

Hilary Mantel: Embodying Thomas Cromwell and Redefining Historical Fiction through 'Women's Writing'

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Abstract

Hilary Mantel's Tudor novels, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, have been credited with rehabilitating the historical fiction genre with their vivid portrayal of life in King Henry's court, through the eyes of Thomas Cromwell. Mantel has received praise for her depiction of Cromwell, but also endured criticism for portraying him in an overly positive light. This paper examines the role of Mantel's work and depiction of Cromwell in the evolution and potential re-framing of the historical fiction genre. It seeks to achieve four things: to assess the compelling nature of her fiction, to situate her depiction of Cromwell in opposition to other depictions, to highlight her literary approach, and to contextualise Mantel's writing within 'women's writing'. Through this multifaceted approach it is conclusively established that although Mantel's narratives are situated within a female-dominated genre, they are told from a masculine perspective and gaze. Nonetheless, they still hold a significant subtext suggestive of the 'feminine'. This paper thereby reinforces the argument of feminist critic Julia Kristeva and shows Hilary Mantel and her 'embodied' depiction of Cromwell in a light previously unseen, holding merit for the genre of historical fiction as a whole.

Keywords: Cromwell, historical fiction, Mantel, semiotics, women's writing

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Introduction

Considered an enigmatic figure in British history (Campbell, 2012), the persona of Thomas Cromwell (1485- 1540) and his role in the Tudor court has been refined by historians multiple times, centuries after the man's death. Cromwell rose to the highest status from humble beginnings, and was instrumental in leading the Reformation in England. He engineered the annulment of King Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, and later, after (most agree) contributed to the downfall and execution of Anne Boleyn, as well as arranging the king's marriage to Anne of Cleves (Borman, 2014). Cromwell is the subject and protagonist of Hilary Mantel's two historical novels, *Wolf Hall* (2012) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) - the first two novels in a trilogy, the third yet to be completed. With these two novels, 1952-born Mantel achieved something unprecedented – she won two Man Booker prizes in close succession, with novels of a genre are seemingly often relegated and confined to the realm of 'popular' or 'women's' fiction. Mantel's contribution to the historical fiction genre is significant, thereby the subject of this research is considered to yield high impact for the genre as it is. To some degree, it can be claimed that Mantel contributes to a rehabilitation of the historical fiction genre, while simultaneously driving forward the ultimate aim of the novel in the twenty-first century.

Historical fiction - inherent or constructed?

Julian Barnes' novel *A Sense of An Ending* (2011) deals with the necessarily fallible nature of history, even if such history is recent and close to the person attempting to recreate it. History, we are told, will always contain unknown elements and ends up reflecting the historian's own history, preferences and biases as much as that of the subject at hand (McCullagh, 2000). A character seeming to speak for the author (as his statement is supported by the narrative) sums it up as follows: "History is that certainty produced at the point where the imperfections of memory meet the inadequacies of documentation" (Barnes, 2011, p.7). Barnes acknowledges the inadequacy or, better said, the questionable propriety of history presented as fact. Obviously, the certainty of history is not certain at all but is a manufactured version of events, based upon agreed upon evidence according to certain method. The resulting conceit is that something as reliable as science is thereby not created but, rather, excavated or recovered.

If that is the belief, then historical fiction must very obviously be a bastardization of such. Creativity allows for - and indeed necessitates - uncomfortable liberties: the recreation of words that were never uttered, and minor characters that may never have been born. The response to an uncomfortable philosophical or existential tension is often resolved in the public and academic imagination by devaluing what produces such tension in the first place. Indeed, it seems the 'problem' of the validity of the historical fiction genre exists within another broader dilemma within art and academia - namely, the division between fiction and non-fiction.

It has been deemed necessary for this division not only to exist, but to be drawn decisively and to be largely inviolate. Consequently, where those lines blur or are erased, there is tension. Some years ago Oprah Winfrey publically excoriated memoir writer James Frey. In his personal narrative, *A Million Little Pieces*, Frey changed certain details of his life, namely details surrounding the manner (but not the fact) of a girlfriend's suicide, as well as the length of time he spent in prison, for example. When Winfrey, having previously endorsed his book, found out about these facts, she acted vindictively, as though personally insulted. Among writers, memoir straddles the line between fiction and nonfiction. Though few came out in support of James Frey, it seems

quite common for writers and teachers of memoir to cite the impossibility of recalling absolute truth in one's life events despite best efforts. Instead, it becomes necessary to inject a measure of fictionalization into memoir.

True and false, in the realm of memory and storytelling, take on connotations that are not and cannot be mathematically exact: "Memory is not false in the sense that it is willfully bad... but it is excitingly corrupt in its inclination to make a proper story of the past" (Diski as cited in Murdock, 2004, p.10). Public imagination, however, appears to reject such ambiguity. A thoughtful article by Aubry on the Frey controversy, criticizes both Frey's and Winfrey's construction of truth (Aubry, 2007). Aubry claims that Winfrey values the sensational narrative of the individual overcoming hardship, and may be unreasonable in her demands that such a narrative be true in the same sense that a news report must be. The nature of the story invites interpretation and a focus on emotional rather than factual truth; yet the public, as represented by Winfrey, would prefer to insist on both (2007, p.155).

If memoir is a zone of discomfort existing necessarily between fiction and non-fiction, historical fiction or fictionalized history must necessarily abide by the same dynamics. When looking at what kinds of fiction have become popular, historical fiction seems to have been relegated to a lower form of fiction, somewhat attractive to the masses but not taken seriously to the extent other forms of fiction are. As is the case with many works of this level of popularity and/or academic seriousness, historical fiction is also often considered 'women's writing' (Wallace, 2005), a designation that further tends to bar it from serious consideration by academia. Such devaluation is comforting to the scholar, who then is free to guard the parameters of truth and fact.

Hilary Mantel's Tudor novels and her Man Booker Prize win can be considered a watershed in the evolution of the historical fiction genre. This research thus aims to examine the role of her work in the evolution and potential re-framing of the historical fiction genre. Specifically, the following aspects will be considered:

- The quality of Mantel's fiction – what is it that makes her novels so compelling that that they cannot be relegated to the status of mere popular fiction or women's fiction?
- Mantel's description of her particular subject, which has been the subject of some negative criticism – there are critics who argue that she is insufficiently critical of Thomas Cromwell, in comparison to historical and other fictional accounts
- Mantel's literary approach, which is visceral and corporeal, which bypasses argument about facts, though respecting them
- Finally, the research will contextualize Mantel's novels within 'women's writing' – a woman's way of knowing the subject – and consider what this contributes to this new form of historical writing and the new validation of it

Thomas Cromwell - friend or foe?

Despite humble beginnings, Cromwell remarkably rose to a degree of power and influence. As Mantel notes, there were others who did so, but only through the church (Channel 4 News, 2012). It seems that Cromwell did so based on his wit and canny knowledge, which makes him unusual, even unique. However, after this was not successful, Cromwell himself fell out of favour and prey

to the power and vicissitudes of the Tudor crown. As Mantel's fictionalized Cromwell states in *Bring Up the Bodies*, "How many men can say, as I must, 'I am a man whose only friend is the King of England'? I have everything, you would think. And yet take Henry away, and I have nothing" (Mantel, 2012, p. 241). There is no doubt about the entanglement between Cromwell and his royal patron and employer, although the nature of the relationship has been approached from different sides. Undoubtedly, Cromwell is also known for his cruelty: under his command, the some 800 Catholic convents and monasteries in the country were closed and often sacked, sometimes with tragic results for their occupants (Loades, 2013, p.138).

Within the parameters forming the basic story of his life, historians and authors across genres and ages disagree. There seems to be fundamental disagreement about whether Cromwell acted autonomously at all, or to what degree. In early 20th century accounts of his life written, there is seeming agreement that he was under the power of King Henry and did little of his own accord. He was placed in the role of facilitating change but certainly did not mastermind it. Later, however, Cromwell's influential role in politics is emphasized (Leithead as cited in O'Day, 2015). Elton (1953) portrays Cromwell as a genius, the source of the vast changes that took place in British society, religion and politics during the Tudor era. His fictional depiction in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) is of a villain, the ruthless man who brings down the blameless Thomas More. In either case, Cromwell is seldom depicted as a sympathetic character. Rather, he is seen as having wielded power ruthlessly, leading to the execution of Anne Boleyn and untold suffering in the country as the religious regime was overthrown and replaced by the Reformation. Cromwell's own dedication to any form of religion can be seen as dubious; therefore, the excesses and the tragedies of the Reformation are attributed to him as mere side effects of his machinations (Leithead as cited in O'Day, 2015, p. 321).

Familiarity with the historical Cromwell does not necessarily prepare us for our encounter with the protagonist of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. Cromwell, in Mantel's fiction, is profoundly human, yet at the same time inspires a sense of awe or admiration from the reader. Mantel accomplishes this multifaceted portrayal in part through point of view – being in the third person, Cromwell's feelings, history, sympathies, relationships, and essential, powerful humanity are conveyed clearly. Based on the author's seeming desire to recreate rather than recall or recount a historical experience, her account of Cromwell is neutral, ambiguous, and avoids judgment of the character. Still, this has led to popular judgments that her depiction of Cromwell is too positive (see for example Brown, 2015). Perhaps most importantly, her depiction of Cromwell is visceral. This seems to be her true contribution - it is a sort of possession. A living writer lends her capacity for sensation and sensory observation to a long dead character.

There is no doubt that, as well as being human, Cromwell in Mantel's novels is larger than life, and the power that he engenders gives the narratives some of structure - their internal shape, as it were. This is, perhaps, more the case with *Wolf Hall*, which Mantel herself identified as imperfect in structure as it "encompasses too much"- *Bring up the Bodies*, meanwhile, is more structured, condensed, polished, and has "a definite job to do" (Channel 4 News). The first novel, while cataloging events, is also the story of Cromwell's rise to power, told from "behind his eyes" (Channel 4 News, 2012). It is, quintessentially, a narrative about Cromwell as a man, and as such, it is compelling. Its structure, though it may appear chaotic, is the organic structure of the unfolding of a man's consciousness and his life, from young adulthood onwards. Cromwell is not only the

thematic heart of the narrative, but simultaneously its power and driving force. In order to create and to be such a power force for the narrative, it is necessary for the character to be compelling and it may be necessary, in fact, to inflate his character.

Mantel has, of course, addressed the issue of her sympathetic description of Cromwell in numerous interviews. Her challenge as an author of historical fiction, as she expresses it, is to avoid ‘judgment’ of her character and to “stay with [the] characters in the present moment” (Channel 4 News, 2012). This depiction of the ‘present moment’ will be discussed further later in this paper, as it is an important and distinctive feature of the work, and, in a sense, one which firmly distinguishes it from history and from evaluative accounts. Further, Mantel states clearly and quite convincingly in her interviews that her objective was never to ‘rehabilitate’ Cromwell, but rather to ‘redefine’ him. Yet the ‘redefinition’ is one that in Mantel’s own words is one whose target is “maximum ambiguity” (Channel 4 News, 2012). The author points out correctly that if she had set out to exonerate Cromwell, she could have done so, with historical evidence to back up her claims. She deliberately does not do so, choosing instead the ambiguity about the character that ‘redefines’ by refusing to define the man as a hero or a villain. In other words, her objective appears to be to make him real, to resurrect him, in a sense. To be sure, some historical claims and assumptions regarding Cromwell are addressed in the novels – for example, in *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell clearly admires Cardinal Wolesly, belying his deliberate and vengeful cruelty to the man in other author’s accounts. He is canny, and unusually shrewd, as evidenced by descriptions such as the following:

He has a way of getting his way, he has a method; he will charm a man or bribe him, coax him or threaten him, he will explain to a man where his true interests lie, and he will introduce to the same man aspects of himself he didn't know existed. (Mantel, 2012, p.6)

However, no hard conclusions are made regarding Cromwell’s virtue or villainy. Instead, the author emphasizes his multifaceted humanity, just like that of a living person for whom the final judgment cannot as yet have been made.

In explaining her narrative approach to the interviewer at Channel 4 News, Mantel’s description of how the character of Cromwell came to her is very distinctive and underscores the essential humanity of her description of the man. Mantel’s initial entry into the story and the era is based on sensory experiences and descriptions. She relates sitting down to begin the novel and experiencing a sort of multi-sensory vision of cobblestones, a leather boot (so detailed she could see the stitching), a feeling of blood on one’s face. This was, of course, the opening of *Wolf Hall*, where Cromwell is first encountered as a fifteen-year-old boy who has just been beaten. Mantel describes how in a “simple twist of being, I was inside Thomas Cromwell’s body”; consequently, the whole story that follows is told “from behind his eyes” (The Royal Society of Literature, 2014). This ‘sliding inside a person’s body’ having been her starting point, Mantel points out that many decisions surrounding the storytelling were automatically and preemptively made. The use of the present tense, for a sense of immediacy, for example, became intuitive and in fact the only possible choice. Indeed, the selection of Cromwell as her subject – which, Mantel states, was not a process of creating a character, but rather of having a character volunteer to come and work with her – determined her subject matter and the period of history she would be describing.

In short, while it may be said that most writers experience a degree of identification with their subjects, either real or imaginary, it is apparent from Mantel's own description of how she came to write about Cromwell, that her sense of oneness or of embodying the character was unusual in degree. Perhaps unsurprisingly, despite the recognition Mantel received for her Cromwell novels (and, more recently, the publicity her work has received with the screen version of both books), reviews of her work are polarized. As will be discussed, some took issue with her rendition of history and her portrayal of the still controversial figure of Cromwell. Conversely, her work is described by other reviewers in almost reverential terms, and ones which distinguish it from other historical fiction by identifying near-mystical elements of her process and its outcome. Here is one example, from a *Guardian* review:

Mantel acts as a resurrectionist, or a medium, because she channels communication between the Tudor world and today. Thus, to conjure up the dead is Mantel's main project in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*... Not only is Mantel a resurrectionist, but also a translator, since she renders her proposal of Cromwell's life and political achievements available for the reader, transposing the sixteenth-century character into a fascinating hero, who believes in education and justice, and leaves an imprint on history. Interestingly, the metaphor of the translator is used by Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* and in *Bring Up the Bodies* where he acknowledges his role as interpreter, and translator of people, languages and history. Therefore, Mantel appropriates Cromwell's 'translating' capacities, and becomes an author/translator who translates a foreign past into a familiar present, without falling into the trap of 'domestication'. (Arias, 2014 , p.19)

The observation that Mantel is working as a 'resurrectionist' is both apt and thought-provoking. On the one hand, it points to aspects of her process and its results, that are very singular. On the other hand, one wonders whether this is merely a fancy way of describing what all historical fiction writers do, almost by definition. I maintain there are qualities of Mantel's work that are singular and redefine the genre much as Mantel redefines Cromwell himself; nevertheless, contextualizing her work within the recent evolution of the historical fiction genre is valuable and will be undertaken subsequently.

In terms of her status as a 'resurrectionist', Mantel is not claiming to have been possessed by the personality of Thomas Cromwell, although she does describe his presence in her work as a sort of spontaneous visitation; Mantel herself embodies the historical figure much as an actor might inhabit his or her character. (Indeed, the interview with Hilary Mantel and Shakespearean actor Harriet Walter highlighted striking similarities between the process of Mantel's writing and that of an actor on stage). We might validly point out, of course, that there is nonetheless a deliberate selection of scenes from Cromwell's life that were selected, and further, that these tend to make the character sympathetic – beginning, of course, with the opening scene of Cromwell as a vulnerable, abused fifteen-year-old boy, seeking refuge in his sister's home. Following from there, throughout both novels, we are invited to see Cromwell as a man with scruples, with loves and aversions, aspirations and vulnerabilities – all of which humanizes him and tends to preclude or prevent a hard judgment.

The style of storytelling supports this hyper-rounded characterization. There is something more compellingly immediate in Mantel's writing than is standard and expected in most historical novels. The level of sensory detail that is conveyed by the author is one relevant element, as is the

sense of immediacy that, according to Mullan (2015), is so powerful as to put the reader back into the time period being depicted. Thus, “One of the best-known chapters in all British history is rendered provisional, as uncertain to the reader as it must have once been to its actors. *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* are charged with the sense of danger” (Mullan, 2015). This same sense of immediacy and intimacy with the subject belies a harsh judgment of him. If indeed we are transported in time so viscerally, that history as we know it is 'provisional', history's judgment of the man does not yet exist. Also, although this did not succeed with all readers and critics, for those willing to enter Mantel's fictional world, the nature of the illusion invites us to forget what we knew about the historical Cromwell and come to him fresh, witnessing a time in which his decisions, successes and failures were still emergent and manifestly the result of personal and environmental circumstances.

Redefining the Historical Fiction Genre

It is possible to make the argument that although Mantel is clearly working within the genre of historical fiction, she is simultaneously redefining that genre. This is clearly true in terms of the recognition that her work on Cromwell has received. Historical fiction is well established as a literary genre, popularized by the work of Sir Walter Scott, and controversial in academic circles almost since the start of its acknowledgment as a genre. In dealing with historical subjects rooted in historiographical 'fact', writers of historical fiction seek to “reconstruct a world ... to particularize... to recapture a fleeting moment” (Shaw, 1983, p.25). The illusion created is that they bring a period of history alive, so that it may form the setting for newly created but ‘historically probable’ characterization and action.

Indeed, this concept of probability is vital and “involves our sense of the novel's 'fit’” (Shaw, 1983, p.21). That is, even though actions and dialog are clearly, at least in part, invented or created, the realities (as they are known) of the historical period must be honoured, never violated. This appears to be the truce that the historical fiction genre has negotiated between fact and creativity. While being entertainment and art, critics appear to agree that historical fiction is ‘fundamentally a mode of knowledge’. Shaw (1983) observes that this requirement is the common factor in the theory put forward by Lukacs, Butterfield and Fleishman (pp.27 – 28). Moreover, Lukacs, (1983, p.113) believes that “The historical novel ‘could enact historical process by presenting a microcosm which generalizes and concentrates’; that is, the protagonist should represent “all the humanly and socially essential determinants” of the era being represented, so that the reader may learn something of the era and perhaps relate it to his own.

Despite these somewhat lofty goals, historical fiction is often considered a lesser form of writing or representing lesser knowledge than 'real' history. As stated by one critic of the genre, the historical fiction genre has been gaining respectability within the past few decades; in fact, *Wolf Hall* winning the Man Booker prize in 2009 was a “turning point in respectability” for historical fiction (Wallace, 2005, p. 207). However, as Wallace also points out, that same year, historian David Starkey called historical fiction “quasi-history of historical novels, written by women, about women and for an overwhelmingly female readership... tosh” (as cited in Wallace, 2005, p. 206). Mantel's work is said to have “made historical fiction respectable again, who had freed it from the (often immensely pleasurable) bodice-ripping romps of Philippa Gregory et al, making a derided genre safe again for those readers who consider themselves properly literary and serious” (Jeffries, 2012). Moseley (2013, p.474) says in his review, “There is a small but insistent

critical voice that historical fiction is escapist and demonstrates a refusal to confront and represent the world in which we are all now living”.

Similarly, Garfield once observed, historical fiction was regarded "as being something of an embarrassment, like an elderly relative, to be tolerated out of a sense of duty and reluctantly supported in a condition of genteel poverty" (as cited in Brown, 1998). The picture that emerges is clear – although historical fiction attracts readers and has more recently been used as a tool, to teach students about a historical period (Rycik and Rosler, 2009). There is a skepticism and consequent deprecation that follows the genre. Of course, Mantel herself has been prey to this, sometimes at the hand of historians wishing to preserve a consistent version of 'truth'. While her books have received popular acclaim, “professional readers” have been “ambivalent” (Wallace, 2005). Kaufman (2010, p. 165) states that *Wolf Hall* is “prejudicial” and that Mantel “imagines [Cromwell's] kindnesses as well as Thomas More's alleged cruelty” in a way that “distorts history”. One wonders, of course, how this historian can be so clear in his allegiances to long-dead men without being prejudicial. This comes, perhaps, from the duality of purpose that is inherent in the genre – to depict a version of fact, and to tell a compelling story. Of course, the concept of 'fact' in and of itself is problematic when one looks at history and historiography. There is seldom one coherent and incontrovertible account of a past event. In fact, Paton Walsh (1972, p 22) points out, history itself is ‘fiction’ - something made – as it is assembled from material and documentary evidence but goes beyond the parameters of such, into the realm of interpretation. The evidence of history is therefore a ‘construct of the mind’.

Perhaps, as suggested earlier, some of historians' uneasy relationship with historical fiction is due to an uneasy sense of the similarity inherent between the two disciplines. There may, as well, be an inherent gender prejudice in the tendency to devalue historical fiction in comparison to 'real' history. The identification of historical fiction as 'written by women and for women' (as quoted above) – which is, of course, far from true – is only part of the story. Historical fiction approaches events from an emotional, creative, sensory and relationship-based perspective – all characteristics traditionally associated with the ‘female’. Traditional 'fact based' history, on the other hand, tends not to reference sentiment or human relationships. Rather, it is analytical and evidence based – an attempt, in fact, to use scientific-like method to address a subject that is far from scientific. White (2005, p. 14) states the case eloquently, noting that fiction is the “repressed 'other' in history”; as “history refuses the real (which can only be symbolized) it therefore refuses the possible. Historical fiction like that of Mantel therefore rehabilitates this 'possible' and places it for consideration under the public eye.

The paradox then arises is that, although society in general is fascinated by delving into the past (as demonstrated, for example, by the many popular historically-based TV series, video games created in settings that echo a distant, often medieval past), many students have a negative view of the study of history, professing to 'hate' it, to find it dry, uninteresting, or incomprehensible (Rycik and Rosler, 2009). What is missing, perhaps, is that more subjective, more emotional version of history. It may even be the case that the loathing of history as it has traditionally been taught is predicated by a feeling that something is missing from it, and that the desire to connect across time with historical figures has been awakened and subsequently frustrated within the reader or student. Historical fiction is being recognized for its educational potential (Rycik and Rosler, 2009), with the recognition that relating to historical figures on a multi-sensory and 'personal' level actually

increases cognition and memory of historical 'facts'. Therefore, the strengths of historical fiction are being evaluated with a view to maximizing them. For instance Pablé (2003, p.99) writes on the loss of local colour in British historical fiction and observes that “worlds within fiction are four-dimensional, i.e. they can be described on a historical, a linguistic, a geographical and a cultural level” (p.99).

Moreover, the fictional depiction of history follows current social trends and sensibilities. These are of course changeable products of the time and place in which they are depicted – but as such, they are clearly reconstructed, ‘fict’ rather than fact. For example, in the late twentieth century,

historical novelists have worked between two strong, sometimes conflicting currents: modernism's recognition that all experience is subjective and every narrative partial, and the contention that the worst historical crimes are somehow unspeakable, so that only those who suffered them have the right to break the silence (Margaronis, 2008, p.139).

Thus, books about marginalized subjects (the author cites and examines Toni Morrison's *Beloved*) become popular. They are, also, works whose content appears to justify the use of literary license. Depicting the dis-empowered who could not speak up for themselves during their own lifetimes, makes their literary resurrection a moral and socially desirable or necessary act, though it does bring up valid issues regarding appropriation of voice – who precisely has the right to speak for those who are not here anymore? The 2017 controversy over the ethnicity and race of Canadian writer Joseph Boyden is an example (Andrew-Gee, 2017). Boyden, in a series of historical novels, depicts the past experience of First Nations Canadians, and has claimed to partake of that lineage. In fact, Boyden is of mixed race with only a small proportion of Native blood, and so his right to tell the stories he has told has been both challenged and defended. However, the historical validity and the literary merit of Boyden's novels are not contingent upon his ancestry. Mantel's experience of embodying a historical character, 'resurrecting' him and, from that perspective, telling his story, seems to demand and imply a more direct relationship between author and character, one not contingent upon a 'match' between their identities.

Mantel's 'embodied' characterization of Cromwell

In depicting Thomas Cromwell and his world, Mantel avoids both the 'quasi-historical' and historically suspect image of the historical novel and the socially-based imperative to speak out for those who cannot, and right historical wrongs. Rather, Mantel has argued that her depiction of Cromwell is merely:

one possible true history based upon the evidence. It is not to say that there are not alternatives or that there is no fictional elements here, but that every attempt has been made to represent a true account of Cromwell and his world. Unlike academic historians Mantel is not proposing a variety of interpretations but one possible interpretation (Phillpot, 2012).

Her specificity is borne of the fact that she experienced, as mentioned earlier, a sort of melding or communion with Cromwell as a character or a figure from history. It should be noted that her description of this powerful experience is not unique among artists – in fact, some version of it may be common. Commenting on the role of the artist in modern society and, specifically, on the

careers of poets Walt Whitman and Alan Ginsberg, Lewis Hyde (2007) notes that each had a transformational experience that was perceived as the presence of another being which inspired, and was in fact that precursor to creative outpouring. Ginsberg imagined that he heard the voice of William Blake reading one of his own poems, and stated, "Almost everything I've done since had these moments as its motif" (as cited in Hyde, 2007, p.252). The work of a poet, according to Hyde, is to let in these visitations and work with them, rather than questioning or rejecting them.

In a live tradition we fall in love with the spirits of the dead. We stay up all night with them. We keep their gifts alive by taking them into the quick of our being and feeding them to our hearts. (Hyde, 2007, p.253)

This is not far off from Mantel's self-described experience of "sliding inside a person's body" or of feeling a long dead character "come and work" with her (The Royal Society of Literature, 2014). To be sure, this is a function of imagination and of craft, but it is also more. Those who love Mantel's Cromwell books are aware of the palpable presence of the man, resurrected through history. The experience is so palpable that Mantel speaks of the 'risk' of creative obsession with history:

You do teeter on the edge all the time," says Hilary Mantel, the morning after she became the first woman and the first Briton to win the Booker prize twice. "It's the place of obsession – a dangerous obsession." Mantel is talking about the risks to a writer's mental health of indulging in historical fiction, of ventriloquising the dead. Or, as she puts it: "What if you visited the 18th century and never came back?" (Jeffries, 2012)

Moreover, being conscious of this process of resurrection and how it differs from other writing processes and styles, resolves various anomalies in the novel and allows us to fully appreciate its many strengths.

For example, critics were as surprised by what the narratives leave out as by what they include, as indicated in this comment:

There are not quite as many material culture revisits in *Wolf Hall* as one might expect of a British historical fiction novel. There are several reasons for this. First of all, Mantel tries to focus less on the details of food, clothing, housing etc., and instead uses broader terms to describe the characters' surroundings, before dedicating most of her time to character interactions rather than material descriptions. Second, the novel is written from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell, who is not often preoccupied by material matters such as displays of wealth through clothing, unless observations thereof contribute somehow to his estimation of another character. (Moseley, 2012, p.473)

The level of immediacy and of essential humanity – as when we witness Cromwell's evolution from a young boy to a position of power, and as when we witness, likewise, the cleverness and wry humour of his thoughts – naturally encourage identification with the character as one sees through his eyes, albeit with the distancing effect of the pronoun 'he' (which often becomes "He, Cromwell" in *Bring Up the Bodies*) (Mullan, 2015). The use of the third person, while it has been called awkward or distancing, may also be more authentic to Mantel's process of communing with, resurrecting and channeling Cromwell. She has not become him, which would justify the 'I', and she avoids the conceit of the fictionalized 'I'. Rather, she is using her experience

of him and her impression of his presence to tell his story, appropriately, in the third person, as an entity who is present but distinct from herself.

Cromwell's humanity in the novels is of course juxtaposed with instances of ruthlessness – and yet, juxtaposition is not the correct term. It is evident throughout that Mantel is representing a palpably human being. Thus, while it is true, as Mosely points out, that material surroundings are scantily described, it is also the case that certain descriptions of physical objects are powerful and memorable. Articles of everyday clothing, for example, and the gold-painted star brought out at Christmas and stored carefully otherwise – these are part of the physical landscape of *Wolf Hall*. Their mention and the attention that they garner from Cromwell is authentic, rather than an author's device to allow her to fill in the physical landscape. These are items that would, genuinely, have fallen under Cromwell's scrutiny and captured his attention for a time. As such, because we are captivated as Mantel is by the force of his persona, the resulting descriptions of relatively ordinary objects becomes memorable, as though we are afforded a glance through time at material as well as social history. Cromwell's thoughts are, to be sure, often abstract, but may be strongest and most memorable when rooted in the small details of material reality:

The fate of peoples is made like this, two men in small rooms. Forget the coronations, the conclaves of cardinals, the pomp and processions. This is how the world changes: a counter pushed across a table, a pen stroke that alters the force of a phrase, a woman's sigh as she passes and leaves on the air a trail of orange flower or rose water; her hand pulling close the bed curtain, the discreet sigh of flesh against flesh. (Mantel, 2012, p. 61)

That *Wolf Hall* is an unwieldy novel is undeniable; however, its negative critics (and those of its sequel) do seem dependent on a biased view of Cromwell that contradicts Mantel's deliberately ambiguous one, or an ingrained prejudice against historical fiction itself on the grounds that it is subjective, personal and emotional, and thus suspect as a viable source of historical knowledge. Often, Mantel's depiction of Cromwell's thoughts appears to walk the line between morality and amorality, as in the following:

He doesn't believe the dead need our prayers, nor can they use them. But anyone who knows the Bible as he does, knows that our God is a capricious God, and there's no harm in hedging your bets. (Mantel, 2012, p. 83)

What is remarkable perhaps about Mantel's depiction of Cromwell is that his ordinary humanity is melded with a sense of his unusual power and influence over a court, a nation and history. If historical figures create the landscape of the stories of history, then it is undoubtedly true that, as the history of certain times and societies are subject to forces, there are individuals who embody those forces. Recording and conveying these power imbalances is in some sense fundamental to any storytelling about human events, real or imagined. Historical fiction is under greater pressure than other fictional narratives to convey something accurate and authentic. Writers of historical fiction can clearly be seen as storytellers, and as such, they are inevitably engaged in shaping events into a coherent and appealing form. To do so involves giving certain individuals a mystique or force. But in fact, when one looks at history, it is undeniable that the power of certain figures does eclipse that of most people of their day and social setting. To depict a version of this may be authentic.

Cromwell's energy and power

Mantel states that it is the 'energy' of her characters that is most important and most distinctive to her, rather than, for example, their physical characteristics (The Royal Society of Literature, 2014). It is often suggested rather than overtly described, in the novels, and may even belie more formal descriptions. For example, when we first encounter Jane Seymour in *Bring Up the Bodies*, she is a shy, somewhat submissive girl who blushes when first meeting the King. The blush is remarked on as befitting a twelve-year-old, and Jane replies "I cannot claim to be twelve" (Mantel, 2012, p. 12). The words suggest a sardonic and worldly quality which presages what Jane is to become; the effect is subtle but pervasive. This quality is difficult to define and is not generally a feature to be considered by literary critics; nevertheless, an attempt will be made here, as this depiction of 'energy' is such an important feature of Mantel's depiction of Thomas Cromwell.

Cromwell's words have import and influence. Moreover, Cromwell's thoughts and impressions of events, because we as readers have come to trust the man's judgment, carry weight. To cite a small example, it is Cromwell's judgment that Wolf Hall (home of Jane Seymour) will have a strong influence on events. Wolf Hall itself is mentioned, famously, only a couple of times in the narrative. It is established that it is the home of the Seymours and we are made aware that Anne Boleyn's power is waning. Toward the end, Cromwell looks toward Wolf Hall and all that it portends. It may seem that the scant mention of this domicile, almost wholly peripheral to the story being told, would scarcely warrant becoming the title of the book. Yet, the mention of Wolf Hall is imbued with a power and importance beyond its ostensible role. Latin proverb "homo homini lupus" that means "man is wolf to man" is subtly invoked in the novel (Mantel, 2009, 572). The reader is unlikely to miss the mention of it, being attuned to the title of the book and perhaps wondering when Wolf Hall will play a role. When it is mentioned for the final time, near the close, we suddenly understand – the history being told is overshadowed by Wolf Hall as its inhabitants will shape the future of the monarchy. The story was not about Wolf Hall, but Wolf Hall determines the fate of everyone in this story.

Thus, when Cromwell looks toward Wolf Hall, he is looking toward the next force that will shape the monarchy. He is looking toward the future, in a moment of something like prescience. It is, perhaps, a contradiction of the 'provisional' sense of history that Mantel creates to state that her fore-knowledge of events precedes the knowledge of the 'future' importance of Wolf Hall. However, the impression of Cromwell's prescience, or, at least, his keen awareness of events and trends, serves to reconcile the contradiction. To imbue Cromwell's thoughts with such power of insight, the man himself must have a presence, a superior intelligence; we must be motivated to listen to him and look in the direction that he points. In a sense, everything in the narrative so far, particularly the portrayal of Cromwell as a powerful and insightful figure, prepares the reader for that moment and for appreciating the importance of *Wolf Hall*. Yet, that insight in and of itself is just an aspect of the fictional Cromwell's own character.

In the final analysis, it is evident, in fact, that the objections that Mantel valorizes Cromwell or is an apologist for him, stem from a probable determination to maintain a view of the man as a villain. When a historical figure is presented as an archetype for evil, all other characteristics and/or achievements seemingly become irrelevant. No one is interested, for example, in hearing what Adolf Hitler had for breakfast, or what sort of Christmas decorations he put up in his home, unless there were sinister undertones in such a description that hinted at his future actions. Therefore, to

describe Cromwell in such an ordinary way may be seen as an attempt to rehabilitate him, to humanize him, and perhaps most importantly, would be seen as distracting from the conventional view of the man as a defined by his evil actions. Thus, such a description would be apt to make readers uncomfortable. At the very least, we would question the author's ultimate motivations. Cromwell is no Hitler, and the example cited above was extreme.

Nevertheless, it is possible that some of the same impulse may be at work in criticisms of Mantel's work on the basis that it represents Cromwell in too positive a way. The objective being ambiguity, the reader cannot easily 'place' or identify the author's objective, and tends to judge it based on a binary – she is 'for' him or 'against' him. The idea that she may be neither – that she may merely be embodying him – is unusual and does not enter consideration. It is of course possible, and perhaps defensible, to consider Mantel an apologist for Cromwell. Yet, while she humanizes him, I would submit that she does not valorize him. His relative morality is almost irrelevant in the face of what appears to be the real justification for writing a novel about him - the fact that this was a man with more than usual power. Mantel undertakes to write a story of how and why that was the case.

Mantel's Novels as 'Women's Writing'

It could be argued that although Mantel's main subject is male, as is her perspective, her approach to the character and the narrative itself is fundamentally female. Thus, the discussion of gender in Mantel's novels can be undertaken with regard to two distinct, though related, components – the form of the storytelling, and the depiction of the actual female characters. Writer Lidia Yuknavitch speaks of 'corporeal storytelling' – a manner of telling a story that is 'embodied' rather than adhering to established, linear, or strict formal considerations (2015). Corporeal storytelling is intuitive; stemming from a prompt, the writing proceeds and often forms its own unique and unprecedented structure based on the flow of narrative. This is certainly reminiscent of *Wolf Hall*, during the writing of which Mantel was discovering her lead character and his story. Mantel has stated of *Wolf Hall* that it “can't be perfect” because it “encompasses too much”; in contrast, *Bring up the Bodies* was written with more technical polish, having a particular “job to do” (Channel 4 News). It is, primarily, the former novel that is reminiscent of what Yuknavitch sees as this new, embodied or corporeal style of storytelling. Mantel's depiction of Cromwell begins with an embodied experience of the character and the man. What follows are a series of subjective impressions, which, though following time in a linear manner, are in other ways not linear at all but consisting of a seemingly organic melding of impressions, thoughts and actions.

In an interview, Mantel mentions a sort of backhanded compliment on *Wolf Hall* given to her by the late Christopher Hitchens, who stated “You'd never know it was written by a woman” (The Royal Society of Literature, 2014). Mantel, of course, does not write her book from a female perspective, or with special attention paid to female characters (despite the fact that they are certainly present and certainly powerful). Her undertaking to write these narratives at all is predicated upon her assumption that, as a writer, she can embody the mind of a man. Women are powerful in the world of the Tudors, sometimes to the point of being objects of fear; in *Bring up the Bodies*, Anne Boleyn is a formidable opponent to Cromwell (He sums up her personality concisely and humorously by noting: “At New Year's he had given Anne a present of silver forks

with handles of rock crystal. He hopes she will use them to eat with, not to stick in people.” (Mantel, 2012, p. 296). In many ways, however, women are mistreated and disenfranchised. Yet Mantel appears to feel no particular duty to emphasize or speak for them, they are even objects of fear, the power field around them is not inconsiderable. She does not insist upon the gender inequality that we would automatically think of when looking back to that era. She makes no points regarding this, instead simply allowing women to exist as a power source. It has been noted that while the historical novel tends to feminize the genre, Mantel’s approach is adamant about glorifying the masculine though not at the expense of the feminine aspects of a monarchical empire (see Horowitz’ Jaffa Beach, 2013). This is a fair assessment of the subject matter of the novels, but a more detailed examination of the role of gender within the narratives will include, as well, the way that they are written. Both content and style are influential with regard to the effects of Mantel’s work on the historical fiction genre.

Julia Kristeva (1985) examined women’s writing with the perspective of semiotics, or ‘signs’, rather than analyzing content alone. Words and the formulation of content, after all, are a patriarchal invention, while the ‘signs’ in the writing - the repetition of sounds, for example - are more instinctive and may display a less socialized and therefore authentic form of expression. The semiotic is a realm associated with the musical, the poetic, the rhythmic, and that which lacks structure and meaning. It is closely tied to the “feminine” (Schippers, 2011). Moreover, subconscious cues in the description of characters and scenes, for example, may likewise distinguish and demarcate the specific concerns of women’s writing. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1985), Kristeva defines these as follows: In order to separate from the mother and establish her own, distinct identity, the female subject must ‘abject’ the mother, refusing association with her and conveying a reaction similar to revulsion. At the same time, however, there is a turning toward the nurturing, safe space of the woman’s or mother’s body, and this in writing is known as the ‘chora’ (as cited in Schippers, 2011).

Such analysis of literature is controversial, not readily accessible, and in certain ways problematic. In essence, it is asserting that there are hidden messages in the writing that the author herself was not conscious of at the time of the writing, which appears to demean the agency and control of the writer as the driving force behind the text. At the same time, however, the paradox Kristeva describes - the abjection of the female or mother, and the desire to exist within a ‘chora’ - can certainly be identified as thematic elements in many narratives, including Mantel’s. This (according to Kristeva) primarily female narrative may be a counterpoint to the hero’s tale, the fundamentally male story told repeatedly in many cultures and throughout history. Moreover, given that these elements of the narrative are instinctive and intrinsic, flowing from subconscious influences, but nevertheless effectively powering narratives, they may well be indicative of an embodied or corporeal form of storytelling. Cromwell’s story as told by Hilary Mantel is certainly not a hero’s tale. There is little heroism of any kind in either novel, nor is there a struggle between good and evil, except perhaps internally (and even then it is fleeing) – rather, moral ambiguity permeates the examination of almost all characters. As Cromwell’s story continues through the two novels, his vision appears to grow narrower and more inclined to cruelty. In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Cromwell characterizes his own evolution as follows:

He once thought it himself, that he might die with grief: for his wife, his daughters, his sisters, his father and master the cardinal. But pulse, obdurate, keeps its rhythm. You think

you cannot keep breathing, but your ribcage has other ideas, rising and falling, emitting sighs. You must thrive in spite of yourself; and so that you may do it, God takes out your heart of flesh, and gives you a heart of stone. (Mantel, 2012, p. 331)

However, even in this self-description, the paradox of the abjection of the female and the search for the safety of the 'chora' are both, certainly, present - in the death of Cromwell's mother and wife, in the inimical relationship he has with Anne Boleyn and the danger and challenge he feels from her, and in his love and reverence for Elizabeth. There is the wish for the mother, in the face of a harsh world, and Cromwell's own parenting impulses, particularly in his adoption of the orphan Rafe. In effect, the adoption of Rafe recreates aspects of his own past, perhaps healing him through a revision of his own adversarial relationship with an abusive father. The associations may go even deeper than that, however. Mantel in interviews has spoken of her own childlessness (Jeffries, 2012). Yet, just as a mother nurtures a baby not knowing what that child will grow up and become because it is his own life, Mantel creates a character who comes briefly alive through her, to engage in whatever action he sees fit.

Mantel tells a story that certainly applies to the historical Thomas Cromwell and accurately reflects his actions. However, it may be said that she tells it in a distinctly female way, with the concerns of a female subject present pervasively as an undertone or subtext to the story.

Conclusion

Mantel picked an odd subject for her series of acclaimed historical novels. Based on her interpretation and narratives surrounding Cromwell, together with her own words about her writing, it seems the subject really may have picked her. From behind Cromwell's eyes, she recreates an immediacy and a projection to the moment in the past that is extraordinary in the historical fiction genre, drawing together aspects of 'women's writing' with a unique stylistic, personal, and interpretative approach. In doing so, she creates ambiguity about her subject, but reserves judgment so common in historical fiction. Any purely historical account of any event or person contains an evaluation; in fact, history itself contains (and in some ways is) an evaluation of past events. What Mantel is set on recreating, instead, is more like the equivalent of a primary historical source rather than a secondary source. Yet when as historians we consult primary sources, we file them into our previous understanding and don't come to them with fresh perspectives. Mantel does not either, but perhaps she comes close through taking a view different than what many would consider 'classical'.

Mantel succeeds in telling an unbiased, embodied tale about Cromwell and takes the reader to a time when all outcomes were yet undefined, and the character himself was yet to be judged. In addition, she conveys both the humanity and the unique power and energy circling around this particular human, being at a particular time and place. In doing so, she captures not only history but valuable insights about the dynamics between human beings.

Why is it relevant to write about Cromwell in the first place? As readers immersed in her narratives, we must check our assumptions. The power behind the power, and the story behind the story, are both arguably the most vital elements of both novels. In reading these narratives, we have no choice but to arrive at an understanding of the relationship between power, individuality, and personality. Mantel's portrayals of Cromwell are evidence of her ability to make connections, even those that transcend life and death and time, let alone things like gender. Essential humanity

and compassion transcends all of these barriers and situates Mantel in the domain of ‘women’s writing’, despite the male-dominated narrative. This is compassion not in its conventional sense of connotation of charity; rather, it is compassion in the sense of feeling with another, feeling instead of another.

Much of Mantel’s accomplishments border on the metaphysical. Mantel's own language and assessments regarding her writing, and that of critics (in calling her a resurrectionist or a medium) may be uncanny to herself and to readers, but is also highly canny. Mantel takes creative risks while undertaking what is perhaps ironically the most pragmatic decision of all – to follow her unique understanding of the past and let it take her to its logical conclusion. Cromwell is portrayed differently than in mainstream literature, namely in an embodied, real manner. This choice puts Cromwell himself into a new light, defying the historical narratives, and also elevates Mantel from the classical dynamics of historical fiction. Her approach and insight allow her to revitalise the genre of historical fiction, infusing it with life, emotion, and compassion. Her purpose appears to be aligned with an observation made by her lead character in *Wolf Hall*:

Some say the Tudors transcend this history, bloody and demonic as it is: that they descend from Brutus through the line of Constantine, son of St Helena, who was a Briton. Arthur, High King of Britain, was Constantine’s grandson. He married up to three women, all called Guinevere, and his tomb is at Glastonbury, but you must understand that he is not really dead, only waiting his time to come again...

Beneath every history, another history. (Mantel, 2012, p. 66)

Overall, it can safely be concluded that a careful analysis of Mantel’s framing of Cromwell reveals a nuanced understanding of what historical fiction can and should achieve, and highlights the depths of both the author and her main character. Mantel’s somewhat ‘unconventional’ approach in essence has the potential to reinfuse the genre of historical fiction with a new sense of meaning and relatability - thereby culminating in what the ultimate act of fiction-writing seeks to achieve. Her female gaze and ‘embodiment’ of an alleged historical tyrann make Mantel a rarely empathetic and fearless historical author.

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