

Thomas More: Humanist and Statesman [B2]

Filosofo, umanista e statista, fu uno dei più brillanti studiosi del Rinascimento e l'inglese più famoso di tutta Europa. Si oppose alla Riforma anglicana voluta da Enrico VIII, ragione per cui fu condannato e decapitato.

The English Renaissance humanist and **statesman** Thomas More is a controversial figure. Considered one of Britain's most **principled** statesmen, he is also **maligned** for his brutal treatment of Protestant heretics. A devout Catholic, he refused, as a matter of conscience, to accept King Henry VIII as head of the Church in England, rather than the Pope. He paid for his principles with his life.

HUMBLE BEGINNINGS

More was born in London on 7 February 1478. The son of a well-connected lawyer, his closest ancestors were a **brewer**, a **baker** and a **candlestick** maker. After an elite school and university education, he became a lawyer and entered local government in London, hoping **to relieve** the city's poverty. In 1505, he married Jane Colt, the daughter of a **gentleman-farmer**. The couple had four children, three girls and a boy, before his wife died in 1511. More insisted, very unusually, that the girls received the same education as his son.

FAMOUS PUBLICATIONS

In 1516, More published a description of an imaginary republic **ruled** by reason. Named Utopia, it was meant to be a contrast with Europe's terrible political conflicts. The work made him one of Europe's leading humanists. In 1518, he published his History of King Richard III, the first masterpiece of English historiography. By this time, More's growing reputation in local government had attracted the attention of the King. More became a member of the King's **Council**, then entered the **Exchequer**, and was finally **knighted**. He became Henry VIII's personal **advisor** and friend.

FIGHTING THE REFORMATION

Storm clouds, however, were appearing on the horizon. In 1527, Henry told More that his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, who had failed to produce a male **heir**, was **void** because of her previous marriage to his **late** brother, Arthur. More **disagreed**, but said nothing. Henry asked the Pope to annul the marriage, but the Pope refused. In October 1529, King Henry VIII made More Lord Chancellor, the highest law officer in the land. One of More's principal responsibilities was to fight against the Protestant Reformation based on the theology of figures such as Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and William Tyndale. More saw this Protestantism as **heresy** and a **threat** to the unity of both the Church and society. Six heretics were **burnt at the stake** at his direction.

TREASONS ACT

However, Henry VIII had decided to ignore the Pope, to divorce his wife and to marry the **courtier** Anne Boleyn. In 1532 Henry declared himself Supreme Head of the Church of England, and in shock More **resigned** as Chancellor. Then, in April 1534, More refused to sign the **Oath** of Succession confirming Anne as Queen because it repudiated the Pope's authority in England. Henry then introduced the Treasons **Act**, probably **to trap** More, which made it treason **to deny** the King's supremacy over the Pope. Henry feared that others could follow More's example.

TREASON AND DEATH

More was **charged** with treason. Faced with perjured evidence, the jury, which included Anne Boleyn's uncle, father and brother, took fifteen minutes to find him guilty. He was **beheaded** on 6 July 1535, dying for his faith and his conscience. He was beatified in 1886 and canonised in 1935. Pope John Paul II declared More "the heavenly Patron of Statesmen and Politicians" in 2000.

UTOPIA

This work, published first in Latin and later in English, is a classic of European literature and later gave rise to the literary genres of utopian and dystopian fiction. It made More the most famous Englishman on the continent. It describes a type of ideal society, one almost impossible to achieve, but one to which people can aspire. Yet for centuries people have questioned whether it is a satire or the blueprint for an ideal society. It is undoubtedly an attack on the conflicts within European society at the time. 'Utopia' is a Greek word coined by More from 'ou-topos' ('no place'). It is a pun on 'eu-topos', which means 'good place'. It describes a pagan, communist city-state in which institutions are governed by reason, unlike Christian Europe, which was divided by self-interest, ideologies, and greed for power and money. Private ownership is abolished, euthanasia is permitted, education is free and universal, and there is freedom of worship. The work's strangest idea is that husbands and wives can inspect each other's naked bodies before marriage!

FINAL MOMENTS

More's execution is one of the most famous in British history. The condemned man walked from his cell in the Tower of London to the scaffold on Tower Hill. The scaffold was actually not very secure, so he turned to the lieutenant in attendance and said, "See me safe up, and for my coming down, let me shift for myself." The executioner begged More's pardon while More was kneeling before the block. More got up, kissed him and forgave him. He then knelt down again and placed his head on the block. He gently moved his beard to one side, telling the executioner that he was innocent. Finally, he altered the ritual by blindfolding himself. His headless corpse was given to his adopted daughter, Margaret. More was buried in an unmarked grave in the Tower of London. The family later recovered his severed head.

Glossary

- **gentleman-farmer** = proprietario terriero
- **ruled** = governare
- **heir** = erede
- **resigned** = dimettere
- **beheaded** = decapitare
- **Yet** = eppure
- **blindfolding** = bendare
- **late** = defunto
- **Act** = legge
- **charged** = accusare
- **pun** = gioco di parole
- **greed** = avidità
- **statesman** = statista
- **candlestick** = candeliere
- **knighted** = nominare cavaliere
- **void** = nullo
- **courtier** = cortigiana
- **buried** = seppellire
- **gave rise** = dare origine
- **See me safe up** = aiutami a salire in sicurezza
- **let me shift for myself** = lasciami arrangiare da solo
- **maligned** = diffamare
- **to relieve** = alleviare
- **Council** = consiglio
- **Exchequer** = tesoro pubblico
- **burnt at the stake** = bruciare sul rogo
- **coined** = coniare
- **lieutenant** = tenente
- **advisor** = consigliere
- **heresy** = eresia
- **threat** = minaccia
- **scaffold** = patibolo
- **severed** = tagliare

- **baker** = fornaio
- **to trap** = tendere una trappola
- **begged** = supplicare
- **kneeling** = inginocchiarsi
- **principled** = esemplare, onesto
- **brewer** = birraio
- **Oath** = giuramento
- **to deny** = negare
- **blueprint** = progetto, modello
- **freedom of worship** = libertà di culto