

A Man For All Seasons

by Robert Bolt

In a culture that is dominated currently by "lost people"; "sandboxed" people; derelicts and vague "waiters" for "Godot", it is refreshing to come across a contemporary playwright who chooses as his subject a man of principle. The re-iterated gospel of despair, mans littleness and absurdity has been shown by at least one writer to be not the whole truth but only part of it. Sir Thomas More is indeed a man for all seasons even this--the winter of our discontent. He is a man of purpose and ideals, a towering individualist and humanist who lives life richly but loves God more, and ultimately chooses to set integrity above physical life and family. This is indeed a play that repays close study--this is the account of a man who stands out clearly as the Renaissance man incarnate yet a modern man in many respects, human witty and urbane, a universal figure of appeal.

The play demands much background knowledge, for example, one should know the history of:

- 1) The Wars of the Roses
- 2) The Houses of Lancaster and York
- 3) The specific conflicts of Henry VIII with the Catholic Church
- 4) The conflicts of Henry VIII with his own archbishops during the period 1527-1535
- 5) The domestic issues concerning the King, his anxiety to obtain an heir, and his divorce and re-marriage

The playwright, Robert Bolt, places his character, More, on the stage in almost every scene, a visible indictment of those around him who so readily accede to King Henry's lightest command. He is shown resisting first the pressures of the King, then the persuasions of a temporarily powerful Wolsey, and finally the appeals of his closest friends and family to change his stand on Henry's divorce. Meg, More's brilliant and spirited daughter, is brought to visit her weakened father after his year of imprisonment and inquisition, so that, like Eve with a barrel of apples, she can tempt him when he is most vulnerable. Her arguments are cummulatively more forceful: Can he not outwardly swear to support the Act of Supremecy, yet inwardly think otherwise? Is he not actually inviting martyrdom for the sake of his own glorification? Has he not already done all that God could "reasonably want?" Above all, has he fully considered how the thought of his suffering and expectable death agonizes those he loves? This last appeal, of course, is the hardest to endure. More's response to Meg's queries is terse and poignant: "The King's more merciful than you. He doesn't use the rack." Nevertheless, even with her many apples and emotional force, "Eve" cannot sway More. Tight-lipped lion-hearted Alice, More's wife, who has all along forseen better than anyone else that her husband will be "snared" in Henry's net, undergirds his final stand by responding to his plea for understanding: "As for understanding, I understand you're the best man that I ever met or am likely to meet-----" The reader can only humbly concur.

Almost as omnipresent as More in the play is the Common Man, a one-man Greek chorus. He is important, first, for providing transition between scenes--telescoping action, providing facts about characters and events, and evaluating behaviour. Second, he is the major source of comic relief in a play of serious issues and tragic consequences. Most important, he is a personality in his own right, the acknowledged representative of the ongoing society which adjusts its sails to the prevailing wind. He is the "plain simple man" who just wants "to keep out of trouble." And More rightfully exclaims, "Oh, Sweet Jesus! These plain, plain simple men!"

The Common Man represents the compromiser, the individual who satisfies self-interest and preserves his skin at all costs. "Better a live rat than a dead lion", mutters the Common Man, as he fails even to show enough compassion to allow a doomed man a few more minutes with his family. This Common Man is, alas, only too familiar and recognizable a man--a person who has walked through every phase of history and stands large as life and twice as successful within our midst today. He represents those who are shrewd enough to resist a compromisingly large bribe but willing enough to pass judgment on, and execute, a man of uncompromised principles. By yielding so passively to prevailing power-holders the Common Man proves as dangerous and distasteful as the tyrants he serves. It is not that More is shown to be a man of the utmost perfection against the villains of his day--he is shown essentially as an ordinary warm human being "at home with compromise" but when at last forced into the cruel test of upholding or betraying his personal convictions he is shown to be incapable of the final compromise--he is no hollow man! More is finally and inescapably ^{shared} shared, the necessary scapegoat whom a Judas--Rich elects to betray for a little petty power, and a share in Wales.

Research work on Sir Thomas More.

- 1) Find a reliable history of Thomas More and take notes on:
 - a) his accomplishments in literature public life and, above all, in religion
- 2) His relationship with Henry VIII--first as his religious spokesman, then as his adversary.

Trace the following events.

1513: More's first year in Henry's service.

1521: "ghost writer" of Henry's defense of the Pope and attack on Luther.

1529: "Submission of the Clergy" - Religious officials accede to Henry's limitations of their power.

1534: Act of Supremacy, acknowledging Henry VIII as supreme authority of the Church of England; occasion of More's first arrest.

1535: The execution of Sir Thomas More on a charge of treason.

- 3) Review the history of the Tudors and their accession to the throne, stressing the Wars of the Roses, in bringing Henry to power.
- 4) Anticipate and clarify potentially difficult references:
 - a) reference to Signor Machiavelli
 - b) the reference to "two Tudors" being sufficient
 - c) "Yorkist Wars" - who were the Yorkists?
 - d) who is called the "English Socrates"?
 - e) who is Erasmus, and what is his role in More's history?
 - f) find out the meaning of these terms? farrier; advocate; pragmatist; bracken

Reading and analysis of the play:

- 1) Outline the sequence of events in each act--date them according to the information given by the Common Man.
- 2) Discuss the extent to which the play parallels actual history, note the individuals who played comparable roles in actual life. (at that time)
- 3) Who was Wolsey? What exactly is his role in this period of time?
- 4) Will Roper -- More's son-in-law and later his biographer -- what part did Roper play in the history of this period?
- 5) Henry VIII - a versatile vibrant monarch ruthless in securing his own will -- how ruthless?
- 6) Rich - a sycophant willing to betray a friend to the highest bidder; is he a "lucky" traitor?
- 7) Thomas Cromwell - a shrewd opportunist. How did he gain power? What was his ultimate end?
- 8) Norfolk--the aristocrat, and More's friend who places personal safety above friendship and principles. How does his conduct differ from that of the Common Man and Richard Rich?
- 9) Concerning plot and action:
 - a) What are Roper's many philosophies?
 - b) Why does Wolsey disappear from the scene?
 - c) Who is Chapuys, and why does he behave so strangely?
- 10) At what point does More find it necessary to resign his office as Lord Chancellor?
- 11) On what charge is he placed in prison?
- 12) What major legal device does he use to avoid -- temporarily -- the death sentence?
- 13) How is More's death sentence finally "engineered"?
- 14) Despite his death penalty, how does More really get the better of his accusers?
- 15) Find reasons for the division of the play into two acts.

On the character of More himself:

- 1) What personal qualities does More reveal through his conversation and actions with his friends and family?
- 2) How does he show himself throughout to be a man who truly understands human nature?
- 3) Does he fit the qualifications of a saint as defined by the Common Man early in Act I?
- 4) Does he change in any way throughout the course of the play?
- 5) What clues in Act I foreshadow More's coming resistance to Henry's divorce?

- 6) What is the central moral dilemma of the play? Why is it necessary to Henry that More make a public stand of support?
- 7) Particularly analyse More's conversation with Henry in Act I.

On the character of Henry VIII:

- 1) What elements of Henry's personality are revealed directly and indirectly in the play?
- 2) How does Henry try to justify his controversial divorce action?
- 3) How does he demonstrate throughout the play that he always means well toward More and yearns to remain his friend?
- 4) What are the exact ironies in this last question for Henry the man, and Henry the King?

On the character of Norfolk:

- 1) How does Norfolk demonstrate his affection for More -- yet at the same time dare not risk his status of security?
- 2) What is the basis for the quarrel between More and Norfolk in Act II? Why does More initiate it in the first place?

On the characters of the "Jackals" -- Cromwell: Rich: and Chapuys:

1) Cromwell:

- a) Does he have any admirable qualities?
- b) Where does he most fully reveal his ruthlessness?
- c) Note particularly his actions at the end of Act I.
- d) What is his doctrine of "political convenience" as defined in his conversation with Rich in the last scene of Act I?
- e) Is he correct in his assumption that the efforts of "upright, steadfast men" are "useless and ill advised"?
- f) Why does Cromwell say: "And if I bring about More's death - I plant my own, I think"?

2) Richard Rich:

- a) How does Rich demonstrate from his first line in the play that he can be bought?
- b) What are his major values?
- c) How does Cromwell manipulate him?
- d) How is he treated by the Common Man?
- e) In how many ways does Rich betray More -- and his own soul, and what is his price each time?
- f) Is Rich a true convert to the doctrines of Machiavelli?

3) Chapuys:

- a) In what ways does Cahpuys demonstrate that he functions for the King of Spain in the same capacity as Cromwell for the King of England?
- b) What causes Chapuys to say of More whom he earlies much admired, "The man's utterly unreliable!"
- c) Why are Chapuys and Cromwell, officials of opposing powers, shown leaving the stage together arm in arm - "conspiratorial"?

The representative of the "mass that follows" -- The Common Man.

- 1) Identify and discuss the three major functions of the Common Man --
 - a) A one-man Greek chorus
 - b) A sort of stage manager (somewhat similar in idea to the one in Our Town)
 - c) As a background commentator.
- 2) Discuss the Common Man as a personality of any age who sets self-interest above all other values.
- 3) Is the Common Man a crafty opportunist, or a moral coward, or both?

Roper:

- 1) Though courageous and outspoken how does Roper reveal himself as immature?
- 2) What qualities of More are lacking in the first portrait of Roper?
- 3) Why does More forbid Meg's marriage to Roper at first--and then later allows it?
- 4) What is Roper's function in the play?

Alice:

- a) Are family solidarity and well being her best interests?
- b) In what ways does she make More's continued quarrel with Henry more painful?
- c) Why is she, at first, so cool and aloof when she visits More in prison?
- d) What causes More to declare "Why, it's a lion I married! A lion lion!"

Meg:

- 1) Meg is a remarkable young woman almost too bright for a woman of her age! What exceptional qualities does she exhibit before King Henry?
 - a) What indications are there that More dotes on his daughter?
 - b) Why is Meg a most potent "Eve" to tempt her father?
 - c) What four arguments does she present to try to persuade her father to swear to the Act of Succession?

Sir Thomas More's personal stand and legal strategy.

- 1) Why does More maintain his stand, even though he knows Henry will ultimately have his way anyhow?
- 2) Discuss his personal integrity
 - a) His religious convictions.
 - b) His concern for public morality.
 - c) His desire, strongly felt, to escape martyrdom.
 - d) Discuss ways in which More succeeds in living up to his philosophy.

Moral issues of the play -- open discussion.

- 1) How much can any one man affect the course of public events and remedy obvious evils? Should he even try?
- 2) What comes first--loyalty to family, self, or principles?
- 3) Do the ends justify the means?
- 4) Can a man say one thing and do another without betraying his principles?
- 5) Is the Common Man right - "Better a live rat than a dead lion"?

Written Work:

Select one of the following two questions and write an essay?

Question 1.

The Common Man states,

"I'm a plain simple man and just want to keep out of trouble". To what extent has his philosophy of "no involvement" permeated modern life and in what ways has it proven--and can prove--highly detrimental to public life?

Question 2.

Bolt wrote that, "The action of this play ends in 1535, but the play was written in 1960 and if in production one date must obscure the other, it is 1960 which I would clearly like to occupy the stage. The life of a man like Thomas More proffers a number of caps which in this or any other century we may try on for size."

Analyse what makes the play relevant to our times and what "caps" we are offered to try on for size.

The playwright, Robert Bolt, places his spectator, here, on the stage in almost every scene, a visible indictment of those around him who so readily accede to King Henry's lightest command. He is shown resisting first the pressures of the King, then the persuasions of a temporarily powerful Wolsey, and finally the appeals of his closest friends and family to change his stand on Henry's divorce. Mag. Here's brilliant and spirited daughter, is brought to visit her widowed father after his year of captivity and imprisonment, so that, like her with a barrel of apples, she can tempt him when he is most vulnerable. Her arguments are essentially more forceful: Can he not outwardly swear to support the Act of Supremacy, but inwardly still acknowledge that he is not actually inviting martyrdom for the sake of his own glorification? Has he not already done all that God would "reasonably want"? Above all, has he fully considered how the thought of his suffering and respectable death amazes those he loves? This last appeal, of course, is the hardest to endure. Here's response to Mag's queries is terse and poignant: "The King's word is final, that you know. He doesn't use the word, 'Nevertheless, even with her very eyes and emotional force, she cannot sway More. Light-bipped Non-hearted Alice, Here's wife, who has all these forces better than anyone else, that her husband will be 'satisfied' in Henry's suit, underpins his final stand by responding to his plea for undercooking: 'As for undercooking, I understand you're the best man that I ever met or as likely to meet-----' The result can only beably worse."

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