

REVISITING THE PAST IN HILLARY MANTLES WOLF HALL

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Abstract:

Hillary Mantel's Wolf Hall is the first in a trilogy of historical novels depicting life in the court of King Henry VIII. The story takes place in England during the tumultuous 1520s, and is told from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell, one of the king's most trusted advisors. The book takes its title – Wolf Hall – from the estate of the Seymour family, which will have a central role in the follow-up novel, Bring up the bodies. In the first novel the title offers a premonition of what is to come, but also an image of the relations between the human beings depicted in the novel, where treachery, cruelty and violence are predominant. The novels are written in a realistic style, with care for historical detail, and consistently focalized through Cromwell himself. In spite of the realism they read as a kind of super hero fiction, highlighting Cromwell's superior capacities of thought and action, but also his loyalty, resilience, and capacity for love and pity.

Key Words: *Wolf Hall, Thomas Cromwell, treachery, loyalty, historical*

Introduction:

‘Wolf Hall’, one of the Man Booker Award winning novels. The novel won the award of 2010, written by Novelist Hilary Mantel who won the award twice for her Tudor novels in series. The novel provides a window to the readers to revisit the history of the country England). Mantel Shows the England of sixteenth Century through the eyes of her Protagonist Thomas Cromwell. She has woven the national myth with the historical facts into the novel. She includes the nation defining events to explore the nation's identity. Mantel has taken the most influential and discussed period of the history which plays an important role in the history of England as a nation.

In this novel we are invited to ask: how else, than by massive innate talent, could a person of such lowly birth have climbed so high? Of Cromwell's youth and European adventures, we learn only glimpses and reminiscences. When he returns to England, he is no longer the young curious brute that we encountered at the beginning. Learned in trade and law, proficient in many languages, he marries a young widow and gains with her a small wool trade business which he rapidly expands. Capable and useful in many ways he enters the service of cardinal Wolsey, who is one of the most powerful men in England at the time.

This is how Cromwell, in his late thirties or early forties, is described: It is said that he knows by heart the entire New Testament in Latin, and so as a servant of the cardinal is apt – ready with a text if abbots flounder. His speech is low and rapid, his manner assured; he is at home in courtroom or waterfront, bishop’s palace or inn yard. He can draft a contract, train a falcon, draw a map, stop a street fight, furnish a house and fix a jury. He will quote a nice point in the old authors, from Plato to Plautus and back again. He knows new poetry, and can say it in Italian. He works all hours, first up and last to bed. He makes money and spends it. He will take a bet on anything (Mantel, 2009, p. 31). Wolsey takes a liking to him, both for his intelligence and for the fact that he, like Wolsey himself, is of lowly birth. He soon becomes indispensable for the cardinal. Meanwhile the king, Henry VIII, is concerned by the absence of an heir. Only one of his many children with Catherine of Aragon, the adolescent princess Mary, has survived infancy. The king now wants to seek annulment of his marriage from the pope, in order to be able to remarry and conceive a legitimate son. In Catherine’s place he wants to marry the ambitious though insignificant young noblewoman, Anne Boleyn, for whom he has developed an all-consuming passion. Cardinal Wolsey fails to negotiate the annulment with the pope and falls into disgrace with the king. Henry breaks his relations with the pope. The cardinal is chased away from his lodgings at Westminster and deprived of his belongings, and dies in seclusion, avoiding the foreshadowing arrest and execution. The king declares himself head of the church in England, installs Thomas Cranmer as the reforming Archbishop of Canterbury, gets his marriage annulled, marries Anne Boleyn and crowns her queen. Anne gives birth to a child who turns out to be a girl. Cromwell’s role in all of this is full of ambivalences, he is loyal to Wolsey but sympathetic of the ideas of the reformation, reading the bible in English and corresponding with its clandestine translator William Tyndale, who is hiding abroad. He keeps visiting Wolsey in his exile, but also turns to offer his services to the king, thus opening for a transfer of his loyalties to Henry at Wolsey’s death, helping him with the legal and strategic details of marrying Anne Boleyn. Well versed in the literature and diplomacy of his time (Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Castiglione’s *The book of the courtier*), he is reflective about the nature and basis of his task, 200 noting that “you have to choose your monarch”. And soon indeed, he becomes the king’s “right hand”. After Wolsey’s death Cromwell gives himself two tasks which stand in profound conflict: to serve the monarch in every way he can (a task which in the end cannot fail to compromise him) and yet to revenge on the cardinal’s behalf (a task which at least in modern terms is morally compromised from the start). His relation to Anne Boleyn is complex: he sees her at first as a kindred spirit, a person of voracious ambition and an iron will. He helps her to become queen, but when she falls out of grace with the king, he also helps him to get rid of her. At the end of *Bring up the bodies* she is executed for treason in the form of supposed sexual relations with five men: her own brother George Boleyn, the king’s attendants Henry Norris, Francis Weston and William Brereton, and the court musician Mark Smeaton, who have been executed some days before. In Mantel’s story the conviction and executions of these men is the culmination of Cromwell’s personal revenge: they personify for him the crimes committed against Cardinal Wolsey. The king remains immune to his reproach, but these

men are privately convicted by Cromwell, among other things for laughingly taking part in a court play which mocked the cardinal after his death. Thus, as Cromwell notes: “He needs guilty men. So he has found guilty men. Though perhaps not guilty as charged” (Mantel, 2009, p. 392). We may add to this, among other things, Cromwell’s services in the reorganization of monastic orders that contribute substantially to his own as well as the king’s funds, while putting monks and nuns out on the street. He is a man guided by a hunger for power, personal wealth and revenge. These are all essential parts of the story. And yet, as Mantel has portrayed him, Cromwell remains, at least to the end of the second book, in all essentials, a good person. Hilary Mantel was born on July 6, 1952, in Glossop Derbyshire. She was the eldest of the three children and reared in the mill village of Hadfield. Her first novel *Every Day Is Mother’s Day* published, in 1985, marked the beginning of her literary journey that has continued. Except her two universally acclaimed historical novels she has written *The Vacant Possession* (1986), *Eight months on Ghazzah Street* (1988), *Fludd* (1989), *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), *A Change of Climate* (1994), *An Experiment in Love* (1995), *The Giant O’Brien* (1998), and *Beyond Black* (2005). Her works are rich in themes and content, but the most important her texts are historical novels written in sequel form such as *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. These books are the part of a planned trilogy whose third book entitled *The Mirror and the Light* is pending publication. Tudor history has remained one of the most talked of and written about topic of the writers. This period attracts the present century writers as well. Hilary Mantel is not the first novelist to write about Tudor history. Many novelists have chosen Tudor age as the background of their bestselling novels before Hilary Mantel’s novels about Tudor era published. A few amongst them are Alison Weir, Philippa Gregory C. J. Sansom, Karen Harper, David Starkey, Jean Plaidy etc. Hilary Mantel’s fictional work stands apart from the others due to its precision of events, style of writing, and deft handling of a subject already known to public. There is nothing new in the story of the Tudors which Hilary tells, readers are already aware of the forthcoming events. We all know the fate of Thomas Cromwell, Anne Boleyn, and Thomas 443 Inhabiting the Minds of the Dead: An Overview of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* www.the-criterion.com More, but the way Hilary places her dialogues in the mouths of the characters dead years back and reinvents the probable situations establishes her at the top of living legends.

Mantel conducted extensive research to ensure historical authenticity and continuity, providing a rich account of the events leading up to the beginning of the English Reformation. *Wolf Hall* brings these events to life, illustrating that all of history is alive with possibility. While the past may seem set in stone, it is comprised of moments and actions that turned the tide of history forever.

Wolf Hall offers a different perspective on Thomas Cromwell, who is usually depicted as calculating and power-hungry. Thomas is the son of Walter, an abusive, drunk blacksmith. After a vicious beating, young Thomas escapes his father’s cruelty by running away to the continent to seek his fortunes. He becomes a soldier, a merchant, and a lawyer, developing

prodigious linguistic and business skills. He returns to England and begins to establish his fortune. He marries Liz Wykys and has three children: Gregory, Anne, and Grace.

Due to his prowess in business and law, Thomas makes his way into the employment and confidence of Cardinal Wolsey, Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII. Concerned with the lack of an heir, the king wishes to annul his marriage with **Katherine of Aragon** and to marry **Anne Boleyn**. He assigns Wolsey the task of arranging this divorce with the Catholic Church, which controls England and most of Europe.

In the course of carrying out Wolsey's orders, Thomas is introduced into the company of the court, coming into conflict with historical figures such as Thomas More. Religious belief is high at this time, and many oppose the idea of the king's divorce. Henry's case rests on the **assertion** that Katherine consummated her marriage with Arthur, Henry's dead elder brother, to whom she was married first. After more than twenty years, this is difficult to prove.

Cardinal Wolsey fails at his task. The king, Anne Boleyn, and public opinion turn against him. Thomas is steadfast in his support for Wolsey, even risking his own ruination after the cardinal is accused of treason. Thomas loses his wife and two daughters to illness. Wolsey dies in transit to London, where he was to be punished.

Thomas' loyalty to Wolsey endears him to the king. After the cardinal's death, Thomas' fortunes actually rise. The task of arranging the annulment now falls to him. As Thomas works his political machinations, he builds a vast network of contacts and spies. Concern and conflict rise over the birth of the Protestant Revolution, spurred on by William Tyndale's translations of the Bible into English. Thomas More, Henry's Lord Chancellor, persecutes readers of Tyndale and those accused of being Protestants on a mass scale.

Thomas becomes closer and closer with King Henry and Anne Boleyn. While he is not a nobleman himself, he is a vital part of the court. This causes some friction between him and characters such as the Duke of Norfolk. The king meets with King Francis of France to help garner favor from Pope Clement. Henry no longer wants to wait for the Pope's verdict on his annulment. He marries Anne Boleyn, who is coronated as queen.

The solution that Thomas proposes to Henry's problem is the Act of Supremacy. This would make Henry the supreme sovereign power in the kingdom, removing the need to appeal to the pope: he could legally end his own marriage. Thomas is given a series of political promotions due to his usefulness and closeness with Henry, including displacing his rival Stephen Gardiner as Master of Scrolls.

Thomas must deal with the public's ill opinion of Anne and the king's new marriage. **Elizabeth Barton**, a nun who claims to be a prophetess, rises in popularity after predicting Henry's death. She and her followers are found to be frauds and are executed.

Anne Boleyn gives birth to a girl, the future Queen Elizabeth. Henry's hopes of a male heir are thwarted. When she becomes pregnant again, she delivers a stillborn child. Henry begins to have eyes for another woman.

Thomas More, a devout Catholic, refuses to take the Oath of Supremacy. This makes him a traitor and he is locked in the Tower of London. No amount of effort on Thomas' part can convince More to take the oath. Despite his popularity as a scholar, philosopher, and statesman, More is executed for treason.

The novel ends with Thomas planning the itinerary for the visits the king's court will make that fall. Thomas has his eyes set on Wolf Hall, the residence of the Seymour family. He has his eye on **Jane Seymour**, one of the court's ladies-in-waiting.

In 1500, the teenage Thomas Cromwell runs away from home to flee his abusive father, and seeks his fortune in France as a soldier.

By 1527 the well-travelled Cromwell has returned to England and is now a lawyer, a married father of three, and is highly respected as the right-hand man of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, with a stellar reputation for deal-making. His life takes a tragic turn when his wife and two daughters abruptly die of the sweating sickness, leaving him a widower. His sister-in-law, Johane, comes to keep house for him.

Cromwell is still in Wolsey's service in 1529, when the Cardinal falls out of favour with King Henry VIII because of his failure to arrange an annulment of the king's marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Cromwell manages to buy the Cardinal a little time before everything the Cardinal owns is repossessed and given to Henry's mistress, Anne Boleyn. Cromwell subsequently decides to relocate the Cardinal and his entourage to a second home in Esher, and the Cardinal moves on to York.

Though he knows the Cardinal is doomed, Cromwell begins negotiations on his behalf with the king. During the course of his visits he meets the recently widowed Mary Boleyn, Anne's older sister, and is intrigued by her. Cromwell is eventually summoned to meet Anne and finds Henry's loyalty to her unfathomable.

Continuing to gain favour with both the king and Anne, Cromwell is disturbed by Wolsey's activities in York, but is shocked when he learns that the Cardinal has been recalled to London to face treason charges and has died on the way. Cromwell mourns his death and vows to take vengeance on those involved in his downfall. Despite his known loyalty to Wolsey, Cromwell retains his favoured status with the king, and is sworn into the king's council after interpreting one of Henry's nightmares, about his deceased older brother, as a symbol that Henry should govern with the blessing of his late father and brother.

Cromwell continues to advise Anne, and works towards her ascent to queen in hopes that he will rise too. Just as the wedding appears imminent, Henry Percy, a former lover of

Anne's, declares that he is her legal husband and still loves her. Cromwell visits Percy on Anne's behalf and threatens him into silence, securing his position as a favourite in the Howard household.

King Henry travels to France for a successful conference with the French. Anne, finally secure in her position, is able to marry Henry in a private ceremony and to consummate their relationship. She quickly becomes pregnant and Henry has her crowned queen in a ceremony which Cromwell organises to perfection.

Historical background [edit] :

Born to a working-class family of no position or name, Cromwell rose to become the right-hand man of Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, adviser to the King. He survived Wolsey's fall from grace to eventually take his place as the most powerful of Henry's ministers. In that role he observed turning points of English history, as Henry asserted his authority to declare his marriage annulled from Catherine of Aragon, married Anne Boleyn, broke from Rome, established the independence of the Church of England, and called for the dissolution of the monasteries.

The novel is a re-envisioning of historical and literary records; in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* Cromwell is portrayed as the calculating, unprincipled opposite of Thomas More's honour and rectitude. Mantel's novel offers an alternative to that portrayal, an intimate portrait of Cromwell as a tolerant, pragmatic, and talented man attempting to serve King, country, and family amid the political machinations of Henry's court and the religious upheavals of the Reformation, in contrast to More's viciously punitive adherence to the old Roman Catholic order that Henry is sweeping away.

Process [edit] :

Mantel said she spent five years researching and writing the book, trying to match her fiction to the historical record.^[6] To avoid contradicting history she created a card catalogue, organised alphabetically by character, with each card containing notes indicating where a particular historical figure was on relevant dates. "You really need to know, where is the Duke of Suffolk at the moment? You can't have him in London if he's supposed to be somewhere else," she explained.

In an interview with *The Guardian*, Mantel stated her aim to place the reader in "that time and that place, putting you into Henry's entourage. The essence of the thing is not to judge with hindsight, not to pass judgement from the lofty perch of the 21st century when we know what happened. It's to be there with them in that hunting party at Wolf Hall, moving forward with imperfect information and perhaps wrong expectations, but in any case moving forward into a future that is not pre-determined, but where chance and hazard will play a terrific role

