

CHAPTER
22

Section 1

LITERATURE SELECTION *from The Recantation of
Galileo Galilei*

by Eric Bentley

In the 1600s, the Roman Catholic Church taught that the earth was the center of the universe. Galileo Galilei, however, observed otherwise. After publicly supporting Copernicus's theory that the earth revolves around the sun, Galileo was declared a heretic. At odds with church teachings, he was asked to recant, or formally deny, this theory. As you read this play excerpt, think about the consequences of Galileo's struggle with the Church.

Palace of the Inquisition. Galileo's quarters. Guards in the entrance hall. Castelli [Galileo's assistant] is eating lunch from a tray.

Guard. The Commissar General.

Firenzuola enters.

FIRENZUOLA, TO CASTELLI. I wish to see the professor alone.

Castelli goes out to a back room where, we can assume, Galileo has been resting. Enter Galileo. The two men stand facing each other.

FIRENZUOLA. Please be seated, Professor. Galileo sits. A private conference between the two of us has been deemed desirable before the tribunal reconvenes. Is that agreeable to you?

GALILEO. Has nothing been decided yet?

FIRENZUOLA. I represent the Inquisition. May I use our method of procedure?

GALILEO. By all means.

FIRENZUOLA. I shall begin by sounding you out a little. What is your own sense of the situation?

GALILEO. Do I know what the situation now is?

FIRENZUOLA. Of the situation . . . as it has developed during the hearing. How would you say you were doing?

GALILEO. Not too badly. I nailed down the main weaknesses in Scheiner's [the leading Jesuit scientist] position.

FIRENZUOLA. You maintained—correct me if I'm wrong—that he is a liar. Even a forger.

GALILEO. I proved those things.

FIRENZUOLA. And proof lies very near to your heart, isn't that true?

GALILEO. That is very true.

FIRENZUOLA. Would you expect Scheiner to enjoy being exposed?

GALILEO. No.

FIRENZUOLA. Yet you needed him. No one but he had read your book.

GALILEO. The others could read my book.

FIRENZUOLA. And understand it?

GALILEO. I could help them understand it.

FIRENZUOLA. Between now and tomorrow's session?

GALILEO. The world has waited for centuries for these truths. The tribunal could wait another week or two.

FIRENZUOLA. And in that spirit you have appealed from Scheiner to the six cardinals?

GALILEO. Yes.

FIRENZUOLA. Three of whom, like Scheiner himself, are members of the Society of Jesus.

Silence. Any comment?

GALILEO. Your own irony is a comment. But not mine.

FIRENZUOLA. You wouldn't, of course, have made this appeal if you didn't think it could succeed?

GALILEO. I wouldn't. No.

FIRENZUOLA. What are—or were—its chances of success?

GALILEO. Oh, about fifty-fifty.

FIRENZUOLA. Yes?

GALILEO. Lucignano's friendly, isn't he? Gorazio and Sordi will jog along behind him, I should think. That's half the tribunal.

FIRENZUOLA. You need five votes.

GALILEO. Are you assuming that the individual Jesuits don't think for themselves?

FIRENZUOLA. What would you assume?

GALILEO. That they have to. Because they respect themselves. And their Order knows about science. . . . They are not inquisitors, they are Catholics, Father Commissar!

FIRENZUOLA. Ah, then you have a better than fifty-fifty chance?

GALILEO. Maybe. If this must be regarded as a gamble. I'd have said faith had something to do with it. You know, the faith which can move mountains.

FIRENZUOLA. Very good, very good. I am not employing our inquisitorial method to torment you. Merely to bring the truth home to you. You have certainly brought home to me your illusion. *Quietly.* Galilei, after you left this morning, the tribunal dismissed your appeal. Unanimously.

GALILEO. What? My book is to be banned?

FIRENZUOLA. Which was inevitable, as I told you in advance.

GALILEO. The tribunal will not even entertain the possibility that the earth moves round the sun?

FIRENZUOLA. Will not even entertain the possibility. *Pause.*

GALILEO. It's unbelievable.

FIRENZUOLA. Tell me why it is unbelievable.

GALILEO. Because what my book provides is not opinion but proof.

FIRENZUOLA. Proof of what?

GALILEO. Of the truth. Obviously.

FIRENZUOLA. The truth. Obviously. Is what is "obvious" to Galilei "obvious" to a tribunal of the Holy Office? Could it be?

GALILEO. Be plain with me, Father Commissar. Proving things true has been my life's business, my personal vocation. Proving certain things true to the Holy Office has occupied me continuously for over fifteen years. The results are in that manuscript. Now if truth did not interest the Holy Office, what would that show?

FIRENZUOLA. What would that show?

GALILEO. A career, a whole life based on a total misunderstanding. A life thrown away. Wasted.

FIRENZUOLA. I should not have enjoyed formulating those phrases.

GALILEO. Then it is so? There is no interest in truth here in Rome at all?

FIRENZUOLA. I am not trying to instruct you but to help you to . . . certain conclusions.

GALILEO, *suddenly.* Do you think you're God? But God could never be indifferent to truth. You can? Firenzuola, you're a human being, aren't you, let me address you as such. Are you totally unconcerned with truth? *Silence.* Then what are you concerned with?

FIRENZUOLA, *unruffled.* What is a Commissar concerned with?

GALILEO, *bitterly.* Power. Just naked power. I suppose that's what you are trying to tell me.

FIRENZUOLA. Let's say administration. A Commissar has very little power. He does what he's told.

GALILEO. By the cardinals. Are you saying they're a lot of power-hungry politicians?

FIRENZUOLA. Heaven forbid! I've got you too excited, Galilei. Let me ask you an academic question. What is a church?

GALILEO. What?

FIRENZUOLA. Not what does it stand for. What is it?

GALILEO. An institution, of course—

FIRENZUOLA. An institution. Among other institutions of this world. Matching itself against other institutions of this world. Matching itself as to what? As to power. Its power against theirs. Or it will no longer exist in this world. What way out is there, except to exist only in other worlds? But the Catholic Church was placed here by Christ Himself. Upon this rock. Upon this earth.

GALILEO. I'm naive in politics, the point is not new. But how, in God's holy name, is the church threatened by wholly unpolitical activities such as mine? How is it threatened by the motion of the earth around the sun?

FIRENZUOLA. I think [Lord Cardinal] Bellarmine must have explained that years ago.

GALILEO. He said all new views were wrong.

FIRENZUOLA. Would that we still had his simplicity! *Pause.* The church is a fabric of traditions, nothing else. None of these traditions must be broken or the fabric as whole would fray, wear through, disintegrate. Now, if Bellarmine could feel that a generation ago, how much more strongly must any good Catholic feel it today!

Protestant power was not stopped, as Bellarmine hoped. Throughout Central and Northern Europe, a so-called war of religion has been raging fifteen years, and no end in sight. Not just that, but—

GALILEO, *stopping him rudely.* Yes, yes! *Silence.* But this preoccupation of yours with power and the struggle for power, this disregard of truth and the struggle for truth, this is just your viewpoint, Firenzuola, an inquisitor's viewpoint. The cardinals of the Catholic Church could not, dare not, permit themselves—

FIRENZUOLA, *cutting in just as abruptly.* You appealed to them from Scheiner. Would you now appeal to them from me?

GALILEO. Yes. I reject this "private conference." *Much louder.* Let me go back before the cardinals. Let me set my proofs before the tribunal.

FIRENZUOLA, *gently.* Very good. I can now

complete my report. This morning, Galilei, five of the six cardinals voted for your execution. *Pause.* By burning. *Pause.* At the stake. If, like Scheiner, I am suspected of lying, you may send Castelli to check.

GALILEO. Burning at the stake!

FIRENZUOLA. The verdict was halted by a single opposing vote, but till tomorrow morning only. Hence the decisive importance of this meeting this afternoon.

GALILEO. Not burning at the stake!

FIRENZUOLA. I see you have believed me.

Silence.

GALILEO, *suddenly.* I have been living in a fool's paradise.

FIRENZUOLA. Had I said so myself, at the outset, you wouldn't have believed me.

GALILEO. My whole life has been based on a misunderstanding. All these efforts, these years, have been wasted.

FIRENZUOLA. And there is very little time left.

GALILEO. For what?

FIRENZUOLA. Even as the captive Arab king can escape the stake by a last-minute genuflection [to bend the knee or touch one knee to the floor as in worship] before the cross, so you can escape it by one small token gesture of submission.

GALILEO. What?

FIRENZUOLA. Read this. *Hands him a scroll.*

GALILEO, *reading tonelessly.* "I, Galileo Galilei, do hereby confess to the sin of disobedience, which sin, however, was committed unintentionally, in zeal prompted by idle vanity, and not in malice as an enemy of Holy Church."

Silence.

And in this way my lifelong attempt to change the church's mind is abandoned forever.

FIRENZUOLA. As you have just demonstrated, your attempt to change the church's mind has definitively failed.

GALILEO. Definitely? Are you the church?

FIRENZUOLA. The Holy Office speaks for the church; the Holy Inquisition acts for it.

GALILEO. No, no, no! I had heard the Jesuits were slippery; I had heard the Inquisition was arbitrary and had not dared to believe it. It's true. But they are not the church. And a final appeal still remains open, the appeal that all Catholics may make when others have failed.

FIRENZUOLA. The appeal to the pope? You have already appealed to him.

GALILEO. The book was snatched from his grasp by the Inquisition. As a good Catholic, I demand the right to present my case to him in person.

FIRENZUOLA. Today? At a couple of hours' notice?

GALILEO. That is for you to say. I don't mind if the tribunal does not meet tomorrow!

FIRENZUOLA. The pope cannot commute a sentence passed by the Holy Office.

GALILEO. Will the Holy Office pass sentence if the pope agrees to state in public what he has already conceded in private?

FIRENZUOLA. Namely?

GALILEO. That the earth moves round the sun.

FIRENZUOLA. That, my dear Galilei, would be more than his triple crown is worth.

GALILEO, *loudly.* I believe in my Barberini [Pope Urban VIII]! I have the right to see him!

Silence.

FIRENZUOLA. I shall try to get you an audience for this evening.

Activity Options

1. **Making Judgments** With a group of your classmates, plan, rehearse, and give a performance of this excerpt for the class.
2. **Analyzing Issues** As a class, discuss Galileo's dilemma. What will happen if he confesses disobedience? What will happen if he does not confess?
3. **Summarizing** Create a playbill, or a poster that announces a theatrical production, for a performance of *The Recantation of Galileo Galilei*.