

## A Man for All Seasons

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Sir Thomas More lived in a time when the entire civilized world had to consciously reconfigure their position and identity in the world, to answer the questions of “where, who, what and why am I” anew. Thomas More consciously chose a path to cement his identity, while also displaying fractures in the image he carefully constructed. While a man of worldly politics, serving a king who judged himself more important than (servants of) God himself, he remained strongly convicted of Catholicism's ultimate truth and merits. While persecuting several Protestants until they had been burned at the stake, he also wrote humanist manifestos and befriended modern thinkers of his age. Up until today, the academic world debates what he meant to say with *Utopia*; whether it was a real attempt at a *Gedankenexperiment* to create a better, utopian world, or whether large parts have to be taken as ironic mockery. More is as ambiguous now as he was when he was still alive. Though he was one of the first non-royals about whom a biography was written, the rest of his life is subject to just as much debate as his most important work. Still, five hundred years later, rigid fault lines run right through society, dividing it into groups sanctifying or alternately vilifying Sir Thomas. Ask any strict Catholic, Protestant or Communist what he thinks of More, and one gets three different answers, each of them having his own valid reasons to like or dislike the 'man for all seasons'.<sup>1</sup>

Since the sixteenth century, Thomas More has inspired writers and artists of all kinds. Through his writings, letters and early biography, much is known about him. However, there has also been an unending stream of controversy surrounding him and his work. As stated, scholars still debate whether the *Utopia* should be read literally or ironically. While some argue he was a malicious, inherently evil and bad-tempered man, others literally made a saint out of him. In this light, many writers have produced their distinctly own representations of More as a character in their work.

Because of the debate, controversy and known unknowns veiling him and his true identity

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<sup>1</sup> While Robert Bolt popularized the term 'a man for all seasons' with his 1960 play of the same name, he borrowed the phrase from one of Thomas More's contemporaries, Robert Whittington. On More, Whittington wrote in 1520: “More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons.” (O'Connell)

up to this day, the memory of More is malleable, maybe even somewhat legendary. As such, every time he is reproduced as a character says as much about More himself, as about the writer interpreting More four- to five hundred years later, as well as the episteme in which the representation was produced.

Stephen Greenblatt, who (amongst others, notably H. Aram Veese) introduced a new methodology in literary criticism called “New Historicism” in the late 1970s, can be of much use dissecting these different motives leading to these very different representations of the man, all based on the same historical Thomas. New Historicism argues against looking at novels, plays and other works as stand-alone, and prefers to see them as interconnected with a network of history, culture, politics, the author himself, and, later, other authors imitating, emulating or referencing the work. New Historicists argue that no text is unbiased, and that no work holds unchangeable truths.<sup>2</sup> Because of this position, they are also criticized.

Because of More's ambiguity, opinions about him are varied, as are representations of him as a literary character. Looking at different interpretations of Thomas More in contemporary culture, can the New Historicist approach be used to interpret these different representations of Thomas More as a character? And, subsequently, do these representations tell us more about More himself, as well as the author and his or her beliefs and cultural upbringing? Lastly, can a study of contemporary representations of Thomas More as a character be of use to shed light on the benefits of the New Historicist approach?

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2 Whitla 300-301.

## CHAPTER 1: THE NEW HISTORICISM

Since H. Aram Veenser and Stephen Greenblatt pioneered the New Historicism, it has proved itself to be beneficial in Renaissance Studies, but it is being criticized for being less useful in other fields of literary analysis. This criticism can, however, easily be thwarted or at the least be critically analyzed itself.

New Historicists analyze texts “with an eye on history”, which formalists had already been doing in earlier decades of the twentieth century, “focus[ing] on a work's historical content and bas[ing] their interpretations on the interplay between text and historical contexts”.<sup>3</sup> The New Historicism differs from formalist analyses because it lets go of a linear structure of history, having “come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely or objectively known.”<sup>4</sup>

H. Aram Veenser listed some of the most salient assumptions “that continually reappear in New Historicist discourse” in his anthology of essays *The New Historicism*<sup>5</sup>:

- that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
- that every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
- that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
- that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature;
- that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.

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3 Murfin 1.

4 Murfin 2.

5 Whitla 300-301.

The post-structuralist critical thought of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan led to a whole range of different areas of postmodernist critical theory, of which the New Historicism is just one; some others include African American Studies and Feminist Criticism. The New Historicism itself can be seen as an application to literary analysis of the French philosopher Michel Foucault's historical and philosophical theories on power and discourse<sup>6</sup>. Rather than seeing history as a continuous change where events little by little alter the course of human history, Foucault argues that history consists of long periods with little change, followed by rapid (and sometimes violent) societal changes in which an entirely new system of power replaces the former very quickly<sup>7</sup>. Within these periods, there are separate systems of knowledge and power, which Foucault calls 'epistemes'<sup>8</sup>. While humans living in these time periods usually adhere to their own epistemes, these epistemes do not hold unchangeable truths, nor can these truths transcend their systems of power. As such, any attempt made at changing the system can only be done from inside of it. One example of power systems shifting rapidly after a long period of stability is of course the end of Catholic hegemony in the sixteenth century, making way for mercantilism, a man-centered society and a religiously purified Christianity in the form of Protestantism. Other examples that come to mind are those of the rise and fall of Communism – roughly, 1917 and 1989, or the rapid process of decolonization that took place between the years 1945 (India, Indonesia) and 1975 (fall of Portuguese dictatorship followed by the last decolonization in the Western world).

It has to be noted that determining where different epistemes begin and end is itself highly subjective. Depending on different power structures and different places, the last episteme might have ended around 1990 (fall of Communism), in the late Eighteenth Century (Enlightenment), around More's time (Reformation, Church of England) or even over 2,000 years ago (rise of Christianity). One might even go so far as to count the whole of mankind's uninterrupted written

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6 UvA 11.

7 UvA 12.

8 UvA 13.

history as one single episteme. We can recognize the violent religious and societal upheaval in most of Northwestern Europe during most of the sixteenth century and part of the seventeenth, now euphemistically named The Reformation, as one such Foucaultian shift of paradigms. It should not have to be explained which side of the conflict Thomas More was on: while he tried to change the system from the inside, he consciously chose to remain within the current episteme and battled against outside agitation.

Maar terwijl Foucault zich vooral bezighoudt met geschiedenis en filosofie, gaat het New Historicism meer specifiek over literatuur. Het New Historicism is dus eigenlijk het resultaat van het toepassen van Foucault's inzichten op literatuur. Het New Historicism plaatst literaire teksten nadrukkelijk in een context van discursieve praktijken. Literatuur wordt gelezen in conjunctie met niet-literaire teksten. Literatuur wordt hierbij gezien als onderdeel van een cultuur die gekenmerkt wordt door een bepaald discursief of machtsregime. De literaire tekst geeft machtsrelaties niet alleen weer maar helpt ook ze tot stand te brengen en in stand te houden.<sup>9</sup>

Some say the New Historicism cannot be used as a framework for any literary criticism, as it is primarily applied on Renaissance works. The New Historicism's scope, however, is in no way limited to the sixteenth century. The New Historicism creates a framework of thought which can be applied successfully to any shift of paradigms, and indeed any work created from within any paradigm possible.<sup>10</sup> How does the work relate to its time, power structures, and so forth? Does it enforce the paradigm or try to change or replace it? In much the same way as *Utopia* can be read as a reply to the power struggle between Renaissance/Humanist forces and the age-old power

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9 UvA 17.

10 Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher have demonstrated that New Historicism can be applied to later centuries in their work *Practicing New Historicism*, which 'juxtapos[es] analyses of Renaissance and nineteenth century topics.' (Gallagher and Greenblatt)

structures that were still there in the form of nobility and church, *Doctor Zhivago* might be analyzed for delivering a comparable sort of criticism but from the standpoint of Soviet Russia: criticism from within.

As Washington State University's Michael Delahoyde puts it, the New Historicism “seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era.”<sup>11</sup> As said, it in no way limits the historical era in question to the Renaissance.

Enkele problematische aspecten van het New Historicism zijn:

- De beperkte mogelijkheid tot verzet/subversie binnen discursieve systemen. Het New Historicism wordt ervan beschuldigd een “entrapment” model voor te staan van subjectiviteit: het subject zit gevangen in discours en kan zich hiertegen niet of nauwelijks verzetten.
- De beperkte focus op teksten uit de Renaissance.<sup>12</sup>

On the one hand, New Historicists admit outright that the New Historicist approach to literary criticism can never be completely objective, as it is always rooted in either today's society's rules, or those of the period analyzed: “The New Historicist also acknowledges that his examination of literature is 'tainted' by his own culture and environment. The very fact that we ask whether Shakespeare was anti-Semitic — a question that wouldn't have been considered important a century ago — reveals how our study of Shakespeare is affected by our civilization.”<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, however, this rhetoric also works the other way. The questions asked and the subjects analyzed differ per generation, per culture and per age or episteme. Focusing on for example Shakespeare's perceived homosexuality, anti-Semitism or the possibility of his having been a woman, are three

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11 Delahoyde 2.

12 UvA 9.

13 Cliffnotes 4.

concrete examples of twentieth and twenty-first century thought applied to older works. As such, Shakespeare remains as malleable as More and cannot or need not be strictly analyzed through sixteenth century goggles. As a new generation asks very different questions regarding the same age-old texts, it could be claimed that the New Historicism allows for an infinitely renewable source of new literary criticism, as the constant changes and shifts in culture and power allow for constantly shifting fields of research and manners of criticism.

As such, the main point of criticism of the New Historicism may also be identified as one of its main strong points. While other forms of literary criticism ignore their being bound in time, culture and place and make it seem like their research is detached from societal influences, the New Historicism admits to that. It does not pretend to be all-knowing, entirely objective, infinitely wise or eternally correct in its literary criticism, but admits that it, and with it every form of text uttered since the beginning of written history, is always bound in place, time and culture. Therefore, it is less likely to be subtly steered by cultural standards, *Zeitgeist* and other influencing factors, because it acknowledges its own subjectivity and mentions it as one of its pillars. New Historicists adhere to the idea that any arrangement of facts, including the way they are ordered and explained, is entirely subjective. Acknowledging one's own shortcomings by being bound by current cultural perceptions might be better than pretending this subtle subjectivity simply does not exist.

## CHAPTER 2 : MORE MORE MALLEABLE THAN EVER BEFORE

Five hundred years after writing his most important work, the opinions on Sir Thomas More are still as varied and multifaceted as he was himself, which not only proves him to be an excellently multi-interpretable character, but also lends him for analysis through the New Historicist approach. An abundant variety of different representations of Sir Thomas as a character in very different media from different centuries makes sure that there really never is a point where everything has been said and every fact and opinion has been researched. More has been portrayed in a broad array of works, from pop songs to Hollywood movies and from novels to plays. New Historicism was consciously designed to tackle a wide variety of sources and forms, and can be of help to analyze these different takes on the same man.<sup>14</sup>

This second chapter helps to set up this analytical approach by first giving a brief overview of his life, works and time. Next, three very different views on More's life and work will be touched upon, all of which are still held by millions nowadays and some of which have been the subjects of heated discussions that have been raging for nearly half a millennium, and still are – up to this very minute. The three viewpoints which will be explored are that of the socialist and/or communist persuasion, the Catholic frame of mind and the (proto-)Protestant view.

### **A violent time: politically, religiously and philosophically**

Thomas More's time was a violent one – literally and figuratively, and much more so than the relatively stable centuries that preceded it. There was a violent societal change manifesting itself in manifold ways from trade to religion, shifting the world from god-centered feudal power structures toward man-centered humanism. Slowly but surely, early capitalism and mercantilism arose, as well

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<sup>14</sup> A contemporary look at some twentieth and twenty-first century works in which Thomas More appears as a character will be discussed in the third chapter.

as the self-made man. In short, the Renaissance swept across continental Europe, and ultimately the British Isles as well.

For the first time in ages, one's name was becoming just as important as the work one produced – a far cry from the centuries of painstaking labor of individual nameless monks. Individualism wasn't deemed a societal threat and eccentric or curious behavior anymore. As such, More really was a self-made man, who navigated his way through troubling and uncertain waters of voracious societal change.

In reality, when the Enlightenment is regarded as a further evolution of a kindred Renaissance spirit, it can be claimed that More's lifetime was an age where the Middle Ages were abandoned and the current episteme –whether it be called humanist, modern, capitalist or otherwise- finally and definitely took hold.

While King Henry VIII's behavior has been a topic of heated debate and controversy for centuries, his behavior seemed to adhere to the new man-centered, God- (or at least church-)rejecting episteme perfectly. The story of Henry tearing away the Church from the Vatican, thereby essentially choosing reproduction and lust –selfish sins- over what had to be regarded as Christ impersonated on earth, does not have to be repeated in detail to be able to state that he showed behavior in line with the then quite recent Machiavellian spirit of power over morals.

In hindsight, it could be argued that More simply chose the wrong path, namely the old, well-trodden one of religious fervor and adhering to the age-old system that had essentially been heralded by Constantine in the third century AD. However, Sir Thomas More tried to embrace the Renaissance in his own way, as Stephen Greenblatt argues in *Renaissance: Self-Fashioning*. While he remained loyal to the Catholic Church, it can not be claimed he did not try to navigate the waters of humanism, as he has been heralded as one of the great sixteenth century humanists. Also, religion and humanism are not mutually exclusive.

### **Thomas More: flag-bearer of Communism**

Whether or not Sir Thomas More's work *Utopia* has to be taken completely seriously, or rather as a sophisticated collection of Latinized puns, sarcasm and irony, remains unsure and has been the topic of heated debate for centuries. Marxists, however, did take to several ideas propagated in *Utopia* which might be called proto-Communist.<sup>15</sup> On the surface, says scholar J.P. Sommerville, “the Utopian way centered on communism; Utopians had no private property and led lives which were closely controlled by the state. They also practiced religious toleration, and permitted euthanasia, suicide and divorce.”<sup>16</sup> In a way, More was not the first to conjure up a sort of proto-Communist frame of thought. Early Christianity put heavy focus on this as well, which can be explained with a famous example. Soon after Jesus died His disciples stuck to His words on selling everything one has and giving the profits to the poor. Ananias and Sapphira, two early Christians who chose to lie about whether or not they sold everything they had, bore the brunt and were killed for their lies.

Dr. Boyle of St. Paul's University of Minnesota lectured on his claim that “Thomas More's *Utopia* is not a Communist Manifesto” in 2012, quoting More's good friend Erasmus of Rotterdam, who pointed out More's use of irony in letters to colleagues:

“Some of the names [of places] used in *Utopia* are famously indicative of [More's humor]. *Utopia* is a Greek neologism for ‘nowhere’, the principal city of the island is Amaurot, which means “foggy or phantom”, the principal river...is the Anider, which is Greek for ‘waterless,’ and the man who tells the story of *Utopia*, Raphael Hythloday, [his surname] is probably best translated as ‘peddler of nonsense’.”<sup>17</sup>

With nearly everything Sir Thomas wrote in *Utopia*, it remains unsure whether he meant it literally,

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15 Severance 1.

16 Sommerville 2.

17 Severance 13.

figuratively, jokingly, seriously, critically or sarcastically. This did not stop early Communists, however, to apply his thoughts literally and make him the closest thing to a saint that the atheist Communists could have had. They did this rather quickly after their Russian Revolution of 1917, as Lenin himself ordered a statue of More made and placed in Moscow: “[The] monument, suggested by Lenin and built in 1918, lists Thomas More (ninth from the top) among the most influential thinkers 'who promoted the liberation of humankind from oppression, arbitrariness, and exploitation.' It is in Aleksndrovsky Garden near the Kremlin.”<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, after the fall of the Soviet empire in 1991, the Russians must have found the statue to be lacking importance and as with many things related to the Soviets, it has been removed just last year.<sup>19</sup> The embittered blogger noticing this stated that “the intent of those running the show in Russia during Putin Term III to turn to a policy of national, proto-monarchist and clericalist reaction can not have been made more clear”<sup>20</sup>, showing the divide between religion and politics, as well as the controversy surrounding famed figures of any of the two, not only still exists, but still is very much alive.

### **Thomas More: martyr of Catholics**

The near-sacred regard in which communists hold and/or held More is but a mere continuation of the saintly view Catholics have had of him for centuries. It should come as no surprise that the religious institute More gave his life for to protect, has protected his legacy with equal fervor over the past five hundred years. In 1886, Sir Thomas was beatified by Pope Leo XIII along with 52 other martyrs from the British Isles. Leo XIII also established More's feast day on July 9<sup>th</sup>, which was later changed to July 6<sup>th</sup>, the day of his execution.<sup>21</sup> Sir Thomas officially became Saint Thomas when he was finally canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1935, four hundred years after his death. The

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18 Durringer 3.

19 Vivaldi 2.

20 Vivaldi 3.

21 'Canonisation' 1

Catholic attitude to More has not changed ever since, as the Catholic Encyclopaedia states:

The modern Catholic attitude on the issue was probably best expressed by Pope John Paul II when honouring him by making him patron saint of statesmen and politicians in October 2000, when he stated “It can be said that he demonstrated in a singular way the value of a moral conscience... even if, in his actions against heretics, he reflected the limits of the culture of his time”.<sup>22</sup>

It should be noted that if there is such a thing, the standardized view on Thomas More is very closely aligned to the Catholic version of events. The image of a saintly, wise and learned man has never really given way to other sentiments in Catholic and Communist discourse and is being actively defended, even by current Archbishops. This will be touched upon in the chapter on modern-day representations of More as a character.

### **Thomas More: persecutor of Protestants**

While there is little doubt as to how Catholics have held More in high regard for half a millennium, the Protestant hesitation to subscribe to this positivity has also been made abundantly clear. More, in an attempt to solidify his position in the world and confirm his loyalty to the Catholic Church, took a strong position against Protestantism after it first arose in 1517. Politically, theologically, More's generation has been one of rapid and violent change after centuries of seeming stability. The institute of the Church was challenged and questioned by many across Europe, amongst whom Savonarola in Italy, Calvin in Switzerland and France, Luther in Germany and many others. More consciously chose to battle these sentiments the best he could and, for a learned and wise man, dealt out quite ruthless criticism. Indeed, “More’s language, like Luther’s, was virulent: he branded

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<sup>22</sup> 'Chancellorship' 8

Luther an 'ape', a 'drunkard', and a 'lousy little friar' amongst other insults. (...) More offers to 'throw back into your paternity's shitty mouth, truly the shit-pool of all shit, all the muck and shit which your damnable rottenness has vomited up'.<sup>23</sup> Because of this strong anti-Protestant position, Protestants have seen More as part of the problem they were trying to correct from the very beginning of the Reformation. More allegedly also acted upon his beliefs by having several early Protestants arrested, tortured and burned at the stake.

For this, he has been vilified by the Northern European part of Christianity ever since. A very early Protestant view on Sir Thomas can be found in the so-called *Book of Martyrs*, officially known as *Actes and Monuments*. This work was originally written in Latin by John Foxe and published as a folio in 1563, but throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there have been numerous additions that describe the stories of as many early Reformers who'd been put to death, as possible, though the book's focus is on English martyrdom. The book was translated quickly into Dutch, German and other languages and has ever since been a leading Reformed authority on the righteousness of the uprising against Catholicism, and, empirically basing this on friends, family and fellow church members, can still be found in many a Reformed household.<sup>24</sup> Thomas More himself is mentioned twenty times in the 1576 English translation of *Actes and Monuments*<sup>25</sup> and plays a pivotal role in two martyr deaths described at length, namely those of Thomas Bilney and John Frythe. The 1655 Dutch version of the book, edited by Adrianus Haemstadius, starts off its article on Bilney with a crushingly destructive and blaming description of More, calling him a henchman of Satan himself:

Ofschoon de satan het goede voornemen der christenen niet kan verhinderen, mort hij er toch over en verzet er zich tegen. Deze voortreffelijke leraar benaarstigde zich, om, zoveel in hem was, ieder op de weg der zaligheid te leiden, die zijn ondergang zochten te bewerken,

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<sup>23</sup> Lehnhof 278.

<sup>24</sup> Including my parental home.

<sup>25</sup> Foxe. I used the browser's search function to look up the total number of times More is mentioned.

onder wie Thomas Morus, de rijkskanselier in Engeland, een geleerd man, maar een hevige vijand van de waarheid, de voornaamste was [...].<sup>26</sup>

Regarding the murder of Frythe, the *Book of Martyrs* condemns More again, stating he did everything he could from buying people to threatening them, trying to disprove their theories intellectually, locking them up, having them followed, killed and tortured: “Spoedig daarna begon Thomas Morus hem te haten en te vervolgen, en, aangezien hij kanselier van het rijk was, vervolgde hij hem te water en te land, liet aan alle wegen op hem loeren, en beloofde hun, die hem aanwezen, een grote som gelds.” According to the *Book of Martyrs*, More then pins down Frythe with Biblical arguments in much the same way he himself was convicted a few years later.

Even in 2014, the discussion between Protestants and Catholics regarding the legacy of Sir Thomas is virulent and at times even violent. The comments under a YouTube video that has unfortunately been removed show how divided the world remembers More even nowadays, with Catholics accusing Protestants of “Protestant lies” and Protestants accusing Catholics of supporting a “burner of innocents”.<sup>27</sup> Another YouTube video shows the same divide: while some say More should be admired, others call him 'an abhorrent man'.<sup>28</sup> This same discussion can be found mirrored all over YouTube and other websites: “An example of dignity and moral courage for all generations”<sup>29</sup>, “but he also burned people at the stake for their own consciences - one of the cruellest, most barbaric acts you could ever inflict.” That the argument might be deep-seated for some is shown by the only comment on the web page containing the full text of Robert Bolt's screenplay for *A Man for All Seasons*. One user specifically created an account named 'Sir Thomas More', uploaded a picture of More as a user icon and stated: “This text is rather inaccurate. I burned Lutheran's [sic] at the stake! I am no hero! I am no saint! You should all be ashamed of

<sup>26</sup> Haemstadius; chapter 'Thomas Bilney, JAAR 1531'.

<sup>27</sup> 'English Martyr...'

<sup>28</sup> Historic Royal Palaces

<sup>29</sup> hiserature

yourselves!”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bolt. See comment at the bottom of the page.

### CHAPTER 3: MANTEL'S MORE (OR LESS)

Sir Thomas More's fashioning of his self-identity outlasted him by several centuries. Even today, a clear divide is visible between those who remember him endearingly and those who still blame him for his supposed misdeeds. In the last hundred years, More has been portrayed as a character many times. Many of these representations fit the profile that Communists and Catholics would seem to adhere to, while the newest reincarnation of More in Mantel's *Wolf Hall* seems to portray the exact opposite to that profile of a wise, humanist Renaissance man. In this chapter, several of these representations will first be mentioned. Next, attention will be devoted to the process with which Mantel wrote her account of one of England's better known historical periods, showing how *Wolf Hall* applies some of the most important ideas of the New Historicism to its narrative structure. Thirdly, Mantel's versions of two Thomases who in the novel serve as each other's antitheses -More and Cromwell- will be discussed, using examples from the novel itself to shed light on how exactly Mantel renegotiated the two historical figures, thereby focusing on Sir Thomas More in particular.

#### Thomas More in the twentieth century

Thomas More has been the subject of many works over the course of the last five hundred years, from early sixteenth century biographies to the revised Protestant *Book of Martyrs* of the seventeenth century and from the Elizabethan play *Sir Thomas More* to More's nineteenth century beatification. Narrowing this abundance of resources on More down to the last century, these past hundred years have represented More as the focal point of manifold literary, theatrical, musical, televised and other works. With the exception of *Wolf Hall*, these works tend to share a similar vision of an enlightened, wise, principled Thomas More who was unfairly put to death.

Henriette [sic] Roland Holst's *Thomas More*, written at the start of the twentieth century,

portrays More as intelligent, balanced and Communist avant la lettre. As explained, Communists heralded More's *Utopia* as one of the earliest works in which Communist ideas were introduced, though up to this day it remains uncertain whether More actually supported these ideas or was mocking them instead.

Two generations later, Robert Bolt negotiated his own version of More in *A Man for All Seasons*, which started out as a BBC Radio play, made its way onto theater stages in 1960 and was turned into a successful film in 1965-66 and again in 1988. The play “follow[s] the standard historical account”<sup>31</sup>, “creating an 'overtly theatrical piece that involves the audience while providing enough distance for critical reflection.’”<sup>32</sup> The play not only “is in keeping with historical depictions” but is also closely aligned “with the [Catholic C]hurch’s view.”<sup>33</sup> Bolt purposefully reinforced More's positive characteristics in the fashion of Brechtian alienation.<sup>34</sup> Bolt's Sir Thomas, though 'overtly theatrical', influenced the version of More as portrayed in the latter half of the twentieth century and again reinforces an idealized picture of More.

Al Stewart, a singer-songwriter who achieved success in the charts of the 1970s, recants More being locked up in the Tower because of “actions that can't be undone”, concluding that “there's nothing to believe in” and “they'll only let you down.” Stewart favorably equates More to “a sailor through the darkness” who “scans the meridian / And caught by the first rays of dawn / The man for all seasons / Is lost beneath the storm.”<sup>35</sup>

Lastly, television productions of the twenty-first century also showed More in the same sacrosanct light. The recent HBO production *The Tudors*, which deals with the debaucheries of the Tudor family, again shows More as a principled, wise man who died because of the personal idiosyncrasies of his mentally unstable King.<sup>36</sup> The favorable image of Thomas More is also

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31 “Context” 5.

32 “Context” 8.

33 O'Donnell 11.

34 “Context” 8.

35 Stewart

36 *The Tudors*

reinforced in the cartoon *The Simpsons*, in which More is portrayed by the character Ned Flanders<sup>37</sup>, known to be the kindest man on the show, as well as a very devout Catholic.

The representations of Thomas More as a character mentioned shed a favorable light on Thomas More but do this for different reasons. While Communists applaud the ideas put forward in *Utopia* on the basis that these might be interpreted as early outings of Communist principles, Catholics herald the remembrance of More for his principled and stubborn refusal to abandon the Church. Though the reasons for applauding More and his legacy differ, the end result tends to be similar: a clean-cut, idealized version of the man.

While recognizing this legacy, Hilary Mantel chose to write a novel from the viewpoint of Thomas Cromwell, who tends to be portrayed as More's nemesis as well as a villain.<sup>38</sup> Mantel mentions a well-known example: "In *A Man for All Seasons*, he is the villain who casually holds another man's hand in a candle flame."<sup>39</sup> In a story focusing on More's contemporary antithesis, Mantel recognized she had to reverse roles as convincingly as possible within the framework of her historical research. On this, she states that "it's possible to write a version of [Cromwell's] career in which he is, at worst, the loyal servant of a bad master."<sup>40</sup>

First and foremost, Mantel reversed the stereotypical portrayals of both men to be able to tell the story of Cromwell: "Blacksmith's boy to Earl of Essex – how did he do it? The story seemed irresistible."<sup>41</sup> As she states she waited over three decades for someone else to write Cromwell's story, only to find no-one did it, she started researching the subject at long last in 2005.<sup>42</sup> While many critics applaud her work, some call it a blasphemous attack on More himself. Both these accusations as well as Mantel's role reversal will be discussed in Chapter 3.

To be sure, the examples mentioned in which Thomas More is portrayed as a character are a mere handful out of dozens or even hundreds of works. A list of sixteen productions in which More

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37 "Margical History Tour" 4. Can be found through Torrenting.

38 (1) Mantel 4. "If a villain, an interesting villain, yes?"

39 (1) Mantel 2.

40 (1) Mantel 3.

41 (1) Mantel 2.

42 (1) Mantel 2.

features as a character can be found on IMDb.<sup>43</sup> Also, a comprehensive (but in no way complete) account of literature and popular works in which More is featured can be found on Wikipedia.<sup>44</sup>

### **Exploring *Wolf Hall's* New Historicist features**

*Wolf Hall* was first conceived as a stand-alone historical novel, but grew to the point where Hilary Mantel decided that she would make a trilogy out of it. Since its publication in 2009, the novel has received much critical acclaim and has been reviewed by many important critics, amongst whom Stephen Greenblatt himself, as well as the late Christopher Hitchens. The average of scores given by sixteen acclaimed newspapers and magazines exceeds 9.0.<sup>45</sup> In these reviews and in interviews with Mantel herself, some of the New Historicist qualities of the novel and the research leading up to it are touched upon. In this chapter, these qualities will be explored by first focusing on Mantel's years of finding materials for the novel, including material sources that find their way into Mantel's novel. This will be followed by a discussion on Mantel's unwillingness to choose to tell the story purely chronologically or strictly historically.

### **Historicity and materiality**

For *Wolf Hall* and the two other novels in the trilogy, Hilary Mantel researched the period in question for years, trying to use each and every small piece of history she could to proverbially fill in the blanks and make her story believable without having to make up things. As such, Mantel adheres to the New Historicist principle of letting history be told by the texts and materials present. Mantel spent years trying to get the facts as right as she could, establishing which person was where

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43 "Filmography: Thomas More"

44 "Thomas More: Literature and popular culture". Though Wikipedia is not an academic source per se, it does have the most complete list I was able to retrieve.

45 "Wolf Hall by Hilary Mantel"

at what time and using other pieces of history which she found to 'fill in the gaps'<sup>46</sup>. New Statesman interviewer Sophie Elmhirst states that “[Mantel] had read everything – all the books, all the books about the books and all the original sources; she filled red Chinese chests with meticulous notes and cards and folders of information. She checked every fact, every source, every date, every letter, every name. Her Cromwell books are a combination of wild imagining and unimpeachable accuracy.”<sup>47</sup> Mantel herself stated on the material and its complexity: “Soon the complexity of the material began to unfold. So many interpretations, so many choices, so much detail to be sifted, so much material: but then, suddenly, no material, only history's silences, erasures.”<sup>48</sup> While faithfully aligning her novel with history, she chose to do it in such a way that she could tell history anew; the same story, but from a very different viewpoint, namely that of Sir Thomas More's greatest enemy, Thomas Cromwell.

Mantel's thorough research not only reflects the New Historicist approach but ultimately even makes use of some of the same materials to tell a similar history: Holbein's paintings play a big part in both *Wolf Hall* as well as Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. In both works, Holbein's paintings are used to emphasize the historicity of material. “Holbein's portrait shows a man of undistinguished ugliness, with a hard, flat, skeptical eye. In *A Man for All Seasons*, he is the villain who casually holds another man's hand in a candle flame.”<sup>49</sup> Mantel and Greenblatt both shed light on Holbein's works, but employ them in different ways. While Greenblatt, much like Mantel, primarily used Holbein's paintings to show the multifaceted history of the period as well as Holbein's art itself, Mantel also weaved the paintings into the storyline. Through the paintings, she partly tells her alternate account of history. In his elaborate review of *Wolf Hall*, the late scholar Christopher Hitchens reflects on Mantel's use of Holbein's paintings:

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46 (1) Mantel 2.

47 Elmhirst 4.

48 (1) Mantel 8.

49 (1) Mantel 2.

The genius of Mantel's prose lies in her reworking of this aesthetic: look again at His Majesty and see if you do not detect something spoiled, effeminate, and insecure. Now scrutinize the face of More and notice the frigid, snobbish fanaticism that holds his dignity in place. As for Cromwell, this may be the visage of a ruthless bureaucrat, but it is the look of a man who has learned the hard way that books must be balanced, accounts settled, and zeal held firmly in check.<sup>50</sup>

Mantel researched the period of More's demise and restructured the narrative to the extent that a complete role reversal of More and Cromwell as protagonist and antagonist is established, all within the boundaries of historical materiality. New Historicists "are interested in recovering lost histories and in exploring mechanisms of repression and subjugation"<sup>51</sup>, "tend to concentrate on those at the top of the social hierarchy (i.e. the church, the monarchy, the upper-classes)"<sup>52</sup> and "are interested in questions of circulation, negotiation, profit and exchange, i.e. how activities that purport to be above the market (including literature) are in fact informed by the values of that market."<sup>53</sup> Without disregarding the historical evidence, Mantel applies these New Historicist notions to rework the history of More and Cromwell into a fictional account which enjoys the liberties opened up by the New Historicism and similar Cultural Studies, as well as reinforces the New Historicist notions of "recovering lost histories" and "renegotiating the past". As reviewer Joan Acocella states in her article for *The New Yorker*, "More and Cromwell were enemies, and history has taken More's side."<sup>54</sup> Acocella mentions the play (and film) *A Man for All Seasons*, in which Cromwell is depicted as "the very picture of skulking evil".<sup>55</sup> Acocella here mentions an important historical work by the British historian G.R. Elton, which appeared "shortly before Bolt's play"<sup>56</sup>

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50 Hitchens 3.

51 Felluga 1.

52 Felluga 1.

53 Felluga 1.

54 Acocella 2.

55 Acocella 2.

56 Acocella 2.

and is also mentioned by Hilary Mantel herself: “The Tudor scholar G.R. Elton had established Cromwell as a statesman of the first rank.”<sup>57</sup> Acocella adds that Elton claimed “that Cromwell wasn’t so bad” and that “under him, Elton wrote, English political policy, formerly at the whim of the nobles, became the work of specialized bureaucracies.”<sup>58</sup> According to Mantel, however, Elton's work did not help popularize Cromwell.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Acocella states that even decades after Elton's work appeared, “Cromwell is still widely seen as the warty toad in the garden of the glamorous Henry VIII.” This is reinforced by the popular recent HBO production *The Tudors*, in which “[Cromwell] is, unequivocally, a villain”<sup>60</sup> as well. Even Robert Hutchinson's recently published biography on Cromwell, Acocella argues, “already in [its] preface (...) calls Cromwell 'a devious, ruthless instrument of the state,' a man who showed no compunction about 'trampling underfoot the mangled bodies of those he had exploited or crushed.’”<sup>61</sup>

“[But] Mantel portrays him as a wise minister and a decent man.”<sup>62</sup> Rewriting the histories of “villains” to make them appear more human than many other fictional and non-fictional works have succeeded in doing, is something Hilary Mantel has done before. Acocella mentions Hilary Mantel's 1992 novel *A Place of Greater Safety*, which tells its story amidst the violence of Revolutionary France in the 1790s by focusing on Robespierre, “performing the (...) feat of making him a sympathetic man.”<sup>63</sup> Mantel reinterprets historical figures by challenging stereotypes that surround them. She methodologically researches the men in question and tells their stories differently from many others. As such, the works in question subscribe to the New Historicist notion that “no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, nor expresses inalterable human nature.”

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57 (1) Mantel 2.

58 Acocella 2.

59 (1) Mantel 2.

60 Acocella 2.

61 Acocella 2.

62 Acocella 3.

63 Acocella 3.

### Shedding set stereotypes

In the process of writing *Wolf Hall*, Mantel lets go of several important devices normally used in both fictional and non-fictional writing, so as to create a work in which an alternative version of the same historical account could be told. The New Historicism states that any arrangement of facts is unique: the manner in which facts are told, which facts are highlighted and which ones are not, the order in which they appear and the angle from which they are approached all matter to make a work have its own distinct voice. Mantel outright acknowledges that her work is not a chronological account of history: “*Wolf Hall* attempts to duplicate not the historian's chronology but the way memory works: in leaps, loops, flashes.”<sup>64</sup>

In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel also chooses to let go of stereotypes employed throughout fictional and non-fictional works. As Stephen Greenblatt reminds in his review of *Wolf Hall*, “[a] historical novel is always an act of conjuring (...) [and] does not have [limits to the recovery of the past]. It offers the dream of full access, access to what went on behind closed doors, off the record, in private, when no one was listening or recording.”<sup>65</sup> Mantel chooses to challenge stereotypes used in the past five hundred years, essentially turning these beliefs upside down, shedding set stereotypes for her own narrative.<sup>66</sup> On this, Greenblatt concludes: “The triumph of the historical novel, in Mantel’s vision, is to reach a point of ignorance.”<sup>67</sup> Mantel herself also touches upon this, stating that to be able to write the novel, she had to first let go of her own ingrained prejudices: “My first explorations challenged my easy prejudices. Some readers think I've been too easy on Cromwell. In fact it's possible to write a version of his career in which he is, at worst, the loyal servant of a bad master.”<sup>68</sup>

As part of the process of avoiding to merely replicate the chronological historical account as

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64 (1) Mantel 6.

65 (2) Greenblatt 18-19.

66 Ying

67 (2) Greenblatt 13.

68 (1) Mantel 3.

well as its set stereotypes, Mantel tries to 'weave together' history in a similar fashion to New Historicist writings. "Biographies of [Thomas Cromwell]", she states, "are cut up into topics: "Finance", "Religion" and so on. He seemed not to have a private life."<sup>69</sup> After years of research, Mantel "[wove] together complex narratives of politics, power and modernity", as Time reviewer Tony Karon put it.<sup>70</sup> To further integrate Cromwell's private and professional life, Mantel also employs a tactic similar to stream-of-consciousness writing. As reviewer Sophie Elmhirst stated on the writing process of *Bring Up the Bodies*: "This was not writing that can be identified as writing in the ordinary sense: spasmodic, agonised, write-delete-write-delete. These were eight-, ten-, 12-hour days, marathons of prose, a 400-page book written in five months."<sup>71</sup>

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69 (1) Mantel 3.

70 Karon 1.

71 Elmhirst 4.

#### CHAPTER 4: TWO THOMASES TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Because of her inability to conjure up plots for novels, Mantel states, she chose a historical topic to follow closely.<sup>72</sup> After years of research in which she categorized, archived and sorted every person and event relating to Cromwell she could find, Hilary Mantel chose to turn the conventional sentiments regarding Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell around. She tried to do this within the boundaries of history: renegotiating the past based on the same historical accounts used as evidence for the 'standardized' version of events. In *Wolf Hall*, Thomas More is not an innocent sheep amongst the wolves, but a wolf himself as well. As Greenblatt states in his review of *Wolf Hall*, “the More of *Wolf Hall* is not Robert Bolt’s principled man for all seasons; he is the man who wished to have the words “terrible to heretics” carved in his epitaph, who attempted to set up an English Inquisition, who chained and interrogated suspected Protestants in his own house in Chelsea, who sent men and women to the stake.”<sup>73</sup> As shown earlier, those who vilify Cromwell tend to applaud More and the other way around. In *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel explores these two characters by reversing the sentiment that is generally attached to them. *Wolf Hall* tells its story through the eyes of a fallible but ultimately very human Thomas Cromwell, using the viewpoint of Cromwell to convey very negative sentiments regarding Sir Thomas More. As such, Mantel employs an essentially postmodern take on history by challenging -it is safe to say, even totally reversing- the near-standardized version of history attached to these figures. Mantel does not pick sides -either Catholic or Protestant- in a battle that has been raging for half a millennium, but rather tries to negotiate the different viewpoints into a storyline in which no-one is completely innocent nor evil. This analysis, then, will focus on the manner in which Mantel reconfigured Cromwell and More, and will deal with More in particular. As the whole novel is told through the perception of Cromwell himself, most utterings regarding More are Cromwell's opinions of him. The quotes on

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72 (1) Mantel 1.

73 (2) Greenblatt 44.

More will be used first to show the general negative sentiments attached to More; second, to show Cromwell is portrayed as a proto-Protestant, while More is portrayed as a malicious 'burner of heretics' as well as a 'torturer of innocents'. Lastly, the critical backlash Mantel received because of renegotiating the past will be discussed.

### **General negative sentiments regarding More**

The family name 'Cromwell' does not have the same predominantly positive connotations that the name of Thomas More has. Thomas Cromwell was involved in More's execution, while later namesakes like Oliver Cromwell were pivotal in the English Civil War of the 1600s. Stephen Greenblatt, in his review of Mantel's novel, even compares Cromwell to Stalin's henchman Beria: "Thomas Cromwell, the focus of Mantel's loving attention for almost six hundred pages, is not that distant from the bureaucratic architect of the Great Purge."<sup>74</sup> Fittingly, in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt adds that "the survival rate for those closest to Henry VIII roughly resembles the actuarial record of the First Politburo."<sup>75</sup> On the subject of Cromwell, the divide between the old episteme and the new –Catholicism vs. Protestantism– is very clear. While John Foxe called More a devil in his *Book of Martyrs*, Foxe's support for Cromwell is firmly established by calling Cromwell "valiant soldier and captain of Christ."<sup>76</sup> Architect of the Great Purge or not, Mantel reworked and focused on Cromwell to the point that the reader identifies with Cromwell, not with More. The many negative sentiments on More uttered throughout the novel will be shortly discussed here by using quotes from *Wolf Hall* itself, as well as several statements by reviewers.

In their reviews of *Wolf Hall*, Stephen Greenblatt, Christopher Hitchens, Angela Alaimo O'Donnell and others do not only mention the divide between the good-natured Cromwell and the "arrogant" More, but also clearly set the two apart. Mantel's Cromwell, O'Donnell writes, "is a

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74 (2) Greenblatt 1.

75 (1) Greenblatt 15.

76 (2) Greenblatt 4.

champion of the people, (...) insisting Henry avoid war (...), showing pity for the plight of powerless fools (...) and inviting poor and abandoned women and children into his household.”<sup>77</sup>

All the while, More, in Greenblatt's words, “has the particularly human perversity of religious fanaticism conjoined with sly intelligence.”<sup>78</sup> O'Donnell calls More “the lesser man”, “overvalu[ing] the head at expense of the heart”, “a prideful intellectual” whose “rigid adherence to his rigid ideology” ultimately forced him to do nothing against his own execution.<sup>79</sup>

*Wolf Hall* clearly supports these summaries with numerous quotes throughout the novel. Cromwell states that More “enjoys embarrassing people”, adding that “there's something sly”<sup>80</sup> about him. Cromwell thinks of More as a prideful man who is “afraid to lose his credibility with the scholars in Europe”.<sup>81</sup> He also calls More a dangerous man, who threatens people who do not agree with him<sup>82</sup> and adds that More “[is a] mule that passes for [a] man.”<sup>83</sup> In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell also suspects More is master of ceremonies in his own trial and execution:

We know his reasons. All Europe knows them. He is against the divorce. He does not believe the king can be head of the church. But will he say that? Not he. I know him. Do you know what I hate? I hate to be part of this play, which is entirely devised by him. I hate the time it will take that could be better spent, I hate it that minds could be better employed, I hate to see our lives going by, because depend upon it, we will all be feeling our age before this pageant is played out. And what I hate most of all is that Master More sits in the audience and sniggers when I trip over my lines, for he has written all the parts. And written them these many years.<sup>84</sup>

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77 O'Donnell 8.

78 (2) Greenblatt 42.

79 O'Donnell 9.

80 (2) Mantel 188.

81 (2) Mantel 410.

82 (2) Mantel 284.

83 (2) Mantel 245.

84 (2) Mantel 447.

In the end, Cromwell remarks, “Master More” might have “played a trick too many.”<sup>85</sup>

Cromwell's visit to Thomas More's home also sheds light on the relationship between the two, as well as how they perceive each other in Mantel's account of history. As reviewer O'Donnell states, More is a man “who trains his daughter in classical languages as a demonstration of his own formidable talents [and] who dislikes and publicly humiliates his illiterate wife.”<sup>86</sup> Cromwell thinks More is a vain intellectual who uses family ties to forward himself in the academic circles of continental Europe, stating that “[his] letters are beyond the human. They may be addressed to his daughter, but they are written for his friends in Europe to read.”<sup>87</sup> More does not like Cromwell as much as Cromwell does not like More. After Cromwell enters More's home, More asks his daughter to leave, stating: “I won't have you in this devil's company.”<sup>88</sup> Protective of his daughter, Cromwell remarks that More keeps her daughter “in a cage for safety.”<sup>89</sup> The scene set in More's home also gives Mantel the opportunity to involve Holbein's paintings once more. Cromwell remarks that “he prefers their host as Hans painted him; the Thomas More on the wall, you can see that he's thinking, but not what he's thinking, and that's the way it should be.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Proto-Protestant vs. burner of heretics**

Apart from general negative sentiments, Hilary Mantel also juxtaposed Cromwell and More on the fault lines of early sixteenth century religion. While Cromwell is portrayed as supporting the (proto-)Protestant cause, More is shown to be a bitter enemy of the causes of Luther, Tyndale and Zwingli. In his review of *Wolf Hall*, The late Christopher Hitchens states that “in Cromwell’s mind, as he contemplates his antagonist More, Mantel allows us to discern the germinal idea of what we

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85 (2) Mantel 510.

86 O'Donnell 9.

87 (2) Mantel 471.

88 (2) Mantel 365.

89 (2) Mantel 190.

90 (2) Mantel 190.

now call the Protestant ethic.”<sup>91</sup> He then cites the most seminal lines in the novel regarding Protestantism, in which Cromwell rhetorically asks whether or not some important ideas of the Catholic religion can be found in the Bible itself:

He never sees More—a star in another firmament, who acknowledges him with a grim nod—without wanting to ask him, what’s wrong with you? Or what’s wrong with me? Why does everything you know, and everything you’ve learned, confirm you in what you believed before? Whereas in my case, what I grew up with, and what I thought I believed, is chipped away a little and a little, a fragment then a piece and then a piece more. With every month that passes, the corners are knocked off the certainties of this world: and the next world too. Show me where it says, in the Bible, “Purgatory.” Show me where it says “relics, monks, nuns.” Show me where it says “Pope.”<sup>92</sup>

Needless to say, Purgatory, monks, nuns and Popes are never mentioned in the Bible. Relics, however, might be found if one considers the Ark of the Covenant. While there is still a debate regarding the question of whether or not More actually sent men to burn on a pile, Mantel is quite clear about it. Hitchens remarks that “More will burn men, while the venal Cardinal Wolsey will burn only books.”<sup>93</sup> O'Donnell adds that “More’s brutal pursuit of heretics throughout *Wolf Hall* all but inoculates the reader against pity for him when his own time comes.”<sup>94</sup>

The religious divide between Cromwell and More is perhaps best made clear through quotes from *Wolf Hall* itself, which is littered with sentiments regarding More's hatred of Protestantism. Merely on the subject of lying to, burning and/or torturing Protestants, more than twenty salient quotes can be found. These quotations are divided into two categories here: general heresy and the

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91 Hitchens 3.

92 (2) Mantel 42.

93 Hitchens 5.

94 O'Donnell 10.

applied science of torturing them.

On the subject of heresy, More is vilified by Cromwell, who remarks that More is “some sort of failed priest, a frustrated preacher”<sup>95</sup>, who time and again comes “[storming in] [with his] clerical friends, breathing hellfire about the newest heresy.”<sup>96</sup> Cromwell mentions that “More calls the German [Luther] shit”, and goes on to quote More, who stated “that [Luther's] mouth is like the world's anus”<sup>97</sup> and that “Lutherans fornicate in Church.”<sup>98</sup> Several times, it is mentioned that Sir Thomas More does not think one should in all cases be truthful to heretics. “He would not trust a safe conduct (...) because More says you need not keep a promise you have made to a heretic. (...) Our Lord Chancellor respects neither ignorance nor innocence.”<sup>99</sup> Later on, Cromwell adds: “More says it does not matter if you lie to heretics, or trick them into a confession”,<sup>100</sup> quoting More directly, who says that “[Heretics] have no right to silence; (...) if they will not speak, then break their fingers, burn them with irons, hang them up by their wrists. It is legitimate, and indeed More goes further; it is blessed.”<sup>101</sup>

In *Wolf Hall*, Thomas More is profoundly disturbed by the thought of what can happen to society when 'heretics' get their way. Münster, where Jan van Leyden took power in the early 1530s to reform the city into a puritanical Lutheran dictatorship, is mentioned as an example of this: “Now, look at Germany today. You see, Thomas, where heresy leads us. It leads us to Münster, does it not?” Sectaries, anabaptists, have taken over the city of Münster.”<sup>102</sup> A while later, while More is incarcerated, Cromwell jokingly remarks that More “looks as one imagines the prophets of Münster to look, though he would abhor the comparison.” In Cromwell's view, More is so focused on having heretics arrested, tortured and killed that his professional life starts to falter because of it: “More botched it, (...) [he must have been] too busy writing a billet-doux to Erasmus, or locking some

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95 (2) Mantel 42.

96 (2) Mantel 43.

97 (2) Mantel 106.

98 (2) Mantel 477.

99 (2) Mantel 247.

100(2) Mantel 291.

101(2) Mantel 291.

102(2) Mantel 468.

poor Christian soul in his stocks at Chelsea.”<sup>103</sup>

While whether or not Thomas More actually did have a hand in having heretical citizens tortured and killed is still a topic of debate. In *Wolf Hall*, however, little room for doubt is left. In case heretics will not lay down their Lutheran tendencies, the novel states several times that it might end in the Tower or worse. Cromwell recalls: “We’re told that the cardinal prefers to pray for heretics and tell them, mend their manners, or Thomas More will get hold of them and shut them in his cellar. And all we will hear is the sound of screaming.”<sup>104</sup> In addition, during his visit to More's house, Cromwell remarks irritably: “Why can More never get a proper shave? Can't he make time, shorten his whipping schedule?”<sup>105</sup> Cromwell recalls that a heretic who had been tortured, a barrister named Bainham, was questioned “by More himself” while the torturing took place<sup>106</sup>, which later is mentioned again: “Bainham is the barrister who was taken up by More last year and tortured.”<sup>107</sup> Cromwell makes several snide remarks on the subject of More's tendency for torture. “More [did not] kill the father outright, but he had him in the pillory and in the Tower, and it broke his health”<sup>108</sup>, “More had him [the boy Dick Purser] whipped before the whole household”<sup>109</sup>, and “If they wanted the man to talk, they should have called in Thomas More.”<sup>110</sup> The incident involving the whipping of Dick Purser is mentioned near the end of the novel again: “Dick Purser was the boy whom More had whipped before the household at Chelsea, for saying the host was a piece of bread.”<sup>111</sup> Also, on the burning of the heretical Little Bilney, Cromwell remorsefully remarks that “Thomas More had spread the rumour that Little Bilney, chained to the stake, had recanted as the fire was set. It wasn't enough for him to take Bilney's life away; he had to take his death too.”<sup>112</sup>

As Hilary Mantel stated, she tried to write Cromwell's story in a positive light. Therefore,

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103(2) Mantel 507.

104(2) Mantel 21.

105(2) Mantel 229.

106(2) Mantel 271.

107(2) Mantel 291.

108(2) Mantel 281.

109(2) Mantel 281.

110(2) Mantel 241.

111 (2) Mantel 508.

112 (2) Mantel 517.

she essentially had to pick sides in a conflict that has been history for over four centuries. As such, she ended up vilifying More by referencing his torturing and heretic-hating tendencies dozens of times throughout the novel: the Thomas More of *Wolf Hall*, while not completely evil, is bureaucratic, bad-mannered, vain, strict and obtuse. As one reviewer wrote, “in Mantel’s version, More is no saint, as he almost certainly was not in real life: he’s fussily pious, stiff-necked and unnaturally fond of torturing heretics.”<sup>113</sup> “While it is not up to Mantel, a writer of fiction, to explain which parts of the allegations are conjured up and which are based in historical fact, Mantel has been criticized for creating an image of Sir Thomas More that might alter the readers’ perceptions to the point they start believing in the version of More presented, instead of the versions presented to the world in works like *A Man for All Seasons*.”

### **Catholic criticism**

Much of the negative criticism Mantel received for her account of the history of Cromwell and More is handed out by Catholics, who have held More in high regard for centuries. For example, Michael Moreland, writing for the Catholic blog *Mirror of Justice*, calls the claim that More “was unnaturally fond of torturing heretics” “slanderous”, and goes on to state that “the scholarly consensus is that there is no historical evidence that More engaged in torture.”<sup>114</sup> A reviewer for the *London Evening Standard* warns that *Wolf Hall* is “so convincing, it risks being taken as a true version of events”, adding that “the novel does a grave disservice to More who was, whatever else you say about him, one of the great men of the Renaissance.”<sup>115</sup> This notion is perpetrated by the Archbishop of Philadelphia, Charles J. Caput, who, after reading *Wolf Hall*, wrote an article in defense of Thomas More. Caput blames the revisionism of postmodern England for altering the memory of Christian heroes: “Anyone wanting a new Britain, or a new Europe, needs to get rid of

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113 McGrath 4.

114 Moreland 5.

115 McDonagh 2.

the old one first. So diminishing Christianity and its influence becomes a priority. And that includes rewriting the narrative on many of Christianity's achievements and heroes."<sup>116</sup> In Caput's view, More was “celebrated in Robert Bolt’s brilliant 1960 play *A Man for All Seasons*” but “trashed as proud, intolerant, and devious in Hilary Mantel’s best-selling novel *Wolf Hall*.”<sup>117</sup> The Archbishop goes on to state that “*Wolf Hall* offers a revisionist Thomas More wrapped in popular melodrama”<sup>118</sup> and even attacks Hilary Mantel ad hominem, accusing her of being openly anti-Catholic: “The author, Hilary Mantel, a lapsed Catholic whose disgust for the Church is a matter of public record.”<sup>119</sup> Additionally, Caput mentions that Mantel picked the wrong 'hero': “The 'hero' of her novel is Thomas Cromwell—More’s tormentor, and in reality, a man widely loathed by his contemporaries as an administratively gifted but scheming and vindictive bully.”<sup>120</sup>

Replying to the Archbishop's complaints, the [Protestant] New Reformation Press writer, Oxford graduate and history professor Korey Maas cites Caput's positive remarks on Robert Bolt's play to remark that “Bolt’s ‘man for all seasons’ is radically different from the person so painfully, so incompletely reconstructed from the evidence that has come down to us. More concisely, British historian John Guy describes it pointedly as 'sumptuous drama but appalling history.’”<sup>121</sup>

If anything, Mantel's “revision” of Thomas More opened up a debate on Sir Thomas and his legacy once more – a debate which has been shown to have been continuing ever since the sixteenth century. It is a debate which runs from reviews to academic circle and from YouTube comments to officials of the Catholic Church. Above all, it is a debate which, without picking sides, primarily shows the lasting legacy of Sir Thomas More, as well as the conflicting views on him which have existed from the 1520s onward. If anything, *Wolf Hall* successfully reinvigorated this debate and while its effect on public opinion on More is not fully known, it keeps the memory of Sir Thomas alive. While Psalm 6 claims that “in death, no one remembers you”, it could also be stated that only

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116 Caput 3.

117 Caput 4.

118 Caput 12.

119 Caput 12.

120 Caput 12.

121 Maas 3.

when no one remembers you anymore, one is truly dead.

480 years after his execution, this certainly is not the case with Sir Thomas More.

## Conclusion

As the New Historicism “argues against looking at novels, plays and other works as stand-alone, and prefers to see them as interconnected with a network of history, culture, politics, the author himself, and, later, other authors imitating, emulating or referencing the work”, *Wolf Hall* has been analyzed as part of, and merely the latest addition to, a running discussion on the identity of Sir Thomas More. Because of his writings, politics and untimely demise, More has achieved a legendary status over the past five hundred years. Ever since he battled and lost against the reform that led to the Church of England, he has been remembered in ways both positive and negative. From the early criticism of Foxe onward, opinions about him have been as varied and multifaceted as he was himself. Three of these different viewpoints have, therefore, been discussed: Catholics and Communists both have their own reasons to hold More in high regard, while Protestants have negatively reflected on More's deeds.

It has been established that these viewpoints are still in use, as the dichotomy between Protestantism and Catholicism produces vivid discussions even to this day. These discussions are widespread throughout society and range from academic and religious circles to YouTube comments. As the New Historicism “seeks to find meaning in a text by considering the work within the framework of the prevailing ideas and assumptions of its historical era” and subscribes to the notion that “no work holds unchangeable truths”, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* reinforces these notions in several ways: based on historical research on the time period and lives of More and Cromwell, the novel seeks to find new meaning in historical figures that have been portrayed as characters hundreds of times, by reinterpreting the past into a new narrative. While reflecting on the episteme of More cum suis, *Wolf Hall* itself fits into the twenty-first century liberal post-modernism which allows for the renegotiation of set historical figures. Like New Historicists “adhere to the idea that any arrangement of facts, including the way they are ordered and explained”, Mantel acknowledges that her work consciously turns the memory of Cromwell and More upside down. Instead of

reinforcing the power structures and standardized views on the early sixteenth century, *Wolf Hall* tries to add to the discussion on these two men by creating a renegotiated, new viewpoint. In his review of the novel, Greenblatt states that “a historical novel is always an act of conjuring (...) [and] does not have limits to the recovery of the past” and that such a novel “triumphs” when “it reaches a point of ignorance.” As such, *Wolf Hall* conjures a sympathetic Cromwell against a negatively portrayed More and indeed makes the reader reach a point of ignorance, a state of flux in between adhering to Mantel's account of events and the canonized portrayal of Bolt; as Greenblatt phrased it: “the More of *Wolf Hall* is not Robert Bolt's principled man for all seasons.” After five hundred years, Thomas More as well as Thomas Cromwell are allowed to be regarded as both saints and sinners. *Wolf Hall* challenges the dichotomy between the two men by reversing common opinion, meriting the running discussions in the literary, scholarly and even religious worlds.

*Wolf Hall* is as much part of our current episteme as More and his works are part of his pre-Reformation Humanist episteme. Even though Mantel does not state that her work is essentially in favor of either the Catholic or Protestant school of thought, their adherents do try to classify her novel along these lines, like Archbishop Caput does in his critique. As said in the introductory statement, “More is as ambiguous now as he was when he was still alive.”

The “limitations to the recovery of the past” which the New Historicism tries to breach, help spawn novels like Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *A Place of Greater Safety*, which in their renegotiation of the past in turn reinforce the open-minded post-structuralist method of analysis that the New Historicism proposes.

The broadness of the New Historicist scope allows for and applies to the discussion on the legacies of Cromwell and More. It is a discussion that encompasses past and present, fiction and history, stereotypes and counterweights, popular and academic. For the past five hundred years, the memory of More has continually been in a process of renegotiation, and therefore is not only very much alive, but also benefited by both New Historicist notions, as well as Mantel's application of

them in several of her works.

They seminally contribute to the notions that there is and always will be more to More, and that both Cromwell and More really were men for all seasons.

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