

On “a man for all seasons”

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The phrase "a man for all seasons" has a long history. Schoolteacher that he was, Bolt obligingly gave the source for his title in one of the 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, 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 phrase points 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?" 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 compromise of a decent sense of his own dignity. 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.

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*, a collection of Latin and Greek proverbial sayings, each with sources and examples and sometimes commentaries 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. 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." Ennius' great man, returning from the 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.

Could this be 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 governorships, describing them in their public commissions as "the friends of all hours." And the phrase also suited the hedonist philosopher Aristippus, says Erasmus. Such men for all seasons, opportunists and pleasure-seekers, are not

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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 intentionally deceptive, is particularly noticeable in dramatic presentations of him because a playwright uses historical figures for his own purposes and because he is especially bound by the mental and emotional equipment of his audience. This limitation is also found in the Elizabethan play of *Sir Thomas More*, where the real reasons for More's silence and martyrdom could not be presented because of Elizabethan censorship.

Robert Bolt was under no constraints from censors, at least not on religious grounds, and he knew very well that the gap between More the witty, successful man for all seasons and the religious martyr was what he had to get at, as his 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 Bolt's 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 in fact subsidiary to the unity of Christ's church (as Bolt recognizes in his 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 perhaps 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. Here he made excellent 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? Is it too much like "Now I lay me down to sleep"?