did this as well). Similarly, Brecht himself wrote in an easy-to-understand German and made sure that English translations of his work were equally accessible. Even his theoretical works on the theater, which tackle very complex topics, are easy to read.

**Persecution**

Modern readers are accustomed to the rigors of free scientific debate, which allows for a variety of viewpoints, so long as data exist to reinforce one’s positions. Even in more esoteric worlds like philosophy and politics, few arguments are taboo as long as they are presented both with good intent and reason. Such freedoms, though, are a modern victory—sometimes a *very* modern one. In Brecht’s day, citizens of the United States faced severe repercussions, including charges of treason, if they espoused socialist or communist views. In [Galileo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei)’s time, questioning the Church’s position on any topic could lead to a charge of heresy, a crime that carried with it a wide array of harsh punishments. Of these, the worst was burning at the stake, and indeed imagery of flames and burning can be found throughout *Life of Galileo*, invoking this very threat. Yet, Brecht argues that, regardless of the time one lives in, true believers in their cause will always to continue to challenge authority, no matter the consequences.

Galileo’s challenge to astrology (upon which the authority of the Church was partially based) was significant, since his ideas undermined centuries-old understandings of the universe and even suggested that fundamental aspects of Christian doctrine were entirely untrue. The Church had taught for centuries that the Earth was the center of the universe, with all other elements (like the Sun, Moon, and planets) captured in successive crystalline spheres. Galileo’s research contradicted the Church’s model of the cosmos, and placed the Earth at the center of just one solar system among countless others. In effect, Galileo’s ideas “got rid of Heaven.” The dissemination of such iconoclastic beliefs was so great a threat to the power of the Church that Galileo was tried before the Inquisition and threatened with torture if he didn’t renounce his views—which he did. The Church’s brutal imprisonment of Galileo appeared to have broken him. He lost the respect and friendship of his pupils, and, seemingly, he lost his enthusiasm for his work. The Church wanted Galileo’s harsh life to be an example to others who might challenge its authority.

However, the Church’s desire to make an example of Galileo clearly failed, as Brecht is using Galileo’s life to illustrate the importance of challenging repressive institutions (the opposite of the lesson that the Church hoped people would derive from Galileo’s story). Though Galileo appeared to have caved to the Church’s demands, he was actually trying to avoid attracting attention so that he could work on a secret manuscript that he disseminates by having a student sneak it out of the country. This is a complicated moral position, since Galileo’s life appears, outwardly, to validate the Church’s authority. However, Galileo is only using the appearance of compliance to give himself the freedom to continue his work. By holding Galileo up as a model of iconoclasm, Brecht seems to endorse a utilitarian attitude. Instead of judging Galileo for not publicly maintaining his stance against the Church, he celebrates Galileo for creating, by any means necessary, the conditions under which he could continue his important work. In other words, Brecht seems to believe that Galileo’s integrity is defined less by his public position than by his commitment to continuing to develop and disseminate subversive ideas.

Brecht also acknowledges the tremendous cost of living in defiance of authority. Galileo’s time in prison and his life after prison take a physical toll on him. For example, writing his final manuscript destroys his eyesight, because he must conduct his work at night, in secret. This was also emotionally difficult for Galileo, as he was continuing his work under threat of execution. Even more significant, his criticism of the Church was morally painful for him because it did not spring from hatred of religion; though Galileo disagreed with the Church’s teachings on astronomy and astrology, he was a devout Catholic, and being at odds with the Church was not a natural or easy position for him. Despite being “a faithful son of the church,” Galileo was willing to question his own deeply-held faith and he continued with his work because he saw himself as helping the church in the process. Men, after all, could be wrong in their interpretation of God’s universe. If he could set them right, it was his duty to do so.

Not coincidentally, these were all values that Brecht and Galileo shared, and it’s noteworthy that, after writing *Life of Galileo*, Brecht faced similar persecution. Brecht emigrated to America in 1941, after nearly a decade of self-imposed exile from his home country of Germany (since, as a socialist, he feared persecution by the Nazis). Yet, it was in America that his political beliefs would cause the greatest scandal. Brecht was called before Congress to testify about his political beliefs in 1947, during a period known as the “Red Scare” in which communists and socialists were persecuted as a danger to society. Though he’d written *Life of Galileo*almost a decade before that interview, the incident only serves to underscore Brecht’s belief that those who go against the grain (as both he and Galileo did) will always suffer for it. Yet enduring that suffering, and continuing one’s work despite it, stands for Brecht as one of the greatest services someone can offer mankind.

**Ideas**

The deadly bubonic plague ripped through Italy during [Galileo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei)’s life, and in Brecht’s time, hundreds of years later, an influenza outbreak gripped the entire world. Both Galileo and Brecht’s societies went to great (and sometimes inhumane) lengths to stop disease from spreading, often by segregating the sick from the healthy, a method that had limited success. Not surprisingly, then, the idea of plague looms large in *Life of Galileo*, and it becomes a metaphor for the way in which powerful institutions try to stem the flow of ideas that challenge their authority. Thus, *Life of Galileo*positions ideas as a kind of contagion, and shows that attempts to keep people from coming into contact with knowledge are repressive and ultimately ineffective. Just like viruses, ideas tend to spread quickly and uncontrollably to others.

Because of the Church’s authority, Catholics in *Life of Galileo* tend to recoil from Galileo’s ideas just as they would from the plague. For example, when Galileo’s housekeeper ([Mrs. Sarti](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/mrs-sarti)) is discovered to have contracted the plague, the townsfolk run past Galileo’s home, whispering in fear and refusing to answer him when he speaks to them because they are afraid of catching the disease. Similarly, when they pass by him in the hall of the Inquisition, they refuse to greet him lest they be seen as supporting his ideas. Brecht strengthens this parallel through minstrel performances. The plague inspired travelling minstrel performers to depict those suffering from the disease, and the minstrels in *Life of Galileo* also sing songs about how horrible Galileo is.

Yet, once someone begins to understand Galileo’s new knowledge, they start instantly to spread it—as the housekeeper’s son, [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti), does. The second that Andrea begins to learn that the sun doesn’t revolve around the Earth, he starts to teach it to his mother. Later, he does the same for [Cosimo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/cosimo-de-medici), the Grand Duke of Florence. Galileo’s lens grinder, [Federzoni](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/federzoni), is no different. Though he has been only recently exposed to Galileo’s new ideas, he quickly presents them to a group of government astronomers and physicists who are amazed at his impertinence. Even those who should be strongly immune to his message, such as the [Little Monk](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/the-little-monk), fall under the sway of the “disease.” The Little Monk is classically educated in philosophy and religion and he has Church-approved knowledge in mathematics. These should work as “antibodies” to Galileo’s “virus.” Indeed, it seems that the Little Monk hopes to cure Galileo of his infection by using these resources. Nevertheless, being in Galileo’s presence for only a short time is enough to infect the Little Monk.

At the heart of Galileo’s ideas is the premise that one must question everything. This, even more than his specific questioning of Aristotle, is the core of Galileo’s infection. As the Inquisitor points out to [Barberini](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/cardinal-barberini-later-pope-urban-viii), Galileo has caused a veritable plague of doubting within Italy and elsewhere. The idea that the Church was wrong about one of its most central tenants has caused many to doubt its other doctrines, and perhaps even faith itself. Since Galileo, for instance, sea captains have begun to place their belief in star charts and compasses rather than God. The minstrel singers of the plague suggest that such questioning has extended even further into the realm of social life. After becoming infected with Galileo’s questioning manner, for instance, tenants now berate their landlords, wives question whether they might achieve sexual satisfaction with men besides their husbands, and apprentices lie in bed rather than working. “Independent spirit,” he warns, “spreads like foul diseases.”

Like Galileo, Brecht had firm and iconoclastic ideas that he hoped would spread like a contagion. His ideas centered on the theater, an arena that (like Galileo’s astronomy) had also been dominated for centuries by the theories of Aristotle (in this context, the idea that the theater should imitate reality as closely as possible). Brecht thought that the theater could be an amazing tool for encouraging intellectual debate and politicizing the masses, but that the naturalistic style prescribed by Aristotle had limited the theater’s political efficacy. Brecht didn’t want people getting wrapped up emotionally in his works; instead, he wanted them to think about the plays—to remember that they were a work of artistic artifice and not real life. Like Galileo’s infectious ideas, Brecht’s ideas on the theater angered some critics and probably scared them. And they spread. Most serious theater directors to this day work in the shadow of Brecht—whether in sympathy, in opposition, or in some combination of the two—which shows the continuing ability of Brecht’s thought to “infect” others.

**Work vs. Passion**

Brecht’s [Galileo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei) is a genius who wants nothing more than to keep his eyes firmly trained on the night sky, looking for answers to large-scale questions about existence and thinking about the way the universe works. He sees this labor as his true calling. Yet, as astronomy isn’t a well-paid profession in Galileo’s time, he finds himself constantly torn between his passion and the banal requirements of day-to-day life, like making money to pay for food. Such considerations tie Galileo down, rob him of energy and time, and ultimately limit his potential. Throughout the play, Brecht presents moments that seem to prompt the audience to ask themselves what would have happened if Galileo had been left to his own devices and allowed to work as he pleased. In turn, this becomes a strong indictment of the money’s importance in our lives. It’s obvious that the Galileo of Brecht’s play did not achieve his full potential because he had to perform mindless work and face equally mindless persecution. In that light, Brecht’s play becomes a polemic against working for money (another facet in his subtle advocating for socialism) because such work stifles progress for all of humanity.

To make ends meet, Galileo must hold three jobs: one as a lecturer at Padua University, one as a private tutor, and the last as an inventor. Each robs him of time. The first job, as a lecturer, seems the most likely to do service to humanity. After all, it allows Galileo to disseminate his ideas to future generations, who can use them and build on them. It also absorbs the least amount of his time: four hours each week in lecture, plus preparation. However, as the [Procurator](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/the-procurator) points out, Galileo’s lectures do little to bring in new students, despite his fame, because mathematics will not be a profitable career for them. And, what’s more, Galileo doesn’t actually get to disseminate his own ideas to his students. He has to teach from approved doctrine, hammering in Aristotle, despite that he knows Aristotle to be wrong. Thus, his teaching job is not contributing to the progress of humanity.

While his work tutoring private students might offer an opportunity for him to undo this harm, it comes with its own set of problems. Only particularly well-off students, like [Ludovico](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/ludovico-marsili), can afford to be tutored by Galileo. Yet Ludovico has no real passion for the sciences. He’s only dabbling in them to appease his mother until he can take over the family estate and concern himself solely with his horses. Good students who could build on Galileo’s teachings in the future (students like [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti)) instead get bumped from Galileo’s tutelage because they can’t afford to pay. Furthermore, as Galileo tells the Procurator, the number of private students he has to take on to make up for his poor university wages taxes his time incredibly. “I teach and I teach,” Galileo pleads, “and when am I supposed to learn?”

His third job, as an inventor, is not quite as cut and dry. Galileo’s inventions do help humanity to progress while making him money. He invents a proportional compass, for instance, that allows even the mathematically disinclined to perform complex calculations with relative ease. It’s used in banking for tasks like figuring compound interest, and in military endeavors for calculating the weight and trajectory of cannon balls. He also invents a water pump and irrigation system for Venice that help many people. This is not only useful work, but it’s also work that Galileo claims to enjoy; however, it’s also “kids’ stuff” to him. It neither asks important questions nor helps to solve them. Instead, such work takes up Galileo’s time when it could (at least in his mind) be completed by someone of lesser genius. Thus, while inventing does advance humanity, it does so to a far lesser degree than the work Galileo would do if he weren’t so busy. Brecht explains the tragedy of this in the poetic opening of the thirteenth scene, remarking that the day Galileo recanted his doctrine might have instead represented the dawning of a new age of reason had Galileo been able to devote himself fully to his passion.

**Greatness**

The “Great Man” theory of historical progress, which was developed in the nineteenth century, argues that history is shaped not by the cumulative lives of everyday people, but by a handful of individuals (who, despite the name, need not be men). According to this theory, such people are possessed of greater thoughts and are capable of greater deeds than their peers, and they move humanity forward in a way of which they alone are capable. Brecht certainly considers [Galileo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei) to be one of these great men, and the play grapples with the nuance of the “Great Man” theory. While *Life of Galileo*suggests that geniuses are essential to human progress, the conflict between Galileo and the ideas of Aristotle (who lived centuries prior to Galileo) shows that the hero worship of important historical figures can also obstruct progress, as the ideas of “Great Men” can be difficult to contradict even when they are clearly wrong.

Brecht explicitly establishes that Galileo is one of the greats (though he allows Galileo to maintain humility by never saying so himself). Galileo’s own boss, the Procurator, says as much to his face: “Mr  Galilei, we realise that you are a great man. A great but dissatisfied man, if I may say so.” The Inquisitor says so, too: “It's easy to get lost in the world of the stars, with its immense distances, if one is a great man.” Galileo’s superior at the university in Florence adds: “I always feel that every moment stolen from that great man is a moment stolen from Italy.” This establishes that Brecht considers Galileo’s ideas to be uniquely important in their potential to redirect the course of humanity and further scientific progress.

Yet, a primary obstacle to Galileo’s important ideas being accepted is the prestige of another great man from centuries earlier, Aristotle. Aristotle’s ideas about the cosmos shaped centuries of religious and scientific thought, and Galileo’s attempt to contradict aspects of Aristotelian thought is met with resistance from all kinds of people, institutions, and disciplines, including the Church, which holds Aristotle in high esteem. One philosopher who clashes with Galileo refers to “Aristotelis divini universum,” Latin for “the universe of the divine Aristotle.” This implies that Aristotle is more than a great man: he’s divine. As [Federzoni](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/federzoni) points out, Aristotle’s doctrine is so believed that no one even bothers to confirm it. Conversely, Galileo’s theories are subjected to criticism from all angles, including philosophy and theology as well as math and hard science.

Thus, for Galileo’s greatness to truly be realized, he has to overcome the sway that Aristotle’s theories hold on astronomy. Galileo believes that this can be done simply by showing men the world through the telescope. However, overcoming the greatness of Aristotle isn’t that easy, since the men can’t even be bothered to look. As Galileo says: “I offer my telescope so they can see for themselves, and everyone quotes Aristotle.” The remainder of Galileo’s life is spent building insurmountable proof of a truth that is right before mankind’s eyes. Therefore, while Brecht clearly believes aspects of the “Great Man” theory of history, he also presents the drawbacks of attributing so much significance to the ideas of one person from long ago.

Brecht also uses Galileo’s conflict with Aristotle to reflect his own life. Since Brecht’s Galileo is a stand-in for Brecht himself, it’s unsurprising that, just as Aristotle was responsible for the cosmological system that Galileo refuted, Aristotle was also the progenitor of the naturalist theatrical style (in which the theater imitated real life) that Brecht sought to overthrow in the twentieth century. Thus, Galileo’s conflict with Aristotle is a subtle polemic against prevailing theatrical traditions, as well as a suggestion that Brecht’s ideas should be taken more seriously, since he (like Galileo) is a misunderstood “Great Man” of his time. Aristotle’s constant presence in *Life of Galileo* shows that Brecht not only firmly believed in the great man theory, but that he also saw it as the responsibility of great men to use their greatness to challenge and even overthrow the ideas of their predecessors.

**Characters**

**Galileo**

Galileo, the protagonist and title character of *Life of Galileo*, is a lecturer at Padua University, where he specializes in using mathematics to prove astronomical models. Galileo is a robust man, full of energy and endowed with a contrarian nature. He is also a talented and engaging teacher with a knack for making complicated topics easy to understand. Though he is a devout Catholic, Galileo likes to question things, which makes him a problem for the Catholic Church. The primary object of his questioning is the Aristotelian model, a centuries old doctrine that says that the Earth exists at the center of the universe. Galileo instead holds to Copernicus’ model, which places the sun at the center of the solar system with the Earth revolving around it. As the story unfolds, Galileo finds himself able to prove unequivocally that Copernicus was right, but he faces the difficult task of convincing the Church that centuries of religious teachings were wrong.

**Andrea**

Andrea is the young son of [Mrs. Sarti](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/mrs-sarti) and a student of [Galileo Galilei](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei). Quick-witted and precocious, Andrea likes to question things and he even becomes something of a teacher himself when he attempts to explain Copernicus’ model to his mother. Andrea is the first to point out to Galileo when something he’s said doesn’t make sense or when a teaching method he’s used doesn’t really work. In this way, he shares the older man’s willingness to question authority. As he ages, Andrea becomes increasingly invested in Galileo’s work and is disgusted by Galileo’s decision to recant his research under threat of torture by the Inquisition. Still, Andrea remains loyal to Galileo and ultimately helps him to publish his final book.

**The Little Monk**

The Little Monk begins as one of [Galileo Galilei](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei)’s many detractors within the Catholic Church, but he ultimately becomes one of Galileo’s students and acolytes. Trained to be a theologian, mathematician, physicist, and astronomer all at once, the Little Monk originally argues with Galileo, defending Aristotle and the centuries of wisdom the Church has taught him. However, the Little Monk has a highly energetic, almost tenacious, desire for the truth. So, when he witnesses the evidence of Copernicus’ model provided by Galileo’s telescope, he finds himself unable to turn away from it. In the end, he becomes one of his teacher’s most vocal supporters, even when both the Pope and Inquisition have arrested Galileo.

**Federzoni**

Federzoni grinds the lenses for [Galileo Galilei](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei)’s first telescope, a simple task that somehow makes him another of Galileo’s students (despite being older than either [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti) or the [Little Monk](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/the-little-monk)). While a skilled workman and devoted friend, Federzoni lacks any kind of formal education. As such, he doesn’t speak Latin at all and he struggles to understand the complicated, Latinate arguments put forth by Galileo’s intellectual opponents. He is never embarrassed by these struggles, though, and he even seems comfortable engaging those opponents once Galileo has required them to make their arguments in Italian. Like [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti) and the [Little Monk](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/the-little-monk), Federzoni turns his back on Galileo after he recants his research.

**Cardinal Barberini**

Cardinal Barberini, who later became Pope Urban VIII, has few speaking lines in *Life of Galileo*, but he nevertheless has a huge impact on the life of [Galileo Galilei](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei) and his followers. A mathematician as well as a priest, Barberini first meets Galileo when the Church has decided that Galileo’s research may continue but not his publishing. During that encounter, Barberini shows himself to be a remarkably intelligent man with a subtle understanding of the Church’s responsibilities. He is a shrewd calculator of what must be done for the Church, but he is also a human being and lover of science. When, as Pope, Barberini is pressed by the Inquisition to allow the torture of Galileo, he demurs and likely saves Galileo’s life.

**Ludovico**

Ludovico (whose name literally means “I play at the house” in Latin) is a rich young playboy whose primary interest is his horses. His mother, however, demands that he be educated broadly and by the best, which leads him to seek out Galileo Galilei as his tutor. Ludovico is something of a one-dimensional character: he cares only about himself and how others perceive him. As his name suggests, he “plays” at being one of Galileo’s students. However, unlike [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti) or the [Little Monk](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/the-little-monk), Ludovico continues on with Galileo in the hopes that it will make him rich. He is briefly engaged to [Virginia](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/virginia), but this ends this when her father’s reputation as a heretic will make him look bad at Church.

**Mrs. Sarti**

Mrs. Sarti is [Galileo Galilei](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei)’s housekeeper and mother to [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti). While Galileo thinks only about the Sun, Moon, and planets, Sarti must think of practical things like the monetary situation of the household and paying the milkman. She may be domineering in this regard, she also cares deeply for Galileo, and risks her life to stay with him during the outbreak of the plague.

**The Procurator**

The Procurator is [Galileo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei)’s superior at Padua University. He is sensitive to Galileo’s genius and need for more money, even if he can’t help Galileo get a raise. A product of his time, the Procurator values both philosophy and theology over religion and he regrets that someone of Galileo’s obviously formidable talent should have chosen a career in base mathematics. The Procurator is especially proud of Padua University as a bastion of free thought.

**Virginia**

Virginia is [Galileo](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/galileo-galilei)’s young, naïve daughter. Despite the presence of a Pope, multiple cardinals, and other religious figures, she is the most devoted follower of Catholicism in *Life of Galileo*and can often be seen praying. She loves her father, but sees his work in science as misguided. When the Inquisition questions her about him, she has no sense of what danger she might be putting Galileo in.

**Cosimo**

Cosimo is the Grand Duke of Florence, though he is only a child around [Andrea](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-life-of-galileo/characters/andrea-sarti)’s age. As such, he is led mostly by his Catholic advisers, and even when he comes to an age of reason, he continues to parrot their beliefs. His age and lack of maturity can be readily seen in the physical tussle he gets into with Andrea over a wooden model of the solar system. Because Cosimo is so easily handled by his staff, it is impossible for him to assist Galileo, although it’s not clear that he would want to assist Galileo even if he could.