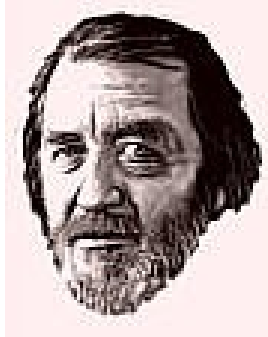


# A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

by Robert Bolt



## THE AUTHOR

Robert Bolt was born in Manchester, England, in 1924. He fought in World War II as a member of the Royal Air Force, and, after the war ended, taught school until 1958. In that year, his first play, *Flowering Cherry*, found success on the London stage. His best-known work, *A Man for All Seasons*, appeared two years later, in 1960. Bolt then turned to writing screenplays for movies, including *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and the film adaptation of *A Man for All Seasons* (1966), winning Oscars for the last two.

Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (the title comes from a description of More by his friend Erasmus) recounts the story of the death of Thomas More during the tumultuous reign of Henry VIII in England. More, a renowned Renaissance scholar and the author of *Utopia* (1516), was appointed Lord Chancellor of England after the death of Cardinal Wolsey. When Henry tried to win a divorce from Catherine of Aragon and the Pope refused, Henry broke with the Catholic Church and, in 1534, Parliament passed the Act of Supremacy, declaring Henry "Supreme Head of the Church in England." More could not in good conscience sign the Act, so he resigned as Lord Chancellor, and in 1535 was beheaded by order of the King.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Sir Thomas More - The protagonist of the play, More is an honest and godly man who refuses to compromise his principles under political pressure. When Henry VIII divorces Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn, and breaks with the Catholic Church in order to obtain the divorce, More cannot give his consent, and pays for his refusal with his life.
- Lady Alice More - Sir Thomas' wife, she is a bitter and angry woman who cannot understand why her husband cannot compromise his principles.
- Lady Margaret More - Sir Thomas' daughter, she loves her father deeply and supports his stand.

- William Roper - Margaret's suitor (and later husband), he is a religious zealot who begins as a zealous Lutheran and ends as a zealous Catholic; he has no discretion, and airs his dangerous opinions with no concern for the consequences. In real life, Roper was More's first biographer after Erasmus.
- Richard Rich - A place-seeking weasel who will do anything to gain political preferment, he first seeks office from More, who refuses him, then betrays More in order to advance in the good graces of Cromwell.
- Duke of Norfolk - More's friend, he ultimately must sit as his judge in his trial before Parliament.
- Cardinal Wolsey - More's predecessor as Lord Chancellor of England, he warns Sir Thomas of the dangers of crossing the king.
- Henry VIII - King of England who plays only a minor role in the play. He considers More his friend, but insists that he go along with his marriage, and demands his head when he refuses to do so.
- Thomas Cromwell - A self-serving politician who does the king's dirty work for him; he spearheads the prosecution of More.
- Thomas Cranmer - Archbishop of Canterbury after the break with Rome, he too takes part in More's prosecution.
- Signor Chapuys - The Spanish ambassador, who tries to get More to condemn openly the divorce of Catherine of Aragon.
- The Common Man - Takes on a variety of small parts, including More's steward, the boatman, and the jailer, and provides commentary on the action. He also serves to draw the audience into the plot of the play by causing them to identify with him in his betrayal and cowardice.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"But every man has his price." (Richard Rich, Ii)

"Readier to be friends, I trust, than he was to be Chancellor." (King Henry, Ivi)

"Because you are honest. What's more to the purpose, you're known to be honest. 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 - and there is you." (King Henry, Ivi)

“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. I doubt if there’s a man alive who could follow me there, thank God.” (More, Ivi)

“The Apostolic Succession of the Pope is ... Why, it’s a theory, yes. You can’t see it; can’t touch it; it’s a theory. 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.” (More, Iii)

“If the King destroys a man that’s proof to the King that it must have been a bad man, the kind of man a man of conscience *ought* to destroy - and of course a bad man’s blessing’s not worth having. So either will do.” (Cromwell, Iiv)

“God made the *angels* to show Him splendour - as He made animals for innocence and plants for their simplicity. But Man He made to serve Him wittily, in the tangle of his mind.” (More, Iiv)

“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, Iivi)

“When a man takes an oath, Meg, he’s holding his own self in his hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers then - he needn’t hope to find himself again. Some men aren’t capable of this, but I’d be loth to think your father one of them.” (More, Iivii)

“The world must construe according to its wits. This court must construe according to the law.” (More, Iiviii)

“I am the King’s true subject and pray for him and all the realm. I do none harm, I say none harm, I think none harm. And if this be not enough to keep a man alive, in good faith I long not to live.” (More, Iiviii)

“He will not refuse one who is so blithe to go to Him.” (More, Ilix)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - The play begins in the home of Sir Thomas More in Chelsea. The Common Man introduces the play, then takes on the persona of Matthew, the steward. Sir Thomas is in the middle of a conversation with Richard Rich. Rich has been waiting for almost a year to gain an office in the government, and argues that anyone can be bought for the right price. More disagrees - then gives him a valuable cup that was sent to him as a bribe by a woman who was to appear before him in court. He advises Rich to avoid temptation and become a teacher. The Duke of Norfolk arrives, engages in a brief exchange with Lady Alice and Meg about falconry, and tells More that Thomas Cromwell, whom Rich has been cultivating, has become Cardinal Wolsey’s secretary. More then receives a letter summoning him to the Cardinal’s palace.

**Act I, scene 2** - At Cardinal Wolsey's palace at 1:00 AM, the Cardinal tries to secure More's support for seeking a divorce for the King. More states that his conscience forbids him to support such a move. Wolsey warns him that his conscience will get him in trouble some day, and muses about who will succeed him as Lord Chancellor of England.

**Act I, scene 3** - More, preparing to leave for Chelsea, has brief conversations with Cromwell and Signor Chapuys, the Spanish ambassador. Both try without success to learn the outcome of his interview with Wolsey, and the ambassador warns him that Spain will not look favorably on any insult to Catherine of Aragon.

**Act I, scene 4** - Back at Chelsea, More finds that William Roper is there courting Meg at 3:00 in the morning. Roper asks More for his daughter's hand, and he refuses because he is a heretic (Lutheran). The ensuing conversation wakes Lady Alice, who chides More for not taking better care of himself. The conversation turns to the identity of the next Lord Chancellor. After the family goes to bed, the Common Man announces that Wolsey has died and More has been appointed to the post.

**Act I, scene 5** - Cromwell speaks to Richard Rich, who is now the Duke of Norfolk's librarian. Cromwell is in the business of gathering information, the more dangerous the better. He and Rich are soon joined by Chapuys. When the Common Man arrives, all three try to pay him for information about Sir Thomas. He tells each one a tidbit of information along the lines of what he wants to hear, and collects a coin from each. It is obvious that many men are keeping an unfriendly eye on the new Lord Chancellor.

**Act I, scene 6** - At Chelsea, the household is in a panic because the King is coming to visit and the Lord Chancellor is nowhere to be found. His wife and daughter are exasperated when they find him calmly attending Vespers, dressed in a cassock. Henry VIII arrives in boisterous good form, and More introduces him to his daughter Margaret, who impresses him with her knowledge of Latin. They then rise to go in to a sumptuous feast prepared for the king's "surprise" visit. Before entering the dining room, Henry asks More if he will support his search for a divorce from Catherine of Aragon, but More insists that his conscience will not permit him to do so. Henry pleads and threatens, but More will not budge. Henry then leaves as abruptly as he came, leaving Lady Alice with a loaded table that will now go untouched. Alice tries to convince her husband to give in to the king's wishes, but she cannot. Roper then arrives and announces that he is no longer a Dissenter, but a loyal servant of Mother Church - in language that smacks of treason after the hints just broadly dropped by the departed sovereign. More urges him to hold his tongue. Then Richard Rich arrives, and Roper hurriedly moves away as if Rich carried the plague. Rich informs More that Thomas Cromwell has been collecting information on him (along with everyone else of consequence in the kingdom), then asks for a job, which More refuses to give him. When Rich leaves, the family urges More to take steps against him, but he refuses. More then insists that the law is his only protection against those who would harm him, and says that he will hide Margaret in the same thicket rather than exposing her to the wild winds of Roper's principles.

**Act I, scene 7** - The scene takes place in a pub. Cromwell and Rich are hatching a conspiracy. Cromwell offers Rich the office of Revenue Collector for the Diocese of York in return for any

useful information he can provide about Sir Thomas More. Rich tells him about the cup given to More as a bribe that he passed on to Rich because he refused to be tainted with it. Cromwell begins to devise a plot to force the Lord Chancellor to change his views, but Rich warns him that More cannot be frightened away from his principles.

**Act II, scene 1** - Two years have intervened since the end of Act I, during which time the Church of England has come into being. More is conversing with William Roper, who, outspoken as ever, is now professedly a loyal son of the Catholic Church in an era when such pronouncements are dangerous; more to the point, he is now Margaret's husband, and his views endanger her. Chapuys then arrives, hinting that, if More were to take a stand against the king, it might lead loyal Catholics in England to take up arms in defense of the faith. As Chapuys ducks out, Norfolk arrives and announces that the Convocation of Bishops has submitted to the king and severed ties with Rome. On hearing this, More removes his chain of office, indicating his intention to resign as Lord Chancellor. Reactions vary - Norfolk is disappointed for the sake of the country, Roper is pleased at what he sees as a noble moral gesture, Alice is angry because it will mean a lower standard of living (they'll have to let most of the servants go), and Margaret is willing to support her father in whatever he does. More insists that their only safety lies in the technicalities of the law, which he believes cannot touch him as long as he remains absolutely silent on the issues at hand.

**Act II, scene 2** - In a conversation between Cromwell and Norfolk, the former insists that More be made to voice support for the king's supremacy and divorce because of the huge following and enormous respect More commands. Norfolk insists on his friend's loyalty, but Cromwell wants to pressure him into making a statement. He intends to do so by accusing More of accepting bribes while he was a judge; he has found willing witnesses in the woman who sent the cup and Richard Rich, to whom More gave the cup when he realized it was a bribe. Norfolk, however, was present that evening, and was able to corroborate More's actions, so Cromwell realizes that he will need "a net with a finer mesh" to catch the former Lord Chancellor.

**Act II, scene 3** - Chapuys arrives at the More home with a letter from the king of Spain thanking More for his support against the divorce of Catherine of Aragon. More refuses to accept the letter, insisting that his views have been must guessed at, but cannot be known because he has not voiced them. Chapuys leaves in frustration. Alice then complains that the house is cold - having lost his government post, the family has no money for food or fuel; the bishops have offered a gift, but More has refused because it would look like payment for his writings, and he wants to identify with no one in this dispute. Roper then informs More that he has been summoned before Cromwell to answer certain "charges." More insists that there is no danger because his case is watertight, and Cromwell, a mere pragmatist, is no match for his expertise in the law.

**Act II, scene 4** - Cromwell, with Rich sitting by taking notes as his personal secretary, tries to trap More, first with alleged support for the Holy Maid of Kent, a young woman executed for prophesying against the king, and then with being the true author of *In Defense of the Seven Sacraments*, a document published under the king's name and for which he was named Defender of the Faith by the Pope. More easily parries these thrusts, but is taken aback when Cromwell reads the king's words accusing him of being a traitor and false friend for not supporting his

marriage to Anne Boleyn. Cromwell then dismisses More, but warns him that he has not seen the end of the matter.

**Act II, scene 5** - More is leaving for home, but can't find a boat to carry him. Norfolk comes up and tries one last time to persuade him to give in and support the king. More refuses, and insists that Norfolk should drop his friendship before it gets him into trouble. Finally More insults Norfolk to get him to leave. Roper then arrives and announces that Parliament has passed an act requiring an oath supporting the marriage of the king and Anne Boleyn, on penalty of treason. More insists that safety may be found in the legal wording of the act, and goes home to study it.

**Act II, scene 6** - More has now been in prison for a year, but has maintained his silence. Cromwell, Norfolk, and Archbishop of Canterbury Thomas Cranmer come to the cell to interview him for the seventh time. Again, they fail to break his silence. Cromwell, in frustration, insists to the others that More must be forced to sign the oath because the king is becoming impatient. Rich, who again has been serving as secretary, asks for the post of Attorney General of Wales, and implies that he would be willing to go far to obtain the position.

**Act II, scene 7** - Alice, Meg, and Roper visit More in prison, charged with trying to get him to sign the act. Margaret takes the lead, and they thrust and parry briefly, then she breaks down and tells her father how much they miss him at home. Alice is furious, convinced that More's refusal is nothing but stubbornness. Finally they embrace, and the jailer, oblivious to Roper's attempts to keep him occupied, tells them that their time is up.

**Act II, scene 8** - This is the trial scene. Cromwell, Norfolk, and Cranmer conduct the trial. More is charged with treason for denying the king his title as Supreme Head of the Church in England. More, insisting that he has never denied the title but has simply refused to sign the Oath of Supremacy, stands on his silence. Cromwell distinguishes among different kinds of silence, and insists that More's silence betokens denial of the title. More cites a maxim of the law to the effect that silence must be presumed to betoken assent. Unable to beat him at the law, Cromwell then calls Richard Rich to the stand, who lies by saying that More denied the supremacy in a conversation with him in the Tower of London. More immediately swears an oath that no such conversation occurred, but the other witnesses have mysteriously been called away to Ireland. More, realizing that Rich's perjury has doomed him, speaks his mind after the jury returns a guilty verdict. More is then condemned to death for the crime of high treason.

**Act II, scene 9** - In the execution scene, More exchanges brief comments with Norfolk, Margaret, Cranmer, the woman who accused him falsely, and the headsman before he is beheaded.

## **ESSAY QUESTIONS**

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. Discuss the significance of oath-taking in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. In the play, the protagonist's refusal to take an oath contrary to his beliefs is central to the plot. Assess More's treatment of this moral dilemma. Was he a noble man of integrity or a stubborn fool? Is his stand in accordance with the teachings of Scripture?

2. Discuss the relationship between law and morality in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Which is more important to the protagonist? Why do you think so? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
3. Discuss the role of the Common Man in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Why do you think Bolt chooses to cast a nameless Everyman in the roles of the minor characters? What is the theatrical impact of such a choice? How does it reflect the central themes of the play?
4. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, which character serves as the most effective foil for the protagonist? Why do you think so? Cite specifics from the play to support your conclusion.
5. Assess the character of Thomas Cranmer as he is portrayed in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. From what you know of church history, how accurate is Bolt's portrayal of the Archbishop of Canterbury?
6. Compare and contrast the notions of truth and morality represented by Thomas More and William Roper in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. How do the differences between the two reveal the playwright's understanding of moral issues?
7. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, to what extent may the protagonist be called a pragmatist, and to what extent is he an idealist? Support your conclusions with details from the script.
8. Compare the character of Richard Rich in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* to that of the protagonist in Goethe's *Faust*. In what sense does Rich sell his soul to the devil? Is what he receives worth what he pays for it? How do the lessons presented by the two playwrights through these characters differ?
9. Robert Bolt, the author of *A Man for All Seasons*, spent thirteen years after his service in World War II as a teacher. How does his portrayal of Sir Thomas More in the play reflect his love and respect for the teaching profession? In what ways may More be characterized more as a teacher than as anything else?
10. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, the protagonist has a very strong sense of self, while many other characters in the play are equally convinced that they know the real Sir Thomas More. Choose three characters in the play and discuss their views of the protagonist. To what extent do they really know who Sir Thomas is, and to what extent are their views of him rooted in their own needs and desires?
11. Discuss the role of silence in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Consider not only the silence of the protagonist in the face of his prosecutors, but also the silence of other characters at key points in the narrative.

12. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius gives his son Laertes the following advice:

“To thine own self be true  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

- To what extent do these words express a major theme of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*? Is the idea of being true to self the chief virtue for the protagonist, and thus for the playwright? Support your argument with specifics from the play.
13. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, to what extent may Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, and Richard Rich be considered Machiavellian? Assess each of these characters on the basis of the precepts contained in Machiavelli's *The Prince*. Which is the most Machiavellian of the three?
14. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, the protagonist has a strong sense of being a man under authority. To what authority does he chiefly submit? Does the answer to this question mark him as a Christian or a humanist? Support your conclusion with specifics from the play.
15. Discuss the playwright's use of irony in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Does the technique serve to distance audience members from the action they are viewing or draw them more fully into it? Why? Cite specifics to support your arguments.
16. Discuss the playwright's use of foreshadowing in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. How does his use of this technique enhance the audience's appreciation of the action on stage? How does it help bring out the major themes of the play?
17. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, why is Sir Thomas More's silence not enough to satisfy Henry VIII? Are his reasons more personal or political? What about Henry's character leads him to take such a position? Support your arguments with specifics from the play.
18. Discuss the concept of “just doing one's job” as it appears in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Which characters attempt to justify immoral behavior in this way? What is Bolt conveying to the audience through these situations as they are portrayed on stage?
19. Contrast the characters of Lady Alice and Lady Margaret in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Why does Sir Thomas More relate so differently to his wife and daughter? What do these characters convey about the major themes of the play? How do they serve to illuminate the character of the protagonist and the consequences of his choices?
20. Discuss the playwright's view of human nature in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, particularly as communicated through the character and speeches of the Common Man. What is Bolt's assessment of human nature? Is it biblical? Why or why not?



21. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, the Common Man cites the old adage, "better a live rat than a dead lion" (cf. Ecclesiastes 9:4). Is this a value with which the playwright agrees? Why or why not? Cite specific characters and speeches in the play to support your conclusion.
22. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Richard Rich asserts that "every man has his price." To what extent does the playwright believe this to be true? Discuss the development of this theme throughout the play, choosing three different characters to illustrate its truth or falsehood.
23. In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, to what extent do differing conceptions of the law held by More and Cromwell account for the two men's actions? Support your arguments with details from the play.
24. Often those who pen historical dramas anachronistically incorporate modern ideas into the plays, especially through the dialogue they give to their main characters. Compare and contrast the incorporation of modern themes as it occurs in Jean Anouilh's *Becket* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* - two plays that were written one year apart. One might expect that the two would address similar thematic material. To what extent is this true? Consider especially the struggles of the title characters with issues of morality and responsibility.
25. Compare and contrast the dramatic techniques used by the playwrights in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Give special attention to the roles of the Stage Manager and the Common Man. What common purposes do they serve in the plays? How do the differences in their characters contribute to the key themes of the stories?
26. Compare and contrast the pictures of Thomas More presented in his *Utopia* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. To what extent does the playwright give an accurate picture of More's ideas and beliefs, and to what extent does he impose twentieth-century values on a sixteenth-century figure?