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Hilary Mantel's handling of Historical Fiction

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ABSTRACT

*There are several literary subgenres, and historical fiction is one of them. The story's most significant aspect is that it is set in the past, with every aspect according to the standards of the time. A historical fiction story transports readers to a former time and location. It is the setting that gives historical novel credibility. Historical fiction takes place in a genuine location and at a historically significant moment in time. As the author fills in the blanks, the details and the action in the novel may combine real-world incidents with those from their imagination. Characters may be entirely made up of fiction or may be based on real persons or both at times. Historical fiction did not become a popular literary subgenre until the early 1800s. One of the first widely read books in the category was *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott which was published in 1819 and narrates the story which took place in 1194. There are no adequate words to express how much Dame Hilary Mantel meant to British literature. She was a writer of extraordinary talent and originality. Her trilogy about the life of Tudor politician Thomas Cromwell will be remembered forever. Our perception of what historical fiction is capable of was completely altered by the beauty and vigour of these compelling books. They achieved incredible success. *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) both received the Booker Prize, while *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) was also nominated. It is not pointless to travel across the past, nor is it a pointless endeavour. The past shifts a little each time we tell a narrative about it because history is constantly shifting behind us. The most meticulous historian is an unreliable narrator; he/she brings to the project the biases of his/her training and the whims of his/her personal temperament, and he/she is frequently forced to murder his/her forefathers in order to make his/her name by coming up with a different interpretation of events from the one that predominated when he/she himself/herself learned the discipline; he/she must make the old new because his/her department's academic standing depends on it. This is exactly what Hilary Mantel did when she wrote the Cromwell trilogy.*

Keywords: History, fiction, Hilary Mantel, Thomas Cromwell, past, old, new etc.

INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's history plays, for instance, demonstrate the interconnectedness of myth, history, and literature up to the early seventeenth century. While myth was regarded as a fabulous form, history focused on locating and documenting the historical facts as rational rhetoric. According to Hayden White, the "militant rationalism" of Enlightenment philosophers affected their attitudes towards the past and led them

to blame irrationality for the failings of historical figures and institutions. White makes this assertion in "Irrational" (p. 136). Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot (1727-1781) and Nicolas de Condorcet (1743-1794) are mentioned by White as examples of this prejudice because they both held a "simple-minded Manichaeism that regarded reason and foolishness as opposed and mutually contradictory states of thought" (White, "Irrational" 139).

Historians eagerly embraced Johann Gottfried Herder's (1744–1803) new philosophy of history, which held that the entirety of history could be broken down to individual history; understanding the historical context of an action or creation is as important as understanding the "intention of the agent or creator, and not merely from writ" (Beiser). This was done in recognition of the inadequacy of condemning past actions that produced the conditions for the present. In contrast to Georg Lukács' claim that Hegel is the creator of the "vast historical process" in *The Historical Novel* (Lukács 29), this emphasis on the individual is different. Given that Scott's "Essay on Imitations of the Ancient Ballad" (Barnaby) demonstrates his early, formative interest in German ballads, including Herder's, it is probably more accurate to view his historical novels as investigations of individual agency in history as opposed to the collective experience for which Lukács argues. Like Hegel, Victorian historians saw history as a "grand historical process" in which "history is past politics, and politics is current history" (Seeley qtd. in Fielding). Victorians valued the study of history at universities because it would prepare future leaders to rule Queen Victoria's subjects. Given the importance of having a thorough understanding of national history, its study became more widespread and institutionalised than ever before. Comparatively speaking, history and literature were "seen as branches of the same tree of learning, a tree that attempted to 'interpret experience for the aim of leading and uplifting man'" (Hutcheon 105).

Academics didn't give much importance to the Historical fiction until this subgenre becomes popular during the early 1800s. One of the first widely read books in the category was *Ivanhoe* by Sir Walter Scott (1819). The titular hero of the story, which takes place in 1194 near the end of the Crusades, returns to England only to discover that he has been disinherited because he fell in love with the wrong woman. Early in the 19th century, historical fiction became increasingly popular in Europe as a result of the Romantic response to the Enlightenment, particularly under the influence of Scottish author Sir Walter Scott, whose writings were extremely popular there. In order to examine the evolution of civilization through conflict, Walter Scott's Scottish novels *Waverley* (1814) and *Rob Roy* (1817) centred on a mediocre character who sits at the crossroads of many social groupings. It has been said that *Ivanhoe* (1820) revived interest in the Middle Ages. In the middle of the 19th century, a number of well-known British authors produced historical novels; the most renowned of these are Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, George Eliot's *Romola*, and Charles Kingsley's *Westward Ho!* and *Hereward the Wake*. The only historical book by Thomas Hardy, *The Trumpet-Major* (1880), takes place in Weymouth during the Napoleonic Wars.

The British writer, Dame Hilary Mantel, popularly known as Hilary Mantel was born on July 6, 1952. She has dabbled with short fiction, autobiographies, and historical fiction. Mantel received the Booker prize in 2009 and 2012 for two historical novels she wrote. Both "Wolf Hall" from 2009 and "Bring Up the Bodies" from 2012 are fictionalised accounts of Thomas Cromwell's rise to power in Tudor England during the rule of

Henry VIII. Together with the third book, "The Mirror and the Light," which was published in 2020, these two historical novels make up the Cromwell Trilogy. Only four authors—J.M. Coetzee, Peter Carey, J.G. Farrell, and Hilary Mantel—have won the Booker Prize twice throughout the award's history. Hilary Mantel has won the Booker award twice, making her the first and only woman author to do so.

A Place of Greater Safety, which Mantel wrote in 1992, was a lengthy manuscript that was the start of her literary career. No one would publish it until she had released four of her earlier works, so she had to wait. She would return to historical fiction in *Fludd* (1989) and *The Giant, O'Brien* (1998), but it wasn't until *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) that she would address a period of history as vast—both in terms of content and legacy—as the French Revolution. Mantel's Tudor novels may be as much about the mythology of England as they are about the mystical and paranormal tales that infuse both the time period and Mantel's writing. However, Sir Walter Scott, who is sometimes cited as the genre's inventor, engaged in a "nation-building narrative" (P. Anderson) in his *Waverley* books, and historical fiction has long been recognised as "a product of romantic nationalism" (P. Anderson). Mantel acknowledges the connection between her historical novels and the country, but she also asserts that she must look into mythology because "Englishness included equal portions of both" ("Dead are Real").

By the end of the 1980s, there was disagreement with the claim made by professional historians that historical studies regarded "the human past as its subjects of study, the reality of fact as its objective, and the dispelling of mistake, falsehoods, and fictions about the past as its purpose" (White, "Kermode's notion" 48). History's isolation from literature was questioned when White argued that historical material is narrativized, or shaped into a narrative form, in order to make whatever events are depicted more accessible and understood.

The combination of historical events and figures into a teleological form—a beginning, middle, and an end—is what White went on to describe as historical narrative's literary qualities. In addition, according to White (*Meta History*), there are four different storylines that the historian might use to present historical information. These are humorous, romantic, tragic, and satiric. The opening epigraph of *Wolf Hall* has a reference to these tropes: "There are three sorts of situations, one labelled tragic, the second comic, and the third satiric" (Vitruvius qtd. in Mantel xxiii). It is assumed that Mantel's Cromwell books primarily employ the tragic form because they lack the idealisation of concepts or individuals found in romantic narratives and because they contain her Vitruvius epigraph. Mantel, on the other hand, clearly makes room in her writing for both satire and humour, as evidenced by the comic relief provided by Cromwell's idiot Antony (*Bring Up the Bodies* 113–15) and the scene in *Wolf Hall* describing the reactions of the dinner guests to Henry nodding off at the table (*Bring Up the Bodies* 18–19). In his most recent book, *Antinomies of Realism* (2013), Fredric Jameson praises Hilary Mantel's portrayal of Maximilian Robespierre in *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), saying

that thanks to Mantel's "intervention in the portrayal of Robespierre," "his political programme can now be taken seriously again" (277), free from the "satiric weight of political vilification and the caricature of his personality and private habits" (278). Jameson cautions that this strategy offers a "social and political diagnosis of corruption" rather than insight into "pre-industrial capitalist economics" (278). Mantel's relevance to Robespierre's "political programme" is a reason to celebrate the pervasiveness of business in late capitalism, where "the universal tolerance of corruption tells us more about what is apolitical in our societies than any number of party-oriented opinion polls" (279). Jameson praises Mantel for "giving us a possibility of rethinking the uses of the historical novel in a mode distinct from hagiography or martyr legend" (279), in addition to seeing Robespierre's "politics of Virtue" (279) as a workable alternative in the "current absence of any genuinely socialist politics" (279).

Jameson's criticism of Mantel's earlier works has implications for her Cromwell novels as well. From Holbein's portrait of Cromwell having "the visage of a ruthless bureaucrat" (Hitchens, "The Man Who Made England" 147) to "the cruel, sly, and greedy servant of an imperious master, the wicked though clever destroyer of a civilization, the unscrupulous builder of a despotism," Cromwell has been portrayed as a caricature of evil, similar to Robespierre which rightfully demolished (Elton 128). Geoffrey Elton, a Cambridge historian, first uncovered Cromwell's "political agenda" in the 1950s, but historical interpretation brushed it under the rug. But before this discovery had much of an influence, "academic trend... passed on and a new generation loathed him anew" ("Dead are Real").

Farseeing modern statesman who had transformed the English government from a personal fiefdom of the king to a bureaucratic parliamentary structure that could survive royal incompetence and enact reforms through legislation rather than through fiat. ("Dead are Real").

Cromwell combats the corruption he discovers in Henry's court with "cool indifference in dismantling the old and perspicacious dexterity increasing anew," "Justas Robespierre does in the revolutionary administrations that formed following Louis XVI's abdication with his "politics of Virtue" (Jameson 279). (Elton 125). He does not have the ideologies of Enlightenment intellectuals to inspire him, unlike Robespierre, and must instead compete with medievalists such as Norfolk, Suffolk, and Gardiner. Cromwell aligns himself with these exact medievalists when he turns against Anne, jeopardizing the progress he has achieved with the country of England. Along with the historical novel's traditional relationship to nation and politics, it is Mantel's work's ubiquitous political component that connects *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror and The Light* so tightly with nation and national identity. It's worth noting that Christopher Hitchens' *Wolf Hall* assessment was headlined "The Men Who Made England." "The beginnings of a serious country called England, which can argue temporal and spiritual concerns nits own language, which will defeat Spain and give birth to Shakespeare, Marlowe, and Milton,"

Hitchens writes at the end of the rupture with Rome (147). Given that any form of nationalism prior to the French Revolution is considered proto-nationalism rather than fully developed nationalism (Gorski 1459), Modernists would dismiss Elton's claims to "national sovereignty" (Elton 160) based on the preamble of Cromwell's Act of Appeals (1533): "This realm of England is an Empire, and so hath been accepted in the world" (qtd. in Elton 160). If Mantel is advocating for a fresh look at Thomas Cromwell by focusing on the medieval institutions he attempted to reform while accusing the current British government of "returning to the Middle Ages" ("Cromwell's Welfare State"), it must be acknowledged that Cromwell's "revolution" (Elton 160) gave birth to a nation. "The Tudor scholar GR Elton had established Cromwell as a statesman of the first order, but Elton's study had done little for Cromwell's public image," Mantel writes in a *Guardian* editorial ("Hilary Mantel: how I came to write *Wolf Hall*"). As a result, Mantel's Cromwell novels represent the aestheticization of Elton's thesis. Cromwell mentions "nation" or "nations" seven times in *Wolf Hall*—for example, when the cardinal is falling from power, Cromwell tells George Cavendish that he "would like sight of the nation's accounts" (*Wolf Hall* 264) as a New Year's gift—and thirteen times in *Bring Up the Bodies*—for example, when Cromwell recalls fighting with the French, he considers the various national types who fought alongside him, fleeing (64). To fully investigate Mantel's demand for a fresh perspective on Cromwell, England must first become the nation that Mantel's Cromwellian visions.

In terms of what research offers to historical novels beyond the chronology of events and material evidence, Mantel says that historical fiction must deal with the concepts that are prominent or evolving in the historical world in order to be "done properly" ("Novel Approaches").

With his cool pragmatism, Cromwell, for example, illustrates the birth of the privileging of reason; his understanding of scripture goes hand-in-hand with his questioning of orthodoxy. Henry VIII, on the other hand, embodies medieval values, as seen by his jousting passion and documented declarations of love, first for Katherine and subsequently for Anne. "We're dealing here with massive archetypes," Mantel says ("Novel Approaches"), reminding us that these two extremely different men—with opposing beliefs and coming from obviously different classes—do have something in common. Returning to the editorial Mantel wrote after winning the Man Booker Prize for her debut novel, it's interesting to see how people react to historical fiction. The old always think the world is getting worse; it is for the young, equipped with historical facts, to point out that, compared with 1509, or even 1939, life in 2009 is sweet as honey. Immersion in history doesn't make you backward-looking; it makes you want to run like hell towards the future. ("History in Fiction"). Mantel's insight is similar to Rigney's concept of "prosthetic memory" (Lands berg qtd. in Rigney, "Fiction as Mediator" 87), which suggests that young adults gain a sense of identity and appreciation of their own historical context by

becoming familiar with historical characters through exposure to official history, academic history, and historical fiction. The fact-fiction duality is likely the most frequently mentioned with authors and readers alike among Mantel's insights into the making and reading of historical fiction. Mantel has been clear about her commitment to the truth and the importance of academic historians. While Mantel's editorial following her first Man Booker Prize win argues for the "value of historical fiction" ("History in Fiction"), she does point out that, while the skill of a historical fiction author should lie in "imaginative interpretation" ("History in Fiction"), leaving the "processing of the present" ("History in Fiction") to journalists, Mantel warns that, in historical fiction, "the only requirement is for the conjecture to be plausible and grounded in the best facts one can get" (History in Fiction).

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