



Sophee Engle

Reader's Guide Project:
A Man for All Seasons

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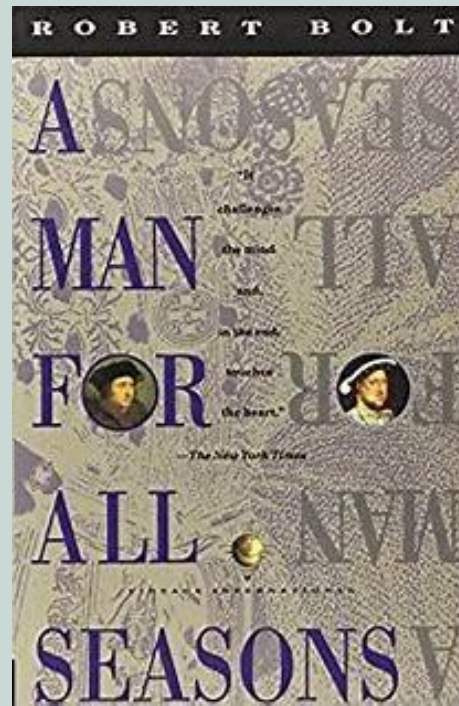
Section 1 – Introduction (to the play, significance of place/setting in the play)

Section 2 – Reading Comprehension (detailing the work, quotes, questions)

Section 3 – Context (outside of the work, the world at large, past & present)

Section 4 – Recommended Readings and Sites (things to read and see, for fun-sies)

Works Cited





This guide for Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* has been designed to help casual readers of the play, for a book club, understand the contexts of the settings and time period. In addition to clarification on events and places featured in the play's story, the guide hopefully will inspire someone to read further into the topics discussed via the mentioned articles or books.





Section 1 - Introduction

The Story, the Importance of Space & Place





Introduction: The Play – the Real World

Written by Robert Bolt in 1954, it was originally an hour-long radio play that was adapted for stage. The stage play opened at the London Globe (nowielgud) Theatre in 1960. It was well-received and largely commented upon. Enough so to make a Broadway debut a year later, running for over a year and winning 5 Tony awards . *A Man for All Seasons* later became a movie, as well as having countless large and small international revivals of the stage play.





Introduction: The Play – the Story

The story takes place during King Henry VIII's reign. After being married to his wife, Queen Catherine of Aragon, for more than twenty years and not having a son/legal heir, King Henry wants a divorce so he can 'try elsewhere' for a son (he has a daughter, but a son would ensure there isn't War of the Roses pt. 2). As the country is connected to the Roman Catholic Church and is against divorce, Henry has decided his marriage isn't valid from the start and should be annulled. Sir Thomas More, a devout Catholic and dedicated lawyer, is caught between being loyal to his friend/his King and what he believes to be right according to God.





Importance of Space & Place

The setting is always important to a story, additionally so when the story takes place in the past. As the play is based on real people and events, there is attention paid to the environments the characters interact in, as those places tell the reader as much about the story's world as the characters and their actions. With 400+ years between the current reader and the basis for the characters, any descriptions of setting tells the reader how society and people function within this world.





For *A Man for All Seasons*, the places hold and exude their own power that characters are subject to. In the early 1500s, physical buildings and earthly resources dictate who can do what, when, and how.

King Henry VIII cannot control the Thames River, so the head of a nation and head of the church, with all his power, must abandon his plans and catch the tide in order to go home. The Tower of London is where royals have stayed and showed diplomatic power, but also where people are imprisoned and executed. Hampton Court Palace is the home of powerful men, King Henry VIII taking the residence from Cardinal Wolsey.





Importance of Space & Place

Sir Thomas More's fate rests entirely on the balance of staying true to himself and his faith, and not providing opposition to King Henry VIII in any way. He chooses silence, on where he disagrees with what the King desires or does, and hopes that it is enough to keep him safe.

For this balancing act, the implications of where people are and who they must present themselves to be in that particular setting are the most important facets of the play. The play's dialogue include lines regarding someone's location and company for reasons why they can't speak freely about something.





Section 2 – Reading Comprehension

Summary, List of Characters, Important Quotes, Themes, Discussion Questions





Summary

Sir Thomas More and King Henry VIII were close friends, but once the King wants to divorce his wife, marry someone new, and passes an Act that places his power over that of God's regarding religion in England, More cannot continue to agree with his friend. Upon Wolsey's death, early in the play, More is appointed Lord Chancellor. With this title and authority, as well as his own reputation, people look to him to agree with the King to confirm the King's action are morally and religiously correct. Since More cannot agree, but promised not to oppose his King, his silence causes massive conflict that results in More's execution on the charges of treason.





Thomas More keeps his opinions very close to his chests, not allowing himself to share them with many people at all. He promised his King would have no opposition, so he is not saying anything that could be considered against the King. When Cromwell tries to interrogate and bully More into saying something that could be considered treason, More won't fall for it. When his wife tells him to save himself from trial and conviction, he won't back down. More believes that Henry shouldn't be able to place himself or his authority of that of God, so he won't sign the Act of Supremacy. More believes that the King is the King and rightfully rules the earth but cannot commit his soul to eternal damnation by saying the Act is entirely correct. More practices this silence and balance well, but the game changed. He is only convicted and sentenced to death because a friend betrayed him and gave false testimony against him in court.



Major Characters

- Sir Thomas More - *the* main character. He is against what King Henry VIII is doing, hopes that not speaking or acting against him will protect him, like the King previously promised.
- Richard Rich - friend to More, resistant to scheme against him but is convinced, gives the falsely-accounted 'smoking gun' testimony that condemns More to his execution for treason.
- Thomas Cromwell - 'Ringleader' against More, lawyer that interrogates and prosecutes More, less remorseful or guilty than Rich.
- The Common Man - Plays all minor/'common' roles in the play, breaks the 4th wall, relates the play to the audience, humorous (not key to plot, but Bolt included him purposefully)

The rest of the characters play smaller roles on 'both sides' of the Act of Supremacy and contribute minorly to the context of Thomas More's situation.



Important Quotes



- “But every man has his price!...there’s always something” -Richard Rich, page 4.

Reader’s first impression of Rich and More, this moment foreshadows both Rich’s ability to be bought into acting against More and that everyone’s efforts to compel More into betraying himself of committing treason will be in vain

- “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?” – Thomas More, page 132

During interrogation, the Duke of Norfolk appeals to More as his friend, genuinely wanting him to sign the act and remain alive. More says this, saying that the ‘fellowship’ gained by signing the act he disagrees with is not worth the damnation of his soul after death.

Important Quotes



- “Your conscience is your own affair; but you are my Chancellor! There, you have my word – I’ll leave you out of it...I’ll have no opposition!”
-King Henry VIII, page 56

This encounter provides the promise that seals More’s fate, as it does not hold. More believes he won’t be dragged into anything regarding the divorce, the removal of Queen Catherine, the marriage to Anne Boleyn, and he’ll be safe if he doesn’t speak in opposition to the King. As we learn, this promise doesn’t remain kept, and More’s silence cannot keep him safe like he was told by the King in this scene.

Themes



Conscience

More weighs being executed for treason against preserving his soul/spirit

Integrity

More didn't condemn anyone who signed the Act, he ignored Spanish efforts to make this a revolution against Henry

Man's Law vs God's Law

More decided while he didn't break man's law, he'd rather be convicted for that than break God's laws

Moral vs Financial Gain

Rich is convinced to betray More via social/financial gains
More loses his job and wealth, but remains morally/spiritually rich

Personal Power

King Henry's beliefs about his power
How Cromwell can get Rich to betray More
What More loses, leading to his trial/conviction



Discussion Questions

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- 1) Is More's silence proof of treason?
 - 2) How do people and place affect what someone can say or do?
 - 3) Should one sacrifice their life and open their family up to earthly suffering over the belief that they're doing the right thing?
 - 4) Knowing that the Church of England forms, and that Queen Anne wasn't King Henry's last wife, what does Thomas More's 'position' and sacrifice mean?
 - 5) Why would Thomas More's life prompt Robert Bolt to write this play over 400 years later, or intrigue mid-1900s audiences into seeing or discussing this play?
 - 6) What does the title, *A Man for All Seasons*, mean?



Section 3 – Context

Author Biography; Historical, Social, Cultural, Literary, Context





Robert Bolt CBE

1924-1995



- Communist Party member from 1942-1947.
- During war, military college program, got history undergraduate degree
- Joined Royal Air Force
- teaching degree from University of Exeter in 1950, taught until started writing plays
- jailed briefly for being in the anti-nuclear protest group Committee of 100, went back to being a successful playwright with a fair amount of film adaptations.
- Debilitating stroke in 1981 that partially paralyzed him and made speech difficult. Via therapy and technology, was able to continue writing plays



Historical & Social Context



When the play was written and performed, Communism existed in England. Intellectuals and middle-class workers were trying to improve the lives of everyone. They were able to influence Labor policies but didn't have a party or policies of their own. As Bolt was Communist from 1942-1947, that perspective could have colored how he wrote about Thomas More's emphasized silence.

Silence to More, in Tudor England, meant betraying neither his King or God. Silence in the western world after WWII could mean that someone isn't trying to help others like the Marxists of England were, or that Americans weren't trying to eradicate Communism in the States as hard as they should be. People on opposing sides of Communism could read or watch this play, relate to Thomas More, and have separate takeaways from the experience.



Cultural Context



Locations like Hampton Court Palace and the Tower of London are fundamental to the play, but also important to British history and culture at the time the play was written.

Hampton Court Palace has been open to the public since 1838, decreed so by Queen Victoria. HPC was one of the only 'attractions' open on Sunday, so working Britons were able to visit. As the palace had been used as a residence by Cardinal Wolsey, King Henry VIII and all six of his wives, William III & Mary II, and George I and his family. Other monarchs used the castle for art galleries, etc. Currently, the events of the castle also feature music and garden festivals.



Cultural Context



The Tower of London has been open to the public since the 18th century. Home of the Crown Jewels, as well as the myths and whispers associated with the prison-elements of the Tower property, Britons know the Tower's value. Tourists flock to the Tower for the darker elements of the Tower's history, but additionally learn that royals used the property for residences, minting and storing national currency, and a menagerie of exotic animals.

These staples of British history have been preserved well and open to the public for centuries, forming elements of British culture and educating those from beyond Great Britain.



Literary Context



The play went to Broadway shortly after its British debut. American audiences would've been less likely to know Sir Thomas More but could've known the story of King Henry VIII and his 6 wives. Also, American audiences would have a different view on Communism than the English. As mentioned, communism was used as a tool to improve working- and middle-class lives in England. In America, the Red Scare and being labeled as communist, rumor or not, was dangerous and vastly-spread. Sir Thomas More's silence could be applied to someone who didn't speak strongly enough against Communism, or someone falsely being accused of Soviet sympathies in America, differing from British interpretation.

Audiences, however their views impacted their takeaways of the show, enjoyed the play enough for it to receive 5 Tony awards. The international fame of the show stretched the story beyond its original British setting. In countless nations and contexts, Thomas More's beliefs and choices could impact audiences through Bolt's writing choices.



Section 4 – Recommended Reading + Sites

4 potential readings for further information and context, 2 interesting places to visit

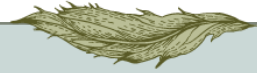




The readings and locations to visit all revolve around further elaboration and context of the time period. The readings involve Thomas More and/or his personal writings, how More is portrayed today, the ‘why’ of More’s struggles, and how Europe at large felt about More and King Henry. The locations are preserved by Historic Royal Palaces charity, having realistic portrayals of how people in More’s time would’ve seen those places.



1) “Sir Thomas More’s Final Years: Silence, Silencing, and Constitutional Change”



Moore, Oliver. “Sir Thomas More’s Final Years: Silence, Silencing, and Constitutional Change.” *Law and Humanities*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2008, pp. 75–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2008.11423743>.

[Hyperlink](https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2008.11423743)

Oliver Moore’s article contextualizes and analyzes More’s silence through moral, religious, political, and legal lenses. He uses the tension between the warring elements of religion and politics to discover the full meaning of Thomas More’s silence. Moore uses the framework of a theory by Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian-British philosopher, to assert that More’s silence, without saying a physical word, says two distinct things simultaneously. Moore uses Thomas More’s trial to discuss the biases that doomed More, and how politics, religion, and law competed against each other in Tudor England until More was convicted and executed. More was built from the old law of England and his execution was a smaller example of a larger pattern, old law in England being eradicated to accommodate new law coming into place.

2) “Building Opposition at the Early Tudor Tower of London: Thomas More’s ‘Dialogue of Comfort’”



Deiter, Kristen. “Building Opposition at the Early Tudor Tower of London: Thomas More’s ‘Dialogue of Comfort.’” *Renaissance and Reformation*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2015, pp. 27–56, <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i1.22781>.

[Hyperlink](https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v38i1.22781)

Kristen Deiter’s article discusses specific details of Thomas More’s imprisonment and execution at the Tower of London. Deiter also discusses the symbolism of the Tower itself, how royals used the Tower for living, a branch of the Royal Mint, storage of the Crown Jewels, the start of the Coronation parade, the place where domestic and international powers met with the monarch and displayed the monarchy’s power. The Tower has always been an aggressive symbol of royal power, with darker undertones, but King Henry VIII’s usage of the Tower property cemented the property’s involvement with torture, imprisonment, and death. More’s “Dialogue of Comfort” sharply contrasted the written portrayal of the Tower that, prior to More, represented the positive and favorable elements of the Tower. More’s writing was the foundation for the “oppositional to the Crown” interpretation of the Tower, creating many other interpretations made by others that viewed the Tower as being against the monarch due to those held inside being ‘treasonous’.

3) “Thomas More: Why Patron of Statesmen?”



Lyter, Veronica. “Travis Curtright, Thomas More: Why Patron of Statesmen?, Lanham MD, Lexington Books, 2015, 221PP., ISBN 978-1-4985-2226-7.” *Moreana*, 53 (Number 203-, no. 1–2, 2016, pp. 299–312, <https://doi.org/10.3366/more.2016.53.1-2.15>.

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Thomas More is the patron saint of statesmen and politicians, among other things. Travis Curtright’s book asks why he was named as such and the modern applicability of More to those people. A section of this book is titled ‘What Bolt Got Right and What Mantel Got Wrong’, discussing the components of Thomas More and his life that were correct in *A Man for All Seasons* and the components of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* that portray More incorrectly. These two popular portrayals of Thomas More present severely different characters for them being based on the same man. Another section of the book is titled ‘Sir Thomas More and his Opposition to Henry VIII in 1533’ and details the potential intrigue of the era when More was supposedly in retirement and Queen Anne was about to be crowned. The section discusses Thomas More’s written works of this specific time period and his biggest physical act of defiance, his boycott of Queen Anne’s coronation.

4) “The English Reformation in Wittenberg: Luther and Melanchton’s Engagement with Religious Change in England 1521-1560



Methuen, Charlotte. “The English Reformation in Wittenberg: Luther and Melanchthon’s Engagement with Religious Change in England 1521–1560.” *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2018, pp. 209–234, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14622459.2018.1505204>.

[Hyperlink](#)

Charlotte Methuen’s article discusses English and German correspondence regarding religious reformation during King Henry VIII’s reign. A 2-year delegation cooperated with people of both sides in England, discussing change within the Catholic Church while the protestant reformation spread across Europe. Those in Wittenberg hoped for English conversion to Protestantism, but King Henry VIII’s executions of Thomas More, Anne, Boleyn, and Thomas Cromwell (among other things) led to skepticism towards Henry and the potential for conversion in England. Additionally, the article discusses the potential for religious relationships within Europe after the deaths of Martin Luther and King Henry VIII. Modern scholars disagree whether Henry’s new church was “Catholicism without the pope” or “Lutheranism without justification by faith”. This article is about the gray areas between Catholicism, Protestantism, and the Anglican Church after King Henry’s split from Rome.

1) Hampton Court Palace



Hampton Court Palace was the home of Cardinal Wolsey before King Henry VIII took over the property. Despite the palace receiving a 'makeover' by King Henry, the Wolsey family crest remains carved into stone in a few spots. Sir Thomas More goes to Hampton Court Palace in the middle of the night to see Cardinal Wolsey, before King Henry commandeered the place. Hampton Court Palace would normally be bustling with people, but it's empty and quiet while More is there. This change, the powerful environment of the property, and Wolsey's power with the Church and the King would have made this location feel different from others in the play. In one of the halls, where the royal courts ate, there are carved heads peering down, hidden in the ceiling decorations. With this, the idea of someone constantly watching you is built into the palace. Thomas More would be right in feeling unsettled or unable to speak freely in Hampton Court. The palace provides a visual understanding of Thomas More's behavior when he is summoned to Wolsey, while he is there, and how he acts once he's back home to his family after his meeting.



Remaining Wolsey Crest



Clock, functions also as device for traveling on the Thames



Great Hall, ceiling decoration has little heads peeking down from the eaves, suggesting the omniscience powers of King Henry VIII

Portion of the outside of Hampton Court Palace



2) The Tower of London



The Tower of London is where Thomas More was held for over a year. The Tower has a reputation of torture, imprisonment, and execution that stems from King Henry VIII's reign and the escalation of using the Tower for that purpose. The Tower has rooms dedicated to pictures and information about people that were held or executed on the property, Thomas More having his own segment. The rooms dedicated to imprisonment displayed torture devices and stated that psychological methods were used on prisoners exponentially more often than physical torture methods. Visiting the Tower provides this information about the practices of the property, but seeing the multiple buildings on the property was interesting. 'The Tower' is a large complex of buildings, some dating back to the year 1100, that were used for royal living, armories, currency mints, and imprisonment. The chapel was one of the most striking elements, with educational information about Lady Jane Grey, Catherine Howard, and Anne Boleyn, and a plaque listing names of people that were executed at the Tower and remain in the crypt underneath the chapel. To see Thomas More's name was emotional, as his body was discarded in the crypt but not properly buried or memorialized.



Wardrobe Tower, dated back to the 12th Century

The White Tower, built with white limestone, intended to awe, subdue, terrify Londoners and deter foreign invaders



Survey map drawn in 1597 of the Tower property





In summation, these sites and readings should further explain the historical settings and circumstances mentioned in *A Man for All Seasons*. The environments of The Tower and Hampton Court Palace ooze royal power upon visitation. Both were built and maintained with being visually impressive and intimidating in mind. The play itself provides suitable context for its events, but the time period and conflicts of the plot are highly researched and written upon, so those interested in looking further would not find a shortage of material to read.



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