

## Migrants: The Book of Sir Thomas More, Act 2, Scene 4

Cast: Sir Thomas More, 3 or more yeomen

Props:

Half a dozen parsnips; one in belt of Yeo1

Red servers' hats, some with parsnips in crown, for the Lombards – to be given to audience members seated on Stage R

Scholar's gown and cap for More, fealty chain

Modern take: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YaeDoTaYK5k>

MC:

It is 1517, a time of civil unrest throughout Europe. Lombards and Flemings have fled to England seeking safety from the dangers of the Continent; the strangers have not been universally welcomed.

*Enter More centre stage.*

SIR THOMAS MORE

Prentices playing at cudgels

Have taken themselves to arms.

I hear that they are come into St. Martin's,

Where they intend to offer violence

To the amazed Lombards.

and fire the strangers' house.

If we expect the safety of the city,

Tis time that force or parley do encounter

With these displeasèd men.

YEOMAN 1,2,3 *muttering things like:*

It's not right. No it aint. Who can afford a house? Or food?

YEOMAN 1, *standing up;*

*as he speaks YEO 2 and 3 respond*

He that will not suffer to see a red herring at a Harry groat,

No!

butter at eleven pence a pound,

Shame!

meal at nine shillings a bushel,

Never!

and beef at four nobles a stone,

Fie!

list to me.

YEOMAN 2, *waving finger at YEO 1*

It will come to that pass, if strangers be suffered. Mark him.

YEOMAN 3

Our country is a great eating country;

ergo, they eat more in our country than they do in their own.

YEOMAN 2

Yea, by a halfpenny loaf a day, troy weight.

Adapted by katherine kerr

Vicki@webcentre.co.nz

YEOMAN 1

They bring in strange roots, *[waves parsnip]*  
which is merely to the undoing of poor prentices;  
for what's a sorry parsnip to a good heart?

YEOMAN 3 *jumping up and pointing to eye*

Trash, trash! They breed sore eyes,  
and 'tis enough to infect the city with the palsey.

YEOMAN 1

Nay, it *has* infected it with the palsey.

*[waves parsnip]*

Or these bastards of dung -- as you know they grow in dung --  
have infected us, and it is our infection will make the city shake,  
which partly comes through the eating of parsnips.

YEOMAN 2 *jumping up*

True; and pumpkins together.

MORE

Peace, 'prentices, peace.

What say ye to the mercy of the king?

Do ye refuse it?

YEOMAN 1

We accept of the king's mercy, but we will show no mercy upon the strangers.

YEO1/2: *whispers, getting louder, waving fists*

No mercy, no mercy.

YEOMAN 1

We call upon their removal which cannot choose but much advantage  
the poor artisans of the city.

YEO1/2: *whispers, getting louder, waving fists, encouraging the audience.*

Remove them, remove them.

Send them back. Send them back.

MORE:

Grant them removed, and grant that this your noise

Hath chid down all the majesty of England;

Imagine that you see the wretched strangers,

Their babies at their backs and their poor luggage,

Plodding to the ports and coasts for transportation,

And that you stand as kings in your desires,

Authority quite silent by your brawl,

And you in ruff of your opinions clothed;

What had you got?

MORE

I'll tell you: you had taught  
How insolence and strong hand should prevail,  
How order should be quelled;  
And by this pattern  
Not one of you should live an aged man,  
For other ruffians, as their fancies wrought,  
With self-same hand, self reasons, and self right,  
Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes  
Would feed on one another...

YEOMAN 2

Before God, that's as true as the Gospel.  
*Tugs down the other others.*

MORE

Let me set up before your thoughts, good friends,  
On supposition; which if you will mark,  
You shall perceive how horrible a shape  
Your innovation bears.

You'd put down strangers,  
Kill them, cut their throats, possess their houses,  
And lead the majesty of law in line  
To slip it like a hound;  
Say now the King,  
As he is clement if th'offender mourn, [*crosses*]  
Should so much come too short of your great trespass  
As but to banish you, whether would you go?  
What country, by the nature of your error,  
Should give you harbour?  
Go you to France or Flanders,  
To any German province, to Spain or Portugal,  
Nay, any where that not adheres to England,  
Why, you must needs be strangers:  
Would you be pleased  
To find a nation of such barbarous temper,  
That, breaking out in hideous violence,  
Would not afford you an abode on earth,  
Would whet their detested knives against your throats,  
Spurn you like dogs.  
... what would you think to be thus used?

This is the strangers' case;  
And this your mountainish inhumanity.

This was an extract from a play called the Book of Sir Thomas More.

It was written, in part, about the anti-immigrant fervour of the 15th century, which culminated in the Evil May Day riots of 1517 when Sir Thomas More attempted to quell a mob attacking and burning the houses of Lombard bankers and Flemish labourers.

The play itself was written at the end of the 16th century, when the English once again felt besieged by immigrants, this time Huguenots fleeing the religious wars in France and the Low Countries.

The play was banned at the time by the Queen's censor as likely to be too incendiary, and not seen on any professional stage until almost 360 years later. It retains its relevancy and discomfort, and not just because it's thought Shakespeare penned More's lines.

As the French say, plus ca change -- the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Of course, whether they change – and for the better – is up to all of us.