



A Man for All Seasons by Robert Bolt
Study Guide
By Gabriel Greene, dramaturg

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Robert Bolt

Robert Oxton Bolt (August 15, 1924 - February 12, 1995) was born and raised in Manchester, served in the British Air Force during WWII and afterward attended Manchester University. Following graduation, Bolt became a teacher of English at the prestigious Millfield private school in Somerset. He remained there between 1950-58. In his spare time, Bolt wrote radio and stage plays (the first of his stage plays to be produced was 1957's *The Critic and the Heart*), but gained little recognition until he penned the script for his play *Flowering Cherry* (1957), which allowed him to leave teaching to become a full-time writer. (*Flowering Cherry* opened on Broadway in October of 1959 but ran for only 5 performances.)

His third play, *A Man for All Seasons*, opened in 1960; the original production made actor Paul Scofield a star and was a hit on the London and Broadway stage. The Broadway production ran for 637 performances, winning four Tony Awards, including Best Play, Best Actor in a Play (Paul Scofield) and Best Direction of a Play (Noel Willman).

The publicity surrounding the production attracted the attention of movie producer Sam Spiegel; Bolt was subsequently hired to revise the screenplay for *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), for which he was nominated for an Academy Award. Throughout the decade, Bolt would specialize in adapting literature to the screen; other film credits include 1965's *Doctor Zhivago* (for which Bolt won an Academy Award) and his own 1966 adaptation of *A Man for All Seasons*, which would bring Bolt a second Academy Award.

Bolt's first original screenplay, *Ryan's Daughter* (1970), bombed at the box-office. After that, Bolt spent a while working on his playwriting career and found success with *Vivat! Vivat Regina!* (1970), for which he was nominated for a Tony Award. Bolt also completed screenplays for *The Bounty* (1984) and *The Mission* (1986).

Though he reportedly described himself as “something between an agnostic and an atheist,” Bolt's plays often examined characters – frequently historical figures – pressed by powerful people to adopt religious or moral positions they feel are untenable. Bolt himself was once jailed as part of a protest in support of nuclear disarmament; though he “hated breaking the law” – maintaining, as does his representation of Thomas More, that the presence of laws are “infinitely valuable” – he felt the proliferation of nuclear bombs “was something that one was more or less bound to dig in one's heels about.”

Bolt was married four times – including two separate marriages to actress Sarah Miles – and fathered four children. Robert Bolt suffered a massive heart attack on April 12, 1979, followed soon after by a stroke. Following a long illness, he died in 1995.

Setting the Scene

A Man for All Seasons takes place in London from 1526 through 1535, during the reign of Tudor king Henry VIII.

Before the Tudor rulers took control of England, the monarchy of England was incredibly unstable. The years between 1455 and 1487 saw an intermittent civil war between supporters of the House of Lancaster (the dynasty of kings that included Henrys IV through VI, all of whom were descended from John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster) and the House of York (the dynasty that saw the rule of Edwards IV and V and Richard III, descendants of Richard, Duke of York). Both houses used a rose as its symbol – a white rose for the House of York, a red rose for the House of Lancaster – and these battles came to be known as The Wars of the Roses.

In 1485, with the Yorkist Richard III on the throne, Henry Tudor led the Lancastrian forces into the Battle of Bosworth Field. After Richard III died in the midst of this battle, the newly-ascended Henry VII effectively ended the conflict between Lancastrians and Yorkists by marrying Elizabeth of York, the daughter of Edward IV, in 1486; this act unified the warring houses.

Henry VII's reign began what is known as the House of Tudor, a series of five monarchs who ruled England from 1485 to 1603. These monarchs were:

- Henry VII (1485-1509)
- Henry VIII (the son of Henry VII; 1509-1547)
- Edward VI (the son of Henry VIII; 1547-1553)
- Mary I (Edward VI's elder half-sister; 1553-1558)
- Elizabeth I (Mary I's younger half-sister; 1558-1603)

Henry VII's great-granddaughter, Lady Jane Grey, served as Queen for all of nine days after the death of Edward VI before being deposed by Mary I and subsequently executed.

The Wars of the Roses, though only tangentially mentioned in *A Man for All Seasons* (Wolsey references "The Yorkist Wars," which would make sense, given that Henry VII was a Lancastrian), weighs heavily over the action of the play.

It was during the Tudor period that the Renaissance came fully into bloom in England, providing an astoundingly high level (both in quantity and quality) of art, music, theatre and literature.

The Characters

Thomas More

Born in London in 1478, Thomas More's education was informed by the humanistic school of thought which was gaining momentum during that period. He was required to converse in Latin in his grammar school and later studied the works of Aristotle. After studying Latin and logic at Oxford University for two years, More returned to London to study law. He became a barrister in 1501, then contemplated abandoning law in favor of a life as a monk, going so far as to reside in a monastery for four years. Though he later returned to law, More continued to observe many monastic practices for the duration of his life, including self-flagellation and the donning of a hair-shirt as acts of self-mortification.

Upon leaving the monastery, More married Jane Colt, with whom he would have four children: Margaret (seen onstage in *A Man for All Seasons*), Elizabeth, Cecily and John. Colt died in 1511, after which he quickly married again, to Alice Middleton, a widow eight years his senior.

More instituted a regular life of prayer, Scripture study and church attendance for the entire household. He also set up a humanistic curriculum for his children (though classical education for women was almost unheard of at the time), ensuring they became skilled in both Latin and Greek in addition to English, as well as offering instruction in music and in sports such as archery.

Having gained a reputation for honesty and fairness in various legal and advisory positions in Henry VIII's court, More also found time to write *Utopia*, the book from which the term for "perfect society" originated. ("Utopia" also translates from Greek to "no place" – emphasizing the impossibility of such a society.)

Henry VIII

Although perhaps the first image that springs to mind of Henry VIII is that of an overweight womanizer, the young monarch was an accomplished athlete, author and musician. Henry excelled at tennis (a slightly different version of the sport that we play today), wrote a book – with the help, it is believed, of Thomas More – entitled *A Defence of the Seven Sacraments* (for which Pope Leo X awarded him the title "Defender of the Faith") and is often credited with the composition of "Greensleeves," in addition to several other pieces.

Henry was not first in line for the throne; through the precepts of primogeniture, his older brother Arthur was heir to Henry VII. Seeking a politically advantageous match for his successor, the king betrothed Arthur to Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile, rulers of Spain. Soon after, however, Arthur died and

Henry became next in line to rule. As Catherine claimed to have remained a virgin during her short marriage to Arthur – and the political implications of a connection between England and Spain remaining constant – young Henry was betrothed to Catherine, and the two were married shortly after he became king in 1509.

Thomas Cromwell

One of Henry VIII's most trusted and important advisors, Thomas Cromwell was born in about 1485, the son of a tradesman. After studying law, he entered the service of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, and later came to prominence at Wolsey's expense. He is credited with shepherding the king's 1534 Act of Supremacy (which anointed Henry as "the only Supreme Head in Earth of the Church of England") through Parliament. Though he was instrumental in securing Henry's divorce from his first wife, Catherine, Cromwell's later insistence that Henry marry Anne of Cleves – a marriage that ended disastrously – led to his own execution in 1540...which, reportedly at Henry's insistence, was carried out at the hands of an inexperienced headsman who required several attempts to finish the job. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658), the military leader and politician who led the overthrow of the British monarchy, is descended from Thomas Cromwell's sister, Catherine. (Although she married, her children kept her name.)

Cardinal Thomas Wolsey

Cardinal Wolsey (c. 1475 – 1530), reputedly the son of a butcher, grew to be the second-most powerful man in England (behind the king), before Henry VIII's displeasure led him to a fall every bit as dizzying as his ascension had been. Educated at Oxford's Magdalen College, Wolsey later headed the school before becoming a personal chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury and, eventually, to Henry VII. When Henry VIII became king in 1509, Wolsey's own fortunes rose as well: by 1515, he had been appointed both a cardinal in the Catholic Church and Lord Chancellor of England, and was a ubiquitous and powerful figure in most affairs of state. Unable to secure an annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine in a timely fashion – though this was hardly Wolsey's fault, given the pressures put upon Pope Clement VII by the king of Spain (a relative of Catherine's) – Wolsey was quickly stripped of all power and charged with treason. En route to London, Wolsey fell ill and died.

Thomas Howard, 3rd Duke of Norfolk

Thomas Howard (1473 – 1554) was one of the most powerful nobles in Henry VIII's court, as well as a battle-tested general. Always anxious to be a loyal supporter of Henry VIII, Howard presided over the trial of his friend Sir Thomas More (whose conviction on the charge of treason was the result of highly suspect testimony). Howard was the uncle of Anne Boleyn, who would become Henry's second wife; when the king determined to get rid of her – via charges of adultery – after she could not produce a male heir, Howard oversaw her trial in 1536, handing her a death sentence despite her questionable guilt. Another of Howard's nieces, Catherine Howard, became Henry's fifth wife; when she,

too, was executed, Howard fell out of favor with Henry. In 1547, he was stripped of his dukedom and scheduled to be beheaded – surviving only because Henry died before being able to sign the death warrant. Mary I – who temporarily restored Catholicism to England – also restored Howard’s dukedom in 1553.

Thomas Cranmer

Thomas Cranmer (1489 – 1556) was educated at Jesus College, Cambridge, and entered the priesthood following the death of his first wife. By the time Henry VIII’s “great matter” was in full swing, Cranmer had risen to an influential position, and proved himself a dedicated servant to the king by pursuing the divorce on the king’s behalf. In 1533, Cranmer became the Archbishop of Canterbury, and was an invaluable advisor both to Henry and Henry’s successor, Edward VI, during whose reign Cranmer led the Church of England in a more Protestant direction. Edward’s death ushered in the reign of Mary I, who wished to return the country to Catholicism. Cranmer was removed from office and charged with both treason and heresy. Wishing to save himself, Cranmer recanted; when he discovered he was to be burned at the stake anyway, he withdrew his recantation and thrust his right hand – the hand that had signed the document – into the fire.

The Conflict

With a sterling reputation and close friendship with the king, Thomas More was an ideal candidate to replace the late Cardinal Wolsey as Lord Chancellor of England. But at the same time, there was a “great matter” brewing:

Henry VIII sought to divorce his wife Catherine in favor of Anne Boleyn, desperate to sire a male heir to the throne. The divorce – like the marriage, years earlier – required special dispensation from the Pope. The new pope, Clement VII, was loathe to grant special dispensation, as he was under enormous pressure from Charles V, who was both King of Spain and Catherine’s nephew. (Charles’ forces had recently sacked Rome and imprisoned the pope for seven months.)

The pope allowed Henry’s suit for a divorce to be heard in England, with Cardinals Wolsey and Campeggio acting as his commissioners. Though apparently a positive sign for Henry, the pope had instructed Campeggio to stall, and when the trial was adjourned on a technicality, the king’s displeasure found its scapegoat in Wolsey, who was charged under the Statutes of Praemunire (a vague charge roughly defined as acting as to derogate from the king’s authority).

Frustrated, Henry vainly sought to increase the pressure on Rome. When that failed, Henry began to target the English clergy. The Statutes of Praemunire – sufficiently vague as to be useful again – were threatened, first to individual members of the clergy, then against the clergy as a whole. Cowed by Henry’s abuse of power and unable to practically fight these charges, the clergy submitted to Henry’s authority, paying a fine of £100,000 to gain the king’s full pardon.

But even as nobles, universities and the clergy fell into line behind the king, More’s silence on the matter resounded thunderously. As the king’s unhappiness about More’s lack of support grew, greater and greater pressures were exerted on More and his family.

Timeline

- February 7, 1478 Thomas More is born in London, the son of a successful lawyer.
- April 9, 1483 King Edward IV dies, leaving two children: Edward V, 12 years old at the time of his ascension, and 9-year old Richard of Shrewsbury. The children's uncle, the future Richard III, is named Lord Protector of the Realm (who acted as regent for monarchs who were still minors).
- April 1483 The future Richard III intercepts Edward V's entourage on its way to London for the coronation. The young boys are placed in the Tower of London; they will not be seen in public again and the specifics of their deaths remain a great mystery to this day.
- July 6, 1483 After Parliament declares Edward V and Richard of Shrewsbury to be illegitimate, Richard III is crowned at Westminster Abbey.
- November 10, 1483 Martin Luther is born in Eisleben, Germany.
- 1484 More attends St. Anthony's school in London, a Latin grammar school where the students are required to converse in Latin.
- c. 1485 Thomas Cromwell, one of the most important figures in Henry VIII's court, is born.
- August 22, 1485 Henry Tudor defeats Richard III in the Battle of Bosworth Field. Henry VII's coronation ushers in the House of Tudor.
- September 20, 1486 Arthur is born to Henry VII and Elizabeth of York, becoming heir to the crown.
- 1489 More becomes a page to John Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Chancellor of England.
- July 2, 1489 Thomas Cranmer, future Archbishop of Canterbury during Henry VIII's reign, is born in Nottingham, England.
- June 28, 1491 The future Henry VIII is born to Henry VII and Elizabeth of York.
- 1492 More is nominated by Archbishop Morton for Canterbury College in Oxford, where he studies on scholarship for two years. The curriculum includes classical studies such as Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and disputations involving formal oratory and public debate.

- 1493 More leaves Oxford without a degree and studies at the New Inn in London, entering the field of law.
- 1498 Desiderius Erasmus (1467-1536) of Rotterdam, a humanist of great learning, travels to England and teaches at Oxford. Erasmus will come to insist upon a Gospel morality based on the Sermon on the Mount.
- 1499 More and Erasmus meet for the first time. Their mutual interest in the 'New Learning' (Renaissance humanism) provides the entry into a great, long friendship. In the summer they together make a social visit to Prince Henry of Wales (the future Henry VIII).
- 1501 More begins his close association with the Carthusian Charterhouse of London, where he will live for the next four years, participating in the monks' spiritual exercises of meditation and prayer, adopting their physical penances, and testing his possible vocation to the priesthood.
- November, 1501 Arthur, heir of Henry VII, marries Catherine of Aragon, daughter of Ferdinand II and Isabella I of Spain.
- April 2, 1502 Arthur dies, leaving Prince Henry as the heir to Henry VII.
- 1502 Martin Luther receives his bachelor's degree from Erfurt University.
- 1503 More lectures on law at Furnivall's Inn for three years.
- November 28, 1503 Pope Julius II succeeds Pope Pius III, who died after a twenty-six day reign.
- 1503 Prince Henry is betrothed to Catherine of Aragon, after obtaining dispensation from Pope Julius II, which is necessary because Leviticus prohibits men from marrying their brothers' widows.
- 1504 More is elected to Parliament for one session.
- 1505 Determining he is not called to a celibate, cloistered life, More leaves the Charterhouse to follow a public life. He marries Jane Colt of Essex (who is sixteen at the time). They have four children: Margaret, Elizabeth, Cecily and John.
- 1505 Martin Luther enters law school on May 20, but when he is caught in a lightning storm, he vows to Saint Anne he will become a monk

- if he is spared. He subsequently enters the monastery of the Augustinian Hermits at Erfurt.
- 1506 In Germany, John Tetzel (1465-1519), a Dominican monk, begins selling indulgences (a pardon from the punishment in purgatory due for sins committed).
- April 3, 1507 Martin Luther is ordained a priest.
- April 21, 1509 Henry VII dies; Prince Henry ascends to the throne as Henry VIII. More composes coronation verses to celebrate the inauguration.
- June 11, 1509 Henry VIII marries Catherine of Aragon.
- 1510 More is appointed under-sheriff of the City of London, an office he will hold until 1518. In this capacity, More deals with all manner of criminal offenses. He is also elected to Parliament as a representative of the City at Westminster.
- January 31, 1510 Catherine of Aragon miscarries a daughter.
- 1511 Jane Colt, More's wife, dies. More re-marries soon afterwards, to the widow Alice Middleton, who is eight years older than More.
- January 1, 1511 Catherine of Aragon gives birth to a son, Henry, who will die less than two months later.
- 1512 More serves as governor and treasurer of Lincoln's Inn (one of four Inns of Court to which barristers belong).
- 1513 Henry VIII reforms the Royal Navy and organizes an expedition against France in support of Pope Julius II.
- November, 1513 Catherine of Aragon gives birth to a son, who dies within the month.
- February 21, 1513 Pope Julius II dies; he is succeeded by Pope Leo X.
- 1514 More writes *The History of Richard III*, which portrays the former king as a ruthless and murderous man driven to vile acts by his evil ambitions.
- 1514 Thomas Wolsey, a butcher's son, is made Archbishop of York.
- December, 1514 Catherine of Aragon gives birth to a son, Henry, who dies within the month.

- 1515 More begins work on *Utopia*, an account of the travels of fictional voyager Raphael Hythloday.
- 1515 Wolsey is appointed Lord Chancellor of England.
- 1516 More becomes a member of the Council of the Star Chamber, a council of the king (headed by Wolsey) that deals with property titles.
- 1516 More's *Utopia* is published in Latin.
- February 18, 1516 Catherine of Aragon gives birth to a daughter, Mary, who will eventually rule as Queen Mary I beginning in 1553.
- 1517 More goes to Calais with Cardinal Wolsey in the fall to help settle commercial disputes between French and English merchants.
- 1517 More becomes a member of the king's Privy Chamber and is now in daily contact with Henry VIII.
- October 31, 1517 Martin Luther posts his 95 Theses at Wittenberg, marking the beginning of the Reformation in Germany. Luther stresses that the punishment for sin can be removed only by faith in the Gospel, and no amount of money charitably donated can relieve one of this responsibility.
- 1518 More becomes master of requests in Henry's service.
- November 10, 1518 Catherine of Aragon gives birth to a stillborn child.
- 1521 More is knighted by Henry VIII and becomes Undertreasurer. More's daughter, Margaret, marries William Roper.
- 1521 With help from More, Henry VIII composes an anti-Luther tract entitled *A Defence of the Seven Sacraments*, for which Pope Leo X confers the king with the title 'Defender of the Faith.'
- January 3, 1521 Martin Luther is excommunicated by Pope Leo X.
- December 1, 1521 Pope Leo X dies and is succeeded by Pope Adrian VI. During his brief papacy, he will unsuccessfully try to launch a Catholic Reformation in response to the Protestant Reformation.
- 1523 More is elected Speaker of the House of Commons, and writes a 'Response to Luther' on Henry's behalf.

- September 14, 1523 Pope Adrian VI dies; he is succeeded by Pope Clement VII.
- 1525 More is made chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, where he adjudicates criminal cases. He also becomes high steward of Cambridge University, where he investigates the dissemination of anti-Catholic tracts in the universities.
- 1527 Henry VIII begins an affair with Anne Boleyn; he begins to explore the possibility of annulling his marriage to Catherine of Aragon.
- May 6, 1527 Rome is sacked by a rogue army of Charles V, King of Spain. Pope Clement VII is imprisoned for seven months; upon his release, the pope would follow a policy of subservience to Charles, who is Catherine of Aragon's nephew.
- 1528 Henry VIII addresses the English public to explain his motives for seeking a divorce from Catherine of Aragon.
- 1529 In a special court established to examine the validity of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, Cardinal Wolsey is unable to get a decision favorable to the king.
- November 29, 1530 Charged with treason and on his way to be executed, Wolsey dies. More has already succeeded him as Lord Chancellor.
- 1531 Henry VIII invents a new title for himself: Supreme Head of the Church in England. More considers resigning as Lord Chancellor.
- May 16, 1532 A number of bishops and abbots sign off on Henry VIII's complete authority over the Church of England. That afternoon, More resigns as Lord Chancellor.
- December 1532 Anne Boleyn becomes pregnant by Henry VIII.
- January 25, 1533 Henry VIII marries Anne Boleyn.
- May 23, 1533 With the help of Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon is declared invalid, and his marriage to Anne Boleyn is recognized as legal. More is absent from all festivities surrounding the marriage and Anne's subsequent crowning as queen.
- July, 1533 Pope Clement VII declares Henry and Anne's marriage to be invalid and threatens Henry with excommunication.

- September 7, 1533 Anne Boleyn gives birth to the future Queen Elizabeth I.
- 1534 More is questioned by Cromwell regarding his association with Elizabeth Barton, the 'Holy Maid of Kent', a Benedictine nun who prophesied disaster if Henry VIII divorced Catherine. More is cleared of traitorous involvement. Cromwell offers More a reinstatement to honor and wealth in exchange for his approval of the divorce; More refuses.
- 1534 Anne Boleyn's second pregnancy ends in a miscarriage.
- March 23, 1534 Pope Clement VII orders Henry VIII to give up Anne Boleyn or face excommunication.
- March 30, 1534 Parliament passes the Succession Act, declaring children born to Henry and Anne to be legitimate successors to the throne. The act also required acknowledgment of Henry's absolute sovereignty; anyone refusing to take the oath will be judged guilty of treason.
- April 17, 1534 More is imprisoned in the Tower of London for reusing to swear to the oath.
- September 25, 1534 Pope Clement VII dies; he is succeeded by Pope Paul III.
- 1535 Cromwell offers More another chance to reconsider his refusal to swear to the oath; More refuses.
- June 12, 1535 Sir Richard Rich, a prominent lawyer and one-time friend of More, visits More in his cell. On the basis of their conversation, as reported to Cromwell by Rich, More is charged with treason. More accuses Rich of perjury.
- July 1, 1535 More is tried for treason and found guilty.
- July 6, 1535 On the scaffold, More declares himself 'the king's good servant but God's first' and kisses his executioner in an act of forgiveness.
- 1935 More is canonized by Pope Pius XI.

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