

A Man For All Seasons

Setting

The play is set at the start of the 16th Century, during the reign of King Henry the 8th. Henry had come to the throne at a young age when his older brother had died. The Pope gave Henry a special dispensation to marry Catherine – his dead brother’s wife. However, after many years Catherine is unable to bear a male child – an heir - for Henry. Therefore Henry seeks to divorce her and remarry.

Running parallel to this set of events was another turning point in history – The Reformation. Since the inception of Christianity the Catholic Church had been the only Christian Church. Critics of the Catholic Church felt it had become corrupt, its beliefs superstitious, its church services too elaborate. They wanted something different, simpler. The voices of these critics were growing stronger throughout Europe during the reign of Henry.

In order to be able to divorce his wife, Henry broke from the Catholic Church and established The Church of English with himself at its head. This act meant he could now grant himself a divorce and reform the church.

This powerful setting of religion and politics allows the playwright, Robert Bolt, to investigate his key theme of conscience. What is more important – the religion or the politics?

Narrative

Act 1:

The King wants to get divorced. This is on everyone’s mind in Act 1. More begins Act 1 as a member of the King’s Council – a panel of representatives that give policy advice to the King. Since More is renowned for his learning and integrity, his opinion on the King’s divorce is much sought after – but More is very discreet. Cardinal Wolsley failed to help the King get his divorce and is executed. Halfway through Act 1 More becomes Lord Chancellor – the highest office in government. Henry visits More at his home and asks him whether he will support his divorce. More responds that only the Pope can grant him a divorce. Henry leaves, saying that he will have “No opposition!” to his divorce. The Act finishes with a scene between Rich and Cromwell. Cromwell gives Rich the lucrative role of Collector of Revenues for York, but burns Rich’s hand in the candle at the very end, angry that Rich believes that Thomas More won’t be able to be frightened.

Act 2:

Act 2 leaps forward two years in time. Parliament has passed the Act of Supremacy stating that “the King is the Supreme Head of the Church in England.” When More hears that The Church in Convocation (i.e a gathering of the heads of the church in England), have submitted to his, he resigns from his role as Chancellor, saying “this is war against the Church!” Once More has made this decision Cromwell begins making a case against More to either destroy him – or, preferably, accept the authority of the King as the Head of the Church in England. Initial pressure and interrogation of More makes little impact, and finally, More is imprisoned. Ultimately, Rich commits perjury in court, stating that More had said to him, ‘parliament had no power’ to pass the Act of Supremacy. This is what More actually thinks, but which he had been very careful never to say because he believed in silence would be his safety. But there was no safety. He is executed by having his head cut off.

The Characters

Thomas More:

Central to Thomas More’s character is God – “Only God is love right through...and that’s my self.” Nearly every character in the play puts their own interests before the interests of God. More doesn’t because God’s love is his “self.” His critics (almost every character at some point in the play), see his morality as impractical. But for More, his conscience is very practical: “Well...I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties...they lead their country by a short route to chaos.” When he resigns as Lord Chancellor, he’s amazed that Roper suggests, “Morality’s *not* practical.” It is very practical, according to More – for in himself there is “a little...little, area...where I must rule myself.” That is his conscience – it is impossible, impractical to exist in a position where he cannot rule this part of himself, thus his resignation from being Lord Chancellor: “I was not *able* to continue...I make no gesture...I’m practical.”

He is judgmental, Thomas More. Cromwell he dislikes exceedingly because he resides at the very opposite end of the moral spectrum to More. Rich he judges too, he knows from the start that he is a character who is morally weak, and he insults him at the end of the play with: “Why Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world...But for Wales - !” Roper – his would be then actual son-in-law, is also a source of irritation at times. This is because Roper’s character is all brazen moral conviction – but very little actual thought.

More respects learning and intelligence. Meg is his favourite because of her wit. Cromwell’s reasoning he finds shoddy. Most of all his intellect finds refuge in the Law: “I’m not God. The currents and eddies or right and wrong, which you find such plain sailing, I can’t navigate, I’m no voyager. But in the thickets of the law, oh there I’m a forester.” He believes that his intellectual prowess, his understanding of the Law, will keep him safe: “I doubt if there’s a man alive who could follow me there [in the thickets of the law].” However, ultimately he isn’t

“practical” and he is naïve, to think that the Law won’t be bended for the King’s will to be done.

The Common Man:

The Common Man tells us at the start of Act 1 that: “The Sixteenth Century is the Century of the Common Man...Like all the other centuries.” The Common Man represents us all, in that he consistently acts in his own interests, in the way that most of us would, if we played his part. He is not noble or heroic, like More, but he is certainly not unethical to the point of being criminal, like Cromwell and Rich. He is simply “practical” to the point that common sense allows. “Better a live rat than a dead lion,” he says in Act 2, and that tends to summarise the code he lives by.

The Common Man is both outside and inside the action of the play. As an outside character he is The Common Man, providing a commentary on events, which helps us understand the narrative, but which is also put in a particular perspective according to how the common man on the street may see it. As a character inside the action of the play, he fulfils a number of incidental roles such as Matthew, the steward, The Boatman, The Jailer, the Foreman of The Jury and finally the Headsman. These are all the roles of ordinary, common people, who are incidentally touched by great events, but who act in an ordinary way.

As The Common Man he sees More’s failure to support the Act of Supremacy as: “his willful indifference to realities which were obvious to quite ordinary contemporaries.” The reality being it’s better to be a “live rat.” This idea is emphasized by the alternative ending, in which the Common Man finishes the play by saying: “don’t make trouble – or if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that’s expected.”

How the Common Man acts in his various roles within the action of the play, bear out his philosophy as The Common Man. As the Boatman he tries to get More to add a few coins to the fare, complaining: “People seem to think boats stay afloat on their own, sir, but they don’t; they cost money.” As the Steward, he accepts payment from both Cromwell and Chapuys in exchange for information about More. But he is canny. He careful not to get out of his “depth...What I can tell them’s common knowledge!” Later, when More resigns from the office of Chancellor, he has no sense of loyalty to More that means he will take a pay cut simply because of his master’s actions. It wouldn’t be practical. As the Jailer he is careful to keep strictly to orders and not allow More’s family to visit him for more than their allotted time: “I’m a plain simple man and just want to keep out of trouble.” As the Headsman – the executioner – The Common Man has the last line of the play: “Behold – the head – of a traitor!”

Cromwell:

Cromwell describes his role as, “When the King wants something done, I do it.” He is a lawyer and ambitious (“success...none of us gets enough of it”). Clearly he wants power, and clearly he despises those who better him. Cromwell is a

believer in the theories of Machiavelli – a philosopher whose work *The Prince* portrayed the idea that the end justifies the means. “Sir Thomas is a man,” he says in Act 1, when challenged by Chapuys that More will not change his opinion about the divorce. The implication being that as a “man” he can be broken. He relishes this challenge. When Rich tells him “you wouldn’t find him easy to frighten,” Cromwell’s reaction is “Why, then he never put his hand in a candle...Did he?” He promptly seizes Rich’s hand and holds it in the candle. The stage direction reads afterwards: “Cromwell’s downturned face is amazed. Triumphantly.” He of course intends on holding More’s hand to the flame in both a very physical (he wants to torture More in Act 2 but Henry won’t allow it) and symbolic way.

Rich:

Rich tells More at the start of the play, “But every man has his price.” He has been reading *The Prince* by Machiavelli at the suggestion of Cromwell. Of all the characters in the play, Rich’s is the most morally weak, and the statement, “every man has his price” is most true of him. Like Cromwell, Rich is ambitious, but he has not Cromwell’s practical talents or fortitude, and seems in part to be motivated more by the trappings of success rather than success itself.

Appearances are important for Rich. More originally recommends Rich to be a teacher, counseling him that “A man should go where he won’t be tempted.”

More even goes so far as to say that Rich could be a “fine” teacher: “And if I was who would know it?” Rich replies. Affirmation is important to him. He is keen to know whether the relationship he has with More is “friendship” and whether the one with Cromwell is as well. Later, in Act 2, he visits More’s house and is deeply sensitive to what he reads as the disapproval of those around him: “I sense that I am not welcome here!” Despite his weakness Rich flourishes by the end of the play. When More first gave him the goblet to sell in Act 1, Rich said he would sell it and buy some gowns as nice as Sir Thomas’s. By the end of Act 2, when he has been appointed Attorney General for Wales in exchange for testimony that More denied the Act of Supremacy – “*he is now splendidly official, in dress and bearing; even Norfolk is a bit impressed.*” The corruption of materialism is complete.

Norfolk:

The relationship between Norfolk and More in *A Man For All Seasons* is one of genuine friendship. More than anything else Sir Thomas is moved by Norfolk’s plea towards the end of Act 2: “Can’t you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?” By his own admission Norfolk is no “scholar.” He is interested in the pastimes of the aristocracy – hunting and dog breeding. He easily follows the King in the Act of Supremacy, seeing it as the natural thing to do. Sir Thomas’ decision to stand on principle, he sees as the behaviour of a “crank” – “You’re not behaving like a gentleman...”

Alice:

Lady Alice was More’s second wife. She couldn’t read, came to a different social background to More, but was proud to be his wife. She is a practical woman who

can't understand why her husband would throw everything away for the sake of principles – “Is this wisdom – to betray your ability, abandon practice, forget your station and your duty to your kin and behave like a printed book!” The final meeting between Alice and More seems destined to be overwhelmed by Alice's bitterness at what has happened. “Your death's no 'good' to me!” she says. Though finally she relents, telling More that while she does not understand why he is doing what he is doing, “I understand that you're the best man I've met or am likely to.”

Margaret:

Margaret is Sir Thomas' daughter from a previous marriage. She is intelligent. Her Latin is described as “better” than Henry's when they meet. It is Margaret who helps Thomas remove the chain of Chancellor from around his neck when no one else would. She is dutiful daughter who tries to reason with her father to the end: “Say the words of the oath and in your heart think otherwise.”

Henry:

Henry is a self interested character. When he first meets Margaret, and she proves a better Latin scholar than himself, “he is not altogether pleased.” He turns the conversation, telling her “I dance superlatively.” In a way he is like Rich's character, he is defensive about what he perceives his weakness are and needs affirmation – approval - for his position. More's approval he dearly craves “because you are honest. What's more to the purpose, you're known to be honest...” He speaks about the divorce as “the one thing that mattered.” Wolsey's failure to gain him this divorce was evidence for him of “villainy.” And his words to Thomas are that on “this matter of divorce” he will have “No opposition!” It becomes Cromwell's task, then, to find the approval that Henry wants from More – “The King's a man of conscience and he wants either Sir Thomas More to bless the marriage or Sir Thomas More destroyed.” We never see Henry again apart from the one scene towards the end of Act 1 – but the consequences of his desire to remarry are everywhere, driving the play on towards its end: “While More's alive the King's conscience breaks into fresh stinking flowers every time he gets from bed.”

Themes

Conscience:

Conscience is the primary theme of the play. The complication of the play – More's refusal to approve the King's divorce and remarriage – comes itself from a so called act of ‘conscience.’ Henry claims: “God has punished me; I have no son...It is my bounden *duty* to put away the Queen...” So he says, anyway. The real complication is the entry of Sir Thomas' conscience from the private sphere into the public sphere. As Wolsey first tells him (“your conscience is your own affair”), then later Henry (“your conscience is your own affair”), a conscience is all well and good, but it has no part to play in political affairs. Cromwell defines

the key principle of political administrative life when he says: “the normal aim of administration is to keep steady this factor of convenience...Normally when a man wants to change his woman, you let him if it’s convenient and prevent him if it’s not...But the constant factor is this element of convenience.” More’s conscience is decidedly inconvenient – and he knows it, telling the King (pointing at his arm) – “Take your dagger and saw it from my shoulder, and I will laugh and be thankful, if by that means I can come with Your Grace with a clear conscience.” More does not see the division between private conscience and public office, nor does he necessarily see that acts of conscience are impractical – “I was not *able* to continue...I make no gesture...I’m practical,” he says when he resigns from being Lord Chancellor. As practical as More may think he is being, it is not practical in the way the world around him perceives it to be (such as Chapuys and Cromwell who end the play arms linked – “men who know what the world is and how to be comfortable in it”) and “his willful indifference to realities which were obvious to quite ordinary contemporaries” end in his execution.

Loyalty & Friendship:

There are different types of loyalties and friendship in *A Man For All Seasons*. There is the type of “friendship” that Rich wants, which is really not about “friendship” – the mutual exchange of affection – but being a “friend” (“A friend of Sir Thomas and still no office?”) - the recipient of gifts. Rich becomes Cromwell’s “friend” and finds his ladder to success. But then there is that genuine form of friendship – such as exists between More and Norfolk. But for More, this friendship is “mutable.” Ultimately, for More, “Only God is love right through,” and the higher loyalty must be to God, not friends. There is also loyalty to your King. As Henry himself says about this loyalty: “There are those like Norfolk who follow me because I wear the crown, and there are those like Master Cromwell who follow me because they are jackals with sharp teeth and I am their lion, and there is a mass that follows me because it follows anything that moves...” More tries his hardest to follow Henry because he wears “the crown” but in the end his higher loyalty is to God. He states before the court after he has been found guilty of treasons, that the Act of Supremacy is “directly repugnant to the Law of God.”

Power & Corruption:

Power corrupts in *A Man For All Seasons*. Every person of power in the play is corrupted in some form. Cardinal Wolsey is no longer a man of God, but a politician who wants to go about his business without the “moral squint” or Sir Thomas. King Henry is motivated by the fulfillment of his own desires, rather than anything selfless. Cromwell is driven by “success” (“none of us gets enough of it”) and Rich follows him because “every man has his price.” Even Norfolk, More’s friend, is corrupted by being in power, doing in the end what is convenient, not what is right. Sir Thomas is the only character not corrupted by power.

Common man: The Sixteenth Century is the Century of the Common Man...Like all the other centuries.

Rich: But every man has his price.

Rich: Work! Waiting's work when you wait as I wait, hard!

Rich: 'A friend of Sir Thomas and still no office? There must be something wrong with him.'

More: A man should go where he won't be tempted.

More: Why not a teacher? You'd be a fine teacher. Perhaps, a great one.

Rich: And if I was who would know it?

More: You, your pupils, your friends, God.

Rich: Sir Thomas, if only you knew how much, much rather I'd yours than this!

More: No, I don't recommend him; but I point him out.

Steward: That one'll come to nothing...

Steward: ...some day someone's going to ask him for something that he wants to keep; and he'll be out of practice. There must be something that he wants to keep. That's only Common Sense.

Wolsey: If you could just see facts flat on, without that moral squint; with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman.

Wolsey: But in addition to Prayer there is Effort.

Wolsey: Oh, your conscience is your own affair; but you're a statesman!

Wolsey: Now explain how you as Councillor of England can obstruct those measures for the sake of your own, private conscience.

More: Well...I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties...they lead their country by a short route to chaos.

Wolsey: You'd like that, wouldn't you? To govern the country by prayers?

Wolsey: Then come down to earth.

Boatman: People seem to think boats stay afloat on their own, sir, but they don't; they cost money.

Common Man: But from his willful indifference to realities which obvious to quite ordinary contemporaries, it seems all too probable that he had it.

Cromwell: When the King wants something done, I do it.

Cromwell: Sir Thomas is a man.

Steward: No, indeed, sir; I serve one.

More: The service of God is not a dishonour to any office.

More: Take your dagger and saw it from my shoulder, and I will laugh and be thankful, if by that means I can come with Your Grace with a clear conscience.

Henry: How is it that you cannot see? Everyone else does.

Henry: Because you are honest. What's more to the purpose, you're known to be honest.

Henry: Your conscience is your own affair; but you are my Chancellor!

More: I couldn't find the other way.

Alice: I am minding my house.

Alice: Be ruled! If you won't rule him, be ruled!

More: But there's a little...little, area...where I must rule myself.

Rich: I sense that I am not welcome here!

Rich: I'm adrift. Help me.

More: I'm not God. The currents and eddies or right and wrong, which you find such plain sailing, I can't navigate, I'm no voyager. But in the thickets of the law, oh there I'm a forester.

Rich: It would depend what I was offered.

Rich: I'm lamenting. I've lost my innocence.

Rich: You enjoyed that.

Alice: Is this wisdom – to betray your ability, abandon practice, forget your station and your duty to your kin and behave like a printed book!

More: I was not *able* to continue...I make no gesture...I'm practical.

More: Morality's *not* practical.

Steward: No-o-o. You never had much time for me, sir. You see through me sir, I know that.

Chapuys: If he's opposed to Cromwell, he's for us. There's no third alternative.

Cromwell: Brought? You brought yourself to where you stand now.

Cromwell: There's a man who raises a gale and won't come out of harbour.

Norfolk: Give in.

More: Our friendship is more mutable than that.

More: Only God is love right through, Howard; and that's my self.

Common Man: Better a live rat than a dead lion.

Norfolk: Can't you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?

More: And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me, for fellowship?

More: When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands.

Jailer: I'm a plain simple man and just want to keep out of trouble.

More: In good faith, Rich, I am sorrier for your perjury than my peril.

Cromwell raises his head and essays a smile. Chapuys responds. They link arms and approach the stairs. As they go we hear that they are chuckling. There is nothing sinister or malignant in the sound; rather it is self mocking, self indulgent, rather rueful laughter or men who know what the world is and how to be comfortable in it.