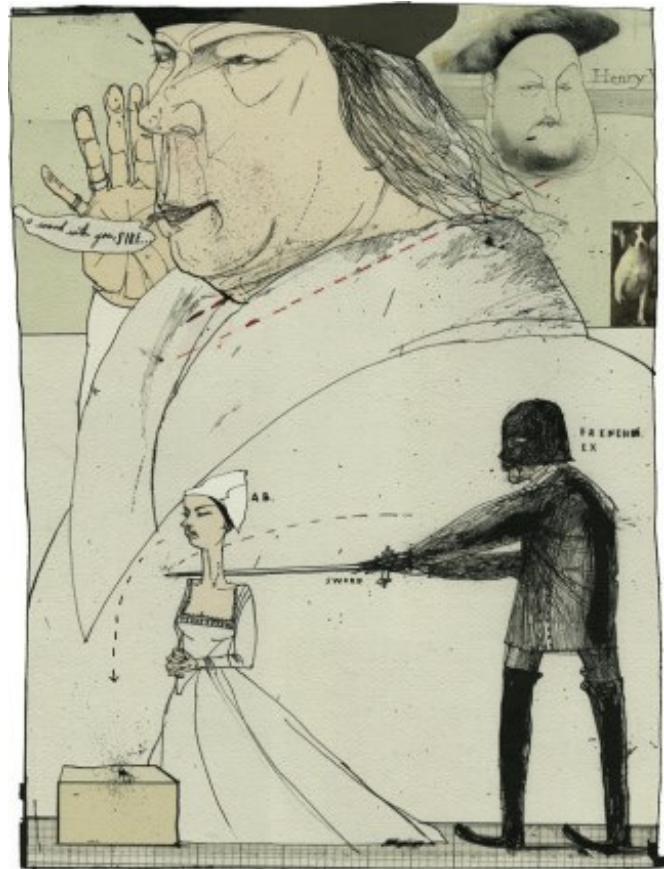


Tudor Tales

Cromwell is still widely seen as the warty toad in the garden of the glamorous Henry VIII; Mantel portrays him as a decent man. Credit David Hughes

In the Living Hall of the Frick Collection, on either side of a fireplace, there are portraits by Hans Holbein of the two most illustrious politicians of the court of Henry VIII. On the left is Sir Thomas More, Henry's lord chancellor from 1529 to 1532, who, when the King needed an annulment of his marriage, and therefore a release from the duty of obedience to the Pope, was too good a Catholic to agree to this. For his refusal, he forfeited his office and, eventually, his life. Holbein's portrait shows him thin and sensitive, with his eyes cast upward, as if awaiting the sainthood that the Church finally bestowed on him, in 1935. On the right side hangs Holbein's portrait of Thomas Cromwell, the minister who did for Henry what More wouldn't. He wrote the laws making the King, not the Pope, the head of the English Church, and declaring the English monasteries, with all their wealth, the property of the Crown. To achieve these epochal changes, he had to impose his will on many people, and that is clear in Holbein's painting. Cromwell is hard and heavy and dressed all in black. His mean little eyes peer forward, as if he were deciding whom to pillory, whom to send to the Tower.



More and Cromwell were enemies, and history has taken More's side. Good examples are Robert Bolt's 1960 play, "A Man for All Seasons," and the 1966 movie that Fred Zinnemann based on it, both with Paul Scofield, as a saintly More, and Leo McKern, as Cromwell, the very picture of skulking evil. Shortly before Bolt's play, though, the eminent British historian G. R. Elton had begun claiming, in successive writings on the Tudors, that Cromwell wasn't so bad. Under him, 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. Yet Cromwell is still widely seen as the warty toad in the garden of the glamorous Henry VIII. In the Showtime series "The Tudors," he is, unequivocally, a villain. Earlier this month, a new biography was published: "Thomas Cromwell: The Rise and Fall of Henry VIII's Most Notorious Minister" (St. Martin's; \$29.99), by Robert Hutchinson, an English writer of popular history books. Already in his preface, Hutchinson 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."

But now the excellent novelist Hilary Mantel has joined the tournament, with "Wolf Hall" (Henry Holt; \$27), a five-hundred-and-thirty-two-page novel portraying Cromwell as a wise minister and a decent man. Mantel is not new to revisionist projects. In her 1992 novel "A Place of Greater Safety," about the French Revolution, she performed the amazing feat of making Robespierre a sympathetic man. Her interest is in the question of good and evil as it applies to people who wield great power. That means anguish, exultation, deals, spies, decapitations, and fabulous clothes.

Mantel recently told an interviewer that she had long planned to write about the Tudors: “Almost all the stories you might want to tell are lurking behind the arras.” Some are quite bawdy, which, if we can judge from the Tudor playwright Shakespeare, is true to the period. A waiter at an inn advises Cromwell not to order the pottage: “It looks like what’s left when a whore’s washed her shift.”

Partly, no doubt, for this high color, which few people dislike, “Wolf Hall” last week won the Man Booker Prize, the U.K.’s most valued literary award. It was heavily favored; the London bookie William Hill gave it ten-to-eleven odds, the shortest ever accorded to a nominee.

Cromwell was the son of a blacksmith, who, in Mantel’s account, beat him regularly and violently. At fourteen, he ran away, to the Continent, and he stayed there for more than a decade, learning several languages and trades. Returning to London, he became a business agent, mostly for cloth merchants, and a lawyer. In his mid-thirties, he entered government service, as an adviser to Cardinal Wolsey, Henry’s princely lord chancellor. But Wolsey, having failed to obtain an annulment for the King, was soon dismissed. He died a year later. Mantel makes much of Cromwell’s kindness to the disgraced man—a show of loyalty rare in the Tudor snake pit.

After Wolsey’s death, Cromwell became a minister to Henry himself, and increasingly indispensable to him. He not only wrote—and pushed through Parliament—the laws that accomplished the English Reformation; he did much of the King’s dirty work. When Henry decides that he needs the castle in which he has stowed his discarded wife, Katherine of Aragon, Cromwell is the one sent to inform the Queen that she is being relocated. He was famously persuasive. He could make your creditors weep, people said; he could convince your tenants that their rents were fair. His cunning was legend. When the King tires of Anne Boleyn, Cromwell watches for hints as to who has caught his eye, and, determining who it is, he immediately loans her father some money at low interest. Such shrewdness made him the most powerful man in England, second only to the King. The nobles hated him, the more so in that a person of such low birth should have been raised above them. “You are everything now,” the Duke of Suffolk tells him. “We say, how did it happen?”

Mantel records Cromwell’s maneuvers without disapproval. And she doesn’t mind that, in his ascent, he got very rich. She tells how much property he owned, and she stresses his capacity for enjoyment. He loves his wife. (We glimpse them briefly, in bed, his hand resting on her “familiar but lovely left breast.”) He adores his two little girls, especially Grace, the slow one. Early in the book, Grace succumbs to the “sweating sickness,” which may have been a strain of plague. (“Grace dies in his arms. . . . He eases her back against the damp sheet.”) Before her, the other girl had died, and their mother. But, 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. One day, the King comes to visit Cromwell, who has been dangerously ill. Cromwell’s two nieces, Jo and Alice, make a fuss over the great man, and he is charmed. “Do you not notice, Master Secretary,” he says to Cromwell, “the older one gets, the lovelier the girls?” It’s like a Dutch painting.

Mantel doesn’t hide Cromwell’s bad deeds, or not always. She mentions the bribes he took, the spies he placed in important households. She tells us that he could kill. His servant Christophe, a ruffian whom he brought back from a trip to France, says that the other boys in the minister’s employ perform innocent tasks. “Only you and me, master,” he says to Cromwell, “we know how to stop some little fucker in his tracks, so that’s the end of him and he doesn’t even squeak.” But Cromwell, as G. R. Elton emphasized, avoided killing. During the conflict over the annulment, Mantel’s protagonist tries again and again to persuade More to make some concession, and thereby save his life.

As for More, he comes off badly, as a man who combines a milky piety with an underlying cruelty. We see him humiliating his wife in front of guests (“Remind me why I married you”), and we get the list of the “heretics” he imprisoned and tortured. Mantel acknowledges that he was a renowned thinker and writer, but she turns this to his discredit. At his trial, he sniggers when a clerk makes a mistake in Latin. Years earlier, in Mantel’s account, he gave the same treatment to Cromwell. To earn a few pence—or perhaps just to get a meal—Cromwell, when he was

seven, worked as a kitchen boy in the house of a cardinal where More was a student, and he had the job of delivering to the scholars, before they retired for the night, a mug of beer and a loaf of bread each. Bringing More his snack, he found him reading a big book. He had had no formal education; he was curious, and he asked More what was in the book. “Words, words,” More replied. Cromwell, in one of his last interviews with More, asks him if he remembers their exchange that night, and More says no. Of course not. Why should he have taken a minute to tell a servant what was in a book, let alone remember the episode many years later? But Cromwell remembers, and as he is assembling the evidence against More he thinks of it. Mantel admires self-made men. (Her father was a clerk. Her mother went to work in a textile mill at the age of fourteen.) Hence, in part, her defense of Robespierre, and of Cromwell.

Mantel’s characters do not speak sixteenth-century English. She has created for them an idiom that combines a certain archaism with vigorous modern English. It works perfectly. And how urbane her people are! When Wolsey, after his dismissal, arrives at the moldering castle to which he has been exiled, he gamely says to Cromwell that he will send for some people to sort out the kitchens: “They will be Italian. It will be violent at first, but then after three weeks it will work.” The most striking feature of the book’s storytelling, however, is the tightness of its point of view. Everything is seen through Cromwell’s eyes. Here is the scene with which the book opens:

“So now get up!” Walter is roaring down at him, working out where to kick him next. He lifts his head an inch or two, and moves forward, on his belly, trying to do it without exposing his hands, on which Walter enjoys stamping. “What are you, an eel?” his parent asks. He trots backward, gathers pace, and aims another kick.

It knocks the last breath out of him; he thinks it may be his last. His forehead returns to the ground; he lies waiting, for Walter to jump on him. The dog, Bella, is barking, shut away in an outhouse. I’ll miss my dog, he thinks.

At this juncture, we don’t even know who “he” is. We soon find out, and we never leave him again. Mantel violates grammar for his sake. Most of the “he”s and the “his”es in the book refer to Cromwell, including ones whose antecedents are not Cromwell. (The minister comforts a young man named Dick Purser, who is weeping: “Purser drops his shorn head against his shoulder.” The shoulder is not Purser’s; it is Cromwell’s.) This is strange, but after a while you get used to it, and understand that the book is, without qualification, Cromwell’s side of the story. It is a novel, not a history book. We have no reason, without external evidence, to believe that any of it is true—though Mantel makes us want to believe.

The prose is elastic. Sometimes it’s elliptical. (After the beating with which the book opens, we don’t see Cromwell again for twenty-seven years.) Elsewhere it is full, or overfull. The book has many descriptions of light; many things are said to be perfumed. One year, Cromwell’s beloved Grace is given the role of an angel in a Christmas pageant, and Cromwell makes wings for her out of peacock feathers: “Grace stood glittering, her hair entwined with silver threads; her shoulders were trussed with a spreading, shivering glory, and the rustling air was perfumed as she breathed.” That’s a heavy load for little Grace to carry, but consider another scene, after the girl’s death, when Cromwell goes to the storeroom to look at her wings:

He touches them. His finger comes away dusty. He shifts his candle out of danger, then lifts them from the peg and gently shakes them. They make a soft sound of hissing, and a faint amber perfume washes into the air. He hangs them back on the peg; passes over them the palm of his hand, to soothe them and still their shiver.

There are the perfume and the shiver again. Now, however, they are not too much but exactly what Mantel needs in order to give Cromwell’s grief its particular sword edge. First, there is the beautiful and spooky visual scene: the dark

storeroom, the one candle, the hands running over the quivering feathers; the dust, as if from a shroud. Then there is the sudden, terrible realization that these wings, Cromwell's gift of love to his daughter, were also a prophecy of her death. That's what the shivering was, that's what needed to be soothed: Grace, dying. And that's what she was going to be—an angel, not just in a pageant. After this, the child hardly needs to be called Grace, but Mantel doesn't stint. She always goes for color, richness, music. She has read Shakespeare closely. One also hears the accents of the young James Joyce. As for the portentousness, the book is full of such effects, and they are entirely appropriate to the magnificent and dangerous world that is being described. Mantel should be congratulated for creating suspense about matters whose outcome we've known since high school. What's going to happen to Anne Boleyn? we think.

We need that excitement, because "Wolf Hall," however long, does not end with Cromwell's end. It doesn't even get Anne to the Tower. Apart from the beating at the opening, it covers only eight years, from 1527 to 1535. My understanding, from Mantel's interviews, is that she meant to take Cromwell to his death, but the conflict with More ran away with the story. So she went ahead with that, stopped at More's death, and began a second volume.

She doesn't exactly conclude with More's death, though. In a half-page coda, Cromwell is planning a trip that the King, wearied by the More business, will make to his western estates. Having noticed that Henry is taken with one of the daughters of Sir John Seymour, he adds to the royal itinerary a visit to Seymour's castle. "Five days," he says. "Wolf Hall." That is the last sentence of the book, and the first one in which we hear the phrase that is its title. Again, this is a portent. Wolf Hall is where Henry will find his third wife, Jane Seymour. But those words mean something else, too. At the beginning of the novel, Henry suffers terrible guilt and indecision over casting Katherine aside in favor of Anne Boleyn. As the book ends, he is about to rid himself of Anne—indeed, to have her executed, on cooked-up charges of incest and treason—in favor of Jane Seymour. Not just he but Cromwell, too, has become inured. "Man is wolf to man," Cromwell says flatly. More was beheaded in 1535, Anne a year later, in both cases on evidence gathered by Cromwell. Four years after that, Cromwell himself was led to the block. (Henry decided that his minister had given him some bad advice.) His head was put on a stake on London Bridge, facing away from the city and the King he had served so energetically. ♦

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