

Sovereignty and human liberty in a man for all seasons



**ASSIGN
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Sovereignty commands an eminent position in *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) composed by playwright, Robert Bolt. This play revolves around a controversy engraved in most Euro-American history, involving sovereignty (loyalty to the Crown), religious faith, personal conviction and individual responsibility. Interwoven with other dominant themes such as Reformation, Church and State, Law and Order, and Marriage, the Liberty of conscience forms the axle on which the entire play turns. In his classical masterpiece, *On Liberty* (1804), John Stuart Mill declares that “ this, then, is the appropriate region of human liberty. It comprises, first, the inward domain of consciousness; demanding liberty of conscience in the most comprehensive sense; liberty of thought and feeling; absolute freedom of opinion and sentiment on all subjects (Mill 2001, 15). It is for this principle that Sir Thomas More stands and tragically falls, since he declines to relinquish his core principles and by extension, his own liberty of conscience for repute, kingly honor, privilege or life.

A nascent liberty of conscience materializes with the wave of the Reformation, signifying a period of tumultuous, radical change and instigating a paradigm shift in thought and the conduct of religion and politics in England and even Europe. Although the term is never coined and universalized until Voltaire, the observer of history discerns its evanescence and fundamentality in the vast chronicle of wars. He pronounces in his writings, “ this is the law last mentioned in terms of its enactment: liberty of conscience being a right which all men have received from nature with their very being, and which all peaceable persons ought to maintain, it is

positively established that no person shall be compelled to join any public exercise of religion.” (Voltaire 2017).

During the Reformation era, England literally divorces herself from papal authority (pun intended) through King Henry VIII’s divorce and decree called The Act of Supremacy, and the English monarch appropriates to himself greater sovereignty in religio-political matters. Here, King Henry VIII assumes more authority and then legitimises his own marital annulment and remarriage to conceive an heir to the Crown. In this process, he seizes the title of the Head of the Church of England, simultaneously dethroning Papal dogma and doctrine. At this reformatory stage, Europe transitions to a new order and partially dispenses with a galling antiquity.

Sir Thomas More attributes the suppression of personal sovereignty as the formula for widespread anarchy and corruption in England. He affirms that “when statesmen forsake their own private conscience for the sake of their public duties . . . they lead their country by a short route to chaos” (Bolt 12). In these words, he links societal order with the harmony of one’s true conviction and the outflow of action. The conscience, serving as the moral compass in issues of right and wrong, should steer the individual’s actions in alignment with his belief system. However, Thomas More laments that the reason for the widespread degeneracy largely owes to the deliberate disregard of the pangs of conscience to enjoy temporary benefit. Good and evil become confused and subsequently, injustice abounds.

Sovereignty over arches as the theme twinned with liberty of conscience as an absolute system of monarchy governs England. By way of the universally

accepted divine right of kings or the divine right to rule, sovereignty compels every English subject to yield his individual will to the king and his wishes. Nevertheless, according to Sir Thomas More, “ there’s a little, little area ... where I must rule myself” (Bolt 35). This region of personal sovereignty, to which he refers, no man must infringe for it defines the heart of a man, resolves essential questions of right and wrong, and shape his personal relationship with God. Another instance of Thomas More urging his individual sovereignty depicts him in direct opposition to the king’s latest parliamentary mandates, the Act of Supremacy and the Act of Succession. He abstains from signing the decree. Allegorizing his point of divergence, he contends, “ Some men think the Earth is round, others think it flat; it is a matter capable of question. But if it is flat, will the King’s command make it round? And if it is round, will the King’s command flatten it? No, I will not sign” (Bolt 79). This intrepid disapproval is worthy of commendation as More adheres firmly to his value system and asserts an individual liberty of conscience which he never surrenders.

Thomas More’s self-sovereignty and immovable integrity starkly contrast with Richard Rich’s perspective on morals and liberty of conscience. Vehemently sustaining in the earlies of the play that “ every man has his price ... in titles, pleasure, women, bricks-and-mortar, there’s always something” (Bolt 6); he concludes that any man’s morals can be marketed to the highest bidder. In Rich’s view, selfish motives and egotistical ambition can always lure, alter and compromise a man’s opinion. His Machiavellian statement presupposes that the only virtue inherent to humankind is selfishness – doing whatever is necessary and justifying the means to

acquire the ends. Persisting in this belief, one deduces that notwithstanding the claims of conscience, Rich's own mind remains subject only to mercenary considerations, and swayed by materialism. True to his personal philosophy, Richard Rich is bribed to testify against his colleague, Sir Thomas More and perjures himself at the latter's trial. Despite these unconscionable expedencies, Rich continues to enrich himself, ascending the social ladder as Attorney General for Wales (Bolt 94).

Similarly, Cromwell concurs with Rich's philosophy of a tradeable liberty and a buyable conscience. Calling himself the ' King's ear,' he serves as a spying sycophant to the English monarch. His value system succinctly put, " when the king wants something done, I do it" (Bolt 40). Here one recognizes that the sacrifice of conscience matters little in the great scheme of things. Without any independence of mind, he implicitly trusts the king to lead him. However, despite petitions, favors and threats, Thomas More unbendingly repels the king's requests and commands to espouse the divorce, inimical to More's own conscience... until at his execution, he stubbornly affirms. " I make my petition to Almighty God that He will keep me in this, my honest mind, to the last hour that I shall live" (Bolt 89).

In conclusion, sovereignty and personal freedom stands as a pivotal question in A Man for All Seasons, as one witnesses the decision of one individual to be faithful to his own heart and to his own God. As he alludes to an essential heroism that is sadly lacking, he instructs, " if we lived in a State where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good .. But since in fact we see that avarice, anger, envy, pride, sloth, lust and stupidity commonly profit far beyond humility, chastity, fortitude, justice and thought, and have <https://assignbuster.com/sovereignty-and-human-liberty-in-a-man-for-all-seasons/>

to choose, to be human at all . . . why then perhaps we must stand fast a little-even at the risk of being heroes" (Bolt 84).

Works Cited:

Bolt, Robert. A Man for All Seasons, Hereford Plays, Heinemann Educational, 1960.

Mill, Stuart. On Liberty, Batoche Books, Kitchener, 2001.

Voltaire. The Philosophy of Voltaire-Collected Works and Treatise on Tolerance. Mosaic Books, 2017.