Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC 175

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers Who Lived between 1900 and 1999, from the First Published Critical Appraisals to Current Evaluations

Thomas J. Schoenberg
Lawrence J. Trudeau
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Preface

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Contents

Robert Bolt
1924-1995

(Full name Robert Oxton Bolt) English playwright and screenwriter.

The following entry presents an overview of Bolt's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *CLC,* Volume 14.

INTRODUCTION

Bolt is best known for his historical play *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), a work based on the life and death of the English political figure and martyr Sir Thomas More. But he is distinguished as well by his work as an award-winning screenwriter, having written the screenplays for such successful films as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and *The Mission* (1986). Bolt's work as both a playwright and a screenwriter centers on a few central themes: the plight of individual selfhood in a corrupt society, the nature of heroism, and the importance of personal conscience. His willingness to address these as well as larger historical and political issues in his dramas and screenplays earned him both popular success and critical acclaim. Although often compared to the American playwright Arthur Miller, Bolt was perhaps more influenced by the German dramatist Bertolt Brecht, and he is credited with introducing Brecht's techniques of "epic theater" to the British stage. While his other plays failed to achieve the critical stature of *A Man for All Seasons,* Bolt is considered a major figure in 1960s British theater, and his seminal achievement, *A Man for All Seasons,* is regarded as one of the great historical plays of the twentieth century.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bolt was born August 15, 1924, in Sale, Greater Manchester, England. He was the second son of Ralph Bolt, a shop owner, and Leah Binnion Bolt, a primary school teacher. Bolt attended Manchester Grammar School, and after graduating in 1940 worked for Sun Life Assurance Company of Manchester. He began attending Manchester University, where he studied history and became a member of the British Communist Party. Bolt served a short term in World War II with the Royal West African Frontier Force in Ghana, achieving the rank of lieutenant. In 1946 he returned to Manchester University and left the Communist Party when Russia began its takeover of Eastern European countries. Bolt graduated with honors in 1949, earning a bachelor's degree in history. After obtaining teaching certification from Exeter University, Bolt worked as a teacher at a village school in Bishopsteignton in Devon. During his tenure there he wrote a school nativity play, an experience that sparked his interest in playwriting. Between 1952 and 1958 Bolt taught at the unorthodox private secondary school, Millfield, in Somerset. While teaching, he also began a career as a radio dramatist. Notable works from this period include *The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew* (1952), a radio play for children chronicling the adventures of a slow-witted knight named Sir Oblong Fitz, and the radio broadcast version of his best-known play, *A Man for All Seasons,* which was originally aired on July 26, 1954. Bolt moved from radio dramatist to playwright when his radio play *The Last of the Wine,* which aired in April 1955, was adapted for the stage in 1956.

In April 1957 Bolt's first play written exclusively for the stage, *The Critic and the Heart,* was produced at the Oxford Playhouse, but met with little success. His second play, *Flowering Cherry* (1957), often compared to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman,* was considerably more successful and earned Bolt the *Evening Standard* Most Promising Playwright Award. Bolt's reputation as a major dramatist was established with the production of his next two plays, *A Man for All Seasons* and *The Tiger and the Horse* (1960). The success of these plays, particularly *A Man for All Seasons,* garnered attention for Bolt, and he was asked to write the screenplay for *Lawrence of Arabia,* which he adapted from the memoirs of T. E. Lawrence. Bolt wrote several more screenplays and won two Oscars, one for *Doctor Zhivago* and the second for the film adaptation of his own *A Man for All Seasons.* Although Bolt continued to write and produce several more plays, including *Vivat! Vivat Regina!* (1970) and *State of Revolution* (1977), none enjoyed the success of his previous works. In 1979 Bolt was left partially paralyzed from a stroke, but he continued writing screenplays, including *The Bounty* (1984), *The Mission,* and finally *A Dry White Season* (1989), which he co-wrote with Andre Brink, Euphan Palcy, and Colin Welland. Bolt died February 20, 1995, in Hampshire, England.

MAJOR WORKS

Bolt's first successful play, *Flowering Cherry,* depicts the disintegration of a middle-class family, as the father, Jim Cherry, dreams of quitting his job as an insurance salesman and purchasing an orchard, thereby recapturing the rural life he enjoyed as a child. As the play progresses, it becomes clear that Cherry has no intention of leaving his career and is holding onto his dream only as a means of escape from the daily boredom of his corporate life. Eventually, Cherry loses his job, and his wife, Isobel, plans on selling their house to purchase an orchard, thus fulfilling her husband's dream. But Cherry hesitates once more and fails to act. The play ends with Isobel leaving Cherry, who then suffers a heart attack and dies. His final vision is of a flowering orchard. *Flowering Cherry* presents family trauma and the ennui of modern middle-class life with relentless detail, and it is often seen by critics as a lament for the plight of the modern working man. In this respect, it is frequently compared to Miller's *Death of a Salesman.*

In his greatest work for the stage, *A Man for All Seasons,* Bolt draws from historical material to tell the story of Sir Thomas More, a political figure from the sixteenth century who was executed by King Henry VIII for his loyalty to the Catholic church. Passive heroism, a familiar theme in much of Bolt's work, typifies More's behavior throughout the play. For example, he attempts to remain silent on the issue of the King's break with the Catholic church, choosing neither to condone nor publicly denounce his monarch's decision, all the while navigating traps set by other characters who wish to discover his true opinion. Because of its sympathetic treatment of the conflict between an individual and the state, the play has been compared to Miller's *The Crucible,* but Brecht's techniques of epic drama are also readily apparent in the work. The inclusion of the composite character, the Common Man, is Bolt's most obvious imitation of Brecht's style. The Common Man, who plays many of the smaller roles, serves as a foil to More, but he also transcends the bounds of the story and acts as narrator or chorus to the audience. Bolt followed a more traditional form in his screenplay for *A Man for All Seasons* and eliminated the character of the Common Man altogether. Critics have drawn parallels between the political unrest of the play and that of Bolt's own time, which was permeated by the Cold War and the looming threat of nuclear holocaust.

Bolt's prevailing interest in the theme of individual conscience resurfaced in his next play, *The Tiger and the Horse,* which critics consider a companion piece to *A Man for All Seasons.* The title of the play borrows from poet William Blake, who wrote in one of his *Proverbs of Hell,* "The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction." The action of the play centers on Jack Dean, an astronomer and college master who aspires to become vice chancellor at the university in which he works, and his wife, Gwen, an avid gardener. Their daughter, Stella, is romantically pursued by Louis, a young student who wants the Deans to sign his petition regarding the dangers of nuclear warfare. Although Gwen wants to sign the petition, she knows that doing so will destroy her husband's career at the university. After great internal struggle, Gwen signs the petition and attaches it to the remaining pieces of a painting that she has destroyed in the master's study at the university. Rather than condemning his wife, Jack also chooses to sign the petition and abandon his ambition.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Beginning with the production of *Flowering Cherry,* and increasingly thereafter, Bolt's plays received significant critical attention, much of it favorable. However, it was *A Man for All Seasons* that established his place as a major playwright. Critics praised Bolt's ability in this work to employ a variety of techniques, both traditional and experimental, and to move seamlessly between styles while maintaining a unity of form and construction. The play was also lauded for the nuanced

and vital portrait it offered, not just of an admirable individual, but of the contested ground between the overlapping spheres of religion, law, and personal responsibility.

Following the critical success of *A Man for All Seasons,* Bolt produced a number of screenplays, several of which received both critical and popular acclaim, most notably *Doctor Zhivago, Lawrence of Arabia,* and *The Mission.* Bolt won an Oscar for *Doctor Zhivago,* the Writers' Guild Award for *Lawrence of Arabia,* and the Palm d'Or for *The Mission.* Although some critics found the last of these screenplays to be didactic and moralizing, others maintained that the epic nature of the tragedy presented was not at all inaccurate, and that the simplified, somewhat stylized way in which the events were retold created a parable that was both relevant and necessary in the modern era of global trade and postcolonial exploitation.

Recent evaluations of Bolt, especially those since his death in 1995, have focused on his output as both a playwright and a screenwriter. Although *A Man for All Seasons* remains his most-studied work, his other dramas and screenplays have received increasing scholarly attention and praise. Bolt has been lauded for his depictions of the individual's struggle with morality, social corruption, idealism, and a desire to achieve greatness, even heroism, in the modern world. He is best remembered for writing effective, entertaining, and sometimes disturbing plays in a traditional and naturalistic style, all of which deal, in one way or another, with the conflict between individual conscience or morality and society. As Gerald Carpenter has noted in a survey of Bolt's career as a screenwriter, "If one had to catch the essence of Robert Bolt's screenplays in a single phrase, I would say that his scripts are dramas of the threatened self. There comes a time in every Bolt film when the protagonist must choose between self and society. The Bolt hero always chooses self, even on pain of death."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew (radio play) 1952
Fifty Pigs (radio play) 1953
The Master (radio play) 1953
Ladies and Gentlemen (radio play) 1954
A Man for All Seasons (radio play) 1954
The Banana Tree (radio play) 1955
Fair Music (radio play) 1955
The Last of the Wine (radio play) 1955
Mr. Sampson's Sundays (radio play) 1955
The Last of the Wine (play) 1956
Oblong and Baron Bolligrew (radio play) 1956
The Window (radio play) 1956
The Critic and the Heart (play) 1957; revised as *Brother and Sister,* 1967
Flowering Cherry (play) 1957
A Man for All Seasons (teleplay) 1957
Oblong and the Bolligrew Island Dragon (radio play) 1957
Oblong and the Lost Treasure of the Bolligrews (radio play) 1957
Oblong and the Magic Apple (radio play) 1957
Oblong and the Siege of Bolligrew Castle (radio play) 1957
Oblong and the Very Difficult Law (radio play) 1957
Oblong Meets the Dragon Again (radio play) 1957
The Drunken Sailor (radio play) 1958
A Man for All Seasons (play) 1960
The Tiger and the Horse (play) 1960
Lawrence of Arabia [with Michael Wilson; adaptor; from the writings of T. E. Lawrence] (screenplay) 1962
Gentle Jack (play) 1963
Three Plays (plays) 1963
Doctor Zhivago [adaptor; from the novel *Doktor Zivago* by Boris Pasternak] (screenplay) 1965
The Thwarting of Baron Bolligrew (play) 1965
A Man for All Seasons (screenplay) 1966
The Red Tent [with Richard L. Adams and Ennio De Concini] (screenplay) 1969
Ryan's Daughter (screenplay) 1970
Vivat! Vivat Regina! (play) 1970
Lady Caroline Lamb (screenplay) 1972
State of Revolution (play) 1977
The Bounty [adaptor; from the novel *Captain Bligh and Mr. Christian* by Richard Hough] (screenplay) 1984
The Mission (screenplay) 1986
A Dry White Season [with Andre Brink, Euphan Palcy, and Colin Welland] (screenplay) 1989

CRITICISM

M. W. Fosbery (essay date September 1963)

SOURCE: Fosbery, M. W. "*A Man for All Seasons.*" *English Studies in Africa* 6, no. 2 (September 1963): 164-72.

[*In the following essay, Fosbery argues that in* A Man for All Seasons *Bolt fails to create relationships among characters, a flaw that renders Thomas More a hollow and ghost-like character.*]

Robert Bolt's play about Sir Thomas More [***A Man for All Seasons***] has aroused enthusiasm in many quarters. We are liable to be told: this play is intelligent, this play is moving, this play is about the courage to be. Maybe it is *about* the courage to be; in his preface Mr Bolt says, ". . . at length he [More] was asked to retreat from the final area where he located his self. And there this supple, humorous, unassuming and sophisticated person set like metal, was overtaken by an absolutely primitive rigour and could no more be budged than a cliff."[1] And in prison Mr Bolt's More states, "When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water (*cups hands*) and if he opens his fingers *then*—he needn't hope to find himself again."[2] Hence, the play would seem to confirm Mr Bolt's stated admiration for Camus—Camus who wrote, "To keep quiet is to allow yourself to believe that you have no opinions, that you want nothing, and in certain cases it amounts to really wanting nothing."[3] More's refusal to take the oath is thus an act of courage, an affirmation of the existential self. At any rate, the play is *about* such matters.

In a programme note Mr Bolt claims "diffidently" that "all the events essential to the action of his [More's] life during the period covered are present in the play." I don't pretend to the knowledge of the relevant history that Mr Bolt has sweated up, but I gather that More countenanced some practices that were not so saintly. They may be details but, of course, squalid details would have disturbed Mr Bolt's assumption that More is a saint—or (since Mr Bolt makes a point of stating, "But I am not a Catholic nor even in the meaningful sense of the word a Christian"[4]), "a hero of selfhood"[5]. In disturbing those assumptions such details might have made the case of Sir Thomas More not only more real, but also more interesting.

No writer—unless he is a historian or biographer—is bound to follow history accurately. He chooses a particular piece of history for much the same reason that another writer chooses a particular story—because the events covered suggest certain issues, and present an opportunity for the fuller discussion of those issues. If, however, the writer is going to do no more than discuss those issues, he might as well discuss them in the abstract. If he chooses certain events as a medium for those issues, we presume he does so because he intends to embody them, to present them as a living experience. Presumptions, of course, are not always justified.

Mr Bolt writes: "The action of this play ends in 1535 but the play was written in 1960 and if in production one date must obscure the other, it is 1960 which I would wish clearly to occupy the stage."[6] Which is no more than we expect: Mr Bolt is a dramatist, not a historian—he is, or we hope he is, concerned with the living present.

The trouble is the play involves us neither in 1535 nor in 1960. Mr Bolt does not write the language of tushery (though all those addresses of "Master Cromwell", "Master Rich" and Master Etcetera open the door to it), but he catches himself in the vice inherent in historical novels and plays: he wants to present an issue which is valid out of its historical context, but at the same time he knows that the facts of that context are known, that distortion of such facts is the prerogative of Hollywood, and so he must acknowledge the facts. The result is that we are uncomfortably aware of issue and context. Even if there is no clash between them, the context shows itself drably indifferent to the issues. We are given odd scraps of knowledge—Henry VIII rather perfunctorily debating between Leviticus and Deutoronomy. Henry, Wolsey, Cranmer and others make their appearances, and the only life they have lies in our historical associations. We make those associations, we know that people of those names lived some time ago. Rightly enough Mr Bolt says that "to have brought into the play even a fair sample of his [More's] acquaintance would have swamped it in a pageant of great names"[7]; but, even though keeping down the number of great names, Mr Bolt gives us little more than a pageant. And what difference is there between an intellectual pageant—solemnly preoccupied with *1960*—and the pageant of a village fête? The one is more intellectual, but it is no more alive. We bring our associations to these personages, it is true, but the associations are considerably less alive after they have been forced through the duration of Mr Bolt's play. The actor I saw play the king did not help Mr Bolt's cause, but the king's deadness was not the actor's fault. If Henry VIII is to be more than a gold outfit, plumes and all, he must be a dynamic force with a capacity to feel and be felt.

Henry is an intellectual symbol. He boasts of having piloted the newly launched *Great Harry* down the river—the river being another symbol, Mr Bolt explicitly tells us in the preface ("As a figure for the superhuman context I took the largest, most alien, least formulated thing I know, the sea and the water"[8]). *Master* Cromwell tells us—with a sneer utterly deficient in meaningful irony—that Henry wears a pilot's uniform for the occasion—made of gold—and that he holds the wheel—assisted by trained pilots. We take the point without difficulty. Henry will boast that *he* has piloted the country through its crisis; we know that it is the small men who do the work. I do not say the point is not worth making but, as it stands, it is no more than a footnote.

Similarly, More is nothing but a symbol, a symbol to which—I refuse to suggest that he is alive by writing *whom*—the other symbols relate. In short, this is a one-man play. We have no sense that the other characters have any life or significance by themselves or for each other. They are so many ghosts hovering round Sir Tho-

mas More; and because of this failure to show More standing in relationship with anyone, More himself becomes a ghost among ghosts. If the intention is to present an issue—an issue burning away in 1960, which already seems distant and faded—that issue must be an experience; and one man does not make an experience.

Yet presumably Mr Bolt wanted or hoped to convey an experience, of a man's being prepared to die rather than perjure his soul, of faith not simply a moral gesture but a practical necessity. In theory this is what it is or should be. As the play stands, it is rather one aspect of the problem of selfhood that seems to emerge: the struggle between More, the man of faith, and the ubiquitous common man who turns up as servant, boatman, goaler, juryman and executioner. We remember that Mr Bolt is concerned with the topicality of 1960: we must then have the common man who admits that he is "almost taken in", pluming himself that he is not, the common man concerned with the realities of hunger, whose belly is not going to be filled by martyrdom. Hence, there are two planes of reality. The common man keeps well and truly to the stage, firm beneath his feet; More at his first entrance comes out on a skeleton balcony and descends an equally insubstantial staircase. I doubt if this image works even at a threshold level; threshold levels have to be stimulated by a context. The common man quite consistently reads us gobbets from a Lytton-Strachey-like history of More's times. The belittling is his point of view, and he holds to the value of expediency because he does not understand More's reality of faith. Hence, he is the basis of all the other characters in the play who surround More and who cannot see why he must be so obstinate. Quite right the common man is too. If he does not understand More's claimed reality of faith, he must hold to what is real to himself. So, too, must More's wife ask why her husband cannot consider his family. Thus, at the end, because men do not understand the reality of faith, the common man must logically be More's executioner.

But we cannot kill something that does not exist. More claims that his faith is real and Mr Bolt, confessedly more interested in selfhood than Christianity, assents to this claim. More ("hero of selfhood") and all he stands for can exist only in so far as Mr Bolt makes this claim valid. Schematically, of course, More's reality does exist. Otherwise, all the play's ghosts could hardly be seen in relation to More, the centre of the play, and More could not be executed. But the scheme of a work is not itself its power of conviction. We have to ask what is executed—or, rather, whether at the moment of execution anything is actually killed. This means: who or what is Sir Thomas More?

More is a man who owes his loyalties to an authority above family or friends or fellow men. Are we to infer that the man of faith re-enacts Christ? Mr Bolt does not seem to have explored the spiritual position as far as that. The authority, however, is one of place (Rome) and theory (that the Pope is Christ's vicar). By this, More shows himself to be atheist, for his loyalties are to defined objects; since he owes his allegiance, not to the immediacy of God, but to instruments (for what they are worth) of God. Admittedly, the play is ambiguous on this score. More says, "Affection goes as deep in me as you I think, but only God is love right through, Howard, and *that's* my *self*." On the evidence of that alone, More dies for his self or soul—which ought to be an immediate enough apprehension of God. But this raises its own question: why, then, should More feel himself damned if he takes the oath? Because this admits the power of the king to mediate where he has, and can have, no supremacy. This supremacy or authority (the word More uses) is possessed by the Pope. We are back where we started. And this undermines our belief that More *will* meet his God, as he confidently claims, on the scaffold. In saying this, I am aware that I am maintaining the ontological point of view, and that a cosmologist will assert the opposite. This may be a matter of personal approach, but Mr Bolt does nothing to convince me that the cosmological approach is any less theoretical, or any more real than I thought before. Why is this?

More is positively repellent, a "creeping Jesus". Maybe Robert Whittinton (who provided the title) spoke the truth of the historical More, that he was "a man for all seasons"; maybe More, as Samuel Johnson wrote (also quoted by Mr Bolt), "was the person of the greatest virtue these islands ever produced." Unfortunately, there is not the faintest chance that Mr Bolt quoted these two men ironically. The preface makes Mr Bolt's subscription to their evaluation all too clear, and the piety of Mr Bolt's More, perhaps because he has taken it on trust from history, is something of a sleight of hand. On one occasion More even emerges as a canting cynic:

WOLSEY:

> . . . Catherine's his wife and she's as barren as brick. Are you going to pray for a miracle?

MORE:

> There *are* precedents . . .[9]

But perhaps Mr Bolt only meant this reference to Providential intervention to be an instance of More's wonderful wit, or of his high regard for Henry VIII. More seriously damaging to Mr Bolt's claims, his More in effect refuses to take the oath of allegiance to the king, as head of the church, because he prefers the longer-term insurance policy of eternity. Mr Bolt clearly did not intend this, but this is what he achieves.

That Mr Bolt did not intend this, is suggested clearly enough by the one-sided solemnity of the play. Somewhat drearily More falls from riches to poverty and

from poverty to prison, because Cromwell is so nasty to him. Effectually, it is no more than that. True, More can always save himself from death and return to the king's favour, if he should scrap his obstinacy and take the oath. True—but what More has to go through does not follow from the premises within himself, and the fact remains that, if Cromwell had not been so nasty, none of this would have happened to poor old More.

Cromwell is a villain, a kind of John Braine hero climbing to room at the Tudor top. Henry is a boaster, said to break out in a sweat every time he thinks of More. Norfolk is a fool, who wants to be in "fellowship" and so follows the crowd. Not one of them ever gives More an uncomfortable moment. More is completely insulated in what he claims to be his faith, and we might ask whether this insulation is not simply the insulation of the paranoiac. If More is to be more than that, if he is to exist in anything more than a private world, if his predicament is to be *felt* to be central *to us* and not merely *to himself,* then he must be made to stand up to some real opposition. His stamina is ostensibly tested in prison, though the horror of the prison, somewhat perfunctorily stated, is not made particular and real to us. And this is not enough: the reality he claims must be tested, and it can be tested only if he has some real intellectual or emotional opposition. If this existed, Cromwell would cease to be just a villain, Henry would be more than a gold outfit quoting Latin and blowing a whistle, Norfolk more than a well-bred sheep.

The material of the play immediately raises questions: Why does More excite such hate in Cromwell? Why does Henry come out in a moral sweat every time he thinks of More's presence? What is there in More that is not an insurance policy? It is easy enough to guess the answers—that More has integrity and that this integrity is a standing rebuke to Cromwell and Henry. But the answers cannot be inferred from what is offered, because Mr Bolt does not really try to demonstrate that his characters are aware of them. (J. C. Flugel's psycho-analysis[10] of Henry VIII is a good deal more dramatic than Mr Bolt's play.) His characters are mere conveniences without capacity to feel and respond to the issues at stake. They neither live—or seem to live (though Mr Bolt claims that More "could not be accused of any incapacity for life"[11])—in themselves, nor bring the issues to life.

Mr Bolt ignores the demands of the material, because he does not find it necessary to provide More with any opposition of equal dynamic force. Mr Bolt, as I have said, assumes that More is a saint: which in its turn suggests that Mr Bolt is at heart unconvinced. I suspect that if Mr Bolt were in a position to know sainthood, or "selfhood", he would not be talking *about* it. I have quoted various passages in which Mr Bolt's protagonist describes his sense of God; but these passages, and the text as a whole, merely state, they do not enact More's faith. The pertinent question to the author is this: Are you prepared to have your head chopped off rather than take an oath? Mr Bolt, if you are not, then you do not understand the nature of such faith, and you have no business to be writing this play. It is one thing to know, because one is told or because one reads, that men did choose the scaffold; it is another to understand their experience. It will do no good to say, with suitable gesture, that this predicament has not passed into oblivion: that men may no longer choose the scaffold for their religion, though they may for their politics. A dramatist is not a journalist; he must convince us that the experience he offers is what he claims it to be. He need not make us believe his values are right, but he must make us believe they are real within the given context.

If the dramatist fails in this, the details hardly matter. Mr Bolt fails because he has to tell us what we are to think. For this reason More is a symbolic ghost—"We think of ourselves in the Third Person,"[12] Mr Bolt writes, deploring our condition; himself caught in it, and round his neck a death certificate in the form of his preface.

Ultimately the fault lies in Mr Bolt's imaginative understanding, his failure to create relationships within the play. The creation of relationships would have meant the end of More as the play's centre, and the equal importance of More, Henry and Cromwell. In so far as the play would still be concerned with the dynamics and the reality of faith, and hence with God, God and faith would be felt in proportion to each protagonist's power of response. In short, God may be felt as much through absence as through immediacy. The danger then lies in Cromwell: little as we would guess it from the play, Cromwell is fundamentally Iago—his hate, his sense of service, are Iago's. From the evidence at hand, Mr Bolt has nothing to add to Shakespeare.

Indeed, Mr Bolt seems to be unaware of the potentialities of the dramatic medium and of the language. No one wants any more pastiche of Shakespearean verse, or any more bogus Jacobean tragedy. We do, however, demand to be interested, interest being the basis of conviction. Drama is not primarily a visual art. Mr Bolt manifestly uses the stage in such a way that we shall concentrate on what is said, and that what is seen shall reinforce what is said. But what is said is infrequently worth hearing. The dialogue is, for the most part, neatly phrased. The odd symbol is thrown into the discussion. I have mentioned that of the sea and the water. Do we infer from the play that these symbols mean "the superhuman context"? And do we read as symbolic such a passage as "a lot of water flowed under the bridge and among the things that have come floating along it . . ."[13]? It depends whether we have read the preface;

but even if we have, the context of the play gives us no indication of the symbolic value of any given passage. (We need not think of Dickens in connection with the river.) The same objections arise with "the Church of Christ . . . for most it can only be a metaphor. I took it as a metaphor for that larger context which we all inhabit, the terrifying cosmos"[14]. Mr Bolt may have imagined that "the terrifying cosmos" found its way into the play, but there is no sign of it in the language. And about the success of his functional imagery and poetic language, Mr Bolt voices in his preface some very touching and poignant doubts.

Contrast Mr Bolt's play with *Richard III,* a play which also uses history, a play in which the characters on the whole stand in relation to a central protagonist, a play whose achievement is undoubtedly crude, and we see after reading no more than Richard's opening monologue how language can be used to convey a number of contrasting attitudes. But then, immature as *Richard III* is, its verse has some energy. And the energy of language is recognized in its power to embody an experience, so that that experience is felt to be of the present and alive. This is true whether the experience be what we crudely call emotional or intellectual. Mr Bolt's range of language, professional as it is, covers no more than what passes for the colloquial vernacular, with interpolated passages of More, and other passages suspiciously suggestive of attempts at Elizabethan periods for the more sententious set pieces. Occasionally we are treated to a piece of wit, such as might grace the parish pulpit or the classroom. There is no personal idiom in the sense of language expressive of differentiated individuality; everyone speaks with the same off-the-peg style. This is the language that is used to express an experience which lies outside the common range of life.

Five minutes in the company of certain men tell us more of what it means to be a Man of God than Mr Bolt's protracted pageant of Sir Thomas More. But then the Man of God—if we find him—is not a symbolic ghost: he exists incarnate in relationship not only with God, but also with his fellow beings. He may fail in his attempt to live in relationship with his fellow beings, for they may fail him. He may have to face standing alone—at some time or another he almost certainly *will* stand alone. But his standing alone is no justification for a dramatist to present him in a context of characters who are no more than stooges. The Man of God who fails to stand in relation with other men who exist independent of himself, and who will not accept his presence, knows that those other men exist. They go on existing, whether he separates himself from them in deliberately standing for his God, or whether he gives up his God to please them. If the Man of God is aware of the presence of those men, then the dramatist cannot afford not to be. In this way, then, More, whatever we may think of him, however alien and unintelligible he may be to us, is theoretically at least in possession of rather more understanding than his dramatist. And until Mr Bolt appreciates this, we shall continue to prefer the company of our friends. When Mr Bolt does appreciate this, it will not matter that his language is not Shakespeare's; he will have offered us something we can take seriously, which is his own, and which will stand up to judgment on its own ground. As it is, the London theatre is in no immediate danger of dramatic redemption.

Notes

1. p. xii.
2. p. 83.
3. A. Camus, *The Rebel* (Penguin), pp. 19, 20.
4. p. xiii.
5. p. xiv.
6. Programme note.
7. Programme note.
8. p. xvi.
9. p. 11.
10. J. C. Flugel, *Men and Their Motives,* (London, 1934).
11. p. xii.
12. p. xi.
13. p. 47.
14. p. xv.

Gene A. Barnett (essay date 1968)

SOURCE: Barnett, Gene A. "The Theatre of Robert Bolt." *Dalhousie Review* 48 (1968): 13-23.

[*In the following essay, Barnett employs the theme of selfhood as a marker for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Bolt's plays* A Man for All Seasons, Flowering Cherry, The Tiger and The Horse, *and* Gentle Jack.]

Robert Bolt, author of ***A Man For All Seasons,*** once stated in an interview that he was "a committed man, but . . . not a committed playwright."[1] He seemed to imply that an artist of stature and integrity could lead two lives. Actually he was admitting that a writer as citizen might take a stand on a major public issue, but that his job as dramatist was to "illuminate a theme", not to offer solutions. Bolt admitted further that he "did not work on a play with only one part of his mind or