

HILARY MANTEL'S RE-APPROPRIATION OF WHIG HISTORIOGRAPHY: A READING OF THE *WOLF HALL* TRILOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF BREXIT

LA REAPROPIACIÓN DE LA HISTORIOGRAFÍA WHIG POR PARTE DE HILARY MANTEL: UNA LECTURA DE LA TRILOGÍA DE TOMÁS CROMWELL EN EL CONTEXTO DEL BREXIT

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Abstract

This article analyses Hilary Mantel's critically-acclaimed Tudor novel series (*Wolf Hall*, 2009; *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012; *The Mirror & the Light*, 2020) in the context of Brexit. Even though Mantel has dismissed any possible analogy between the Reformation and Brexit, this research builds on the hypothesis that the past and the present interact in historical fiction, a genre that has contributed to both feeding and questioning the myths upon which nations are constructed. More specifically, I focus on the trilogy's protagonist, Thomas Cromwell, to argue that he is presented as the architect of what Whig historiography has understood as the pillars of Englishness (and, by extension, Britishness), often evoked in the discursive context surrounding Brexit. However, although the narrative's portrayal of Cromwell undoubtedly fosters the reader's sympathy with the character, a deeper analysis of Mantel's characterisation and narrative techniques —and, more specifically, Cromwell's status as a flawed human being presented through the lens of what turns out to be an unreliable narrator— suggests that Mantel's portrayal of Cromwell cannot be reduced to a simple vindication of the Whiggish notion of Englishness, subtly questioning instead the myths upon which the latter is built.

Keywords: Brexit, Hilary Mantel, historical fiction, Thomas Cromwell, Whig historiography.

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la aclamada trilogía de novelas sobre Tomás Cromwell (*Wolf Hall*, 2009; *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012; *The Mirror & the Light*, 2020) en el contexto del *Brexit*. Aunque Mantel ha rechazado cualquier analogía entre la Reforma y el *Brexit*, este trabajo parte de la hipótesis de que pasado y presente interactúan en la ficción histórica, género que ha contribuido tanto a alimentar como a cuestionar los mitos sobre los que se construyen las naciones. Más concretamente, el artículo se centra en el protagonista de la trilogía, Thomas Cromwell, para argumentar que es presentado como el arquitecto de lo que la historiografía Whig ha identificado como los pilares de la identidad nacional inglesa (y, por ende, británica), frecuentemente evocados en el contexto discursivo del *Brexit*. Sin embargo, aunque el retrato que la narración hace de Cromwell indudablemente fomenta la simpatía del lector hacia el personaje, un análisis más profundo de la caracterización y técnicas narrativas de Mantel —y, más específicamente, el estatus de Cromwell como un ser humano imperfecto presentado a través de los ojos del que se acaba revelando como un narrador no fiable— sugiere que el retrato que Mantel hace de Cromwell no es una simple defensa del concepto Whig de ‘inglesidad’, sino que cuestiona sutilmente los mitos sobre los que este se ha construido.

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Palabras clave: *Brexit*, Hilary Mantel, historiografía Whig, novela histórica, Thomas Cromwell.

1. Introduction

Historical fiction currently attracts unprecedented critical acclaim in Britain, and the success of Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009) is good evidence of this. Postmodern history, which drew attention to history’s narrative nature and the subsequent difficulty of neatly separating historical discourse from fiction (see for example White 1973), played a fundamental role in bringing historical fiction back to the mainstream, as it greatly inspired what would eventually become two highly influential subgenres, namely “recovered histories” —“premised on a tension between the official record as recorded by canonical history [...] and other accounts” (Chadwick 2020: 169)— and what Hutcheon famously called “historiographic metafiction” (1988).

Postmodernism very much revolved around a sense of scepticism about the so-called grand narratives, including history itself, casting doubt on the extent to which it is possible to have knowledge of the past. Intimately related to postmodern postulates, historiographic metafiction “refutes the natural or common sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction” (Hutcheon 1988:

93). This subgenre was used to denounce hegemonic narratives that have traditionally monopolised historical “truth”, combining traditional historical fiction strategies with metafiction (thus drawing attention to its own fictional nature). It should be noted, however, that, regardless of the undeniable impact of historiographic metafiction, other forms of self-reflexive historical fiction have since appeared, including what critics are beginning to refer to as ‘neo-historical fiction’, characterised “by a curiosity about the temporal otherness of the past and about the different ways in which the past was experienced when it was still the present” which does not, however, share the quintessentially postmodern questioning of the possibility of accessing the past (Johnson 2017: 546-547). Mantel has discussed what historical fiction writing is for her, having stated that she clearly focuses on whatever can be recovered from the past, rejoicing in the creative possibilities she sees in the gaps and incoherencies in the historical records (Simpson 2015).

The first in a trilogy of novels, *Wolf Hall* is a fictionalisation of the rise to prominence of a lawyer of obscure origin who would eventually become Henry VIII's chief councillor: Thomas Cromwell (1485-1540). It covers his life from 1500 up to the execution of Thomas More in 1535. Its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), covers the period between September 1535 and the summer of 1536, when, upon the execution of Anne Boleyn, Cromwell is granted a barony. The final instalment of the trilogy, *The Mirror & the Light* (2020), spans the last four years of Cromwell's life, up to his execution.

Fuelled by the trilogy's success (including two Booker Prize wins), scholarship has increasingly turned to Mantel's oeuvre, even if she “still awaits discovery for literary criticism and narratology” (Kukkonen 2018: 974). Researchers have so far inquired into the “spectral” quality (Arnold 2016) that permeates much of her “super-realist” fiction (Knox 2010), perhaps best seen in her 2005 novel *Beyond Black* (Stewart 2009). Chadwick (2020) has recently provided an insightful analysis of Mantel's first foray into historical fiction, *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992),¹ arguing that, while clearly inspired by both recovered lives and historiographic metafiction, this novel is not exactly postmodern. This seems to corroborate what Hart detects in another of Mantel's novels, *Fludd* (1989), namely “a nostalgia for a ‘grand narrative’ [...] whose unifying and meaning-making power is no longer feasible” (Hart 2019: 87).

Research on the Cromwell trilogy has not yet addressed the trilogy's third and final novel, with the notable exception of Kenny (2022), who shows how Cromwell's characterisation as a lawyer in the trilogy is influenced by philosophical pragmatism. Among the rest of the scholarly works available, Alghamdi (2018) claims that Mantel's Thomas Cromwell novels have greatly contributed to the

rehabilitation of historical fiction, largely thanks to their extreme originality, even if traces of Walter Scott, Philippa Gregory and even the Gothic novel can be found in them (Griffin 2019: 87; Gačnik 2020). Mantel's linguistic strategies and her use of intertextuality have also been studied as means through which accuracy and authenticity (verisimilitude) are achieved in *Wolf Hall* (Stocker 2012; Saxton 2020). So far, the most exhaustive analysis of the character of Thomas Cromwell and the narrative technique used by Mantel in the trilogy has been provided by Johnston (2017), although, again, this work pre-dates *The Mirror & the Light*, with important consequences as far as the author's narrative technique is concerned, as shall be seen below.

This article aims at exploring the use Mantel makes of Whig historiography in her *Wolf Hall* trilogy. Focusing on characterisation and narrative technique, I will argue that the narrative, far from being a vindication of Whiggism's main tenets, invites profound reflections on identity in twenty-first-century Britain. In doing this I am filling a research gap as, even if scholarship has highlighted that Mantel's works have characteristically explored issues of both individual and collective identity (Knox 2010: 321), to my knowledge researchers have not yet specifically addressed this in the Thomas Cromwell trilogy. In this regard, Baker (2015) attempts to explore the concept of nation in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. Her research, however, only explores the extent to which England could be considered a nation in Henry VIII's reign, it does not mention Whiggism and it pre-dates both the Brexit referendum and —crucially— the publication of the trilogy's final instalment, in which the impact of the author's narrative technique can be fully appreciated. Similarly, Griffin does hint that the turbulent England depicted in Mantel's novels remarkably resembles that of 2016 (2019: 87-88). However, Griffin falls short of a full explanation as to how this parallel comes into effect. Last but not least, and as seen above, although previous research has already analysed characterisation and narrative technique, it has tackled both mostly separately, and definitely not in connection with the use of Whiggism in the novels.

The starting point in my analysis is a crucial tenet of historical fiction research: historical novels draw a parallel between the past and the present (Ciplijauskaitė 1981: 12-16). More specifically, this genre, whose birth Lukács linked to periods of critical historical transformation (1963: 19-30), is strongly connected to national identity: historical discourse has traditionally presented the nation as a “living” entity rooted in an almost mythical past (Anderson 1991), and the novel has contributed to both feeding and questioning such mythical narratives by featuring national icons as characters and setting their plots in “foundational” times (Brantly 2017: 136). In turn, this points to a synecdochical relationship between the historical fiction hero and the nation (Lukács 1963: 35).

In *Wolf Hall*, this foundational time is Henry VIII's reign, which saw the birth of an independent Church of England, one of the four pillars of Englishness (crown, parliament, constitution and the Protestant church), according to Whig historiography (Kumar 2001: 45). And the present it was written in is no other than that leading to, and immediately following, Britain's 2016 Brexit Referendum, in the discursive context of which the so-called pillars of Englishness have been absolutely central.

Whig historiography has presented Britain as a nation teleologically oriented to increased "liberty, parliamentary rule and religious toleration" (Wilson and Ashplant 1988: 2), invariably siding with Protestants and Whigs (McClay 2011: 48-49), and leaving an indelible trace in the popular imagination. Crucially, this teleological interpretation has identified Henry VIII's reign as a foundational time since "[t]he English Reformation [...] gave the liberating kick that prepared the way for the Whig revolution" (Knox Beran 2016). As presented in the rhetoric of former PM Theresa May, Brexit is but the culmination of this long fight for freedom, ushering in "great national change" (Marlow-Stevens and Hayton 2021: 883). May's rhetoric was nothing but a continuation of Britain's official political discourse, as the relationship between Britain and the European Union has always been fraught with difficulties arising from the Whig-induced exceptionalist interpretation of the task the country should perform in Europe (Daddow 2015). Indeed, Post-WWII Britain's (and especially England's) national identity issues had already led to a European Community membership referendum held as early as 1975, preceded by intense parliamentary debate in which Britain's traditions of both "internationalism" (presenting the country as having a global, not exclusively European vocation) and parliamentary democracy and sovereignty featured prominently as threatened by EC membership (Ludlow 2015: 24-26).

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English national identity discourses are central to this discussion as they lie at the core of the public debate on Britain's EU membership: Euroscepticism was higher in England than elsewhere in the UK before the 2016 referendum (Kenny 2015: 36) and most of those identifying exclusively as English or more English than British voted Leave (Virdee and McGeever 2018: 1809). Clearly feeding on the tenets of Whig historiography, such discourses have opposed a liberty-loving England to Brussels (Kenny 2015: 44), presented as severely limiting Britain's traditionally international vocation and, most importantly, its links to the 'Anglosphere', as Britain's former Dominions are referred to by the Eurosceptic right (Wellings and Baxendale 2015).

At all events, the fact that *Vote Leave* (the referendum campaign favouring Brexit backed by mostly Conservative leaders including Boris Johnson) chose "Let's take back control" as their slogan, presenting the issue at stake as a battle for Britain's

democracy and parliamentary sovereignty (Virdee and McGeever 2018: 1804), is in itself good evidence of the extent to which Whig historiography has influenced the views of British voters across the political spectrum, especially among the older generations. Not less importantly, it also suggests that the discourse of Brexit clearly transcends the purely political sphere, having dominated British public opinion largely thanks to the disseminating role played by both the traditional press (which the British still rely on at times perceived as especially transcendent) and online media. A “compelling narrative” was thus created, alerting to the dangers of uncontrolled immigration, and drawing on a national identity largely infused by the Whiggish “self-representation of Britain (meaning, more often than not, England) as *the* ideally Liberal and democratic nation first shaped by the Reformation, the Industrial Revolution and later framed by Victorian values” whose survival crucially depends on its independence from freedom-restraining Brussels (Maccaferri 2019: 391-392, 395, emphasis in original).

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Interestingly, Mantel has openly dismissed any possible analogy between the Reformation and Brexit: “What foreign policy in the 1530s was trying to do was not come out of Europe but go into a new kind of Europe” (in “BBC Reith Lectures. The Iron Maiden” 2017). While this suggests that Mantel values the Reformation and Brexit very differently —Mantel is a ‘Remainer’ (“Arts Figures Backing EU Remain Campaign” 2016)— it does not preclude the possibility of reading this narrative against the background provided by Brexit. This is exactly the aim of this article, in which I will argue that while the trilogy’s main character, Thomas Cromwell, is presented as the architect of at least some of the pillars of Englishness, a deeper analysis of the character’s traits and Mantel’s narrative technique —especially her use of an increasingly evident unreliable narrator— suggests that this portrayal of Cromwell goes well beyond a mere rehabilitation of this historical figure —an aim Mantel has herself denied (2012).

2. Becoming Acquainted with Mantel’s Thomas Cromwell

Unlike most other fictional accounts of Henrician England, Mantel’s trilogy focuses on Thomas Cromwell. Inspired by sympathetic sources (Arias 2014), this Cromwell is very different from the ruthless, amoral character in previous representations. From a literary point of view, the trilogy’s most remarkable feature is its third-person present-tense narrative voice, which comes through via a fusion of “a Jamesian free, indirect style with a restrained stream of consciousness” (Mukherjee 2009), which foregrounds Cromwell’s thoughts and perceptions (Huber 2016: 78). Thus, it is as if sitting behind a camera placed behind Cromwell’s

eyes that the reader is mostly given access to the different events and characters (Wilson 2017: 155), including Cromwell himself. Accordingly, it would not be accurate to claim that “we experience the world entirely from the principal protagonist’s perspective”, as Johnston does (2017: 543). Rather, the story is mostly told as if the narrator had access to Cromwell’s conscience, and it is through this conscience that the narrator reproduces not only the words but also (what Cromwell assumes are) the thoughts of other characters. This arguably has a twofold effect: first, as will be explored in this section, both the narrative technique and Cromwell’s characterisation foster the reader’s sympathy. Ultimately, however, and as will be shown in the next section, the reader is subtly invited to question the whole narrative and consider the extent to which it can be trusted.

In *Wolf Hall*, the reader has access through multiple flashbacks to Cromwell’s troubled childhood and adolescence, skilfully used to offer the narrative portrait of a character that twenty-first-century readers find attractive. This is in no small part because Mantel’s Cromwell embodies the characteristics of the myth of the self-made man (Gačnik 2020: 77, 88). Thus, he leaves England a nobody, acquires all sorts of skills—including a prodigious memory—being variously employed in France, Italy and the Low Countries, only to return to England, where he succeeds as a lawyer, starts working for Cardinal Wolsey, becomes a member of the House of Commons and, eventually, Henry VIII’s right-hand man.

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The magnitude of Cromwell’s achievements undoubtedly gains the readers’ admiration. And this in spite of Cromwell’s portrayal being essentially problematical: “readers repeatedly witness Cromwell committing acts of brutal ruthlessness, of intimidation and cynical entrapment”, all evidence of “his uncanny talent for gauging, with sinister precision, an opponent’s [...] weaknesses” (Johnston 2017: 539; see also Alghamdi 2018). To this, and in line with Kenny (2022: 111), I would add a non-negligible element of revenge, best seen in how he concocts the destruction of Anne Boleyn. Using evil gossip, he builds a convincing case culminating in the conviction of Anne for adultery with different courtiers and even incest with her own brother—conveniently, those who contributed to, or rejoiced in, Wolsey’s fall from grace: “[h]e needs guilty men. So he has found men who are guilty. Though perhaps not guilty as charged” (Mantel 2013: 392).

While I agree that Mantel’s portrayal does not conceal Cromwell’s flaws, my argument is that the reader’s sympathy with the character is not only gained but sustained throughout the entire narrative. This is largely due to a combination of three essential factors, namely the intimate nature of much of Mantel’s narrative portrait of Thomas Cromwell, his pragmatic personality and, last but not least, the narrative technique used throughout the trilogy. Indeed, the narrative provides much of Cromwell’s private life, almost completely absent from the historical

records. This includes his sexual urges, the comfort he derives from his wife's company, the love he feels for the (sometimes adopted) members of his family, his patronage of scholars and even his charitable nature as he provides for the poor—all of which greatly contributes to humanising this literary character.

Yet one feature may be said to capture the essence of Mantel's Cromwell: pragmatism. Interestingly, this was a virtue cherished by Coleridgean, English Romanticism as a reaction to German metaphysics, widely deemed "otherworldly, abstract, and un-English" (Kaiser 2004: 13). By way of example, perceiving Wolsey's imminent fall, and however much he loves him, Cromwell's common sense dictates he should start provisioning for himself: "He [...] is ready to welcome the spring [...]. There is a world beyond this black world. There is a world of the possible. A world where Anne can be queen is a world where Cromwell can be Cromwell" (Mantel 2010: 205). Thus, while spending countless hours on state business, he makes himself immensely rich.

Truth be told, Mantel's Cromwell also embodies pragmatism of a less likeable kind. He works his way up by speaking to the right people. He uses his skills as a lawyer and his forceful powers of persuasion to make others comply with his wishes. And he stoops to bribing, handpicking the members of a jury or even fabricating evidence if necessary. Again, the latter is perhaps best seen in the case against Anne Boleyn, whom he destroys once he realises that her chances of giving Henry his coveted male heir are dim. In short, Mantel's Cromwell seems to encapsulate every principle of legal pragmatism, a philosophy that "makes the case for not adhering to principles but focussing on outcomes" (Kenny 2022: 110).

This notwithstanding, the unique perspective from which the story is told (via a narrator that appears to provide full access to his conscience) makes it virtually impossible for the reader not to sympathise with Mantel's Cromwell, thus forgiving him his flaws. For, indeed, his ruthlessness appears to serve a higher purpose. As perceived by Cromwell, the English king is an erratic, dangerous despot: "It is his councillors, as mean a crew as ever walked, who carry his sins for him" (Mantel 2020: 67). Not surprisingly, such sins include "get[ting] the king new wives and dispos[ing] of the old" (15).

Cromwell despises Henry: were he not king, he would "have him locked up" (Mantel 2010: 447). Nevertheless, he respects the institution he represents, although with his usual dose of pragmatism. In his idea of kingship, the "body natural" should be neatly separated from the "body politic" (see Borman 2016: 170). Thus, as a powerful metaphor for Henry's corrupt soul, no words are minced in the narrative to refer to his almost obscene physical decay: "the fine calf visibly bandaged, his face puffy and pale. Henry is the site, his body the locus, the blood and bile and phlegm; his burdened and oppressed flesh the place where all

arguments come to rest” (Mantel 2020: 116). Consequently, he does not see Henry as his God-ordained lord: “Henry puts a hand on his shoulder. In that anointed palm there is *vertu*. Once consecrated, a king can heal. So why does he not feel healed?” (380). And yet he recognises that, after the instability caused by the Wars of the Roses, only a strong monarchy can unite the country.

Henry represents the Medieval order. In his own words in the narrative, “[a] king is made by God, not Parliament” (Mantel 2020: 341). Yet Cromwell believes that those times in which the monarch could “override Parliament” and “govern only by himself” have passed (Mantel 2010: 447): “The world is not run from [...] his border fortresses, not even from Whitehall. The world is run from Antwerp, from Florence, from places he has never imagined [...]. Not from castle walls, but from counting houses” (Mantel 2010: 378). Consequently, he regards it as his duty “to restrain my cannibal king” (Mantel 2020: 119). In the narration, therefore, Cromwell appears as the architect of a new England in which the king’s power is to be limited by Parliament. Cromwell’s views on governance at least partly justify the foul means he resorts to, including the dissolution of Henry’s first marriage to Katherine (which only produces a daughter, Mary), and even his second (which results in the execution of Anne Boleyn): “[w]hat use is Anne’s child, the infant Elizabeth? [...] [T]his dynasty, still new as kingship goes, is not secure enough to survive such a course” (Mantel 2013: 29).

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Mantel’s Cromwell appears as a supporter of reform. Thus, he takes issue with irrational Catholic dogma and does not favour practices like the cult of images or relics. Likewise, Cromwell is very vocal about the corruption of religious houses. All this—together with the huge economic profit resulting from it—is presented in the novels as the driving force behind the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Yet, as stated above, pragmatism also has an impact on his own religious views: he regards both Catholic and Protestant zealots with equal suspicion. In fact, Cromwell comes closest to defining his views on religion when he suggests that his mind, unlike (Catholic) Thomas More’s, is not “fixed on the next world” but on the “prospect of improving this one” (Mantel 2010: 635).

Not surprisingly, as a pragmatic person, Mantel’s Cromwell becomes immensely rich whilst implementing his reforms. However, the narrative appears to justify it: “No man in England works harder than he does. Say what you like about Thomas Cromwell, he offers good value for what he takes” (Mantel 2013: 245). Because, as presented in the narrative, what Cromwell does is to put all his political and legal cunning (which results in the making or unmaking of up to four of Henry’s marriages) at the service of his vision of what England should become: a country with “an equal justice, from Essex to Anglesey, Cornwall to the Scots border” (82); a country in which the people, represented in Parliament, can limit royal

power; and a sovereign country also in religious matters, with its own, more rational church, which involves the dissolution of “the small monasteries” (243). His star project is, therefore, the English Reformation, legally engineered by Cromwell, which is presented as not only springing from his own religious views but out of national necessity:

It is time to say what England is, her scope and boundaries [...], to estimate her capacity for self-rule. It is time to say what a king is, and what trust and guardianship he owes his people: what protection from foreign incursions moral or physical, what freedom from the pretensions of those who would like to tell an Englishman how to speak to his God. (Mantel 2010: 338)

The narrator thus outlines the pillars of the new state Cromwell is building, arguably designed to safeguard England’s sovereignty (“her capacity for self-rule”) as the legal reflection of the English national identity he is actively promoting, best expressed through the English people’s right to their own national church (“freedom from the pretensions of those who would like to tell an Englishman how to speak to his God”).

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3. Further Insights into Mantel’s Cromwell

As suggested in the previous section, the narrator’s often imperceptible distance from the character inevitably results in the reader feeling equally close. Additionally, some traits of this personality (most notably his pragmatism), as well as the fact that the narrative seems to present him as the chief agent that started transforming England into the country Whiggism has traditionally understood it should become, make it difficult for the reader not to associate Cromwell with Englishness. However, it is my contention that Mantel’s approach to this issue cannot be reduced to a simple vindication of the Whig concept of Englishness.

Cromwell, having travelled around Europe, and being fluent in several languages, not only reflects on who he is, but actually realises that he is in constant change: “He Thomas, also Tomos, Tommaso and Thomaes Cromwell, withdraws his past selves into his present body and edges back to where he was before” (Mantel 2010: 71). This seems to indicate that Mantel’s Cromwell’s understanding of identity is essentially post-structuralist, viewing it not as a state but as a process (Hall 1991: 47). Otherwise put, identity is not about “being” but about “becoming”, an interesting tenet which is expressed through ekphrasis when Cromwell comes across different copies of his portrait being made: “and so he comes into the hall to find versions of himself in various stages of becoming” (Mantel 2013: 8).

Cromwell is therefore presented as a fragmented self who wants to bring change to his country. However, he perceives fellow Englishmen as belonging in an earlier episteme, very much rooted in a mythical past and an organic sense of history, both of these making up the core of the English nation as an imagined community. The ancient myths evoked in *Wolf Hall's* mysteriously entitled chapter “An Occult History of Britain” (2010: 65-66), linking the origin of Britain to the fall of Troy (as in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae*), reinforce this interpretation. As perceived by the character, therefore, the English people —“squalid and ignorant” (Mantel 2013: 96)— very much believe in what Romantics would refer to as the “cultural nation” built upon a common genius that is made visible through history (Heath and Boreham 1999: 34): “These are old stories”, his admired master Wolsey tells him, “but some people, let us remember, do believe them” (Mantel 2010: 94). Crucially, this history is presented as a continuum that goes back to “shared historical and social cultural practices” whilst projecting itself into the future, as the nation is nothing but the “organic outgrowth of a people”, and the essence or genius of this people must, and will, remain unaltered (Kaiser 2004: 18-19).

It is precisely because he knows this that Cromwell concludes that all peace treaties with France are bound to fail. As Hall puts it, “all identities operate through exclusion, through the discursive construction of a constitutive outside and the production of abjected and marginalized subjects” (1996: 15). Recognising France as England's traditional “constitutive outside” in the discourse of Englishness (see Newman 1997: 124), Cromwell realises that the English hate the French for the war they brought upon them, and the French have not yet forgotten the English “for the talent for destruction they have always displayed when they get off their own island”; consequently, “the kings may forgive each other; the people scarcely can” (Mantel 2010: 117-118).

Accordingly, it is by considering the English people's belief in their *genius* that Cromwell concocts his plan to bring about his changes, which need to be presented as congruent with England's *genius* and organic history. The first step is the toppling of Queen Katherine, and he expects no major opposition to this move: the xenophobic attitudes resulting from the strong sense of English national identity his reforms evoke will naturally awake fear of the other: after all, the English “like Katherine because they have forgotten she is Spanish” (Mantel 2010: 358-359).

Once Katherine is set aside, the first changes may be brought about. *Wolf Hall's* Part 6 opens with Cromwell enunciating the legal principles behind the English Reformation:

the prince gets [his power] through a legislative body [...]. It is from the will of the people, expressed in Parliament, that a king derives his kingship. [...] Christ did not

bestow on his followers grants of land, or monopolies, offices, promotions. [...] “The legislative body”, he says, “should provide for the maintenance of priests and bishops. After that, it should be able to use the church’s wealth for the public good”. (Mantel 2010: 532)

In doing this, Mantel’s Cromwell presents the four pillars of Englishness to be later upheld by the Whig historical tradition, namely the Crown, Parliament, Constitution and the Protestant church. However, in order to succeed in changing the country, Cromwell first needs to provide an illusion of continuity. He will do so by invoking the unalterable nature of the English *genius*, thereby providing history with a teleological sense. Accordingly, in a stroke of legal pragmatic genius, his Act of Supremacy “doesn’t [...] make the king head of the church”; it simply “states that he is head of the church, and always has been” (Mantel 2010: 588). To which the narrator ironically adds, “[i]f people don’t like new ideas, let them have old ones. If they want precedents, he has precedents” (588). In her characterisation of Cromwell, therefore, Mantel evokes the “invented traditions” used by ideological apparatuses to feed national identity discourses, implying “continuity with [...] a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1).

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By disclosing Cromwell’s conscious manipulation of English public opinion, Mantel subtly raises questions about the organic sense of history and the very existence of the English *genius* that the traditional pillars of Englishness arguably stand for, since Cromwell, rather than securing continuity, is shown as radically breaking with the past. As Katherine’s 15-year-old daughter Mary remarks, Cromwell’s “ancient precedents” have been “invented these last months” (Mantel 2010: 289-290).

It follows from above that evidence can be found that the author cunningly plays with her readers as regards how they are to interpret Cromwell. And further doubts result from Mantel’s narrative technique. As already seen, the story is told as if the narrator had full access to Cromwell’s conscience, and this raises questions concerning the extent to which the narrator can be trusted. In Mantel’s own words, “[t]he reader has to [...] interrogate every line asking how reliable is this person as witness to his story or someone else’s story” (“BBC Reith Lectures. Adaptation” 2017). While the narration presents a man of enormous capacity and extraordinary intelligence, the reader knows what the final outcome will be: Cromwell is to die, executed by order of his King, which seems to indicate that he cannot keep him so tightly under control as he seems to in *Wolf Hall*. If his perception of, say, Henry, is therefore not entirely reliable, where does this place his perception of all the other characters or, for that matter, even his worldviews? And what are the implications of this in terms of how the reader is to make sense of Cromwell?

One early clue is highlighted by Johnston (2017: 539): *Wolf Hall* opens with a young Thomas being brutally beaten by his father. Soon afterwards, Thomas leaves England, in search of—the reader assumes—a better future away from his violent father. It turns out, however, that Thomas's beating was the way his father punished him after learning that his son involved himself in a street fight and ended up stabbing another youth. And it is only later that the reader learns from Bishop Stephen Gardiner (Cromwell's enemy) that the youth stabbed by the young Thomas eventually died (Mantel 2013: 86). How could Cromwell, to whose conscience the narrator appears to have full access, forget such a crucial episode? Or is it that this access is not as full as it seems?

Mantel addresses this in *The Mirror & the Light*. Although he struggles to retain his optimism—"he is always inclined to think the world will turn our way" (Mantel 2020: 720)—, the Cromwell that emerges here is one dominated by a feeling of exhaustion and vulnerability: "He feels tired. Seven years for the king to get Anne. Three years to reign. Three weeks to bring her to trial. Three heartbeats to finish it. But still, they are his heartbeats as well as hers. The effort of them must be added to all the rest" (19). As the narration progresses it becomes clear that Cromwell is overwhelmed by increasing anxiety and guilt. He recurrently dreams of Anne Boleyn's execution. Such visions gradually multiply to involve other characters whose deaths he procured, like George Boleyn or Thomas More. Eventually Cromwell is depicted as increasingly haunted by ghosts—a trademark of Mantel's "spectral realism" (Funk 2020)—while he feels abandoned by Thomas Wolsey, whose guidance he has continued to feel even after the latter's death.

Further evidence of the narrator's (and Cromwell's) unreliability can be found in the fact that the trilogy's third novel contains subtle references to Cromwell's eventual fall, although neither the narrator nor (in most cases) the character shows any signs of recognising them as such. For example, quite early in the novel Chapuys (the imperial ambassador) amicably warns Cromwell that he may see Henry's favour withdrawn, reminding him of Wolsey's fall (Mantel 2020: 57-68). Halfway through the novel, Martin (a fictional jailer in the Tower of London who appears as one of Cromwell's protégés) candidly says to him: "I trust it shall be many a day before I see you here [the Tower]" (384). More ominously, Lord Thomas Howard (Norfolk's half-brother) predicts Henry will let Cromwell fall: "I pity you, for there is no way forward for you. He will hate you for your successes as much as your failures" (386). Last but not least, soon after Henry's disastrous first encounter with Anne of Cleves, there is a scene in which Cromwell and his son Gregory eat pastries from an Italian plate, the pattern of which becomes visible as the pastries disappear from its surface: "it depicts the Fall of Troy" (727). Mantel thus poignantly suggests that Anne of Cleves is the Trojan Horse that will bring

about Cromwell's destruction, although the narrator does not mention any reaction on Cromwell's part. Even if there are signs in the narration that Cromwell may be giving in to pressure, he still enters a dialectical fight with his enemy Gardiner in which he compares himself to Petrarch, who "lay as one dead for the best part of a day" and "just before the burial party was due, he sat up—and then he lived for another thirty years. *Thirty years*, Stephen" (787, emphasis in original).

By the time it becomes clear to the reader that Cromwell understands that all is lost, the fall is already imminent and subsequent events unfold relentlessly. The narrator depicts Cromwell walking to the Council chamber minutes before his arrest as follows: "It is a boisterous day, and as they cross the court the wind takes his hat off. He grabs at it, but it is gone, bowling in the direction of the river" (Mantel 2020: 803). While this image clearly evokes Cromwell's future decapitation, the narrator does not mention how Cromwell interprets it, although the reader has been told that the night before Cromwell dreams that the Whitehall Palace stairs lead to a cockpit in which a cock baiting spectacle is taking place: one of the fighting animals is killed by the other and "is raked from the sand and thrown to a cur" (803). It is not difficult to construe that Cromwell sees himself represented in the dead cock and understands that the end is inevitable, although the narrator makes no mention of this.

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My perception of the narrative strategy used in the novels, therefore, and especially *The Mirror & the Light*, differs substantially from Johnston's, who highlights the apparent paradox that, although the reader experiences the world from Cromwell's perspective, their actual access to "Cromwell's interior" is remarkably limited (2017: 543-544). What Johnston crucially omits is that Mantel's narrative technique first gives the reader the *illusion* of full access to Cromwell's conscience. Eventually, however, it cleverly casts doubt on the narrator's reliability—who may not after all have full access to the character's conscience—and, by extension, Cromwell himself: Cromwell seems to take too long to realise the actual danger he is in, but the narrator takes even longer. As the narration progresses, it becomes clear that his ghostly visions are but a sign of guilt: "The feeling around his heart—that it is crushed, forced out of shape—he now understands as a deformity caused by grief. He feels he is dragging corpses, shovelling them up" (Mantel 2020: 853). Yet he only realises this when he is already imprisoned in the Tower, awaiting his own death. Significantly, it is only then that (the ghost of) his mentor Thomas Wolsey makes himself visible again to Cromwell. This enormous sense of guilt, together with an inferiority complex he has still not overcome (and which, it is suggested, may lie behind his resolution to destroy Thomas More), contributes to his mental torture while imprisoned.

All this strongly suggests that in his final days Cromwell concludes that his life has not been well spent. The end does not always justify the means. And this end may

not be the strong, solid edifice he had long envisaged. Throughout *The Mirror & the Light* Cromwell adopts a confessional mode, consigning his fears and tribulations to his diary, which he refers to as “The Book Called Henry”. Through this diary, references to which appear earlier on in the trilogy, Cromwell gradually shares with the reader the conclusion he is reaching that his remarkable talent, intelligence, and skills have their limits: “You cannot anticipate or fully know the king. [...] Do not turn your back on the king. This is not just a matter of protocol”, he writes halfway through the novel (Mantel 2020: 393, 395). This inevitably has a destructive effect on his self-assurance: “He takes out The Book Called Henry. [...] He wonders if he has any advice for himself. But all he sees is how much white space there is, blank pages uninscribed” (553).

Consequently, Cromwell appears to come to terms with the fact that he is not the all-powerful, invincible statesman that comes through in the first two novels. He has already paid a high enough price —Cromwell feels he has failed as a caring father (Mantel 2020: 694)— and he will now pay for his efforts with his own life. Yet the question is, were these efforts worth the while? As a prisoner in the Tower, he realises that his new England, which he has created through legislation, is but a construct: “the law is not an instrument to find out truth. It is there to create a fiction” (846). This evokes an earlier reflection appearing in *Wolf Hall*: “When you are writing laws you are testing words to find their utmost power. Like spells, they have to make things happen in the real world” (Mantel 2010: 574). The Thomas Cromwell of the *Wolf Hall* trilogy, very much like Mantel herself, is extremely meticulous as regards his language choices. This suggests that he is fully aware of the illocutionary force of language. In human societies, it is implied here, reality does not exist outside the realm of language in action, i.e. discourse —epitomised here by the law, as befits a lawyer’s mind. Ironically, it is this same discourse devised by him (and which creates his new England) that will lead to his death: “He has lived by the laws he has made and must be content to die by them” (Mantel 2020: 846). Thus seen, the trilogy echoes Mantel’s first historical novel, *A Place of Greater Safety*, in which Danton, Desmoulins and Robespierre become the victims of the very “apparatus” they helped create (see Chadwick 2020).

4. Conclusion: *Wolf Hall* in the Context of Brexit

In this article I have provided an account of the characterisation of Thomas Cromwell and, especially, Mantel’s narrative technique in the *Wolf Hall* trilogy. My ultimate aim, however, was to explore how this narrative addresses issues of the present it was written in, with inevitable connections to national identity issues. In this respect, suggestions have been made that, while such connections can indeed

be detected in the novels, this is a multi-layered narrative affording different, apparently mutually exclusive readings.

On the one hand, the illusion of extraordinary intimacy that the narrator creates between the reader and the main character in this fiction, together with the latter's fascinating personality, make it virtually impossible for the reader not to sympathise with Cromwell. Additionally, the fact that the essentially pragmatic Cromwell is undoubtedly presented as laying the foundations of an independent Protestant church and a parliamentary monarchy —the pillars of Englishness traditionally upheld by Whig historiography— inevitably seems to make him a suitable representative of quintessential Englishness.

On the other hand, however, I have argued that the narrative invites the reader to re-consider his/her views on the character. As the narrative progresses, the reader accesses Cromwell's fragmented, essentially post-structural and arguably post-national sense of self. This crucially collides with the English national identity discourse he evokes. In other words, Cromwell is presented as asking the English people to believe in a fallacy since he sustains his policy on an epistemological foundation he does not uphold as valid.

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Regardless of this, the reader is somehow led to understand that Cromwell's moves are justified as he knows what is best for his country. Extradiegetically, some doubts may trouble the processing of this understanding on the part of the reader as s/he knows that the real Cromwell is to be eventually executed by order of the king he presumes to know and control. Clues, however, begin to appear, especially in the third novel, suggesting that the narrator's perception of Cromwell is not entirely reliable. Insomnia and ghostly apparitions are used to indicate an increasing sense of guilt while the narrator is not —and the character does not seem to be— able to identify what for the reader are clearly cataphoric references to the latter's eventual fall. As a result, it gradually dawns on the reader that the narrator's perception of Cromwell as in possession of a powerful, virtually infallible mind is not entirely accurate. Both characterisation and narrative technique, therefore, make it possible for the reader to construe that, however admirable, Cromwell's reforms, arguably leading to the creation of a Protestant parliamentary monarchy, not only were based on false premises —the teleological sense of history based on the English genius— but also came at too high a cost (which Cromwell would pay with his own life).

This interpretation is all the more relevant as it is difficult for the reader not to relate it to the historical context in which the trilogy was published, which is none other than that of pre- and immediately post-Brexit Britain. As seen above, the discourse of Brexit has heavily relied on the same teleological view of British history traditionally presented by Whig historiography as an uninterrupted road towards greater freedom (represented by a parliamentary monarchy) and a more rational sense of religion (represented by a national Protestant church). Such

values have been somehow encapsulated in the principle of English (and eventually British) exceptionalism, which, working hand in hand with increasingly visible xenophobic attitudes (Gregorio-Godeo 2020), has more recently complicated Britain's relationship with the EC/EU and largely accounts for the country's exit from the latter. Significantly, such values are those evoked by Cromwell in the trilogy, also fostering xenophobia and resulting in England's break with Rome. And if such changes are exposed in the narrative as based on epistemological fallacies, what are the implications of this as far as Brexit is concerned?

As Mantel has clearly stated, the Reformation and Brexit are two very different events. However, this does not seem to make it impossible for a fictionalisation of one to contain relevant allusions to the other. After all, Mantel herself—whose works have characteristically explored issues of both individual and collective identity (Knox 2010: 321)—has referred to Brexit as resulting from “a gigantic failure on the part of the voting public in Britain to know their history”, and partly attributed it to the fact that “all nations have a fantasy of a golden age” (“BBC Reith Lectures. Silence Grips the Town” 2017). As I see it, the *Wolf Hall* trilogy definitely identifies the Tudor period as England's golden age celebrated in the popular imagination whilst subtly yet effectively questioning the validity of such myths. Crucially, this is very much in line with the “nostalgia for a ‘grand narrative’ [...] whose unifying and meaning-making power is no longer feasible” that Hart (2019: 87) detects in Mantel's earlier novel *Fludd* (1989). In light of this, and unlike Saxton (2020: 138), I would contend that the Thomas Cromwell trilogy could not be categorised as historiographic metafiction. Although intensely self-reflexive, it simultaneously exudes nostalgia for, and serves to denounce, hegemonic narratives that have traditionally monopolised historical “truth” (in this case, Whig history). Additionally, it crucially does not call into question the extent to which it is possible to have knowledge of the past. Rather, and as suggested above, Mantel seems to be quite happy scrutinising the existing historical records and resorting to her artistry in order to fill the blanks and resolve the contradictions of her sources. This latter aspect draws the trilogy closer to the realm of neo-historical fiction, even if it might be preferable to let the author speak for herself by quoting a short metafictional excerpt from *The Mirror & the Light* in which the narrator, alluding to Henry's first encounter with his daughter Mary after the latter has finally signed her submission to her father's authority, reflects on the beauty of historical fiction:

When the chronicles of the reign are composed, by our grandchildren or by those in another country, [...] they will reimagine the meeting between the king and his daughter—the orations they made each other, the mutual courtesies, the promises, the blessings. They will not have witnessed, they could not record, the Lady Mary's wobbling curtsy, or how the king's face flushes and sweeps her up; her sniffing and his sob, his broken endearments and the hot tears that spring from his eyes. (Mantel 2020: 154)

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Notes

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1. *A Place of Greater Safety*, a fictional account of the interconnected lives of three French revolutionary leaders (Camille Desmoulins, Georges Danton and Maximilien Robespierre), was in fact the very first novel Mantel ever wrote. The manuscript was rejected by publishers and so the author focused instead on other literary projects which eventually became her first two published novels: *Every Day is Mother’s Day* (1985) and its

sequel *Vacant Possession* (1986). Both can be read as state-of-the-nation novels, sordid black humour being effectively used to highlight the pitfalls of the welfare state under (and immediately prior to) Thatcher’s premiership. Having become a recognisable literary voice (and historical fiction having by then recovered some of the prestige it had lost over most of the twentieth century), Mantel saw *A Place of Greater Safety* finally published in 1992.

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