

Narrative over plot in  
top girls and life of  
galileo



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German playwright Bertolt Brecht developed his theory of epic theatre as a response to the renaissance of Aristotelian tragic theatre in the latter part of the 1920s (Hecht, 40). Where Aristotle allowed the audience of his theatre the purgation of their emotions through dramatic scenes arousing catharsis, Brecht dared his audience not to weep or fume, but to become bothered by the offending subject: utterly, lastingly, and to the point of action. The focus of Brechtian theatre then became not the play's story or plot, with its many Romantic devices of poetics and intense feeling, but the much more purposeful and straightforward narrative ("Brecht on Theatre", 37). The preference of narrative over plot manifests itself in the work of a wide range of plays spanning the decades between epic theatre's inception and the present day. This is clearly demonstrated in Brecht's own 1943 play *Life of Galileo*, as well as British playwright Caryl Churchill's 1982 play *Top Girls*. Though the two pieces were written nearly forty years apart, their emphasis on narrative over plot has remained largely the same.

Bertolt Brecht's *Life of Galileo* is exactly what it proclaims itself to be: the life of Galileo. It reads like a biography, with language that often takes on a purely pragmatic and academic tone. The events of the play follow Galileo's development of his telescope and subsequent discovery of the heliocentric nature of the universe through to his death. Through Galileo's trials and tribulations, the play produces an image of the troublesome subjectivity of truth, and begs its audience to understand that the relationship between truth and progress is a line that slopes upward. This narrative is present and active first and foremost in the dialogue between characters. Scenes in *Galileo* often do not move the story forward so much as they are majorly

composed of long debates or lessons concerning the nature of truth, usually with regard to the struggle between science and religion or, similarly, progress and tradition. For example, in Scene Four, Galileo has just moved to Florence and is in the company of the Grand Duke – Cosimo de Medici – and his scientists. The Philosopher says, when prompted to look into Galileo's telescope, " The universe of the divine Aristotle, with the mystical music of its spheres and its crystalline vaults... add up to an edifice of such exquisite proportions that we should think twice before disrupting its harmony." (39). Here, The Philosopher is resisting what he knows in some capacity to be true in order to preserve what he first knew as true, because he is comforted by the stagnation of the truth – which is valid in that an existence wherein one must always question what is and is not real is a maddening one, but invalid as a refusal of clear scientific evidence. The Philosopher and the Mathematician go on to say that there must be something wrong with Galileo's telescope, if his findings contradict the great Aristotle's (40). While this discussion is informative to Galileo's struggle against the potency of tradition, it does not contribute to the plot: at the end of the scene, the Grand Duke is too tired to comment and leaves, while his scientists have still not looked through the telescope.

Outside of the actual content of the scenes in the play, the stage design also reflects the Brechtian priority of narrative over plot. In productions of *Life of Galileo*, the title of each scene are projected on the stage to be read by the audience. An example is the title of Scene 3: " 10 January 1610: Using the telescope, Galileo discovers celestial phenomena that confirm the Copernican system. Warned by his friend of the possible consequences of his

research, Galileo proclaims his belief in human reason" (22). Here, everything that is going to happen in the following scene is communicated to the audience, which relieves them of the pressure of following the plot and makes the plot essentially irrelevant to the scene about to unfold. The audience's attention must then be directed to the philosophy of the argument between Galileo and Sagredo, in which Sagredo begs that Galileo keep quiet, as he would misplace God and therefore disturb all of humanity if he were to share what was verifiably true (28). This use of the stage as a separate storytelling entity is typical of epic theatre, as is described in "Brecht on Theatre". Whereas before epic theatre, "The environment... was defined by the hero's reactions to it," now the stage was a character of its own, with an attitude and mechanized methods of participation (70, 71). Finally, an emphasis on narrative is demonstrated in the development – or lack thereof – in Galileo's characters. Whereas the laws of naturalistic theatre say that dramatic characters are multi-faceted products of their heredity and environment (laws which Aristotelian tragic theatre arguably adopts), the characters in Galileo are minimalistic, only defined by their stance on the narrative issue; we as the audience do not have any insight into their past or their motivations. We only know what they believe in. Galileo is a man who believes in scientific proof, human reason, and the promotion of truth despite its inconvenience. That is all the information that is necessary for the story to unfold.

Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* starts immediately after the defining action of the play, in which protagonist Marlene gets a promotion. In this way, the play is aggressively Brechtian from the beginning. The infamous opening scene

features women from several different time periods and levels of existence, all well known for having faced adversity in their womanhood and their ambition as women. This scene feels like a separate play within itself, as it in no way contributes to the rest of the story; the characters are not recurring and the discussion is not brought up again. It is only concept. The figures from history converse about the ills of their lives at the hands of pathetic men: Griselda's husband does not value himself enough to trust that Griselda will be faithful to him and thereby feels as though he must test and torture her, the women in the Emperor's palace are beaten by the Emperor with sticks so that they will not have daughters, and the Cardinals are so baffled by the notion of a woman being as close to God as a man that Pope Joan is stoned to death when her womanhood is revealed through her pregnancy. The commentary quickly becomes concerned with the toxicity of the patriarchy, as whenever success is to be had, the women have to assume the undesirable traits of male oppressors in order to be taken seriously, risking personal and emotional vacancy. For example, Lady Nijo tells: "... when His Majesty came in Genki seized him and I beat him till he cried out and promised he would never order anyone to hit us again" (38). In order to correct the wrongs that were done to her, Lady Nijo recognizes that she must become violent, since communicating verbally, rationally, will not be effective with The Emperor. The narrative is echoed amongst the six at the dinner table, and the party ends abruptly with Joan praying as others are sick or worried sick.

Many of the characters in this play are only introduced for the purpose of fulfilling the narrative – even outside of the dinner party scene. In Act 2,

Scene 1, Marlene and the audience are introduced to Mrs. Kidd, the wife of the man whose job Marlene has just been promoted to. She attempts on behalf of her husband to manipulate Marlene into simply handing him his old job back after seeing that he cannot handle being replaced by a woman: she says, "... he's got a family to support. He's got three children. It's only fair" (69). After demonstrating her husband's pathetically entitled nature, she is dominated in conversation by Marlene and, much like the ladies at the dinner party, is never heard from again. Concerning the structure of the dialogue, there are innumerable moments where characters are speaking over one another, creating a cacophony that confuses and disengages the audience from what is being said. Often times, the overlapping of dialogue occurs when the content of the dialogue has to do with the plot as opposed to the narrative. In Act 2, Scene 2, Joyce and Marlene argue about their pregnancies. Joyce says: "... if it'd sat down all day with my feet up I'd've kept it / and that's the only chance I ever had because after that -", while in between 'it' and 'and', Marlene cuts her off, starting, "I've had two abortions, are you interested?" (92). However, when the same two characters are speaking moments later about Joyce's despicable ex-husband, they do not overlap one another at all; each line is clear and complete.

Although the form of Brechtian theatre has remained largely the same in the forty years between when *Life of Galileo* and *Top Girls* were written, its characteristics (specifically the emphasis of narrative over plot) have evolved in a few ways, as clearly demonstrated by the two plays when held in juxtaposition. For example, the narrative of the play has become more

specific over time. While Galileo dealt with the importance of accepting truth in an evolving world, an abstract and broad struggle, *Top Girls* is focused on the damaging emotional effects of the patriarchy, a specific social issue. As far as plot goes, Brecht's *Galileo* ironically seems to be more plot-heavy than *Top Girls*, perhaps because Churchill learned from Brecht that she could get away with telling a story with no plot. *Life of Galileo*, while not based in action by any means, does follow a journey: Galileo must find a way to get the truth out there. One scene goes logically into another following the timeline of Galileo's life. However, in *Top Girls*, arguably the only plot point that is not explained in exposition is Angie's schemes to spend time with her 'Auntie' Marlene. For the first act, each scene in this play is a completely different set of characters and does not have anything to do with the next; in this way, *Top Girls* is more ascribable to the thoughts of epic writer Doblin, who said that "with an epic work, as opposed to a dramatic, one can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life" ("*Brecht on Theatre*", 70). Finally, the narrative purpose is discussed much more blatantly in *Life of Galileo* than in *Top Girls*. In *Galileo*, characters often have conversations about exactly what the narrative is concerned with, as in the aforementioned conversation between Galileo and the Philosopher in Scene 4. The play is littered with the word 'truth'. Contrastingly, when Churchill writes *Top Girls*, she does not write the word "patriarchy" once, instead choosing to have a more subtle discussion, in which the women in the play do not address and may not even be aware of the central issue. This is somewhat regressive from Brecht's point of view, as he praises the "bold fundamental thesis" of the plays of Georg Kaiser (qtd. in Hecht, 64), whose work he lauds as the immediate precursor to epic

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theatre. He said in a radio interview that, "... before Kaiser, plays depended essentially on suggestion, whereas Kaiser appeals to the reasoning power of the public" (Hecht, 65).

However, while the aspect of narrative in epic theatre has evolved somewhat in the decades between Brecht and Churchill, the effect remains the same: the consumer of the play becomes bothered by the underlying issue and is moved to action. In today's society, the most important function of art is its ability to motivate change, and the narrative issues of Brecht's *Life of Galileo* and Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* both hold significant relevance in the context of our current political climate. Where traditional dramatic theory offers (what is viewed as necessary) escapism, epic theatre knows that it must prevent escapism by any means necessary in order to continue stimulating progress. The priority of a story's narrative over its plot is thereby the complete epitome of epic theatre: it has a purpose, a stance, an unrelenting agenda.