

# The Life of Galileo | Themes

## Freedom of Thought and Speech

The matter of freedom lies at the heart of the *Life of Galileo*. From nearly the first moment that Galileo first explains his discoveries, he is cautioned that he risks retribution from the Catholic church. Galileo's telescopic observations strengthened the Copernican theory that the sun lay at the center of the universe and all other heavenly bodies orbit around it. Refuting the millenia-old Aristotelian concept of Earth being encircled by orbs that propped up the stars, these theories also contradicted church teachings on key biblical passages about the location of the Christian heaven and the movement of the sun and Earth.

In Brecht's telling, Galileo is a scientist who pursues the truth regardless of the effects it may have on the people, religion, and society within which he lives. The vast institution of the church, on the other hand, is portrayed as a regime that forces people not to see the truth, even when they are offered a telescope. Galileo's lack of concern with the consequences of his work has him confronting papal decrees, an inquisitor armed with machines of torture, and his own desire for comfort in his life.

Brecht first wrote the *Life of Galileo* in Denmark in the late 1930s while in exile from his native Germany, where the Nazi regime had revoked his citizenship and burned his books. Galileo is threatened with death by burning at the stake if his books are deemed heretical by the church; the reader's knowledge that further astronomical research has proved Galileo correct casts this threat as a misguided persecution. An individual's right to think and write free from censure and persecution were central to Brecht's life experience as well as to this text.

## Knowledge and Society

The question of what knowledge individuals should possess is a recurrent issue throughout the *Life of Galileo*. For example, in Scene 5, when Galileo is in Rome and the church is evaluating the accuracy of his telescopic observations, the astronomer argues with various clergymen who quote scripture that counters his research. The Infuriated Monk says that "...man can't be expected to understand everything!" Later, in Scene 7, the Little Monk argues that peasants should not know that Galileo's research is refuting the words of the Bible, since they would lose all faith and have no purpose in life. The nobleman Ludovico is likewise concerned with the structure of society when, in Scene 8, he cautions Galileo not to continue his research. In Ludovico's opinion, the farmers cannot understand the finer points of astronomy, but having a little knowledge would disrupt them and destabilize the entire productive economy.

Galileo lands squarely on the opposite side of the subject from all three of these characters. He believes that man can learn and know everything through careful observations; it is the principle of the scientific approach. Moreover, he believes that this knowledge should be available to all, so much so that he insists that the Florentine court philosopher refrain from speaking in Latin so that all present (in particular Galileo's assistant, the lens grinder Federzoni) can understand the discussion. He even begins to write his books in the common language instead of the traditional scholarly Latin in order to make them accessible to all. The Ballad Singer and his Wife in Scene 9 sell Galileo's pamphlets for two centesimi (2 cents) each in the marketplace.

However, it is worth considering that Galileo is unable to mount a strong defense to any of the arguments put forth by the Infuriated Monk, the Little Monk, or Ludovico. Brecht's Galileo believes knowledge should be the possession of all in society, but he is unable to