Adegboyega Paul Salawu

Dr. Paul

English 211

11/22/2021

Hilary Mantel’s Cromwell

Historians often depict Thomas Cromwell as a cunning and conniving villain in TV and film adaptations. The negative view of his character is deeply rooted and based on literary works and theatre up until 2009 when Hilary Mantel published her novel *Wolf Hall*, and portrayed Cromwell in a nontraditional way. Mantel portrayed Cromwell's character in a more appealing manner and not conniving like her predecessors had done. In my essay, I aim to highlight certain moments in Mantel’s novel that she used to portray Cromwell as a character whose actions were based on his passions and not just to fit the stereotype he had been given. A few of the things that I will be highlighting are Cromwell’s reaction to his family members death on All Hallows Day, his encounter with some Lollers when he was younger, and for a peak inside his love life—the repeated mention of Queen of Sheba's tapestry will allow the opportunity for readers to properly understand and get to know Cromwell's character. Mantel's decision to interpret a historical character like Thomas Cromwell in a different lens is to indirectly comment on the subjectivity of interpreting and writing history, thus introducing readers to a Cromwell who was himself the author of histories that have indicted him for being Machiavellian.

For many years, literary depiction of Tudor history always portrays Thomas Cromwell as a selfish villain. In plays like *The Fifth Queen* (1908) by Ford Madox Ford and *Anne of a Thousand Days* (1948) by Maxwell Anderson, Thomas Cromwell was depicted as a briber,

torturer, snake-like, and evil man. However, Hilary Mantel depicted him in a more favorable light by narrating the story through Cromwell's view. She used historical evidence—artifacts—to narrate her story by introducing reader to a different version of Cromwell. Interpreting history involves using evidence and fiction to narrate a story. An example of interpreted evidence in *Wolf Hall* is the notion that Walter Cromwell is an abusive father. "Walter Cromwell was a drunken, quarrelsome scoundrel" (Hutchinson 8) who appeared in court many times due to his numerous fines. Another piece of concrete evidence to know that Walter was abusive was when he was fined in 1477 for assaulting and "drawing blood" from William Mitchell (Merriman 3). Hilary Mantel did what every historian usually does—which is build a story from existing artifacts. One of the main issues with looking towards artifacts in order for the "truth" of what happened in the past is that there can be many different interpretations. Which clearly Mantel viewed these artifacts in a different way than others did in the past, which is due to the fact that history is passed down through what is left behind from a generation. The past once existed, but our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted. Therefore, there is no accurate way to narrate past events.

Historiographic metafiction which is coined from the combination of historical fiction and metafiction is a narrative format that is influenced by past events whereby the reader is reminded that history is always subjective and created with a certain goal in mind. "History-writing was seen to have no such conventional restraints of probability or possibility. Nevertheless, many historians since have used the techniques of fictional representation to create imaginative versions of their historical, real worlds" (Hutcheon 106). This quote by Linda Hutcheon illustrates that historians have the power of using fiction to create different versions of historical figures characters. They tell the story from their own perspective, while using fiction to

their advantage. In *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel used historiographic metafiction to change Thomas Cromwell's narrative and to make people question how Cromwell has been depicted in the past as a historical character.

Throughout the novel, one of the characteristics that Hilary Mantel used to paint Thomas Cromwell's portrait is a Machiavellian who is strongly driven by his passion. Several episodes of the novel pointed to the fact that Thomas Cromwell was a Protestant by heart, thus some of his decisions were vital to the Protestant Movement. The first indication that Mantel aimed to paint Cromwell as a Protestant can be found in the chapter "At Austin Friars" in the novel. One quote that specifically highlights this is, "He has said, Liz, there's Tyndale's book, his New Testament, in the locked chest there, read it,…it's in English, read it for yourself: that's the point, Lizzie. You read it, you'll be surprised what's not in it" (Mantel 36). In this part, Cromwell was depicted to the readers as someone who not only believed in the protestant movement, but also as someone who was urging his wife Liz to read Tyndale's New Testament. Owning and reading the New Testament was considered unlawful, but that did not stop Thomas Cromwell. He was taking a risk by reading it and urging his wife to do the same.

Wolf Hall's Thomas Cromwell was not just the ordinary Machiavellian, he was a man with a purpose—to reform England—and several decisions he made, contributed to the completion of his purpose. In the novel, Mantel mentioned how Thomas Cromwell's purpose influenced some of his major decisions such as his marriage to Elizabeth Wykys, who was "a woman of wealth and property, and this could have been Cromwell's chief motivation in marrying her" (Borman 23). During a trip to Antwerp, Cromwell helped save Henry Wykys' wool business and subsequently made a major decision. "You want a new husband. Will he do?" (Mantel 39). This was the question Wykys asked his young, widowed daughter Lizzie. Their

marriage was not a product of mutual feelings. It was a contract which they considered signing. “Almost, they did. Lizzie wanted children; he wanted a wife with city contacts and some money behind her” (Mantel 40). That was Cromwell’s first arranged marriage. However it was quite ironic since he arranged the marriage of King Henry to Anne Boleyn, which was a product of love and not just a contract like Cromwell’s own marriage.

Anselma was the true love of Thomas Cromwell. In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel used the Tapestry of King Solomon and The Queen of Sheba to give the readers an experience of what Cromwell’s love life entailed. “Behind the cardinal, moving a little in the draft, King Solomon bows, his face obscured. The Queen of Sheba—smiling, light-footed—reminds him of the young widow he lodge with when he lived in Antwerp” (Mantel 22). In the novel, every time Thomas Cromwell comes across The Queen of Sheba’s image, he thinks of Anselma. But why would he think of Anselma when looking at a tapestry of the Queen of Sheba? It is because Christians hold King Solomon and Queen of Sheba to a high esteem due to his wisdom and her beauty. “And when the Queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord, she came to prove him with hard questions” (American Bible Society). In the book of Kings in the Bible, their meeting was deemed as a successful one.

The continuous mention of the tapestry in the novel was to show the reader how often he still thinks about Anselma. “Sheba makes Anne look bad” (Mantel 184). In this episode of the novel, Cromwell visited Anne Boleyn in order to initiate their unspoken contract—which is: Cromwell helps Anne become the Queen of England and Anne helps Cromwell attain top positions—he saw his beloved tapestry again. Cromwell however compared Anne Boleyn to his beloved Anselma but concluded that Anne was too bad of a person.

The continuous mention of the tapestry in the novel by Mantel is for the readers to see the irony and similarities between King Henry and Thomas Cromwell's love life. Mantel used the episode in which Cromwell was gifted the tapestry to shed a light on what both men have in common. "I used to he said, explaining himself excusing himself; the king said no matter what, we all have our follies in youth, and you can't marry everyone" (Mantel 321). This episode showed the readers how both men share common beliefs when it comes to women and dating, yet history depicts their characters in different ways—King Henry as heroic and brave while Cromwell is conniving and deceiving.

Wolf Hall shared some of Thomas Cromwell's memories that birthed his passion for the Protestant Movement. The memory when he was "anointed" by a Loller with the ashes of Joan Boughton. "She placed on the back of his hand a smear of mud and grit, fat and ash" (Mantel 330). This moment shaped who Thomas Cromwell became, and what his purpose really is. Cromwell on several occasions self-diagnosed himself with having a faulty memory, but this incidence was an unforgettable one in his life. "He has never forgotten the woman, whose last remnants he carried away as a greasy smudge on his own skin. (Mantel 330). This incident placed the struggles of Lollers on young Thomas Cromwell when he was anointed by their remains. One cannot really blame a hardworking man--who would give anything up for his purpose--after all.

Thomas Cromwell is indeed himself the author of histories that have indicted him for being a Machiavellian. The events on 'All Hallows Day' is an example that Thomas Cromwell purposefully chose a certain image to be portrayed as his character. "He looks up. Like an afterimage, the form of the tears swims in his eyes; the picture blurs" (Mantel 143). In this episode of the novel, Cromwell was mourning the death of his wife and daughters. Contrary to

how other historians have portrayed Cromwell's character as a selfish person, Mantel portrayed Cromwell as a loving man and a person who truly cares for the people around him.

While Cromwell was mourning his deceased wife Liz while reading her prayer book, the novel shows us the lengths that Cromwell would go to in order to protect the image he "needs" to portray. The moment George Cavendish walked in on him while mourning with Liz's prayerbook, Cromwell tried hide his emotional face by purposefully lying about why he was sad. "I am crying for myself, he says. I am going to lose everything, everything I have worked for, all my life…" Mantel took charge and made the readers see Thomas Cromwell a different way. She focused on making readers experience what his childhood was like, what he had sacrificed, the people had lost, in order for them to see him through a different lens. Although Cromwell was supposed to be seen as a tough and ruthless man, he actually did care for others, but did not want people to think of him as weak or inferior.

When Mantel was asked about what inspired her version of who Thomas Cromwell was, she hinted that the fictional character Cromwell shares some resemblance with herself. "He seemed to be occupying the same physical space as me, with a slight ghostly overlap. It didn't make sense to call him 'Cromwell', as if he were somewhere across the room. I called him 'he'" ("How I Came to Write Wolf Hall", n.p.). Mantel showed that writing history is a subjective art. Every writer uses their own personal narrative model to explain documented historical facts, but there are lots of different versions of history.

The subjectivity of history is highlighted with historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon who coined the term "historiographic metafiction" defines the term as follows: Historiographic metafiction is one kind of postmodern novel which rejects projecting present beliefs and standards onto the past and asserts the specificity and particularity of the individual

past event. It also suggests a distinction between "events" and "facts" that is one shared by many historians. Since the documents become signs of events, which the historian transmutes into fact, as in Historiographic Metafiction, the lesson here is that the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted. Finally, Historiographic Metafiction often points to the fact by using the paratextual convention of historiography to both inscribe and undermine the authority of historical sources and explanations ("The Pastime of Past Time" 122). Linda Hutcheon argues that the only evidence of historical events are the artifacts and documents they leave behind. The stories behind them are not always facts, instead they are works of art. Hilary Mantel's Cromwell is only one example of historiographic metafiction and its impact on the way we view certain historic figures and events.

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