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A Utopian, a Martyr or a Fool: Fictional Portrayals of Sir Thomas More in “A Man for All Seasons” and “Wolf Hall”

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Introduction

The figure of Sir Thomas More, the founding father of utopian thought, a scholar and a saint, has attracted the attention of numerous writers and playwrights who made him a protagonist of their works. His biography, abounding in dramatic changes of fortune, first from an average lawyer to the Lord Chancellor of England, through the impoverishment and disfavour following his refusal to support king Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Boleyn, and finally to the dramatic circumstances of his imprisonment in the Tower of London, the trial for high treason and the ensuing beheading—all of these events are a tempting and almost ready-made material for all possible kinds of dramatic or novelistic plots. Most of the recent ones draw upon the material and facts presented in the ground-breaking biography of Thomas More published by Raymond Wilson Chambers in 1935. This chapter analyses two of such works, Robert Bolt's and Fred Zinnemann's 1966 film *A Man for All Seasons* and the more recent novel *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel, published in 2009, both of which come back to the Renaissance utopian, More's personality, dramatic life story and the historical events of his times. Characteristically, both works discussed here present the fictional character modelled on the historical Thomas More along entirely contrastive lines. For Robert Bolt, Thomas More is first and foremost a martyr and a paragon of all virtues; the film consistently creates his character as a noble and tragic

figure. In contrast, for Hilary Mantel and her main protagonist, Thomas Cromwell, More is primarily an impractical fool and a hypocrite. Interestingly, none of the works dwells extensively—if at all—on More's *Utopia*, which, from the point of view of intellectual history, is probably one of his major contributions to the development of European thought and, from a biographical perspective, perhaps an important moment in the protagonist's life. Yet, neither the film nor the novel present the ideas or the impact of this work and *Utopia* constitutes an eloquently absent hole in the centre of both texts. Still, this omission—however challenging—seems understandable and well motivated by the two works' themes and goals. Firstly, their plots focus on the events much later than the year 1516, visibly more dramatic and picturesque than the somewhat static and less cinematographically attractive intellectual history. Secondly, because they are clearly character-driven, both the film and the novel are interested in More—the man—rather than in his work. Thus, because of the audience and theme-oriented reasons, they decide to eliminate More's book and his utopian ideas from the various subplots forming the canvas of their works. Though directly unrepresented, *Utopia* does, however, constitute a major subtext for both *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall*, providing an underlying context for the plot and motivations of the character, explaining the background of disputes and choices, and introducing a further political dimension to both works. This chapter discusses the two texts to show how the unrepresented text exerts a strong, though paradoxical, narrative and intellectual influence on the two fictional portrayals of the author of *Utopia*.

The Drama of the Martyr

Fred Zinnemann's film *A Man for All Seasons*, released in 1966, is based on the extremely successful earlier play by Robert Bolt, who then wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation. Starring Paul Scofield as More, Wendy Hiller as his wife Alice, Orson Welles as Cardinal Wolsey and the young John Hurt as the particularly unworthy Richard Rich, the film won four Academy Awards in 1966 (for Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Adapted Screenplay) and has enjoyed an unceasing acclaim ever since. The film focuses on the last seven years in the life of Thomas More, following his lack of support for King Henry VIII's divorce and new marriage, his resignation from the office of Lord Chancellor, the refusal to take the oath recognising the king of England as the head of the Church of England, and his ensuing im-

prisonment, trial and execution. All of these events, exceedingly dramatic in themselves, abounding in turns of fortune and gravity, would suffice to make a dynamic plot of any text. In Bolt's and Zinnemann's film, however, they are subordinated to the character of Sir Thomas More who is an intellectual and emotional centre of the narrative.

In a succession of scenes and intelligent, witty dialogues—which are a particularly strong element of the film and one of the hallmarks of Bolt's plays in general—there emerges a portrait of the main protagonist who is consciously stylised as a noble hero of a grand tragedy. The figure of Thomas More is first installed as that of a good lawyer and an honest clerk: his knowledge of the law is impressive and his competence unquestionable; moreover—in a sharp contrast to the majority of his colleagues—he does not accept bribes, nor does he profit financially from the offices he holds. The first attempt to discredit him undertaken by Thomas Cromwell and involving the alleged bribery case falls miserably precisely because it is so manifestly ill-founded. He is a principled rather than opportunistic lawyer: in the often quoted scene of the argument with his son-in-law, William Roper, he declares that he would give the devil the benefit of the law as it is the law and law only that can defend an innocent—even if it happens to be the devil (Zinnemann 1966). In one of the film's cruel ironies, this knowledge of and hope invested in law is cruelly abused by his own trial where he is first accused of standing against the king (when in fact he merely refused to support his act of supremacy), and then sentenced due to the false testimony. Thus, his competence and principles are drastically violated and have to give in to sheer power unafraid to exercise itself in order to have its way.

Apart from his professional high standards the character of Thomas More is shown in the film as a warm and affectionate man: his relationship with his wife Alice and daughter Margaret is close and warm; and even when his political decisions result in the impoverishment of the family and the loss of their status, he is able to explain his motivation and make them accept it. Family life and the simple pleasure of sharing time with the loved ones seem to be an important part of the character of Thomas More: though not interested in food, he enjoys common meals, and though not caring particularly about dress, he appreciates its importance for the female members of the household. Likewise, his figure is constructed as a good and loyal friend, ending his friendship with Lord Norfolk in order not to test or abuse the latter's loyalty to the King and choosing the loss of a friend rather than putting him in an uncomfortable position. Ironically, his personal loyalty and fair conduct are, too,

like his belief in law, severely abused: during the trial it is Richard Rich, the man he helped and knew from his youth, that provides false testimony and, like the Biblical Saint Peter, betrays him three times.

Finally, Sir Thomas More is represented in Zinnemann's film as a staunch defender of religion and a man of profound faith, unafraid to stand for it even if it takes displeasing the king and risking his own life. Unable to support the king's divorce, he resigns from the office of the chancellor; unable to take the oath, he refuses to do it and keeps silent about his motives. He is not happy to lose his life and part with its simple pleasures, but resigned to do so to be consistent with his own principles. In the last conversation with his wife staged in the film, while already in the Tower, he explains that what he believes in is a part of himself, a part of his soul, and he cannot simply discard it (Zinneman 1966). Again, this spiritual consistency ironically leads him into the scaffold, as what the king and the state require is exactly the opposite.

All the thus constructed and shown in the film character features of the figure of Thomas More make him not merely a noble but essentially a tragic hero. His competence, honesty, loyalty and perseverance collide dramatically with the ignorance, dishonesty, manipulation and egoism of those who surround him, starting with King Henry himself. The authority and respect he commands turn against him once the latter features become advisable and he comes into a violent conflict with the less than noble standards of his time. Thus, the film constructs its major conflict along the lines of classical drama: as an insolvable conflict of two opposing ideas with one of them inevitably losing and the death of the noble hero being a dramatisation of the impossibility of a compromise. Presented by Max Scheler as the crucial characteristics of the tragedy, the tragic conflict changes it from a literary genre into an existential concept (Scheler 1996: 70-71). The conflict does not arise out of blunder or frailty but is a result of the tragic knot of values which clash despite the protagonist's will (Scheler 1996: 72). As in his other screenplays, e.g. in *The Mission*, Robert Bolt is interested in tragic heroes and in the drama of the martyr who falls prey to the powers over which he has no control, and who yet tries to preserve his integrity and dignity. Portrayed in *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More is another example of Bolt's characters of high principle that stand for values and virtues explicitly unwelcome by their contemporaries and who are killed precisely for these principles. And yet, in keeping with Bolt's sympathy for tragic characters and noble values, despite their tragic end, these are precisely these noble figures that triumph morally over those who use brutal power only.

The Shrewdness of the Clerk

This portrayal may be sharply contrasted with the representation of Sir Thomas More included in the recent Booker Prize-winning novel by Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (2009), in which the Renaissance scholar and Lord Chancellor features as one of the background characters. The novel's plot is set between the years 1527-1535, and so covers almost exactly the same period as Zinnemann's film; it focuses, however, on the figure of Thomas Cromwell, first on his service as a lawyer and an assistant employed by Cardinal Wolsey, and then, after the Cardinal's fall, on his rise to the highest positions and influence at the court of King Henry VIII. The novel, though ostensibly employing the third-person narration, reflects chiefly Cromwell's point of view and represents his opinions and ideas. As a consequence, it constructs the character of Sir Thomas More as not merely marginal to the narrative—in contrast to Zinnemann's film where it is central—since the novel's focus lies somewhere else; more importantly, the character of More and his views emerge as considerably less positive and overall more difficult to sympathise with than it was the case with the film.

Mantelian Cromwell, though seemingly unprejudiced, perceives Thomas More as an altogether obstinate and limited man and as a misanthrope unable to enjoy life. In one of the early passages in the novel he notices that “under his clothes, it is well known, Thomas More wears a jerkin of horsehair [and] beats himself with a small scourge, of the type used by some religious orders” (Mantel 2009: 87). For Cromwell, such practices are nonsensical and he has no understanding for them: as he comments, “we don't have to invite pain in [...]. It's waiting for us, sooner rather than later” (Mantel 2009: 87). Far from being a hedonist himself, Cromwell sees such practices as a profound hypocrisy: unnecessary and conspicuous. Similarly, he notices the shabbiness of Lord Chancellor (whom he describes as “genial, shabby [...] his shirt collar is grubby”; Mantel 2009: 121) and likewise considers it to be merely a pose. His implied opinion about the future saint is quite critical: he clearly sees his actions as inflated and exaggerated, resembling behaviour of the Biblical Pharisees rather than genuine simplicity and humility.

Though a religious man himself, knowing by heart the whole Bible and reading it avidly, Cromwell has no time for religious orthodoxy and lack of tolerance; he clearly disapproves of Sir More for his persecution of heretics, tortures and burnings. The terrifying description of the burning of one of the “heretics”, ordered by More,

is a clear accusation of the chancellor of not merely narrow-mindedness but primarily of the lack of humanity. Just as in Zinnemann's film, Mantelian More is also a man of principle but this time this principle is much more negative: he does not hesitate to burn a man alive for the views that do not conform to the principles he holds dear. Thus, in *Wolf Hall*, both the very principle and its consequences are seriously questioned and presented as sheer cruelty rather than Christian faith. Also as a scholar, Sir More writes prolifically about heresy, not limiting himself to academic arguments only; as Cromwell observes, "More, in his pamphlets against Luther, calls the German shit. He says that his mouth is like the world's anus. You would not think that such words would proceed from Thomas More, but they do. No one has rendered the Latin tongue more obscene" (Mantel 2009: 121). A much more flexible character himself, Cromwell finds such extremity alarming, both in form and in consequences; so fixed an attitude clearly seems to him excessive and wrong. The fictional Cromwell prefers compromise; even till the very end of More's trial he hopes the chancellor will bend his unswerving views, give in a bit and save his life. He openly declares, "I want him to have every opportunity to live to rethink his position, show loyalty to our king and go home" (Mantel 2009: 594). A shrewd lawyer, Cromwell believes in negotiations, which he says are always cheaper than an open conflict; sees no ill in compromise and change and has little understanding of More's hard-line views, which for him are a nonsensical obstinacy.

Primarily, however, he is suspicious of Sir Thomas More's public appearance: he seems to believe that a lot of More's features are simply a show designed to create the image of authority, where at the bottom, a much less dignified motivations may lie. In an angry speech delivered at the dinner to which both he and More are invited, Cromwell asks openly if ironically:

Let's have this straight. Thomas More here will tell you, I would have been a simple monk, but my father put me to the law. I would spend my life in church, if I had the choice. I am, as you know, indifferent to wealth. I am devoted to things of the spirit. The world's esteem is nothing to me. [...]. So how did he become Lord Chancellor? Was it an accident? (Mantel 2009: 191)

Cromwell clearly implies that the pose of humility and spirituality that Thomas More creates and impresses the world with is merely a pose and underneath, he is a man as greedy and vain as anyone else, not necessarily in an excessive but in a purely human way. For him, More chiefly pretends to be a saint-like figure and his adher-

ence to religious principles he interprets as a way of keeping up at all costs the appearance of one. For pragmatic Cromwell it is not merely an impractical obstinacy; more damagingly, for him it is sheer hypocrisy.

Though politically an opponent, Cromwell shows some understanding towards Thomas More. Like him, More is a good lawyer; he is a sharp scholar, which Cromwell admires; he is a religious man, which Cromwell himself is too; finally, like himself, More has a brilliant daughter whom he teaches just as he does his own one. This common ground makes these two characters similar and could, in theory, secure their understanding. Ironically, however, their similarities set them apart and it is the difference in their attitudes towards challenges that makes them mortal enemies. Cromwell the pragmatic has no patience for More the idealist, not because he himself has no ideals, but because he believes his ideals are in the end insignificant when the king's will is concerned. More believes in the moral victory of a principle, Cromwell—in the effectiveness of a strategy; Cromwell is ready to adapt and negotiate, More categorically refuses to do so.

In the end, then, when perceived and described through the eyes of his political and ideological opponent, the fictional figure of Thomas More emerges as the one of a principled fool: a hypocrite ready to sacrifice his life for his public appearance of a saint. Such a presentation is obviously distorted by the narrative perspective adopted and follows logically from the lack of sympathy and understanding on the part of Cromwell, whose character is the narrative focaliser in the novel. Though unfavourable and subjective, it seems, however, quite a plausible portrayal, far removed from the heroic and noble rendering of the same character done earlier by Robert Bolt.

The Importance of Utopia

Interestingly, in none of the analysed works does Thomas More's *Utopia* feature prominently—if at all. In Zinnemann's film there is only one scene in which a gathering of people in the inn are merrily talking and the characters laugh that they are talking about utopia (*A Man for All Seasons*); likewise, in Mantel's much longer and detailed novel there are only one or two side remarks mentioning the word "utopia" with no further narrative consequences. One reason accounting for this interesting omission may be the setting of the action more than ten years after the publishing of More's work and in a different political climate. Both the film and the novel are focused on

the events surrounding the Act of Supremacy, taking into account politics much more than intellectual history and clearly more interested in the turbulent historical events than in ideological disputes. Another reason explaining the absence of *Utopia* may be connected with the narrative focus of both works: both the film and the novel are character-driven, their centre are the characters, More and Cromwell respectively, set against the background of their times with the politics—as they both were prominent public figures—coming to the fore. *Utopia* does not seem, under the circumstances, a necessary context to show and understand the characters; faced with political and moral dilemmas, they have little time and opportunity to discuss it.

And yet, though unrepresented in the two narratives, Thomas More's *Utopia* may be argued to provide an important context for both works and explain to some extent the drastic differences in the way they construct the fictional character of its author. Zinnemann's and Bolt's More is a man of principle and integrity, ready to face death for his principles if necessary. His principles, however, are not those of the Roman Catholic Church only. Behind them lies a vision of a state which is a state of law and harmony; a structure in which every man has a place and in which order and plan rule rather than chaos and impulsive whimsical decisions. Law is an important part of the description of More's utopian society; Utopians have few laws but these laws are observed and provide a basis for all the relations within the society (More 1901: Book Two). The utopian laws are simple and clear—there is no need for a complicated and obscure system which would serve only lawyers themselves; it is also incorruptible—bribes and wrong decisions have no place in the Utopian society. More's *Utopia* describes a society which is simple and—precisely due to the simplicity and rationality of its organisation—immensely attractive; he describes a social organisation based on the ideal of stability and predictability, with a clear notion of which virtues are rewarded and which vices punished. Thus, organised state provides its inhabitants with the much desired safety that is not threatened by whimsical or unpredictable changes of fortune. Perhaps that is why More—though seemingly approving of divorces in his book—does oppose the actual divorce of King Henry VIII, seeing it not so much as a sacrilege or religious trespassing, but as a wanton breach of the law which should be observed. His moral immutability, then, is based on the clear idea of what a state should be like—predictable, stable and safe for its inhabitants—and his firm refusal to accept any departures from this model. It is quite clear that the society presented in More's *Utopia* is constructed in many cases as an antithesis and criticism of the English society of his times (Ostrowski 2001: 51). Thus, the

insistence of Thomas More on clear laws and their observance, so emphatically presented in *Utopia*, may be interpreted as a veiled criticism of the whimsical and random treatment of the law by the ruling Tudors.

Similarly, the simplicity of lifestyle led by the fictional Thomas More reflects perhaps the descriptions found in the real-life More's *Utopia*. The lifestyle of Utopians is depicted there as busy but comfortable, deprived of luxury and conspicuous wealth, yet aimed at development and pleasure. Learning and reading are an essential part of life, and are encouraged both for men and women. The fictional Thomas More in both *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall* lives by these principles, too, even though they are ironically exaggerated and treated with suspicion by the character of Cromwell, who draws attention to More's shabbiness and sham rather than mere simplicity. Yet, the education of Thomas More's daughter and the stress put on the usefulness of all the members of the family reflect perhaps the model of social relations proposed by the historical More in *Utopia*. The fictional figure of Sir Thomas More, then, seen either as a martyr (as in *A Man for All Seasons*), or criticised as a hypocrite (in *Wolf Hall*), in both cases seems heavily modelled by the ideas of the society expressed in More's *Utopia*. Perhaps it is the vision of a harmonious social organism regulated by rational laws, stable, predictable and fair, that lies behind the characters consistency—or obstinacy, according to Cromwell—and makes him reject the reckless and capricious behaviour of King Henry VIII. What the fictional Sir Thomas More seems to abhor most is the state and its inhabitants treated as a ruler's property and exploited according to his passing whims. This is the crux of his conflict with Cromwell: while the latter seems ready to compromise any ideas of the state he might have for the sake of the king's whim, More adheres strictly to his vision of the state as it should be in principle rather than as it is in the reality of his times. His refusal to serve, then, and to support the king may be seen as both religion- and conscience-driven, and as an expression of his rejection of a certain model of the state with which he deeply disagrees.

Thomas More's golden book, then, with its description of an imaginary society, although seemingly absent from the two narratives, may yet provide an interesting insight as to the motivations and ideas of the otherwise quite unfathomable and paradoxical fictional character of Sir Thomas More. Represented either as a hero (as in *A Man for All Seasons*) or as a fool (as in *Wolf Hall*), in both works he seems to be a larger-than-life character, whose motivations are either unusually noble or impractically naïve. Yet, however contrastively presented, the protagonist's character traits

and deeds might be interpreted not only as resulting from the features of his fictional personality but also as a consequence of his theories and ideas which can be traced back to the earlier published book, and which may be variously—either positively or negatively—viewed. More's *Utopia*, then, although unrepresented, inevitably provides a natural and indispensable intertext to interpret the fictional representations of Sir Thomas More, both in the two works analysed above, and in other artistic representations of his figure.

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