

Church v. hero:  
should either win?



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It is a volatile point in history: the intersection of science and religion at the height of the Inquisition; it is a time when the Church reigns and a man, a physicist, must choose life or death, himself or science. Galileo Galilei's legendary dilemma and the circumstances surrounding it are presented in Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo* from a perspective that is clearly criticizing institutions with such control. In this case, the Catholic Church, while reminding us that men are simply men, no matter how heroic their actions appear. These issues are expounded throughout the play; however, Scene 11 has the most significant role in Galileo's development, as it simultaneously reveals the extent of the Church's control and humanizes Galileo in just a few lines. Despite his courage to venture into unexplored realms of science and thought, Galileo is not a hero. He is only a man. Scene 11 is the shortest scene in the play and one of only three scenes in which the title character does not appear. Yet it is here that Galileo is made completely human. In the quest for a hero, one might ignore his almost hedonistic desire for food, thought, and fine wine and the sacrifices that he makes to acquire money. These characteristics of Galileo are revealed early in the play, when he plagiarizes another man's telescope invention in order to get a salary raise from the city (Scenes 1 and 2), and then again in Scene 11 when the Pope says, "He has more enjoyment in him than any other man I ever saw. He loves eating and drinking and thinking. To excess. He indulges in thinking bouts! He cannot say no to an old wine or a new thought" (Brecht 109). However, one cannot ignore a hero's cowardice in the face of physical pain. In this light, he is reduced from hero to ordinary man. In this scene, the Pope and the Inquisitor are in the midst of an argument over the pending examination of Galileo by the Inquisition and the torturous methods that may

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be involved. The scene subtly reveals the evil at the heart of the Inquisition: the Church, which should be Godly in practice, partakes in torturing individuals capable of testing the power of the institution, forcing them to conform to the Church's will and thereby eliminating any danger of upheaval. The Inquisitor states, " He is a man of the flesh. He would soften at once" (Brecht 109). This describes the basic human instinct to shrink from pain. Every man has his breaking point, the point at which the pain and the fear and the shame are so great that he cannot withstand one moment more. Galileo is no different. Also, Galileo is a man of science—he knows more of how pain can be inflicted than most men. As the Inquisitor later adds, " Mr. Galilei understands machinery" (Brecht 110). With this knowledge added to the fear of physical discomfort, Galileo later does what most men would do under the circumstances: he recants. Because this scene reveals the negative side of the Church and the human-ness of Galileo, the audience is not distracted from the criticism of the institution. If Galileo had been portrayed as a hero, that aspect of the story would have taken precedence over the theme of institutional control; the heroics would linger and the criticism would be forgotten. Brecht is also reminding us that heroes are unnecessary—man is capable of anything if he opens his mind, just as Galileo does. Brecht clearly disagrees with institutions that hold complete control over the common man. Scene 11 illustrates just how broad and deep the control of the church is at this point in Galileo's life. Here we see only two characters, both officers of the Catholic Church, each on separate sides of the issue. Oddly enough, the individual who relents is the higher in rank, the Pope. He should have complete control because he is second only to God in the Catholic hierarchy; he is a man of science, but he is also a tool of

religion, as the Inquisitor reminds him: Ah, that is what these people say, that it is the multiplication table. Their cry is, 'The figures compel us,' but where do these figures come from? Plainly they come from doubt. These men doubt everything. Can society stand on doubt and not on faith? 'Thou are my master, but I doubt whether it is for the best.' 'This is my neighbor's house and my neighbor's wife, but why shouldn't they belong to me?' After the plague, after the new war, after the unparalleled disaster of the Reformation, your dwindling flock look to their shepherd and now the mathematicians turn their tubes on the sky and announce to the world that you have not the best advice about the heavens either. Up to now your only uncontested sphere of influence. (Brecht 109) The Pope's duty is to serve God and tend his flock on earth, and he, like any shepherd, cannot allow God's people to wander from their faith. He must have obedience and loyalty in the name of God, and therefore must censor anything of detriment to the greater cause; despite his personal beliefs, he must do whatever is necessary to uphold the Church and its control over the people. Thus, even the Pope falls under the cloak of the Church. He is a slave to duty and must answer first to his position and second to his personal feelings. As the Inquisitor tells him, the fate of faith is in his hands: Doctors of all chairs from the universities, representatives of special orders of the Church, representatives of the clergy as a whole, who have come believing with childlike faith in the word of God as set forth in the Scriptures, who have come to hear Your Holiness confirm their faith: and Your Holiness is really going to tell them that the Bible can no longer be regarded as the alphabet of truth? (Brecht 108) He is under tremendous pressure to save the faith of the people, thereby preserving the foundations of society. The Pope must

choose between duty and conscience—he is adamantly against Galileo’s condemnation, but so many lives would be shattered if the common people were told that there was more to the universe than they could find in the Bible. Like the little monk’s parents, they would feel very alone. “‘ There is no eye watching over us, after all,’ they would say. ‘ We have to start out on our own, at our time of life. Nobody has planned a part for us beyond this wretched one on a worthless star. There is no meaning in our misery’” (Brecht 84). The people rely on the Church to lead them to a better life in heaven; their faith is all that they know. It is the Pope’s duty to preserve the unity that comes from shared faith, and because he is controlled by that which he governs, he cannot refuse to punish Galileo for fear of social collapse. Brecht cleverly uses Scene 11 to plant seeds of thought in the minds of his audience members. Through the controversy of Galileo’s life and the circumstances surrounding his session with the Inquisition, Galileo explores both the dangers of institutional control and the folly of elevating men to a heroic status. One will only be disappointed when both prove fallible. Bibliography Brecht, Bertolt. Galileo. New York: Grove Press, 1966.