

# “Make or Mar”: History and Fiction in *Wolf Hall*

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## ABSTRACT

*Wolf Hall*, the first installment of a trilogy by Hilary Mantel on England under Henry VIII, recounts the often-told story of the King's divorce from Katherine of Aragon and his marriage to Anne Boleyn from the viewpoint of an unlikely protagonist. The book centers on the life experience and personal consciousness of Thomas Cromwell, a man of obscure origins who emerged in 1532 as Henry's right-hand man in the King's "Great Matter" and served as his chief minister until his execution in 1540. Henry's personal quest to divorce his aging queen and marry a younger woman occasioned England's split from the Catholic Church, and it shaped the course of the Protestant Reformation in England and galvanized the emergence of a Protestant national identity for the English. Mantel focuses on Cromwell as a way to engage the modern debate over Henry VIII and the politics of change in his reign. As the novelist takes a firm position in favor of the revolutionary politics of the Reformation, she theorizes history, particularly, the place of fiction in history. Fiction in *Wolf Hall* at once underscores an understanding of the past as violent and multiple and informs invention and change to the new. As Mantel's interrogation of history foregrounds the figure of the individual, in this case, Thomas Cromwell, she highlights the way historical fiction, in its plurality and division, frames a progressive vision of history. As Cromwell invents himself out of a personal past of violence and obscurity, he strives for and brings about radical change in England. Fiction, at once an inescapable way to understand the past and the basis for moving beyond it, informs the undertaking to make history.

**KEYWORDS:** history, fiction, the individual, violence, the Reformation

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Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* recounts the often-told story of Henry VIII's divorce<sup>1</sup> from Katherine of Aragon and his marriage to Anne Boleyn from the viewpoint of an unlikely protagonist. A work of historical fiction that has also been characterized as a "biographical novel" (Maslin), the book centers on the life experience and personal consciousness of Thomas Cromwell, a man of obscure origins who emerged in 1532 as Henry's right-hand man in the King's "Great Matter"<sup>2</sup> to end his first marriage and served as his chief minister for eight years until his execution in 1540 (Starkey 43). Henry's personal quest to divorce his aging queen and marry a younger woman occasioned England's split from the Catholic Church, and it shaped the course of what would become known as the "Protestant Reformation" in England<sup>3</sup> and galvanized the emergence of a Protestant national identity for the English. Through a series of proceedings and maneuvers, Henry's government, under the organization and leadership of Reform-minded Cromwell and his cohort, declared the King's first marriage null and void and his subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn lawful. In this way, the English established the legal authority of the Church of England as independent of the papacy in Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> The contemporary legal term for what Henry VIII was seeking from the Pope, the dissolution of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon, was an "annulment." An annulment declared that the marriage was null and void and in effect had never existed at all. I follow major Tudor historians such as David Starkey in using the term "divorce" to refer to Henry's case for annulment of marriage because the political effect and historical significance of the legal dissolution of the marriage of Henry and Katherine amounted to that of a divorce in modern terms.

<sup>2</sup> This was how contemporary English referred to the matter of Henry's divorce from Katherine of Aragon (Starkey, ch. 33).

<sup>3</sup> As historians have pointed out, what is popularly known in history as the "Protestant Reformation" began as a phenomenon of religious reform early in the sixteenth century well within the Roman Catholic Church itself, centered on the authority of the Bible, particularly the Gospels, and it developed into a revolutionary break with the Church of Rome only decades later. The term "Protestant" was a term that initially referred to a specific local event in Germany in 1529 where princes and representatives from a number of towns signed a document in "protestation" against the authorities' official condemnation of Martin Luther and his writings. Such an act of protest would later forge an identity for Luther's followers and other reformers as "Protestant" in history (Marshall, *The Reformation*, ch. 1). Because the term "Protestant" is a later designation for the phenomenon of religious reform that began early in the sixteenth century, in the rest of the paper this historical event is referred to as the "Reformation," "Henrician Reformation" (designating the historical period of the King's reign), or "English Reformation"; individual participants of the event are referred to as "Reformers" or "evangelicals" for the primacy of the teaching of the Gospels in their faith and their quest for radical change of the Christian Church; and to the action that they pursued is referred to as "Reform" (e.g., MacCulloch xx; Marshall, *Reformation England* 29–30). References in this paper to widely-known facts and discussions of the Reformation in both England and on the continent of Europe are based on the following works on this important historical event in human history: Cameron, esp. 1–185, 280–91; MacCulloch 3–213; Marshall, *The Reformation*, ch. 1; Marshall, *Reformation England*, esp. 2–60.

England's declaration of sovereign independence from papal authority in 1533–34 that would alter the course of history has been a focal point for the modern debate on Henry's reign and the English Reformation, and writers' interpretations of this event center on the role and agency of contemporary political personalities. J. J. Scarisbrick argues that the King bears full personal responsibility while assigning Cromwell a secondary role as an opportunistic Reformer (Foreword). Judged primarily in terms of his service to Henry, Cromwell also has been portrayed as a villain (Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Ford Maddox Ford's *The Fifth Queen*) or a genius of state formation (the scholarship of G. R. Elton). Yet not much is known about his personal life. Mantel's undertaking to focus, front and center, the story of the English Reformation and the court of Henry VIII on the personal life and political career of Cromwell establishes a different image of this political figure as a fundamentally decent, strong, talented, and pragmatic human being who struggled against all odds to rise in the world and to change it, radically, for the better.

In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel engages the controversy over the reign of Henry VIII, staking a firm position in favor of the revolutionary politics of the Reformation. The novelist's interrogation of history foregrounds the figure of the individual, in this case, Thomas Cromwell, as both a figure acted upon by history and a source of history itself in the making. This paper tackles Mantel's theorization of history and fiction with respect to the politics of Henry VIII and the English Reformation. The following three sections of the paper demonstrate the way the figure of the individual serves as the basis for Mantel's conceptualization of historical fiction. The paper analyzes the way Mantel theorizes history, in particular, the place of fiction in history. Fiction in *Wolf Hall* at once underscores an understanding of the past as violent and multiple and informs invention and change to the new. Mantel highlights the way historical fiction, in its plurality and division, frames a progressive vision of history. As Cromwell invents himself out of a personal past of violence and obscurity, he strives for and brings about radical change in England. Fiction, at once an inescapable way to understand the past and the basis for moving beyond it, informs the undertaking to make history.

*Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* are the first two installments in Mantel's plan for a trilogy on Thomas Cromwell's personal history and involvement in the reign of Henry VIII. While the final installment has yet to

appear in print, both of these Cromwell novels are known for their faithfulness to known history, and the novelist's fastidious insistence on historical accuracy has impressed critics as indicative of the author's ambition to take on history much like a serious historian.<sup>4</sup> While both novels represent Mantel's interpretation of key events in early Tudor England, history itself is the very thematic core of *Wolf Hall*. Its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, is a fast-moving narrative that covers a period of mere months from the end of 1535 through the first half of 1536, when Anne Boleyn falls out of royal favor, is tried and executed for adultery along with a number of men, and Jane Seymour emerges as Henry's third queen. By contrast, the narrative of *Wolf Hall* ambles at a much slower pace, recalling and meditating on the past and its meaning for the present. It reflects on what history means and how it functions. Where reviewers have noted the much tighter plot structure of *Bring Up the Bodies* (McGrath; Wilson), *Wolf Hall* sprawls all over and examines the deep recesses of the past for individuals and groups of different conditions and status.

In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel insists on staying faithful to known history precisely in order to challenge certain entrenched views on Henry VIII and the English Reformation. The fidelity of the novel's Cromwell fiction to history seems to highlight, all the more, the counterargument that Mantel makes to long established views and representations on this subject. In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel's sympathetic portrayal of Thomas Cromwell as a person with a deep inner existence and a rich family life offers such a refreshingly different view of the historical figure that one reviewer characterizes the book as "less a historical novel than an alternative history novel" (Burrow), that is, a work that presents an "alternative" interpretation of history. Another reviewer remarks that Mantel "rewrites the history of England from 1527 to 1535 with Thomas Cromwell as hero" (FitzHerbert). In Mantel's novel Thomas Cromwell is neither a soulless political operator, nor a monster of destruction. The King that he serves, often characterized as a brutal tyrant with numerous jilted and dead wives in popular history, is, in the novelist's imagination, a large-hearted monarch whose humanity is evident in his inner turmoil, familiarity with courtiers, and even, his being a sexually unimaginative man (Mantel 69, 254–56, 323, 332, 528–29).

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<sup>4</sup> At the 2017 Oxford Literary Festival, Mantel promoted historical fiction as a legitimate intellectual engagement with history, as the historical novelist Elizabeth Fremantle has discussed in a blog. I thank anonymous reviewer 1 for pointing out the blog to me: <http://the-history-girls.blogspot.tw/p/about-us.html>.

The novelist's engagement with the debate on Henry VIII and the Reformation is inextricably bound up with the mutually reinforcing relation of history and narrative fiction. On the one hand, history as established factual knowledge drives Mantel's fiction. On the other hand, narrative fiction is the way the author works out her argument on history. As characters in *Wolf Hall* participate in the making of major historical events, they understand who they are in terms of the stories lived, told, and re-told. These stories are diverse, often messy, contradictory, and they overlap. They are understood from the multiple perspectives of individual historical figures, and they change over time. *Wolf Hall* is Mantel's undertaking to make coherent sense of them all, and in this sense, the novelist's fiction as a narrative discourse represents and interprets the stories of history. Mantel reminds readers that fiction is, ineluctably, a part of history; it informs and shapes history. While fidelity to known history legitimates the novelist's political agenda in favor of the English Reformation, her fiction reinforces the complexity and richness of her argument on history, for it is through fiction that Mantel shows and interprets the multiple details of lived life and conscious experience.

As the novelist centers her fiction on a major maker of history, she also *makes* history with her fiction, which shows the central importance of imagination and creativity in arriving at historical truth and making a historical argument. The novel is able to convey historicity at the same time that it makes a powerful intervention in the debate on the Reformation and the politics of Henry VIII's marriages. The historical argument on the series of events connecting Henry's domestic life to English national politics, as Mantel shows in the novel, hinges on contemporary historical figures' meaningful, discursive representation of the messy and multiple stories of history.

## **I. Thomas Cromwell and the Work of Fiction: Conceptualizing Historical Fiction in *Wolf Hall***

Mantel insists on the ineluctable, intimate connection between what takes place as material historical events and the continued undertaking by all, from contemporary historical actors to later interpreters of history, to recount and make sense of the past and to engage in narrativity. As characters in *Wolf Hall* participate in the making of major historical events, the stories that they live, observe, and at times misunderstand are continually being interpreted, re-

interpreted, patched up, taken apart, and then re-shaped, to form a coherent and meaningful narrative discourse. When the novel begins, Cromwell thinks the King's current lady is Mary Boleyn and uses this piece of information to form his political judgment, only to find out later that Mary's sister Anne is the one who figures in the King's "Great Matter." In the novel, the stories that the characters tell about themselves, those who surround them, and those in the past are fundamentally diverse, lacking a neat logical connection to one another and told from multiple perspectives by different characters. They offer competing versions of the past that also get revised and changed by the storytellers over time.

Narrative fiction in *Wolf Hall* refers both to the content of the narrative (the rich, complex, and diverse stories lived and told that are not neat or coherent) and to the discourse that represents, interprets, and gives meaning to this content. As narrative theorist Gérard Genette has pointed out, the term "narrative" does not stand alone as a "univocal" theoretical term about how stories work, but it necessarily overlaps with and implies a relationship to other concepts fundamental to fiction and narration. Genette identifies three components of narrativity that are interrelated: *story* (the content), *narrative* or *narrative discourse* (the meaningful representation of the story being told), and *narrating* (the act of story-telling or the process of the production of narrative itself) (26–27). This paper's conceptualization of narrative fiction follows Genette's tripartite classification of narrative fiction. It uses the term "story" to mean the messy, plural and diverse content of narrative that is experienced in history from different perspectives, in different conditions, by individual historical figures. With respect to the historical fiction of *Wolf Hall*, "story" is the very unorganized material of history, consisting of events, situations, actions, behavior, and feelings, that has no inherent structure or coherence. "Narrative" or "narrative discourse" in this paper means the meaningful representation of stories that constructs and makes coherent intellectual sense of the stuff of history.

"Story" and "narrative" in this way are mutually reinforcing, for meaning drives the interest in stories and story-telling, and narrative discourse legitimates itself upon the existence of story material. One can argue that there is also a conceptual distinction between "history" in the sense of lived concrete reality, and "story" as experienced and understood by human beings in history, but Mantel reminds readers that stories are themselves the stuff of the particular

situations and experiences of history and therefore inseparable from history. Individuals such as Thomas Cromwell live historical reality with a keen sense of their own stories, the stories of others, and the making of stories as they take action and undergo diverse experiences. While this paper makes a distinction between established historical facts and the “stories” of Cromwell’s life as Mantel imagines in fiction, it also treats the “stories” of Cromwell and “history” as lived by the novel’s characters as inextricably bound up with each other in *Wolf Hall*.

As *Wolf Hall* is both an investigation of history and a work of the novelist’s imagination, the theorization of history and fiction is fundamental to the central agenda of the novel. Historians and theorists from Natalie Zemon Davis to Arthur Danto and Hayden White have long stressed the inescapability of fiction in the study of history—in terms of the expression of the imagination rather than fixed empirical evidence. Hayden White’s theoretical work on history has highlighted the “fictive nature of historical narrative” (89). Because history is discursive and one always has to interpret it in order to understand it (51–81), the fictive is always a component of history. As Davis warns of practicing “naïve empiricism about one’s historical narrative” (7), she promotes awareness about the *form* (rather than *content*) of history in raising “the questions of communication” in historical scholarship, “about the production, dissemination, and reception of cultural forms” (6). And philosopher Arthur Danto has pinpointed narrative as a mode of knowing and explaining history. Narrative informs history as a discourse. The study of history involves not perfect absolute truth in scientific terms but the lively engagement with the imagination and speculation. Unlike the physical sciences, history is not knowable as a subject of nature. There is always a multiplicity of possible scenarios and explanations for what happened in the past. Because the unknown and the unknowable are an inescapable part of the past, history cannot be explained strictly by scientific law and logic. Narrative, therefore, serves as a fundamental means of historical knowledge (Danto 111, 169, 255). Paradoxically, the fictive, as an inescapable component of history, is both a sign of the incompleteness and imperfection of historical knowledge and the key to historical truth.

In *Wolf Hall*, fiction as the vital basis for the case of history focuses on Thomas Cromwell as the protagonist and historical individual. In Georg Lukács’s highly influential *The Historical Novel*, historical fiction examines

the ordinary individual under pressure from great social forces in a time of upheaval, as exemplified in the historical realism of Walter Scott (22, 32–34). Mantel at once subscribes to and seeks to move beyond Lukács’s vision of historical fiction. Her fiction shows individuals at critical moments of great change in history, at once feeling the social pressures exerted on them and taking action to change history itself. Her protagonist emerges beyond circumstances of low birth and childhood abuse to achieve great wealth and power. Yet as he makes history and shapes England’s future, his upbringing as the son of Walter the brutish blacksmith is always with him, in the way it influences his frame of mind and awareness of rank and status. In Mantel’s fiction, Thomas Cromwell is not just the product of social forces, even though he is certainly that, and the protagonist constantly shows awareness that he thinks and acts differently than the aristocrats because of the way he was shaped earlier in life; he is also the maker of social forces. According to the terms of Perry Anderson’s analysis, Mantel’s would be a “postmodern turn” of historical fiction, structurally flouting the model of the genre as established by Lukács by making the protagonist a great maker of history rather than an ordinary individual in society.

The novel also mixes up the historical past and the readerly present by narrating the story throughout in the present tense and in modern English (Acocella; Burrow; Brace; Smith; Hitchens; Wood; and MacFarquhar). Such a strategy pulls the subject of the novel into a present that is immediately relevant to the readers. It further highlights the way Mantel’s narrative works as both an interpretation of history and an invented work of fiction.

Mantel’s deployment of modern American and British slang (as Christopher Hitchens has observed) reflects the novelist’s play with temporality as well. Moreover, the presence of such modern vernacular in *Wolf Hall* reminds readers of Cromwell’s identity as a son of working and ethnically mixed people’s Putney and the popular basis of the protagonist’s political interests. Cromwell’s brutish father Walter describes the carved saint his mother prayed to the night he was conceived: “it was St. fucking Felicity if I’m not mistaken” (Mantel 287). In young Cromwell’s neighborhood, Owen Madoc, seeing Cornish invaders coming within miles of Putney, declares that “Those fuckers can fly” (306). The same character again uses the obscene name in the modern sense of a person that is foolish or deserving of contempt (“Fucker”) when he addresses young Cromwell as “You little fucker” (Mantel 307).



A generation later, Owen's son, the Welsh boatman Sion Madoc, offers his take on what goes on in court between Henry and Anne: Henry has sex with Anne's mother, her sister, and Anne "goes to it with her brother" (Mantel 272). As Sion tells stories about Henry's court, Cromwell recalls the "Putney imagination" of his childhood and tips the boatman (273). His listening to and showing an appreciation for a working man like Sion reflect his interest in knowing "people's minds" (273). The vernacular is a reminder of the connection between the history of Henry's court and the broader public history of England. What happens at court has a powerful impact on the entire country, and outside the court working people take an interest in and comment on their king and his women the same way they do other current events.

The effect of the vernacular in *Wolf Hall* on the story of Henry's court and domestic life, furthermore, is to strip court politics of its perceived glamor and prestige. When Bishop Fisher defends Eliza Barton's prophetic threats to the King, Cromwell challenges the Bishop's pretentious reference to the prophet Amos with American slang: "Don't 'prophet Amos' me, man. She threatened the king" (Mantel 504).<sup>5</sup> Such an expression lays bare the Bishop's agenda for what they are, treason behind the mask of piety.

Mantel's play with Lukácsian ideas about historical fiction moves beyond just the terms of political power and temporality. As is evident in her use of the modern vernacular, the novelist also plays with ideas of social hierarchy and order, imagining courtly politics from the perspective of the Welsh boatman, taking down the lofty language of prophecy with American slang. It is vitally significant that Mantel centers her narrative of the Henrician Reformation and the King's succession woes in *Wolf Hall* on a man of humble origins rather than on the King of England himself, for Mantel's "postmodern turn of fiction," where the protagonist is a powerful maker of history rather than an ordinary individual, is also a critique of traditional order and established hierarchy. As a man from below who wields power at court, Cromwell understands that hierarchical order is not natural and that power shapes and makes it. He is not just a powerful figure in history, but his social origins are obscure and throughout the novel Cromwell remains aware of his Putney roots and also how others see him. Unlike Henry VIII, who inherited great power and seeks a male

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<sup>5</sup> The use of a proper noun as a verb is distinctively North American and modern. Nearly all instances of such a slang that I can find are from the U.S. or Canada and many of them are from the early twentieth century. See for example, the expression "Don't George me" (Macaulay 56).

heir to keep the Tudor dynasty going in England, Cromwell is a man who, cut off from a violent and abusive father in his youth, has made his own way in the world of birthright and inherited privilege.

Paradoxically, Cromwell's common origins have made him who he is. By making a man who rose out of obscurity to exercise great power in the era of the Reformation the center of her fiction, Mantel calls attention to the mutually interactive relation between the individual and historical circumstances. Not only is the individual, as Lukács points out (22, 32–34), shaped by forces of history, but for Mantel he may also find himself in a situation to shape history. Cromwell is as much, inescapably, the child of Putney as he is the builder of English national identity. The actions of Cromwell as a political figure revolutionize English politics and religious life, even as they bear the imprint of working people's London, pragmatic and knowing. The politics and dynamic of hierarchy and power underscore Mantel's conceptualization of historical fiction in *Wolf Hall*, and such a conceptualization reflects her central interest in the individual self as the source of fiction and creativity in history. Social roots mark the individual and, at the same time, the individual carries within himself the great capacity to make up, anew, institutional and power relations between human beings in society.

Such playful strategies of language, temporality, and social status are intimately bound up with Mantel's conceptualization of historical fiction. She focuses on the protagonist's personhood as an individual as a way to work out her theorization of history and fiction. The historical record shows that as a youngster Cromwell left Putney, spent his formative years on the continent, and after mastering trade, law, and several European languages there, returned to England to become a power player in government and politics. Mantel recreates Cromwell's personal mobility, between places, communities, and social strata as an easy fluidity of identity that lends itself to self-invention. In the novel, Cromwell's identity is made up of all the encounters and experiences he has had with people from all walks of life in different countries and at different times of his life. He is Morgan Williams's young brother-in-law who bids him farewell in Welsh before leaving Putney (Mantel 11). Having spent his youth on the continent, he converses elegantly as a courtier with the King's bastard son on Castiglione (370). He is not confined to any traditional borders of society or geography but moves across established boundaries and between

communities and is thus able to draw on a rich diversity of experiences and know-how when he presents himself to others.

Fiction itself is the very basis of Cromwell's identity. The novel shows that Cromwell's personhood, that is, his condition of being an individual with dignity, distinctive identity, and the capacity for original thinking and action, does not come naturally to a man of such low birth. The Duke of Norfolk observes in the novel: "Damn it all, Cromwell, why are you such a . . . person? It isn't as if you could afford to be" (Mantel 151). In a world where social hierarchy and traditional order determine one's identity and path in life, Cromwell was not born to hobnob with aristocrats like Norfolk and Suffolk, who carry their personhood for granted as the natural privilege of the rank to which they were born. And Norfolk indicates that he takes great offense at Cromwell for his presumption of personhood, despite his humble origins: "You . . . person . . . you nobody from Hell, you whore-spawn, you cluster of evil, you lawyer" (173).

Cromwell is an individual not because of high birth, nor of a career in the church, like Wolsey, but precisely, as the old Duke's indignation indicates, because of his savage and low origins. There is no traditional basis for his identity in birthright, family wealth, privilege of rank, nor the clerical establishment. The cardinal reminds Cromwell that the circumstances of his protégé's birth were even lowlier than his own: "you were born in a more dishonorable estate than me" (Mantel 64). Cromwell is keenly aware that Wolsey, born a commoner, at least has his university education and position as a high churchman to legitimate his place in the world of power and privilege. Meanwhile, Cromwell has not even such an advantage to make his common origins acceptable to Henry's court: "Putney . . . It is the dark fact. And since he's not a churchman, there are no ecclesiastical titles to soften it" (79). In *Wolf Hall*, he is the one character who was not born to go far in life and has managed to reach the stratosphere of royal government. His identity is one of his own invention rather than the legacy of august ancestors or the culmination of a church career. He is a man of self-invention.

Lacking traditional advantages such as these, Cromwell turns seemingly insurmountable challenges in life into the freedom from the established restraints of family, geography, rank, tradition, and even nationality, and invents himself as a remarkable individual in English history. The protagonist is a man of constant transformation and invention. Stephen Greenblatt's term

for early modern figures who engaged in the conscious shaping and representation of oneself as a social act, “Renaissance self-fashioning,” may apply to Cromwell as well, for he is one of those men outside the “stable inherited social world” of the aristocracy (8). Where most of the historical personalities that Greenblatt characterizes as iconic figures of “self-fashioning” are upwardly mobile “middle-class men,” Cromwell, like William Tyndale, is not from the middle strata of society but carries with him a “highly charged geographical and ideological mobility” (7).

Like Tyndale, who had been raised on the Welsh border and was exposed to linguistic and cultural difference early in life (Daniell 13–14), Cromwell’s geographical origins in Putney expose him to the wider world beyond. Early in life, the protagonist is told to “follow the river” to go to “the sea” (Mantel 12). Where Tyndale was exposed to the Welsh language while living on the Welsh border, Mantel also shows Cromwell speaking Welsh and growing up used to an environment of linguistic plurality and ethnic difference. Historically, both men are known for their mastery of multiple languages and their commitment to Reform, notably in their promotion of the vernacular Bible. From his years on the continent, Cromwell is fluent in Spanish and Italian. In the novel, he offers to speak in Latin as an alternative to English with Henry’s first wife, Katherine (266).

In Mantel’s fiction, it is not just that Cromwell’s personal story is self-invented, but that there are multiple inventions of Cromwell, by himself and others as well. Cromwell does not know the date of his birth, and his older sister Kat “has assigned him a date” (Mantel 23), which can be entirely her invention or based on her knowledge of family history. The protagonist tells the King that his mother gave birth to him at the advanced age of fifty-two, and he persists in such an incredible belief about the age of his mother at his birth, however fuzzy he is about his own birthdate (75–76, 309). Mantel invents these biographical details as a way to show that the distinction between fact and fiction is not absolute and that stories such as these, whose basis in historical veracity may be doubtful, make up a person’s identity.

In Mantel’s imagination, Cromwell’s own patrons are creative in the way that they exercise their power and promote him. As a mentor, Wolsey makes up and circulates stories about his origins in order to make him seem exotic rather than just low-born. Early in the novel, the narrator describes Cromwell as “a work in progress” by the cardinal, who in promoting his protégé works on

inventing an identity for him at court. At this stage, Wolsey paints Cromwell as a “character” whose youth was “secluded, spent almost entirely in fasting, prayer, and study of the Church Fathers” behind the walls of a monastery, and has turned “wild nowadays” (Mantel 68). Wolsey is also responsible for multiple other stories of Cromwell’s birth. The King has heard that Cromwell was an orphan raised by monks (202). Thomas Cranmer has heard that pirates kidnapped Cromwell as a baby (228). Henry’s appointment of Cromwell as the Keeper of the Jewel House is an act of creation: “What you are, I make you. I alone. Everything you are, everything you have, will come from me” (332). While Cromwell engages in self-invention and others invent him, he also enables self-invention in others. Richard Williams, Cromwell’s nephew and son of Kat and Welshman Morgan Williams, adopts his uncle’s last name and invents himself as an English courtier (164).

The protagonist’s fluidity in identity is threatening to characters in exalted circles who perceive him as a newcomer and a social climber from below. Henry tells the protagonist that Suffolk is dubious about his obscure origins (Mantel 201). On numerous occasions, he is called a Jew by the likes of the Duke of Suffolk and Thomas More (84, 175, 177). Thomas Boleyn calls him “butcher’s dog” after calling Wolsey “butcher’s boy” (64). Yet as Mantel imagines, even when Katherine, Henry’s first queen, snarks about Cromwell’s low birth, she recognizes that Cromwell is the one man for whom all was impossible in birth and who has enterprisingly made all possible through his own inventiveness. She acknowledges his radical creativity: “The blacksmith makes his own tools” (269). Before he invents himself, he has had to invent the means for self-invention in the first place. Born to a murderously violent father, he has literally raised himself into the successful man that he is. Before he makes history as the man who invents the legal justification for England’s split from Rome, he invents himself, and before he does that, he finds the means to do it.

While a character like More as a youngster is comfortably placed in school and prepared for a career in law and scholarship, Mantel imagines that Cromwell invents ways to educate himself even before he spends his formative years on the continent. At the kitchen of Lord Morton’s palace, loaves of bread and orders of foodstuffs provide young Cromwell opportunities for lessons in basic math and literacy. By the time he returns from the continent, he knows the “new poetry” from Italy as well as any fashionable courtier (Mantel 29).

And he is the very source of fiction. He makes up, even, England's foundation myth with his son: "those Merlin stories you read—we are going to write some more" (258). When Henry is disturbed by the appearance of his late brother in a dream, Cromwell readily makes up an interpretation that reminds the King to move forward (255). An impressed Thomas Cranmer calls him "a man of vigorous invention" (256).

Such a tremendous capacity for fiction feeds on the protagonist's material knowledge and understanding of social situations and the larger environment. As he stands before the King, keenly aware of how far he has risen from the brutish household in Putney, Cromwell recognizes the intimate connection between the image he projects and his role as an increasingly important man at court. Where aristocrats are the products of pedigree, he is his own conscious and effortful production. Sir Nicholas Carew wears his "ancient family face" (Mantel 411). The expression, "Arrange your face," also made a title for one of the chapters of *Wolf Hall* (265), speaks to, precisely, the importance of image-shaping for this self-invented man. Cromwell's image is one he actively shapes and constructs rather than inherits: "Arrange your face" (377) is what he thinks to himself in the presence of the King.

In Mantel's imagination, the great maker of history has no fixed base for a home or a natural identity. Because he spent his youth in Italy, he was "Tommaso"<sup>6</sup> there and gets homesick for Italy when he first comes back to England as an adult (Mantel 101). When the protagonist meets his father again after his return from Putney, Walter Cromwell observes that his grown son looks like a "foreigner," and he admits that he is indeed one (102). And his time abroad has made him a more cosmopolitan individual than England's elite. He sees that Thomas More has been conned into paying a lot for a cheap-quality carpet from the continent (210–11). And his knowledge of the Italian version of an anticlerical tale that Charles Brandon tells shows the Duke of Suffolk to be a provincial that the English nobleman truly is (170).

As the historical record offers precious little information about Cromwell as a private person, Mantel's invention of Thomas Cromwell's personhood undergirds her engagement of history as a writer of narrative fiction. Her fiction of the individual with a deep interior life centers her understanding of history as informed by the creative imagination, for not only does the individual bring about change and make history, but the core of the individual is the very

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<sup>6</sup> Italian for the name Thomas.

creation of the protagonist himself. By characterizing the hero of *Wolf Hall* as a man of self-invention and by making fiction the very basis of his personhood, Mantel makes fiction the basis for her interpretation of history. She engages the debate over the Henrician Reformation by focusing on Cromwell as an individual in public and private life. She projects her imagination of lived contemporary life under Henry VIII on Cromwell, and she invents a private life for the historical figure about whom so little personal is known.

## II. “Make or Mar”: The Individual and the Violence of History

In *Wolf Hall*, when characters look back on the past, they recreate it by telling stories. The stories of the past that they tell are full of violence and refer to divisions and breaks in history; they are stories of crisis, war, religious persecution, pain, and death. Oral story-telling, in the sense of unorganized everyday experience that is lived and expressed in personal utterances, and the narrative discourse that is the meaningful interpretation of stories are mutually reinforcing. At the same time that the novel’s characters witness events take place and participate in the making of history itself, they also narrate and discuss what has happened. As they tell and re-tell stories, they are driven with a sense that these stories mean something, and they engage in a search for meaning. As shall be discussed in the final section of this essay, both More and Cromwell have a keen sense of what history means based on stories as lived condition and forms of human communication. For More, the narrative discourse of history centers on himself, and the stories that he tells throughout his life in his writing are the basis of such an interpretation of history. Stories of Lollard burning at the stake and monastic repression, on the other hand, inform Cromwell’s understanding of history as a narrative discourse. Both interpretations of history legitimate themselves on the mass of story material that is lived history.

The past remains with us in signs, from images, physical objects, to dramatic re-enactment. And it is these images, objects, and gestures that link the telling and re-telling of stories meaningfully to the formation of interpretive discourse. Signs such as these take us beyond the messy and unorganized material of stories towards the act of interpretation and thus enable a meaningful and coherent representation of history. The complex of semiotics that these images, objects, and elements make up lays the foundation for a neat

and systematic interpretation of history that is narrative discourse. The formulation of narrative discourse, however, is achieved at the expense of the countless stories from the past as lived condition and material experience. The signs that point to narrative discourse also reflect the irretrievable loss of the past to the present. With every attempt to preserve and recover the past in the meaningful construction of narrative, the past as the great mass of unorganized lived stories and oral experiences recedes into the distance, eventually to be lost in time.

In this way, history is inextricably bound up with lack, loss, rupture, and division. The arrival of the new signals the passing of the old. As Cromwell mourns the passing of his wife, family members cut up her clothes to make “new patterns” (Mantel 110). At Wolsey’s passing, his regalia as a cardinal becomes precious fabric for different uses, from a “crimson cushion or a patch of red on a banner of ensign,” to “a man’s inner sleeve or . . . a whore’s petticoat” (245). The passing of a person exercises human beings’ imagination, in this case, to create new clothing out of old outfits. And nothing speaks so well of the way both aesthetic creation and loss are bound up as history in Wolsey’s vision of his own tomb: “His corpse will lie beneath the outspread wings of angels, in a sarcophagus of porphyry. The veined stone will be his monument” (20). Great artwork by a fine “sculptor from Florence” shall be an enduring memorial to the dead (20). Fiction, therefore, is the way human beings understand and come to terms with history: to make anew and to create artwork with the destruction or passing of the old.

Mantel imagines and portrays characters as storytellers and makers of historical fiction themselves. Characters in *Wolf Hall* tell stories of the past because understanding the past is vital to how they may move forward in the present. As individuals look back on the early days of Henry’s marriage with Katherine, they wonder what will happen to court and country as Henry continues divorce proceedings against the queen (Mantel 34–35). Wolsey serves as the royal family historian in the tales he tells of Henry VIII, his family and marriage to Katherine, and his feuding ancestors from the Houses of York and Lancaster, Edward IV and Welsh courtier Owen Tudor (26–28, 69–70, 87–90). Yet Wolsey does not have a monopoly on stories about the royals, for the royal family inspires popular tales and rumors. London neighborhoods are abuzz with rumors about the King’s new lady upon the commissioning of a large emerald ring for a woman at a jeweler’s (32–33). Some of the stories that



characters tell reflect their attempt to formulate a meaningful narrative, that is, an interpretive discourse based on the events as they see them. But some stories turn out to miss key facts. The rumored new lady of the King, whom Cromwell identifies to Wolsey as Mary Boleyn (68), turns out to be, instead, Anne Boleyn, her younger sister (78). Because history comes alive in narrative recreation, it does get misrepresented, under-represented, and then corrected and contested over time, and such a process attests to the fluidity, fragmentation, and multiplicity of history, and certainly to the way history gets inextricably bound up with fiction.

The political struggle over the royal divorce and the conflict over the Reformation that become the focus of so many contemporary storytellers represent a major moment of violent rupture in English history. Mantel observes the ferocity and savagery of personalities on both sides of the conflict. Thomas More tortures heretics in his basement (Mantel 21). Queen Katherine's inner toughness is demonstrated in an episode in her early marriage to Henry where she, acting as his regent while he is away fighting in France, thinks the severed head of the King of Scotland that warred against the English should make a sweet gift for her husband (28). Anne Boleyn's pursuit of power and glory threatens not only to break up a royal marriage, but also to remake power relations and political arrangements between England and the rest of Europe. As her quest for supremacy threatens to crush men and women in her path, she herself is physically threatened with violence as well. Mantel recreates the historically well-known scene where Anne finds herself represented as a decapitated woman on a card, "Anne *sans tête*," and is unfazed by it (224). The threat of violence surrounding this character, as well as the great risk that her venture to be Queen poses to herself and established arrangements of power both at court and abroad, suggests that she is at least as tough as her rival, Queen Katherine.

Thomas Cromwell is a man deeply identified with violence both as a historical person and as the protagonist in *Wolf Hall*. While little is known about Cromwell's birth family, Mantel imagines that his social origins are so thoroughly steeped in brutality that he is a character who copes with violence from birth to death. In the novel, even before his engagement in the brutal and treacherous games of power at Henry's court, Cromwell is a man born to a savage father. The narrator imagines that Cromwell's "father was no doubt drunk at his birth" (Mantel 23). When he leaves Putney and escapes the

murderous Walter, the boy Cromwell is looking to become a mercenary (13). Mantel makes up this story where in Italy as a young man he survives a venomous snake bite—an episode that bespeaks the way that this man has made a life for himself by encountering and coming to terms with violence. His encounter with the snake reminds him of his likeness to the slithering creature, for he notices that he has “serpent eyes” (92).

Violence drives Cromwell away from his birth home, to his adopted home of Italy, and his identity is broken up into different places, cultures, languages, communities, and social strata. Cromwell is English, Italian, related to the Welsh; he is from working people’s Putney, he adopts the French boy Christophe, and he is Henry’s courtier. Cromwell’s engagement of violence bespeaks the way invention works in history; it cuts up, separates, violates, and therefore also creates a multiplicity of conditions and perspectives. The very act of creating oneself is violent. The discursive representation of history as a coherent narrative objectifies and turns a living individual, with his infinitely complex life, into a character in a drama. Narrative structures and turns history, which is never entirely known and knowable in the boundless, unorganized mass of story material, into a coherent, meaningful fictive account.

The fluidity of Cromwell’s identity is, therefore, part and parcel of his multiplicity as a person. Little is known historically about Cromwell’s inner life and emotional experience. In her fiction, Mantel interprets this lack of personal information as the result of Cromwell’s own conscious, intensely self-aware privacy. *Wolf Hall* shows the protagonist making a conscious and deliberate effort to shield his personal life from the political sphere, because he is keenly aware of himself as multiple and dynamic, rather than unified and coherent. Paradoxically, his personhood has a dignity, complexity, and multiplicity *beyond* fiction precisely *because of* fiction. As his identity is the expression of self-invention, his personhood at once is based in fiction and has a reality beyond fiction.

Throughout *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell is aware that he is not just his public image, and he shields his private life from public view. Early in the novel, he tells Wolsey that he does not know Spanish well, when he actually speaks it fluently, because, as he explains to his wife, “He doesn’t have to know everything I know” (Mantel 32). In a moment of camaraderie with young men in his household, Cromwell lets his guard slip to tell of his days in Italy as a young profiteer who, along with buddies, scams a cardinal. He pauses self-

consciously, thinking, “what is this? I don’t tell stories about myself” (270). The fact that his patrons invent him does not mean that just anyone can invent him, for Cromwell wishes to authorize the fiction of his identity himself. While he is happy to let Wolsey invent him, he is wary that Cavendish should also represent and recreate him at a moment of vulnerability for him. At Wolsey’s dismissal from power, Cromwell breaks down and bewails his patron’s downfall. He avoids being seen in an effort to preserve personal dignity: “He falters . . . He is crying. He says to himself, let George Cavendish not come by and see me, and write it down and make it into a play” (196–97).

As is widely known historically, of course, George Cavendish, Wolsey’s gentleman usher, did manage to catch Thomas Cromwell at just such a private moment, and his recreation of such an intense moment of self-revelation by Cromwell is forever an indelible part of the human drama of Tudor court history. As Cavendish famously writes in his memoir *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, Cromwell fears for his own future at his patron’s downfall and loss of royal favor at court, but he quickly decides to tackle the situation directly, for he will “make or mar, or ever I come again” (108–13). And instead of wallowing in despair, he pursues political action in parliament and builds his own power base from there (Cavendish 108–13; Coby, ch. 5; Loades, ch. 2).

For Mantel, who builds a fiction of interiority and personhood for Cromwell as the basis for her argument on Reformation history, George Cavendish’s representation of Cromwell here is the one vital authority that legitimates the novelist’s portrayal of Cromwell. This famous anecdote in Cavendish’s memoir confirms Mantel’s understanding of Cromwell as a human being who is complex, multiple, and fundamentally decent. Moreover, it establishes Cromwell as a forward-looking maker of history who understands the way history works critically and has his own vision of history. Mantel’s fiction of Cromwell as the self-invented man of the Reformation, therefore, finds key collaborating historical evidence in Cavendish. Yet as Cromwell’s conscious effort to avoid being seen suggests in Mantel’s recounting of Cavendish’s anecdote, Cavendish’s memoir, a narrative that recalls, is also an act of violation. Mantel never celebrates the making of history in the fictive imagination without reminding us, at the same time, of the violence that such an act of representation makes. And in her fictional recreation of Cavendish, she is fully aware of her own complicity in this violation of Cromwell’s personhood. To make history is to construct a narrative discourse out of rich,

complex lived material of stories. In the process of making history, one violates, divides, compartmentalizes the mass of unformed material and turns it into a neat structure and coherent discourse. Cavendish and Mantel as well isolate and focus on a moment in Cromwell's personal existence in order to build a portrait of this historical person.

In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell's confession of fear, self-doubt, selfish desire, and eventually, forceful impetuosity at his master's ruin all speaks to the character's intense humanity as an individual:

“I am crying for myself,” he says, “I am going to lose everything, everything I have worked for, all my life, because I will go down with the cardinal—no, George, don't interrupt me—because I have done what he asked me to do, and been his friend, and the man at his right hand. If I had stuck to my work in the city, instead of hurtling about the countryside making enemies, I'd be a rich man—and you, George, I'd be inviting you out to my new country house, and asking your advice on furniture and flower beds. But look at me! I am finished.” (Mantel 144)

The protagonist recovers quickly from his apprehension and self-pity to plan for a seat in parliament. And he says to Cavendish, who will turn this into history: “I can only try. I'll make or mar, before I see you again” (145). And Cavendish observes to himself that “Make or mar” is ever Cromwell's “common saying” (145).

“Make or mar” thus memorably encapsulates the character's will to charge forward and make his way in the world by sheer force of personality. The individual forges ahead to accomplish great deeds or end up in ruin. As Cavendish's account shows Cromwell's utterance in a moment of crisis and adversity, “make or mar” also illustrates at once the violence and forward momentum of history. As Cavendish recalls Cromwell's plan to gain a seat in parliament at this critical moment, Cromwell wants to bring about meaningful change in history by taking action. At the same time, the protagonist's forward action to change history relies on a fundamental respect for and sound understanding of history. As characters in *Wolf Hall* tell stories of the past in order to understand the present and how to move on to the future, the hero of the novel himself theorizes history in order to effect radical change.

To make history, one must first have a vision of history. And Cromwell recalls Reformist lawyer James Bainham's vision of history as a way to confirm to himself that progress is possible and, indeed, necessary: "He thinks of what Bainham said, before they burned him; in England there have been eight hundred years of mystification, just six years of truth and light; six years, since the gospel in English began to come into the kingdom" (Mantel 421). While the violent energy of Tudor personalities drives England, Mantel suggests that there is, after all, a difference between the violence of a Reform-minded political figure like Cromwell, who wishes to bring about change, and that of More, who resists change. The difference lies in the Reformers' progressive vision of history. As Bainham asserts, Reform transcends the many centuries of mindless repetition of monstrosity and ignorance in England, to bring enlightenment to the country. The striving to create radical change can bring about a genuine break with the past and forge a civilization beyond savagery.

Cromwell's commitment to the way forward beyond the past of savagery is rooted in his vision of history. The protagonist understands the inescapability and even, the necessity, of historicism, that is, the understanding that the past influences the present, and at the same time, the flawed and fragmented nature of one's own historical perspective. Behind this undertaking to invent a new political and religious order in England is a vision of history that respects and draws inspiration from the past in its multiplicity, fragmentation, and complexity. It is at the moment when Henry's staunchly Catholic first wife calls Thomas Cranmer a heretic that Cromwell remembers Bainham's view of history and his martyrdom. He stands up to Katherine: "Cranmer is no heretic . . . He will reform what needs reformation, that is all" (Mantel 421). The remembrance of the past drives a vision of the future.

### **III. The Mirror of History: The Making of the English Nation**

A powerful metaphor for history in *Wolf Hall* is the mirror, a tool for self-reflection. And the hero of the novel is keenly aware that such a mirror fundamentally undergirds one's humanity and integrity, and he critiques what other individuals do with "mirrors." A mirror of history, in this sense, is the meaningful interpretation, that is, the narrative discourse, of the stories from the past. The story of Savonarola, for Cromwell, shows the disastrous consequences of the rejection of history. The outright denial of such a mirror

simply returns humanity to the days of primitive bestiality. Savonarola and his followers built a bonfire of the vanities, into which they threw their possessions, including their family heirlooms, clothes, books, legal papers, and pets: “what was worst . . . they threw in their mirrors. So then they couldn’t see their faces and know how they were different from the beasts in the field and the creatures screaming on the pyre. And when they had melted their mirrors they went home to their empty houses” (Mantel 288). Savonarola’s project to burn all, cleanse all, break off completely from the past of sinful humanity and begin anew in the glorious building of a godly community, ironically, transforms human beings into creatures little better than beasts. Where the preaching friar embarks on mass purification to transcend all sin and attain spiritual perfection, he ends up reducing humanity to bestiality. The quest for transcendence and purity manifests itself, in the case of Savonarola, as the denial of history. And in this denial of history, Cromwell sees the rejection of humanity and its civilization.

The novel investigates the way different “mirrors” of history reflect different stances on the politics of change in the age of the Reformation. While he also professes to spiritual purity like Savonarola, More does not burn his mirror but instead holds it up to project a self-image of unchanging perfection. More’s mirror is the Catholic Church, at once ancient and exalted, peerless and divine, inviolable and immovable through time. Just as the Catholic Church is unbending and impregnable, More indicates that he will not yield to the politics of change. As Cromwell, Audley, and Cranmer urge the English humanist to sign the oath of submission to Henry VIII as required by the parliament, More refuses to accept the new arrangements of power. He claims for his defiance of the state the transcendent authority of “all the angels and saints . . . and all the company of the Christian dead, for as many generations as there have been since the church of Christ was founded, one body, undivided” (Mantel 525).

Cromwell reminds More that his view of history as an all unified and unifying monolith is in fact skewed and narcissistic:

A lie is no less a lie because it is a thousand years old. Your undivided church has liked nothing better than persecuting its old members, burning them and hacking them apart when they stood by their own conscience, slashing their bellies open and feeding their guts to dogs. You call history to your aid, but what is history to you? It is a mirror that flatters Thomas More. But I have

another mirror. I hold it up and it shows a vain and dangerous man, and when I turn it about it shows a killer, for you will drag down with you God knows how many, who will only have the suffering, and not your martyr's gratification. You are not a simple soul, so don't try to make this simple. (Mantel 525)

The struggle between the forces of Reform and the established Catholic Church, as represented by Cromwell and More in this confrontation, takes place as a debate on the vision of history. More's mirror, conveniently claiming the authority of an absolute and supreme Catholic Church, serves to flatter one man's ego. He looks into a monumental institution that reaches back to time immemorial and sees a reflection of himself as the Church's great angelic martyr. Yet Cromwell reminds him that the Church itself is not one but many, not fixed and unchanging, but violent and brutal. At the same time that it claims to be "undivided," it has perpetrated crimes against humanity. There is not just one version of history, but multiple, as Cromwell promises to show More "another mirror."

Just as Savonarola's absolute purity reduces humanity to bestiality, More's claim to transcendent perfection as the follower of the one true faith appears monstrous to the protagonist. The denial of the diversity of perspectives and experiences inherent in the historical process, as in the case of More, serves a monolithic understanding of history that pretends to a god-like, all-seeing, and entirely orderly and simple-minded vision of oneself. The monstrosity of such a single and absolute vision of history is evident in More's relentless endeavor, throughout his career as a public man of letters, to create and present a coherent and perfect account of himself: "More publishes all his letters from his friends. Even when they reprove him, he makes a fine show of his humility and so turns it to his profit. He has lived in the public. Every thought that passes through his mind he has committed to paper. He never kept anything private" (Mantel 527). Such a self-vision as god-like, all-seeing, and all-seen is in stark contrast to Cromwell's principled privacy.

The refusal to face the violence—the fragmentation, imperfection, and plurality—of history is itself an act of brutality. The denial or repression of the gaps, divides, and multiplicity inherent in the historical process itself creates a violent breach and regression of history. Savonarola's rejection of the mirror of history takes place as a total break with the past, and it returns humanity to the

primal condition of beasts. More's claim that history moves through time as one absolute inviolate, undivided, and eternally unchanging unity sacrifices the many and diverse voices of the Church's critics and victims. Where Savonarola wishes to burn all mirrors, and More's mirror is ideal, whole, and centered on his perfect self-image at the expense of others, Thomas Howard, Anne Boleyn's uncle and the Duke of Norfolk, simply has no awareness of a mirror at all. He is so completely assured of his preeminence as an aristocrat that he has no desire to seek self-reflection. His identity is so thoroughly wrapped up in the heritage of ancient bloodlines and august prerogatives that he has no need for history outside himself. Uncle Norfolk himself embodies the past and tradition in person. Utterly ignorant of any mirror, he is pure animal, frequently threatening to bite into the common-born Wolsey at court: "Tell him Norfolk says he must be on the road and out of here. Or—and tell him this—I will come where he is, and I will tear him with my teeth" (Mantel 173). Later, after Wolsey has gone north, he makes the same threat: "I will chew him up, bones, flesh and gristle" (221). The Duke's faith in and reliance on his teeth as an expression of noble prowess and pedigree that zealously guard against untoward social climbers like Wolsey and Cromwell show him to be the lowly evolved beast that is the aristocrat.

Where characters like Savonarola, More, and Norfolk repress or deny history in its multiplicity and fragmentation, Cromwell sees that the review of one's humanity in the mirror of history is always imperfect, but that the basis of humanity is the plurality of history. The protagonist's agenda for Reform is to look into history and liberate voices and views that have been censored or covered up in the past. To move forward is to respect the voices of the oppressed in the past and confront the history of the Catholic Church's repression towards dissenters and laypeople.

Cromwell indicts the false and repressive historical vision of the Catholic Church as lacking in creativity and fiction:

When did anything good last come from a monastery? They do not *invent*, they only repeat, and what they repeat is corrupt. For hundreds of years the monks have held the pen, and what they have written is what we take to be our history, but I do not believe it really is. I believe they have suppressed the history they don't



like and written one that is favorable to Rome. (Mantel 202–03; emphasis added)

The monks' notion of history is one of repeated sameness that perennially cements the monumental prestige of the ancient Church. The monks are corrupt because they live on the fruits of the poor, they exploit the poor and, moreover, they do not produce or create. Their suppression of the creative drive forward in history bespeaks their repression of difference and change in the past. To invent the new, then, is to return to proper history, that is, the vision of history as fragmented, complex, and plural, and to restore the suppressed voices of the past. Cromwell's undertaking as a Reformer is to recover the multiple perspectives and experiences in the past.

The most celebrated work of Cromwell in government is certainly his drafting and pushing through in parliament a series of legislation that established the sovereignty of England and its basis in secular authority. Particularly well known is his expression in the "Act in Restraint of Appeals"<sup>7</sup> that England was an "empire" that answered to no greater political authority on earth (Loades, ch. 8). Appropriating for English national identity the medieval feudal idea of empire as the only form of political authority that owed no fealty to an overlord, Cromwell in effect invented the idea of national sovereignty for the country (ch. 8). In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel describes Cromwell as he makes momentous history at the desk: "He hesitates, his quill hovering. He writes, 'This realm of England is an Empire.' *This realm of England is an Empire, and so has been accepted in the world, governed by one Supreme Head and King*" (396). The novelist seizes on the very moment Cromwell drafts the legislation to demonstrate the way the maker of history draws upon his understanding of the past as a source of liberation for the present and invents England's destiny as a sovereign independent state.

By making self-invention the basis of Cromwell's personhood, Mantel identifies him as the man of progress with the proper vision of history. She

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<sup>7</sup> Statute passed by the parliament of England in 1533 which declared that England was a self-contained, autonomous jurisdiction by itself in matters of legal dispute, thus putting an end to the Pope's claim to jurisdictional authority over the country as the spiritual head of the universal Catholic Church, and making impossible from thereon any appeal to papal authority on the part of English litigants beyond law courts in England. The immediate application of the law was to deny the validity of Rome's judgment on Henry's first marriage to Katherine and to allow the King's divorce proceedings to be settled entirely within English jurisdiction, where Thomas Cranmer as Archbishop of Canterbury was able to pronounce a verdict in favor of the King (e.g., Scarisbrick, ch. 10; Guy, ch. 3; Loades, ch. 8).

celebrates him, therefore, as the hero of the early English Reformation. Fiction serves history by breaking up one's perspective of the past and creating the new, and the novelist locates such an undertaking in Cromwell's obscure origins, which enable the fluidity and space for his self-invention and invention of English identity. The protagonist's humble origins in Putney, as the son of the violent and abusive Walter, are, after all, meaningful in his great ambition to create a life for himself and nationhood for England. A preaching friar like Savonarola achieves his fantasy of purity and perfection at the expense of history itself. An ignorant aristocrat such as Norfolk, who has no sense of history outside his pedigree, has neither the drive nor the vision to make history. The narcissism of the eminent humanist Thomas More serves to undermine and subvert, rather than to create history in its diversity and rich complexity. It is up to the man from Putney, who perennially engages and copes with violence, who has seen the world in its division, plurality, and brutality, to invent the English nation in law and statecraft. By examining the circumstances that shape and produce Cromwell, Mantel calls attention to the basis of fiction in historical circumstances of birth, geographical fluidity, social mobility, and pragmatic values.

To make the new is to let the past speak in its true and free form. Cromwell, who has experienced and embodied violence from childhood, wields tremendous power to make history in the age of Henry VIII and the English Reformation. Rather than jettisoning the mirror of history, the protagonist looks into it to find the way to the future: his future, England's future. His conviction that the monks have denied the multiple voices and experiences of history underlies his commitment as a Reformer. And his argument for England's sovereign independence from papal Rome is based on his reading of England as a feudal empire in the Middle Ages. The fundamental resourcefulness and creativity of Cromwell show that such a practice of historicism springs from the protagonist's capacity for fiction, seen in his constant interest in making up narratives, in representing and recreating history, and in his fundamental respect for the imperfection, fragmentation, and multiplicity of history. Taking the imperfect material from his past and England's past, he molds them to invent himself at court and government and to make up England's place in the world as a nation of independent dignity. As Mantel celebrates Cromwell as the hero of the Reformation, she shows that, at its best, fiction, engaging the human imagination and capacity for creation, is the basis for change and progress.

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