

A Man for All Seasons Study Guide

A Man for All Seasons by Robert Bolt

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Plot Summary

Sir Thomas More is a close friend of King Henry VIII. As a philosopher and thinker, though, he morally objects to Henry divorcing Catherine, his wife. She has not born him a male heir, and Henry is obsessed with creating a progeny. At the time, divorce was not legal as it was controlled by the Roman Catholic Church. More cites that the Pope, head of the Catholic Church, would not likely provide a special dispensation for the divorce. The Pope had already granted Catherine the ability to marry Henry, but only after it was revealed she and her first husband, Henry's deceased brother, had never consummated their own marriage. More discusses his feelings with the current Chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, but Wolsey feels More is being impractical.

Later, More meets the Spanish Ambassador to England, Signor Chapuys. Because Queen Catherine is the aunt of the King of Spain, Chapuys feels loyal to her more than to Henry. He discusses the situation with More and finds out More is against the divorce. Chapuys stresses the religious significance of marriage to the Catholic faith. He sees More as his ally in the matter. More, though, is more thoughtful about his reasoning. However, Chapuys does not comprehend this thoughtfulness and sees More's agreement as a testament to his Catholic faith.

Once at home, More's daughter Margaret tells him her boyfriend came to visit her while More was away. Roper, the boyfriend, asked for Margaret's hand in marriage. Furious, More refuses to let Margaret marry Roper. Roper is a Lutheran, which means he is a Protestant. More does not want a Protestant in his family. At the same time, Chancellor Wolsey was sent into disgrace by Henry. Wolsey was not able to convince the Pope to give him special dispensation for the divorce. Wolsey died suddenly, and Henry appointed More as Wolsey's successor.

Thomas Cromwell, known only as a close confidant of Henry, speaks with Richard Rich, a man More helped find a job. More also gave Rich a silver cup as a gift, not realizing the silver cup was given to him as a bribe. Cromwell presses Rich to give him information about More; in return, Cromwell promises Rich a high-powered position in the court. Chapuys and More's servant Matthew enter soon after. Cromwell, Rich, and Chapuys try to bribe Matthew into giving them information about More. He tells them very vague facts, information well-known to the court. The three men pay him nonetheless.

Henry travels to More's London home where More is nowhere to be found. After searching for him, More arrives back at his home at the last minute before Henry arrives. The two men talk, and More reminds Henry he promised not to ask More about his position on the divorce. Henry becomes angry, and he tells More he will not press him for his opinion on the divorce. However, More must promise not to speak out against the divorce publicly. After Henry leaves, More's wife Alice begs More to reconsider his stance. She wants More to do whatever Henry asks of him in order to stay in his favor. Then Rich shows up and tells More Cromwell and Chapuys are trying to find information to blackmail More. Rich, however, uses this information to blackmail



More himself and asks for a better job. More refuses. Feeling rejected and embarrassed, Rich meets with Cromwell and tells him about the silver cup More received as an unknowing bribe. In return for this information, Cromwell gives Rich a job.

Back in Parliament, the Act of Supremacy was passed. This act would establish England will be Protestant and follow the Church of England. Henry, as king, will act as the head of the church. The act has not become fully realized, though, as it still needs the bishops of England to pass it. More is more diligent than ever. He says if the bishops pass the act, he will resign his newly-acquired position. He is adamant and insists he will not explain himself or his position to anyone but the king. His family pleads with him to change his mind, but he refuses. He receives a letter from the king of Spain commending him for his decision.

By now, Henry has received word of More's resistance. He tells Cromwell he plans to persecute More, but he needs more evidence against him. Cromwell meets with the Duke of Norfolk and tells him about the silver cup bribe. However, Norfolk pokes holes in this evidence and tells Cromwell More gave the cup away once he realized it was a bribe. Cromwell leaves in order to find more evidence against More.

Later, Cromwell calls More into his office and begins to cite charges against him. He says More was sympathizing with an enemy and had taken credit for a book written by Henry. He then reads More a letter in which the king calls More a villain. While More was able to wave off the other two accusations, the king's words hurt him.

More meets with Norfolk outside Cromwell's office. He tells Norfolk being his friend is a liability. Being friends with More could mean Norfolk would be considered a conspirator against the king. After the discussion, the scene changes to More's imprisonment. Parliament signed another act into law stating all of Henry's subjects must swear an oath of allegiance to Henry and his new capacity as the head of the Church of England. Also, the act states the subjects must fully agree and support Henry's divorce from Catherine. Refusing to swear the oath, More ends up in prison.

Many people come to try to change More's mind, including his family. When visiting More, Alice finally comes to understand why More took the position that he did. They reconcile their differences and rekindle their love. At More's trial, Rich gives false testimony saying More vocally denied Henry as the true ruler of the church. Before he is beheaded, More gives a speech about the evils of a government that would condemn a man to death for being quiet about his opinions.



Act 1, Section 1

Summary

A Man for All Seasons is divided into two acts. However, there are no scenes dividing the acts. For the purpose of this guide, the text has been divided into different sections.

The play opens with a monologue given by the Common Man. He is alone onstage with a basket of props. He is upset that he is the one to open the play primarily about royalty, but he pulls out the costume of Matthew. Matthew is Sir Thomas More's manservant. More enters the room, and Richard Rich follows soon after. They argue about whether or not every man can be bribed. More is shocked when Rich claims a man can be bribed after being tortured, either mentally or physically. More realizes Rich is citing an idea written by Machiavelli. Rich reveals Thomas Cromwell told him to read Machiavelli's works. According to Rich, Cromwell offered him a job, but he did not take it. He would rather work for More.

More tells Rich there is a job opening for a teacher, but Rich does not want to teach. In his mind, teaching is thankless and does not provide enough opportunities for advancement. More warns working in politics will eventually cause problems because the temptations are numerous. To demonstrate this, More shows Rich a silver cup someone gave him as a bribe. At the time, he did not realize it was a bribe. Now that he knows, he gives the cup to Rich. Rich mentions she will sell the cup and buy nice clothing with it.

The Duke of Norfolk, More's wife Alice, and More's daughter Margaret enter the room. Norfolk brings news that Cromwell has become the Cardinal's secretary. It is odd because the group all know Cromwell is widely disliked by the court and other politicians. Norfolk tells Rich he should look to Cromwell for a position. However, Rich reaffirms he would rather work for More. As everyone leaves, Rich runs back to grab the silver cup. Matthew then tells the audience Rich will never amount to anything. However, Matthew says More is far too generous and giving for his own good.

More arrives at the office of Cardinal Wolsey, who is the current Chancellor of England. Wolsey is writing a letter to the Pope asking for special dispensation for King Henry VIII's divorce from his wife, Catherine of Aragon. King Henry wants a male heir, and he feels his mistress would be able to give him one better than his wife. Wolsey gives the letter to More and asks for his opinion. More begins to discuss the style of the letter, but Wolsey presses him for his opinion about the subject. When More says he is cautious about the divorce, Wolsey says More is far too moral. The times call for a change; in Wolsey's eyes, the divorce is the only way to save the country. Wolsey says More should have found a job in the church rather than in politics.



Analysis

The Common Man's opening monologue foreshadows his part in the play. By one man carrying around a basket of uniforms, it shows mankind is uniform. Most people go about on their day-to-day business without letting their morals interfere. They even let their work hinder their ideals. As the play moves forward, the Common Man strays more and more from being the faithful servant. And as his morals degrade, his guilt grows greater.

The reference to Machiavelli's work is a reference to *The Prince*. The book suggested the government should take any means necessary in order to grow stronger. Decisions guided by morals would hinder the government's growth. Because Rich identifies with Machiavelli's treatise, it shows a great deal about his character. It foreshadows that Rich will stop at nothing to gain power and wealth. At the same time, More's resistance to Machiavelli's ideas shows he is completely different; he supports moral judgment and reveres the man who looks to his conscience as a guide.

By suggesting Rich become a teacher, More sets a theme into motion. Following the same idea that a man's conscience should be his guide, More believes one of the most important callings in life is to be a teacher. In Rich's case, he means a regular school teacher. However, his actions and speech dictate he wants to teach people how he believes they should behave, thereby controlling them.

Vocabulary

Perverse, embroidered, liturgical, impose, sufficiently, deteriorating, indifference, affable, contaminated, exhalation



Act 1, Section 2

Summary

More leaves the Chancellor's office and heads outside. He has a brief interaction with Cromwell before Cromwell goes into the Chancellor's office himself. Signor Chapuys, the Spanish Ambassador to England, presses More for details about his meeting with the Chancellor. When More is vague about their discussion, Chapuys believes More must be in disagreement with Wolsey's opinions. Chapuys tells More that the divorce would be detrimental to the relations between Spain and England, as Catherine is the king of Spain's aunt. He also disguises his concern to be one of religious fervor, saying that marriage is a sacred sacrament in the Catholic Church. Chapuys believes More is his ally, so he leaves. More then gets on the ferry and goes home.

When More arrives, he sees Margaret and her boyfriend Roper, a Lutheran, are together at a late hour. More is congenial about his visit, but he is angry when Margaret tells him about Roper's proposal of marriage. More refuses to let Roper marry his daughter. Roper believes it is because of his family's social standing. However, More tells Roper it is his "heretical" faith separating him and Margaret. Roper tries to argue, but More reminds Roper he was a devout and zealous Catholic until only a few years ago. He sends Roper on his way. Alice soon comes in, and Margaret leaves the room to prepare tea. More tells Alice about the proposal. She is shocked, but she then realizes her husband was only trying to distract her from discussing his meeting with Wolsey. More turns down any mention of the meeting, but Alice mentions Norfolk suggested More should be the Chancellor rather than Wolsey.

Analysis

Scene three introduces two characters who are portrayed as the two most selfishly-motivated characters in the play. Cromwell and Chapuys disguise their politically-motivated actions underneath two different facades. Cromwell tries to be friendly and poses himself as a learned admirer of More's. Chapuys shows his only concern is that the divorce would harm Catherine and their shared devout Catholic faith. However, both only want to gain favor in their respective kings' eyes.

Two motifs in this play are water and land. They are referred to multiple times by different characters, and they are also used to describe the characters' moral values. For instance, More believes his beliefs are firmly rooted; they are unshakable and unchangeable. In his mind, that is the way faith and morals should be. Many of the other characters like Roper, though, are characterized by water. Roper changes his morals to suit whatever is popular at the time. He does not abide by his words, thus he is malleable and unstable.



Interestingly enough, though, Roper characterizes what the Protestants hated about the Catholic Church. Martin Luther believed the Church had become corrupt and changed their stance on issues for the Pope's personal gain. More represents the values Luther spread; Luther wanted faith to be universal, yet permanent. Values should not change in order to satisfy a fleeting want or need. Yet More was so repulsed by the Protestant faith he refused to have a Protestant for a son-in-law.

Vocabulary

Dispatch, aesthetic, dictum, exasperation, dynasty, barren, precedents, dispensation, plodding, felicitated, amicably, abstractedly, fathom, silting, resignedly, advocates, ruefully, impudence, flippant



Act 1, Section 3

Summary

The next scene consists of the Common Man coming onto the stage set with a single spotlight shining on a robe and cardinal hat. He states the Cardinal officially died of health-related problems; however, it was widely rumored the Cardinal died because he had fallen out of Henry's favor. The Pope did not grant the special dispensation for the divorce, so Henry had Wolsey arrested. The Chancellor died while being transported to prison. However, Henry appointed More as the new Chancellor of England in Wolsey's wake.

The next scene begins with Rich and Cromwell discussing their new positions in the court. While Rich discloses he is Norfolk's secretary, Cromwell is much more secretive about his new position. After Chapuys enters the room, Cromwell states he does whatever the king asks him to do. He then tells the two at the moment, the king is sailing down the Thames on his way to More's house. He wanted to discuss his divorce with More and try to change his mind.

Matthew, More's servant, enters the room, and the three are eager for him to answer their questions. One at a time, they approach Matthew and ask him for information about More. Matthew tells Cromwell More hates discussing the divorce, and then he tells Chapuys More is very religious. Rich realizes the information Matthew gave was common knowledge. All three men pay Matthew before they leave. Matthew tells the audience each of the men would take their information and aggrandize it to feel important. He played a trick on them, and all three fell for it.

Analysis

When telling the audience of Cardinal Wolsey's death, the Common Man is foreshadowing More's own fall from grace and his eventual death. He makes it clear Henry has struck fear into every member of his court; this divorce has consumed the politicians' lives. The only way to survive is to give Henry what he wants. What makes it difficult for More, though, is he will not try to grovel like Wolsey did. While Wolsey tried his best to get permission for the divorce, More is against it altogether. It is easy to see the Chancellorship will not fare well for More.

The Common Man as Matthew is also slowly starting to show his degradation from More's friend to More's betrayer. While he didn't actually give away pertinent information, the fact that he used details about More's life for personal gain shows he abused his position and friendship with his master. However, he did not do it to hurt More personally. Rather, Matthew only wanted the money. His motivation is completely removed from the subject matter; he has no interest or concern over whether or not Henry divorces Catherine. For the politicians, they are either for or against the divorce,



and all their actions are guided by their decision. However, the Common Man is removed from this fight and instead adds another point of motivation. He uses the fight in order to serve himself.

Vocabulary

Repute, eagerly, furtive, protrude, reproachfully, caricature, ebony, rheumatism, kippers, bilked



Act 1, Section 4

Summary

Alice, Margaret, and Norfolk have all been expecting Henry's arrival. However, More is nowhere to be found. When he arrives from the vespers service, Norfolk scolds him and tells him to change into more formal attire. It doesn't matter, though, because Henry arrives and insists his visit be treated casually. Margaret and Henry begin speaking in Latin, but Henry quits because he realizes her Latin is better than his. He also tries to wrestle with Norfolk. Later, he discusses a book which More helped him write.

More and Henry leave the room to be alone. Henry tries to bring up the divorce, but More insists he cannot agree with it. More also reminds Henry he promised not to discuss the matter or to press More to change his mind. Henry tells More the divorce must take place in order to produce an heir and everyone else understands. He is confused as to why More is so adamant about his stance. More tries to remind Henry the king does not need More's permission, but Henry insists he must have More's blessing because he respects him. But realizing More will not change his mind, Henry leaves immediately.

The other three chastise More for insulting the king by condemning the divorce. Then Roper arrives and announces he has changed back to Catholicism. He says he is staunchly against the change the king wants to implement; he then accuses More of political corruption. Rich then arrives and informs More that Cromwell and Chapuys had bribed Matthew into giving up information. He also asks More for a more powerful position, a request which More turns down. Rich leaves, visibly upset. When More and Roper argue more, More exclaims he will never let his daughter marry Roper. However, he soon apologizes for his temper.

The scene changes to a local pub, the Loyal Subject. Cromwell enters and begins a short dialogue with the publican, an innkeeper, then begins to accuse the publican of being deceitful. He then welcomes Rich and tells him a new position has opened; if Rich wants it, he should tell Cromwell everything he knows about More. Still upset from being rejected by More, Rich tells Cromwell about the silver cup bribe.

Analysis

It only takes one scene to show Henry is a disingenuous, greedy, and arrogant man. He does not care about the truth as much as he cares about appearances. These two ideas contradict each other, but Henry demands they be carried out simultaneously. For example, he wants Margaret to think of him as a scholar, but he cannot admit her Latin is far superior to his. Instead, he changes the subject.

Most importantly, though, Henry wants More to validate his divorce. He knows More is a moral and wise man; if More agrees with the divorce, then Henry will feel like he is



doing the right thing. Since More does not agree with the divorce, though, Henry knows the whole affair is wrong. But instead of facing this possibility, Henry instead chooses to eliminate his moral conscience: More. With More gone, Henry is free to do whatever he wishes, free from judgment.

Again, the water and land symbolism is apparent in the play. With his morals, Henry is defined by water symbolism. His grand entrance on the Thames river is the perfect allusion to his wishy-washy moral code. Roper's morals are compared to the ocean which changes frequently and violently. And land is personified in More who stands firm to Henry's unsuccessful attempt to sway him.

At the end of Cromwell's scene with Rich, Cromwell holds Rich's hand close to a flame. This is significant because the symbol of fire casts Cromwell as the devil character. Also, by stating people like More only belong in Heaven and not on earth, he admits to his evil, sinister nature. In his mind, his behavior is the standard for how people on earth behave. He, however, has found complete solace in this and is a guide for others to become morally depraved. By telling Rich his next bribe will be much easier on his conscience, he is acting as a teacher, something More was trying to do with Rich as well. Rich, though, chose to follow Cromwell's path because it led to tangible wealth and power.

Vocabulary

Fanfare, hoisted, erupt, testily, plainsong, cassock, dowdy, harebrained, superlatively, auditor, licentious, indulgently, rosebay, ambiguous, meddle, flares, jackals, irksome, reputedly, deplorable, moodily, bellow, wooingly, haven, discreet, impudence, fortnight, martyrs, indicates, perturbed, noncommittally, hostilely, libel, eddies, unremitting, publican, tactful, lamenting, litigant,



Act 2, Section 1

Summary

Scene 5 features only the Common Man. He announces in the past two years, the Church of England was established by Parliament rather than by a war. He then said those who opposed it had put themselves in that situation because they were old-fashioned. The next scene shows More and Roper, now his son-in-law, arguing about More's loyalty to the Church. Chapuys enters and speaks with More privately. He says many people are willing to die to defend Catholicism. He then asks whether or not it is true More will resign if the bishops make Henry the head of the Church of England.

Norfolk arrives and Chapuys leaves. Norfolk exclaims the bishops have cast aside the papacy and pronounced Henry as the supreme head of the Church of England. More gets up to take off his chain of office; no one but Margaret will help him. Norfolk claims More is being a coward, but More defends his decision. Alice is upset with her husband's resignation because she knows what the outcome will be. Roper is congratulatory and sees More's response as a symbol of his faith. No one tries to understand More is resigning because it is the morally right thing to do.

Analysis

Margaret proves herself as a thoughtful young woman when she helps her father remove his chain of office. Nobody else will help him; everyone else thinks More is in the wrong. Margaret sees, though, her father is doing what he thinks is right. While she may not agree with him, she knows her father would never make such a grave decision on a whim. She realizes her father is putting his life in danger. Yet Margaret helps him carry this burden in a small way.

Matthew's short monologue at the end of scene 2 shows his steady fall from being a decent character. He questions More's intentions when asking him to stay for less money, and he claims More was only asking him to stay for smaller wages because More is greedy. Matthew knows More is not greedy; however, he is slowly starting to only look out for himself. Staying with More means a pay cut, and having money is more important to Matthew than helping the man who has been his friend and companion.

Vocabulary

Despair, approvingly, fastidious, degradation, quibble, sonorously, maliciously, angelic, titters, suavely, agitation, galvanized, metaphorical, intones, agile, subdued, tenuous, vestige, jocosity



Act 2, Section 2

Summary

Cromwell tells Norfolk he plans to use the silver cup bribe against More. Norfolk, though, knows More did not know the cup was a bribe. He tries to tell Cromwell going after More is a bad idea, but Cromwell does not listen. He brings in Rich and the woman who gave More the cup. As the two dignitaries listen to the testimonies, Norfolk remembers he was there the night Rich received the cup, and it was shortly after the woman gave it to More. Cromwell then says he will find new evidence against More. He tries to convince Norfolk to work with him; since Norfolk is More's friend, it will look like a fair case instead of a witch hunt. Norfolk refuses and leaves the room.

Chapuys arrives at More's home and notices how bare it looks. He goes inside and delivers a letter from the king of Spain to More. According to Chapuys, the king of Spain is very grateful for More's stance on the divorce and thinks of him as an ally. More refuses to open the letter, though, thinking it might indict him later. As Chapuys leaves, he mentions the king will have even greater respect for More since he didn't open the letter. As Alice and More argue over their finances and More's decision, Roper comes in and announces someone has come to take More to Hampton Court on treason charges.

Analysis

What is odd about these two scenes is that More acts out of character as compared to earlier sections of the play. When he doesn't open the letter, he says he must remain loyal to Henry. However, More only quit his position because he disagreed with Henry on a significant issue; he had to follow his conscience knowing the king was making a mistake. This does not mean, though, More was against Henry or his rule. Opening the letter would appear to be a sign that More was in alliance with Spain, and More wanted to prove he still supported Henry. Not opening the letter was the only way he knew how to prove this.

Vocabulary

Recapitulate, judicature, contemptuously, affability, impeccably, corroborate, canter contradict, tangible, barbarity, patronizing, gravity, genteel, trumps, melancholy, incognito, flabbergasted, bracken, forgo, reproachfully, sickle, distress, pragmatist



Act 2, Section 3

Summary

More and Rich sit in Cromwell's office while Cromwell begins to interrogate More. Cromwell tells More Henry is displeased with More's refusal to support the marriage. More still won't repent, so Cromwell accuses More of fraternizing with a woman who was executed for treason. He then accuses More of claiming to have written a book attributed to the king. More waves off both accusations and cites them as inconsistent. As a final gesture, Cromwell reads a letter written by Henry. In the letter, the king calls Henry a villain and a traitor. More was upset by Henry's words and leaves the room.

More meets Norfolk outside. He tells Norfolk to not associate with him anymore because it is dangerous for his reputation. Norfolk, though, waves this off and tells More just to change his mind. More then picks a fight with Norfolk, and his words sting Norfolk. More claims Norfolk isn't fit for heaven because he caved under pressure. Norfolk punches More and leaves. Roper and Margaret enter and tell More Parliament signed an act which required all of Henry's court to take an oath of allegiance. Hoping for the best, the three leave for More's home to read over the new act.

Analysis

The fight scene between More and Norfolk is interesting to dissect. On one hand, More could truly be upset with Norfolk. He considers Norfolk his friend, so he may be fed up with Norfolk trying to make More go against his morals. On the other hand, he may have picked the fight to push Norfolk away. He uses strong language to describe how Norfolk betrayed his conscience and his morals, and Norfolk was visibly upset. By punching More, he succeeded in ending their friendship. Whether or not More planned for this, though, is up to interpretation.

Vocabulary

Prophesying, notorious, abstain, canon, instigated, perjure, viciously, sportingly, wary, villainous, impudence, fractional, gale, covert, jeer, importunate, gravely, splentic, sloth, wistfully, administer, compulsion



Act 2, Section 4

Summary

The Common Man, dressed as a jailer, comes onstage and reads a letter. In the letter, it reveals Cromwell, Norfolk, and Archbishop Cranmer are all charged, tried, and found guilty of high treason. Cromwell and Cranmer are even executed. Rich, though, is the Chancellor and died peacefully in his sleep. But those events have not happened, and the Common Man reveals a haggard-looking More in a jail cell. Cromwell, Norfolk, and Cranmer enter and begin questioning More and his allegiance. More does not answer questions about the oath of allegiance, but he knows if he remains silent, they cannot charge him with treason. Upset, the men leave. Cromwell bribes the jailor to watch for any treasonous activity. Later, Rich asks Cromwell for a higher position. Cromwell ignores the request, though, and tells Rich Henry is getting upset with the delay.

More's family visits him the next day. Margaret pleads with her father to take the oath. She says he can speak the oath with his mouth but refuse the oath with his heart. More, though, says an oath is a spoken promise to God. Even speaking an insincere oath would be blasphemy. Alice is visibly and audibly upset with More, but he pleads with her to understand his reasoning. As he breaks down emotionally, Alice finally sees the damage this situation has caused More's heart and mind. She then tells More he is the best man she has known.

Analysis

When the Common Man tells the audience about the charges and executions, it is to show Henry's court is anything but stable. These men who groveled at Henry's feet found perhaps the king didn't care about them; instead, he only cared about his own gains. In Henry's mind, they did not contribute enough to his wild spree of marriages. Thus, they committed treason. Because these men were killed by Henry, the text argues More had died a more noble death. Though he was eventually executed, he followed his conscience and died guilt-free. These men, though, died as cowards for bending their morals to attempt to survive Henry's wrath.

To More, having his family understand his reasoning is one of the most important things he wants before his death. Until this point, his family saw his choice as indignation; they thought he wasn't considering their feelings or social standing. When Alice sees More break down, though, she realizes what kind of torture More was going through. Even though she didn't understand his reasoning, she took back all her anger and resentment.



Vocabulary

Aggrieved, iniquitous, affronted, murmur, weight, pettishly, vestment, gabbling, cursy, accusatory, disengages, avarice, beseech, rebuked, reprovngly, obstructing, turnkey, dignity, portentous, heraldic



Act 2, Section 5

Summary

On stage, the Common Man is arranging the props to look like a courtroom. As he leaves, Cromwell storms onstage and tells the Common Man he must act as the head juror for More's trial. As the trial begins, Cromwell accuses More of high treason and denouncing the king. More is taken aback and tries to defend himself, but Cromwell says More's silence speaks to his opinions. Next, Cromwell puts Rich on the stand. Lying on the stand, Rich claims More told him Parliament did not have the power to make Henry the leader of the Church of England. More accuses Rich of selling his soul for power.

The jury finds More guilty. Unable to hold his silence any longer, More explains his position on the matter. He does not agree with the Act of Supremacy, and he says the Magna Carta and the Coronation Oath both proclaim the Catholic Church has full authority over these matters. He still wants everyone to know he is loyal to Henry as the king, but he cannot be loyal to Henry as the leader of the Church of England.

The next scene depicts the moments before More's execution. More tells the executioner, played by the Common Man, not to feel badly about killing him. After the stage goes black, the Common Man takes the mask off and says staying alive is easy as long as you don't make trouble for yourself.

Analysis

The Common Man has made a rather large transformation. His first role is More's servant. Now, he is More's executioner. While he never set out to conspire against More, his selfish actions led him to complete a morally depraved task: killing an innocent man. More's final words to the executioner are interesting as well; they could either be taken as satirical or serious. If the words were meant as an ironic way, More would have meant it is not alright to commit immoral tasks if they pertain to one's job. More personified this idea because it was his job to agree with Henry. Yet he let his conscience override his political position. If the words were serious, though, it makes More like a Christ figure. He is forgiving the executioner for his role in More's death because the executioner is only doing his job.

Vocabulary

Rhetorical, rigorously, heinously, forthink, obstinate, pardon, rigged, liege, maxim, construes, wits, shrill, incessant, pedagogue, heeded, empowered, flummoxed, repugnant, ruminatively, trappings, formalized, ascends, easel, gall, blithe



Characters

Sir Thomas More

Sir Thomas More is the protagonist of *A Man for All Seasons*. He is a thinker and philosopher, and he later becomes the Chancellor of England. As such, he is morally opposed to King Henry VIII's divorce to Catherine of Aragon. However, he does not oppose it because he wants to be a martyr. Instead, he cannot support the divorce because of his conscience. Rather than making his opinions vocal, though, he keeps quiet about his stance on the matter. More personifies land, as land is immobile. Both he and others compare his moral fortitude to the land. Regardless of his respectability, Henry has More tried and beheaded for high treason against the throne.

The Common Man

The Common Man is a holistic character in the play. He narrates various parts of the play and adds his own commentary. Mostly, though, he appears playing the working class characters, like Matthew the steward, the jailor, the executioner, and others. The Common Man (referring to both the narrator and the encompassing characters) is often required to do jobs which conflict with his personal beliefs. However, the Common Man feels guilty about his slight role in the events surrounding More. At the end, though, he says he puts those feelings aside and focuses on the fact that he is alive. The Common Man betrays More, but not because he is malicious. The Common Man betrays More because he just wants to get by each day without trouble.

King Henry VIII

Even though King Henry VIII appears only briefly onstage, he is overwhelmingly present in the minds and speech of the other characters. He wants to divorce his wife Catherine because she has not produced a male heir; because the Catholic Church will not grant the divorce, Henry is determined to start his own church and make his own decisions independent of the papacy. He wants the other characters to think he is a thoughtful and moral man. However, his anger and quick temper betray this façade. Henry is the personification of water. His beliefs are the most fluid and unstable as he makes decisions and decrees on selfish whims.

Richard Rich

Richard Rich is a low-level worker who only wants to be more prosperous and powerful. As the story progresses, he gains more prominent positions because he works with Cromwell to indict More. His prosperity, though, comes at the cost of Rich's conscience. He would rather have an important status than follow his morals. Rich is a foil of More; as More loses his status, Rich gains status.



Alice More

Alice More is Thomas More's wife. For the majority of the play, she doesn't understand why her husband won't concede on the issue of Henry's divorce. More desperately wants her to understand his position, but he cannot speak with her about his reasoning. Right before his death, though, they speak in the prison. Alice then acknowledges More's reasoning should only be between him and God, thus resolving the tension between the couple.

Duke of Norfolk

The Duke of Norfolk is More's only constant friend throughout the play. However, he is not entirely sympathetic to More's beliefs. Rather, Norfolk doesn't follow the drama unfolding in Henry's court. He is encouraged by both More and Cromwell to end his friendship with More. Though he doesn't believe in them, he follows Henry's decrees so he can keep his job.

Thomas Cromwell

Thomas Cromwell is a lawyer who is acting as King Henry's agent. He is set on bringing More down, and he will stoop to any level to do so. He has very little guilt about his actions as he is motivated by a purely evil nature.

Signor Chapuys

Signor Chapuys is the Spanish Ambassador to England. As such, he is determined to stop the divorce from happening. While he pretends his motivations are to protect the sanctity of the Catholic Church and Catherine's marriage, he is actually politically motivated.

Cardinal Wolsey

Cardinal Wolsey is the Chancellor at the beginning of the play. Henry has charged him with obtaining a special dispensation from the Pope allowing the divorce to take place. When he does not obtain this, he dies in disgrace. His death is a looming warning to others who do not fully support or help Henry divorce Catherine.

William Roper

William Roper is the romantic interest of Margaret More. His opinions are usually in opposition to More's, and he also very vocal about his ideals. He shows his morals aren't too important to him, though, because he converts to Catholicism in order to marry Margaret.

Margaret More

Margaret is the well-educated and thoughtful daughter of More. She is the character most like More even though she questions his actions.



Objects/Places

Hampton Court

Hampton Court is where King Henry's subjects work. The characters meet here frequently.

More's House

More's house is a significant distance away from Hampton Court. The only way to arrive is by boat.

The Tower of London

The Tower of London is where prisoners are kept. More is held there after he is charged with treason.

Thames River

The Thames River connected More's house to Hampton Court. Henry rides down the Thames to visit More at his house.

The Silver Cup

More received the silver cup as a bribe, though he didn't realize it at the time. He gave it to Rich when he realized what it was. Cromwell tried to use it to indict More.

A Defense of the Seven Sacraments

King Henry wrote this book with More's help. Cromwell tries to use More's help as a way to indict him of treason.

The King of Spain's Letter

More received a letter from the king of Spain saying how much he appreciated More defending Catherine's marriage. More did not open the letter.



The Common Man's Basket of Props

The Common Man carries the basket onstage. It is full of props which comprise all his costume changes.

The "Jury"

The "jury" at More's trial is eleven coat hangers topped with white wigs.

The Common Man's Books and Letters

During a few of the Common Man's scenes, he reads from books and letters describing past or future events.



Themes

Is Silence Wise?

One of the important messages in *A Man for All Seasons* is that silence is not always wise. In More's case, he used silence as a way to keep his true reasons to himself. He did not want to indict himself, his family, or his friends. Instead, he hoped people would allow him to keep his opinion while letting him do his job. However, the Common Man makes an interesting point that sometimes silence isn't always wise. Norfolk kept silent about his own feelings, but they ended up costing him his reputation and he was later charged with treason. Even the audience is somewhat scolded for being silent rather than standing up for its beliefs. In the texts' eyes, "silence" is more than keeping one's mouth closed. "Silence" is allowing injustice to happen and then going along with the action.

Being a Moral Guide

More wanted to show his friends and family how he believed people should behave. Instead of telling them how they ought to act, he lived his life according to his morals. This is what he wanted to teach them; living according to one's beliefs is more important than material wealth. However, the play had another moral guide: Cromwell. Rather than being a moral guide, though, Cromwell was an immoral guide. He showed Rich throwing aside morals and being an obedient servant was more lucrative than being a good person.

The Effects of Guilt

Many of the characters suffer from guilt. Rich and the Common Man, especially, degrade themselves to be self-serving men. They do not stand up for what is right even when they know the right choice. Instead, they trick themselves into believing the payoff for an immoral deed is better. Yet the guilt they carry tells a different story. Even More suffers from guilt because of the silver cup bribe. Although he did not accept the cup knowing it was a bribe, he still felt badly. The cup served as a physical reminder of his guilt as it followed him to his indictment.

Style

Point of View

The point of view is from the audience's perspective. The audience sees the entire plot unfold with very little plot action happening offstage. As for a character point of view, the Common Man provides the majority of the commentary on the other characters as well as the plot. Because the Common Man represents the every-day person, he shows the dealings of the rich and powerful have very little effect on his life. The plot is also meant to show More in a sympathetic, and even saint-like, light. More is the solid, unmovable focal point. All the other characters move around him like water surrounding an island.

Setting

The story is set from 1529-1535 England during the reign of King Henry VIII. Much of the action takes place in Hampton Court and More's home in London. However, there are times when the stage is meant to be just a stage for the Common Man to use. What is unique about this setting is the plot is set amidst real-life events; Henry was unable to produce a male heir by his wife Catherine, so he wanted a divorce. Because the Catholic Pope would not give him permission, England broke away from the Catholic Church and formed the Church of England. This was a time when Protestantism was gaining popularity, and the Protestant faith allowed for divorce.

Language and Meaning

The language is spoken in mainly contemporary English. While the real-life counterparts would have spoken a more archaic form of English (like Shakespearean English), the play itself used modern-day English so the audiences could better understand.

Structure

The play is divided into two acts, and neither act has any formal scene divisions. However, the play does make use of different settings and conversations. This makes play more fluid, allowing for the action to be uninterrupted.



Quotes

The Sixteenth Century is the Century of the Common Man. Like all other centuries. And that's my proposition. (Act 1)

There are those like Norfolk who follow me because I wear the crown, and there are those like Master Cronwell 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. (Act 1)

I'm not God. 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. (Act 1)

This isn't 'Reformation,' this is war against the Church! Our King, Norfolk, has declared war on the Pope—because the Pope will not declare that our Queen is not his wife. (Act 2)

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...I trust I make myself obscure? (Act 2)

There's a man who raises the gale and won't come out of the harbor. (Act 2)

I have no window to look into another man's conscience. I condemn no one. (Act 2)

What is an oath then but words we say to God? (Act 2)

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. (Act 2)

Friend, be not afraid of your office. You send me to God. (Act 2)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Discuss the water and land symbolism. Where do these appear? Who are they associated with? How do they personify land?

Topic 2

What does the silver cup represent? How does the cup follow More?

Topic 3

Discuss More. What was his stance on Henry's divorce? Why did he feel this way? How does More show others that he feels this way?

Topic 4

Discuss Henry. Describe his presence while he was offstage. Describe his presence while he was onstage. What does Henry need from More?

Topic 5

Is Cromwell comparable to the devil? What does he do that is reminiscent of the devil? Does More believe that Cromwell is comparable to the devil?

Topic 6

What roles does the Common Man play? Discuss each one in detail. How does each character fall deeper in immorality? How does each character betray More?

Topic 7

How does silence pervade the play? What are the two different types of silence personified in the characters? What characters embody these types of silence?

Topic 8

Why does More stress the importance of teaching? Who does he think would be a good teacher? Who are the moral guides? How does each "teach" others?



Topic 9

How does the setting inform the play? What parts of history coincide with the play? What parts differ?

Topic 10

Discuss Rich. What are Rich's motivations? Why does he choose to follow Cromwell? Is Rich's rise comparable to More's fall?