

MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

A Play about Thomas More
by Robert Bolt ¹

Lord, let me be able in argument,
accurate in analysis,
correct in conclusion,
candid with my clients,
and honest with my adversaries.
Stand beside me in court so that I will not,
in order to win a point,
lose my soul.

St. Thomas More's Prayer

Introductory Information about the Play:

Historical Context:

Why write a play about St. Thomas More?: The 20th century playwright Robert Bolt felt that he owed an explanation why he, a professed agnostic, would write about a Catholic saint. "This brings me to something for which I feel I need to explain, perhaps apologize. More was a very orthodox Catholic and for him an oath was something perfectly specific; it was an invitation to God, an invitation God would not refuse, to act as a witness, and to judge; the consequence of perjury was damnation, for More another perfectly specific concept. So for More the issue was simple (though remembering the outcome it can hardly have been easy). But I am not a Catholic nor even in the meaningful sense of the word a Christian. So by what right do I appropriate a Christian saint to my purposes? Or to put it the other way, why do I take as my hero a man who brings about his own death because he can't put his hand on an old black book and tell an ordinary lie?

For this reason: A man takes an oath only when he wants to commit himself quite exceptionally to the statement, when he wants to make an identity between the truth of it and his own virtue; he offers himself as a guarantee. And it works. There is a special kind of shrug for a perjurer; we feel that the man has no self to commit, no guarantee to offer. Of course it's much less effective now that for most of us the actual words of the oath are not much more than impressive mumbo-jumbo than it was when they made obvious sense; we would prefer most men to guarantee their statements with, say, cash rather than with themselves. We feel—we know—the self to be an equivocal commodity. There are fewer and fewer things which, as they say, we "cannot bring ourselves" to do. We can find almost no limits for ourselves other than the physical,

¹ Robert Bolt, *Man For All Seasons: A Play in Two Acts* (New York: Random House, Inc. 1990). Used with permission.

which, being physical, are not optional. Perhaps this is why we have fallen back so widely on physical torture as a means of bringing pressure to bear on one another. But though few of us have anything in ourselves like an immortal soul which we regard as absolutely inviolable, yet most of us still feel something which we should prefer, on the whole, not to violate. Most men feel when they swear an oath (the marriage vow for example) that they have invested something. And from this it's possible to guess what an oath must be to a man for whom it is not merely a time-honored and understood ritual but also a definite contract. It may be that a clear sense of the self can *only* crystallize round something transcendental in which case, our prospects look poor for we are rightly committed to the rational. I think the paramount gift our thinkers, artists, and for all I know, our men of science, should labor to get for us is a sense of selfhood without resort to magic. Albert Camus is a writer I admire in this connection.

Anyway, the above must serve as my explanation and apology for treating Thomas More, a Christian saint, as a hero of selfhood" (Robert Bolt).

Background on More: "English saint and diplomat, More (1478-1535) was the author of Utopia and lord chancellor from 1529 to 1532.

More had been one of Henry VIII's primary councilors. He began to fall out of favor with the king when he did not sign a letter urging the pope to declare Henry's marriage to Catherine void.

In 1533 the Act of Restraint of Appeals cut judicial ties between England and Rome. Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury, declared the king's marriage to Catherine void on May 23, 1533. Anne Boleyn was crowned June 1.

More was called to Lambeth on April 13, 1534 to confirm by oath the Act of Succession (March 1534) which, in part, declared the king's marriage to Catherine void and the one to Anne valid. More was willing to accept this. But he refused the oath because it also entailed a repudiation of papal supremacy.

On April 17 he was imprisoned in the Tower of London.

In 1534 the Act of Supremacy established the king as the supreme head of the Church of England. Denying this authority was considered high treason.

More was tried in Westminster hall on July 1, 1535. He was convicted of treason for his refusal to affirm the king's supremacy. He was beheaded on Tower Hill July 6.

More was beatified on December 29, 1886, and was canonized on May 19, 1935."