

A Man for all Seasons

Robert Bolt

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About the author

Robert Oxton Bolt was born in Manchester in 1924, the son of a shopkeeper. He was educated at Manchester Grammar School and later at Manchester University where he completed a degree in History. He taught English and History for many years, turning to full-time writing only at the age of 33 after the success in London of his play, *Flowering Cherry*. Although he is best known for his original play, *A Man for all Seasons*, most of his writing was for screenplays or television and he remains one of the world's great writers of cinematic dialogue. Among his screen credits are *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), *The Bounty* (1984) and *The Mission* (1986). In 1966 he successfully adapted the stage version of *A Man for all Seasons* for the screen. He was twice married to actress Sarah Miles. In 1979 a heart attack and stroke left him paralysed. He died in Hampshire, England in 1995, following a long illness.

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About the play

The historical context of *A Man for all Seasons* is generally well known, as Bolt points out in his preface. In 1509 Henry VIII succeeded to the throne of England, inheriting a prosperous nation-state, united after the civil wars of the previous century. The power of the monarch was growing; the role of the nobility changing and the middle class was on the rise. After several years of marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Henry still had no male heir to secure the stability of the realm. He petitioned the Pope to annul his marriage so that he could wed Anne Boleyn, whom he hoped would give him a son. The failure of Henry's Lord Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, to secure papal approval for the annulment led to his replacement by Sir Thomas More, a respected lawyer and intellectual. More was opposed to the divorce and Henry's attempt to usurp papal power by making himself head of the Church of England. More's conscientious stand in refusing to take the oath of Supremacy is the central theme of *A Man for all Seasons*.

Bolt explains that he was struck by More's love for life and his 'adamantine sense of his own self' (p. xii) which would not allow him to swear on oath something he did not believe because it would be a violation of his integrity. More's conscience was directed by his faith in God and in the authority of the Catholic Church, which derived traditionally from St Peter, the first 'pope', appointed by Christ as his vicar. To make the play relevant to his own time, in which religion no longer holds the place it once did and a man's word carries less weight than it used to, Bolt has departed from historical accuracy by making his More a hero of the more modern concept of individual conscience. Bolt's More has faith but finds God's will impossible to fathom and consequently bases his actions on his own conscience and the law. Bolt uses imagery of the sea, 'the largest, most alien, least formulated thing I know' (p. xvi) and reference to ships, currents, tides and seafaring to symbolise the unknowable cosmos which faces More – and modern man – while dry land represents the comparative safety of society and the law.

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The main characters

Sir Thomas More

Sir Thomas More is the play's protagonist. A member of the King's Council and later Lord Chancellor, he is a learned and incorruptible jurist, a friend and loyal subject to the King and a devout Catholic (although Bolt plays down the religious dimension of More's character). More cannot in conscience agree to Henry's divorce and his action in making himself head of the Church of England because it is a violation of the Church's, that is, God's law, and for More, divine, or natural law is superior to man's law. More is committed to the service of his King but to violate divine law is to risk the salvation of his soul. He has no desire to be a martyr but puts his trust in English law, under which silence is construed as consent, to save him from punishment for his refusal to swear the King's oath. Convicted on false evidence and sentenced to execution, More is finally forced to choose between his God and his King. He rejects the authority of the King's law to execute him, appealing to the higher law of God.

More's reputation as a statesman and scholar extends throughout Europe, and he counts men such as Erasmus among his friends. Because he is widely known and respected he comes under pressure from many quarters over the swearing of the King's oath, but he remains constant to the end. More's character has been shaped by his knowledge and love of the law. He is calm and restrained in his actions and his speech, but he is also witty, insightful and a shrewd judge of character. Having attained the highest position in government, he is not personally ambitious or greedy like men such as Wolsey and Rich. Above all he is a man of integrity; his conscience is his 'self' – his soul – and although he is sometimes afraid, he never doubts that he is doing what is right. He disproves the cynical proposition that 'everyman has his price' (p. 2), even though he is forced to make many sacrifices, including the loss of his family, in remaining true to himself. More is a hero almost too good to be true but Bolt keeps us sympathetic with his character by exposing his weaknesses and vulnerabilities such as his fear of death and his desperate need to have his family's love and understanding before he dies. The cynical comments of the Common Man also serve to make him seem less a figure of awe.

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The Common Man

Bolt explains in the preface that the character of the Common Man is an adaptation of the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's alienation technique which is intended to distance the audience from the action on the stage. In fact, the Common Man also provides a link between the audience and the play by commenting on and interpreting the action and providing some historical data. Bolt intended 'common' to be understood as 'universal' but the Common Man is generally seen as vulgar and immoral, embodying the worst in human nature. In order to establish the 'universal' character of the Common Man – and to show how readily he is prepared to adapt in order to survive – Bolt presents him in a number of roles. Despite the variety of roles, however, he develops as though he were a single character. While the Common Man serves a number of masters he always looks out for himself first. He is shrewd and opportunistic and through the course of the play becomes increasingly involved in More's downfall.

As Matthew, More's Steward, he is fickle in his loyalty, taking bribes from both Chapuys and Cromwell in return for information – albeit harmless – about his master. He leaves More's employment rather than take a pay cut and uses flattery to manipulate Rich, whom he holds in contempt, to take him on. As the boatman he is the voice of the average working man with his finger on the pulse of public opinion. As publican of The Loyal Subject he is aware that Cromwell and Rich are plotting to trap More but keeps silent, appealing in advance to the audience to exonerate him and feigning not to understand either their intentions or More himself. Forced into close proximity with More, the Common Man, as jailer, begins to feel guilt for the first time, but comforts himself with the thought that it is better to be 'a live rat than a dead lion'. He would set More free if he could but he has a job to do. With uncharacteristic passion, More condemns the Common Man for his lack of principles: 'Oh, Sweet Jesus! These plain, simple men!' (p. 88) Compelled to act as foreman of the jury then executioner, he cannot escape implication in More's death. The Common Man's priorities represent those of mankind in general: self-preservation and a peaceful life.

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Thomas Cromwell

Cromwell is identified early in the play as 'the coming man'. A farrier's son, he is initially secretary to Cardinal Wolsey but after Wolsey's fall and More's resignation is appointed to the position of Lord Chancellor. He is a man of great ambition, intellect and energy but he has no conscience. Cromwell does Henry's dirty work: 'When the King wants something done, I do it' (p. 21). What Henry wants is Sir Thomas More to agree to his divorce and Cromwell sets himself to break More's opposition, by corruption or force: '[The King] wants either Sir Thomas More to bless his marriage or Sir Thomas More destroyed. Either will do' (p. 70).

Cromwell is clever and manipulative: he professes to be an admirer of More, pays More's manservant to spy on his master and bribes the weak Rich to tell him about the silver cup More gave him and eventually to perjure himself. In prison Cromwell tries emotional blackmail, using More's family to try to break down his resistance. He is also prepared to use physical force as his brutality in thrusting Rich's hand into the candle flame shows. He dismisses the idea of using the rack to make More swear the oath because he knows the king would not allow it, but taking away More's books is another form of torture. As More continues to hold out, Cromwell's intimidation becomes more intense and he no longer tries to hide his anger and hatred which is aggravated by More's superior knowledge of the law. For More 'the law is not an instrument of any kind' but in facilitating Rich's perjury, Cromwell uses the law as a instrument to bring about More's death.

Cromwell, with his overbearing ambition, deceit, lack of conscience and disregard for the law, is the antithesis of More. For More, 'necessity' means being true to his conscience. For Cromwell, necessity means certain political goals, and More's integrity, or 'innocence', stands in the way of their achievement. Cromwell's character appears to have no redeeming feature but, in his defence, he does believe himself to be acting in the nation's interest in procuring England's independence from Rome; and as Lord Chancellor – a position which had been the undoing of both Wolsey and More – he is answerable to a demanding and powerful King.

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Richard Rich

Richard Rich is an academic, ambitious, but morally weak and unsure of himself. He falls under the influence of Cromwell and his Machiavellian ideas. More takes an interest in Rich, and seeing the weaknesses in his character, encourages him to take a post as a teacher where he won't be tempted. Rich's acceptance of the silver goblet, which was given to More as a bribe, shows he is corrupt, and More subsequently rejects him as unreliable when he begs for employment. Rich is obviously desperate for guidance: 'I am adrift. Help me' (p. 38). In turning the young man away, More may bear some responsibility for Rich's later betrayal.

Rich, bitter and frustrated, is the perfect tool for Cromwell who offers him the position of Collector of Revenues for York Diocese in exchange for information about the goblet offered to More as a bribe. There is some struggle with his conscience and the acknowledgement that More is a truly innocent and courageous man but Rich accepts, agreeing with Cromwell that if he has only just realised that he lost his innocence 'some time ago ... it can't have been very important ...' (p. 44) Rich's increasing stature and self importance are revealed in his reaction to the request for employment by the Steward, Matthew, who is still, however, as contemptuous of Rich as he always was: 'Oh, I can manage this one! He's just my size!' (p. 62)

Rich's rise corresponds with More's downfall. His shabby clothes and abject manner in Act One contrast with his 'splendidly official' demeanour in the trial scene in Act Two. More's sharp wit, however, strips him of his pretensions: 'Why Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world ... But for Wales--!' (95) Rich is a dangerous man because he has no integrity and no allegiance to anything but himself.

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Duke of Norfolk

Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, is an influential nobleman and advisor to the King, and a close friend to More and his family. Bolt makes him a bluff, hearty character, more interested in physical than intellectual pursuits.

Norfolk's allegiance is to the seat of power – the King: 'Norfolk ... (follows) me because I wear the crown' (p. 32). Norfolk and the nobility in general put up little or no opposition to the king's divorce – 'We're supposed to be the arrogant ones, the proud, splenetic ones – and we've all given in!' (p. 71) Norfolk is faced with a dilemma when Cromwell tells him that the King expects him to play a part in prosecuting More because it forces him to choose between obeying the king and betraying his friend.

Norfolk does not understand More's refusal to swear the oath and begs him to give in for the sake of their friendship. More acknowledges that Norfolk has good reasons for taking the oath and is willing to end their friendship on good terms, which would allow Norfolk to obey the King without a guilty conscience, but a confused Norfolk rejects his offer. His inability to decide where his loyalty lies – with his King or with his friend – angers More who challenges him to look to his own integrity: 'Is there no single sinew in the midst of this that ... is just Norfolk?' (p. 73) Even after More has chosen prison over compromising his conscience, Norfolk still does not understand: '... I don't know whether the marriage was lawful or not. But damn it, Thomas, look at those names ... Can't you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?' (p. 78) Norfolk is a simple man, without malice and genuinely fond of More, but their friendship does not survive the difficult times because it is not based on shared values.

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The King

Henry appears in only one scene, but is a constant presence throughout the play. Visiting More's home, he reveals himself to be a product of the new Renaissance learning, proficient in Latin and Greek, an excellent dancer and a musician and composer. His religious treatise has been recognised by the pope but Henry's relationship with Rome is now strained. There is a certain superficiality in Henry's manner and an immaturity demonstrated by his need for flattery and his reluctance to face the consequences of his actions. Henry understands More's moral objection to the oath and claims to have great respect for his honesty and sincerity: 'Thomas ... I respect your sincerity ... it's water in the desert...' (p. 32). However, Henry shows he is a hypocrite who places greater value on appearances than honesty by ordering More to keep his views to himself.

Henry believes his lack of a male heir is divine punishment for marrying his brother's widow and needs the divorce to ease his conscience. Wolsey, More and Cromwell, in the post of Lord Chancellor, are all charged with satisfying Henry's disturbed conscience. The King's personal and political need for More's approval becomes so strong that it makes his death inevitable: 'While More's alive the King's conscience breaks into fresh stinking flowers every time he gets from bed' (p. 81). Henry gives power to certain individuals, such as Wolsey and Cromwell, to do his will, but cuts them down savagely when they fail him. His corruption and duplicity call forth the same qualities in those who serve him, and while he does not physically confront More again, he is responsible for his persecution and death.

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Alice More

Alice is More's second wife. In her late forties, plain and overdressed, she was born into the merchant class but is now very conscious of her status as 'a knight's lady'. While her husband is an eminent scholar, Alice is illiterate and refuses his offer to teach her to read. She does not approve of Margaret's high level of education and is perhaps jealous of the bond of learning the girl and her father share. Alice constantly scolds More but is quick to defend him against criticism by others: 'Thomas has his own way of doing things' (p. 26). She is not afraid to speak her mind and almost every other character feels the sharp edge of her tongue at some point in the play.

Alice reacts to More's resignation as Chancellor with anger and bewilderment; interpreting his unwillingness to talk about his reasons for resigning and later his refusal to swear the oath as a lack of trust in her. More's silence, the change in the family's circumstances and his unwillingness to accept financial assistance from the clergy make Alice unhappy and bitter. While she does not understand the motivation behind her husband's refusal to swear the oath, she reconciles with him because she knows he is a man of integrity, and accepts that he must follow his conscience: 'As for understanding, I understand you're the best man that I ever met or am likely to; and if you go – well God knows why I suppose' (p.86). More's reaction shows how much he loves her and values her honesty and strength: 'Why it's a lion I married! A lion! A lion!' (p. 86)

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Margaret (Meg) More

Margaret, Sir Thomas More's daughter, is a lovely, gentle girl, reserved, intelligent and, unusual for a woman at the time, highly educated. Although she modestly claims to pass for a scholar only 'among women', she embarrasses the King when her Latin proves to be better than his. Where Alice is feisty and outspoken Margaret is the peacemaker, defending her father against Alice's criticism and interceding in his arguments with Roper. The relationship between Margaret and her father is very close and trusting: he protects and encourages her and she provides him with intellectual support. More has been in the habit of confiding in Margaret, so his silence on the matter of the king's divorce puzzles her.

Margaret understands why her father would not want to be Lord Chancellor, and shows her support for him when he decides to resign from the position by taking the chain of office from around his neck. Her unspoken fear that the Act of Succession and the oath could hold dangers for More is realised when he is imprisoned. Although she knows he will be angry, she takes advantage of Cromwell's offer to allow her to visit to convince him to swear the oath. When he dismisses her clever arguments one by one she becomes desperate and resorts to hurting him by describing how miserable she and Alice are without him. Margaret understands her father but she questions his actions. At his execution More acknowledges their special relationship: 'You have long known the secrets of my heart' (p. 98).

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William Roper

Will Roper is More's son-in-law. In each of Roper's scenes he is taking a stand on some issue of conscience. Firstly he adopts Luther's ideas, which makes him a heretic in the eyes of More who consequently forbids his request for permission to marry Margaret. However, when the King attacks the Catholic Church, Roper changes his mind and springs to its defence, even dressing in black and wearing a crucifix, 'like a Spaniard'. Roper's inconsistent idealism contrasts with More's steadfastness. More describes his son-in-law's ideals as 'seagoing principles' because like the tides they are never fixed but are always changing. Unlike Roper, More puts his faith not in an unknowable God but in society and the law: 'The law Roper, the law. I know what's legal, not what's right' (p. 38). Roper lacks a sense of humour and has a touch of pomposity about him – for which More teases him gently – but is basically a decent man.

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Chapuys

Chapuys is the Spanish ambassador and uncle of Queen Catherine. He represents the interests of Spain, which opposes the divorce between Catherine and King Henry, and is an important man whose status warrants an attendant to assist him. Chapuys has been sent by the King of Spain to find out where More stands on the matter of the divorce and to persuade him to openly oppose it. Spain represents another quarter from which More faces pressure. Chapuys' diplomacy is underhand: he bribes More's steward, Matthew for information on his master, and tries to manipulate Cromwell who recognises in the Spaniard a cleverness similar to his own: 'O sly! 'Do you notice how sly he is, Rich?' (p. 21)

In speaking with More, Chapuys tries to hide his true motives which are political, with flattery and references to religion. Because he is devious himself he hears hidden meanings in what More says, which leads to misunderstanding. Chapuys recognises that More is a good man and an influential one, and urges him to speak out against the divorce, to be a rallying point for English opposition. He believes wrongly – but not unreasonably – that More's silence on the divorce indicates support for Spain and is confused and angry when More rejects the Spanish king's letter as treasonous. Chapuys' warning to the Steward, Matthew, that: 'No man can serve two masters' proves to be prophetic for More when he is eventually forced to choose between his God and his King.

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Cardinal Wolsey

Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor of England, holds the country's highest ecclesiastical and political offices. With his great wealth and power he seems for many to embody the worst abuses in the Church. The commanding way in which Wolsey sends for More and the fact that he intends to bypass the King's advisory Council in mediating with Rome for Henry's divorce indicate how much power Henry has allowed him. Wolsey is blunt: 'My effort's to secure a divorce. Have I your support or have I not?' (p. 11) His motivation is political – he is prepared to take certain 'regrettable' measures against the church, if necessary – and he is dismissive of More's conscience: 'If you could just see the facts flat on, without that moral squint; with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman' (p. 10). After negotiations with the Pope stall, Wolsey falls from favour with the King and More is appointed Lord Chancellor, setting up the confrontation between More and the King which is the play's central theme.

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Some central ideas

- integrity
- corruption: every man has his price
- silence: as consent/opposition/protection/betrayal
- law: God's law versus man's law.

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Significant quotes

'But every man has his price' (p. 2)

'If you just see facts flat on, without that moral squint; with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman' (p. 10)

'When the King wants something done, I do it' (p. 21)

'Lie low if you will, but I'll brook no opposition – mind that, Thomas' (p. 33)

'The currents and eddies of 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' (p. 39)

'But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather not that I *believe** it, but that *I** believe it ...' (p. 53). Note 2 x italics*.

'The King's a man of conscience and he wants either Sir Thomas More to bless his marriage or Sir Thomas More destroyed. Either will do' (p. 70)

'I don't know whether the marriage was lawful or not. But damn it, Thomas, look at those names ... Can't you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?' (p. 78)

'When a man takes an oath, Meg, his holding his own self in his own hands' (p. 83)

'As for understanding, I understand you're the best man that I ever met or am likely to; and if you go – well God knows why I suppose' (p. 86)

You understand my position, sir, there's nothing I can do; I'm a plain simple man and just want to keep out of trouble' (p88)

'Why, Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world ... But for Wales--!' (p. 95)

'What you have hunted me for is not my actions, but the thoughts of my heart' (p. 95).

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Workbook questions

1 What is the significance of the play's title?

2 Bolt explains in the preface how and why his character differs from the historical More, but what changes did Bolt make also to the final trial scene?

3 Describe three occasions in the play where Bolt uses water to symbolise danger or menace.

4 Make a list of all the characters who apply pressure to More over the oath. Beside each name write the appeal each one makes and their real motive for trying to get More to swear/not swear the oath.

5 The drama is one of words rather than actions. Give some examples where Bolt uses verbal exchanges/confrontation to great effect.

6 Margaret says to her father in prison: 'We sit in the dark ... wondering what they're doing to you here.' Is More justified in letting his family suffer for his beliefs?

7 Who do you think is the play's main antagonist?

Practice topics

Oral explorations of the text

- 1 Research and present to the class an explanation of: (a) The Act of Supremacy; (b) The Act of Succession; (c) The Pilgrimage of Grace
- 2 As Thomas Cromwell, at the end of the play present a monologue justifying your actions.

Creative response

- 1 Margaret has kept a diary. Write four excerpts from this diary demonstrating her state of mind as the family's fortunes decline.

- 2 As Chapuys, write a despatch to the King of Spain describing and interpreting More's reaction to his personal letter of support.

Essay questions

Ideas, characters and themes

- 1 'A *Man for all Seasons* is a play about the competing principles of pragmatism and idealism.' Discuss.
- 2 'You brought yourself to where you stand now.'
'Yes. Still in another sense I was brought.'
Who is responsible for the death of Sir Thomas More?

Structures to construct meaning

- 1 Robert Bolt deliberately constructs the play to show two kinds of men for all seasons; those with integrity, and those without.
- 2 Bolt cleverly uses the dramatic feature of silence to convey meaning in *A Man for all Seasons*. Show how he does this.

Implied/expressed points of view

- 1 Through the play *A Man for all Seasons*, Bolt's respect for the individual conscience persists. Do you agree?
- 2 Bolt's belief that we are compromised by the world we inhabit is clearly shown in *A Man for all Seasons*. Discuss.

How readers' interpretations differ

- 1 The picture of Sir Thomas More presented in *A Man for all Seasons* is limited by our preoccupations and vision of the particular time and place in which the play was written. Discuss.
- 2 If *A Man for all Seasons* poses the question of whether God's law is irreconcilable with human law, then how a reader responds to this question will be partly determined by their own attitude to where laws come from.