Hilary Mantel

The Wolf Hall Trilogy

Presented by: Ante Andabak

Hilary Mantel's terrific and towering Tudor trilogy – made up of *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) – stands as a prime example of modern historical fiction, which is at the same time thoroughly political. There are few, if any, comparable recent titles in the Anglophone world in terms of both the critical acclaim and commercial success that these novels have garnered. The first two entries have earned back-to-back Booker Prizes, and the third has won the Walter Scott Prize for historical fiction, among many other accolades.

Mantel took the period and place done to death, the Court of Henry VIII, and found so much vivid life in it, which she then carefully and sumptuously recreated, that even the intellectual offspring of Jacobins, who do not have the stomach for the idea of royalty or taste for their intrigues and dramas, found themselves engrossed. She managed that outstanding feat by choosing to inhabit and tell the story entirely from the perspective of Thomas Cromwell, the most unusual historical figure who, despite having the lowest possible origins, rose to become Henry's chief minister and his most important, trusted and powerful advisor.

Historiography and broader culture have consistently portrayed him as shown him as nothing bu a scheming, conniving, Machiavellian knave with hands more smeared than the butcher's, due to whose malign influence some great men like Thomas More were executed (most famously in Robert Bolton's 1960 play *A Man For All Seasons*, adapted into a 1966 Academy Award best picture-winner of the same name). Such a unanimous verdict could be ascribed to historians and artists too often emulating the standard behaviour of kings after a rebellion in some part of the realm has been quashed: "the gentry pardoned, and the poor dangling from trees," as was wryly summarised in *The Mirror and the Light* (301). Not taking that well-trod road, Mantel decided to give Cromwell a fair hearing, and in the process, historical fiction with a bite and class consciousness unusual for the court-centric iteration of the genre was created.

Admittedly, some important historians already revealed the other side of the perennially tarred Cromwell, like G. R. Elton who had established him "as a statesman of the first rank" (Mantel 2023, 382) and Mary Robertson whose "doctoral thesis on Cromwell's ministerial household enabled Mantel to turn her belief that Cromwell was not just a villain but also a politician of genius into the basis for a fully realized picture of his life and times." (Robson) But none of them filtered down to numerous fictional portrayals of Henry VIII and his cut-throat retinue. "Blacksmith's boy to Earl of Essex – how did he do it? The story seemed irresistible. I thought someone else would write it." (Mantel 2023, 382) She wanted to set it down on the page by the late 70s, immediately after writing her first and painstakingly precise novel, *A Place of Greater Safety* (completed in 1979, but published in 1992), about the lives of revolutionaries Georges Danton, Camille Desmoulins and Maximilien Robespierre. However, when she came around to it some thirty years later, still "no one had told the story of the man" who was one of the principal drivers of English Reformation, and the main architect of the annulment of the king's first marriage to Katherine of Aragon; the resulting split from Rome, marriage to, and subsequent trial and execution of Anne Boleyn; and the dissolution of

monasteries among many other events with great historical implications.

In Mantel's interpretation, "Cromwell is an arch-plotter, smarter than Henry though not meaner." While her sympathetic portrayal of him has been challenged, and the author, raised Roman Catholic herself, was accused of flagrant anti-Catholic bigotry, no one would dispute her estimation that "there seemed no limit to [Cromwell's] massive, imperturbable competence." (Mantel 2023, 383) The crucible in which the modern English state has been formed had been handled in such a decisive and far-reaching fashion by the blacksmith's son, whose varied ministerial activities all went into bringing about "a new conception of sovereign nationhood." (Hart, 150)

His base, commoner background, opened the door for the class aspect to hold court where it usually never did, in the novels primarily devoted to the politicking of blue-blood personages. This was why someone like Mantel, who initially wrote with singular relish and passion about the French Revolution, could apply the same ardour to royals and high nobility long before the gleaming reflection bouncing off the guillotine blade could have shed the properly politically revealing light on the aristocratic goings-on.

In addition, her narratological choice to tell the story in the present tense and entirely through Cromwell's point of view through a strictly focalised third-person perspective brought sensibilities of literary modernism to a genre of historical fiction that – despite some notable outliers that could come under the heading of historiographic metafiction – was usually welded to traditionalism of all kinds, not least literary ones. "It has mostly been a conservative, nostalgic art form, prone to flatter the reader by embellishing the received version of events, and to soothe the reader, by taking the politics out of the past. The counterforce is real history—messy, dubious, an argument that never ends." (Mantel 2023, 270)

Despite the ideal setting for "a certain kind of historical fiction that feeds collective fantasy" and "taps into that common childhood daydream that we are not the children of our parents but of more distinguished strangers, who will turn up any day to collect us," Mantel rather plunges us into a painful past rife with politics. Due to the widespread "slavish, oily royalism of the genre" (Mantel 2023, 269), back when Mantel was starting out, "historical fiction wasn't respectable or respected. It meant historical romance. If you read a brilliant novel like Robert Graves's I, Claudius, you didn't taint it with the genre label, you just thought of it as literature." (Mantel 2023, 262) But even as recently as the time of the publication of the first two instalments of her trilogy, multiple major critics who highly praised the novels were quick to point out how the "hackneyed label" (Lesser) of historical fiction – which functions as something of "a byword for middlebrow wasteland" (Robson) – doesn't fit them, with one reviewer marvelling at how the novels belonging to "a somewhat gimcrack genre not exactly jammed with greatness" could end up being so good and successful, and concluding, half-jokingly, how one of the reasons "is that Mantel seems to have written a very good modern novel, then changed all her fictional names to English historical figures of the fifteen-twenties and thirties." (Wood)

For this infusion of stylistic modernism to work, though, in the still mostly medieval setting to work, though, the single consciousness through which all the events were to be refracted had to be someone special, and here we can point out the splendid congruence between form and content. Just as Cromwell was the greatest political supporter of the Protestant efforts to have the Bible translated and published in contemporary English, Mantel chose to write about the first four decades of the sixteenth century in modern vernacular and not to get caught up in the period-appropriate thous and thines. And just as Cromwell was one of the people who ushered in early modernity in England by spearheading the break with the traditional Papal authority, Mantel chose a

narrative strategy stemming from and reliant upon a similarly consequential early 20th-century literary supersession of the 19th-century realist modes of representation.

Note:

This is the modified version of the first section from the paper, "Bodily abounds. Hilary Mantel's *The Mirror and the Light* as Cixousian 'feminine text'"

See at: https://open-research-europe.ec.europa.eu/articles/5-236

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