

Queen of hearts:  
woman power and  
the woman question  
in a man for all  
seasons



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In Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), paradoxically, queenly power and the woman question emerge as salient themes. Since ancient times, one understands that the woman is popularly conceived of as the weaker vessel and an instrument of reproduction, primarily to birth a male heir to secure primogeniture and hence, continuity of the male lineage. Close analysis of this work clarifies on the role and status of women of the three major socio-economic classes: elite, bourgeois and poorest. Despite these diversities, one appreciates that Bolt merely mirrors the concepts of femininity in a radicalising period such as the English Reformation, reflecting the woman's primal image as a paragon of fertility, polarisation, and passivity. Here, alongside the profound rivalries and feminine fragility, phenomenal fortitude and courage shine in resplendence.

In *A Man for All Seasons*, a bizarre game of thrones plays out in which the survival and stability of the monarchical dynasty depends on the fulfillment of the queen's responsibility to give birth to a son. The infertility of Queen Catherine of Aragon, Spain gives King Henry VIII 'lawful' licence to divorce her, pitting her against archrival, Queen Anne Boleyn, whom King Henry subsequently marries. Cardinal and Lord Chancellor Wolsey even calls her 'barren as a brick' and stresses the criticality of the situation declaring, "Catherine's his wife and she's as barren as a brick. Are you going to pray for a miracle?" He implies here the practicality of the divorce as an expediency to secure primogeniture and perpetuate Tudor rulership. For the entire piece, the subject matter of the queen's fertility runs paramount and one even senses the urgency, as it is discussed in official terms.

As the controversy thickens on the stability of the governing regime, royal succession and the performance of the queen's duty, the queen stands as a polarising force in *A Man for All Seasons*. Queen Catherine of Aragon and Queen Anne Boleyn become polarising forces as religio-political allegiances are blurred and disputed and the legitimacy of rule questioned. Chapuy hints at the enmity surrounding the queens, mentioning that " Charles, ... The King of Spain would feel himself insulted by any insult offered to Queen Catherine." (Bolt 68). On one hand, the Queen Catherine's Catholic supporters advocate Papal dogma, ecclesiastical primacy and the interests of Spain and her non-Catholic supporters maintain the sanctity of marriage, even among the reformers. On the other, Queen Anne Boleyn's camp represents the campaign for not only the continuity of the Tudor regime and the interests of the Crown, but also marks an assertion of autonomy in Reformation England.

Although Sir Thomas More toils to excuse himself from self-incrimination, there comes a point when he can no more straddle the fence as the issue of the queen creates wider cleavages in the affairs of both Church and State. The contest of the queens is again voiced in the Duke of Norfolk's question addressed pointedly to him: " Thomas, we must know plainly whether you recognize the offspring of Queen Anne as heirs to His Majesty." The Act of Succession to which Sir Thomas More refuses to subscribe, is articulated to ensure recognition and unconditional loyalty towards the new queen and England's possible heirs, Queen Anne and disownership of the former Queen Catherine. As a result, several royal officials, including Sir Thomas More as the Lord Chancellor, are executed because of their unpopular stances. The

once cordial relations between King Henry VII and the Pope, the King of Spain, Cardinal Wolsey, Sir Thomas More and other royal administrators embitter as the issue of the queen antagonises and polarises. As cleavages widen and strife deepen between the queens, naturally their offspring inherit these antagonisms. Although unmentioned in the play, history records that Queen Catherine's daughter who reigns as Queen Mary I violently clashes with her half-sister and the daughter of Anne Boleyn, Queen Elizabeth I. Indeed, the battle of the queens becomes so acid and acute that it tyrannises England to the point that several from both camps tragically lose their lives on charges of high treason and heresy.

In the play, one observes the subjection and docile servility of the queen. As the entire plot centres on the queenly figures, Catherine and Anne, one realises that strangely, they are muted for the entire play. The spectator only gains insight on them through second-hand observation and accounts behind the operations of the king and his cabinet. This silence, or the lack of discourse accorded to the queens, may symbolise a power deficiency, especially in light of the fact that men dominate discourse for the entire play: the King, royal government ministers and the common man. Existing as a passive shadow, one hardly sees the queen. She is neither engaged nor is she granted the privilege of action.

The perceived powerlessness of the female evinces itself in King Henry's conversation and attitude as he inferiorises his daughter borne by his first wife Catherine. " I have a daughter, she's a good child, a well-set child – But I have no son. (He flares up) It is my bounden duty to put away the Queen, and all the Popes back to St. Peter shall not come between me and my  
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duty!" With this commentary, he brushes aside the possibility of his daughter ruling or even decisively contributing to the regime. He little thinks that his daughters (both Queen Mary I and later Queen Elizabeth I) would ascend the throne and preserve the Tudor dynasty after he dies. He never envisions that his daughters would reign in his stead as authoritative sovereigns, impacting the face of England forever.

Contrasted with the queens of all women characters in the play, emerges Margaret More, prominently towering as a singular figure, exuding female dignity and power. Even King Henry VIII mentions, " Why, Margaret, they told me you were a scholar." As a scholar and excelling academic, Margaret More displays diligence and strength of mind. She masters the Greek and Latin language, and is considered an exceptional writer and translator. However, her sweetness of temper and the unique, father-daughter relationship residing between her and her father distinguishes among all other virtues. She loves and respects her father, Sir Thomas More till the end of his life. Correspondingly, he even shares some of the privacies of his mind with her.

Margaret More also serves as a foil to her hysterical, aggressive and lesser educated mother. Her courtship and marriage with a contrarian lawyer, Mr. William Roper relay a sense of her open-mind and liberality in perspective. Even as the tide of the Reformation rises in England, she seems to appreciate the necessity for change in self and society. However, Lady Alice More, Sir Thomas More's wife, exhibits herself as a dutiful and conservative yet defiant and assertive woman. She maintains her household, respects her husband as the head of the home, but fails to understand the mystery of her husband's conflicted position as Lord Chancellor. She unsuccessfully badgers <https://assignbuster.com/queen-of-hearts-woman-power-and-the-woman-question-in-a-man-for-all-seasons/>

him with demands for information behind his impervious refusal to approve the king's divorce and throws angry tantrums at his intractability. In her first lines, she hotly argues with the Duke of Norfolk on falconry – a subject of which she knows little. Many times, she demonstrates an unwifely harshness and even lack of sympathy for More's burdensome state responsibilities. Infuriated at her husband's imprisonment and pending execution, she virulently vents, " And if anyone wants my opinion of the King and his Council they've only to ask for it!" Replying to which More exclaims, " Why, it's a lion I married! A lion! A lion!" Hence, the spectator discerns Alice's proud assertiveness and strong will whether with her husband or surrounded by a litany of dignitaries.

In the end, the woman, embodied in the queen of hearts, still wields as much authority as the man, representative of the metaphorical neck that turns the head. They exert an undeniable intelligence and power to manipulate the course of events in their favour and to withstand overwhelming trial and difficulty. The politics of the palace, although male-dominated, and in the private sphere, *A Man for All Seasons* still validates the woman as an key actor in driving the plot forward, even forecasting the approaching rule of the most notorious queens of England.