

Make or Mar: Hilary Mantel's Re-Imagining of Thomas Cromwell in *Wolf Hall*

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Introduction

Thomas Cromwell: a villain, a tormentor, and a Machiavellian. He has not been depicted too kindly in the literary, theatrical and television and film adaptations in which he features as a fictional character, and unsurprisingly so. Cromwell was a man who was hated by many in his own time and was at best described as cunning and conniving. This vision has trickled through in cultural depictions (such as literature, theater or film) of him up until 2009, when Hilary Mantel published her *Wolf Hall* which became the first of an immensely popular and highly anticipated trilogy that won its author the Man Booker Prize of 2009. *Wolf Hall's* Cromwell is a surprisingly appealing fictional character, a man who can be classified as intelligent, competent and kind: the complete opposite of the adaptations that came before *Wolf Hall*, which have generally portrayed a ruthless and murderous Cromwell. This thesis will reflect on how Mantel ultimately has shifted the negative paradigm in which Cromwell as both a literary character and historical figure has existed for many years towards a more positive view of Cromwell. This will be achieved by studying Mantel's choices in creating Cromwell's background and relationships, the literary devices she has employed in her novel, how *Wolf Hall* fits into the theories of Linda Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction and Stephen Greenblatt's New Historicism and how they are related to Mantel's re-imagining of Cromwell.

For many years Cromwell has existed in literary depictions of Tudor history as the villain. Ford Madox Ford's *The Fifth Queen* (1908), for example, shows a Cromwell who is nothing less than evil personified; a snake-like, sardonic man who is always a step ahead in plotting the downfall of those who get in his way. In *Anne of a Thousand Days* (a play by Maxwell Anderson from 1948; adapted into a motion picture in 1969) Cromwell does not fare much better; he is depicted as a briber, a schemer and a torturer. Robert Bolt's famous *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) is undoubtedly the best-known negative representation of Cromwell

(and for Hilary Mantel it was the text that she was up against, this representation having been around for decades and having gained a sense of historical authority). In Bolton's text Cromwell is the antagonist to Thomas More and he plans More's downfall as if he does not have a conscience at all. In his biography of Anne Boleyn, *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (2005), Eric Ives states Cromwell is the one to blame for Anne's execution. It is only in recent years that Cromwell is depicted in a slightly more favorable light: in the television series *The Tudors* (2007 – 2010) he still aims towards bettering his own position, betraying his mentor cardinal Wolsey in the process as he works to destroy Anne, yet he is also shown to be a hard-working, capable minister who feels remorse over the choices he has made; and Anne Stevens' novel *The Winter King* (2013) gives the reader a Cromwell who is still an utterly pragmatic and scheming man, but one who struggles with his conscience.

All these previous representations of Cromwell make *Wolf Hall's* view of Cromwell as a thoughtful, often kind man such interesting material and an excellent topic for research: rather than adding to the prevalent negative view of Cromwell in literature, Mantel has chosen to go down a different path in her depiction of him, showing readers the 'other' Cromwell and thus commenting indirectly on the subjectivity of interpreting and writing history.

Mantel acknowledges that her Cromwell and his story are not necessarily to be trusted: My Cromwell shakes hands with the Cromwell of the Book of Martyrs, and with the trickster Cromwell of the truly awful but funny Elizabethan play about him. I am conscious of all his later, if fugitive, incarnations in fiction and drama. I am conscious on every page of hard choices to be made, and I make sure I never believe my own story. (Bordo "Notes" (n.p.), chapter 13, note 32)

Yet Mantel also states "fiction is commonly more persuasive than history texts" (Bordo "Notes" (n.p.), chapter 13, note 44): she has reworked her interpretation of the historical sources cleverly into a version of this man that is very different from how he has been

depicted before, and even though her interpretation breaks with how Cromwell has commonly been perceived it is a convincing one. It is difficult (not impossible, however, as this thesis will also discuss) to find fault with the character written by Mantel, and such an explicitly positive image has left an important mark on this popular literary topic. This is why this thesis will go into an in-depth discussion of this unique take on Thomas Cromwell's portrayal in *Wolf Hall*.

Two key researchers that have strongly influenced the debate on historical fiction will play an important role in this discussion: Stephen Greenblatt, who coined the term 'New Historicism', and Linda Hutcheon, who formulated the theory of historiographic metafiction. New Historicism is a literary theory that is based on the notion that a literary work must be understood both in the context in which it was written and by the context in which readers and critics assessed it. Beliefs, prejudices and environment influence both an author and a critic, and this must be kept in mind when reading both the work itself and the critical responses that it received. Naturally, *Wolf Hall* is not a historical but a modern text, yet Mantel based her interpretation of Cromwell on the historical sources from his own day and age; New Historicism therefore relates to *Wolf Hall* in considering the sources Mantel has used and how she has used them in order to write her own version of Cromwell.

Historiographic metafiction is a term used to indicate the combination of historical fiction (a narrative format that is set in the past) and metafiction (in which a work reflects on itself as being an object created by an author, forcing readers to be aware of its status as a work of fiction and asking questions about the link between reality and fiction). Historiographic metafiction reminds its reader that history is always subjective and a construct created with a certain goal in mind: this is exactly what Mantel does in *Wolf Hall*, for her reworking of history was written with the amelioration of Cromwell as a character and as a historical figure in mind.

This thesis will use these literary theories work and the works of other authors who have written on *Wolf Hall* in general and on Cromwell's role within the novel specifically, such as Elmhirst (2012) whose portrait on Hilary Mantel reveals the author's own perspective on her novel and her Cromwell, Acocella (2009) whose review of *Wolf Hall* looks at the various sides of Cromwell's character that are represented in Mantel's novel, Kaufman (2010) who challenges the accuracy of the representation of Thomas More in relation to Cromwell, and articles by Mantel herself (such as "How I Came to Write Wolf Hall", "The Novelist's Arithmetic" and "Thomas Cromwell, Perhaps Not Such a Villain?").

In chapter 1, this thesis will look at how biographers (Robert Hutchinson, 2007; Tracy Borman, 2014) have interpreted historical sources to reflect on Cromwell the man, and make a comparison of these biographies with the portrait Mantel has painted of Cromwell the character. The literary techniques used by Mantel and how they are implemented in the novel will be examined in chapter 2. Chapter 3 will discuss how *Wolf Hall* can be considered in the light of New Historicism and within the framework of historiographic metafiction, combining the research from chapters 1 and 2 to culminate in a reflection of how Mantel's choices have determined Cromwell as a literary character and the readers' perception of him. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the findings of this thesis as well as suggest possibilities for further research.

Chapter 1: “A great Traveller in this World”

Documentation on Thomas Cromwell’s life is quite an interesting subject. Almost nothing is known about his early days as a child (the only thing that seems to be fact is that he was of low birth) and the rise in his status throughout his career is mostly visible in legal documents in which he is mentioned: his name turns up here and there as draftsman of these documents or his presence in certain places has been recorded (for example his stay at the English Hospice of the Most Holy Trinity and St Thomas in Rome in June 1514 (Borman 20). This chapter will discuss two biographies on Thomas Cromwell’s life which both base themselves on these historical documents: *Thomas Cromwell: The Untold Story of Henry VIII’s Most Faithful Servant* by Tracy Borman and *Thomas Cromwell: The Rise and Fall of Henry VIII’s Most Notorious Minister* by Robert Hutchinson; the first one published after *Wolf Hall*, the second before. The information given in these biographies will be compared to the events in *Wolf Hall* to discover what changes Mantel has made in writing her account of Cromwell’s life and how she has filled in the gaps where historical sources have been lacking. Ultimately this chapter will reflect on the positive effect that Mantel’s choices have had on the reader’s perception of Thomas Cromwell.

Childhood, travels and women

Thomas Cromwell’s exact date of birth is unknown, and there is very little known about his youth. It is most likely that he was born in 1485, a very fitting date: the Tudor family seized the English crown in August of that year. According to the records he was the only boy born to Walter Cromwell and his wife Katherine; his two sisters Katherine (who was, as historical sources reflect indeed married to the Welshman Morgan Williams) and Elizabeth were most likely considerably older than he was (Borman 8), and he claimed his mother was fifty-two when he was born (Hutchinson 7).

Both Hutchinson and Borman remark on Walter Cromwell's behavior and run-ins with the law: "Walter Cromwell was a drunken, quarrelsome scoundrel" (Hutchinson 8), who was frequently fined and had to appear in court several times. Most poignant in these records in relation to *Wolf Hall* is that Walter was fined in 1477 for assaulting and "drawing blood" from a William Mitchell (Merriman 3). There cannot be any certainty as to whether Walter was physically abusive towards his son, as he is shown to be in *Wolf Hall*. His assault of William Mitchell though does show that Walter had quite an aggressive streak, and it is not impossible that he took out his frustrations on his son. Mantel has taken this possibility of Thomas being abused by Walter and reworked it so that in her novel, it is presented as truth to the reader: the novel in fact opens with Walter beating his son up whilst yelling at him to get up. And despite his father's abusiveness which almost kills the young Cromwell, in *Wolf Hall* he goes back to Putney to visit his father sometime around 1515 (*Wolf Hall* 91): according to Borman, Walter Cromwell probably died while his son was on his travels (99) and this meeting therefore most likely did not take place.

Cromwell left England around 1502 or 1503 and travelled to several countries, including Italy (Mantel often alludes to his stay there). It is known that he also visited Flanders (Antwerp was a thriving merchant city) and Mantel adds a personal element to this that cannot be confirmed historically: the character of Anselma, the love of his youth. Cromwell is reminded of her by the face of Queen of Sheba on a tapestry that hangs in Wolsey's house: one of the many references Mantel makes with regard to Cromwell's love of art. Whereas there is no historical record of the existence of a woman such as Anselma, it is confirmed that Cromwell was indeed married 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). Mantel confirms this idea: "Lizzie wanted children; he wanted a wife with city contacts and some money behind her" (*Wolf Hall* 35). Yet their marriage seems like a loving

one in *Wolf Hall* and her death greatly affects Cromwell: “He feels he could almost sleep, but when he sleeps Liz Wykys comes back, cheerful and brisk, and when he wakes he has to learn the lack of her all over again” (*Wolf Hall* 87). After her death, Cromwell has an affair with his dead wife’s sister Johane, while he is also strongly attracted to two of Henry VIII’s conquests, Mary Boleyn and Jane Seymour. This “sensitive side to Mantel’s Cromwell [is] not usually considered by historians of the period” (Horowitz n.p.): in fact, it is very unlikely that it is true that Cromwell even had any romantic attachments after the death of Elizabeth: “The sources provide no other hint of infidelity on Cromwell’s part. Nor do they suggest that he took any mistresses after Elizabeth’s death” (Borman 73).

Thomas Wolsey and Thomas More

It is unclear when exactly Cromwell took service in the household of Cardinal Wolsey; but there is a general consensus that they had met by the year 1516 (Borman 32). Wolsey had made himself into one of the most powerful men in England: “a role model and mentor whom Cromwell, in all his grasping venality, could surely look up to” (Hutchinson 19). One of Wolsey’s goals was to build two new secular colleges in Oxford and in Ipswich, but this was by no means a cheap affair, and Wolsey was not planning on using his own resources to build them. Instead he sought to obtain a papal dispensation from Pope Clement VII to tear down those monasteries that were said to be in decay and no longer made the Catholic Church any money (Hutchinson 19). These monasteries had gotten money from the nobility and the clergymen in high positions for a long time in order for the monasteries to support the poor: when they disappeared the nobility and the clergy (including Wolsey) could keep their money in their pockets. Furthermore, by tearing down these monasteries the land that they stood on could be sold for high prices and Wolsey used this money to fund his colleges. It was Cromwell who carried out the task of investigating these religious houses; eventually twenty-nine of them were suppressed and “a total of around eighty monks, canons and nuns were all

evicted without ceremony” (Hutchinson 20). The ones that survived often offered bribes to be spared, and Wolsey and Cromwell took their financial advantage. It led to Cromwell becoming very unpopular; it was reported there was a man who was planning to kill Cromwell and he had to take security precautions to keep any unwanted visitors out of his home (Hutchinson 21).

Cromwell’s relationship with Wolsey was a business agreement, yet the relationship depicted in *Wolf Hall* is almost that of a father and a son. This is established early on in their association, when Wolsey stretches out his hand towards Cromwell and Cromwell (supposedly) steps back or flinches (*Wolf Hall* 59). Wolsey reassures him: “I would really like the London gossip. But I wasn’t planning to beat it out of you” (*Wolf Hall* 59) and tells Cromwell the story of the man (Miles Revell) he himself feared in his own childhood, establishing a bond between them. When it comes to the monasteries, the exact arrangements and results of their dissolution are mostly kept in the dark by Mantel. Instead she mostly focuses on the friendly relationship Cromwell and Wolsey seem to have rather than what they achieved together: “She does not dwell on the spiritual or even the social consequences of the massive appropriation and redistribution of land and treasure that her hero oversaw” (“How It Must Have Been” 22).

Despite the fact that Cromwell worked for a Cardinal, it was often questioned whether he was truly a Catholic. Cromwell wanted to dispute these rumors. Just before his execution in July 1540, he stated: “And now I pray you that be here, to bear me record, I die in the Catholic faith, not doubting in any article of my faith, no nor doubting in any Sacrament of the Church” (Cobbett 437). In *Wolf Hall* Cromwell is quite moderate in his attitude when it comes to religion. Cromwell says “it’s not that he [Cromwell] loves Brother Martin [Martin Luther] himself; he and the cardinal agree it would be better if Luther had never been born, or better if he [Luther] had been born more subtle” (*Wolf Hall* 32). Yet he does keep up with the

reformist writings; he owns both the Tyndale and the Luther versions of the Bible and knows Erasmus' translated version of the New Testament by heart, and he "favors neither Catholics nor evangelical reformers, England's earliest Protestants [...] his aim is to prepare his extended family to survive whatever the realm's pulpits may proclaim as the truth and as often as that truth changes" (Kaufman 172).

This is the opposite view of Mantel's Thomas More, who is depicted as a cruel man, who does not accept any dissidents. About Luther, More says, "that his mouth is like the world's anus" (*Wolf Hall* 99). When it comes to heretics (as More sees these early Protestants) Wolsey says, "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" (*Wolf Hall* 18). William Roper, More's son-in-law, describes him in his biography as a man of justice, and thus as quite the opposite: "I assure thee on my faith, that if the parties will at my hands call for justice, then, all were it my father stood on the one side and the devil on the other, his cause being good, the devil should have right" (Roper 24). It is a very different image from the heretic-burning More that Mantel gives the reader. Roper confirms that Thomas More was indeed educated at the house of Cardinal and Chancellor Morton (2), as is also described by Mantel. Mantel also places Cromwell at this scene as a kitchen boy (for which there is no historical evidence) who encounters More and asks him what he is reading, to which More condescendingly replies, "words, words, just words" (*Wolf Hall* 485). Even as a child, Mantel's More was not a kind character; and he grew up to be "a vain and dangerous man [...] a killer" (*Wolf Hall* 463). And yet, "during More's term as chancellor, six heretics were put to death. As he prepared for his death, he watched Cromwell at work, seeing off assorted defiant priests and priors – and one bishop. Cromwell's toll reached several hundred before his execution in 1540" (Kaufman 168).

Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn

It was through his loyalty to Cardinal Wolsey that Cromwell won favor with King Henry VIII: “Ironically, Henry was perhaps the only man at court who felt any affection towards the disgraced cardinal” (Borman 94). The exact date of Cromwell entering Henry’s service is unknown; what is known is that he first had to prove himself to Henry before he would be trusted with something so important as Henry’s so longed-for divorce from Katherine of Aragon (Borman 98). Cromwell proves his worth to Henry by showing him that his value lies in the “manipulation of parliamentary affairs” (Hutchinson 52), and it is not long after he has gained the king’s trust that he starts to “amass a considerable collection of royal offices and appointments” (Hutchinson 53). In 1532 he is entrusted with the task of the annulment of Henry’s marriage and ensuring Henry is able to marry Anne Boleyn. In *Wolf Hall* Henry’s trust in Cromwell is established by a dream Henry has had of his dead brother Arthur. Henry sends for Cromwell to come to the palace at Greenwich, to explain the king’s dream to him and to reassure him, for Henry seems to think his brother has appeared to him to make him feel ashamed (*Wolf Hall* 226). Cromwell does come, telling Henry, “if your brother seems to say that you have taken his place, then he means you to become the king he would have been” (*Wolf Hall* 226). Henry seems to find solace in Cromwell’s words, and it is the first big step towards Cromwell becoming Henry’s most trusted advisor.

Henry relies on Cromwell both in public and in private matters in *Wolf Hall*: when disaster strikes and Anne first gives birth to a girl before having a series of miscarriages, Cromwell is one of the few advisors whom Henry keeps close to him and who he seems to care for. An example of this is when Cromwell falls ill in 1535. According to Borman, “Cromwell was too sick to attend court [in April 1535] and the king himself paid him a visit at home” (185). This visit is described by Mantel in the novel (*Wolf Hall* 504) and she uses the event to reflect on the personal bond that Henry and Cromwell seem to have developed:

“Henry kisses him firmly on both cheeks, takes him by the arms and (in case he thinks he is the only strong man in the kingdom) he sits him back, decisively, in his chair” (*Wolf Hall* 505). During this visit Henry talks to Cromwell about his childhood and about his brother. Afterwards, Johane sits with Cromwell, and she tells him, “‘Henry is frightened of you.’ He shakes his head. Who frightens the Lion of England? ‘Yes, I swear to you’” (*Wolf Hall* 507). Mantel creates an understanding between the king and his advisor that can almost be classified as friendship; but ultimately, they also need each other to achieve their goals: Henry needs Cromwell to divorce Katherine (and is fully aware of the extent of power that Cromwell has now) and Cromwell needs Henry to stay in this political game and, most importantly, stay alive.

The bond between Cromwell and Anne was by no means as personal. In Wolsey’s fall it was “the poison of Anne Boleyn’s disfavour [which] still afflicted him” (Hutchinson 37): Cromwell was fully aware that Anne played a big part in the downfall of his former master, which “made her a natural enemy of Cromwell” (Borman 125). In *Wolf Hall* a short play, “The Cardinal’s Descent Into Hell”, is performed (*Wolf Hall* 218); Henry “sits frozen [...] his eyes are afraid”, but Anne is “laughing, pointing, applauding [...] lit up, glowing” (218). Hilary Mantel’s Anne is without remorse or even kindness, described as a woman who is very hard to please and not eager to forgive (*Wolf Hall* 322). But it is not her kindness that the historical Cromwell needed in achieving his goals: “For Cromwell, alliance with Anne was only ever a means to an end” (*Wolf Hall* 126). *Wolf Hall*’s Cromwell seems to find what is almost a kindred spirit in Anne: like Cromwell himself, she “doesn’t like to show her hand” (198), she is unemotional and rational: “Anne’s face wears no expression at all. Even a man as literate as he can find nothing there to read”; “If you walked up to her and said, you are to be boiled, she would probably shrug: *c’est la vie*” (245). Cromwell does not like her that much, but he does seem to respect her for how steadfast she is in her goals and how far she is

willing to go to achieve them, and he uses these traits to his own advantage. When Thomas More puts John Petyt, a man who was suspected of funding Tyndale and has been condemned to die, in the Tower and his wife comes to ask Cromwell to get him out, it is Anne to whom Cromwell goes for help: “He speaks to Lady Anne. What can I do? she asks, and he says, you know how to please the king, I suppose; she laughs and says, what, my maidenhead for a grocer? [...] Anne says, I have tried, I myself as you know have put Tyndale’s books into his hand” (*Wolf Hall* 247). Yet Cromwell never fully trusts her, “When Cromwell gives her a present (a set of silver forks, handles made out of rock crystals) he thinks: “He hopes she will use them to eat with, not stick in people” (*Wolf Hall* 242), nor does he understand Henry’s interest in her, made clear when Cromwell shakes his head after Sir Henry Norris asks him, “You don’t see it, do you? Anne?” (271) It is near the end of *Wolf Hall* that the cracks in their forged bond start to show and that Anne starts to realize that Cromwell does not necessarily serve her, and that his plans are quite different from hers (forming a friendship with the German princes rather than building an alliance with France (516)), even though she is strongly under the impression that he does serve her, going as far as to almost affectionately call him “her man” (323). Up until the end of *Wolf Hall* (and therefore up until 1535) their goals were similar; but their falling-out is a rapid one. Mantel depicts the relationship between Anne and Cromwell as one that starts out as a careful power balance and that slowly shifts towards something that resembles a tentative friendship. Or so it seems; because for Cromwell, Anne was mostly a key necessity in keeping Henry satisfied and thus vital to keeping himself in Henry’s good graces and nothing more: “The fact that this aligned with Anne’s own desires was incidental: Cromwell was motivated by service to his royal master first, and himself second” (Borman 126).

Mantel acknowledges the dark side of Cromwell throughout the novel, but his less than admirable actions have been kept quite vague; it is clear that for Mantel it is not so much

about detailing Cromwell's career and actions, but the relationships that are formed or changed (such as Cromwell's relationships with Wolsey, Henry and Anne) in the process of his rise and the influence it has on the more private aspects of his life (such as his family). This is not an account of Cromwell the public minister, but of Cromwell the adventurer, husband, father and servant. By choosing to not go into detail about the events that other interpretations of Cromwell have used to make him seem despicable, Mantel has instead highlighting the more emotional side of Cromwell. In doing so she has humanized Cromwell, a character to identify and sympathize with, and has done so very effectively.

Chapter 2: “I called him ‘he’”: Creating Cromwell’s Character

This chapter will discuss the narrative techniques that Mantel applies in her novel. Four literary elements (narration/perspective, time, literary/art references and language) will be examined in order to demonstrate that the choices made by Mantel contribute to the positive representation of her Cromwell. According to Mantel, “historians are as adept at hiding as they are at ‘showing’ the past” (Booth 106); hiding and showing is exactly what Mantel does throughout her novel in order to form the reader’s perception of Cromwell. This chapter will argue that Mantel’s Cromwell has become a loveable character through his creator’s literary manipulation.

In the *Handbook of Narratology* Uri Margolin defines the narrator in the prototypical sense as “the single, unified, stable, distinct human-like voice who produces the whole narrative discourse we are reading. [...] a fictional agent who is part of the story world and whose task it is to report from within it on events in this world which are real or actual for him” (649). The reader experiences the story of *Wolf Hall* through Cromwell’s feelings and thoughts. Yet Cromwell is not the one narrating the story – even if the present-tense narration is so closely connected to Cromwell (an example of this is the extensive use of the pronoun “he”: often it is grammatically ambiguous which character “he” is referring to, whether it is Cromwell himself or the character Cromwell is having an interaction with) that it seems he is. *Wolf Hall* is related from Cromwell’s third person limited perspective, creating an ever so slight distance between the reader and the character: the reader can hover over his shoulder, but never see into his mind. The narrator never reveals anything that Cromwell himself is not involved in or could not have known, and does not let on about events that are yet to come.

Mantel’s novel is presented to the reader through Cromwell’s subjective perspective – he is the focalizer of *Wolf Hall*. Focalization is a term based on the “point of view” and was formulated by Genette, who rigorously separates the terms of “narrator” and “focalizer” – he

formulates it as two questions, “who speaks?” (narrator) and “who sees?” (focalizer). He emphasizes that the term “focalization” is not a mere replacement of “point of view”, but goes beyond it: “a story is told *from* a particular point of view, a narrative focuses *on* something. This preposition indicates the selection of, or restriction to, amounts or kinds of information that are accessible under the norms of a particular focalization” (198). In *Wolf Hall* the reader is able to only get the same information that Cromwell as the focalizer has, the reader’s knowledge is the same as Cromwell’s at any point during the story. Both the narration and the focalization are important for how the reader judges Cromwell. The story is experienced alongside Cromwell: it is impossible to know why Cromwell makes certain decisions, what effects they will have (for the narration is present-tense and there is no omniscient narrator) and how any other character feels about them (for there is a limited perspective, and Cromwell is the only focalizer). The result of these choices is that readers will sympathize with Cromwell’s actions, for they are unable to place them in a wider perspective.

The novel opens in the year 1500 and closes in July 1535. However, not all thirty-five years in between are described in the novel. In her narrative Mantel frequently plays with time, often skipping through it – smaller time jumps of a year or a few months, but also a major one of twenty-seven years; throughout *Wolf Hall* Cromwell frequently refers to the events that took place during this time (such as his travels or the people he met), which have evidently shaped much of who he is as an adult – but Mantel never makes explicit *how* these events have changed him or even what exactly took place (Cromwell’s references to his past are always related to very specific incidents and do not give any other information about what else might have occurred). Two terms (coined by Genette) related to the narrative idea of time that are very important in considering *Wolf Hall* are analepsis and prolepsis. The first of these two is the easiest to understand in relation to the novel, for it is defined very simply as “flashback” (*About Time* 29) and applies, for example, to Cromwell referring to events during

the aforementioned twenty-seven year gap. Prolepsis is defined as the “moment in a narrative in which the chronological order of story events is disturbed and the narrator narrates future events out of turn” (*About Time* 29). *Wolf Hall* does not exactly adhere to this definition, for the narrator never disturbs the present-tense narrative. Yet Currie also describes prolepsis as anticipation (29), or in another word foreshadowing, which plays a very subtle but important role in the novel and in understanding Cromwell’s position at the end of it. On the relationship between past time and present tense (as in *Wolf Hall*) Peter Brooks states: “If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it” (23). Any reader interested in Tudor history already knows at the very beginning of the novel that Cromwell will become the second most powerful man in England; but that his story will ultimately end with his downfall, and Mantel refers to this throughout the novel. Her foreshadowing of Cromwell’s fate is not very explicit but it is there. A key example is the presence of the Seymour family in *Wolf Hall*, Jane in particular: the woman who would eventually become Henry’s third wife and would bear him his only son, who became King Edward VI. Jane Seymour was the key to keeping the Tudor’s succession to the throne alive – in *Wolf Hall* she is nowhere near this status yet. In fact, Mantel depicts her family as involved in scandalous rumors about an affair that their father is involved in. Cromwell takes a romantic interest in Jane. It is near the end of the novel that she tells him she is leaving court. She is going to the Seymour family estate: Wolf Hall. The title itself is foreshadowing, for the last chapter of the novel has Cromwell planning out Henry’s summer trip to the west of England. In his planning Cromwell finds a few days to spare, and he says,

I seem to have four, five days in hand. Ah well. Who says I never get a holiday?’ Before ‘Bromham’, he makes a dot in the margin, and draws a long arrow across the page. ‘Now here, before we go to Winchester, we have time to

spare, and what I think is, Rafe, we shall visit the Seymours.’ He writes it down. Early September. Five days. Wolf Hall. (*Wolf Hall* 532)

Cromwell simply wants to visit Jane in whom he has a romantic interest, but he has no idea yet that this visit to Wolf Hall will set off a series of future events that will reach its culmination in Cromwell’s death: Anne Boleyn’s downfall, Henry marrying Jane, Jane’s death just after childbirth, Henry’s next (fourth) and failed marriage to Anne of Cleves orchestrated by Cromwell that resulted in his execution for treason in 1540. For Cromwell, Wolf Hall is the beginning of his end.

Another interesting aspect related to time in *Wolf Hall* is when the story is told to the reader. It is written in the present tense. This could mean that the story is told directly after a certain event has occurred mere moments ago – Samuel Richardson developed this sense of immediacy in writing, and he called this method “writing to the moment”; he uses a letter-writer who records the passing thought, gesture, and incident in great detail while moving toward the novelist’s foreordained end” (McKillop 36). The effect of “writing to the moment” in Mantel’s novel is that it is easier to feel connected to Cromwell – and because the reader is living the story at the same time Cromwell is, he is a more innocuous character. His choices might turn out for the worst; but seeing as Mantel never uses any form of prolepsis as Currie defines it (and the foreshadowing is only noticeable for those that know how the historical Cromwell came to his end) neither Cromwell nor the reader could have known how those choices turned out. Mantel makes use of tense, time jumps (an example of one of these is that the dissolution of the monasteries, a duty that Cromwell performed for Wolsey and that made him a hated man does not appear in the novel for it takes place during one of these time jumps) and of the gaps in the historical sources; she is able to create a man who inspires the reader’s sympathy rather than their loathing.

Wolf Hall frequently refers to works of art. One of the most important ones is the tapestry depicting the story of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, which features throughout the novel. This tapestry (which does not seem to have any historical counterpart and was most likely made up by Mantel) depicts the Biblical story of King Solomon receiving the Queen of Sheba:

When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relationship to the Lord, she came to test Solomon with hard questions.

Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the Lord, she was overwhelmed.

She said to the king, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your people must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord’s eternal love for Israel, he has made you king to maintain justice and righteousness.” (*New International Version*, 1 Kings 10: 1-9)

Cromwell says the Queen of Sheba (“smiling, light-footed” (*Wolf Hall* 19)) reminds him of the widow Anselma that he was with while he was living in Antwerp as a wool trader. The reader does not find out why; Cromwell never says anything about her apart from the fact that she is a widow. It seems Mantel used the tapestry and the supposed likeness that the Queen of Sheba and Anselma share in order to reflect on Cromwell’s humanity, for the reader does find out that Cromwell was in love with Anselma and Cromwell admits that the honorable thing to do would have been to marry her, but “if he had married Anselma he couldn’t have married Liz; and his children would be different children from the ones he has now” (*Wolf Hall* 19). The tapestry’s figure of the Queen of Sheba is also compared to Anne Boleyn: “Sheba makes Anne look bad: sallow and sharp” (*Wolf Hall* 164).

King Solomon was known to be an adulterer: he had hundreds of wives and concubines. According to a fourteenth-century Ethiopian account on the origins of the bloodline of the House of Solomon (the *Kebrā Nagast* or, in English, the *Glory of Kings*) he and the Queen of Sheba were engaged in a sexual relationship, but they were not married. According to 1 Kings 10 Solomon “gave the queen of Sheba all she desired and asked for, besides what he had given her out of his royal bounty. Then she left and returned with her retinue to her own country” (1 Kings 10: 13): this ‘retinue’ was thought to be a son. The Queen of Sheba therefore is ‘the other woman’, with a child born out of wedlock. This could very well be related to the question as to why the Queen of Sheba is linked to both Anselma and Anne: both of them are ‘the other women’ of the novel. Henry desperately wants Anne even though he is married and Cromwell still thinks of Anselma even though he is married to Liz. Yet Anselma is compared to the Queen of Sheba in a positive way by Cromwell and Anne is not, for Anselma was never the other woman whilst Cromwell was married to Liz in a physical sense: his statement about his children indicates that he did not regret his choice to marry Liz, and that his thoughts about Anselma were mere memories of a happy time.

Cromwell never even saw her again after he left Antwerp. Anne however ensured Katherine of Aragon was removed from her position as queen and removed from her husband's bed without shame, taking Katherine's place in both. There is a purity about Anselma, a purity that Anne has lost by her deviant actions: this reveals something essential about the honorability of Cromwell's character and about the feelings he has towards his wife and children. Mantel uses this tapestry and what it represents for Cromwell to remind the reader that Cromwell too is simply human, driven by his feelings and emotions; but they are kept in check by his morals.

Another important work of art in *Wolf Hall* is the portrait that the painter Hans Holbein (who also features as a character in the novel) draws of Cromwell. It confronts Cromwell with his own image and how the rest of society perceives him, now he is at the height of his power:

There is no trace of a smile on the face of his painted self. [...] "I don't think you look like that," Helen Barre says. "I see that your features are true enough. But that is not the expression on your face." Rafe says, "No, Helen, he saves it for men." (*Wolf Hall* 431)

His son Gregory asks Cromwell if he was really not aware that he looks like a murderer, as another character once told Cromwell. He was not; Cromwell still sees himself as a good man, and it is logical for the reader to do the same for Mantel has presented him as one, making it easy to forget Mantel's vague allusions to his not entirely honorable actions. Cromwell's thoughts and inner turmoil are what lies at the heart of *Wolf Hall*, carefully constructed in and around history:

Mantel's chief method is to pick out tableaux vivants from the historical record – which she has worked over with great care – and then to suggest that they have an inward aspect which is completely unlike the version presented in

history books. The result is less a historical novel than an alternative history novel. It constructs a story about the inner life of Cromwell which runs in parallel to scenes and pictures that we thought we knew. (Burrow n.p.)

Apart from works of art, Mantel's re-imaginings of historical events also play an important role in forming the image of Cromwell that is presented to the reader. An important historical event Mantel reworks in the novel is that of the burning of a Loller woman, Joan Boughton, at Smithfield in the year 1494, when Cromwell was a boy. Lollardy was a religious movement that arose in the middle of the fourteenth century and continued until the English Reformation – it followed the teachings of John Wycliffe, who advocated translating the Bible into the vernacular, and thus Lollardy can be considered the precursor to Protestantism, for that movement also did not agree with the idea that the Bible should only be read in Latin by priests and advocated critical thinking about the Catholic Church. Cromwell helps Joan's friends scrape together what is left of her after her burning. There is no historical evidence that Cromwell was present at this event, and Cromwell himself seems to have his doubts about his presence. He relates to the reader that he ran away into town from home even though he was supposed to help his father Walter make brine to use for blacksmithing (Walter's profession), afraid of receiving another beating from his father:

Now, when he thinks back on this, he wonders at his own faulty memory. [...]

He can't remember how he got back home, and what Walter did instead of killing him by inches, or why he'd run off in the first place without making the brine. Perhaps, he thinks, I spilled the salt and I was too frightened to tell him.

(Wolf Hall 293)

Mantel uses this burning of a Loller to reflect on Cromwell's aversion of religious persecution and his moderate stance on the topic of Protestantism. Cromwell performs a kindness in his helping the Loller's friends by collecting fragments of her bones and her ashes and giving

them to her friends, so that they can keep her with them, in spite of the fact that he knew very well that Lollers were considered heretics.

In *Wolf Hall* language is an interesting concept. In total the novel contains seven different languages (Latin, French, Italian, German, Welsh, Arabic and Flemish; some more frequently used than others). For Cromwell, language is a way of gaining trust and of being liked: He uses French to speak to Anne Boleyn to humor her, seeing as she fills “her sentences with French words when she pretends she can’t think of the English” (*Wolf Hall* 55), for she had lived in France for quite some time and sees French as a more refined language than English. By showing Anne that he can speak to her in her preferred language, she is inclined to listen to him. He does the same with Eustace Chapuys, for “French, as it happens, is the first language of the ambassador of the Empire and Spain; and like any other diplomat, he will never take the trouble to learn English, for how will that help him in his next posting?” (*Wolf Hall* 158), and Cromwell wants to keep Chapuys on his good side. Cromwell also uses foreign languages to hint at his past, his travels across Europe and his time spent in Italy, for he speaks Italian with Bonvisi (*Wolf Hall* 159); he thinks back to the bet he had in Italy to pick up a snake which he had to hold for ten seconds, counting in German (*Wolf Hall* 82) seeing as it is a slow language; and there is one instance of Arabic in Cromwell’s reminiscences (*Wolf Hall* 339). Cromwell speaking other languages shows the reader that he has come a long way from being the poor blacksmith’s boy who would never get anywhere; he is now an educated and intelligent man of the world. For Cromwell, being able to speak several languages is a way of countering the negative things that are said about him:

He is a good friend and master; this is said of him everywhere. Otherwise, it is the usual abuse. His father was a blacksmith, a crooked brewer, he was an Irishman, he was a criminal, he was a Jew, and he himself was just a wool-trader, he was a shearsman, and now he is a sorcerer: how else but by being a

sorcerer would he get the reins of power in his hand? Chapuys writes to the Emperor about him; his early life remains a mystery, but he is excellent company, and he keeps his household and retainers in magnificent style. He is a master of language, Chapuys writes, a man of most eloquent address; though his French, he adds, is only *assez bien*. (*Wolf Hall* 479)

The reader is rooting for Cromwell because they have seen the hardships of his childhood – Mantel makes the reader see Cromwell as a go-getter, a fighter; and his ability in different languages is an example of this, for Cromwell never received any formal education and therefore it must have been a struggle to become so linguistically proficient. The opinions of the characters that criticize Cromwell (such as Thomas More) are easily debunked by making them into the villain (the picture Mantel paints of More, as explained in Chapter 1, is that of a hardcore religious fanatic who is willing to torture all dissenters to death).

Apart from being trusted and liked, there is also one language that carries connotations of family and of home, reflecting the softer side of Cromwell, and this language is Welsh. The first chapter, in which Cromwell is about nine or ten years old, has the first instance of the use of Welsh. Cromwell says goodbye to his brother-in-law Morgan Williams (a Welshman) in perfect Welsh: “He says, ‘*Hwyl, Morgan Williams. Diolch am yr arian.*’ Thank you for the money. ‘*Gofalwch am Katheryn. Gofalwch am eich busnes. Wela i chi eto rhywbryd. Poblwc.*’ Look after my sister. Look after your business. See you again sometime” (*Wolf Hall* 10). There are no historical sources that suggest that Cromwell was bilingual, and therefore it is possible that the young Cromwell has studied (a bit of) Welsh specifically to be able to speak to his brother-in-law in Morgan Williams’ native language, for no other characters that speak Welsh are mentioned. This establishes the idea of Welsh as the language of family and it returns throughout the novel, for example when his nephew Richard (who was mostly raised by Cromwell and who considers himself one of Cromwell’s children) says goodnight to

Cromwell in Welsh, and Cromwell explains to the reader: “Sleep well; it is the familiar form for those who are close to home. It is the usage for fathers, for brothers” (*Wolf Hall* 147).

Welsh is also used when Cromwell recognizes the boatman as an old acquaintance from when he was a boy: “‘Is that not Sion Madoc?’ ‘Never forget a face, eh?’ ‘Not when it’s ugly.’ ‘Have you seen yourself, *bach*?’ [...] Sion gets a tip. It’s worth anything, to be reacquainted with the Putney imagination” (*Wolf Hall* 241): how a boatman from Wales came to end up in Putney is not explained by Mantel, nor can a Sion Madoc be found in any historical records. Madoc seems to be a character invented by Mantel for the sole purpose of reminding the reader of Cromwell’s low status when he was a boy and how far he has come. The Welsh language refers back to childhood and to home; the Welsh spoken by Richard and the boatman reminds the reader of the young Cromwell, beaten up by his father and fleeing to his sister in fear; and the reader sympathizes with him in these reminders of his childhood, forgetting what Cromwell eventually has become.

On creating Cromwell, Mantel has said: “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 has transposed this notion of being in the same space as Cromwell to *Wolf Hall* perfectly: as the readers, we think we experience Cromwell’s life with him; his hardships gain our sympathies, his victories are ours. Mantel has managed to create a man who is almost impossible to dislike. The choices that have been made in the narration reflect his thoughtfulness. There is a personal aspect in everything that Mantel describes in the novel: no work of art, choice of language or event is randomly chosen, all of them serve a greater purpose of endearing Cromwell to the reader. Yet there is an underlying sense of darkness to Cromwell at times. It is a reminder of the historical Cromwell’s actions that have ultimately also shaped Mantel’s Cromwell as a character. Mantel’s Cromwell himself hints at

this ambiguity of his character, as he looks at the painting made by Hans Holbein: “Hans has made his skin smooth as the skin of a courtesan, but the motion he has captured, that folding of the fingers, is as sure as that of a slaughterman’s when he picks up the killing knife” (*Wolf Hall* 430).

Chapter 3: Historiographic Metafiction and New Historicism in *Wolf Hall*

Writing history is a subjective act. Every writer applies his or her own narrative model to the “facts” as they have been handed down from the time period they were first documented in to our own day and age. Every writer uses these “facts” in their own way, making them fit into their own version of history, and this leads to all sorts of difficulties in considering history and how it has been documented. Every instance of history that has been recorded on paper is not objective – so what is history? Is it truth? What can even be considered “truth”? And how do the concepts of truth and history relate to the concept of fiction (for writing itself is subjective and thus classifiable as fictional)? How does history work in fiction, how does the author of fiction “alter” history? And how does this change the reader’s perception of history? This chapter will discuss these questions in relation to *Wolf Hall*, using two key literary concepts: Linda Hutcheon’s theory of historiographic metafiction and Stephen Greenblatt’s New Historicism. Hutcheon and Greenblatt’s concepts will be explained and connected to *Wolf Hall* in this chapter and, together with the research done in chapters one and two, contribute to reflecting on how Mantel’s depiction of Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* has influenced the reader’s perception of him both as a character and as a historical figure (the lines between which seemingly have become more and more blurred throughout the novel).

Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” in the late 1980s. She herself explains 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)

It is a genre that raises “issues about knowledge of the past and the bearing that narrative has on that knowledge” (*Postmodern Narrative Theory* n.p.): historiographic metafiction, in its self-reflexivity, reminds that history *is* a narrative, and the genre “self-consciously reminds that past events, though real were constituted as historical facts through the process of ordering and selection” (Samad n.p.). History is a textual and human construct, just as fiction is. Historiographic metafiction blurs the lines between history and fiction, fully aware that it does so. *Wolf Hall* does not necessarily fit Hutcheon’s term perfectly: in metafiction, the author often disturbs the narrative layers of a story in explicit ways (for example by intruding into the plot to comment on the act of writing or reading themselves, by directly addressing the reader, or involving him- or herself with one of the characters). This does not happen in *Wolf Hall*; the sense that the reader is experiencing the story along with Cromwell is never explicitly violated by Mantel’s presence as the author. On writing *Wolf Hall* and the difference between being a novelist and a historian, Mantel says:

Unlike the historian, the novelist doesn’t operate through hindsight. She lives inside the consciousness of her characters, for whom the future is a blank. Acting always on imperfect information and, like all of us, only half-conscious of their own motivations, they have to hazard the unknown. It is up to the historian to analyze their actions and pass judgment in retrospect. The novelist agrees just to move forward with her characters, walking into the dark. (“The Novelist’s Arithmetic” n.p.)

This statement fits how Cromwell is presented to the reader: as mentioned in chapter two, the reader receives the same amount of information that Cromwell has himself at that point in the novel. Mantel's decision of letting the reader experience *Wolf Hall* on the same level as Cromwell is

an honourable one: it seeks to protect the legitimacy or validity of people's knowledge *at the time* from the potentially destructive retrospective view [...]
 However, her acknowledgement that the novelist's characters always act 'on imperfect information', and that they are 'only half-conscious of their own motivations', while providing classically fertile ground for the novelist, also permits, in other hands, writers to round out the imperfections of this knowledge, and this half-consciousness of motive, with the benefit of hindsight. (Dentith 146)

For *Wolf Hall*'s Cromwell the future might be unknown; but it is not for the reader or for Mantel for that matter. Both a large part of the readership and Mantel are aware of what is to come for Cromwell, and it definitely plays a role in how Mantel has written *Wolf Hall*. For example, the opening of the novel already hints at how Cromwell's story will eventually end: "Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen; knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard. His head turns sideways; his eyes are turned towards the gate, as if someone might arrive to help him out. One blow, properly placed, could kill him now" (*Wolf Hall* 3). It is a strong foreshadowing of Cromwell's execution: he was beheaded, killed by one properly placed blow with an axe.

Even though the novel does not reflect on its status as a work of fiction in the text, it does "problematize the question of historical knowledge" ("The Pastime of Past Time" 474) through the choices that Mantel makes with the historical material that is available to her and the choices she makes in order to fill up the gaps where there are no historical resources.

These choices are ultimately Mantel's re-imagining of Cromwell: not only as Henry VIII's right-hand helper (which historically is accurate) but also as a man. It is this side of Cromwell (his childhood, marriage, children and home life, as discussed in chapter one) that cannot be found in historical records; it is possible to find that he was indeed married to Elizabeth Wykys for example, or that his uncle worked as a cook, but the feelings and thoughts Cromwell has were imagined by Mantel:

Did he really meet Thomas More when he was a small child? There is a coincidence of time and place which adds up (in the novelist's arithmetic) to an opportunity; his uncle, John Cromwell, was indeed a cook at Lambeth Palace when 14-year-old More was a page in the household. Did Cromwell love his daughters, who died young? We don't know, but we can see how he cared for his son, and he would surely have educated Anne and Grace if they had lived; he moved in the same circles as More, and education for girls was the fashion. Stray remarks of Cromwell's show how he admired strong and clever women. But did he – it seems unlikely – really like small dogs? A 1534 letter to Lord Lisle in Calais from his man of business in England suggests that a present of 'some pretty dog for Master Secretary [Cromwell]' should be high among his lordship's priorities. ("The Novelist's Arithmetic" n.p.)

Mantel uses the facts that exist in the documents as possibilities, and uses these possibilities to rewrite Cromwell's history. And because they are possibilities, it is impossible to say whether they are true or not; they could have happened, or not, as is so often the case for the past. The way Mantel chooses to use these possibilities is what makes Cromwell a character that can be admired by a reader, as has been shown extensively in chapter two. Mantel gives Cromwell's history a certain direction, just as every writer does, and in this case the direction is quite positive.

Stephen Greenblatt used the term New Historicism for the first time in 1982. An important influence on this form of literary theory is the thinking of Michel Foucault. Foucault argued that history is not a period of time in which small changes continuously take place and thus shape the course of history in a moderate way, but rather that it consists out of long periods of time during which there are very few changes which are then shaken up by a major change in society. This change causes the system of power that was in place up until then to be replaced by a completely different one. Each one of these periods has its own system of knowledge and power: Foucault terms these 'epistemes'. Within these epistemes, there are a number of truths that are held to be valid, and that are part of that specific time period. However, they cannot transcend the system and they do not hold universally within that system. These truths are part of a regime of power: they determine who is in power and which groups must be repressed. These relationships (who is in power and who is repressed) can shift with every new time period; but there is no system in which there is no power. Power will always be present for it is a system within itself and is closely connected to knowledge (Huwiler et al. n.p.).

New Historicism has developed as a reaction against historicism. Historicism held the traditional conception that literary texts were a reflection of the spirit of the age (Tyson 268); they saw the ideologies in these texts as a reflection of society in its entirety, ignoring the marginalized, non-dominant ideas present in society. New Historicism (based on Foucault's idea that the truths of an episteme are not universal) does look for those suppressed voices in a society, and believes that the historical context of a work cannot be ignored when interpreting the work, because both this context as well as the text are part of the truths and ideas present in a society. The same holds for interpreting a text of a certain time period: modern critics or historians must consider a text both in the light of the context in which it originated but also within the context of their own time, they cannot separate the values of

their time from themselves when reading a text. The ideologies of modern society influence a reader as much in reading a text as the ideologies of the society in which the work was written influence the author in writing it. Because of these different contexts New Historicism does not have a specific method, for it is impossible to give a definitive interpretation of a text. Instead, New Historicism is based on four main beliefs, two of them (which hold particular importance when considering *Wolf Hall*) explained as follows:

(1) Literature is historical, which means [...] that a literary work is not primarily the record of one mind's attempt to solve certain formal problems and the need to find something to say; it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it, therefore, is through the culture and society that produced it. (2) Literature, then, is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to history, which means a particular vision of history. (Belsey 144)

For historicist and New Historicists alike, history is told through the sources that exist from that particular time period that is written about. Mantel has adhered to this quite closely, founding her novel on every piece of information that was available about Cromwell and the time period:

Mantel had done long, professorial research into her subject. She first had the idea for a book about Thomas Cromwell in her mid-twenties; she 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. (Elmhirst n.p.)

What makes Mantel's novel stand out not as historicist but in fact New Historicist is her choice of subject in *Wolf Hall*. New Historicism, as explained, looks for the voices that

have been lost or repressed. Cromwell cannot exactly be classified as either one; but he has definitely become history's villain, "still widely seen as the warty toad in the garden of the glamorous Henry VIII" (Acocella n.p.). Throughout the years he has usually been depicted negatively (a number of these negative depictions are mentioned in the introduction), ranging from deceptive and cunning to evil incarnate, whereas his enemy Thomas More for example usually is the good man: "More and Cromwell were enemies, and history has taken More's side" (Acocella n.p.). In *Wolf Hall* Mantel has turned the tables; here More is the evil torturer and Cromwell the decent man, while still being true to the historical sources. As mentioned before, even the gaps that exist in Cromwell's history that Mantel has filled in are based on historical information, simply interpreted in a positive way. This turn-around of the representation of Cromwell and More is based on the same sources that have been read so often in More's favor: what makes the difference is Mantel's interpretation. An example of this are the paintings made by Hans Holbein of More and of Cromwell that Mantel has both featured in her novel. More's Cromwell describes the painting of More as he visits More's house: "Entering the house, you meet the family hanging up. You see them painted life-size before you meet them in the flesh; and More, conscious of the double effect it makes, pauses, to let you survey them, to take them in" (*Wolf Hall* 187). Cromwell thinks, "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" (*Wolf Hall* 189). Literary critic Christopher Hitchens said about these two portraits that they, along with Holbein's painting of Henry

have for generations dictated the imagery of the epoch. The first shows King Henry VIII in all his swollen arrogance and finery. The second gives us sir Thomas More, the ascetic scholar who seems willing to lay his life on a matter of principle. The third captures King Henry's enforcer Sir Thomas Cromwell, a

sallow and saturnine fellow calloused by the exercise of worldly power. 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. (n.p.) (See appendix 1 for pictures of the Hans Holbein paintings)

Here Mantel has, through a clever use of the time period's artifacts, challenged the prevailing stereotype that existed of Cromwell. This fits in with the New Historicist idea of recovering or representing a side of history that has never been shown before. Mantel's use of works of art (the paintings) to give meaning to Cromwell rather than only considering literature is also a testimony to her New Historicist approach. Historicism did not take into account any other context than literary works in considering another text's meaning, whereas New Historicism pleads for a broader perspective, also making use of representations in other types of art.

Another important point of New Historicism is that "historical analysis [...] cannot adequately demonstrate that history is linear, causal, or progressive" (Tyson 272). The arrangement of events in a text and the manner in which they are highlighted is important for interpreting a text. *Wolf Hall* also works in this way. As mentioned in earlier chapters, there are significant time gaps; some events, which take place in a very short amount of real time, take up an entire chapter whilst several months might pass by in two pages. It duplicates "not the historian's chronology but the way memory works: in leaps, loops, flashes" ("How I Came to Write *Wolf Hall*" n.p.). The "events" (which were imagined by Mantel, thus making them more "non-events", for they are imaginary) that are important in creating the reader's image of Cromwell are singled out, and this includes events that have not been recorded in

historical documents, which (as stated by the founding father of New Historicism himself Stephen Greenblatt, in his review of *Wolf Hall*)

provide a powerful hallucination of presence, the vivid sensation of lived life.

They set the dead in motion and make them speak: I am not a stick figure in a textbook; I was once alive, emotionally complex, beset with fears and daydreams, just as you are now. (“How It Must Have Been” 24)

By showing those conversations and events that have taken place behind closed doors, imagining their content based on the historical material that *was* recorded, Mantel creates Cromwell’s human side, presenting a side of Cromwell that up until *Wolf Hall*’s publication was unexplored.

Altering the ideas of historical metafiction and New Historicism (in order to apply to *Wolf Hall*) and incorporating them into her novel has given Mantel the opportunity to present an up until now unimagined side of Cromwell, a side that has not been present in other representations. This has an influence on both the reader of the novel as well as on the paradigm that this historical figure turned literary character exists in. Mantel’s positive portrayal has ignited a renewed interest in the historical Cromwell’s life and has started a debate as to whether the negative Cromwell portrayals that came before *Wolf Hall* did him any justice, considering his earlier characterization too harsh. Mantel making different choices in how to treat the historical sources have also influenced other writers: for example, the earlier mentioned *Winter King* by Anne Stevens but also her novels *A Falcon Falls* (2016) and *Autumn Prince* (2016) show a Cromwell struggling to reunite his pragmatism with his morals, and author Caroline Angus Baker is currently working on a novel that also represents the softer side of Cromwell.

Representing Cromwell and thus representing history is shown to be fluid; history changes its face with the choices made by each new storyteller (either historian or novelist,

who might not be so different after all) and strongly influences how a reader perceives history: “The past is not dead ground, and to traverse it is not a sterile exercise. History is always changing behind us, and the past changes a little every time we retell it” (“On Dealing with History in Fiction” n.p.).

Conclusion: Cromwell the Adventurer, the Trickster, the Chancer

In his acceptance speech for winning the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1983, William Golding said about the novel: “There is no other medium in which we can live for so long and so intimately with a character. That is the service a novel renders. It performs no less an act than the rescue and the preservation of the individuality and dignity of the single being, be it man, woman or child.”

Rescuing and preserving Cromwell is precisely what Hilary Mantel has done in *Wolf Hall*. She was by no means the first to do so; the fictional Cromwell has been around since Shakespeare’s time, and he most likely will be for years to come. Yet the term ‘rescuing’ does not exactly apply to the adaptations that appeared before *Wolf Hall*: ‘scapegoated’ or ‘vilified’ would be more appropriate. Mantel has gone against the prevailing view of Cromwell as the personification of evil itself, offering an alternative image of Cromwell. She has done so by giving her readers a Cromwell with an abusive childhood and later a home life, a married man with daughters, whose home is a shelter to flee to for those in need:

Even after his wife and daughters are gone, Cromwell’s home breathes comfort. It smells of cakes. There is always a dog, and she is always named Bella. At one point, Cromwell picks up the current Bella, and she kicks her legs with happiness. The house is full of young people—his nieces and nephews, his wards, his assistants—telling jokes and running through the halls.

The girls, especially, are wonderful. (Acocella n.p.)

This side of Cromwell had, until *Wolf Hall*, not been considered or imagined. Mantel uses Cromwell’s emotional attachments (which make the readers sympathize with him) to counterbalance his bad deeds, which Mantel does not necessarily try to cover up. *Wolf Hall* shows the reader he was not afraid to offer or take bribes or to use spies (common practice in “the Tudor snake pit” (Acocella n.p.)), and that he was definitely capable of killing. Yet he

always tried to avoid doing so, as was already noted by the British historian G. R. Elton, who had written about the Tudors (*The Tudor Revolution in Government*, 1953) a few years before Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) was published in which Cromwell was represented as the ultimate villain:

Under him [Cromwell], Elton wrote, English political policy, formerly at the whim of the nobles, became the work of specialized bureaucracies. England thereby progressed from the Middle Ages into the modern period, and you can't make that kind of revolution without breaking eggs. Elton's research revealed, furthermore, that under Cromwell only about forty people per year were killed in the service of the Crown's political needs. That's a pretty cheap omelette. (Acocella n.p.)

Wolf Hall's Cromwell is redeemed by Mantel not only through appealing to the reader by showing Cromwell's difficult youth or the love he has for his family, but also through the use of several literary devices, such as her narration (which has a limited perspective and is in the present tense) and her clever use of time (time periods in which Cromwell performed some of his most dirty work are skipped over).

The reader meets a Cromwell in *Wolf Hall* who does what is necessary, but does not take personal pleasure in it. Not even bringing about the downfall of his antagonist in *Wolf Hall*, Thomas More, gives Cromwell any satisfaction; throughout the novel Cromwell fruitlessly tries to persuade More to concede and thus save his own life. But More doesn't, and he is beheaded. It is a reflection of and an attribute to Cromwell's character, to his sympathy, when after More is beheaded at the end of the novel "he [Cromwell] makes the sign of the cross" (*Wolf Hall* 532): Cromwell, who had to fight against the Catholic Church for most of the story in order to get his king what he wanted, performs one of the ultimate Catholic rituals as a tribute to the man he wanted to save but couldn't. This is the impression

of Cromwell that Mantel leaves us with as *Wolf Hall* comes to a close; a man ambiguous in his actions, but with his heart in the right place. It is also an eerie foreshadowing of the ultimate ending that Mantel's trilogy will have: Cromwell, like More, will meet his end with his head on the chopping block, five years after the end of *Wolf Hall*. And importantly, it is a prime example of how Mantel has taken a historical event (the execution of More) and turned it into something much more personal, rewriting history (which was, as stated in chapter three, always on More's side) to fit her interpretation of it. This is part of Mantel's New Historicist approach in *Wolf Hall*: she has searched for the other side of history and for the other side of Cromwell, representing Cromwell in a way he had never been considered before whilst using the same historical sources as those supporting More have. Mantel reminds the reader implicitly in *Wolf Hall* that history is a constructed narrative (as Linda Hutcheon's term historiographic metafiction also explains), a process of picking out and combining historical evidence until it fits the interpretation that an author wishes to convey to the reader.

It is remarkable how a man like Cromwell with such a simple background came to be one of the most powerful men in English history, and how soon he plummeted from grace. In his wake he left a changed country, an England that could never return to how it had been before Cromwell's rise. In the public eye Cromwell became the villain: but *Wolf Hall* questions that image, making the reader wonder whether the negative judgment that has been passed on Cromwell for years has been a fair one. Mantel has shifted the paradigm: in her creation of the *literary* Cromwell (which is founded in the choices she has made in his background and relationships but also in the literary devices she has employed and the literary theories of historiographic metafiction and New Historicism she has adhered to) Mantel has ultimately changed the way her audience views Tudor history, having shaped also a new image of the *historical* Cromwell, literature and history having merged: "less like a historical figure than a figure from myth, an adventurer, a trickster, a chancer; one of those strange

beings who transcend anything that could have been predicted for them, and who change the shape of the world before they leave it” (“Thomas Cromwell, Perhaps Not Such a Villain?” n.p.).

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Appendix 1: Hans Holbein's portraits of King Henry VIII, Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell



Henry VIII



Thomas More



Thomas Cromwell

Appendix 2: Intellectual property statement

Universiteit Utrecht

**STATEMENT: INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY**

Utrecht University defines “plagiarism” as follows:

If, in a thesis or some other paper, data or parts of a text produced by someone else are used without the source being identified, this counts as plagiarism. Among other things, plagiarism may entail the following:

- cutting and pasting text from digital sources such as encyclopedias or digital journals, without using quotations marks and references;*
- cutting and pasting any text from the internet without using quotation marks and references; copying from printed material such as books, journals or encyclopedias without using quotations marks and references;*
- using a translation of the above texts in your own work, without using quotations marks and references;*
- paraphrasing the above texts without using references. A paraphrase should never consist of merely replacing some words by synonyms;*
- using pictures, sound recordings, or test materials produced by others without references, so that it appears that this is one’s own work;*
- copying work by other students and passing this off as one’s own work. In case this is done with the other student’s consent, the latter will be an accomplice to the plagiarism; even in cases where plagiarism is committed by one of the authors collaborating on a paper, the other authors are accomplices to plagiarism if they could or ought to have known that the first-mentioned author was committing plagiarism;*
- submitting papers acquired from a commercial source (such as an internet site offering summaries or complete essays) or written by someone else for payment.*

I have read the above definition of “plagiarism,” and I hereby state that I have not committed plagiarism in the appended essay or paper.

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Date: 25 January 2017

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