



Rewriting the Tudor Myth: How Historical Fiction Challenges the Official Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The Tudor era was a time of intense myth-making, largely shaped by state-sponsored narratives designed to reinforce the legitimacy and power of the monarchy. Under Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, historical accounts were carefully curated to present a version of the past that served political ends, transforming figures like Anne Boleyn, Thomas More, and Thomas Cromwell into symbols rather than complex individuals. This paper explores how Hilary Mantel, through her *Wolf Hall* trilogy, dismantles these myths and offers an alternative, more humanized history. Mantel's portrayal of Thomas Cromwell disrupts the long-standing vilification of his character, presenting him as pragmatic and deeply human rather than a one-dimensional political schemer. Historical fiction serves as a counter-history, challenging the state's version of events by exposing the inconsistencies, omissions, and biases in official records. This paper examines how Mantel reconstructs history, using narrative techniques that shift perspectives, emphasize interiority, and question historical "truths." It further explores the broader role of historical fiction in questioning dominant ideologies and how it allows for multiple interpretations of history. By comparing Mantel's work with primary Tudor-era sources and

historiographical debates, this study argues that historical fiction is not merely imaginative storytelling but a crucial medium for re-examining and reclaiming historical narratives from state control.

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Introduction

The Tudor dynasty is one of the most mythologized periods in English history. Henry VIII's break from Rome, Elizabeth I's reign as the "Virgin Queen," and the portrayal of figures like Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell have been subject to centuries of political and literary shaping. Many of these narratives were deliberately constructed to serve the monarchy's agenda, ensuring that history remembered its rulers in ways that legitimized their power. Official histories, often written under royal patronage, presented carefully curated versions of events, suppressing inconvenient details and vilifying or glorifying key figures as needed.

Historical fiction, however, offers an alternative lens. By blending meticulous research with narrative freedom, it has the power to expose the artifice of historical myth-making. Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy is a masterful example of this practice. Through her portrayal of Thomas Cromwell, Mantel dismantles the longstanding image of him as a ruthless manipulator, instead presenting a pragmatic, intelligent, and deeply human figure. This paper explores how Mantel's work challenges the Tudor myth and serves as a form of counter-history, questioning the authority of state-sanctioned narratives.

The Tudor Myth and Its Construction

The Tudor myth was largely shaped by official propaganda, chroniclers, and later, by Shakespearean drama. Henry VIII's court historian, Edward Hall, constructed a narrative of the Tudors as divinely ordained rulers, emphasizing their legitimacy in contrast to the instability of previous reigns (Elton, 1977). Under Elizabeth I, figures such as William Camden further solidified the image of the Tudors as heroic and just rulers, particularly in response to Catholic challenges (Doran, 2003).

One of the most enduring myths is the demonization of Thomas Cromwell. In works such as Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* and Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Cromwell is depicted as a Machiavellian figure, in stark contrast to the virtuous Thomas More (Guy, 2000). This binary—



Cromwell as the power-hungry bureaucrat and More as the noble martyr—has long dominated historical and cultural narratives.

However, these accounts were shaped by Tudor-era politics. More, a Catholic martyr, became a symbol of resistance against Protestant reform, while Cromwell, an architect of the English Reformation, was vilified to align with later religious and political agendas (Scarisbrick, 1997). The question then arises: how much of what we “know” about these figures is genuine, and how much is the result of Tudor-era myth-making?

Mantel’s Cromwell: Rewriting a Villain

Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* trilogy represents a radical departure from traditional portrayals of Thomas Cromwell, challenging his long-standing reputation as a scheming, ruthless bureaucrat. In historical and literary tradition, Cromwell has often been vilified as a Machiavellian figure whose political maneuvering led to the downfall of Anne Boleyn and the consolidation of Henry VIII’s authority. From William Shakespeare’s *Henry VIII* to Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*, Cromwell has been depicted as a cold, unfeeling manipulator, set in contrast to the virtuous and principled Thomas More (Guy, 2000). However, Mantel’s revisionist portrayal invites readers to reconsider Cromwell as a pragmatic statesman, shaped by his personal history, social mobility, and deep understanding of Tudor politics.

A Psychological Reassessment: Cromwell’s Interior World

Mantel’s most striking narrative technique is her deep psychological exploration of Cromwell. Unlike traditional histories that present him as a two-dimensional villain, Mantel’s trilogy offers an intimate perspective, immersing readers in Cromwell’s thoughts, memories, and emotions. Her use of free indirect discourse allows the reader to inhabit Cromwell’s mind, experiencing his wit, intelligence, and personal struggles firsthand (Mantel, 2009). This shift in narrative perspective is crucial, as it transforms Cromwell from a political abstraction into a deeply human figure.

One of the most significant aspects of Mantel’s characterization is her emphasis on Cromwell’s early life. Traditionally, little attention has been given to his origins, but *Wolf Hall* foregrounds his brutal childhood—his father, Walter Cromwell, is depicted as an abusive blacksmith whose violent outbursts force young Cromwell to flee his home. This portrayal not only elicits sympathy but also contextualizes Cromwell’s later pragmatism. Unlike aristocrats such as Thomas More or Stephen Gardiner, who inherit



status and influence, Cromwell rises through sheer intelligence and adaptability, making him a modern figure in a rigidly hierarchical society (Loades, 2013).

The Cromwell-More Dynamic: Reversing the Traditional Narrative

A particularly compelling aspect of Mantel's revisionist approach is her portrayal of Thomas More. In contrast to *A Man for All Seasons*, which presents More as a noble martyr for religious freedom, Mantel's More is an uncompromising ideologue, whose intellectual rigidity blinds him to political reality. He is depicted as a man who delights in torturing heretics and refuses to engage with the complexities of the Reformation. Mantel does not deny More's brilliance, but she strips away the halo that later Catholic hagiography and popular culture have bestowed upon him (Mantel, 2009).

Cromwell, by contrast, is pragmatic rather than dogmatic. He does not seek to impose a singular religious vision but instead aims to serve the king and secure England's stability. His flexible, problem-solving approach contrasts sharply with More's moral absolutism. This dynamic serves as a broader commentary on historical interpretation—Mantel challenges the simplistic dichotomy of Cromwell as villain and More as saint, instead presenting a more nuanced and morally complex relationship (Elton, 1977).

Anne Boleyn and the Art of Political Survival

Mantel also reinterprets Cromwell's role in the downfall of Anne Boleyn, which has traditionally been viewed as the defining act of his villainy. Conventional histories, such as those by Eric Ives (2004), present Cromwell as the architect of Anne's downfall, driven by personal animosity and political expediency. While Mantel does not exonerate him, she reframes his actions within the brutal context of Tudor realpolitik.

In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Cromwell's move against Anne is not motivated by personal vendetta alone but by political necessity. Anne's failure to produce a male heir and her increasing unpredictability threaten the stability of Henry VIII's reign. Moreover, Mantel suggests that Cromwell's orchestration of Anne's fall is, in part, an act of retribution for the execution of his mentor, Cardinal Wolsey. This layered depiction complicates the traditional narrative—Cromwell is not merely a schemer but a man navigating the treacherous currents of Henry's court (Mantel, 2012).



The Politics of Memory: Why Cromwell's Reputation Suffered

One of the reasons Cromwell has historically been cast as a villain is the way history is written by the victors. Following his execution in 1540, his enemies, including the conservative aristocracy and Catholic chroniclers, shaped his posthumous reputation. The likes of Raphael Holinshed and Nicholas Harpsfield depicted him as a man of low birth who wielded disproportionate power, fueling the perception of him as a dangerous social climber (Scarbrick, 1997). Even in later Protestant histories, Cromwell was overshadowed by figures like Cranmer and Henry VIII himself, relegating him to the role of an enforcer rather than a key architect of the English Reformation.

Mantel's novels challenge this historical bias, arguing that Cromwell was not merely a king's servant but a visionary statesman. His efforts to modernize England's legal and financial systems, his diplomatic acumen, and his advocacy for religious reform make him one of the most consequential figures of the 16th century (Levine, 2015). Mantel restores to Cromwell the complexity and agency that centuries of historical writing have stripped away.

Cromwell as a Modern Political Figure

By reconstructing Cromwell as a man of intellect, resilience, and adaptability, Mantel presents a Tudor-era figure with distinctly modern sensibilities. He is an outsider who ascends to power through merit rather than birthright, a master of bureaucracy who understands the mechanisms of political survival. His story resonates with contemporary readers because it challenges the notion that history is shaped solely by kings and noblemen; instead, it is often shaped by those who operate behind the throne.

Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy is not merely historical fiction—it is historical revisionism in its most compelling form. It demonstrates the power of narrative to reshape our understanding of the past and challenges us to question the stories we have long accepted as truth. In doing so, it reclaims Thomas Cromwell from the margins of history and restores him as a figure of enduring complexity and significance.

Historical Fiction as Counter-History

Historical fiction does not merely retell history; it reinterprets it. Unlike official historical accounts, which often serve political agendas, historical fiction allows for nuance, alternative perspectives, and the voices of those omitted from traditional records (White, 1987).

Mantel's trilogy exemplifies this counter-historical approach. By centering Cromwell, she reclaims a figure historically marginalized in favor of More-centric narratives. Furthermore, her portrayal questions the very nature of historical "truth." The novels highlight the fragility of history—how it is shaped by who records it and for what purpose (Greenblatt, 2004).

This is particularly evident in how Mantel reconstructs events such as Anne Boleyn's downfall. While official accounts often paint Cromwell as the mastermind behind her execution, Mantel presents a more complex reality—one in which Cromwell is neither a hero nor a villain but a man navigating the ruthless landscape of Tudor politics (Mantel, 2012).

The Role of Historical Fiction in Shaping Contemporary Historical Consciousness

Why does historical fiction matter in the 21st century? In an era of misinformation and competing narratives, Mantel's work reminds us that history is not fixed—it is constructed. Her trilogy urges readers to question long-standing assumptions and consider the biases inherent in historical accounts (Levine, 2015).

Moreover, by humanizing figures like Cromwell, historical fiction fosters empathy. It allows readers to engage with the past not as a distant, impersonal record but as a dynamic and deeply human experience (Hutcheon, 1988).

Conclusion

Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy exemplifies how historical fiction can challenge official narratives and reclaim marginalized perspectives. By deconstructing the Tudor myth and presenting a more nuanced portrayal of Thomas Cromwell, Mantel not only rewrites history but also questions the nature of historical truth itself.

Historical fiction, at its best, serves as a counter-history—offering alternative perspectives, filling gaps in official records, and challenging dominant ideologies. In doing so, it reminds us that history is not merely something to be recorded but something to be continually re-examined.



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