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**Identity and Conscience in Robert Bolt's A Man for All
Seasons**

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To my Family and my husband

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INTRODUCTION

Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* presents a "hero of the self" whose unwavering integrity collides with King Henry VIII's egoistic drive to wrench personal salvation and political permanence for the Tudor line from an unwilling, because politically cornered, Pope.

The Pope refuses to condone an annulment for Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon (of Spain) having already dispensed with biblical law to permit him to marry her in the first place. Sir Thomas More ignores Henry's pleading demands, throws off the Duke of Norfolk's friendly advice, and places his family in jeopardy, because he cannot in good conscience submit his immortal soul to the commands of a mortal king. Neither does the political powder-keg that Henry's enemies may see More's obstinence as a signal for revolt convince him to submit. This crucible of moral standards takes place in the early sixteenth century, but Bolt contemporizes the drama by inserting an audience go-between, the Common Man, whose asides remind the viewer of More's relevance to twentieth-century heroism.

The Common Man makes all too clear that the likes of a Sir Thomas More are as rare today as they were in Henry's VIII's kingdom. The play based on the life of Sir Thomas More. An early form of the play had been written for BBC Radio in 1954, and a one-hour live television version starring Bernard Hepton was produced in 1957 by the BBC.

But after Bolt's success with *The Flowering Cherry*, he reworked it for the stage. It was first performed in London opening at the Globe Theatre in 1960. It later found its way to Broadway, enjoying a critically and commercially successful run of over a year. It has had several revivals, and was subsequently made into a multi-Academy Award-winning 1966 feature film and a 1988 television movie.

The plot is based on the historical events leading up to the execution of More, the 16th-century Chancellor of England, who refused to endorse Henry VIII's wish to divorce his wife Catherine of Aragon, who did not bear him a son, so that he could marry Anne Boleyn, the sister of his former mistress. (Historian's Demur:2016:23)

SECTION ONE: BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT BOLT

1.1 ROBERT BOLT

Robert Bolt was born in Manchester in 1924. He was educated at Manchester Grammar School. As a schoolmaster, he worked at Millfield public school in Somerset. It was during this time as a teacher that Bolt took up playwriting, first for the radio and then for the stage. His first commercially presented play, *The Critic and the Heart*, was presented at the Oxford Playhouse in 1957; in the same year he achieved his first success in London with *Flowering Cherry*. (Zinneman, Fred:1966:34)

As a result he was able to give up teaching in order to write full time. In 1960 he had two plays produced in London, *The Tiger and the Horse* and, in July, *A Man for All Seasons* both of these plays focused upon the demands and responsibilities of commitment, both personal and political, as a major theme. At this time, Bolt, previously a member of the Communist Party, was sentenced to one month's imprisonment for refusing to renounce civil disobedience in protesting against nuclear weapons for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. On his release, he started work on the first of several film screenplays, *Lawrence of Arabia* (about T. E. Lawrence) for the director David Lean; this was later followed by the script for Lean's *Doctor Zhivago*, for both of which Bolt won Oscars. Bolt also continued to write for the theatre: *Gentle Jack* was staged in 1963, (*Mister Roberts* :1968:12)

The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew (a play for children) in 1965 and *Vivar! Vivat Regina*, in which the major characters are Queen Elizabeth I and Mary, Queen of Scots, in 1970. In 1977 his play *State of Revolution*, a version of the events before and after the Russian revolution, was presented at the National Theatre in London. Further screenplays included *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), *The Bounty* (with Mel Gibson and Antony Hopkins in 1984) and *The Mission* (1986). In 1983, however, he underwent heart by-pass surgery and then suffered a stroke which left him paralysed on his right side.

Bolt had remained a Communist, although this was supposed to be illegal for any member of the Forces. But back at university, and beginning to enjoy a new-found freedom of life and thought, Bolt found he could no longer go along

with the 'Party line', so, after five years as a member, he left the Communist Party, he came to the conclusion that 'philosophically and spiritually you are stuck with yourself and any good you achieve you will achieve in yourself and any evil you suffer you will suffer in yourself (Hayman, 1999: 7).

1.3 THE THEATRICAL CONTEXT

In the 1950s the Berliner Ensemble theatre company, led by the German writer and director Bertolt Brecht, had visited London with several productions. Their style of presentation, which became known as 'Brechtian', was strongly influential in the English theatre of the late 1950s and early 1960s. Bolt employs many Brechtian devices in *A Man for All Seasons*. Generally, English theatre at this time was naturalistic: the action of plays was presented in a realistic, naturalistic way in settings that were as realistic and naturalistic as possible. In short, the aim of theatrical productions was to create and present as accurate an illusion of reality as possible to the audience. (Christopher Smout: 1995:17-108)

1.4 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The action of the play actually took place over several years: More was appointed Lord Chancellor in 1530, and he died in 1535. After the Wars of the Roses, Henry VII became King of England in 1485. He had two sons, Arthur and Henry. Naturally it was expected that Arthur, the first son, would in his turn become King, so in order to secure the new Tudor dynasty Arthur was married to Catherine of Aragon from Spain, thus allying England with the major European power of the time. It was not foreseen that Arthur would die young, before becoming King, thus creating possible future instability and losing the Spanish alliance. It was decided, therefore, that Arthur's younger brother Henry, who was now the heir to the throne, should marry the widowed Catherine of Aragon. While the teachings of the Catholic Church forbade a man to marry his brother's widow, a dispensation to allow this was granted by the Pope, based on the book of Deuteronomy (chapter 25, verse 17) of the Old Testament of the Bible. Hence, when Henry died in 1509, Henry VIII became King with Catherine as his queen. Their marriage, however, produced no sons who survived infancy: (Bernard Adams:2004:11-23)

Henry became increasingly desperate for a male heir. Furthermore, in the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament Henry read that any man who married his brother's wife would be punished by being unable to produce a male heir. Henry became

disenchanted with Catherine and convinced that he was being punished for his sin in marrying her. (Bernard Adams:2004:11-23)

SECTION TWO: A MAN OF ALL SEASONS

2.1: AUTHOR'S PREFACE

The bit of English History which is the background to this play is pretty well known. Henry VIII, who started with everything and squandered it all, who had the physical and mental fortitude to endure a lifetime of gratified greeds, the monstrous baby whom none dared gainsay, is one of the most popular figures in the whole procession. (Kemény János:1980:985)

We recognize in him an archetype, one of the champions of our baser nature, and are in him vicariously indulged. Against him stood the whole edifice of medieval religion, founded on piety, but by then as moneyed, elaborate, heaped high and inflexible as those abbey churches which Henry brought down with such a satisfying and disgraceful crash. The collision came about like this: While yet a Prince, Henry did not expect to become a King, for he had an elder brother, Arthur. A marriage was made between this Arthur and a Spanish Princess, Catherine, but Arthur presently died. (Kemény János:1980:985)

The Royal Houses of Spain and England wished to repair the connection, and the obvious way to do it was to marry the young widow to Henry. But Spain and England were Christian Monarchies and Christian law forbade a man to marry his brother's widow. To be a Christian was to be a Churchman and there was only one church and the Pope was its head. At the request of Christian Spain and Christian England the Pope dispensed with the Christian law forbidding a man to marry his brother's widow, and when in due course Prince Henry ascended the English throne as Henry VIII, Catherine was his Queen. For some years the marriage was successful; they respected and liked one another, and Henry took his pleasures elsewhere but lightly. However, at length he wished to divorce her. The motives for such a wish are presumably as confused, inaccessible and helpless in a king as any other man, but here are three which make sense: Catherine had grown increasingly plain and intensely religious; Henry had fallen

in love with Anne Boleyn; the Spanish alliance had become unpopular. (István Nagy Szőnyi:1966:12-19)

2 :2_The Meaning of Conscience in The Man for all Seasons

Bolt states that he is largely motivated by opposition to what he sees as "vaunted absence" of individuality in modern society. He believes that we define ourselves in terms of social socially, we fly from the idea of an individual to the professional "class, describers, to the classifiers, the men with categories and a quick ear for the latest subdivision...". (M.S.P.XI). He adds that;

We no longer have, as past societies, have had, any
Picture of individual man, (stoic philosopher, Christian
Religious, rational gentleman), by which to recognize
Ourselves; we are anything. But if anything, then
Nothing, and it is not everyone who can live with that ,
Though it is our true position. (M.S:P.XI)

He mentions that the hero of his play is Thomas More, a man with; an adamant sense of his own self. He knew where he began and left off, what area of himself he could yield to the encroachments of his enemies and what to the encroachments of those he loved.(M.S:P.XII) man who cannot claim a special morality for " In another sense (10) Bolt "professional and public life because he cannot cut himself in two. Admits that the present society does not, like before, provide us with a coherent, socially relevant ideal, but it;

’‘can only have as much idea as we have what We
are about, for it has only our brains to
Think with. And the individual who tries to
Plot his position by reference to our society
Finds no fixed points...’’. (M.S:P.Ibd.)

The self to which Thomas More withdraws is clearly not his body. When his friend Norfolk argues for More's refusal to support the king, More answers that, ‘I will not given in because I suppose it-Ido-not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but I do...’ (M.S:p.72). He insists to distinct his self from his appetites, pride and spleen, which are all connected with the physical side of human body. (Windisch:2001:17)

2-3 :Natural Law and the Problem of Certainty

The question of whether law is a moral proposition has occupied philosophers of law for thousands of years. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Harvard Law Review debates between Lon L. Fuller, advocating natural law theory, and H. L. A. Hart, who went on to write the seminal modern defense of legal positivism, *The Concept of Law* (1961), grappled with the whole question of whether natural law theory could be recuperated in the mid-twentieth century. .(Kulcsár:1987:48)

Their debates inspired discussions leading up to John Finnis's elaborate defense of natural law theory, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (1980), and more recently to Robert P. George's two collections of essays, *Natural Law Theory* (1992) and *The Autonomy of Law: Essays on Legal Positivism* (1996). A central obstacle to these attempts to rehabilitate natural law theory is the fact that in its traditional dress, natural law theory, one of whose early and most influential exponents was Thomas Aquinas, is rooted in moral absolutism. .(Kulcsár:1987:48)

A Man for All Seasons (1960), puts the debate over natural law theory into a contemporary con- text, in terms surprisingly similar to those in which legal philosophers have debated natural law theory since the 1950s. Bolt's play is an underappreciated but surprisingly rich literary site for the modern debate over law and morality. .(Kulcsár:1987:48)

2-4 :Access to Divine Law

Antigone's unproblematic access to divine law matches Henry's. Henry claims to know God's will without the aid of papal or any other mediation. This degree of certainty is just what we might expect or insist on in a natural law hero. The gravity of Antigone's conflict with Kreon tolerates no moment of uncertainty about the moral rightness of burying her brother in the face of the positive law that forbids it, just as the intensity of Henry's conscience tolerates no uncertainty about God's opinion of his first marriage. By contrast, in Bolt's depiction, More's complexity entails a surprisingly high degree of uncertainty about divine law (Kulcsár:1987:48)

2-5 :More as a Hero of Selfhood

The uncertainties that Bolt ascribes to him render More an unwilling martyr. The consequence is a humanized and endearing portrait. At one point, when his wife is fearful about his unwillingness to placate the king, More tells her first that he is less important than she thinks and second that "this he is not the stuff of which martyrs are made" .Nevertheless, these endearing traits carry dramaturgical risks that are relevant to the version of natural law theory that Bolt presents through

More. The less certain More is about the hand of God that he is to obey, the less clear his motive is for facing his imprisonment and execution. This problem is only magnified by the hardships that his refusal to give in to Henry visit upon his own family. Even further aggravating the problem of motive are the facts about More's strategy: he is determined to remain silent, refusing to explain his own position about the king's behavior, even to his own family, because he is certain that through his silence the law will be his refuge against execution if not against imprisonment. (Michael MacDonald:1992:236-244)

Bolt copes with this problem by way of another anachronistic shift: he depicts More as what he calls "a hero of selfhood." In his preface to the play, Bolt explains his sense that in the contemporary age the self's integrity is constantly under attack, that there are fewer ways of defining the boundary between self and society. The self has become an equivocal commodity (Michael MacDonald:1992:236-244)

SECTION THREE: The main characters

3-1 :Sir Thomas More

A Sir Thomas More is the play's protagonist. A member of the King's Council and later Lord Chancellor, he is a learned and incorruptible jurist, a friend and loyal subject to the King and a devout Catholic. More cannot in conscience agree to Henry's divorce and his action in making himself head of the Church of England because it is a violation of the Church's, that is, God's law, and for More, divine, or natural law is superior to man's law. More is committed to the service of his King but to violate divine law is to risk the salvation of his soul. He has no desire to be a martyr but puts his trust in English law, under which silence is construed as consent, to save him from punishment for his refusal to swear the King's oath. More is forced to choose between his God and his King. He rejects the authority of the King's law to execute him, appealing to the higher law of God. He is a man of integrity; his conscience is his 'self' – his soul –even though he is forced to make many sacrifices, including the loss of his family, in remaining true to himself. (Thomas Shaffer L:1998:35)

3-2 :The Common Man

Bolt explains in the preface that the character of the Common Man is an adaptation of the German playwright, Bertolt Brecht's alienation technique which is intended to distance the audience from the action on the stage. In fact, the

Common Man also provides a link between the audience and the play by commenting on and interpreting the action and providing some historical data. While the Common Man serves a number of masters he always looks out for himself first. He is shrewd and opportunistic and through the course of the play becomes increasingly involved in More's downfall. As Matthew, More's Steward, he is fickle in his loyalty, taking bribes from both Chapuys and Cromwell in return for information – albeit harmless – about his master. He leaves More's employment rather than take a pay cut and uses flattery to manipulate Rich, whom he holds in contempt, to take him on. (Heinemann:2006:22-74)

3-3 :Thomas Cromwell

Cromwell is identified early in the play as 'the coming man'. A farrier's son, he is initially secretary to Cardinal Wolsey but after Wolsey's fall and More's resignation is appointed to the position of Lord Chancellor. He is a man of great ambition, intellect and energy but he has no conscience. Cromwell does Henry's dirty work: 'When the King wants something done, I do it'.(Halley Court:2003:26-123)

Cromwell is clever and manipulative: he professes to be an admirer of More, pays More's manservant to spy on his master and bribes the weak Rich to tell him about the silver cup More gave him and eventually to perjure himself. In prison Cromwell tries emotional blackmail, using More's family to try to break down his resistance. He is also prepared to use physical force as his brutality in thrusting Rich's hand into the candle flame shows. He dismisses the idea of using the rack to make More swear the oath because he knows the king would not allow it, but taking away More's books is another form of torture. (Halley Court:2003:26-123)

3-4 :Richard Rich

Richard Rich is an academic, ambitious, but morally weak and unsure of himself. He falls under the influence of Cromwell and his Machiavellian ideas. More takes an interest in Rich, and seeing the weaknesses in his character, encourages him to take a post as a teacher where he won't be tempted. Rich's acceptance of the silver goblet, which was given to More as a bribe, shows he is corrupt, and More subsequently rejects him as unreliable when he begs for employment. Rich is obviously desperate for guidance: 'I am adrift. Help me' (p. 38). Rich, bitter and frustrated, is the perfect tool for Cromwell who offers him the position of Collector of Revenues for York Diocese in exchange for information about the goblet offered to More as a bribe. There is some struggle

with his conscience and the acknowledgement that More is a truly innocent and courageous man but Rich accepts, agreeing with Cromwell that if he has only just realized that he lost his innocence ‘some time ago ... it can’t have been very important ...

3-5 :Duke of Norfolk

Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, is a nobleman and advisor to the King, and a close friend to More and his family. Bolt makes him a bluff, hearty character, more interested in physical than intellectual pursuits. Norfolk is faced with a dilemma when Cromwell tells him that the King expects him to play a part in prosecuting More because it forces him to choose between obeying the king and betraying his friend. Norfolk does not understand More’s refusal to swear the oath and begs him to give in for the sake of their friendship. More acknowledges that Norfolk has good reasons for taking the oath and is willing to end their friendship on good terms, which would allow Norfolk to obey the King without a guilty conscience, but a confused Norfolk rejects his offer. (Halley Court: 2003:26-123)

3-6 :The King

Henry appears in only one scene, but is a constant presence throughout the play. Visiting More’s home, he reveals himself to be a product of the new Renaissance learning, proficient in Latin and Greek, an excellent dancer and a musician and composer. His religious treatise has been recognised by the pope but Henry’s relationship with Rome is now strained. There is a certain superficiality in Henry’s manner and an immaturity demonstrated by his need for flattery and his reluctance to face the consequences of his actions. Henry understands More’s moral objection to the oath and claims to have great respect for his honesty and sincerity. Henry shows he is a hypocrite who places greater value on appearances than honesty by ordering More to keep his views to himself. Henry believes his lack of a male heir is divine punishment for marrying his brother’s widow and needs the divorce to ease his conscience. Wolsey, More and Cromwell, in the post of Lord Chancellor, are all charged with satisfying Henry’s disturbed conscience. (Ackroyd, Peter:1989:43)

3-7 :Alice More

Alice is More’s second wife, plain and overdressed. Alice constantly scolds More but is quick to defend him against criticism by others: ‘Thomas has his own

way of doing things'. She is not afraid to speak her mind and almost every other character feels the sharp edge of her tongue at some point in the play. Alice reacts to More's resignation as Chancellor with anger and bewilderment; interpreting his unwillingness to talk about his reasons for resigning and later his refusal to swear the oath as a lack of trust in her. (Thomas. Summa:1990:42)

3-8 :Margaret (Meg) More

Margaret, Sir Thomas More's daughter, is a lovely, gentle girl, reserved, intelligent and, unusual for a woman at the time, highly educated. Margaret is the peacemaker, defending her father against Alice's criticism and interceding in his arguments with Roper. The relationship between Margaret and her father is very close and trusting: he protects and encourages her and she provides him with intellectual support. More has been in the habit of confiding in Margaret, so his silence on the matter of the king's divorce puzzles her. Margaret understands why her father would not want to be Lord Chancellor, and shows her support for him when he decides to resign from the position by taking the chain of office from around his neck. Her unspoken fear that the Act of Succession and the oath could hold dangers for More is realised when he is imprisoned. (Davis P. Harding:1962:1-193)

SECTION FOUR: CONCLUSION

4-1 :Conclusion

A Man for All Seasons may suggest that corruption is the only avenue to survival in a world full of bad individuals, men like More, who have no hope to survive. The play offers a desolate, pale, unhappy and cheerless world. Men like Cromwell, Richard Rich, and Wolsey are examples of persons ready to sell out their principles for advancement. They find the easy and happy life with the approval of the king and that leads them to act against their conscience. Bolt draws a clear distinction between the characters, Sir Thomas More who has principles and conscience and those who lack it. Although he is destroyed in a bodily sense, his goodness and courageous stand have lived in the minds of many people over centuries. Death cannot kill Thomas More and his likes for they are immortalized by their glorious actions and their idealism and principles provide a ray of hope in life of honest people.

Richard Rich and Thomas Cromwell are the villains of the play, they exploit their positions for personal gain and destroy the life of an innocent man. However, some critics believe they too are victims of a system over which they have little control, a system that depends on compliance for survival, in which rebellion leads swiftly to elimination. Cardinal Wolsey is an exemplary citizen of such a state, yet he falls victim to the king's desire. All these villains survive, yet none have any real freedom to act or to speak. (MacCormick, Neil:2002:1-88)

However, to examine a literary character such as Bolt's More in terms of traditional or archetypal hero. Bolt, a self-identified agnostic, (xiv), a phrase "hero of selfhood" refers to the deeply religious More as a that refers to the ideas of twentieth-century French philosopher, Albert Camus as an exemplar of this orientation. In fact, it is this type of existentialist hero, more than archetypal hero figure, that More represents in *A Man for All Seasons*. (Davis P. Harding:1962:1-193)

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