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Thomas More, a Man for all Seasons: Robert Bolt's Play and the Elizabethan Play of Sir Thomas More [1]

The phrase "a man for all seasons" has a long history which may serve to lead us to some reflections on the personality of Thomas More as it appeared in a play staged during the reign of Elizabeth, some sixty years after his death, and in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*.

Schoolteacher that he was, Bolt obligingly gave the source for his title in one of two quotations at the beginning of his printed play. One quotation was from Jonathan Swift, who called More "the person of the greatest virtue these islands ever produced" -- an astounding accolade from a writer who did not make such judgments lightly. The other was from Robert Whittinton, [2] a schoolteacher of More's time, who said that More "is a man of angel's wit and singular learning; I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness, and affability? And as time requireth a man of marvellous mirth and pastimes; and sometimes of as sad gravity: a man for all seasons."

Whittinton's praise is included in an obscure textbook called *Vulgaria* printed in 1520, which gives rules and examples to help schoolboys "make latins" -- that is, translate English sentences into Latin. But Whittinton's Latin translations point to a source that is anything but obscure: Desiderius Erasmus, the man who, apart from Englishmen, was closest to More's heart. Whittinton took hints for his eulogy from two letters of Erasmus which were first published, with considerable fanfare, in 1519. In one of them, written in 1499 in the first flush of Erasmus' enthusiasm for his new English friends, Erasmus said of More: "Did nature ever create anything more supple or sweet or felicitous than the character of Thomas More?" [3] Twenty years later, when he had lived in England for several years and knew More well, he wrote a long character sketch in which he praised More for his extraordinary blending of gaiety and gravity and for his flexible adaptation to company of all sorts with no com-

promise of a decent sense of his own dignity. [4] And Whittinton's Latin for "a man for all seasons" -- " vir ... omnium horarum" -- clearly came from Erasmus' prefatory letter dedicating his masterpiece, *The Praise of Folly,* to Thomas More. The *Folly* or *Moria,* as Erasmus and More usually called it after Folly's name in Greek, was written at More's house in 1509. It was suggested, says Erasmus in the prefatory letter, by the similarity of Moria and More, since, though More was far from being a fool in the usual sense of the word, he nevertheless delighted, like the personified Folly who speaks her own praises in Erasmus' book, in making fun of the ordinary lives of mortals. "On the other hand," Erasmus went on to say, "though your remarkably keen intelligence places you worlds apart from the common herd, still the incredible sweetness and gentleness of your character makes you able and willing to be a man for all seasons to all men (cum omnibus omnium horarum hominem agere)." The *Moria* was a sensationally famous book -- it had gone through 22 editions all over Europe by 1520 -- and there can be little doubt that Erasmus, with a little help from Whittinton, ultimately provided the title for Bolt's play, which is the main source from which most people know about More today.

Hence it would perhaps be enlightening if we knew what associations the phrase had for Erasmus. And he has kindly obliged us since it is one of the over 3000 entries in his monumental *Adagia,* [5] a collection of Latin and Greek proverbial sayings, each with sources and examples and sometimes commentary that amount to separate little essays. There Erasmus says that "omnium horarum homo" is applied to those who are equally adept at pleasantries and serious matters and whose company we always enjoy. Quintilian, he says, had applied it to Asinius Pollo, a famous Roman orator; [6] and More's well known oratorical skill is a principal feature of the Elizabethan play and (less flamboyantly) in the courtroom scene of Bolt's play. Erasmus remarks that the character encapsulated in the phrase is exemplified by a fragment from the early Roman poet Ennius, describing what sort of character "the friend of a man who is his superior in rank and fortune ought to have." [7] Ennius' great man, returning from burdensome labors of state, calls upon his friend, who is described thus:

> one with whom
> He freely spoke of matters great and small,
> Confiding to him thoughts approved or not,
> If he so wished, and found him trustworthy;
> With whom he took much pleasure openly

> Or privily; a man to whom no thought
> Suggested heedlessness or ill intent,
> A cultured, loyal and a winsome man,
> Contented, happy, learned, eloquent,
> Speaking but little and that fittingly,
> Obliging, knowing well all ancient lore,
> All customs old and new, the laws of man
> And of the gods, who with due prudence told
> What he had heard, or kept it to himself. [8]

A fitting description of Henry VIII and his one-time friend Thomas More? Perhaps, but with no overtones of the tension in Bolt's scene between Henry and More, when new customs conflict with old, and the law of God with the laws of man, and when keeping his opinions to himself becomes More's final and perilous line of defense.

But Erasmus also includes some examples of an opposite and darker meaning of the phrase. It was applied by the tyrannical emperor Tiberius to two of his opportunistic drinking companions, whom he rewarded with provincial governerships, describing them in their public commissions as "the friends of all hours." [9] And the phrase also suited the hedonist philosopher Aristippus, says Erasmus. Such men for all seasons, opportunists and pleasure-seekers, are not lacking in Bolt's play: Rich, Cromwell, Wolsey, Henry himself. In a sense Bolt's play is about two kinds of men for all seasons: one whose flexibility has an unyielding core of integrity and a number of others who yield to the demands, any demands, of the moment.

Perhaps I should remark in passing that "seasons" in Whittinton's English does not refer to the seasons of the year, as the makers of the first movie (with Paul Scofield) seemed to make it do; through the Tower window one could see a change of seasons in the landscape. It is not as if a man for all seasons can cope successfully with the problems of spring, summer, fall, and winter -- youth, maturity, middle age, old age and death. The long shadows are present from the very beginning in Bolt's play. The Latin phrase and Whittinton's translation mean "suited to all hours, times, occasions."

But More has also been a man for all times in another sense not meant by the phrase: he has appealed in quite different ways to different eras or periods of time, and the picture presented of him at various times and places seems always, and perhaps inevitably, to have been limited by the preoccupations and vision of a particular time and place. This diminution of the man, which is not necessarily dishonorable or inten-

tionally deceptive, is particularly noticeable in dramatic presentations of him because a playwright uses historical figures for his own purposes (and sometimes for the purposes of others) and because he is especially bound by the mental and emotional equipment of his audience. The Elizabethan play of Sir Thomas More and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons,* each in its own way, reduces the man for all seasons to a man for a season.

It is surprising, in a way, that the Elizabethan play was written at all. Then as now, Sir Thomas More, to say nothing of St. Thomas More, was something of an embarrassment to the English establishment. Even his enemies recognized that he was a man of great intelligence, learning, affability, and integrity. If he was right, then the English ecclesiastical establishment and the civil bureaucracy based on the spoliation of the monasteries were, in principle if not always in practice, wrong. On the continent, especially in Germany and Austria, dozens of Latin plays about More were staged in Jesuit schools, often with elaborate music, costumes, and stage-props, to let the boys show off their Latin for their parents (they were paying for it), to place a halo on Thomas More, and to reassure everyone that Henry was a beast and Anne was a bitch. We know of these theatrical effusions mostly from the printed programs, which had summaries in German, scene by scene, so that the parents could follow what was going on. Such propaganda was not surprising on the Catholic continent.

Nevertheless, in the 1590s a London theater company, Lord Strange's Men, commissioned a group of playwrights to put together a play about More. We know it only from a single manuscript pieced and pasted together, written in six different hands, which was not published until 1844. No one paid much attention to it until some 25 years later when two scholars, experts on early handwriting, gave some reasons to believe that one or more of the added pieces was in the hand of Shakespeare. It was like firing a pistol at the top of a snow-laden mountain. The avalanche of scholarly studies is still roaring; seven years ago it took almost 50 pages just to list them. [10] No detail has been overlooked; even the wormholes in five of the pages show how one of them has been misplaced. The upshot of it now is that three of the playwrights have been certainly identified, that Shakespeare might well have been a fourth, that the play may (or may not) have been actually staged, and that the sources have been identified exhaustively (and exhaustingly).

The play has 17 scenes, which fall into three groups. The first concerns the so-called "ill mayday" riots of 1517, which More, according

to Edward Hall's chronicle, quelled by addressing the mob in a speech emphasizing the divine authority of the king and the need for law and order to prevent the total destruction of society. More's confrontation with the mob and his speech constitute the scene which Shakespeare may have written. After this coup, Sheriff (that is, city attorney) More rapidly receives a knighthood and the lord chancellorship. The second group of scenes, more loosely juxtaposed, displays More (in a sometimes humorous light) at the height of his success as lord chancellor: at his first meeting with Erasmus he changes his clothes with his steward to test the perspicacity of the great scholar; he gives an offensively long-haired ruffian a choice between prison and a barber (shades of the 60s!); and during a play performed at his house to entertain the Lord Mayor he steps in to improvise the part of an absent actor. Finally, in the concluding group of scenes, after he refuses the king's order to sign some unspecified articles, he is confined to his house (where he consoles his family and servants), is arrested as a traitor, imprisoned in the Tower, led out to the scaffold, and executed.

As the law required, the manuscript of the play was submitted to the official censor, Edmund Tilney, who objected strenuously to the scenes on the riot. The very idea of a citizen uprising was offensive to the Elizabethan establishment, with some justification perhaps, since such riots did actually occur during the years when the play was probably written. Tilney even required that the scene in which More is presented with the innocuously mysterious articles be totally altered.

And here is the nub of the difficulty with the play. In the season when it was written it was utterly impossible even to touch on the reason More died, as the playwrights well knew. And no one can hope to present the personality of More without probing the fascinating and elusive contrast, to some even contradiction, between his love of life and his willingness to die. The playwrights fell back on Thomas More, citizen of London, beloved for his loyalty to the city, his integrity as a judge, his compassion for the poor, his solicitude for his family and servants, and his delight in jokes, some of them crude, though never quite pointless, practical jokes. The More of the play also has a deeper, religious dimension. He knows that earthly honor and power are evanescent, that death comes for all, and that to be merry in heaven is what finally matters -- solemn beliefs that Bolt could neither accept nor presuppose in his audience. Sometimes in the final scenes the gaiety and gravity manage to fuse in a few flashes of summer lightning. But the gulf between the loyal, familial citizen and the unbudging recusant is usually unbridged.

No fire leaps between the poles of the jokester and the martyr.

Robert Bolt was under no constraints from censors, at least not on religious grounds, and he knew very well that the gap was what he had to get at, as his witty and acute preface makes quite clear. But the religious pole no longer carried any charge for him or, as he perhaps rightly thought, for most of his audience. It could only be a metaphor for something else, the watery, amorphous, terrifying cosmos in which modern existential man finds himself and from which More seeks shelter in the thickets of the law like a skillful forester. For, unlike the Elizabethan More, Bolt's hero is afraid of death and uses all his legal skill to avoid it. He remains scrupulously silent on the points at issue in the hope that the law will protect him. Only when he has been convicted on perjured evidence does he declare himself on the ecclesiastical supremacy and the divorce of Henry VIII, most emphatically on the divorce, though that was subsidiary to the unity of Christ's church (as Bolt recognizes in the preface, though not in the play). The traumas of divorce, he rightly knew, were likely to be more familiar to his audience than the dangerous and destructive rending asunder of Christ's body in his Church.

I do not belittle Bolt for not doing what he felt unable to do, what he thought could no longer be done at all, at least in a play, that is to probe the deepest motives of More's death. He has presented More's dealings with his family and friends with pungent pathos, far beyond the sometimes playful, sometimes platitudinous pieties of the Elizabethan play. Here he made far better use of the earliest and best brief biography of More by his son-in-law William Roper. More's dealings with the other, extremely various men for all seasons, the opportunists, is subtle and convincing. One might object that the rivetting scene in which More provokes the Duke of Norfolk into renouncing their friendship is historically distorted by Bolt's own sense of class warfare. But his play is so powerful and well made that for a long time to come it may well be the principal source from which most people get their picture of Thomas More. So brilliant is his drama that it provoked all but one of the dozen or so modern performances of the Elizabethan play. But his picture of More is partial, not simply as any attempt to recover that complex personality must be imperfect, but in a radical and important way: it omits the religious dimension almost entirely. Am I the only one who is faintly embarrassed by the perfunctory night prayers of More and his family early in the play? Too much like "Now I lay me down to sleep"?

Be that as it may, Bolt does not give fully adequate answers to the questions: Why did More try to save himself by silence? Why was

he finally willing, though not eager, to die? To answer these difficult questions we must look to his writings, and especially to the last work he wrote in the Tower, a meditation in Latin on Christ's agony in the garden, which has come down to us in the copy he himself wrote. [11] There it becomes clear that he hid out of a humble awareness that if he exerted all his strength to save himself and was unable to do so, he would be sure that it was God's will for him to die a martyr's death. He admitted that some men might be inspired by God to seek out martyrdom, but he thought it safer to exhaust every legitimate means to escape; for then he could be certain not only that he was not deceived by presumptuous pride, not only that it was God's will that he should die, but also that God would give him the strength to do so. In fact, More strongly suspected that the way he chose, the humble and surer way, might indeed be more difficult than the eager pursuit of a martyr's death. Of the eager martyr he comments:

> Besides is it not possible that God in his goodness removes fear from some persons not because he approves of or intends to reward their boldness, but rather because he is aware of their weakness and knows that they would not be equal to facing fear. For some have yielded to fear, even though they won out later when the actual tortures were inflicted.... And so God proportions the temperaments of his martyrs according to his own providence in such a way that one rushes forth eager to his death, another creeps out hesitantly and fearfully, but for all that bears his death none the less bravely -- unless someone perhaps imagines he ought to be thought less brave for having fought down not only his other enemies but also his own weariness, sadness, and fear -- most strong feelings and mighty enemies indeed.

And in the last analysis More was willing to die not for any theory of the papacy, or any idea or tradition or even doctrine or for his irreducible selfhood, but rather for a person, for Christ. As Bolt himself makes More say: "Well ... finally ... it isn't a matter of reason; finally it's a matter of love." But Bolt cannot make us see who that love was for. If for More it was love of the Church, it was so only insofar as the Church is made up of Christian persons in whom Christ is present and who constitute the mystical body of Christ. Perhaps we come closest to realizing the martyr's loving dependence on Christ as a person when More imagines Christ's speech to those who are afraid to die:

> O faint of heart, take courage and do not despair. You are afraid, you are sad, you are stricken with weariness and dread

of the torment with which you have been cruelly threatened. Trust me, I conquered the world, and yet I suffered immeasurably more from fear, I was sadder, more afflicted with weariness, more horrified at the prospect of such cruel suffering drawing eagerly nearer and nearer. Let the brave man have his high-spirited martyrs, let him rejoice in imitating a thousand of them. But you, my timorous and feeble little sheep, be content to have me alone as your shepherd, follow me as your leader; if you do not trust yourself, place your trust in me. See, I am walking ahead of you along this fearful road.

Since you will find More most fully in his own writings, I am delighted to help you celebrate the acquisition of important books by him as well as about him, especially, of course, the Yale edition of his complete works. To present More's personality is like trying to describe some scent such as that from new-mown grass or pine needles or fresh turned earth or pepper or even a whiff of sulfur, or all of them blending and wafting in turn. Study what has been written about him -- and the mass of that has recently accumulated with dumbfounding rapidity. But above all, in his writings, I repeat, in his writings, you stand the best chance of finding and feeling the man for all seasons.

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NOTES

1. This paper is a modified form of a lecture given at the College of St. Francis de Sales in Allentown, Penn., on 4 December 1989. I wish to express my gratitude for the gracious hospitality extended on that occasion to me and my family.

2. *The Vulgaria of John Stanbridge and the Vulgaria of Robert Whittinton,* ed. Beatrice White, Early English Text Society, Original Series No. 187 (London and Oxford, 1932), pp. 64-65. But slight omissions in Bolt's form of the quotation show that he took it not directly from Whittinton but from R.W. Chambers' *Thomas More* (London, 1935).

3. *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami,* ed. P.S. Allen et al., 12 vols. (Oxford, 1906-1958), *1,* 274 (No. 118, lines 23-25).

4. *Opus epistolarum, 4,* 16 (No. 999, lines 111-130).

5. *Adagia* No. 286, *Opera omnia,* ed. J. Clericus (Leclerc), 10 vols. (Leiden, 1703-1706), *2,* 144; translated in *The Collected Works of Erasmus,* trans. and annot. R.A.B. Mynors, James McConica, et al. (Toronto, 1974-), *31* (trans. Margaret Mann Phillips), 304-05.

6. Quintilian, 6.3.110-111.

7. Aulus Gellius 12.4.4.

8. The translation is by John C. Rolfe in *The Attic Nights of Aulus Gellius,* 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1960-1961), *2,* 371. See the Latin, with a translation by Margaret Mann Phillips, in *Moreana* 50/14.

9. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars,* Tiberius 42.1.

10. *Four Plays Ascribed to Shakespeare*: The Reign of King Edward III, Sir Thomas More, The History of Cardenio, The Two Noble Kinsmen: *An Annotated Bibliography,* compiled by G. Harold Metz (New York and London, 1982), pp. 69-117.

11. Here I have borrowed a few paragraphs with minor modifications from my edition and translation of More's *De tristitia Christi,* vol. 14 of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More (New Haven and London, 1976), pp. 775-6.

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Précis

Robert Bolt borrowed the title for *A Man for All Seasons* from an English translation of "omnium horarum homo" in the textbook *Vulgaria* (1520) by Robert Whittinton, who had himself borrowed the phrase from Erasmus' dedication of *The Praise of Folly* (or *Moria*) to Thomas More. From Erasmus' explanation of the saying in his *Adagia* we learn that it could be applied not only to men of admirable flexibility but also to hedonists and opportunists, such as Henry VIII, Cromwell, Rich and Wolsey in Bolt's play.

Plays tend to limit More's complex character according to the requirements of various times and audiences. While it is not surprizing that Latin school plays on the continent glorified More and vilified Henry and Anne, it is remarkable that in the 1590s an English play on Sir Thomas More was written for Lord Strange's Men. Written by six playwrights, it survives in a single manuscript, which became famous in the late nineteenth century because it was thought one scene was written in the hand of Shakespeare himself. Since the reasons for More's stand against Henry could not be specified, as the censor's notes make clear, the play cannot explore the motives of More's martyrdom and falls back on his roles as effective orator, London citizen, family man, and jokester, though it does

make clear that he looks forward to being merry in heaven. In Bolt's existentialist play the absence of a true religious dimension makes it impossible for him to explore the real reasons for More's attempt to avoid death by keeping silent.

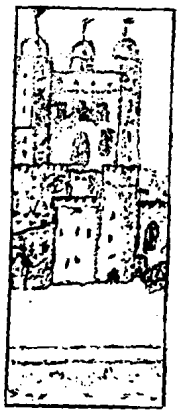
The true grounds of More's martyrdom, his love for Christ in his Church, can be seen best in the last work he wrote in the Tower, *The Sadness, Weariness, Fear, and Prayer of Christ before his Capture*. And the best way to pursue the elusive and complex character of the man for all seasons is to read his works.

Résumé

Après un examen de la portée dramatique du titre de la pièce de Bolt *A Man for All Seasons* (l'expression "omnium horarum homo", empruntée à Erasme via Whittinton, pouvant aussi bien s'appliquer à More qu'aux hédonistes et opportunistes de la pièce: Henry VIII, Cromwell, Rich, Wolsey), l'auteur met en parallèle l'oeuvre de Bolt et celle écrite sur More dans les années 1590, par plusieurs auteurs élisabéthains (dont probablement Shakespeare).

Il en ressort que pour des causes différentes (point de vue existentialiste au 20e siècle ou raisons de censure au 16e siècle) la dimension religieuse de More est escamotée dans ces oeuvres écrites sur lui. Mieux vaut encore, pour retrouver le martyr authentique et son amour du Christ dans son Eglise, relire les oeuvres écrites par lui, et, en particulier, son dernier écrit de prison, *De tritistia Christi*.

M.C.R.



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"If anyone is brought to the point where he must either suffer torment or deny God, he need not doubt that it was God's will for him to be brought to this crisis. Therefore, he has very good reason to hope for the best."
(Sir Thomas More: *De Tristitia Christi*)

Quote and illustration taken from the "Souvenir Programme" of the *Sir Thomas More* production by the Stage One Theatre Company (London, Sept. 1990).

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