

Brecht and the Biographer

by James Reston, Jr.

When I started my biography of Galileo in 1990, I was wary of Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo*, for I perceived that my intention, to humanize Galileo and make him accessible to a wide, popular audience, was the same as Brecht's. Yet the biographer must approach an historical subject far differently than the playwright.

There was real irony in my caution, for I love Brecht's work. I had loved the Arena Stage production of *Galileo* in Washington. Now I can only imagine the pleasure I would have derived from seeing Charles Laughton in the title role on Broadway in 1947. As a young man during the summer of 1962 when the Wall went up, I had lived in Berlin, and I had learned the rhythms of my German by reciting Brecht's cryptic poems. I can remember striding brazenly down the Kurfürstendamm and declaiming to the lindens: "*Ich, Bertolt Brecht, bin aus den schwarzen Wäldern. / Meine Mutter trug mich in die Städte hinein / Als ich in ihrem Leibe lag. Und die Kälte der Wälder / Wird in mir bis zu meinem Absterben sein.*" ["I, Bertolt Brecht, come from the black forests. / My mother carried me to town while in her womb I lay / And still the coldness of the woods lingers / And shall remain in me until my dying day."]

I made devout pilgrimages to the Berliner Ensemble, crossing through the checkpoints and padding along the grim

streets of East Berlin to Schiffbauerdamm. And later, in researching an *Esquire* article on the "Children of the Holocaust," I had retraced my youthful steps into East Berlin to pay a visit to Brecht's daughter, Barbara Brecht-Schall and her husband, Ekkehard Schall, the foremost Brecht actor in the world. I had been struck by the splendor of their apartment amid the grimness of their neighborhood.

But Brecht was dangerous to my biographer's process, and not only because theater is fiction, and biography is supposedly fact. The distinction, I believe, is overrated. True enough, as a biographer I need to be absolutely correct in presenting historical fact. I know from painful experience that only several factual errors in a thick biography can be damaging, for it is the perversity of the pedestrian reviewer to focus on a minor factual error rather than the grand conception of a book.

But I am a devotee of Virginia Woolf's view of the art of biography: that the best biographies include only the "creative facts" or those facts which elucidate character. Biographers do not tell the full truth, if truth is determined by relating all the facts. If they are good, they are selective and judgmental.

Perhaps then the playwright and the biographer are not that far apart after all. Didn't Brecht choose to highlight certain salient episodes in Galileo's life? And hadn't I done the same? I had occasionally

excluded thousands of facts and episodes, either because I found them boring or not relevant to the development of Galileo's character or too dense for the general reader. I certainly did not invent the interior thoughts of Galileo. But how important a difference is that anyway? I have my personal vision of Galileo, just as much as Brecht ever had his, and I organized my material to promote that vision. My crime, just as much as Brecht's, is the sin of omission as much as commission.

The historical context in which Brecht wrote his play and I wrote my biography seems more to the point. Brecht wrote three versions of his *Galileo*. The "Danish" version was written in his exile from Nazism in 1938 when Hitler was villain to the world, and a German villain at that. The monster was about to embark on his campaign for world domination. In Brecht's disgust with the Führer, his beliefs had swung towards Communism, but his Communism was waxing in its infancy, and it was rattled by Stalin's purges and later by the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. In this confusion between countervailing horrors, the Danish version of Brecht's *Galileo* is the most historically accurate and the most ambivalent. Many episodes are presented almost as brief historical reconstructions. In his recantation, Galileo is presented as a broken

man who is simply crushed by the all-powerful Vatican.

This interpretation squares with my vision of Galileo, and my vision emerged from the slavish work of mastering the historical record. And yet in the nineties Galileo as a symbol of opposition to tyranny means nothing to me, except in an abstract historical sense. I am not moved to high emotion about despotism in today's world, and therefore, despotism forms no part at all of my creative process.

The second version of *Galileo* is sometimes referred to as the Laughton version (because Brecht was working with Charles Laughton on the English version). The revisions that Brecht undertook for this 1947 Broadway production were occasioned by changed circumstances. Hitler and Nazism were dead, but the atomic age had sprung forth. The issue for Brecht's Galileo had changed from his role as the opponent of the establishment. Now the question was the moral duty of the scientist in the face of earth-shattering technology. Brecht wrote of his Laughton version: "Galileo is shown as a man who was right, one of the great heroes of the next five hundred years who overcomes all resistance—but who then collapses and becomes a criminal."

With my nineties sensibility I can say that at no time in my Galileo research did I ever view Galileo as a criminal, nor do I think any rational reading of the real Galileo story could ever support such a view. Brecht crossed an important line, almost in the way Oliver Stone did with JFK, or Joe McGinniss did with Edward Kennedy. When Brecht did so, he would have done well to change the name of his play and of his main character. He is intent to portray the scientist who has sold out and who wallows in guilt for having done so. This is a perfectly valid dramatic theme. But when applied to Galileo, it oversimplifies and ridicules real history.

"Welcome to my gutter, dear colleague and brother in treason," Laughton's Galileo proclaims. "I sold out, you are the buyer....I surrendered my knowledge to the powers that be to use it, no, not use it, but abuse it, as suits their ends. I betrayed my profession. Any man who

does what I have done must not be tolerated in the ranks of science."

This sounds far more like the voice of Robert Oppenheimer than of Galileo. It is powerful material and can move and touch an audience in a theater. But it also conveys a false picture of the real Galileo, and because Brecht's language is so compelling (just as Oliver Stone's images of Kennedy are powerful), historians have to spend years disabusing the public of these wrong-headed but dramatic notions. I prefer what Galileo really said...and what he did not say...in the aftermath of his humiliation. At the bottom of his despair, torn by his conflict between his faith and his science, and longing for the company of his dead daughter, he said:

"I feel myself perpetually called by my beloved daughter....I loathe myself."

In the third version of *Galileo*, staged at the Berliner Ensemble in 1956 (the year of Brecht's death), Brecht's ideology is full-blown, fixed and dogmatic. Galileo has become even meaner. He loves to wallow in his crime against humanity and against science. The bigger his crime, the more Brecht's last Galileo enjoys thinking about it. In becoming a total ogre, the character has lost his ability to touch the audience. If I am not touched in 1994 by opposition to tyranny or by the scientist who sells out, I am profoundly disinterested in the plight of "the masses." And so all three versions of Brecht's *Galileo* are, to me, irrelevant today. They are pure art and bad history.

They also miss the central anguish of the Galileo story: the conflict between science and faith. For Brecht is unconcerned with religious faith, even contemptuous of it as the opium of the people. How, therefore, could the faith of his Galileo ever be represented as deep, sincere and enduring? Devout faith, to Brecht, must be caricatured as something silly and stupid. The purveyors of faith, particularly the priests and cardinals and popes of the Roman Catholic Church, must be tyrants and frauds. That makes them less interesting, and Brecht makes Galileo's persecutors far less interesting than they were in reality.

In the nineties there are two reasons for a new look at Galileo, and Brecht's play cannot be the vehicle to do it, no

matter how the costumes or the sets might be modernized. The most important is the fact that in 1979 Pope John Paul II launched a formal reexamination of the Galileo case by the Catholic Church. This was a noble act (and partly a Polish act, for this pope is sentimental about the half-Polish Copernicus). It was a gesture, once and for all, to expunge the stain of Galileo from church history and to prove at last that the Church was not anti-science. The pope announced his decision to reconsider Galileo at a scientific conference at the Vatican to commemorate the birth of Einstein.

For a *divine institution* to reopen the most embarrassing episode of its entire history is a fascinating thing. It raises the question: can a divine institution admit to error? Can the house of God honestly and sincerely purify its history? ("How can a divine institution be impure to begin with?" the logicians would ask.) If it can admit to error, even an error from 350 years ago, does that not undermine its moral authority over modern scientific issues like biotechnology where the possibilities of science are morally repugnant?

Thus, a relevant look at Galileo today must have the depth of his faith at its center. His religious devotion and his true devotion to his church must be treated honestly as a prime mover of his behavior, and it cannot be scoffed at or ridiculed. When Galileo's church turns upon him, Galileo must be deeply torn. And the priests of a modern Galileo cannot be caricatures. True, they betray Galileo's faith, and they debase the Church by making it anti-science—and the Church has suffered profoundly as a result of that error. But their motivations are not entirely sinister. During the trial of Galileo in 1633, the Catholic Church found itself in pitched battles against the armies of Protestantism at the height of the Thirty Years War. The Vatican view of the universe could scarcely stand to be undermined when Catholic and Protestant armies faced one another north of the Alps.

The second reason to revisit Galileo today is provided by an ungainly, flawed spacecraft called Galileo which is speeding on its way towards a rendezvous with Jupiter in December 1995. The Galileo

mission is arguably the most important science undertaking of the space shuttle era, but NASA named its Jupiter mission after the founder of modern astronomy warily. Would the agency become embroiled in the sticky controversy over science and faith? Their fears were justified, since their mission sparked my interest in doing a full-fledged biography of Galileo the man, not Galileo the mission. Still the name of Galileo is especially associated with Jupiter, since it was he who first saw the moons of Jupiter.

In a broader sense, Galileo is synonymous with celestial discovery. The Hubble space telescope is the modern equivalent of Galileo's first telescope. Just as on that magical day in 1610 in Padua when Galileo raised his telescope to the moon and to Jupiter, modern Galileos are seeing things through Hubble that no human eyes have seen before. But unlike Galileo, the modern Galileos do not seem to be moved spiritually by what they see. They do not have poetry and romance in their souls as Galileo did. That is why their awesome discoveries do not capture the public's

High Upward

Through an uncelestial old brass folding telescope.

by John Hollander

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imagination. They need a good playwright or biographer to come along and dramatize their situation *in human terms*. If modern scientists seem devoid of romance or poetry, that is because, since the trial of Galileo in 1633, science has become divorced from spirituality—and from art and drama.

Science and faith and drama are the poorer for it. Modern astronomers do not know how to talk to the public about their wondrous scientific breakthroughs in a way the public can understand. Galileo himself understood that problem, eschewed the scientific language of the day (Latin) for the common tongue. He went on to become a great literary stylist. There is nothing undramatic or boring about science, only undramatic and boring and confusing ways to communicate it. Galileo is intrinsically one of the most theatrical and dramatic personalities in all world history. And yet I was to find, both to my surprise and delight, that he had been encrusted and ossified by

scholarship. I set out to liberate him.

In today's culture of science, scientists should be immensely pleased when humanists move onto their territory. They may find themselves being reminded of some old fundamental lessons and truths that they once knew in their early days, but had forgotten, as they got lost in detail and lost in the Latin of their modern language.

James Reston, Jr.'s biography, Galileo: A Life, was published by HarperCollins last May. He is collaborating with the theatrical director Adrian Hall on a television adaptation of the book, to be broadcast by PBS.

Excerpt from "Concerning Poor B.B." from *Selected Poems* by Bertolt Brecht, translated by H.R. Hays, copyright © 1947 by Bertolt Brecht and H.R. Hays and renewed 1975 by Stefan S. Brecht, reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace & Company.

O yes yes there where some
kind of center is Or pivot
from which I hang by a
cord of blindness most
often slack At the end
of a black alley along
which it is strung the
moon shrinks the small
circle of blue dome at
the sky's peak beyond black
In a dark compass leg
a piercing beyond the top
of my head to mark the
hole in the world which
started to unravel
so soon after that
broad azure drawn A
glance at it would
be as useless as a
careful chart So I
don't care too much
about how terribly
painful it is when
I try to gaze right
up and when supine
I try to pore over
the misspelled
braille so far
beyond touches
of the eye-tip
All the way up
high among the
imaginables or
far behind the
unpierced dark
distant spaces
ones is closer
to all the way
down than to a
midpoint in
the dark in
stuck in
eye I am
my right
nearer a
low zero
a bottom
than a top
always Down is
here Up is th