



Thomas Cromwell as a Literary Construct: Power, Agency, and Historical Reimagination

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ABSTRACT

The figure of Thomas Cromwell, long vilified in English historiography as a ruthless schemer in the court of Henry VIII, has undergone a striking transformation through Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy. This paper examines Cromwell not merely as a historical actor but as a literary construct shaped by Mantel's transposed narrative strategies. It argues that Mantel's fictional reworking of Cromwell challenges entrenched Tudor myths and offers a counter-history that emphasizes empathy, agency, and human complexity. Drawing on *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020), this study situates Mantel's Cromwell within broader debates on the ethics of historical fiction, the function of narrative in reshaping collective memory, and the politics of rehabilitating marginalized figures. Mantel humanizes Cromwell by foregrounding his personal losses, emotional intelligence, and pragmatic statesmanship, thereby reframing him as a man of vision rather than a villain of propaganda. Through close analysis, this paper demonstrates how Cromwell's literary reconstruction engages with issues of power, subjectivity, and historiographical bias, while simultaneously reflecting modern anxieties about governance, morality, and identity. Ultimately, Mantel's Cromwell illustrates the capacity of historical fiction to intervene in dominant narratives, reconstruct political memory, and



compel readers to reevaluate both the past and its enduring presence in cultural consciousness.

Introduction: Cromwell in History and Literature

Thomas Cromwell (1485–1540) remains one of the most polarizing figures in Tudor history. Born into relative obscurity, he rose to become Henry VIII’s chief minister, orchestrating the English Reformation and overseeing the dissolution of the monasteries. His execution in 1540 was as spectacular as his rise, and in the centuries that followed, he was largely remembered as a Machiavellian figure: ruthless, manipulative, and morally ambiguous. Historians such as Elton (1977) emphasized his administrative genius but did little to soften his reputation, while dramatists and chroniclers cast him as a villainous foil to the more saintly Thomas More.

Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* trilogy radically reconfigures this image. By narrating events through Cromwell’s perspective, Mantel reshapes historical memory, dislodging entrenched narratives and proposing a more empathetic view of his character. This reinterpretation does not simply rehabilitate Cromwell; it foregrounds the **narrative power of historical fiction** to challenge dominant historiographies and expose the constructedness of “official history.”

This paper investigates Cromwell as a **literary construct** in Mantel’s work, examining how his portrayal embodies themes of power, agency, and human reimagination. It further interrogates the ethical stakes of rewriting history through fiction, particularly when such reimaginings influence public understanding of the past.

The Traditional Cromwell: Villain of the Tudor Myth

The “Tudor Myth,” a term popularized by mid-twentieth-century historians, refers to the deliberate crafting of dynastic legitimacy through propaganda under Henry VIII and Elizabeth I (Doran, 2003). Within this myth, Thomas Cromwell became a convenient scapegoat—an ambitious minister who bore the burden of unpopular reforms. The execution of Anne Boleyn, the dissolution of monasteries, and the erosion of papal authority were all ascribed to Cromwell’s cunning rather than Henry’s will.

Literary portrayals reinforced this negative construction. In Robert Bolt’s play *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), Cromwell emerges as More’s foil: unscrupulous, pragmatic, and devoid of moral conviction. Such representations echoed Catholic historiographies, which vilified him as a destroyer of religious life,



and Protestant narratives, which cast him as too radical and self-serving. The cumulative effect was a figure remembered less for his reforming vision and more for his cruelty and opportunism.

By the early twenty-first century, Cromwell's image was largely ossified as history's villain. Mantel's trilogy unsettled this narrative, reimagining him as a man of empathy, intellect, and complexity.

Mantel's Reimagining: Humanizing a Historical Villain

Thomas Cromwell's historiographical reputation has been shaped largely by propaganda, chroniclers, and dramatists who cast him as the archetypal Tudor villain. In Tudor chronicles such as Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancaster and York* (1548), Cromwell is presented as a manipulative and cunning man whose rise epitomized dangerous social mobility. Centuries later, dramatists like Robert Bolt in *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) reinforced this image, positioning Cromwell as the foil to Sir Thomas More—the corrupt pragmatist against the principled martyr. In these accounts, Cromwell serves as a narrative device through which audiences affirm moral binaries: good versus evil, principle versus expediency, sanctity versus corruption.

Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy dismantles this caricature by providing Cromwell with psychological interiority, emotional resonance, and narrative agency. She reclaims his subjectivity by moving him from the margins of Tudor history into the center of the story. Her narrative technique—most notably, the innovative “he, Cromwell” voice—renders him both omnipresent and intimately human. Readers are not merely told about Cromwell; they inhabit his perspective, experiencing events through his memory, perceptions, and reflections.

Mantel humanizes Cromwell in several ways. First, she emphasizes his personal losses. The death of his wife Elizabeth and two daughters in the sweating sickness provides a profound sense of vulnerability. These tragedies, sparsely documented in historical record, are imaginatively expanded in Mantel's work, situating Cromwell not as an abstract agent of policy but as a grieving father and husband. His grief informs his empathy: he identifies with those marginalized by court hierarchies, from Wolsey in his disgrace to commoners at risk of displacement from monastic dissolution.

Second, Mantel portrays Cromwell's intellectual and emotional intelligence. Unlike the aristocracy, he is pragmatic, polyglot, and cosmopolitan—fluent in languages, law, finance, and theology. This breadth of knowledge, often overlooked in traditional portrayals, is reimagined as a source of resilience and



adaptability. Mantel highlights his ability to read people and situations, positioning him as a man whose political dexterity is grounded not in cruelty but in perception.

Third, Mantel emphasizes loyalty and memory. Cromwell's loyalty to Wolsey, even after the cardinal's fall, becomes a defining trait that counters his reputation for opportunism. His actions against Anne Boleyn's faction in *Bring Up the Bodies* are framed not solely as ambition but as retribution for Wolsey's humiliation. In this light, Cromwell emerges less as a cold strategist and more as a man guided by fidelity and emotional continuity.

This reconfiguration raises questions about the ethics of fictional empathy. Critics such as Guy (2000) warn that novelists risk romanticizing controversial figures. Yet Mantel's reimagining does not exonerate Cromwell entirely; she acknowledges his ruthlessness, his role in judicial manipulations, and his complicity in violence. What distinguishes her work is the insistence that Cromwell's actions be understood in the broader context of his time. Power at Henry's court is precarious, and survival demands compromise. Mantel, therefore, compels readers to grapple with the moral ambiguity of history rather than succumb to reductive villainy.

By giving Cromwell a voice, Mantel dramatizes the silence of the historical record. As Hutcheon (1988) argues, historiographic metafiction highlights the constructedness of history by filling archival gaps with imagination. Cromwell's inner world is precisely such a gap, and Mantel exploits it to reconstruct a figure who was denied complexity by earlier narratives. In doing so, she foregrounds the interplay between history and fiction, fact and interpretation, and reminds readers that even history's villains deserve reconsideration as full human beings.

Mantel's Cromwell thus emerges not as a villain but as a protagonist embodying both strength and vulnerability. The result is a figure who challenges official Tudor propaganda and encourages a reassessment of how history itself is written, remembered, and reimagined.

Power and Agency: Cromwell as Political Architect

Thomas Cromwell's rise to power is one of the most remarkable trajectories in Tudor history. From blacksmith's son to Earl of Essex, his life exemplifies the possibilities—and perils—of social mobility in early modern England. Historians such as Elton (1977) emphasized Cromwell's role in institutionalizing government, crediting him with administrative innovations that laid foundations for modern bureaucracy.



Yet this historiographical narrative often overlooks the personal and political negotiations through which power was exercised.

Mantel's trilogy reframes Cromwell's power not as structural reform alone but as lived, dynamic agency. Her Cromwell is a political architect whose ability to navigate shifting allegiances, read the king's moods, and manipulate legal frameworks reveals the intricacy of power in Tudor court life. In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell demonstrates that power is less about brute force and more about interpretation: "He learns to look at faces as if they are texts, to be read, decoded, and remembered" (Mantel, 2009, p. 68). This metaphor encapsulates the nature of power as both relational and interpretive.

Cromwell's agency is dramatized most clearly in his orchestration of Anne Boleyn's downfall in *Bring Up the Bodies*. Traditionally cast as the villain who engineered her fall, Mantel portrays Cromwell as operating within a web of necessity. His actions are motivated by multiple imperatives: Henry's impatience for a male heir, his loyalty to Wolsey's memory, and his survival in a volatile court. Mantel does not absolve him of responsibility; rather, she situates his agency within an environment where moral purity is incompatible with political survival.

The precariousness of Cromwell's power is equally significant. Agency in Mantel's narrative is never absolute but negotiated through compromise and vulnerability. His proximity to Henry affords him influence, yet it also exposes him to constant risk. The execution of Thomas More illustrates this tension: while Cromwell manages the trial, he remains haunted by its ethical implications. Later, his own downfall in *The Mirror and the Light* underscores the fragility of political agency. Power, Mantel suggests, is a double-edged construct that both enables and imperils those who wield it.

From a theoretical perspective, Cromwell's agency exemplifies Greenblatt's (2004) notion of Renaissance self-fashioning: the crafting of identity within power structures. Cromwell fashions himself as both servant and master of the state, a man who reshapes England's religious and political landscape while simultaneously being shaped by the demands of monarchy. His ability to reinvent himself—from Wolsey's secretary to Henry's indispensable minister—demonstrates not only his resourcefulness but also the instability of identity in an age of political flux.

Mantel further complicates the question of agency by emphasizing its ethical dimension. Power in the trilogy is not celebrated uncritically; it is haunted by conscience, memory, and loss. Cromwell's reflections reveal a man who perceives the costs of political maneuvering: the human toll of reform, the



violence of justice, and the compromises demanded by loyalty to Henry. Agency, then, is not simply instrumental but deeply ambivalent—both enabling and morally corrosive.

By reimagining Cromwell as a political architect, Mantel challenges reductive portrayals that cast him as either Machiavellian schemer or bureaucratic genius. Instead, she situates his agency at the intersection of pragmatism and vulnerability, revealing the complexities of power in both historical and literary terms. In doing so, she not only rehabilitates Cromwell's image but also reflects on the enduring question of how individuals navigate—and are navigated by—the structures of authority.

The Ethics of Reinterpretation in Historical Fiction

Historical fiction's engagement with the past raises ethical questions: What are the responsibilities of novelists when reimagining real lives? Does fictional empathy risk distorting historical truth? Mantel addresses these concerns directly, asserting that fiction operates in the gaps left by historical record. As she observes, "The historian will tell you what happened. The novelist will tell you what it felt like" (Mantel, 2017, p. 12).

This distinction highlights fiction's capacity to **humanize historical abstraction**. Yet it also underscores the ethical stakes: Mantel's Cromwell may alter public perceptions of Tudor history in ways that compete with scholarly historiography. For some critics, this risks romanticizing Cromwell. For others, it represents a valuable corrective, foregrounding voices suppressed by official narratives.

Levine (2015) argues that narrative networks can reframe history by emphasizing contingency and connection. Mantel's Cromwell exemplifies this, drawing attention to the multiplicity of perspectives occluded by official Tudor propaganda.

Narrative Technique: Mantel's Transposed Perspective

Mantel's prose style plays a crucial role in Cromwell's reconstruction. The use of free indirect discourse and her distinctive "he, Cromwell" narrative voice collapse distance between character and narrator. This transposed perspective blurs the line between interiority and external narration, compelling readers to inhabit Cromwell's consciousness while maintaining historical ambiguity.

The fluidity of Mantel's narration mirrors the instability of history itself. Facts are filtered through perception, memory, and rumor, underscoring Hutcheon's (1988) notion that history and fiction are



discursive constructs rather than transparent reflections of reality. By embedding readers in Cromwell's perspective, Mantel dramatizes both the richness and the uncertainty of historical experience.

Cromwell as a Mirror of Modernity

Mantel's Cromwell resonates not only as a figure of the sixteenth century but also as a mirror of twenty-first-century concerns. His pragmatic politics, negotiation of power structures, and awareness of institutional fragility speak to contemporary anxieties about governance and democracy. As Greenblatt (2004) suggests in his theory of self-fashioning, Renaissance figures were deeply engaged in constructing identities within systems of power. Mantel translates this dynamic for modern readers, illustrating how Cromwell fashions himself as both servant and master of the state.

Thus, Cromwell's reimagining functions as more than a Tudor revision; it becomes a commentary on modern political subjectivity, agency, and ethical compromise.

Criticism and Reception of Mantel's Cromwell

Mantel's trilogy has received widespread acclaim, winning the Booker Prize for both *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. Critics praised her reworking of Cromwell as bold and empathetic, though some expressed concern over the blurring of history and fiction. Guy (2000) argued that fictionalizing figures like Cromwell risks overshadowing historical scholarship with imaginative reconstructions.

Yet the novels have also reinvigorated interest in Tudor history, prompting debates about historiography, narrative ethics, and literary responsibility. For many readers, Mantel's Cromwell has become the definitive Cromwell, supplanting earlier portrayals. This cultural impact underscores the profound influence of historical fiction in shaping collective memory.

Conclusion: Literature as Counter-History

Hilary Mantel's reimagining of Thomas Cromwell exemplifies the transformative power of historical fiction. By humanizing a long-vilified figure, she destabilizes entrenched myths and demonstrates how literature can serve as counter-history. Her Cromwell embodies the ethical and imaginative possibilities of fiction: to reframe agency, interrogate power, and render history as lived experience rather than abstract chronicle.



In treating Cromwell as a **literary construct**, Mantel foregrounds the act of narration itself—its silences, biases, and capacities for empathy. The trilogy thus illustrates how fiction can both supplement and challenge historical record, reshaping collective memory while engaging critically with the ethics of interpretation.

Ultimately, Mantel's Cromwell reveals that history is not fixed but negotiated, contested, and continually reimagined. By bridging the gap between the sixteenth century and the present, Mantel compels us to recognize the enduring relevance of historical fiction as a mode of inquiry—one that does not simply tell us what happened, but challenges us to reconsider how we understand the past, and why it still matters.

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