

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Directed by Fred Zinnemann
Produced by Fred Zinnemann
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1966

For the Protestant, such a story as that of Sir Thomas More seems, at first, a tale of robust fortitude wastefully expended. The Roman Catholic Church was corrupt, tired, and shot through with venal men more inclined to serve themselves than God. To split from such an unholy relic seems commendable. After all, Christ's church as founded bears little resemblance to the wheezing enterprise the Church had become by the time of the 16th Century. That which seemed ordained by God was but the inevitable product of poor practices compounded by the weight of tradition. But to split from the Church for the glorification of Man, to legitimize a political disagreement by dressing it up as religious conviction, only compounds the mistake. Sir Thomas More knew the failures of the Church. But politics and religion should not be intertwined. By Christ's command, they are to stand apart. And Henry wanted to rule the country and the Church. This was—must be—unacceptable. Henry tries to justify his quest for an heir by claiming that he never legitimately married Catherine—it was an unholy union that should be annulled, this after having already secured special dispensation from the Pope to marry her! Henry cites scripture to justify annulment, and Thomas has scripture to counter Henry—but Henry doesn't want to discuss it. If Henry is basing his decision on the Bible, what the Bible says should be of great interest to him. And Thomas's implication is well-taken: the Pope should decide, especially because the scriptures are not clear. But Henry wants to make himself the final arbiter of virtue. And for all the talk of the risk of dynastic wars should Henry not sire a male heir, it's really about pride—all the salons and courts of Europe buzz with gossip about Thomas's profound silence. Henry has what he wants; there is no more risk of uncertainty. But one esteemed man will not bend his knee. Henry, leaving Thomas's house in a huff, is found to be greatly relieved when he mistakes another wedding guest as Thomas (which shows Henry's need for his approval and leaves him publicly embarrassed since Thomas is absent). Henry keeps pushing Thomas for his approval. But the irony is that no one would care what Thomas thinks unless he was so renowned for his honesty. This very honesty, however, prevents him from telling the king what he wants to hear. Every character but Cromwell is pricked by his conscience. And Thomas is a reminder of their evil. That is why he is hounded mercilessly. They make excuses. Some even take perverse delight in their corruptibility.

A Man for All Seasons is a very intelligent work of art. It is overflowing with rich dialogue and thought-provoking symbolism. Consider the scene where Henry visits Thomas. Henry jumps off his boat and inadvertently gets his stockings muddied. He pauses, looks back at his noblemen with a vacant expression, then breaks out in a maniacal laugh. The noblemen,

not finding it funny at all, gradually join him in laughing, and then proceed to recklessly jump out of the boat like the king, purposely dirtying their baroque raiments.

This is a picture of the whole country in the matter of Anne Boleyn. Henry's mistake was in going to such great lengths to secure his first divorce (risky jump off the boat). Still, he has no son. He looks foolish asking again (he's in the mud now). But he can't admit weakness, so he blames the Pope for condoning something which is supposedly indefensible (he's laughing now), and his subjects, who are uncomfortable in the midst of such political instability, react as the king demands. The nobles laugh (they want the king's approval and the preservation of their position), and jump in the mud (leaving Catholicism).

Sir Thomas More was a lonely man who was immune to flattery, bribes, and honors. Since he was also extraordinarily intelligent and inspiring, he was a threat. Being a lawyer, he took refuge in the law ("silence gives consent") until the law was corrupted through perjury and jury intimidation. Ironically, the film shows Thomas encouraged by his future son-in-law to destroy Richard Rich, Thomas's disgruntled hanger-on through the extralegal means at his command. Thomas More's forceful reply: "And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned 'round on you, where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? [...] Yes, I give the Devil benefit of law for my own safety's sake."

But, as Thomas observes, Richard has lost his soul, not for the whole world, but Wales. He will have his just reward. This is something More tries to impress upon Norfolk, when he encourages More to go along to get along. "Why can't you do as I did and come with us, for fellowship?"

"And when we die, and you are sent to Heaven for doing your conscience and I am sent to hell for not doing mine, will you come with me, for fellowship?"

Today's controversies are far removed from the intrigue of royal succession and state control of religion. But the film is really about the power of words, what they mean, and the import of their absence. Our courts today are not free from corruption, either. Every day, hundreds of people across America perjure themselves to foster their own ends, protect their freedom, settle private scores, and (for many) achieve a goal weightier (they suppose) than justice. For such as these, this quote is conclusory: "What is an oath but words we say to God?"