

When History Becomes Story: The Craft of Reconstruction in Hilary Mantel's Historical Fiction

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Abstract

The novels of Hilary Mantel explores history not merely as a collection of events and dates but as an evolving battlefield, where competing voices, shifts in power and re interpretation of the past continuously influence the present. Hilary Mantel's historical fiction is distinguished by its ability to breathe life into the past while simultaneously challenging the notion of the deceased remaining undisturbed. In her *Thomas Cromwell trilogy* (*Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies*, *The Mirror and the Light*), *A Place of Greater Safety* and *The Giant O'Brien*. Mantel deftly navigates the thin line separating actual historical events from fictional storytelling. Her methodology highlights the gaps, omissions and accuracies that characterize our collective memory, illustrating that history encompasses not only what is documented but also what is forgotten or ignored. The objective of this paper is to explore the way in which Hilary Mantel interpreted and reshaped history in her literary works, focusing on unspoken aspects and disputed reality within historical context. By examining the text like *Thomas Cromwell trilogy*, *A Place of Greater Safety* and *The Giant O'Brien* this analysis aims to reveal how Mantel deals with historical issues such as political authority, religious struggle, societal exclusion and commercialization of the human body through a combination of historical insight and creative story telling. This research intends to illustrate how Mantel's novel confronts conventional historical narratives, giving a platform to individuals. Recreating the narrative of women throughout history has been a crucial goal for feminists. Contemporary female writers also strive to depict the experiences of different characters from the past, and historical fiction serves as an ideal category for these representations.

Keywords: History, power, unspoken, political, authority, recreating

Historical fiction occupies a complex space between creation and reality, as well as between imagination and factual documentation. In the literary works of Hilary Mantel (1952-2022), however, history transcends its role as only a backdrop for narrative, instead emerging as a dynamic arena of debate and interpretation. Mantel's historical novels, particularly her renowned Thomas Cromwell trilogy comprising *Wolf Hall* (2009), *Bring up the Bodies* (2012) and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) provide insights that extend beyond mere Reconstruction of Tudor Era and politics. These works facilitate a dialogue between contemporary experiences and historical contexts, as well as between narrative aspiration and the lacunae in historical accounts. Mantel invites her audience to engage with history from an immersive perspective, encouraging a deeper understanding rather than simply perceiving it as a remote and detached chronology. In an era where historiography recognizes the constructed essence of history itself (Hayden, White, Linda Hutcheon, John Scott) the work of Mantel exemplifies the necessity for continual re - examination of historical narratives. She skillfully integrated meticulous archival research with creative re-interpretation, thereby uncovering both the limitations and opportunities involved in narrative constructing the past. Her novels extend beyond mere accounts of monarchs to illustrate the intricate dynamics of power, memory, Gender and subjectivity within the context of historical temporality. This study investigates Mantel's approach of historical reconstruction oeuvre. It focuses particularly on the Cromwell Trilogy as a significant re-evaluation of Tudor political dynamics and gender roles, while also positioning her earlier historical novels *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), which is related to the French Revolution and *The Giant O' Brien* (1998) set in eighteenth century London. The analysis will focus on Mantel's distinctive narrative strategies including her selection of perspective and engagement with memory.

In essence, Mantel historical novels transcend mere depictions of the past. They challenge us to reflect on our memories, consider what we leave out, and recognize the voices that often go unheard in prevailing narratives. Engaging with Mantel's work allows readers to encounter history not as a final chapter, but also an ongoing dynamic dialogue. Historical fiction has always navigated a delicate balance between staying through two factual events and embracing creative freedom. Sir Walter Scott, who is often hailed as a pioneer of the genre, stressed the importance of merging historical accuracy with a compelling narrative. However, by the late 20th century, scholars such as Hayden White, in his work "Meta-history" (1973) wrote, "History is employed

like literature underscores the fictitious qualities of historiography.(White,82).Later on introduced the term “Historiographic Meta-fiction” to describe “Postmodern historical novels self -consciously interrogate their own relation to the past.(Hutcheon,105). John Scott also writes, “How gender operates as a category of exclusion in historical discourse.” (Scott, 42) Hilary Mantel's novels are actually aware of these critical discussions. She emphasizes thorough archival research while simultaneously rejecting the notion that history can be seen as a straight forward truth. In various, interviews, Mantel has clarified that her aim is not to “make things up” but rather to “connect the dots”, to envision the thoughts and perspectives that historical records often overlook. Her interpretation of history does not contradict established facts; instead, it fills in the blanks.

Historical Fiction and Theory

The challenge of reconstructing history lies in the discrepancy between “what actually happened” and “What is reported to have happened.”As Hayden White points out, “Historians always tend to organize events into a familiar narrative framework.” (White, 82).Hilary Mantel takes this concept to heart, highlighting the process of storytelling itself. Her novels don't simply serve as clear windows into the past; instead, they are intricately crafted interpretations that emphasize the gaps, silences, and contradictions within historical narrative.

In her novel *A Place of Greater Safety* Mantel presents the French Revolution not as a straight forward moment of chaos but as the lived reality filled with hunger, betrayal and the quest for acknowledgement. In her authors forward she emphasizes, “This is a novel about the revolution; not a history, not a philosophy, not a morality” (APGS p.14).This statement underscores the legitimacy of fiction to reinterpret history without claiming to hold the ultimate truth. Linda Hutcheon's idea about Historiographic Meta-fiction strongly related to what Mantel does in her writing. Although Mantel does not often engage in clear Meta-fiction techniques, her stories are highly conscious of their work of reconstruction. The close third person view in the Cromwell's trilogy which frequently turns into inner thoughts, creates uncertainty regarding objective history. Mantel states, “He needs guilty men so he has found men who are guilty. Though not necessarily guilty as charged.” (BUB 327).This statement highlights the narrative political aspect: guilt is not as absolute truth but rather a construction influenced by power.

John Scott's contribution to feminist historiography claiming that "gender serves as a key way to indicate power dynamics" (Scott,42) is crucial to Mantel reconstruction. The downfall of Anne Boleyn in *Bring up the Bodies* represents not just a political maneuver but also a display of gendered weakness. Law reflecting patriarchal power eliminates Grace, mercy and feminine autonomy. Mantel writes, "Once the queen's body is yielded to the law, her words are windy." (BUB, 359) .In this context, reconstruction implies re establishing the silenced female figure as essential for comprehending history.

Thomas Cromwell Trilogy

The first book of Cromwell's Trilogy consists of *Wolf Hall* (2009). In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel presents Thomas Cromwell as a figure who is neither a villain nor just a servant to Henry VIII, but rather as someone capable of radical change. She employs the present tense to eliminate distance in time, "so now get up." (Wolf Hall,2009,p.03). In *Wolf Hall* Mantel offers a fresh perspective on Tudor politics as seen through the lens of Thomas Cromwell, often depicted as cunning and heartless, Cromwell is portrayed her as a practical and empathetic figure, deeply affected by his past losses. Mantel writes, "He learns from the dead, he looks back, and the past has something to tell him." (Wolf Hall,p.37).

Cromwell's instincts for survival are heavily influenced by his personal traumas, the death of his wife and daughters. For Cromwell, history is not just theoretical; it's shaped by intimate dealings, quiet agreements, and daughters. For Cromwell, history is not just theoretical; but shaped by intimate dealings, quiet agreements, and the dynamics of home life. These initial words instantly immerse readers in Cromwell's physical experience of abuse from his father. By chronicling Cromwell's rise from the edges, Mantel reinterprets Cromwell's rise from the edges, Mantel reinterprets Tudor history from a grassroots perspective highlighting negotiation, survival, and cleverness. Her reconstruction has material foundations, "The world is not run from where he thinks. Not from Westminster, not even from Whitehall. It is run from places like these." (Wolf Hall,2009,p.97).By emphasizing kitchens, workshops, and home Mantel portrays history as a tangible experience, rather than just a display of courtly life.

Bring up the Bodies

In *Bring up the Bodies*, Mantel examines the downfall of Anne Boleyn, highlighting how a blend of testimony, gossip and power shapes what we consider to be 'historical truth. Thomas Cromwell, now a master of political strategy, expertly twists narratives to align with King Henry 8 desires. As Mantel writes, "The truth is not what we said ,but what was meant." (*Bring up the Bodies*,2013,p,152).This nuance put focus on the historical evidence. The accounts presented at Anne's trial priorities constructing a narrative that pleases the king over factual accuracy. Mantel illustrates Cromwell's pragmatic and ruthless nature; "He needs guilty men, so he has found them." (*Bring up the Bodies*, 2013p p, 245) This arbitrary assignment of guilt shows how history is shaped more by power than by a sense of justice. In *Bring up the Bodies*, reconstruction appears in the form of judicial storytelling. The trial of Anne Boleyn illustrated how history is shaped by testimonies, performances and political needs. Mantel portrays Anne as both a person with agency and an object, "The queen's glance slides over him; her eyes are like dark glass, into which he cannot see." (*Bring up The Bodies*,p,228).The mystery of Anne's inner self becomes a historiographical challenge how can one recreate what is hidden in archives? The solution lies in dramatization. Cromwell observes, "You can make a case, half a case, any case. If you get the witness" (*Bring up the Bodies*, 2013,p,301).Mantel emphasizes the constructed nature of narratives, proving that legal and historical reconstruction depends on selective accounts.

The Mirror and the Light

The concluding novel depicts Cromwell rise and subsequent demise, culminating in his execution. It serves as a reflection on death, impact and the delicate nature of authority. The story opens with the lines; "Once the queen is dead, no one will remember her." (*The Mirror and in the Light*,2020,p,05). The last scene of the execution crystallizes Mantel's perspective on history as an event. The *Mirror and the Light* carries the Mantel method of reconstruction further by tackling the subject of death. Cromwell's last days are filled with reflections from the past. Mantel writes, "Stepping into the light, his wife, his daughters, Wolsey." (*The Mirror and the Light*, 2020 p,412) He sees them walking talking, and playing. This sense of loss acknowledging how the past still influences at any time. Cromwell downfall highlights the vulnerability of historical power He believed he was creating a sturdy foundation for the king's rule, yet in reality it was more like a rickety shed ,assembled hastily from planks this suggested that attempts at rebuilding are merely temporary and precarious, at risk of falling apart at any moment.

Mantel's inaugural work of historical fiction *A Place of Greater Safety*, illustrates her nascent fascination with depicting revolutionary turmoil. Focusing on key figures like Danton, Desmoulins, and Robespierre the narrative portrays the Revolutions an unpredictable experience instead of a predetermined event, "They desired justice, not upheaval. However, history remains indifferent to human desires." (*A Place of Greater Safety*, p.213). Mantel highlights starvation and human bodies as pivotal historical elements. "The populace is consuming grass, yet they are still urged to be patient. Wait for freedom, waiting for sustenance." (*A Place of Greater Safety*, 1992 p.132). In this context, reconstruction signifies rooting beliefs in physical scarcity. Similar to the Cromwell series, the book uncovers the fabrication of narratives. Camille Desmoulins contemplated; "When bread is unattainable, one resorts to consuming slogans." (*A Place of Greater Safety*, 1992, p.341) History is reshaped through both language and deeds, with slogans serving as substitute for nourishment. Her Storytelling approach defies straight forward chronology, focusing instead on the unpredictability of life during the revolution. This technique embodies White's observation that narratives shape history rather than objective facts. Mantel portrays the revolution not as a detached series of events but as a lived reality where ideals intermingle with violence, and human weaknesses influence political outcomes.

The Giant O'Brien

In *The Giant O'Brien* Mantel explores late 18th century London, dramatizing the class between mythology and empirical science through the tale of Charles O'Brien, an Irish giant and John Hunter the surgeon intent on dissecting him. O'Brien is portrayed as "a man who will vanish into myth." (*Giant O'Brien*, p.67) His physique, both idealized and commercialized becomes emblematic of colonial exploitation and objectification inherent in science. Fearing his destiny, he mourns, "They will boil me down to my bones, and what story will I tell them?" (*Giant O'Brien*, p.114). His distress over bodily obliteration reflects wider issues concerning the eraser of marginalized narrative in history.

Mantel Approach to Narrative

In her historical novels Mantel employs a unique style of reconstruction that sees her apart by using the present tense, she minimize the distance between past and present, allowing history to resonate in the here and now. The close third person point of view, often simplified to "he" in the

Cromwell trilogy, fosters a sense of intimacy while still leaving room for uncertainty. This deliberate ambiguity encourages readers to actively piece together the character's perspectives alongside the narrator. Mantel also pays special attention to the overlooked aspects of history. Figures such as servant women and those on the margins typically absent in traditional historical accounts come alive in her writing. For instance in *Wolf Hall* Cromwell notes, "It's easy to make long -term plans, but the servant still need dinner." (Wolf Hall,p.142). This emphasizes the everyday disrupts grand historical narratives, portraying history through the lens of ordinary life, Furthermore, her meticulous focus on sensory details such as clothing ,kitchens and typical bodies, bringing it to life in a tangible way. As Mantel herself noted in her Reith Lectures, "The past is not dead ground ,and to traverse it is not science but art." (Mantel, Reith Lecture)

Hillary Mantel works of historical fiction re imagine the past as a debated delicate and physical narrative. They do not accept historical records at face value, nor do they simply turn them into fiction. Instead ,they engage in a re imagining that recognizes gaps, highlights, voices and dramatizes the intricacies of storytelling. Cromwell's trilogy presents Tudor politics from the view point of a realistic outsider. A Place of Greater Safety rebuilt the revolutionary narratives through themes of hunger, slogans and betrayal. *The Giant O'Brien* counters the rational scrutiny of the enlightenment by employing myth. Through her works, Mantel expresses that the process of historical reconstruction is not just about retrieving facts but about transforming view points. Mantel's novel goes beyond simply filling the gap in history; they challenge our understanding of what historical knowledge really is. She highlights the complex relationship between memory, power and storytelling, reminding us that history is always up for debate and subject to change. By focusing on the practical wisdom of Anne Boleyn the tragic eloquence of Camille and the enduring myth of O'Brien Mantel shine a light on those who have been silenced or overlooked. Her works engage with important discussions in the study of history reflecting on narrative structure, historiography meta-fiction, gender perspective, and the lingering presence of historical figures. Mantel's work is significant because it brings the past to life in a relatable way, showing that history is not just a list of events, but a collection of lived experience filled with voices that refuse to be ignored. By reimagining history, she allows the dead to speak once more, giving them agency in the narrative.

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