Why write a play about Sir and Saint Thomas More, a Tudor lawyer who had his portrait painted by Hans Holbein in 1526 and his head chopped off by order of Henry VIII in 1535? In real life More was a conservative public servant of high principles and formidable intelligence, whose execution for treason led to his enduring fame. He was also a prolific writer, best known for *Utopia* (1516), a book describing an imaginary ‘ideal’ state. More’s contemporary, the Oxford scholar Robert Whittinton, first described him as ‘a man for all seasons’ (see the two epigraphs to the play). Many others admired and respected him for his integrity, scholarship and humour, among them his friend the great European humanist Erasmus and his ideological opponent at Court, Secretary Thomas Cromwell.

It takes courage, at any time, to stand up against officially-sanctioned bullying for what your conscience holds to be right, especially when bullies control the legal system and the state religion. More was not a willing martyr; he used all his lawyer’s skills to fight for his life, ultimately relying on the sanctity and letter of the law to protect him.

For Robert Bolt, ‘wit’ (a medieval word meaning cleverness) to defend personal spiritual integrity is what gives energy to the play’s debate about an innocent man whose last words urged others to ‘pray to God to give the King good counsel, protesting that he died his faithful servant, and God’s first’ (*Paris Newsletter* account of More’s trial, 1535). As Bolt explains in the play’s Preface, what drew him to More’s predicament was not so much the unique historical and religious circumstances as ‘a hero of selfhood’ who would not lie on oath even to save his life (p.xiv).

*A Man for All Seasons* makes lively, challenging theatre, full of strong characters and More’s own clever words. Paul Scofield (who played More onstage and in the 1966 film version) commented:

The character is so diverse ... Robert Bolt’s writing gave me so many clues. It would have been sheer nonsense to re-create some kind of great historical epic; the very act of scaling down the action made the personal tragedy and the human sacrifice so great. (*Radio Times*, BBC, London, 1976)

Most importantly, the play raises crucial political and moral questions that we still face in society today. You don’t have to agree with More’s religious views to understand why he was condemned or to engage in
the same basic arguments. The play encourages debate about our own ideals – would we be prepared to stand up for them, even if it became unsafe? We see old laws safeguarding human rights being altered or even cancelled to meet what politicians worldwide claim to be urgent needs of state. More’s life as a subject continues to reflect a testing time for people of good conscience everywhere.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

To understand why Henry VIII’s public servants and churchmen were inclined in general to go along with his demands and why so much pressure was exerted on More to conform, you need to be aware of the broad historical circumstances affecting England and Europe at the time.

Early Tudor England

The political and religious situations at the end of the fifteenth century when More was born were interconnected and highly unstable. He was about seven in 1485 when the so-called Wars of the Roses (a dynastic struggle between two branches of the same ruling family that caused thirty years of civil war) ended with the death of Richard III on a battlefield. The victor, Henry Tudor, was proclaimed Henry VII; he had to spend the next twenty-four years strengthening his tenuous but defensible claim to the English throne and establishing his own dynasty.

Bolt’s Preface sketches in the next historical step. Henry’s heir, Prince Arthur (a clever choice of name to gain popularity by evoking the heroic tradition of King Arthur), died soon after his marriage in 1501 to Catherine, Princess of Aragon. The second son, Prince Henry, married Arthur’s widow (principally to maintain the Spanish alliance) and was crowned Henry VIII in 1509. In order to marry his brother’s wife, normally a forbidden relationship in Christian church law, Henry was given a special dispensation by Pope Julius II.

The rise of public servants

Another significant development was occurring at this time in power relations around the monarch. Feudal aristocrats who fought for power during the Wars of the Roses were beginning to lose ground to a new breed of career public servants. Henry VIII still surrounded himself with hereditary nobility, like More’s friend the Duke of Norfolk, but astute commoners were also rising through the ranks of public office. These included Thomas Cromwell, a farrier’s son who became Henry’s Secretary of State, then Chancellor; and Richard Rich, who rose through positions in the legislature to become Lord Chancellor in his turn. Henry’s most influential chancellor, Thomas Wolsey, was a butcher’s son who became a cardinal.
Thomas Cromwell
Cromwell, especially, exerted control over parliamentary business by lobbying and drafting Bills, and supervised affairs of the Church in the interests of good management for the Crown. Unlike Wolsey, who rose to power through the Church, Cromwell was a layman and a pragmatist, a man to do the king’s business. He devised constitutional ways to both limit the independent power of bishops and, more significantly, redirect the prime allegiance of English clergy to the monarch rather than the pope. He also supervised the wholesale closure of monasteries in England, appropriating the Roman Catholic Church’s considerable wealth for Henry’s treasury.

While More expressed his own views on religious reform, he did so from a conservative position within the faith and was opposed to Cromwell’s idea of supreme control of English Catholics by the English king.

The Reformation
To appreciate More’s dilemma you need to consider how he would have been reacting to religious changes of the period. It isn’t necessary to understand all the details of the Reformation as it affected England (specifically from 1529 to 1559) to follow the play’s arguments and points of religious tension. Read Dickens (1964) for more details if you’re interested in this aspect of history; and see Bolt’s discussion in the Preface of how he draws on history to create a drama about ‘the way it was lived’ (p.x).

Catholicism in England and Europe
Early Tudor England was part of a larger European ‘unity’ of Christian countries (France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Austria), supposedly held together by spiritual allegiance to the supreme head of the Roman Catholic Church, the Pope. Generations of disgracefully mercenary popes and rival popes, as well as a few good ones, had been tolerated by English people who had gone on practising their Christian religion at a mostly untroubled distance from European scandals.

There had been earlier English critics of the Papacy and Catholic beliefs and practices, like John Wycliffe (d.1384), whose followers were intermittently persecuted and derisively named ‘Lollards’ (mumblers of prayers). The influence of Lollardy was low-profile but persistent and widespread, stimulating social and political debate about the place of religion in everyday life. Specific targets, like Cardinal Wolsey, the Papal Legate and Chancellor of England, fuelled criticism of the Church.
Thomas More, who succeeded Wolsey, was the first non-clerical Chancellor for generations, yet he was a pious, conservative Catholic who hated heretics (people who thought, spoke and wrote about things contrary to authorised Catholic doctrine). More was authorised to read and report on heretical writings in England and when he became Lord Chancellor he was proud to describe himself as ‘relentless towards thieves, murderers and heretics’ (written as his own epitaph).

**Luther**

Criticism of the established Church became more focused in Europe after 1517, when Martin Luther, a monk and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg, began a series of public attacks on corrupt Church practices. His writings were widely spread, causing violent debate across Europe. This lengthy religious and cultural upheaval, known as the Reformation, devastated individuals on all sides and split countries along religious lines.

Eventually, the European ‘Roman’ Catholic tradition, maintaining allegiance to the pope as spiritual head of a country’s religious life, was divided from the ‘Protestantism’ of countries that no longer recognised the supreme authority of a pope. In the play, Roper exemplifies the shifting thoughts of the time when he argues passionately both for and against Luther’s reforming ideas (p.17, p.36).

**The royal divorce**

Bolt’s ‘Common Man’ suggests that in England, the Reformation ‘was achieved not by bloodshed but by simple Act of Parliament’ (p.47). The catalyst for change was Henry VIII’s divorce and remarriage which, as the play shows, had serious political as well as religious consequences – and blood was certainly shed in the process. It brought down Cardinal Wolsey, enhanced Cromwell’s control and trapped More in a fatal dilemma.

After eighteen years of marriage failed to produce a living male heir, Henry moved to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn for ‘reasons of state’. Divorce required the Pope to reverse the original papal dispensation of 1509 (agreed on theological grounds) to invalidate the royal marriage in 1527 (on contrary theological grounds).

The play picks up the controversy in two important scenes: firstly when Wolsey tries to win More’s support (pp.10–13), and secondly when Henry tries to bully More (pp.29–34). The crux of the argument for conscientious Catholics was a conflict between irreconcilable passages in the Bible about
marring a brother’s wife. In the end the new Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, supported Henry and declared the royal marriage null and void. Cromwell then pushed legislation through Parliament to enforce compliance with Henry’s will.

In the play, Henry appeals to More to help him clear his ‘conscience’ for making an incestuous marriage with Catherine. His textual authority is Leviticus 18:16, ‘Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother’s wife’, a point reiterated in Leviticus 20:21, ‘if a man take his brother’s wife, it is an unclean thing … they shall be childless’. More, in reply, cites Deuteronomy 25:5, which appears to support the idea of marrying a dead brother’s wife.

Three Bills guided through Parliament by Cromwell to become new statutes between 1532 and 1534 compromised More’s beliefs and loyalties; in his view, the legitimate moral and spiritual power of the Church was undermined permanently for political expediency – that is, simply to allow Henry’s divorce to proceed.

Submission of the clergy
This was a process which made the Convocation (assembly of bishops) forbidden to legislate except by licence and assent of the Crown. More resigned the Chancellorship in protest (see p.48, pp.52–3).

Succession Act
After Archbishop Cranmer declared the marriage to Catherine null and void, Parliament recognised Henry’s marriage to Anne Boleyn and settled royal succession on their children as legitimate heirs. Slandering the marriage was treason; compliance was required by an oath. The play emphasises the significance of this Act in More’s concern about the actual wording of the oath (pp.73–4), his interrogation after he refuses to take it (pp.76–9), and the way in which Margaret compromises herself by trying to persuade him to save his life (p.83).

Act of Supremacy
In 1521 Henry wrote a book defending the papacy and refuting Luther’s arguments about Catholic sacraments, for which Pope Leo X granted him the title Fidei Defensor, Defender of the Faith. The abbreviation FID DEF is still found near the sovereign’s head on all English coins. Henry was excommunicated in 1533 by Pope Clement VII. In a final retaliation, the 1534 Act unequivocally declared the king to be Supreme Head of
the English Church, rejecting all foreign authority (i.e. the pope) in ecclesiastical matters.

**More: a virtuous career in the world**

More struggled inwardly to balance two ways of being, the spiritual and the worldly. He was rigorously pious, attending daily services in his private chapel and secretly wearing a hair shirt throughout his life to mortify the flesh. At the same time, he was a successful lawyer, royal servant and head of a large family household in Chelsea. The play illustrates both aspects of More’s character, especially during the scene in which Henry makes a ‘surprise’ visit (pp.25–41).

**Utopia**

More was associated with the foremost European thinkers and scholars of the time. Today he might be called a ‘public intellectual’, although he was not given to public pronouncements so much as known for his devotional writings and *Utopia*, an expression of More’s ideas for a perfectly organised civil society.

**Argument and wit**

The intellectual energy that characterised More’s relationships can be traced in several ways in Bolt’s play. Consider how he engages in argument with two very different young men, Rich (e.g. pp.2–5) and Roper (e.g. pp.16–18). He exercises his wit with Wolsey, Cromwell, Chapuys, Norfolk, Henry, Cranmer, Alice and Margaret. More’s Christian humanist approach to education for women is exemplified in the affectionate pride he has in his daughter Margaret’s erudition, and in his offer to teach Alice to read.

**‘The English Socrates’**

A sinister note on More’s political situation is introduced by Chapuys, who reminds More that Erasmus calls him ‘the English Socrates’ (p.49). This is a dangerously attractive nickname for someone who is tempted to face the prospect of martyrdom for his principles. More is well aware that Socrates, condemned for expressing critical ideas on ethics and politics in the Greek state, could have escaped but chose bravely to accept a cup of hemlock as a death sentence in 399 BC.