A Man for All Seasons

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ROBERT BOLT

Robert Bolt was born to a middle class family in the North of England. As a young man he fought in World War II as a member of the Royal Air Force, and after returning home he trained as a teacher and began to write. During the 1950s Bolt wrote several radio plays for the BBC, some of which he would then adapt into stage plays. He had his first commercial success with the 1956 play, *The Critic and the Heart*, and then again in 1960 with the success of two plays, *A Man For All Seasons* and *The Tiger and the Horse*. During the 1950s and 60s Bolt was a member of the Communist Party, for which he was briefly sent to prison. However, this seemed to have little effect on his career, and he continued to write plays into the 1970s, as well as several critically acclaimed screenplays including *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Doctor Zhivago*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Understanding the historical moment at which *A Man For All Seasons* takes place is essential to understanding the plot and stakes of the play. The action covers roughly six years, from Thomas More's appointment as Lord Chancellor in 1529 to his death in 1535, but requires knowledge of England from even a few years before that. Henry VIII was an English King who came to power in 1509 after the death of his older brother. He wanted to marry his brother's widow, Catherine, but that was against accepted Biblical teachings, and so he sent a special request to the Pope, asking for his marriage to be legitimized. The Pope agreed, and Henry and Catherine were married. Unfortunately, although Catherine had many children, she also had many miscarriages, and never gave birth to a son. Henry wanted a male heir, and by the mid-1520s was carrying on an affair with Anne Boleyn, who promised that if he married her she would give birth to a boy. The Catholic Church would not allow him to divorce Catherine, so Henry decided to separate England from the Catholic Church and install himself, instead of the Pope, as the head of the church. Although this would have been unthinkable even 15 years earlier, England's separation from the Catholic Church occurred during the Protestant Reformation, a period in history during which many people become dissatisfied with the Church and created their own, new branches. Henry passed the Act of Supremacy, which declared that he was the head of the church. Most of Parliament and the nobility signed it, but Thomas More would not. This sets into motion the events of the play, which deal with More's refusal to acknowledge the new Church of England.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

This is one of the few literary works to focus on Thomas More himself, but many other plays and novels investigate the same time period and the royal court during the reign of King Henry VIII. *Henry VIII*, a history play by Shakespeare first performed in 1613, covers the same time period as *A Man For All Seasons*, although More is not a character. Hilary Mantel's historical novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* follow the life of Thomas Cromwell, in which More features as a secondary character. Of course, More's own writings also provide insight to his character, and many of his lines in the play are taken directly from his own prose. His most famous work is *Utopia*, published in 1516. Robert Bolt also writes in a style related to that of Berthold Brecht. Both men were interested in showing that theatre was a performance, and not a perfect depiction of events, and they tried hard to provoke self-reflection in the audience. Some of Brecht's most famous plays are *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *Life of Galileo*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Man For All Seasons
- **When Written:** 1950s
- **When Published:** 1960
- **Genre:** Historical drama
- **Setting:** London in the 1530s
- **Climax:** The trial of Thomas More for treason
- **Antagonist:** King Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell

EXTRA CREDIT

Stage and Screen. Robert Bolt was arguably more famous as a screenwriter than as a playwright. He wrote *Lawrence of Arabia*, and won two Academy Awards for Best Adapted Screenplay, one of which was for his adaptation of his own play, *A Man For All Seasons*.

First Drafts. *A Man For All Seasons* was originally a radio play written for the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) which aired in 1954.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play begins sometime in the late 1520s with a conversation between Thomas More and his friend Richard Rich. More dislikes bribes and being in the public eye, whereas Rich cannot wait to increase his social status from his current position as a

poor academic. More helps Rich by connecting him to his friend, the Duke of Norfolk, who takes Rich under his wing and hires him as an assistant.

More goes to meet with Cardinal Wolsey, the Lord Chancellor of England. Wolsey wants More's help writing a letter to the Pope asking him to annul King Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. More resists, and Wolsey warns him that as a statesman his private conscience and moral objections should not be more important than the fate of the country. Although More's objection is moral, people are already beginning to think his protest is political, like Chapuys, who assumes More's silence means he has allied himself with Catherine, and by extension, Spain.

Back at home, More deals with his daughter Margaret's suitor, Will Roper. More likes Roper, but thinks his morals are too changeable, even calling him a "heretic." He eventually softens to Will, whose politics become more moderate, allowing Will and Margaret to marry.

Some time later, in 1530, Wolsey dies, and More is appointed the Lord Chancellor. Thomas Cromwell, a lawyer and a confidant of the King, is becoming suspicious of More. Although he is in an even more public position than before, More has still refused to publicly acknowledge the King's divorce. Cromwell bribes More's Steward as well as Richard Rich to try to find incriminating information he can use to bribe More.

The King comes to visit More in his home, and attempts to convince him to validate the divorce. Henry is upset because he feels that, without More's approval, his religious standing and soul are in jeopardy. More remains unchanged, and the King leaves abruptly and angrily. Henry expresses his frustration to Cromwell, who, together with Rich, plots to find a way to punish More, or convince him to change his mind.

Parliament passes the Act of Supremacy which establishes Henry's right to split from the Catholic Church as leader of a separate Church of England, but More will not sign it. Increasingly, people take his silence to mean he does not support the King at all, which is not the case. More's family and friends attempt to convince him to change his mind, but he will not. As the pressure increases he becomes increasingly committed to his conscience. He resigns from his role as Chancellor, but continues to be persecuted by Cromwell and the King.

More is eventually imprisoned, although he has not been charged with anything. Cromwell and Rich visit and attempt to get him to take an oath acknowledging the Act of Supremacy. His family also visits and begs him to relent. More does not, and is brought to trial. During the trial Rich lies under oath and says More denied the King's title as Supreme head of the Church of England. This was not true—More never denied the title, he just refused to endorse it. Unfortunately, the jury finds him guilty of treason without deliberation, and in 1535 More is executed.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Common Man – A character that plays all of the other minor, "common" roles in the play. First, he acts as Matthew, Thomas More's Steward. He later becomes the Boatman, Jailer, Foreman, Innkeeper and Headsman. Robert Bolt describes him as being in his late middle age, dressed all in black so that he can easily assume the roles of his alter egos. The "common" in his name, according to Bolt, represents "what is common in us all." The Common Man is supposed to be a character the reader can identify with. He isn't a saint or a king or a member of the upper class; he's just an ordinary guy. He's a reminder that most people in history were not the protagonists, but were instead the innkeepers, the servants, etc.—supporting characters that nonetheless influenced history.

Sir Thomas More – Thomas More is the "Man For All Seasons" in the title of the play. He is an English lawyer, eventually promoted to Chancellor and assistant to the King after Wolsey's death. A devoted Catholic, More refuses to sign Parliament's Act of Supremacy, which declares King Henry, and not the Pope, the Supreme Head of the new Church of England. More is committed to his conscience, and this prevents him from signing the Act, because he feels in his heart it is the wrong thing to do. He is intellectual, quick to laugh, and compassionate, though above all else he proves to be devoted to his own concsience and beliefs. He is married to Alice More and is the father of Margaret More.

Richard Rich – He begins the play as a poor academic and Thomas More's friend, but quickly rises through the ranks of British society. First Rich acts as an assistant to Norfolk, and then he befriends Cromwell, who helps him attain higher and higher positions. Over and over Rich is presented with the opportunity to follow his conscience and protect his friendships, or sacrifice his morals for wealth. Nearly every time, Rich chooses to advance himself.

Duke of Norfolk – A friend of Thomas More, and a member of the government under the King. In the Second Act he is forced to collaborate with Cromwell to try to convince More to approve the Act of Supremacy, but while Cromwell has malicious intentions, Norfolk is genuinely concerned for More's wellbeing. He is not particularly smart or thoughtful.

Alice More – The wife of Thomas More and mother of Margaret More. Of the members of Thomas More's family, she is the least understanding of his resistance to the King. She would rather her husband compromise his morals and remain alive, than die defending what he believes. She also loves being a member of high society, and so More's retirement and their family's ensuing poverty is especially difficult for her to deal with.

Cardinal Wolsey – Thomas Wolsey is a Cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church and Lord Chancellor, an adviser to the King. When England was a part of the Catholic Church he served as a liaison between the King and the Pope. He likes Thomas More, but finds his refusal to cooperate with the King frustrating. Bolt describes Wolsey as being incredibly smart, incredibly ambitious, and incredibly unhappy. Although he was eventually accused of treason, he died before he could be tried and executed.

Thomas Cromwell – He begins the play as Secretary to Cardinal Wolsey, but primarily acts as an agent of the King. His job is to carry out any and all of the King's requests. Although his campaign against More is initially purely political, Cromwell begins to personally dislike More. Cromwell understands that the King's anger will put his life in danger if he cannot convince More to cooperate. Although Cromwell ends the play as a "victor," he was later executed for treason and heresy.

King Henry VIII – Often referred to only as the King, Henry was the ruler of England from 1509-1547. He had six wives, although the play only refers to two—Catherine of Aragon and Anne Boleyn. He wanted to marry Catherine, although the Bible forbade men from marrying their brother's wives, so he wrote a letter to the Pope asking for an exception. He married Catherine, but expected her to have a son, which she did not. He then decided he wanted to marry Anne, who promised to give him a male heir. The Catholic Church refused to annul his first marriage, so he created a new church, the Church of England, of which he was the highest-ranking member, which would allow him to go through with his divorce. Henry requires absolute devotion from his subjects, and has difficulty handling dissent.

Catherine of Aragon – The first wife of King Henry VIII. She was originally married to Henry's older brother, Arthur, but he died less than a year after their wedding. She was the daughter of the King and Queen of Spain, and so her marriage to Arthur was strategic—it was mean to unite the two countries. After Arthur died, she was married to Henry to preserve the political union. Because the Bible specifically forbids a man from "laying with" his brother's wife, Henry had to write to the Pope to get his marriage approved. Later, after Catherine had been unable to give birth to a son, he tried to divorce her on the grounds that the Pope's approval didn't count, and the marriage had never been legitimate. She never appears onstage.

Anne Boleyn – The second wife of King Henry VIII. She never appears onstage, but sets in motion many of the play's events. She and Henry begin an affair while he is still married to his first wife, Catherine, but he needs to find a way to annul his marriage so that any children he has with Anne with be his legitimate heirs. Anne eventually became queen and gave birth to Elizabeth I, who would rule England for almost fifty years.

MINOR CHARACTERS

William Roper – A young man in love with Thomas More's daughter, Margaret, who he eventually marries. He comes from a good family, although he never seems to have a real job. He has strong opinions that he changes often, which make him seem unserious.

A Woman – She attempts to bribe Thomas More to rule in her favor in a court case. Although she sends him a **silver cup**, he does not rule in her favor. The cup becomes important as Cromwell searches for any of More's past indiscretions with which to blackmail him.

Chapuys – A professional diplomat to Spain. He is sympathetic to Thomas More's struggle because he sees More's resistance to the King's divorce as an endorsement of Catherine, and by extension, Spain. He generally begins meetings pretending they are for pleasure, when really they are for business.

Chapuy's Attendant – An assistant to the Spanish diplomat, Chapuys.

Margaret More – The daughter of Thomas More and Alice More. She is well read and well spoken. She is in love with Will Roper, who she eventually marries.

Thomas Cranmer – The Archbishop of Canterbury. Although his position is technically in the clergy, he is not personally religious. Bolt describes him considering "the Church as a job of administration."

Steward – A servant of Sir Thomas More named Matthew. He is loyal to his master, but shares gossip about with everyone who asks. The same actor who plays the Common Man plays him.

Boatman – A man who rows **boats** up and down the Thames. The same actor as the Common Man plays him.

Innkeeper / Publican – Also referred to as the Publican. He runs the inn where Rich and Cromwell meet to plot Thomas More's downfall at the end of Act One. The same actor who plays the Common Man plays the Innkeeper.

Jailer – The man who oversees Thomas More while he is in prison. The same actor as the Common Man plays him.

Foreman – The head juror in the trial of Thomas More. The same actor as the Common Man plays him.

Headsman – The executioner of Thomas More. The same actor as the Common Man plays him.

TERMS

Act of Supremacy – *A Man For All Seasons* revolves around the first Act of Supremacy, an Act passed by Parliament in 1534. Although the Church of England had already begun to separate from the Roman Catholic Church, this act declared that the King of England (**King Henry VIII**), and not the Pope, was the Supreme Leader of the Church.

Lord Chancellor – Lord Chancellor is a position in the English government. **Cardinal Wolsey** begins the play as Chancellor, but after his death **Thomas More** takes over. The Chancellor was an advisor to the **King**, and was also known as "Keeper of the King's Conscience." This is why, when Thomas More refuses to sign the Act of Supremacy because of his conscience, the King is so upset, because it makes him feel as though he should have a guilty conscience. The Chancellor wears a special decorative chain symbolizing his position. More's eventual removal of the chain demonstrates that he is giving up his position.

Church of England – Before 1534, the Church of England was the English Church, a branch of the Roman Catholic Church. After 1534 and the Act of Supremacy, the Church of England split from the Catholic Church, and appointed the King of England as the Supreme Leader of the Church, as opposed to the Pope.

The Protestant Reformation – Also known simply as the Reformation, the Protestant Reformation is the roughly 130-year time period during which several new branches of Christianity separated from the Catholic Church. The Reformation began in 1517 when Martin Luther, a monk, scholar, and the founder of Lutheranism, published the *95 Theses*, calling out hypocrisy in the Church. Following Luther's attacks on the Church, many others expressed their own dissatisfaction and created their own Christian movements. Although the Church of England was primarily founded to give **Henry VIII** the ability to grant his own request for a divorce, its creation was made possible by the previous decades of religious unrest, which had weakened the control of the Catholic Church.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

FINANCIAL VS. MORAL RICHNESS

Over the course of the play, Thomas More's fortune falls metaphorically (as he falls out of the King's graces) and literally (as he becomes poorer as a result of his lower social standing). In contrast, More's onetime friend Richard Rich becomes wealthier and wealthier from scene to scene—the two men's relative fortunes are mirror images. Although from the outside Rich looks like the more successful of the two men, Robert Bolt demonstrates appearances can be deceiving, by contrasting monetary wealth with rich morals. A polished, luxurious appearance does not represent a pure heart. Instead, More's relative poverty and Rich's relative wealth represent the opposite of their moral standings.

As Thomas More becomes increasingly committed to his moral position, his social standing decreases. More begins the play affluent, with many servants, fine clothing, and the ability to gift fine goods, like the **silver cup** he passes on to Rich. Rich, who has an eye for luxury, even comments that he wants "some decent clothes," specifically a gown like More's. However, More doesn't value material goods. When his fortunes fall he is unperturbed, since his conscience is more important to him than physical objects and social power. Although his house is cold and food is scarce, he refers to what little he has as a "luxury." More's misfortune is more difficult on his family, but he tries to comfort them by saying, even "at the worst, we could be beggars and still keep company, and be merry together!" In his mind, wealth means nothing without his family and personal values, and his family and his values are enough to support him even in the absence of conventional riches.

As Richard Rich sacrifices any morals and personal integrity, he is rewarded with gold, titles, and power. In his very first scene, Rich comments that any man can be bought for the right price. Throughout the play, he proves he can be purchased, as there is nothing he won't do for the proper payment. Each time Rich reenters, his status has grown by degrees. In the first scene he remarks how he doesn't want to be a teacher because "who would know it?" Although he does not say it, Rich likely also does not want to be a teacher because he wants the bribes that come with a more prestigious position. Soon after Rich is working for Norfolk, but trades information about More (who secured him his position with Norfolk) with Cromwell for an even more prestigious position. In his final appearance, during which Rich lies under oath, the stage directions note that he is "now splendidly official, in dress and bearing." During a moment in which he essentially condemns More to death with a lie, Rich, now the Attorney General of Wales, is the richest he's ever been. More even comments upon it, asking his former friend, "For Wales? Why, Richard, it profits a man nothing to give his soul for the whole world…But for Wales!"

Throughout the play characters attempt to bribe each other with money, power, and status. For most, a bribe is powerful enough to override any previous loyalties or moral reservations. More is one of the only characters who cannot be swayed by offers of luxury, and although he is forced to suffer, he never weakens. He is even concerned with appearing to have taken a bribe. He tells his wife, Alice, that he is unwilling even to take charity from the church, because (despite that they are not paying him for his writings) "It would *appear* as payment." Others have less integrity. More's Steward sells secrets about him for money, as does Rich. Still others, notably the Common Man as the Jailer, note the true cost of bribes. He refuses an offer to report anything More says in prison. The

Jailer realizes that taking the bribe would temporarily benefit him, but it would also involve him in a complicated, potentially deadly situation. He remarks "fifty guineas isn't tempting; fifty guineas is alarming…if it's worth that much now it's worth my neck presently."

When it comes to Thomas More and Richard Rich, monetary wealth indicates a lack of morality. Rich, whose name even suggests his eventual economic status, has no morals or conscience. As a result, he happily takes bribes, and gains money and power. Thomas More, in contrast, values a moral richness over a worldly one. He doesn't necessarily despise money, but he would rather feel spiritually rich and true to himself than keep a well furnished, impressive home. Although accepting bribes works out for Rich in the short run, the Jailer points out that monetary gain can be a stepping stone on the path to the gallows, and More worries that although accepting bribes can lead to a comfortable life, they would damn him in the afterlife.

THE MEANING OF SILENCE

In *A Man For All Seasons*, silence is powerful, but only because it is open to interpretation. Thomas More uses silence as a tool to protect himself and his family, believing that silence is truly neutral. By speaking, he knows he will incriminate himself, whereas by keeping silent he hopes to remain innocent in the eyes of the law. Unfortunately, to Cromwell, and—more importantly—to Henry VIII, silence is not neutral; it is both malicious and (eventually) treasonous. There is no single agreed upon meaning of silence, and therefore silence represents something different for each of the characters. Because its meaning is changeable, silence can easily be manipulated by those in power.

Thomas More does not want to go against the King, but his conscience prevents him from signing the Act of Supremacy. In silence, More finds a compromise. He can keep his conscience clean, and not incriminate himself, even as he opposes the King. More means his silence to be a truly neutral response—one not meant to cause offense, but also not meant to signal approval. Before he is imprisoned, More tells Alice "in silence is my safety under the law, but my silence must be absolute, it must extend to you." He believes that, in refusing to take a stance on the King's marriage, he cannot be persecuted for going against it. By his logic, if he never says anything against the King, people will assume he's a fully supportive subject. During his trial, More argues that "Silence is not denial." When Cromwell insists that his silence has "betokened" or indicated some opinion, More responds that his silence should have indicated consent, if anything. He uses the Latin legal phrase "*qui tacet consentire*," or "silence gives consent." Based on this reasoning, by staying silent, More agreed that King Henry has a right to the throne and his title. More acknowledges that he is being punished for his silence, which, ironically, he hoped would protect him.

Though he continues to use silence as a neutral response, he understands how it can be, and has been, misinterpreted.

Cromwell distinguishes between different types of silences. He chooses to interpret More's silence on the validity of the King's marriage to signify disapproval and denial of the King's power. Cromwell is aware that More's silence speaks louder than words. At first, he is sure that More will "line up on the right side," but he is still upset that More will not outright voice his support for the King. Norfolk wonders why, if More is "silent, why not leave him silent?" to which Cromwell responds, "This 'silence' of his is bellowing up and down Europe!" Although More intended his silence to be inconspicuous, it instead is interpreted nationwide as an opinion in itself. Cromwell argues that every man in the court and every man in the country knows More's opinion of the King's title even though More has not spoken a word. Therefore, Cromwell argues, More's silence isn't silent at all.

Also notable are the numerous characters who stay silent, or remain inactive, when they could speak up. More's conviction comes not only because Cromwell found enough people to speak against him, but because no one chose to speak up in his favor. Although More's fate is more or less sealed going into the trial, the nail in the coffin is Richard Rich's testimony. Rich testifies that More claimed "Parliament has not the competence," suggesting that More does not believe in the power of the Parliament. More did not say this, and so by inventing this lie—by choosing not to be honest about More's silence—Rich kills his former friend. Later, the jury is given the opportunity to consider the evidence, but instead they give a guilty verdict without discussion. In this moment, silence indicates a lack of critical thought. This lack of critical thought represents a desire to keep in line with Cromwell and the King. Once again, silence contributes to More's conviction.

More uses silence as a shield. Unfortunately, though, silence becomes as dangerous as a voiced opinion, because in the absence of speech his motives are left open to interpretation. Silence can potentially act as a shield, but few of the characters that have the opportunity to remain silent and save a life do so. Instead, silence becomes a weapon, useful for whoever has the most persuasive interpretation.

CONSCIENCE, INTEGRITY, AND REPUTATION

Consciences are personal moral compasses that help a person tell right from wrong, but in *A Man For All Seasons*, private moral codes become public spectacles. King Henry's guilty conscience over his (potentially illegitimate) first marriage causes him to demand that the public, and Thomas More, comfort him and assuage his guilt. More's conscience, which acts as a religious compass, steers him towards his eventual death, because he cannot go against his

deeply help convictions, even if doing so would calm the King and save More's life. Conscience is linked, then, to personal integrity. More, who trusts his conscience, has great personal integrity, while Cromwell, who is more self-serving and has less personal integrity, distrusts conscience. Cromwell at one point argues that he often hears criminals talk about their consciences, suggesting that Cromwell associates any reference to personal conscience with personal guilt.

Thomas More is guided by his conscience. He is a man of great integrity, and he acts in a manner that he believes is right and just, even in the face of opposition from the King himself. More's conscience is more important to him than his reputation, material wealth, and even his personal safety, because his conscience is linked to his religion, and disobeying his conscience would be, for More, like disobeying God. During his trial, More argues "In matters of conscience, the loyal subject is more bounden to be loyal *to* his conscience than to any other thing." Here, More is arguing that loyalty to his conscience is more important than loyalty to the King.

Further, More believes that public officials can and should be guided by their consciences. He states "I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties…they lead their country by a short route to chaos." He sees a conscience as something solid and moral, a compass strong enough to guide a ruler in governing his country. When More refers to "public duties" he doesn't mean the wellbeing of the people, but instead public reputation. Throughout the play More stands by his assertion that staying true to one's own values is more important than giving in to public pressure.

More also notes that everyone has their own personal conscience, and that what may seem moral or right to one person will not necessarily seem so to another. When Norfolk pressures More to sign the act, he reasons that More should see the other people who have already signed it and "come with us, for fellowship." More counters that "when we stand before God" Norfolk will be "sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine." What Norfolk did doesn't damn him, according to More, as long as his conscience allowed him to sign the act. But More's conscience will not allow him to sign it, and therefore he will not.

Henry's conscience, and the consciences of the people of England, are troubled by Henry's second marriage to Anne Boleyn. Although the King and Parliament have rewritten the laws of the land and the church, lingering guilt over his first marriage and divorce weigh on Henry's mind. Bolt notes in the prologue that Henry's first marriage "added a bad conscience," because it was forbidden by the Bible to marry one's brother's widow. The King's desire to have More acknowledge the nullification of his marriage, then, seems to be related to his need for a clean conscience. Cromwell later states, "The King's a man of conscience and he wants either Sir Thomas More to bless his marriage or Sir Thomas More destroyed." This doesn't seem much like the traditional conscience that helps a person tell right from wrong. Instead, the King's conscience here is looking for validation. He wants More to agree with him that his conscience should be clear, which will help make it so. Cromwell and Henry are interested in their own definition of conscience. In the same scene, Cromwell uses the circular logic that "If the King destroys a man, that's proof to the King that it must have been a bad man, the kind of man a man of conscience *ought* to destroy—and of course a bad man's blessing's not worth having." As opposed to More, who lets his conscience guide him towards what he feels is right, Cromwell and the King use conscience as a convenient way to justify their behavior.

Thomas More's commitment to his conscience inspires all of his actions throughout the play. In an effort to keep his conscience clean, and to adhere to his strict religious beliefs, More tries to stay true to himself in the face of external pressures. Similarly, many of King Henry's actions are motivated by his attempts to clear his guilty conscience—he worries that his marriage to Catherine is illegitimate, and that he is sinning by remaining her husband. The King persecutes More so aggressively because he wants More's blessing, a blessing that will clear his conscience and potentially save his soul. However, the King's conscience is also tied to public opinion—he does not want to be seen as living in sin, and a pure conscience will lead to higher popularity among his subjects. In contrast, More's reputation is secondary to his conscience. He doesn't care what people think of him as long as he knows he is following his heart.

MAN'S LAW VS. GOD'S LAW

Thomas More values law and order. He uses the law to work out personal and moral dilemmas, and uses it as a rational shield against Cromwell and the King. Although More is religious and hopes to be rewarded for his moral behavior in the afterlife, religion and God's laws are sometimes confusing to him. Bolt uses the symbols of **water, tides, and the sea** to represent religion and the afterlife because water is "the largest, most alien, least formulated thing I know." In contrast, man's laws are like **dry land**, easy to navigate, stable, and safe. A religious man and a lawyer, More orders his life by the laws of man because he understands them, but he ultimately allows his public life to fall apart when it becomes clear to him that man's law and God's law have diverged. To More, it is more important to obey his conscience, which is accountable to God's law.

More relies on laws to orient himself in a society that is falling apart. When he can no longer count on his fellow public officials to obey religious laws or even personal moral codes, he turns to laws created by men as a final line of defense. Bolt writes in the preface, "If 'society' is the name we give to human behavior

when it is patterned and orderly, then the Law extending from empirical traffic regulations, through the mutating laws of property, and on to the great taboos like incest and patricide is the very pattern of society. More's trust in the law was his trust in society…" More describes the country as being "planted thick with laws from coast to coast—man's laws, not God's" and wonders "if you cut them down…d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow them?" He sees man-made laws as the last structures keeping English society in place. He believes they are important to abide by, because without them the world would fall into chaos. This is at least partially due to More's lack of faith in his countrymen's religious devotion. He jokes to Norfolk that "the nobility of England, my lord, would have snored through the Sermon on the Mount." But even as More appreciates the way law shapes and clarifies behavior, others believe More is twisting the law to his own ends. Cromwell accuses More of "perverting the law—making smoky what should be a clear light," while More counters that the law is objective, and cannot be used to obscure. He says, "The law is not a 'light' for you or any man to see by; the law is not an instrument of any kind. The law is a causeway upon which, so long as he keeps to it, a citizen may walk safely."

Surprisingly for a religious man, More does not govern his life according to the law of God. The ins and outs of religion are almost too complex for him to consider. He says, "The currents and eddies of right and wrong, which you find such plain sailing, I can't navigate. I'm no voyager. But in the thickets of the law, oh there I'm a forester." Christian law is also what has caused much of the conflict in the first place, since it states that a man cannot marry his brother's widow, which the Pope overturned to allow Henry to marry his first wife Catherine. However, when Henry wants to divorce Catherine, he decides his initial marriage was in fact unlawful. Thomas More's conflicting feelings come as a result of this backtracking—should he heed the Pope's amendment, or Henry's insistence that the Pope is wrong and without the authority to make such a decree? Midway through the play, in response to Roper's accusation that "law's your god," More admits that he finds God too "subtle." More values religion, but in times of duress he prefers man's laws to religion, which is more difficult for him to comprehend.

Although a reader would expect God's law to govern the lives of the characters in *A Man For All Seasons*, the men and women are instead split between closely observing man's law, or else no law at all. More, the lawyer, finds solace in the neat order of manmade laws, which he tries and fails to use to protect himself against Cromwell's attacks. Cromwell, Rich, the King, and others, meanwhile, seem bound to no laws at all. They work in their own self-interest, or in the interest of the King, who operates above all legal systems, privileging instead his own whims and desires and framing them as law.

FRIENDSHIP

In *A Man For All Seasons* friendships, which are traditionally sources of comfort and joy, instead become dangerous. The Duke of Norfolk, for example, is put in danger by his friendship with Thomas More, as it leads the King and others to assume that the Duke shares More's traitorous opinions. Other friendships are harmful because they come with expectations—the King calls More his "friend," and uses this connection to sway More politically. Still other friendships pose a threat because they come with no expectations at all—Richard Rich sees his friendship with More only as a way to personally advance himself. When it's convenient, he happily denies his relationship to More, selling him out again and again. Friendship, then, is a loaded term in the play—characters use it to refer to personal relationships as well as professional ones; it stands in for political alliances, and can be used as a tool of political pressure.

Richard Rich's friendships are almost always lopsided. At first, More believes the two are true friends, but Rich sees the friendship as a stepping stone to higher ranking acquaintances. In their first scene together, Rich wonders if he should say he has the "friendship of Sir Thomas More," or "acquaintance." More easily responds that they have a friendship, but Rich describes himself as being "A friend of Sir Thomas More." By saying "friend of" instead of "friends with" he shows how one sided the friendship truly is. Rich doesn't see himself as having any obligation as a friend, instead expecting More, who is higher ranking, to help him. Later, Cromwell assumes Rich and More are old friends. Rich is reluctant to admit they are friendly, first saying "He isn't really my *friend*..." and then explaining that More just recommended him to the Duke, as though the favor was not directly related to the two being friends. Rich worries that if Cromwell thinks he feels any affection towards More, Cromwell will be less likely to help him climb the social ladder. Rich also tries to become friends with Cromwell, but just as Rich had been hesitant to declare himself friends with More, Cromwell says Rich can call them friends "If you like"—yet he never describes Rich as a friend. For Cromwell, political alliances are more important than friendship.

The King refers to Thomas More as a friend, but the two are so unevenly matched in power that they could never have a true, reciprocal friendship. In fact, the King wants More to feel as though he has an obligation to keep him happy. When political pressure does not immediately change More's behavior, the King hopes the pressures of friendship will cause More to weaken. The King thanks God "I have a friend for my Chancellor," though suspects More is "readier to be friends, I trust than he was to be Chancellor." This is true. More is engaged in a balancing act—he does not want to upset the King, but he wants to stay true to himself. By introducing the concept of friendship, the King makes it extra difficult for More, who is now disappointing the King both politically and personally. In

the same vein, Alice cautions More to "stay friends" with the King—meaning that More should stay in the King's good graces, politically as well as personally.

More and Norfolk are close friends, but their camaraderie proves dangerous for Norfolk when More falls out of the King's good graces. Cromwell even uses Norfolk's friendship with More to threaten Norfolk, warning that he will "tell the King of your loyalty to your friend," which will send a signal that Norfolk is loyal to More and not to Henry. Later, Norfolk confronts More about his behavior. He argues that More is not considering how his behavior affects his friends, and tells More he is "dangerous to know!" Although More values his friendships, he values his integrity even more. When Norfolk confronts him, More responds that they can simply stop being friends, and Norfolk will then be safe. More insists he still feels deeply for Norfolk, but that they should just agree to stop being faithful to each other. Although he is the one at risk, Norfolk has difficulty breaking off an acquaintance so easily. Even later, when Norfolk has solidly aligned himself with the King as opposed to More, Norfolk looks out for his old friend and tries to ensure he's being treated with some dignity.

A Man For All Seasons takes place in what Norfolk describes as "a world of changing friendships." Friendships are often unreliable, and when they are reliable they're dangerous. Bonds of friendship are taken to signal political alliances, or else exploited for gossip. For More especially, friendships are often toxic and even deadly. The most important, stable relationships in his life are the bonds of family, which cannot be as easily manipulated for personal gain.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

WATER, TIDES, AND THE SEA

Bolt uses many forms of water and water-related objects (the ocean, tides, the currents of the river, boats) to represent the often unknowable nature of religion and morality. Unlike human laws, which are represented by **dry land**, good and evil, like the ocean, are impossible to fully understand. Thomas More describes the law as a forest in which he is a competent forester. In contrast, when describing "the currents and eddies of right and wrong," More claims that he cannot navigate and is no voyager.

DRY LAND

Dry land exists in contrast to **water, tides, and the sea**. It represents society and the laws of mankind, as opposed to the laws of religion or personal morality. Dry land is unchanging, predictable, and safe. Thomas More relies upon human law to protect himself, when he feels like religion is too complicated and open to various interpretations.

THE SILVER CUP

This cup stands in as symbol of corruption. Thomas More receives the cup as a bribe before the play begins, but immediately gives it to Richard Rich, who happily accepts it. More does his best to follow his conscience and not let outside forces influence him. In contrast, Rich is happy to accept bribes and compromise himself if it means his social status will continue to improve.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *A Man for All Seasons* published in 1990.

Act 1 Quotes

It is perverse! To start a play made up of Kings and Cardinals in speaking costumes and intellectuals with embroidered mouths, with me.
If a King or a Cardinal had done the prologue he'd have the right materials. And if an intellectual would have shown enough majestic meanings, colored propositions, and closely woven liturgical stuff to dress the House of Lords! But this!
Is this a costume? Does this say anything? It barely covers one man's nakedness? A bit of black material to reduce Old Adam to Common Man.
Oh, if they'd let me come on naked, I could have shown you something of my own…The Sixteenth Century is the Century of the Common Man. Like all other centuries. And that's my proposition.

Related Characters: The Common Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

This is the very first speech in the play. The Common Man delivers it, which he notes is ironic, as he is an ordinary man in a supporting role, while the major characters are all "Kings and Cardinals." Although he jokes that a higher class individual would give a better speech, the Common Man does a perfect job of setting up one of the plays interests—the differences between common men and noble men, and the place each occupies in history.

Historical plays are generally written about nobility, or else about famous historical figures. *A Man For All Seasons*, for example, can be described as a play about nobility. However, the majority of people who have lived have not been noble, and the majority of people reading and seeing the play will also not be in the upper 1% of society. By having the Common Man introduce a play about the elite, the readers and watchers are reminded of the role the average person plays in history. They might not be included in history books or plays, but they are crucial supporting characters, and they will endure, because there have always been ordinary people and there always will be.

The Common Man also suggests that, while he stands in for all ordinary people in the orbits of the elite protagonists of the play, much of his identity is constructed. The same actor plays all of the "common" characters, and so makes a point to call out the costume he wears as just that, a costume, emphasizing that we are reading or watching a play, and not reality.

Rich: But every man has his price!
More: No-no-no—
...
Rich: But yes! In money too.
More: No no no.
Rich: Or pleasure. Titles, women, bricks-and-mortar, there's always something.
More: Childish.
Rich: Well, in suffering, certainly.
More: Buy a man with suffering?
Rich: Impose suffering, and offer him—escape.
More: Oh. For a moment I thought you were being profound.

Related Characters: Richard Rich, Sir Thomas More (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

This scene is our first introduction to Thomas More and Richard Rich. They enter the stage in the middle of an argument about whether or not loyalty and conscience can be purchased. From the beginning, Thomas More shows himself to be steadfastly committed to his moral values. He thinks that there is no price for which his actions or loyalty could be purchased, and this turns out to be correct—throughout the play many try, and all fail, to buy him off.

Rich, in contrast, is easily bought. Although at this point he is talking hypothetically, later, when he is offered wealth and power in exchange for information or loyalty, he barely hesitates to sell his own values or the lives of his former friends for his own personal gain.

Wolsey: It's a devious situation.
More: There must be something simple in the middle of it.
(*Again this is not a moral dictum; it is said rather wistfully, as of something he is beginning to doubt*)
Wolsey: I believe you believe that. You're a constant regret to me, Thomas. If you could just see the facts flat on, without that horrible moral squint; with just a little common sense, you could have been a statesman.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Cardinal Wolsey (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Cardinal Wolsey has called Thomas More to his office to discuss a letter Wolsey is writing to Rome. Wolsey hopes to get the Pope's approval for the King's divorce from Catherine. Wolsey has purposefully appointed an incompetent ambassador to Rome so that he can sidestep him and write directly to Cardinals and other high-ranking figures in the Church, even though it is not technically his job.

More considers both Wolsey's behavior and the King's request for a divorce to be devious. A devout Catholic, he believes divorce to be wrong, and the Pope to be right. Unfortunately he is also a hardworking, devoted statesman, and knows that following his conscience will go directly against the King, to whom he is also loyal. Wolsey sees this conflict in More: he desires to serve the King, but also serve his heart. Wolsey, unlike More, believes a truly successful statesman must be loyal only to the state and the King, and that conscience only complicates matters. In contrast, More finds the matters of his conscience to be extremely clear, and wishes political strategy were as simple as following his moral compass.

Well...I believe, when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties...they lead their country by a short route to chaos.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More (speaker), Cardinal Wolsey

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from a conversation between Thomas More and Cardinal Wolsey. The King wants to divorce his wife, and while Wolsey is happy to make this wish a reality, More has reservations. Wolsey is frustrated that, in his mind, More is privileging his "private conscience" over the fate of the country, as Wolsey thinks that privately held beliefs have no place in politics.

In contrast, More argues that a country *should* be built upon the private consciences of statesmen. These moral compasses, he thinks, will guarantee a lawful, ethical, organized nation, whose citizens are safe physically and spiritually. And as the play progresses, More is proved right. Characters like Cromwell and Richard Rich begin to advance policy and enact punishment without first consulting their consciences. This leads to false imprisonments, lying under oath, and unlawful executions—essentially, trying to rule by forsaking their private consciences brings the country closer and closer to ruin.

Cromwell: Oh no—they'll talk about the divorce. The King will ask him for an answer.
Chapuys: He has given his answer!
Cromwell: The King will ask him for another.
Chapuys: Sir Thomas is a good son of the Church!
Cromwell: Sir Thomas is a man.

Related Characters: Chapuys, Thomas Cromwell (speaker), King Henry VIII, Sir Thomas More

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 39

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Cromwell and Chapuys have engaged in a short conversation in the stairwell of Hampton Court. Cromwell has just told Chapuys that the King has planned to personally visit Thomas More's house to ask him to approve his divorce. Chapuys is shocked, because it is common knowledge that More has refused to approve the divorce multiple times, and has asked not to be approached about it again. This is an early example of Thomas More's impartial silence backfiring—although he has hoped his silence will protect him from giving the King an answer, the King nonetheless continues to try and wear him down.

Cromwell's assertion that "Sir Thomas is a man" demonstrates that Cromwell believes anyone can be bought for the proper price—whether that's the promise of money if a person complies, or the promise of punishment if they do not. Although Cromwell is correct that most men can and will give up their convictions under pressure, Thomas More is not one of those men.

The great thing's not to get out of your depth...What I can tell them's common knowledge! But now they've given money for it and everyone wants value for his money. They'll make a secret of it now to prove they've not been bilked...They'll make it a secret by making it dangerous...Mm...Oh, when I can't touch the bottom I'll go deaf, blind, and dumb. (*He holds out coins*) And that's more than I *earn* in a fortnight!

Related Characters: Steward (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

In the scene before this speech, both Chapuys and Cromwell paid Thomas More's Steward for gossip about his master. The Steward gave both men information, but in each case the gossip was common knowledge, and exactly what the two men wanted to hear. Cromwell was happy to learn that he had intimidated More, and Chapuys was relieved that More remained committed to his religion.

The Steward, meanwhile, is happy to supplement his income with these bribes, but is cautious about accepting too much money. He realizes that there is a trade-off between retaining some moral integrity and selling information about More, and wants to remain in the sweet spot where he is not too morally compromised, but still receiving some dirty

money. His comment about "touching the bottom" likely refers to the symbol of water as complicated morality. He does not want to get so deeply involved that he loses all sense of his own conscience, and if he does ever get to that point he will stop absorbing and passing along incriminating information.

Norfolk:...d'you propose to meet the King disguised as a parish clerk? A parish clerk, my Lord Chancellor! You dishonor the King and his office!
More: The service of God is not a dishonor to any office. Believe me, my friend, I do not belittle the honor his Majesty is doing me.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Duke of Norfolk (speaker), King Henry VIII

Related Themes:

Page Number: 46

Explanation and Analysis

More is almost late to a meeting with the King because he has been praying. Norfolk doesn't understand how prayer could be more important than a meeting with the King, and generally believes More should stop splitting his loyalty between religion and the King himself. More disagrees with Norfolk. As he argues earlier in the play, "when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties...they lead their country by a short route to chaos." For More, loyalty to one's conscience, loyalty to God, and loyalty to the King can and should happily coexist. The King, who More assumes is also a religious man, shouldn't be unhappy that his subjects are religious too.

More: ...I'm *not* a God. The currents and eddies of right and wrong, which you find such plain sailing, I can't navigate. I'm no voyager. But in the thickets of the law, oh, there I'm a forester. I doubt if there's a man alive who could follow me there, thank God...
Alice; While you talk, he's gone!
More: And go he should, if he was the Devil himself, until he broke the law!
Roper: So now you'd give the Devil benefit of law!
More: Yes. What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?
Roper: I'd cut down every law in England to do that!
More: Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you—where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast—man's laws, not God's—and if you cut them down—and you're just the man to do it—d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then? Yes, I'd like to give the Devil benefit of law, for my own safety's sake.

Related Characters: Alice More, William Roper, Sir Thomas More (speaker), Thomas Cromwell, Richard Rich

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 65

Explanation and Analysis

Richard Rich has come to visit Thomas More in his home. More and his family know that Rich has been working with Thomas Cromwell to undermine More, and so are suspicious of him. Roper and Alice want to arrest Rich, but More argues that there isn't any law preventing him from being a bad, corrupt person.

In this quote, More explains his personal morality. He sees man's laws as land, which he understands, and God's laws as the sea, which he does not. He can better navigate the laws of man than he can the laws of God, which is why he's been so successful as a lawyer. Roper argues that he would happily break the law if it meant punishing someone he believed really deserved it, but More explains that if the laws are broken once, even for a good cause, they lose their integrity forever. Without the legal system, More worries no one would be able to orient themselves morally and ethically, and the whole population would be at risk from others who chose to abuse the law for their own personal gain.

More's theory regarding the importance of laws was proven true historically. Thomas Cromwell invented and broke laws

in order to convict More of treason, but was later convicted of treason himself, a conviction made easier in the wake of the laws Cromwell had shown to be easily manipulated.

I'm a prominent figure. Someone somewhere's collecting information about Cromwell. Now no more shirking; we must make a start. There's a stuffed swan if you please. Will, I'd trust *you* with my life. But not your principles. You see, we speak of being anchored to our principles. But if the weather turns nasty you up with an anchor and let it down where there's less wind, and the fishing's better. And "Look," we say, "look, I'm anchored! To my principles!"

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More (speaker), Thomas Cromwell, William Roper

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In the middle of a debate with Will Roper regarding More's conscience and his commitment to staying silent, the conversation turns to Will's unreliable moral compass. More has continually critiqued Will for his constantly shifting opinions. When the play opened Will was a devoted Protestant, but midway through the first act he admits he has become more moderate, and by the second act he will be a committed Catholic again.

Although Roper is admittedly always committed to his principals, More complains that his principles are constantly changing, and it's easy to be passionate about a cause if you know you won't have to commit yourself to said cause for very long. Moments earlier, More has referred to Roper's principles as "seagoing," or changeable. Although Roper clearly tries to be moral, he is essentially out at sea, his morals too weak to guide him.

Roper: You are denying the Act of Supremacy!
More: No, I'm not; the Act states that the King—
Roper: —is Supreme Head of the Church in England.
More: Supreme Head of the Church in England—"So far as the law of God allows." How far the law of God does allow it remains a matter of opinion, since the Act doesn't state it.
Roper: A legal quibble.
More: Call it what you like, it's there, thank God.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, William Roper (speaker), King Henry VIII

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

More has been called upon to take an oath supporting the Act of Supremacy, an Act that will separate England from the Catholic Church. Although Roper, now a devout Catholic, doesn't support this Act, it worries him that More, a high-ranking government official, is willing to publically deny it. What Roper understands that More does not is, regardless of More's motivations, his refusal to approve of the Act will not be read as neutral. Instead, it will be interpreted as a rejection of the new Church and a rejection of the King.

More tries to defend what is essentially a moral objection by using the legal language of the Act to limit his interpretation of its power. Instead of giving the King supreme power over the Church of England, it gives him power only "as far as the law of God allows"—a system of checks and balances that More hopes will prevent the King from overreaching his God-given power.

The Apostolic Success of the Pope is—....Why it's a theory, yes; you can't see it; can't touch it; it's a theory. But what matters to me is not whether it's true or not but that I believe it to be true, or rather, not that I *believe* it, but that *I* believe it...I trust I make myself obscure?

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More (speaker), Duke of Norfolk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 91

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas More and Norfolk have gotten into an argument regarding More's reluctance to sign the King's Act of Supremacy. After the law passed through Parliament, More resigned from his position as Chancellor, as he would rather be unemployed than work in a government he feels is behaving immorally. Norfolk is concerned for his friend, and tries to convince him to change his mind. Norfolk is less religious and less committed to his conscience than More, and argues that More is throwing his life away for what is

essentially a theory of religion—one that sees the Pope as the head of the Church.

More acknowledges that the differences between the branches of Christianity are technically theoretical, but nonetheless believes strongly enough in his theory that he will sacrifice everything in his life for it. Whether or not he is right or his theory is true, More is committed to his beliefs, and sees his faith and commitment to that faith as an integral part of who he is as a person.

More: Son Roper, you're pleased with me I hope?
Roper: Sir, You've made a noble gesture.
More: A gesture? It wasn't possible to continue, Will. I was not *able* to continue. I would have if I could! I make no gesture! My God, I hope it's understood I make no gesture! Alice, you don't think I would do this to you for a gesture! That's a gesture (*Thumbs his nose*) *That's* a gesture! (*Jerks up two fingers*) I'm no street acrobat to make gestures! I'm practical!
Roper: You belittle yourself, sir, this was not practical; this was moral!
More: Oh, now I understand you, Will. Morality's *not* practical. Morality's a gesture. A complicated gesture learned from books—that's what you say, Alice isn't it?...And you, Meg?
Margaret: It *is*, for most of us, Father.

Related Characters: William Roper, Sir Thomas More (speaker), Alice More

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

After the Act of Supremacy passes through Parliament, More chooses to resign from his position as Chancellor. He does not want to be forced to sign a document that is in conflict with his private conscience. This decision requires a great deal of deliberation, and even though More believes he has done the right thing, he understands there may be political or legal retributions, and knows his family will suffer financially at the very least.

Despite all of this, More did what he believed to be right in order to stay true to his moral values. However, because More makes no official statement, his motives are left up to interpretation. Unfortunately, More's immediate family, the people who should know him best, still see his resignation as a symbolic gesture. Likely more people will see it that way too, including Chapuys, who will assume it means that More supports Spain, and the King, who will assume More doesn't support him. In fact, More's resignation has nothing to do with his political alliance—he still remains loyal to Henry—it is simply a way for him to protect himself and his conscience while presenting a neutral political stance.

Alice, it's a point of law! Accept it from me, Alice, that in silence is my safety under the law, but my silence must be absolute, it must extend to you.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More (speaker), King Henry VIII, Alice More

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Although no one understands why Thomas More is remaining silent on major state-related issues, he repeatedly attempts to justify his position. In this conversation with Alice, soon after he has silently resigned from his position as Chancellor, he explains to her why he protests the way he does, and why he has stood against the King again and again.

More believes that if he must go against the King, the best way to protect himself is to remain silent and inoffensive. He believes "silence is my safety," and expects that the law will protect him. He (mistakenly) believes that by remaining silent he will provide the King and his henchmen no incriminating evidence that can then be held against him. In reality, More's silence is interpreted as treasonous, and his motivations are assumed to be disloyal. The law, which he hoped would protect him, is instead manipulated so that his silence can be held against him.

Norfolk: But he makes no noise, Mr. Secretary; he's silent, why not leave him silent?
Cromwell: Not being a man of letters, Your Grace, you perhaps don't realize the extent of his reputation. This "silence" of his is bellowing up and down Europe!

Related Characters: Thomas Cromwell, Duke of Norfolk (speaker), Sir Thomas More

Related Themes:

Page Number: 98

Explanation and Analysis

The Duke of Norfolk has been enlisted by Cromwell to convince More to sign the Act of Supremacy. More's silence is a threat to the King and his power, as it is embarrassing for a high-ranking formal official to publically denounce his ruler. Although More intended his silence to be neutral and hoped to prevent anyone from making any assumptions about his motivations, his silence has been interpreted as a rejection of the King and his new role in the Church of England. More believes his silence will protect him, but because it has been misinterpreted it instead incriminates him.

Norfolk, who wants to think the best of his friend, hopes that Cromwell will leave More alone. Unfortunately, Crowell understands that More's silence is actually incredibly loud. His actions speak louder than words—and so his silence and resignation are interpreted as a signal that he does not support King Henry.

Chapuys: Goodness can be a difficulty.
Attendant: Excellency?
Chapuys: In the long run, of course, *all* good men everywhere are allies of Spain. No good man cannot be, and no man who is not can be good…
Attendant: Then he really is for us.
Chapuys: He is opposed to Cromwell, is he not?
Attendant: Oh, yes, Excellency.
Chapuys: If he's opposed to Cromwell, he's for us. There's no third alternative?
Attendant: I suppose not, Excellency.

Related Characters: Chapuy's Attendant, Chapuys (speaker), Thomas Cromwell, Sir Thomas More

Related Themes:

Page Number: 106

Explanation and Analysis

As they wait to speak to Thomas More, Chapuys and his Assistant discuss whether or not Thomas More is a good man. Throughout the play Chapuys has assumed that More's silence has signaled that More disapproves of the King's behavior. Chapuys has further assumed that if More is against the King, then he must be in favor of the rights of the King's ex-wife Catherine. Following this logic, if More supports Catherine, then he must also support her home country of Spain. Chapuys makes this mistaken logical leap because, as he says here, he believes all men who support Spain to be good, that all good men must also support Spain. Because Chapuys believes More must be against the King and for Spain, his logic implies More must be a good man. Chapuys doesn't consider a third, more nuanced option—that More is neither bad, and for England, nor good, and for Spain, but instead neither good nor bad: merely a moral person trying to deal with his own complicated conscience.

Chapuys: I have a personal letter for you.
More: From who?
Chapuys: My master, the King of Spain. You will take it?
More: I will not lay a finger on it.
Chapuys: It is in no way an affair of State. It expresses my master's admiration for the stand which you and Bishop Fisher of Rochester have taken over the so-called divorce of Queen Catherine.
More: I have taken no stand!
Chapuys: But your views, Sir Thomas, are well known—
More: My views are much guessed at…
…
Chapuys: But, Sir Thomas, your views—
More: Are well known you say. It seems my loyalty to my King is less so!

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Chapuys (speaker), Catherine of Aragon, King Henry VIII

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107

Explanation and Analysis

Chapuys and his Assistant have come to visit Thomas More and thank him for what they see as his allegiance to Spain. Chapuys has taken More's lack of approval for the King's new religious initiatives to signal More's disapproval of the King. He has then reasoned that if More disapproves of King Henry, then More must support Catherine, and if he supports Catherine he must support Spain. Because Chapuys has wrongfully assumed More is his ally, he wants to give him a thank-you gift. However, More is actually still loyal to Henry, and merely resigned from his position because he opposed a specific Act Henry wanted to pass.

More is frustrated by Chapuys' insistence that he has "taken a stand." This moment is similar to earlier in Act 2, when

Roper congratulated More on the "gesture" of resigning as Chancellor. More does not mean his actions to be interpreted as a gesture, or a symbol, or a stand taken. Instead, he hoped that by remaining silent and resigning from his post people would stop asking and assuming his position.

As More says, his silence has allowed many people to guess what his opinions regarding the King are. However, More's silence has also allowed people to assume they understand his opinions and motivations, even when they have no real proof of his political alignment.

Alice: "Luxury"!.
More: Well, it's a luxury while it lasts…There's not much sport in it for you, is there? Alice, the money from the bishops. I can't take it. I wish—oh, heaven, how I wish I could! But I can't.
Alice: I didn't think you would.
More: Alice, there *are* reasons.
Alice: We couldn't come so deep into your confidence as to *know* these reasons why a man in poverty can't take four thousand pounds?
More: Alice, this isn't poverty.
Alice: D'you know what we shall eat tonight?
More: Yes, parsnips.
Alice: Yes, parsnips and stinking mutton! For a knight's lady!
More: But at the worst, we could be beggars, and still keep company, and be merry together!

Related Characters: Alice More, Sir Thomas More (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 110

Explanation and Analysis

Chapuys and his assistant came to visit More, and as they leave More described some kindling for the fire as a luxury. Alice overhears him and becomes outraged, as she does not believe their economic situation is luxurious at all. More does not see himself as living in poverty because he remains free, feels that his conscience is clear, and is still able to live with his beloved family. Although his position has fallen since the first Act, he feels the loss of material wealth is a fair trade for his clean conscience. However Alice, who seemingly has no moral stance to protect regarding the matter, is frustrated by her new social situation, and wishes More would accept some charity. More refuses this charity because he worries it could be interpreted as a bribe, and will not, under any circumstance, allow it to appear that his behavior is motivated by anything other than his own conscience.

Cromwell: The King's a man of conscience and he wants either Sir Thomas More to bless his marriage or Sir Thomas More destroyed.
Rich: They seem odd alternatives, Secretary.
Cromwell: Do they? That's because you're not a man of conscience. If the King destroys a man, that's proof to the King that it must have been a bad man, the kind of man a man of conscience *ought* to destroy—and of course a bad man's blessing's not worth having. So either will do.

Related Characters: Richard Rich, Thomas Cromwell (speaker), Sir Thomas More, King Henry VIII

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Cromwell and Richard Rich meet in Cromwell's office to discuss Thomas More. Although More has removed himself from politics, his silence is well known, and many have interpreted his silence as being a direct attack on the King himself. More's former role as Chancellor meant that he served as the King's conscience, and for this job More used his own conscience to guide him in matters of state. Because he felt morally conflicted by the King's divorce, More resigned instead of dirtying his conscience. Unfortunately, since the King had seen More's conscience as his own, More's moral objections now weigh heavily on the King himself. Because More felt morally compromised, the King, too, feels guilty about his behavior. However, the King does not like feeling conflicted, and so wants More to vocally support him, or else disappear.

Cromwell uses the same logic as Chapuys to justify why More must be dealt with. While Chapuys argues that any man who is against Henry must be for Spain, and any man who is for Spain must be good, Cromwell reasons that any man the King is against must be bad, and so the decision of the King to persecute someone means that person deserves to be persecuted.

Norfolk: ...The one fixed point in a world of changing friendships is that Thomas More will not give in!
More: To me it has to be, for that's myself! Affection goes as deep in me as you think, but only God is love right through, Howard; and *that's* my *self*.
Norfolk: And who are you? Goddammit, man, it's disproportionate! *We're* supposed to be the arrogant ones, the proud, splenetic ones—and we've all given in! Why must you stand out? You'll break my heart.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Duke of Norfolk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

Norfolk meets More on the banks of the river. The King has recently told Thomas Cromwell, who has passed the information on to Norfolk, that his loyalty to Thomas More makes it seem as though his loyalty to the King is split. Although some, like More, have argued it is possible to be both loyal to the King and to another person or set of moral values, the King wants devotion to him to be absolute.

Norfolk cannot separate his concern for More from their friendship, and doesn't think he can simply turn off his feelings for More like a light switch, even though they put him in danger. Norfolk's loyalty is split in two, and he is conflicted about how to proceed. More, on the other hand, believes he can cut off his friendship with Norfolk while continuing to feel affection for him. More's loyalty is split three ways—between Norfolk, the King, and his own conscience—and he knows that he must choose his conscience, which makes it easier for him to cut ties with Norfolk.

More: The nobility of England, my lord, would have snored through the Sermon on the Mount. But you'll labor like Thomas Aquinas over a rat-dog's pedigree. Now what's the name of those distorted creatures you're all breeding at the moment?
...
Norfolk: Water spaniels!
More: And what would you do with a water spaniel that was afraid of water? You'd hang it! Well, as a spaniel is to water, so is a man to his own self. I will not give in because I oppose it—*I* do—not my pride, not my spleen, nor any other of my appetites but *I* do—*I!* Is there no single sinew in the midst of this that serves no appetite of Norfolk's but is just Norfolk? There is! Give *that* some exercise, my lord!

Related Characters: Duke of Norfolk, Sir Thomas More (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

The King has told Norfolk that he worries Norfolk's friendship with Thomas More has compromised Norfolk's loyalty. Thomas More understands that his friendship is dangerous, and so picks a fight with Norfolk to try and break them apart.

More starts with a general criticism of the noble class in England. Because they care about their status, heritage, and inheritance, More argues that they care more about earthly luxury than about religion and morality. More argues that the nobility have traded their morality for their elite social positions, and they have forgotten what makes them human. By living their lives in service of the King and of luxury they have forgotten to live their lives according to their consciences. More drives this point home with a metaphor about how if a dog deviates from its breed, it is drowned. His point is, presumably, that people should be held to similar standards, and should be true to themselves—that is, their selves at their deepest, most human core—because that is what their role in God's universe requires.

Norfolk: Oh, confound all this…I'm not a scholar, as Master Cromwell never tires of pointing out, and frankly I don't know whether the marriage was lawful or not. But damn it, Thomas, look at those names…You know those men! Can't you do what I did, and come with us, for fellowship?
More: And when we stand before God, and you are sent to Paradise for doing according to your conscience, and I am damned for not doing according to mine, will you come with me, for fellowship?

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Duke of Norfolk (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 132

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Cromwell, Cranmer, and Norfolk come to visit Thomas More in his prison cell. A new Act of Succession has gone through Parliament, and the King wants More to sign it. More has continued to refuse to approve the Act, but also has remained silent instead of publicly denouncing it. Cromwell has tried various strategies to get More to cave in and publically approve the Act. He has bribed him and imprisoned him, but nothing has worked.

In this exchange Norfolk tries another strategy to convince More to sign the Act. Norfolk reminds More of their friendship, and argues that More should sign the Act "in fellowship." Norfolk believes that since he signed the act with a clear conscience, More should be able to do the same thing. More, however, is not convinced. He tries to explain to Norfolk that although it is possible for other men to sign the Act and feel morally uncompromised, he personally would be unable to do the same. He argues that he and Norfolk could behave in the exact same way, but because More would believe he was acting immorally, he would be punished for his actions in the afterlife while Norfolk would not be.

Then it's a poor argument to call it "neat," Meg. When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. And if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loathe to think your father one of them.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More (speaker), Margaret More

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 140

Explanation and Analysis

Alice, Margaret, and Will Roper come to visit Thomas More in jail. Thomas Cromwell, who hopes they will convince More to sign the Act of Succession, probably sent them. Once again, More tries to justify his silence to his family. He sees taking an oath in approval of the Act to be a major moral choice. By taking an oath, he says, a man is fully committing himself and his conscience to a cause. However, if a man commits himself to something he does not believe in, then he is sacrificing his personal integrity and essentially his soul. More is uncomfortable taking an oath because he does not believe in it, and by going ahead with it he would sacrifice his conscience, which is the part of himself he values the most.

Cromwell: …But, gentlemen of the jury, there are many kinds of silence. Consider first the silence of a man when he is dead. Let us say we go into the room where he is lying; and let us say it is in the dead of night—there's nothing like darkness for sharpening the ear; and we listen. What do we hear? Silence. What does it betoken, this silence? Nothing. This is silence, pure and simple. But consider another case. Suppose I were to draw a dagger from my sleeve and make to kill the prisoner with it, and suppose their lordships there, instead of crying out for me to stop or crying out for help to stop me, maintained their silence. That *would* be betoken! It would betoken a willingness that I should do it, and under the law they would be guilty with me. So silence can, according to circumstances, speak. Consider, now, the circumstances of the prisoner's silence. The oath was put to good and faithful subjects up and down the country and they had declared His Grace's title to be just and good. And when it came to the prisoner he refused. He calls this silence. Yet is there a man in this court, is there a man in this country, who does not *know* Sir Thomas More's opinion of the King's title? Of course not! But how can that be? Because this silence betokened—nay, this silence *was* not silence at all but most eloquent denial.
More: Not so, Master Secretary, the maxim is "qui tacet consentire." The maxim of the law is "Silence gives consent." If, therefore, you wish to construe what my silence "Betokened," you must construe that I consented, not that I denied.

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell

(speaker), King Henry VIII

Related Themes:

Page Number: 151

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas Cromwell has finally taken Thomas More to court. More has been accused of Treason and of conspiring against the King. Although More has not said or done anything treasonous, Cromwell argues that his silence is in itself a declaration of opposition against Henry. Cromwell then tells a hypothetical story, in which certain men's silence allows another man to be murdered. Cromwell argues that in this case the silence was more than silence—it would have allowed a murder to occur—and therefore the silent men would be partially guilty.

Cromwell argues that More's silence is "betoken," meaning Cromwell believes More's silence can be interpreted as saying something political. Cromwell and the King have interpreted More's silence as an attack on the King's title and legitimacy. According to Cromwell's logic, because More would not sign Acts that gave the King power, More must not believe that the King should have that power.

More argues that silence is not denial. He thinks that because he never expressed his thoughts or motivations, it should be inadmissible evidence. He had hoped his silence would be a legal loophole, which prevented anyone from labeling him treasonous. Ironically, More, who has always counted upon the law to protect him, is unable to defend himself when Cromwell turns the law against him.

Act 2 Quotes

❝ Cromwell: I put it to the Court that the prisoner is perverting the law—making smoky what should be a clear light to discover to the Court his own wrongdoing!
More: The law is not a "light" for you or any man to see by; the law is not an instrument of any king. The law is a causeway upon which, so long as he keeps to it, a citizen may walk safely. In matters of conscience—
Cromwell: The conscience, the conscience…
More: The word is not familiar to you?
Cromwell: By God, too familiar! I am very used to hear it in the mouths of criminals!

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 152

Explanation and Analysis

Thomas More is being tried for treason. In court More attempts to defend himself, but Cromwell fights back, and argues that More is "perverting the law" and complicating it to save himself. This is ironic, because Cromwell is the one manipulating the law to implicate More, which More sees happening.

More, who was a lawyer and dedicated his life to man-made laws, believes the law should guide people over moral dilemmas, in the same way a boardwalk or a bridge helps people navigate over bodies of water. Cromwell wants the law to lay out who is guilty and who is innocent in black and white, but More understands that the law works in more complicated ways.

More tries to appeal to Cromwell and cites his conscience as a guiding moral compass that he uses together with the law. Cromwell is unconvinced. He only hears people invoking their consciences when they are guilty, and so doesn't believe (or at least tries to convince the jury) that a conscience is strong enough to keep More behaving ethically and lawfully.

❝ Norfolk: Have you anything to say?
More: Yes. To avoid this I have taken every path my winding wits would find. Now that the court has determined to condemn me, God knoweth how, I will discharge my mind…concerning my indictment and the King's title. The indictment is grounded in an Act of Parliament which is directly repugnant to the Law of God. The King in Parliament cannot bestow the Supremacy of the Church because it is a Spiritual Supremacy! And more to this the immunity of the Church is promised both in Magna Carta and the King's own Coronation Oath!
Cromwell: Now we plainly see that you *are* malicious!
More: Not so, Master Secretary! I am the King's true subject, and pray for him and all the realm…I do none harm, I say none harm, I think none harm. And if this be not enough to keep a man alive, in good faith I long not to live…I have, since I came into prison, been several times in such a case that I thought to die within the hour, and I thank Our Lord I was never sorry for it, but rather sorry when it passed. And therefore, my poor body is at the King's pleasure. Would God my death might do him some good…Nevertheless, it is not for the Supremacy that you have sought my blood—but because I would not bend to the marriage!

Related Characters: Sir Thomas More, Thomas Cromwell, Duke of Norfolk (speaker), King Henry VIII

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

After More has been found guilty by the court, he is finally given the opportunity to defend himself. He breaks his silence, and explains that he refused to sign the Act of Supremacy because he believed the Act went against God's law. Because More believes God bestows religious supremacy, he morally could not sign an Act that said the King could bestow religious supremacy upon himself. More was not a disloyal subject, and still believed in the power of the King—he just didn't think the King could rightly call himself the head of the Church.

Once he has heard More's justification for his behavior, Cromwell interprets it as malicious, but More explains it isn't so. He says that the opposite is true. More cared about the King and opposed the Act because he wanted the King to make different decisions that would protect his conscience and his soul. More explains he would, and soon will, happily die at the "King's pleasure." The only thing More will not do, however, is compromise his own personal morality.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1

The curtain rises to reveal the Common Man sitting on a dark stage with a basket full of props. He admits that he doesn't know the exact right words to say to introduce the play, and suggests that a King or a Cardinal would give a more eloquent introduction.

The Common Man provides a prologue, or a short speech introducing some of the themes and ideas dealt with in the play. Although he suggests that someone with higher social status would give a better speech, he follows in the tradition of many of Shakespeare's plays, in which common men (or women) introduced stories about members of the noble class.

The Common Man calls himself "Old Adam," and assembles the Steward's costume from his basket. As he speaks, the lights come up on the stage, revealing a table. The Common Man, now the Steward, begins to unpack his basket. He takes out a jug of alcohol and several goblets, including Thomas More's **silver cup**, and sets the newly revealed dinner table. He asserts, "The Sixteenth Century is the Century of the Common Man. Like all other centuries."

Although the Common Man is, as his name suggests, common and unexceptional, this provides him (in some ways) safety and longevity. Unlike the upper-class protagonists, he is at least safe from court intrigue and political infighting. And unlike the protagonists, who are in powerful but fragile positions, he knows that commoners like himself will endure for centuries, whether they are remembered by history or not—starting with "Adam," the first man according to the Bible.

The newly set table suggests that we are now in Thomas More's house in London. More and Richard Rich enter, clearly in the middle of an argument. Rich asserts that "Every man has his price!" but More gently disagrees. Rich argues that even if a man can't be bought with material things, he can be manipulated. He also suggests that if a man is made to suffer, he can be bought off by promising to take the suffering away.

From the very beginning, Rich and More stand in stark contrast to one another. More, who is wealthy, would happily give away his wealth to maintain his strict moral code and personal integrity. Meanwhile Rich, who is poor, would happily trade his conscience and his morals for a prestigious position and the money that comes with it.

More notices that Rich's argument sounds like the one Machiavelli, a contemporary diplomat and writer, makes in his book *The Prince*. More asks Rich who told him to read Machiavelli—it seems out of character for him. Rich admits that Thomas Cromwell recommended it. Rich says that Cromwell has promised to help him, presumably with his social status. More is surprised, as he wasn't aware the two even knew each other, but Rich points out that More doesn't know everything about him.

Niccolò Machiavelli was a 16th century writer and philosopher most famous for his work The Prince, which argues that immoral behavior can and should have a place in politics if it gets one the desired result. Rich, who cares more about himself than advancing any specific political agenda, and Cromwell, who will advance his political agenda regardless of human cost, are poster children for Machiavellianism. In this moment Rich also reveals for the first time that he isn't as loyal a friend as More had assumed.

Rich complains that although he's been in London for seven months, and made many acquaintances, he still isn't in a position of power. Rich wonders aloud if More counts him as an acquaintance or a friend. More tells him that they are engaged in a friendship. Rich however, doesn't refer to their relationship as a mutual friendship, instead calling himself "A friend of Sir Thomas."

Rich is more concerned with what can be extracted from a friendship than with the friendship itself. Instead of referring to his reciprocal relationship with More as a "friendship," he talks about being "a friend of" More. In this way, Rich makes it clear that he is only concerned with what More can offer him as a high-powered ally, and not what he can do for More in return—and certainly not whether or not they actually like each other.

More reminds Rich that he could have a teaching position if he wanted, but Rich isn't interested. More tries to explain that he struggles to navigate coercion and corruption, as his influence comes with built-in moral dilemmas. He shows Rich a **silver cup** which he was given as an attempted bribe. More feels corrupted just by keeping it in his house, and so gives it to Rich, who happily accepts. Although it's a gift, Rich admits that he will immediately sell it for luxurious clothing like More's.

More's political position comes with power, which in turns comes with people trying to bribe and manipulate him. For More, who is just trying to do his civic duty, these bribes are an unwelcome distraction. For Rich, however, the bribery is appealing. He only wants to gain money and influence, and doesn't mind if he is corrupted in the process.

The Duke of Norfolk, More's wife Alice, and More's daughter Margaret enter arguing about Norfolk's recent hunting trip. Norfolk claims his hunting falcon was able to dive for its prey even though it could not see through the clouds, while Alice thinks this seems impossible. After a minute, their conversation turns to philosophy. Rich again praises Machiavelli's *The Prince*, and defends it, along with Thomas Cromwell, whose aggressive political strategies both Norfolk and More dislike.

Alice and Margaret's banter with the Duke of Norfolk demonstrates their self-possession, education, and intellect, which sets them apart from many women of the period. Once again, Rich reveals that although More believed him to be a close friend, he is hiding many secrets, including his relationship with Cromwell and his political ideology. Machiavelli essentially invented the concept of political scheming, a strategy both Rich and Cromwell will invest much of their time in later in the play.

Now that they are on the topic of Thomas Cromwell, Norfolk reveals to the group that Cromwell has been promoted to the Cardinal's Secretary. Everyone is shocked. Alice asks, "a *farrier's* son?" but Norfolk reminds her that the Cardinal himself is the son of a butcher. Rich admits he likes Cromwell, and More suggests that Rich can use his connection to Cromwell instead of his friendship with More to advance himself.

A farrier is someone who puts the shoes on horses. This is a lower class job, and so it is impressive that Cromwell has experienced so much social mobility in his lifetime—from near poverty to a position in the royal court. Although Alice expresses surprise at Cromwell's humble upbringing, Norfolk makes it clear that one's former status (be it low or high) is less important than a person's status in the present moment. More also begins to realize how tenuous his relationship with Rich is, and seems to understand that Rich uses friendships as a way to personally advance himself.

The Steward enters with a letter summoning More to the Cardinal's office, although it is now eleven at night. As More leaves he sees that Rich is unhappy. More suggests that Norfolk employ Rich in some clerical position. Rich thanks More, and More once again tells him, "Be a teacher."

More himself would probably be happier as a poor teacher, as he believes the lack of money would be a fair trade for a clear conscience. Still, because he is a good friend More understands that Rich has different desires, and will not be happy without wealth and power.

As Rich leaves, the Steward comments on the **new goblet** More has given Rich. After Rich has left the stage, the Steward observes that More gives too much away. He wonders what More will do when he's asked "for something that he wants to keep," hypothesizing "he'll be out of practice."

Because More values physical luxury less than uncorrupted morals, he is happy to give away this expensive cup, and, eventually, nearly all of his physical belongings. Rich, however, is happy to compromise himself for some silver. Later, the Steward's prediction turns out to be false—More does *find something he wants to keep: his conscience and religious devotion. To keep these things, however, he must sacrifice his life.*

The scene changes, and Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas More meet in Wolsey's office. It is now past one in the morning. Wolsey has More read over a dispatch to a Cardinal in Rome, in which the King requests that the Pope annul his marriage to his wife, Catherine. More doesn't believe the marriage can be lawfully annulled, but he refuses to say so. Instead, he wishes there were "something simple" in the middle of the situation, and Wolsey responds that More is "a constant regret" because of his "horrible moral squint," and that with "Just a little common sense" More "could have been a statesman."

This is the first moment that More chooses to stay silent rather than publically approve the King's behavior. This frustrates Wolsey, a career politician, who believes that personal moral convictions have no place in politics. Wolsey thinks decisions should be made based on what is best for the nation, not personal opinion. More, although religious, finds religious law (essentially, morality from a divine perspective) confusing, which is why he wishes for "something simple" that can help guide his decision. Wolsey wishes More would stop looking for answers in God's law and instead turn to immediate matters of state.

More and Wolsey hear the trumpet announcing the King. He's returning from an evening with his mistress, Anne Boleyn. Wolsey asks how More is going to make sure the King has a legitimate son, and reminds him that if the King has no heir, the reign of the Tudors will end. More says he prays daily for the King to have a son. Wolsey counters that More is praying for a miracle. Catherine is barren, but Anne is not, and so it is in the best interest of the state to allow Henry to divorce and remarry. Wolsey once again asks for More's support in securing the King a divorce.

More must carefully balance his loyalty to the King and his loyalty to his own conscience. He is devoted to the King and wants his reign to continue, but does not want to approve steps that will, in his mind, go against God and the Church. Although Wolsey is a Cardinal, which makes him a member of the Catholic clergy, he takes his position as an almost entirely political one, and wants to ensure Henry will have male heirs for policy's sake. In contrast, More sees praying as a personal moral loophole—he can hope that Henry will have male heirs, but he will not have to enact policy that he finds morally troublesome.

Wolsey acknowledges More's right to his own conscience, but points out that as a statesman, he should consider the fate of the state. Wolsey admits that the actions they must take are "regrettable," but believes they are necessary for the sake of England; without an heir, England will have a war of succession. Wolsey wonders how More "can obstruct those measures for the sake of [his] own, private, conscience." More replies, "when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties…they lead their country by a short route to chaos. And we shall have my prayers to fall back on." He then admits that he would love to live in a country governed only by prayers.

Wolsey sees More's silence as More privileging his personal preferences over the fate of the entire country. More, meanwhile, sees his silence as a way to protest what he sees as a massive moral mistake—Henry's desired divorce. While Wolsey believes that personal consciences get in the way of governing, More finds that if you have strong personal integrity it can help you govern, allowing you to make decisions you truly believe are correct and can feel confident in.

Wolsey asks More who should be the next Cardinal. More suggests a man named Tunstall, but says *he* would rather be Cardinal than allow Thomas Cromwell to take the position. Wolsey tells More that they are enemies for the moment, and that he should keep this in mind if he is interested in being the next Cardinal. Wolsey tells More he'd be better off as a cleric, and More reminds Wolsey that the position he, Wolsey, holds is in fact a religious one.

Although Wolsey's position is a religious one, he is more politically than spiritually minded. Ironically it is More, a public servant in a relatively secular position, who is more spiritually than politically minded.

The scene changes to the banks of a **river**. More calls for a boat and the Common Man appears dressed as a Boatman. More tries to get the Boatman to take him home, but the Boatman is off duty. As they're talking, Cromwell steps out from behind an arch on the stage. He's on his way to talk to the Cardinal, but clearly been listening to More's conversation. He wonders if More left the Cardinal in "his laughing mood," but More explains that he did not. Cromwell tells More he admires him. The Boatman tells More that people refer to Cromwell as "the coming man."

The river represents God's law and the complicated nature of religion. More, who cannot find a boat, is out of step with popular religious sentiment—England will soon have its own Church, separate from the Catholic Church, and More is unable and unwilling to make the transition. Although More's life would be much simpler if he could simply cave and go along with Wolsey and the King's plans, he cannot compromise his conscience. When Cromwell asks if the Cardinal was in a "laughing mood," what he really is asking is if More has approved the divorce. Although More does not state his stance explicitly, he makes it clear that he still stands in opposition.

Before More can start on his way home, the diplomat Chapuys appears on the bank of the **river**. Chapuys represents the King of Spain's interests, and reminds More that the King of Spain will be insulted by any insult paid to his relative, Catherine. Chapuys wonders if More and the Cardinal parted "amicably" and "in agreement," which is his way of asking if More helped the Cardinal secure the King's divorce. More says that they only parted "amicably." Chapuys understands that this means More does not support the divorce. He calls More a "good man," but More says Chapuys doesn't know him well enough to make that claim.

In Chapuys' mind, a good man is a man who is on the same side of the issue as he is. In this case, because More will not approve Henry's divorce, a stance that benefits Spain, Chapuys sees More as good. For More, however, everything is more complicated. He isn't opposing the divorce because of a treasonous allegiance with Catherine or Spain, but instead because he is morally opposed on a personal level. Although many would argue that More is a good man because of his moral integrity, Chapuys calls him good because he believes they are politically allied, united by the allegiances of men instead of under God and conscience.

More turns to the Boatman, who agrees to row him home. They discuss the **river**. More wonders if it is filling with dirt, but the Boatman replies "not in the middle, sir. There's a channel there getting deeper all the time." The Boatman says his wife is "losing her shape…losing it fast," and More jokes "so are we all."

Although many people at the time are sacrificing religious conviction for political gain, the deepening center of the river represents More's increasing commitment to his moral compass. Even as the Boatman jokes that everyone is losing their shape, More's stance is becoming more rigid by the day.

Back at home, although it is very late at night, More finds Margaret is still awake. Her suitor, Will Roper, is also at the house. Margaret tells More that Roper wants to marry her. Will tells More that although his family is not involved with the palace, he comes from a good background, and More agrees that his pedigree is fine. Still, More forbids Margaret from marrying him, and explains that as long as Will is a "heretic" More will not bless the marriage.

More likes Will Roper generally, but he does not respect his opinions because they change so rapidly. Although More is in conflict with the King and the English government, he has remained committed to a single side of the issue. In contrast, Roper is always in conflict with a new group because he has no real moral agenda as of yet.

Will argues that he is not a heretic, but that the Church itself is heretical. He sympathizes with Martin Luther and The Protestant Reformation, and believes that the Catholic Church is corrupt. More counters that Roper is constantly changing his mind regarding religion, and so his opinions can't be trusted. More then sends Roper home. More tells Margaret that Roper is like his father, who just liked being contrary and "**swimming** in the opposite direction" of popular opinion.

There are few things More (a person with steadfast integrity who puts a great deal of thought into his political and religious stances) respects less than a person who has no personal integrity. More sees Will as heretical for the sake of being heretical, without any true beliefs. The symbol of water is also used again to represent the difficult and unknowable nature of morality and religion. Will doesn't seem to care what his religious position is, as long as it goes against public opinion.

Alice wakes up and joins More and Margaret. The two women want to know why Wolsey called More to meet. They tell More that Norfolk thinks More will be Chancellor if Wolsey dies. More tells them he doesn't want to be Chancellor, and refuses to talk about it further, pointing out that "there will be no new Chancellors while Wolsey lives." More is also getting sick, and Alice brings him tea, reminding him that all men, both great and poor, can get sick. The Common Man then enters the stage and announces that Wolsey has died, and Thomas More has been appointed the next Lord Chancellor. Wolsey died on his way to the Tower of London "under charge of High Treason."

More doesn't have any great political ambition, though he does have a sense of his political duty. He doesn't particularly want to be Chancellor, but will assume the role if he is called upon to accept it. Alice's reminder that all men can get sick is both a literal and figurative reminder—any man, no matter how high up, can be laid low, either by illness or by his rivals. Similarly, so can any man of high morals eventually be corrupted.


The sets change and the stage becomes Hampton Court, the royal palace. Richard Rich passes Thomas Cromwell in a stairwell, and the two begin to talk. Cromwell wants to know what Rich is doing in Hampton, and Rich explains that he is currently working for Norfolk, who came to the castle to hunt with the King. Cromwell comments on changing fortunes; Wolsey was once high-powered but died a traitor, and Rich, once a political unknown, is rising quickly. Cromwell describes Thomas More and Rich as friends, which Rich is hesitant to confirm. Rich instead describes More as someone who helped him once professionally. Cromwell wonders if Rich has any allegiances to More or Norfolk, or if he is open to bribes.

Although Rich has been helped by More, who recommended him to Norfolk, and by Norfolk, who has been happily employing him for some period of time, he has no real allegiance to either of them. His resistance to Cromwell's use of the word "friend" demonstrates that he views all of his relationships as political, not personal ones, and values his acquaintances based only on what they can provide for him.



Rich doesn't answer Cromwell's question because Chapuys and his Attendant interrupt their conversation. Chapuys wonders what exactly Cromwell's job entails, and Cromwell explains that he is the "King's Ear," and that "when the King wants something done, I do it." He explains that the legal system of Justices, Chancellors, and Admirals are all written into the constitution, but he has a role outside of the law.

Cromwell is committed neither to God's law nor to man's law. He is an enforcer of the law of the King, which is based primarily on the King's desires. Sometimes these desires correspond with what is best for the state, but sometimes they do not. Cromwell's political allegiance is ostensibly to the King, but truly it is to himself. He simply understands that he can advance himself more swiftly if he works for the most powerful man in the country, and caters to his every whim.

Cromwell reveals that the King will soon visit More in his home and ask him for another answer regarding the divorce. The King will travel in his own **new ship**, built to his specifications, and which the King will steer himself. Chapuys is surprised, as he knows More has already made his opinion regarding the divorce known. He insists that More "is a good son of the Church!" and will not approve the divorce. Cromwell replies "Sir Thomas is a man," suggesting that any man can be persuaded to change his mind.

Once again, Chapuys assumes that More's opposition to the King's divorce, which for More is based on questions of personal conscience, is in fact support for Spain. By staying silent, More's motives are up for public interpretation. Cromwell, meanwhile, believes that even a man with convictions like More can somehow be manipulated. The symbol of ships and water reappears. By having his own boat constructed and steering it himself, the King is metaphorically taking control of the religion of his country and therefore the legitimacy of his marriage.

More's Steward enters. Clearly both Cromwell and Chapuys want to talk to him. The two men end their conversation, and each says "good day," expecting the other to leave, but neither does. Eventually, Chapuys caves in. He pretends to leave, but gestures to the Steward to follow him. Instead of fully exiting he hides onstage with his Attendant, within earshot but out of sight. Rich remains onstage, unsure of where to go. Cromwell presses the Steward for information about More. The Steward reveals that lately More has seemed frightened and nervous. Cromwell then leaves the stage, and gestures for Rich to follow him. Rich defensively claims that he has no gossip to share.

The Steward tells Cromwell exactly what he wants to hear—that the pressure Cromwell has begun to place on More is working, and he lives in a constant state of anxiety. From what we've seen (and will see) of More this is partially true, but his primary source of anxiety is protecting his family and staying true to his conscience, not any punishment Cromwell might enact. For once, Rich has some reservations. Although he likely does have gossip to share about More, he holds back, perhaps because he dislikes feeling like an informant on the same level as the Steward, or perhaps because, however briefly, his conscience is making an appearance.

Chapuys and his Attendant reemerge from behind the curtain to talk to the Steward. The Steward reveals that More prays and goes to confession often. Chapuys knows the Steward is serving as an informant to both him and Cromwell, and he tells the Steward it is impossible to be loyal to both of them. The Steward explains that in fact he is not loyal to Cromwell, to Chapuys, or to his master, Thomas More, but instead he is faithful to God. He reveals that he is wearing an enormous cross, described as a "caricature" of the cross Chapuys himself wears.

Again the Steward tells Chapuys what he wants to hear. He isn't lying, but he is giving Chapuys the portion of truth that he is most interested in. This portion reaffirms More's religious convictions, which Chapuys continually misreads as loyalty to the Catholic Church and Spain, but is in fact a more abstract moral sense of right and wrong. The Steward's cross, although clearly cartoonish to the audience, reads as real to Chapuys, who sees only what he wants to see.

Rich reenters after Chapuys and his Attendant have left the stage. He gives the Steward a coin and asks him what Chapuys wanted to know. The Steward repeats to Rich what he told Chapuys, and adds that he just tells people what they want to hear. As Rich turns to go, the Steward points out the direction that Cromwell went, assuming Rich would want to follow him. Angrily, Rich purposefully exits the stage in the opposite direction. The Steward, now alone onstage, takes a moment to speak directly to the audience. He explains that he shares common knowledge like it's gossip, and doesn't trade in real secrets. He says it is important "**not to get out of your depth**," for "**when I can't touch the bottom** I'll go deaf, blind, and dumb."

The Steward truly has no allegiances, except to himself and his own well-being. He happily receives payments for public information, but is careful not to divulge any true secrets that could be traced back to him. Like the Steward, Rich feels no need to honor any one alliance, and he's temporarily upset by the perception that he is in some way affiliated with or indebted to Cromwell. Note also that the Steward uses the symbolic language of water and land. Although some might argue that his behavior is immoral, he makes sure it never becomes so immoral that he loses his way or puts himself in danger, either physically or spiritually.

The scene transitions to More's house. Alice, Margaret, and Norfolk are looking for More. The King is arriving soon on an unofficial visit (that everyone nonetheless knows about) and More cannot be found. More eventually shows up—he's been praying. He is wearing a cassock, which Norfolk, Margaret, and Alice make him take off. More seems unconcerned by Henry's "surprise" visit, and when Norfolk accuses him of "dishonor[ing] the King and his office," argues that worshiping God is important, and shouldn't be "a dishonor to any office."

More's cassock is a robe traditionally worn by priests and clergymen, and is thus a physical symbol of his commitment to his faith. Ironically, although Henry will soon declare himself Head of the Church of England and is fighting for a divorce on religious grounds, he is not a particularly religious man. More's statement that worshiping God shouldn't be "a dishonor to any office" is fair, but it also will not prove to be true. Because More worships God, he resists Henry's divorce, which is seen as an act of political betrayal.

King Henry arrives by **boat,** which he himself navigated. More, Margaret, and Alice all pretend that his visit has surprised them. The King flirts with Margaret, and praises her intelligence, but is unhappy when she proves herself to be better at Latin than he is. He then asks Margaret if she can dance, and praises her legs, while mocking Norfolk's "wrestler's leg." Despite this, the King argues that he could beat Norfolk in a fight. The King then tells Margaret that he, too, is a scholar. She knows of the book he wrote, and the King jokes that More, a known but unofficial collaborator, heavily contributed.

Henry's boat, steered by him, represents the new control he's taken over English Christianity. Indeed, he will soon found the Church of England, over which he will have total power. The way he controls his boat, and England's religion, is the same way he hopes to soon control More, who has yet to approve of his divorce. Although he is literally the most powerful man in England, Henry still needs external validation—his conversations with Margaret and Norfolk demonstrate that even a king can be insecure.

The King finally turns his attentions to More. At first he doesn't talk about politics. Instead he talks about the "great experience" he had steering his eponymous ship, "The Great Harry," **down the river**. Finally, he turns to court affairs, and tells More he is grateful he has "a friend for my Chancellor," although More is "readier to be friends…than he was to be Chancellor."

Once again Henry's ship is used to represent his religious power. By describing his relationship with More as a friendship, the King exerts a new pressure on his Chancellor. Although More won't cave to political pressure, the King knows how deeply More values his friendships. This makes More's position even tougher — as an employee and a friend he doesn't want to disappoint the King, but he still has the same convictions as before.

Henry and More discuss the late Cardinal Wolsey. More comments that Wolsey was "a statesman of incomparable ability." Henry argues that because Wolsey failed him, he could not have been a great statesman. Henry criticizes his pride, and his ambition; Henry was convinced Wolsey wanted to be Pope. The King reveals he felt trapped and controlled while the Catholic Church and its Cardinals remained influential in England.

In an irrational leap of logic similar to one Chapuys made earlier, the King assumes that because he disagreed with Wolsey, Wolsey must have been a fundamentally bad (and even unskilled) man. Ironically, the King criticizes Wolsey's pride and ambition, even though the ever-ambitious Cromwell is one of his closest confidantes. A key difference is that Cromwell's ambition makes him more subservient, whereas Wolsey's ambition made him act independently.

Although he has promised not to, Henry once again brings up his divorce. More says that although he's been thinking about it since their last conversation, he hasn't come to any conclusions. This frustrates the King, even when More pledges his loyalty. The King explains that he *needs* More's approval, because, as it is, he "stand[s] in peril of [his] soul." The King uses the passage in Leviticus which says "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife," to invalidate his own first marriage. When More explains that he thinks it's a complicated situation best left to the Catholic Church itself, Henry responds angrily. He says he doesn't need the Pope to tell him that he's sinned; he can tell for himself. He says that his inability to have a son is a sign from God that his marriage is illegitimate.

The King needs More's approval because he sees More as an external conscience. As long as More disapproves, the King feels like he is sinning, which torments him in this life, and could potentially damn him in the afterlife as well. The King has attempted to manipulate the Bible to fit his own needs. Although he received a religious exemption that allowed him to go through with his first marriage, he now wants to cherry pick which parts of religion are relevant. The exemption he previously attempted to make from the Leviticus quote now becomes his argument for again circumventing Biblical rules.


More wonders why, if Henry is so sure of himself, he needs More's approval. The King explains that many of his followers lie to him because he is king and they respect him, like Norfolk, or else because they see the ways that he can benefit them, like Cromwell. But More, Henry explains, isn't like that, and is sincere and honest, and can be counted on for an honest opinion. He then asks More for his thoughts on the music that had been playing earlier during his arrival. More suspects that the King wrote this music himself, and praises it.

The King appreciates that More has no ambition, or that his ambition is at least tempered enough to keep him honest. However, More's integrity, which the King praises and which motivates him to seek More's opinion, is also the very thing that prevents More from giving the King the answer he desires.

The King tells More his "conscience is [his] own affair," and that he, the King, will leave More alone as long as he remains silent, and does not oppose him publicly. Yet Henry warns that any noise, any words, signs, letters, or pamphlets will count as treason. He tells More that anyone who claims Catherine is his wife is a liar and a traitor. In a final gesture, the King attempts to bribe More. He tells him, "If you could come with me, you are the man I would soonest raise," but More is flustered and cannot respond. Although he had planned to stay for dinner, Henry observes that "the **tide** will be changing," and leaves early.

More's silence, which he has been using to protect himself, has backfired and frustrated the King. The King's threats show that even though More's silence is meant to signal obedience to the crown, if not to every decision made by it, he is close to being branded a traitor. However, once again More stays true to his conscience, and steadfast against the promise of bribes. When Henry refers to the "tide" he means both that the dominant religion in the country will be shifting (from Catholicism to Anglicanism) and that More will soon be falling out of favor if he doesn't change his mind.



Alice is upset that More has not been more cooperative. She asks him to "Be ruled!" or else rule the King by actually stating his opinion. More explains that although he is the King's loyal subject, he needs to have some control over his own life, and his own conscience. Alice urges him to "stay friends" with the King. More says he'll do his best to smile and flatter.

With the King, a "friendship" is more than a normal acquaintance. By staying the King's friend, More stays in his good graces politically, which will allow him and his family to live peacefully and happily. Unfortunately, unlike in a real friendship, the power is so imbalanced that a disagreement has the potential to destroy More's entire life.

Suddenly Will Roper arrives, flustered. He has been offered a seat in Parliament, and because of his "inconvenient conscience" doesn't know whether or not to take it. More suggests that Roper would be a good fit because of his heretical religious views, which are in line with the new religious reforms the King is making, and which More privately sees as heretical. But Roper admits he's become more moderate recently.

Will Roper, who More criticized earlier for changing his opinions rapidly, has again rapidly changed his opinion. Once a steadfast Protestant, he's now become more Catholic. Still, he manages to go against the tide of popular sentiment—as England is on the verge of its own Protestant Revolution.

The Steward enters, and announces that Richard Rich, has come to visit uninvited. Rich is in a strange mood, and complains that he feels unwelcome in More's house. He confesses that Cromwell has been asking questions about More. Rich says that More's Steward has been questioned both by Cromwell and Chapuys, which More already knows and does not seem to mind. Rich acts guilty, and asks More to employ him, promising to be trustworthy. More declines, on the grounds that Rich can't even be trusted to act in his own best interests, much less the interests of an employer.

Rich has been feeling guilty about his role in More's persecution. More was his first friend in London, and set him on his way politically, and so he feels some sense of loyalty. Rich's attempted repentance seems based less on his concerns for More's well-being, however, and more on his desire to clear his own guilty conscience. More's comment that Rich can't even act in his own best interest points to the fact that Rich is putting himself in political jeopardy by trying to rekindle his friendship with More.

More's family wants to arrest Rich. Margaret thinks he should be arrested for being bad, as that is God's law, but More counters, "Then God can arrest him." Roper argues that More is setting man's law above God's, but More explains that he finds man's law simple to follow, whereas God's law is too complicated. He explains, "The **currents and eddies** of right and wrong…I can't navigate. I'm no voyager. But in the **thickets of the law**, oh, there I'm a forester."

Although a religious man, More finds God's law—the law of conscience and divine morality—too difficult to follow or understand. He finds man's law to be more reliable when making moral decisions. More uses the metaphor of God's law as a confusing, twisting river, whereas man's law is an easily traversable island. He can reliably judge someone according to man's law, but worries he would not be able to do the same using God's—instead, he can only try his best to be moral and hope for the best.

Roper says he'd "cut down every law in England" if it meant he could somehow indict the Devil, but More argues that laws are important for the safety of mankind, even if it means that the Devil also gets some protection. Roper then argues that the law seems to be More's god, which offends More. He tells Roper that he will "hide in the **thickets of the law**" with Margaret, where she will be safe and Roper will not be able to woo her with his constantly changing "**seagoing principles**." More repeats that he believes he is entirely safe, as he is not on the wrong side of the law.

More believes in the strength and endurance of the laws of mankind. He thinks they are important to maintain because even if sometimes they let a guilty man go, the majority of the time they serve to protect the innocent. Roper, meanwhile, would happily break the law if he thought he was doing what God wanted. More would not, as he doesn't presume to know what God really wants. More's criticism of Roper's "seagoing principles" refers to his constantly changing religious stances.

The scene changes to a pub. The Common Man enters as himself, but then dresses himself from a basket on stage, and sets up a table with mugs and stools. He has transformed himself into a Publican (Inkeeper). He jokes that he can barely understand what More is saying because he is so common. Cromwell enters the pub and asks for a private room. Rich joins him, and they meet in a backroom. Cromwell shares court gossip with Rich, who promises not to repeat it, because this conversation is "in friendship." Cromwell wonders if Rich is really capable of keeping a secret, and Rich clarifies that it "would depend what I was offered." Cromwell doesn't necessarily respect Rich, but he likes that he is so open about being so corruptible.

Rich, a reliably bad friend, has decided that he and Cromwell are true friends, a designation Cromwell finds useless. Rich has generally used "friendship" as a way to extract something from acquaintances, whether it's money, influence, or power. Cromwell, meanwhile, sees everything as political, and has no use for even the façade of friendship. Rich continues to prove that he has very little integrity and will compromise himself morally for a bribe. Ironically, Rich's constantly shifting allegiances please Cromwell, who likes that Rich is so open about his loyalty being available for purchase.

Cromwell offers Rich a position as Collector of Revenues for York Diocese, if Rich will help the King secure his divorce. Cromwell explains that his role as a royal administrator is to make sure the courts run smoothly and conveniently, and so if the King wants a new wife, he will make it as easy as possible for the King to get a new wife. He continues that if the King's life is more convenient, so is everybody else's. Rich accepts Cromwell's offer, but is surprised by his good fortune. Cromwell observes that Rich seems depressed. Rich explains that he feels like he's lost his innocence, though Cromwell suspects he lost it a long time ago. They both believe that Thomas More has an innocent conscience, but Cromwell nevertheless begins to plot to manipulate him. Cromwell believes that since More has sense, he can be frightened. To demonstrate how a man can be manipulated due to fear, Cromwell holds Rich's hand over a candle flame and burns him.

Cromwell's allegiance is not to the laws of God or man, but to the King himself. His explanation of his duties also suggests that the King himself rules not based on any internal moral compass, but based on what is easiest and best for him personally. Although Rich has spent the entire play so far seeking out bribes, this is the first moment where he explicitly feels like he has "lost his innocence." Readers will note, however, that he has been selling out his "friends" for essentially the entire play, and has been vocal about his openness to bribery for nearly as long, even before opportunities for bribery presented themselves to him. In the final moment of the Act Cromwell, who Rich had momentarily mistaken for a friend, proves that he will stop at nothing to get what he wants.

ACT 2

The Common Man enters and explains that two years have passed since the play's first act. In the meantime, the Church of England has been created. Although great changes usually come with bloodshed, the Common Man explains that this change came "by simple Act of Parliament." Still, despite the relatively peaceful transition, he warns that those who are "against the **current** of their times" risk imprisonment and torture.

When the Catholic Church would not cave to Henry's requests, he created a whole new branch of the Church, of which he was the head. This a perfect example of "man's law" and the preferences of one man being turned into "God's law" and a religious mandate for the entire country.

The stage lights brighten and reveal More sitting at his desk in his home. Roper is pacing the stage in front of him. Roper is now married to Margaret. He is dressed all in black and wears a cross to signal his allegiance to the Catholic Church. More comments on how quickly Roper's religious allegiance has shifted. Roper calls More's decorative chain, a symbol of his Chancellorship, "a degradation."

Once again, Will Roper has changed his religious affiliation. He was once a vocal Protestant, then he was a moderate Catholic, and now he is very committed to the Catholic Church. Notably, each of his shifts has corresponded with an equal and opposite shift in the English public—now that the country is Protestant, Will is Catholic.

More and Roper discuss the new Act of Supremacy, which makes Henry "Supreme Head of the Church in England." More is glad that it clarifies that the King is head of the Church only "so far as God allows," a distinction which Roper calls "a legal quibble." Roper wonders how far More thinks the law of God extends and allows, but More stays quiet. He warns Roper to keep his opinions quiet too, because they're treasonous.

More morally objects to Henry's new position as Supreme Head of the Church in England, but uses the legal language of the law to keep his conscience clear. Because the King is head of the Church "so far as God allows," More can feel confident that he can religiously justify the extent to which he still supports the King.

Chapuys interrupts the conversation, entering ahead of Margaret, who was guiding him to More's office. Chapuys says he has come to visit More as a fellow "brother in Christ," though More understands that he is really here on business. Chapuys is upset that More is allowing Henry to divorce Catherine, and argues that More, by being associated with the King, is being corrupted by his actions.

Chapuys has interpreted More's silence regarding the King's divorce as a silent rebuke of the King and a silent support of Catherine. Although More never pledged any allegiance to Chapuys, he nevertheless sees More's actions as a betrayal to England, as Chapuys had previously used More's silence to assume his political position.

Chapuys says he has heard that More will resign if the bishops in court all submit to the Act of Supremacy. He says that if More were to step down, it would signal to the world that he did not see the King's marriage, or his claim of religious supremacy, to be legitimate. More's position of Chancellor would add even more weight to his silent gesture. More is concerned that his actions could be interpreted as signaling anything, especially when Chapuys explains that his abdication could inspire widespread violent resistance.

More's opposition to the King's Act of Supremacy is personal, as the King's actions do not mesh with More's personal religious convictions. Unfortunately, because he has kept his opinions quiet, More's motivations are constantly guessed at, and his political leanings are widely misinterpreted. This is upsetting to More, who hoped his silence would be essentially apolitical.

Roper enters excitedly, announcing that Norfolk has arrived with news. Chapuys quietly pretends to leave, but stays onstage, listening. Norfolk announces that England has severed its connection with Rome. True to his word, More is committed to resigning from his post, and asks for help removing his Chancellor chain. Only Margaret will help him. More sees the creation of the Church of England as a declaration of war against the (true) Catholic Church, and he believes that the war has been waged only because Henry wanted to marry Anne, instead of for some deeper moral reason.

More does not personally support the King's reasons for a separation from the Catholic Church. More refuses to support the Act of Supremacy because it weighs on his conscience, which is why he chooses to resign—yet Alice and Norfolk accurately predict that his resignation will be interpreted as an attack on the King. More, because his motivations are pure, cannot see how his actions will be interpreted by others.

More refuses to answer whether or not he sees Catherine as the legitimate queen. Norfolk is confused as to why More would give up everything—money and power and "the respect of your country." More responds that he still believes in the power of the Pope, and though he admits that the Pope's supremacy is merely a theory, it is a theory that is important to him.

More is committed to doing what he feels is right. Losing power, influence, or wealth is less important to him than losing his own moral integrity. More understands that the differences between Catholicism and Anglicanism are, at their cores, "theories," but he is still willing to fight for what he believes is correct.

More asks Norfolk if he will repeat what More has said. Norfolk says no, and More points out that Norfolk is then breaking an oath of obedience to the King. Norfolk accepts More's resignation on behalf of the King and tells him that his fear of retribution is unfounded, as the King is "mindful of [More's] goodness and past loyalty." As Norfolk leaves, More warns him that there might be a rebellion in the north.

Norfolk's friendship with More now puts him in danger. Because he wants to protect More, he must be less obedient to the King, to whom he has pledged total loyalty. Norfolk deeply believes in the power of friendship, and assumes the King's friendly history with More will protect him in the future as well.

Alice is upset. She is worried the King will punish More. Roper appreciates More's gesture, though More says he didn't mean for his resignation to be symbolic. More thinks his resignation was moral, but Will, Alice, and Margaret explain that morality is symbolic for most people.

More, who resigned because he was following his conscience and doing what he genuinely thought was right, is frustrated that his very earnest decision is being interpreted as a symbolic one, more political than personal.

More believes he will be safe if he and his family remain silent. He cautions Alice to remain silent even under oath.

More believes silence is all he needs to protect himself and his family, despite the fact that people like Chapuys, Cromwell, and the King have already misinterpreted his silence.

More dismisses his staff, because he will no longer be able to pay them. He tells the Steward he will miss him, which upsets the Steward. The stage clears, and the Steward explains to the audience that it doesn't matter if More will "miss" him, as sentimentality means nothing if he cannot pay his wages.

This is an instance where money and luxury take precedence, but at no true moral cost. It would be irrational to ask a servant to stay on without pay, even if they would be working for a martyr.

Later, presumably in the palace (although it is not stated), Norfolk and Cromwell talk in a private corner. Norfolk wants to leave More to his silence, but Cromwell believes that More's "silence" is "bellowing up and down Europe." The two consider how to pressure More into speech. They believe that he will eventually end up on their side, and that he is not a traitor.

Norfolk believes More's silence is good natured, and a legitimate attempt to stay out of politics. Cromwell, meanwhile, sees More's silence as louder than words, and believes he is sending a political message in opposition to the King even though he is not speaking.

Cromwell believes More can be blackmailed for once taking a bribe. Norfolk believes that More is too upstanding to have ever accepted a bribe, but Cromwell brings in Richard Rich and a Woman—both of whom, he says, can prove More's guilt. Rich acknowledges Norfolk as an "old friend," but Norfolk acts as though they don't know each other well. Cromwell explains the Woman once tried to bribe More with a **silver cup**, although More did not rule in her favor, coming to a lawful conclusion instead. Rich then received the cup as a gift from More, and later told Cromwell about the bribe. Norfolk argues that this doesn't count as accepting a bribe, because More gave the cup away to Rich as soon as he received it. Cromwell admits this was just a "trial," and that he'll find something else he can use to manipulate More.

Although he previously burned bridges with Norfolk and More, Rich now tries to acknowledge Norfolk as a friend. Norfolk, who sees how manipulative and selfish Rich is, rebukes him. Cromwell's attempt to find an incriminating anecdote about More falls flat. Although More technically accepted the bribe delivered to him, he did not let it affect his moral judgment, and did his best to rid himself of an object he felt could potentially corrupt him. The silver cup, ironically, is not a symbol of More's corruption, but of Rich's. Rich happily accepted the cup as a gift and now uses it to sell out his old friend.

Before Norfolk leaves, he tells Cromwell that he isn't interested in persecuting More. Cromwell tells Norfolk that the King is aware of his friendship with More, and for that reason wants Norfolk to persecute More even more aggressively, to prove his loyalty to the crown.

Norfolk's friendship with More continues to put him in danger. The King is now aware of his split loyalty, and the only way for Norfolk to prove his allegiance to the King is to sever his relationship with More, which he is reluctant to do.

Once Norfolk has left, Cromwell and Rich begin to scheme. Rich explains he is "only anxious to do what is correct," and Cromwell agrees that they must obey the law, even if they have to make up new ones themselves. More's old Steward then enters. Cromwell had called him to the palace to corroborate Rich and the Woman's story about More accepting a bribe, as he was also present the night More gave Rich the **silver cup**—but, because Norfolk found the story unconvincing, the Steward was never asked to testify. The Steward asks Rich if he needs a servant now that he is wealthy. Rich says he does, but remembers the Steward being rude to him back when he was poorer. The Steward counters that when Rich was not powerful he was also insecure and assumed people were treating him badly, but now that he is powerful he doesn't notice and doesn't feel disrespected.

Rich's desire to "do what is correct" is ironic, because up until now he has only been doing what benefits him. Cromwell's comment makes it clear that they are only barely operating within the law or any set of moral codes. They only follow the "law" so that they themselves will not be indicted for criminal activity. Although the Steward had actually been rude to Rich when he was poorer, this was based more on Rich's personality than his status. However, now that the Steward has something to gain from Rich, he will happily flatter and manipulate him.


Back at More's house, Chapuys has come to visit. Chapuys and his Attendant comment on how cold the house is. They understand that since More stopped actively supporting the King he's become much poorer. They then discuss More's goodness. Chapuys thinks that because become More is opposed to Cromwell, then he must be allied with Spain, and therefore he is a good man.

More has sacrificed a life of luxury in order to live according to his own conscience. As he has earlier, Chapuys mistakes More's personal moral code for a political criticism of the King. Chapuys assumes that anyone who opposes Cromwell is an ally of Spain, and any ally of Spain, in his eyes, is morally good.



More enters and greets Chapuys. Chapuys delivers a letter from the King of Spain. He insists it isn't political; it is just a thank-you to More for taking a stand against Henry's divorce from Catherine. More will not take the letter, which he fears will incriminate him, and insists he has not taken a stand. More explains he is still loyal to the King, which surprises Chapuys, who had assumed More was against England. Chapuys leaves, and complains to no one in particular that More is "unreliable."

More is not unreliable as Chapuys claims—he is steadfastly committed to his own conscience and his own personal interpretation of religion. Chapuys finds him unreliable because he has assumed More's silence was actually a political gesture opposing Henry and supporting Spain.


Margaret enters with a bundle of plants for the fire as Chapuys leaves. More describes the fire as a "luxury," although Alice is upset with their new, lower standard of living. More argues that things aren't all that bad—they still have food and each other.

Although his family disagrees, More places the luxury of living according to his own values above physical and economic luxury.


Clergy from the Catholic Church have collected money to thank More for opposing the King. Alice wants More to accept their charity, but he is worried that it will appear as though he is being sponsored by the Church.

More doesn't want to seem compromised in any way. He worries that accepting money, even charity, could be interpreted as a bribe or declaration of allegiance, and he could be seen as corrupted, and his silence as politically motivated.

Roper enters and announces that More must go to Hampton Court to answer charges brought by Cromwell. Roper comments that Cromwell is a devil. More responds that Cromwell is only a lawyer. He tells his assembled family that he is not worried because he believes in the strength of his case.

More assumes, as he has in the past, that he can protect himself with the laws of man. Unfortunately, More is not as safe as he thinks, because Cromwell rarely follows the law strictly, and will happily manipulate the rules to get his way.

The scene changes to Cromwell's office. More has come to hear Cromwell's accusations, and Richard Rich has joined them. More refers to Rich as an "old friend" and comments on his expensive gown, but Rich does not acknowledge him.

Rich's expensive gown is his reward for selling out More. More's reminder of his and Rich's former friendship falls on deaf ears—Rich, who never particularly valued this friendship, has sacrificed it for his own advancement.

Cromwell explains that the King is displeased both by More's silence and his resignation as Chancellor, but says the King would reward him for blessing the divorce. More is not moved to action.

More refuses to give into the King's implicit bribe, which will restore his status in exchange for More's verbal approval.

Cromwell next brings up up a treasonous woman More once wrote to, but More explains he has witnesses and a copy of the letter that prove he was not conspiring against the King.

More also refuses to cave to threats made by Cromwell. He is confident that he has spent his life acting morally, and cannot then be manipulated by those questioning his morality.

Cromwell tries a final strategy to pressure More into approving the King's divorce. He brings up the King's book, which More co-wrote many years ago, called *A Defence of the Seven Sacraments*. Cromwell argues that More actually wrote the book, and says that it is treasonous because it supports the Pope. More denies this, claiming he only answered the King's legal questions. Finally, Cromwell lets More go home, but first he reads a letter from the King, which denounces More as "traitorous" and "villainous."

More has remained faithful to the King despite his opposition to key decisions Henry has made. This commitment and loyalty continues here—the King was said to have written his book, and so More refuses to name himself as a ghostwriter, which would essentially call out the King as a liar. Despite his earlier assurances, the King's past friendship with More will not now protect More from Henry's wrath.

Alone in Cromwell's office, Cromwell and Rich scheme together. More had said he was not scared because he had nothing to hide, but Cromwell still believes he can find something incriminating in More's past that would frighten him. Cromwell explains to Rich that "the King's a man of conscience and he wants either Sir Thomas More to bless his marriage or Sir Thomas More destroyed." Rich doesn't understand, and Cromwell tells Rich that he's confused because he has no conscience.

More acted as the King's external conscience for so long that now that he seems unlikely to cave the King must live with a guilty conscience forever, or else destroy More, and thus symbolically destroy his own conscience. Rich, who long ago gave up any moral tethers, is predictably confused by the concept of moral reservations.

Waiting at the banks of the river, More is upset that he cannot get a **boat** to take him home. He runs into Norfolk, who criticizes his behavior. Norfolk thinks it is fine for More to put himself in danger, but it is unfair for him to also put his friends in danger. More suggests Norfolk stop being friends with him, but Norfolk resists. He doesn't think friendship can be turned on and off like a switch.

More's inability to get a boat symbolizes how far against the Church of England he has gone, and how conflicted he is in his decision to remain silent on the Act of Supremacy. More and Norfolk's friendship has finally become too dangerous to remain unaddressed. Both men value the friendship, but More values his friend's wellbeing above the relationship itself. In contrast, Norfolk cannot separate the friendship from caring about More's wellbeing.

More begins to insult Norfolk, in an attempt to end their friendship. He begins with mild insults, but eventually accuses Norfolk of being entirely self-serving. More tells Norfolk that he has no conscience, backbone, or noble pedigree. Norfolk is so upset that he slaps More and exits.

Although Norfolk has demonstrated much more conscience and loyalty to More than almost anyone else, in the end he is still more concerned with his own wellbeing and political career than More's. While he could have remained silent and impartial, he has chosen to actively involve himself in Cromwell's schemes. What More says is harsh, and is meant to provoke Norfolk, but this doesn't mean it's untrue.

Roper and Margaret find More on the riverbank and tell him that a new Act of Succession has been passed. It will require everyone, More included, to take an oath supporting it. More heads home to read the bill to see if there is anyway he can take it and keep his conscience intact, or if he must avoid it. He makes a speech to Roper and Margaret about man's purpose, arguing that man is made to serve God, and "if he suffers us to fall to such a case that there is no escaping" then he must try his hardest to escape.

Man's law and God's law come together in More's decision regarding the Act of Succession, which will legitimize Henry's divorce and his children with Anne Boleyn. The Act itself is a law written by humans, but More's objection to it is spiritual. Still, More finds solace in legal codes and rules, and so even though his reservations are religious he is always looking for legal ways to justify his behavior.

The Common Man enters an empty stage. He explains that he is now a Jailer, and is in charge of watching the newly imprisoned Thomas More. An envelope descends from the sky, and he opens it and reads—it contains the fates of various characters from the play. Cromwell will be found guilty of High Treason and executed in 1540, and Norfolk will be found guilty of High Treason in 1547, although he will not be executed because the King will die before he can sign the order. Rich, in contrast, will continue to rise in rank and will die of natural causes. No longer reading from the letter, the Jailer adds, "so did I" die in bed, of natural causes, "And so, I hope, will all of you."

It is difficult to make thematic claims about the deaths of real people, and it's important to resist saying that Cromwell and Norfolk were sentenced to die because they sacrificed their personal integrity, but it is likely that it became clear to the King and others that their motivations were based more on self-interest than a genuine desire to help the nation. Rich, although he sacrificed all of his personal integrity to advance himself, surprisingly paid no political price for his behavior.


At one o'clock in the morning, the Jailer wakes More up. Cromwell, Norfolk, and Thomas Cranmer have come to visit. Cromwell presents More with the Act of Succession, which states that the King's marriage to Catherine was unlawful because the Pope didn't have the power to approve it, along with a list of people who have already sworn to it. More explains that he recognizes Queen Anne's children as legitimate heirs because "the King in Parliament tells me that they are," but he still won't agree to the Act. Cromwell argues that if More won't take the oath he must have treasonous reasons. Norfolk agrees that this is a "fair assumption," but More counters this, saying, "the law requires more than an assumption; the law requires a fact." He explains that if his motives are not known, he cannot legally be executed for his motives.

More relies on the intricacies of the law to protect him, even now that the law has landed him in jail. He also defers to the law, acknowledging the legitimacy of Anne's children, even though he morally opposes the the Act that legitimizes them. Although More's silence has not protected him thus far, he still falls back on it for protection. Silence makes his motives mysterious, and he trusts the law not to assume any motivations.


Norfolk is frustrated by More's silence. He argues that he, along with many others, have already signed the Act, and that, for the sake of "fellowship," More should too. More again refuses to sign. He says that although Norfolk believed it was the right thing to do and followed his conscience, More's conscience will not let him. He clarifies that he doesn't think those who signed the Act are damned—just that he personally would be.

More has never been one to "go with the flow," and so just because others have signed the Act doesn't mean he will. He honestly believes that other men could sign the Act with clear consciences—if they had no real moral qualms about it—but he cannot. Norfolk sees the bonds of friendship as strong enough to overcome moral reservations, whereas More's adherence to his conscience will always be more powerful than peer pressure.



Cromwell calls More out for honoring his doubt more aggressively than he has honored the King of England. More neither agrees nor disagrees, and asks to go to bed. More also criticizes Cromwell for acting like a "dockside bully," instead of lawfully, with justice.

Because More values the law so much, Cromwell's prosecution of him, which is barely legal, is frustrating, because he cannot defend himself through the usual legal pathways.


Frustrated, Cromwell, Norfolk, and Cranmer eventually leave. Cromwell asks the Jailer if he has heard More say anything treasonous. The Jailer has nothing to report, and Cromwell has him swear an oath promising he is telling the truth. Cromwell then promises the Jailer money if he hears anything, though Cranmer adds that the money is not a bribe. In an aside to the audience, the Jailer explains that the offer of money makes him suspicious, and says he doesn't want to become involved in anything political.

The Jailer is one of the only characters besides More to understand the power of silence. His silence protects him, because he understands that any overhead murmurings worth paying for could potentially also be worth killing for, and he doesn't want to be involved in this deadly level of politics, whether or not he might receive some money in the process.

On their way out, Rich and Cromwell talk. Rich wants a new, better, job, specifically that of the retiring Attorney-General of Wales. Cromwell ignores Rich's request and explains to Rich that time is of the essence. The King is impatient, because More's continual refusal to sign the Act makes him feel illegitimate. More had acted as a stand-in for the King's conscience, and as long as he dissents the King's conscience remains guilty. Cromwell briefly considers torturing More, but decides he'll fine "some gentler way."

Rich is always scheming and looking for new ways to increase his wealth and status. Again, the King sees More's dissent as his own conscience speaking against him. As long as More is alive and in opposition he makes the King feel guilty, which he does not like or want.

In the early morning, More's family comes to visit him. They comment on the awful conditions of the jail, but More argues it isn't that bad—the worst part is being separated from the people he loves.

More's commitment to his conscience is more important to him than even his freedom. Although he is stripped of every luxury, he still refuses to complain.

Alice, Roper, and Margaret are all happy to see More, but they reveal that they are just visiting to convince him to take the oath. More explains that by taking an oath he would be betraying himself and God. Margaret tells More how sad and cold the house is without him, and More complains that hearing her speak is more torturous than anything the King or Cromwell has come up with.

Cromwell has allowed More's family to visit because he hopes they will convince him to finally give in. However, More remains steadfast. By giving in he would be betraying not only himself but also God, and, he believes, would suffer both in this life and the next.

The Jailer cuts their visit short, and will not accept a bribe to extend it. In his final moments with his family, More tries to compliment the food Alice has brought for him, but she is upset because he will not give in and return to family life. More thinks he can make a "good death," but she angrily replies, "Your death's no 'good' to me!" However, she eventually concedes that she trusts God's plan, even if she doesn't understand it.

In Alice and More's last conversation Alice finally begins to understand his point of view. Even though she doesn't want to leave him and absolutely doesn't want him to die, she finally understands his commitment to himself and to God and why he cannot give up.

The scene changes from the jail cell to a courtroom. The Common Man changes out of his Jailer's costume. He constructs a makeshift jury out of hats, each representing a man. Half of the hats are costume pieces from roles he has played, including the Steward, Boatman, Innkeeper, and Jailer. Cromwell enters, praising "The **Canvas and Rigging** of the Law." He then reminds the Common Man that he will serve as the head juror, or Foreman.

Although man's law is usually represented by dry land in the play, Cromwell's reference to its canvas and rigging (both parts of a ship) suggests that the law has become too complicated for even More to navigate. The Common Man's many hats in the jury help demonstrate the role common people played in historical affairs.

Norfolk begins the trial by charging More with High Treason. However, he makes it clear that if More were to repent now, he would be pardoned. More rejects the offer. Cromwell accuses More of denying the King his title of Supreme Head of the Church of England. More is upset because he has never denied this. He argues "silence is not denial."

In the end, More's life is a luxury he is willing to give up to remain true to his morals. Once again, More is frustrated by those who willfully misinterpret his silence. He purposefully remained silent because he did not want to deny Henry's supremacy, even as he privately disapproved.

Cromwell counters that there are many kinds of silences. Although More did not speak, he made his opinion known through his silence. Therefore, his silence is "betoken." It is technically a silence, but it is as loud and as well known as a spoken rejection of the King. More reasserts that if silence is taken to mean anything, then "silence gives consent."

Silence here means two different things to two different people. More sees his silence as no answer, or consent if an answer must be assumed. Meanwhile Cromwell takes the same silence to signify that More does not consent and does not approve.

Cromwell accuses More of using legal jargon to make the case more complicated. More argues that the law isn't supposed to be a clear "light," but instead a guide for those who already have a strong conscience. Cromwell responds that conscience is a term used by criminals, and people who serve their consciences are more selfish and less interested in serving the King and the State. More explains that he sees conscience as a personal loyalty, but one that can coexist with a loyalty to the King. In fact, More believes that by following his conscience he can even better serve the King—because his conscience will only allow him to tell the truth.

More believes that the secular and religious laws are only useful if they are used in tandem with a person's own conscience. He has no desire to manipulate the law, but simply wants to operate within it according to his personal moral code. Cromwell, meanwhile, uses the law as a weapon to get what he wants. A central conflict of the play has been the question of whether one can be loyal to the King while also being loyal to something or someone else—for example, one's conscience or one's friends. More thinks it's possible, but Cromwell and the King disagree.

Richard Rich is called as a witness. He is now the Attorney General for Wales, and is dressed in expensive clothing. He takes an oath and promises to tell the whole truth, but forgets to say "So help me God," and has to be reminded. He lies under oath, and tells an invented story. He claims he visited More in jail, and while he was there he asked More why he wouldn't accept the King's title as Supreme Head of the Church of England. He says More verbally rejected Henry's title. More immediately protests. He rationalizes that after years of silence, it wouldn't make any sense for him to suddenly confess, in private, to Rich.

Rich has ascended to his most prominent social position yet. He has traded all of his "friendships" and moral reservations for wealth and power. He lies under oath, and uses his former friendship with More to add legitimacy to More's invented confession. Rich has completely forgotten any morality he once had, as evidenced by his symbolically butchered oath.

More is given a final opportunity to speak before the jury deliberates, but his fate is already sealed. He accuses Cromwell of persecuting him not for his actions, but for his thoughts, and he calls out Rich for selling his soul for Wales.

More's silence has officially been interpreted as treasonous. Although he expected the law to be on his side, he was less protected than he thought. The law only protects the innocent when all parties choose to obey it—and when the men who make *the law decide that it does.*

The jury does not even take any time to deliberate the case. They immediately declare More to be guilty of High Treason. After years of silence, More finally speaks out and defends himself, although he notes how backwards it is that he only gets to defend himself once he's already been declared guilty. More explains that the King's Act of Parliament goes against the "Law of God," because the King, a man, cannot control the Church, but in spite of this More is still a loyal subject of the King. He reiterates that he meant the King no harm, and that even now he will die for his King. He is angry that he was persecuted not because he denied Henry's supremacy, which he sees as a large, important religious issue, but because he denied Henry's divorce.

More's only true crime was staying true to his own conscience, which went against the King's desired divorce. Although he should have been protected by the law in his silence—since he took no treasonous action—the law has been corrupted beyond recognition. This can also be seen in the order of the trial—More is only allowed to try and clear his name once he is already sentenced to die.

The scene changes. The courtroom disappears and a chopping block replaces it. The Common Man dons a new costume, becoming the Headsman. More approaches the Headsman, but is intercepted by Margaret. He tries to comfort her, explaining that his execution, and death in general, is the will of God. Cranmer approaches him with a Bible, and More comforts him too, explaining that he is being sent to God, and so he is not upset.

More's deep spirituality protects him in his final moments. Although other people would probably be scared, he is confident that he has made difficult but morally justified choices, and even if they have led him to his death he can go knowing he did what he believed to be right. The grief and distress of the characters surrounding More emphasize how personal his beliefs are.

There is a total blackout, during which the Headsman executes More. Then the Common Man, who has changed out of his of his Headsman costume, comes out of the darkness. He cautions the audience not to make trouble, or "if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that's expected."

The Common Man's final lines are a warning—More was punished for his dissent, but also for his unanticipated steadfastness. More's commitment to his morals was inexplicable in a world full of changing "tides" and morally compromised people. Unable to break his will, the King decided to take his life.

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