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DIS-MANTELING MORE

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Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, winner of the prestigious 2009 Booker-Man award for fiction, re-presents the 1520s and early 1530s from Thomas Cromwell's perspective. Mantel mistakenly underscores Cromwell's confessional neutrality and imagines his kindness as well as Thomas More's alleged cruelty. The book recycles old and threadbare accusations that More himself answered. "Dis-Manteling" collects evidence for the accuracy of More's answers and supplies alternative explanations for events and for More's attitudes that Mantel packs into her accusations. *Wolf Hall* is admirably readable, although prejudicial. Perhaps it is fair for fiction to distort so ascertainably, yet I should think that historians will want to have a dissent on the record.

Keywords: Thomas Cromwell, *Wolf Hall* persecution, fiction, polemic, religious fanaticism

Le livre d'Hilary Mantel, Wolf Hall, lauréat du prestigieux Booker-Man award de 2009, peint un tableau des années 1520 et du début des années 1530, en adoptant le point de vue de Thomas Cromwell. Mantel se trompe en soulignant la neutralité religieuse de Cromwell, ainsi qu'en le peignant gentil et Thomas More cruel. Le roman recycle les accusations anciennes et élimées auxquelles More lui-même a répondu. « Dis-Manteling » rassemble les preuves de la justesse des réponses de More et fournit des explications supplémentaires concernant les événements (et les attitudes de More que Mantel amalgame dans ses accusations). Wolf Hall se lit admirablement bien, mais est rempli de préjugés. Peut-être est-il acceptable que la fiction déforme la réalité avec tant d'affirmation, cependant je crois que les historiens voudront exprimer leur dissentiment au regard de la documentation historique.

Mots-Clés: *Thomas Cromwell, Wolf Hall, persécution, fiction, polémique, fanatisme religieux*

Wolf Hall de Hilary Mantel, ganadora del prestigioso premio de ficción *Booker-Man* (2009), recrea las décadas de 1520 y 1530 desde la perspectiva de Thomas Cromwell. Mantel enfatiza erróneamente la neutralidad

confesional de Cromwell, presentándolo lleno de amabilidad frente a un Tomás Moro crudelísimo. El libro recicla viejas y manidas acusaciones contra Moro, que él mismo refutó. “Dis-Manteling” (Des-Mantel-ando) reúne evidencias que prueban la precisión de las respuestas de Moro, aportando explicaciones alternativas de los hechos y actitudes que Mantel esgrime en sus acusaciones contra Moro. *Wolf Hall* se lee de forma admirable, aunque es claramente tendencioso. Quizá la distorsión sea un rasgo propio de la ficción, pero pienso que los historiadores pueden disentir de esta lectura de los hechos.

Palabras clave: Thomas Cromwell, *Wolf Hall*, persecución, ficción, polémica, fanatismo religioso

* * *

There is so much to admire in Hilary Mantel’s acclaimed novel, *Wolf Hall*, winner of the 2009 Man Booker Prize – but not the book’s Thomas More. He publicly ridicules his wife Alice, beats a servant, tortures and executes religious dissidents. Mantel’s protagonist and narrator, Thomas Cromwell, by contrast, is considerate at home, compassionate toward the unfortunate, and even kind to More in disgrace, although one passage near the novel’s mid-point typifies the subdued snarl that marks Cromwell’s and, apparently, Mantel’s assessment of More’s character and preoccupations.

In mid-December, James Bainham, a barrister of the Middle Temple, abjures his heresies before the bishop of London. He has been tortured, the city says, More himself questioning him while the handle of the rack is turned and asking him to name other infected members of the Inns of Court. A few days later, a former monk and leather-seller are burned together. The monk had run in consignments of books ... through St. Katherine’s Dock, where the chancellor [More] was waiting to seize them. The leather-seller had possession

of Luther's *Liberty of a Christian Man* ... That's how the year goes out, in a puff of smoke, a pall of human ash hanging over Smithfield (274-75).¹

At that time, 1531, the year “went out” several months later, but, writing fiction for our time, Mantel asks to be excused liberties of that sort (533). The anachronism is not unprecedented. Neither, truth be told, is *Wolf Hall*'s tendentious rendering of Thomas More. Still, the novel so savagely brings More to ground – and will likely and deservedly be read so widely – that it seems timely to separate some fiction from fact and to speculate why More has lately been tackled in such rough manner.



Mantel has More's reputation for cruelty precede him in *Wolf Hall*. She mentions it near the novel's start, as Cromwell recalls Cardinal Thomas Wolsey's gentler methods. Reportedly a pack of determined heresy hunters approached Wolsey – Cromwell's benefactor in the novel, as in history, and More's predecessor as chancellor – to denounce several dissidents and to receive leave to apprehend them. Instead, Mantel's Cromwell tells us, Wolsey urged those in pursuit to pray for their prey, “poor benighted souls,” and warn them “to mend their manners or Thomas More will get hold of them and shut them in his cellar. And,” Wolsey adds, “all we will hear is the sound of screaming” (18).

¹ Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (New York, Holt, 2009). References to her novel are placed in parentheses. After she has had Bainham racked, he is executed and, at the stake, “wrapped in his sheet of flames,” he begs God to forgive More (299), but Mantel is unforgiving. Here, parenthetical references preceded by *CW* refer to the volume and page in *The Complete Works of Sir Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963-1997).

Wolsey dies long before *Wolf Hall* winds down, but his warning takes on new life as the novel develops. Few chapters run their course without at least one allusion to Thomas More's fiendishness, which, predictably, inspires numerous remarks at the book's end. During the last conversation between Cromwell and More, the former breaks an awkward silence with what could pass as a disclaimer: "If I were king," he says, "I would have left you [More] to live out your life. To repent of your butcheries" (520). By then, however, Mantel has had Cromwell select the jury that will convict More. She specifies the care he took to get jurors who were disposed to deliver the verdict expected by their sovereign. Yet, aside from that episode, she reveals no more about her protagonist's reputation for judicial murder. During More's term as chancellor, six heretics were put to death. As he prepared for his death, he watched Cromwell at work, seeing off assorted defiant priests and priors – and one bishop. Cromwell's toll reached several hundred before his execution in 1540. Yet Mantel brings her novel to a close well shy of that, very soon after More's exit.²

Mantel is said to be planning to publish a sequel. Perhaps her protagonist's "butchery" will be scrupulously recorded there. Already, in *Wolf Hall*, there are hints of his hubris. "It is bliss" for him "to think of two dukes," Suffolk and Norfolk, "on the run from him" (508). If one reviewer, Joan Acocella, is right, Mantel's admiration for "self-made men" and, by implication, her disdain for the well-born may account for that "bliss" – as well as for Cromwell's

² For Cromwell's casualties, consult Geoffrey R. Elton, *Policy and the Police: The Enforcement of the Reformation in the Age of Thomas Cromwell* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1972), 383-425 and Robert Hutchinson, *Thomas Cromwell: The Rise and Fall of Henry VIII's Most Notorious Minister* (New York: St. Martin's, 2007), 72-90.

“decency” and More’s “indecentcy.”³ More’s father was sufficiently well connected to place his son with John Morton, Chancellor and Cardinal. Mantel puts a young Cromwell in that same household as a servant, charged with bringing Morton’s “scholars” their bedtime grub. The story has the younger boy from the kitchen, curious, ask More what he was reading. “Just words,” was the condescending reply. When Cromwell rehearsed the brief exchange years later, More had no recollection of it (485). Yet Mantel’s man had stroked the insult while witnessing More’s rise and fall. And as More – overthrown but still “combative” – was marshaling words for his final defense before the jury Cromwell stacked against him, the latter, also combative, spitefully, albeit silently, recycled the snub. “Words, words, just words,” Mantel’s readers “hear” him reflect; “I remembered you Thomas More, but you didn’t remember me. You never saw me coming” (524).

Nonetheless, as Mantel’s Cromwell concedes, More, although imperceptive, has a wonderful way with words – and an enviable advantage in circles where wit is more highly prized than political prudence. Sixteenth-century Europe’s educated elites (and posterity), according to Cromwell, will read More’s correspondence and think of his enemies as “fools and oppressors.” Prolific early modern “humanists” and historians who revere them will cast the novel’s butcher as “the poor victim with the better turn of phrase” (465).

“Just words”? Mantel’s More lived in literature; as her Cromwell was quick to point out, he was remote from commoners’ experience. Ordinary people, who had been on the front lines, knew that soldiers would not roast babies “for their enjoyment,” as More

³ Acocella, “Tudor Tales,” *The New Yorker*, October 19, 2009, 79-81.

claimed; in 1527, the troops who raided Rome were “too busy carrying away everything they [could] turn into ready money,” according to Cromwell who – unlike More – had soldiered. But *Wolf Hall*’s More either believes the story or keeps it spinning for polemical purposes – so that the church’s enemies come across as easy-to-hate villains. Credulous or conniving, he generally lets words distort reality, because, Cromwell continues, More’s expectations for the next trump his sentiments about the suffering in this one. He often whips himself and wears a jerkin of horsehair beneath his other garments, irritating his flesh, “invit[ing] pain in.” William Roper, More’s son-in-law and first biographer, gives away that much; Mantel’s Cromwell adds that More assumes his “fury of righteousness” ensures him a celestial reward. In *Wolf Hall* Cromwell, who is critical of religious extremism, is mystified by More’s assumption (and asceticism). But, in an emblematic instance, Mantel has her protagonist concentrate less on the More’s “fury” than on ordinary people who, oddly, find employment – if not pleasure—making instruments of self-torment. “Simple villagers” (or perhaps monks, he admits) “comb the horsehair into coarse tufts.” They “ought to be found better jobs,” Cromwell concludes, shifting from the fanatics who flail themselves to the need for full (and more useful) employment (72).

Mantel’s Cromwell is perseveringly practical. Giving the devil his due, he concedes that More is industrious. “He’s never idled for an hour; he’s passed his life reading, writing, talking toward what he believes is the good of the Christian commonwealth” (193). “Words,” though, “just words”! The consequences for the church’s evangelical critics, whom More reviled, were awful (“butchery”). Also awful (and absurd), in Cromwell’s estimation, is More’s certainty that what he regards as “the good of the Christian

commonwealth,” is indeed good. “You and God have always been on familiar terms,” *Wolf Hall*’s Cromwell tells More, adding, “I wonder how you dare. You talk about your Maker as if he were some neighbor you went fishing with on Sunday afternoon” (462).

Cromwell’s comment on More’s familiarity with God is part of *Wolf Hall*’s analysis of More’s appeal from the consensus of his colleagues to his conscience, which will not let him endorse under oath the Act of Succession. But, on this occasion, Mantel sees more than her protagonist. She has More elaborate – and the elaboration is superbly done: “you [Cromwell along with his associates] say you have the majority. I say I have it. You say Parliament is behind you, and I say all the angels and saints are behind me, 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.” Cromwell is having none of this; to him, More’s appeal to something hovering over history – something more authoritative than the requirements that loyal subjects swear to the succession – makes little sense. Mantel’s Cromwell (and probably Mantel) considers More’s appeal to a larger, mysterious, invisible majority – to the *communio fidelium* – utterly impractical. Cromwell believes More is deceptive, trying to camouflage the certainties and ambitions that make him a “vain and dangerous” man (463).

More’s appeal to the consensus of the faithful did not play at all well when he last appeared in “a best-seller,” Robert Bolt’s often-staged, twice-filmed *A Man for All Seasons*. There, during a conversation with the duke of Norfolk, Bolt’s More dramatizes the suspicion later voiced by Mantel’s Cromwell. In the play, More starts by agreeing with Norfolk that the faith of the Roman Catholic faithful, living and dead, made only a “tenuous link” between the authority of the apostle Peter and the supremacy of the pope.

Apostolic succession was a theory, the two Tudors acknowledge, “but what matters to me,” More says, is not whether it’s true or not, but that I believe it to be true.” The playwright promptly clarifies with italics in the script as his More supplies, “rather, not that I believe it, but that I believe it. ... I trust I make myself obscure.” Obscure? Not at all! Norfolk seems confused, but he is not presented in the play as a particularly intelligent character. Bolt makes the point; Mantel’s Cromwell echoes it: More simply argues the sovereignty of conscience, which, as Patrick Whitely notes, “serves to preserve a secular audience’s sympathy.” Playgoers who refuse to “accept the truth of [papal hierocratic theory] may well accept More’s sense of self.”⁴ In Mantel’s novel, Cromwell plays the unsympathetic secularist. It matters to him whether theories are true. In his disenchanted world, someone who proposes to put conscience and zany ideas about mysterious majorities, which pass as the sum and substance of personal faith, above the law and loyalty to the king (“that I believe it”) is “vain and dangerous.”

Mantel’s Cromwell favors neither Catholics nor evangelical reformers, England’s earliest Protestants. He is exasperated when confessional enthusiasms surface in his household. His aim is to prepare his extended family to survive whatever the realm’s pulpits may proclaim as the truth and as often as that truth changes. If those he loves “are not to be flattened in the next change, it is he who must teach them the defensive art of facing both ways – faith and works, pope and new brethren” (212). Religion neither uplifts nor tantalizes this Cromwell. Religion “flattens” and “butchers.” He finds a convent near St. Paul’s Cathedral especially thoughtless and

⁴ Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1960), 53; Patrick J. Whitely, “Natural law and the Problem of Certainty: Robert Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons*,” *Contemporary Literature* 43 (2002), 779.

uncharitable, and Mantel has him generalize and remind himself that, “all the time,” “he runs up against” the religiously fervent who are morally insensitive (343-44). And *Wolf Hall*'s Thomas More, to Cromwell's mind, fits that description perfectly; self-inflicted suffering is an arresting though morally indifferent way to call attention to the transience of the pleasure of this world. But it is More's way, Cromwell sometimes says, and it is all the more immoral when accompanied by a commitment to make others suffer. The others, of course, are obstreperous dissidents whom Mantel's More was said to have throttled. Her Cromwell takes him to task as well for having failed, as king's privy councilor and chancellor, to advance plans to address the indignities and suffering that ordinary subjects endure – the “spectacles of pain and disgrace,” which Cromwell “see[s] around [him], the ignorance, unthinking vice, the poverty and lack of hope,” that inspires him to cope with depleted supplies, price-gouging, an irascible sovereign, “and oh, the rain.” More brooded about “the next world” because, Cromwell guesses, he saw “no prospect of improving this one.” “And you do?” More inquires, when confronted with this (Cromwell's) assessment (519-20).

Mantel captures the differences, after 1532, between More's outlook and Cromwell's. The latter trusts that a modicum of “yesmanship” might yield some social progress, as one of More's characters in the first book of his *Utopia* did. That character, to whom More gave his name, commended public service and predicted that well-meaning, hardworking councilors might, at least, prevent society's “spectacles of pain and disgrace” from getting far worse. Although *Utopia*, which was circulating by 1516, as More was about to become one of the king's councilors, is almost infinitely interpretable, its muted optimism about any official's effectiveness is

nearly demolished by a second character's cynicism. For Raphael Hythloday holds court in the first book – and holds courtiers in contempt, claiming the most ambitious among them are too self-absorbed to exert themselves on behalf of commoners. They are “trapped and sinking in the ooze of sycophancy and self-seeking maneuvers,” according to historian J.H. Hexter, who accurately, if a bit flamboyantly, paraphrases Hythloday's bitter criticisms of “status-oriented” councilors who tell kings what they want to hear rather than what they need to hear.⁵ As for more honorable public servants, they have no choice but to conform, if they have any hope of being heard. Any adviser who challenges the consensus is swiftly marginalized. Yet advisors who conform lose perspective. They may retain influence, but, Hythloday holds, they cannot formulate and implement projects for social improvements. When Mantel's More contemplates the next world, doubting the prospects for “improving this one,” he is recycling Hythloday's pessimism. Perhaps readers of *Utopia* and *Wolf Hall* ought to be excused if, considering her Cromwell, they recall why Hythloday avoided politics and public service. He was convinced that courtiers must toss their integrity overboard and sail with the prevailing winds, which correspond with their king's frequently perverse whims (CW 4: 96-99).

The character in *Utopia* who bears More's name seems to agree. He certainly does not dissent vigorously from Hythloday's appraisal of court life – yet he is displeased by Hythloday's unwillingness to serve. Let circumstance dictate compromise, he replies, even if one's opinion about what would improve the lot of all in the realm must be suppressed to ensure that one can make modest

⁵ Hexter, *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation: More, Machiavelli, and Seyssel* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 85-87.

contributions (CW 4: 100-101). But *Utopia's* first book gave Hythloday the better fortified position. Political culture seemed so stacked against principled public servants that their contributions could only be purchased at the expense of their principles. They must endorse "the bad advice [and] pestilential policies" of influential others, "who prefer to corrupt the best of men than [to] be corrected by them." Should a courtier's "integrity and innocence" be miraculously preserved for a time, he will increasingly appear unpatriotic (CW 4: 102-103).

On this count, Mantel's Cromwell concedes some ground to Hythloday, acknowledging that an "infinitely flexible" mind is required of colleagues who would survive and succeed at the early Tudor Court (318). More seems to have agreed yet, undeterred, he continued pursuing his legal and political careers, both of which had been launched years before he created Hythloday. More told friends who were skeptical that good could come from a scholar's devotion to public service that he was being "dragged" into it. He knew that courtiers' "feigned love" and "fierce hatred" made Court a thoroughly unpleasant place. Nonetheless, he trusted he could manage to be useful, despite the prevalent duplicity and hostility.⁶

And being useful at Court was increasingly important, as the king grew impatient with his bishops' failure to persuade the pope to annul his first marriage. King Henry's support for the bishops,

⁶ See *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed., Elizabeth F. Rogers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 6-8. Later, having experienced the "fierce hatreds" at Court and having resigned as chancellor, he suggested that "the whole temporality" must not be condemned because some "temporal folk" were "frail" and "evil." At the time, however, the polemical context likely induced More to amend Hythloday's comprehensive libel; he was faced with evangelical reformers' eagerness to condemn "the whole spirituality" because a few wicked and "frail" priests disgraced their profession (CW 9, 108).

moreover, was critical if the sectarian challenges to the Catholic churches on the Continent, which endangered the rule of law there, were not to spread and complicate every effort to keep the peace and keep the faith in England.⁷

Mantel's Cromwell sees things differently and has a different take on More's motives. Appeals to the rule of law and the value of church unity seem to Cromwell to camouflage the real reason More waded into recent controversies. "Let's have this straight," Mantel has her Cromwell sum up, "Thomas More here will tell you, I [More] would have been a simple monk, but my father put me to law. I would spend my life in the church, if I had the choice. I am, as you know, indifferent to wealth. ... The world's esteem is nothing to me." Cromwell pauses, satisfied that he has concisely captured (and mocked) More's sense of himself – emphasizing selflessness. But the pause is short, and the punch line telling. "So how did he become Lord Chancellor," Cromwell asks, feigning amazement; "was it an accident" (157-58)?

Mantel's script is riveting. During the dinner discussion spiced with Cromwell's taunts, she has More criticize the worldliness of his predecessor as chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, much as he actually did in Parliament. Cromwell in *Wolf Hall*, then, was responding to insults leveled at the prelate and politician he had long, loyally served – even after Wolsey was ostracized and humiliated. More might have replied immediately to Cromwell, had Mantel not introduced a late guest. More's rejoinder, therefore, was postponed – although for only a page. Departing, he proclaims that Cromwell

⁷ Germain Marc'hadour, "Fuitne Thomas Morus in Aulam Petractus?" in *Acta Conventus Neo-latini Sanctandreami*, ed., I. D. McFarlane (Binghamton: SUNY Press, 1986), 444-46 and William Rockett, "Wolsey, More, and the Unity of Christendom," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 35 (2004), 139-41.

“is no friend to the church, as we all know, but he is friend to one priest [Wolsey]. And that priest, the most corrupt in Christendom” (159). For so marvelously rendering Cromwell’s contempt, Mantel gets high marks. Historians should agree as well that her More has also gotten Cromwell right (“no friend to the church”). Arguably, however, both Mantel and her Cromwell have gotten More all wrong.



More would have known that Cromwell was rewriting the rules that had governed commerce between the English Catholic Church and the English Catholic king, because Pope Clement VII kept Henry VIII from getting what he most wanted in the late 1520s and thereafter. More would also have known that Cromwell became a good friend to the factions in Parliament friendly to evangelical reformers, who pilloried papal hierocratic theory and who tried to corset Rome’s influence in England. As early as 1529, Cromwell was implicated in evangelicals’ efforts. England’s Catholic bishops were no match for him. More was their ally, however, the king and Commons looked to Cromwell to engineer the resident bishops’ submission.⁸ Mantel mapped out Cromwell’s confessional neutrality, but historians now know what More surely knew, that her map bears little resemblance to the territory: Cromwell gravitated toward the evangelical reformers and their colleagues in the book trade. He readily patronized their efforts. Mantel may, in her sequel to *Wolf Hall*, want to take account of what William

⁸ Geoffrey R. Elton, “The Commons’ Supplication of 1532,” *English Historical Review* 66 (1951), 507-534; John Guy, *Thomas More* (London: Arnold, 2000), 159-60.

Underwood calls the “strong case” that Cromwell was “a partisan Protestant.”⁹

He was partial, that is, to the “heresies and errors” the resident bishops considered “contagious and pestiferous,” “corrupt and farre discrepant from the true sense of the gospell and [of] catholique understanding of scripture.”¹⁰ To help prelates suppress “corrupt doctrine,” More agreed to become chancellor. In 1529, in his first speech to Parliament in that capacity, he intimated that failures to prosecute English evangelicals during the previous decade were responsible for the “new enormities sprung amongst the people” and for the degradation of holy orders, religious vows, purgatory, sacraments, and saints.¹¹ More promised greater diligence. Objections were raised and still are – not only in Mantel’s novel – to the heresy procedures he sanctioned. He was resolved, he explained, to collect reliable information without having accusers risk “runn[ing] in the deadly malice” of persons they accused (CW 10: 98-101).

But the bishops and their agents would do the collecting. More would avoid the collateral damage – accusers intimidated or assaulted – by having “spiritual judge[s] meddle” “without an open accuser complaining” (CW 10: 126). He was criticized for precisely that, for letting the bishops preside over an inquisition, unjust and unprecedented. Henry Ansgar Kelly, however, recently sifted such

⁹ William Underwood, “Thomas Cromwell and William Marshall’s Protestant Books,” *The Historical Journal* 47 (2004), 517-39. Also see Susan Brigden, “Thomas Cromwell and the Brethren,” in *Law and Government under the Tudors*, ed., Claire Cross, David Loades, and J.J. Scarisbrick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 31-49.

¹⁰ David Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae* (London, 1737), 3: 735-39.

¹¹ Edward Hall, *Hall’s Chronicle*, ed., Henry Ellis (London: Johnson, 1809), 764.

complaints along with the procedures that bishops, with More's endorsement, used to ferret out those "contagious and pestiferous" heresies. Kelly concluded that the methods were "very workable and reasonable" and "standard at the time." A bishop received information that raised suspicion about a nearby preacher's or printer's activity and orthodoxy. What mattered – especially to critics of the process – was that the bishops became the accusers. Their staffs composed articles – in effect, accusations – that suspects addressed when summoned, articles that were sometimes based on dissidents' reputations and not on observed acts of defiance. Witnesses were not called until suspects denied, under oath, the charges that the bishops' articles enumerated. The oath was critical because what seems to have stirred greatest opposition was that suspects were compelled to make disclaimers, solemnly swearing to their truth, before they knew much about the case against them. To commoners who mistrusted church officials, the likely consequences would be frightening. Abuses were expected, as More admitted: with "a temporal judge [there is] an open cause appearing ... whereas a spiritual judge may call a man after his own pleasure if he bears the party displeasure." Still, More maintained – and Kelly agrees – that bishops did not improvise ruthlessly but followed a conventional canonical procedure with good cause (CW 9: 133).¹²

More could do little about commoners' mistrust. The evangelical reformers were immensely successful baiting Catholic officials and persuading the laity that the purportedly grotesque superstitions of a few among them were signs that Rome was gulling all England. The evangelicals exaggerated, blaming the credulity of

¹² Henry Ansgar Kelly, "Thomas More on Inquisitorial Due Process," *The English Historical Review* 123 (2008), 878-79 and 893-94. Also see Dominique Goy-Blanquet's review, *Moreana* 177-178 (2009), 238-51.

“a few dotting dames” on priests and bishops and multiplying that “few” until they became all the realm’s pious Catholics (CW 6.1: 237). More countered by exposing the critics’ bogus calculus but also insisted that England’s bishops’ efforts to silence the most implacable critics would have greater effect than his work collecting evidence to undermine their assertions. Hence, when Cromwell colluded with some reformers to restrict bishops’ powers to proceed against evangelical critics, More connived to keep Parliament from debating the bill. It is a shame that Hilary Mantel does not imagine and dramatize what might have occurred during the protests and deliberations. Cromwell and his associates would certainly have been smart to have pitched the alleged crimes of and against Thomas Bilney into their protests. To the anticlericals in the Commons, Bilney’s ordeal, trials, and execution proved the church had acted repugnantly. To More, Bilney’s experiences proved quite the contrary, namely, that the church was patient and (too often) indulgent – and that he was given every opportunity to repent and save himself. Bilney did recant and repent too late for a reprieve, according to More, who said that he had heard the heretic’s final words at the stake. Mantel does not trust More (531), yet, despite her doubts, she might have found a perfect place in *Wolf Hall* to paraphrase More’s assurances that Bilney’s remorse enabled him to bypass purgatory and that, lifted up “forthwith from the fire ... to heaven,” he was praying “incessantly for the repentance and amendment of all [who] have been by his means while he lived into any such errors induced or confirmed” (CW 8.1: 25).¹³

¹³ We only have More’s word for Bilney’s recantation and repentance, and Mantel is not the first to mistrust it. Conceivably, More cut corners to reclaim Bilney posthumously for the church, but the martyr has also acquired a reputation for ducking under the truth. Greg Walker’s, “Saint or Schemer? The 1527 Heresy

“The provys against” Bilney were “so many, so good, so clere and evydent, and so much more than suffycyent,” More declared, that the heretic’s father would have been persuaded of his son’s guilt (CW 6.1: 277).¹⁴ England’s bishops were far more accommodating, as noted, and nearly all of them came around, under pressure from Cromwell, to accommodate their king’s intentions to divorce Katherine of Aragon and Rome. Cromwell choreographed the passages from royal intention to parliamentary implementation, and he was principally responsible as well for most bishops’ acquiescence or “submission.” More, however, would not budge. He became Cromwell’s chief disappointment. Several historians believe that he was also active organizing dissent. That surmise is far from incontestable, yet suspicions to that effect are reinforced by Eustace Chapuys, the imperial ambassador to Henry’s Court, who let on that More was also “a great friend” to Queen Katherine’s friends.¹⁵ Cromwell laboring to strip Katherine of her title and to smooth the transition to her replacement, Anne Boleyn, was neither appeased by More’s promises not to meddle nor – if he did meddle – pleased with opposition.

If – and to the extent that – More secretly worked to stall or stop King Henry’s divorce from Katherine of Aragon, he did so, in

trial of Thomas Bilney Reconsidered,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 40 (1989), 219-38 pronounces his subject “more a schemer than a saint.” For Cromwell’s part in the attempt to restrict bishops’ practice of keeping accusers under wraps, see John Guy, *A Daughter’s Love: Thomas and Margaret More* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 208 and 315.

¹⁴ Thomas More’s attention to the case signals that he was “clearly driven to be active in the forefront of the fight against English Lutheranism,” as James Simpson suggests. See Simpson’s *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformed Opponents* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 46-47.

¹⁵ *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic of the Reign of Henry VIII* (London, 1862-1932) 5: 60 and 5:85.

part, because his king's first queen was a means to ensure her husband would keep the faith. And the king's Catholicism was absolutely critical if the realm's bishops were to proceed expeditiously against boneheaded heretics. If both royal authority and common sense appeared to be against them, the evangelicals' leading patrons, More assumed, would not keep insisting that "to talk heresies is no heresy" – as if "traitorous words" were not treason (CW 10: 69). But in *Wolf Hall* (and in history), Thomas Cromwell thought differently, as did lawyer Christopher St. German, who denounced More for having justified the bishops' supposedly preemptive and unprecedented procedures. St. German has since been celebrated for his erudite defense of dissidents' rights to due process and his agility, exhibited in what some historians consider a matter-of-fact trouncing of More – and his clerical friends. Henry Ansgar Kelly disagrees. We have heard him scold unknowledgeable critics of the bishops' interrogations and accusations. He also complains of historians who have applauded St. German's "air of sincere reasonableness," forgetting or simply missing that their man was neither sincere nor reasonable. Kelly convincingly concludes that St. German's opposition was "fuelled by malice." He knew he was "setting forth ... false statements about current practice and ... perversely wrong assertions about canonical procedures," although Kelly is not ready to deny that he "really was a dunce." Indeed, Kelly looks to be narrowing interpretive options to a single one: St. German maliciously *and* stupidly resisted "reasonable and workable" techniques of the time – a time when diminishing bishops' authority as heretics' accusers and judges would have attenuated the church's self-defense and profoundly altered its time-honored, canonical approach to inquisitorial "due process." To Thomas More, St. German's seemingly reasonable proposal that dissidents face

accusers rather than their bishops' suspicions was untimely and unconventional. If that innovation were tried, More predicted, "the streets were likely to swarm full of heretics" (CW 10:105).¹⁶

The English bishops, under pressure, bowed to the king's wishes, formulated with assistance from St. German, Cromwell, and the anticlerical factions in the Commons. More continued writing rebuttals of the anticlericals' claims, hoping to keep that swarm of heretics from forming. He submitted his resignation as chancellor, which *Wolf Hall* uses as an occasion for a brief but memorable conversation. Cromwell confronts More immediately after the latter surrenders the Great Seal and asks "what will you do now?" "Write. Pray," More answers, and Cromwell replies that his "recommendation would be to write only a little and pray a lot" (300). Instead, the former chancellor wrote a lot. Alistair Fox and Richard Marius claim that his output was far more "snarling" than substantive – and that his rejoinder to St. German was particularly "ineffectual" – "a failure."¹⁷ Other historians suggest that More exported his frustrations by "discard[ing] the aesthetically driven poetics of his own earlier humanist letters and fictions," that he became confrontational, petulant, and self-protective. But they also estimate that his adversaries' successes at Court, in the Commons, and in both Convocations of clergy convinced More that emphatic and sometimes ferociously argued reiterations of the truth – "the clatter of words" – were necessary to win "the clash of ideas,"

¹⁶ Kelly, "Inquisitorial Due Process," 849. Also see 834-36 and 858-60. Kelly lists the literary historians and historians of law who have lionized St. German.

¹⁷ Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 125; Marius, *Thomas More* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 437-38.

specifically, to reconfirm the superiority of the more traditional ones.¹⁸

A third pair of scholars seems to me to present the most compelling assessments of More's late polemical treatises. Brendan Bradshaw and James Simpson call them "spirited," "brilliantly argued," "forensic rather than philosophical," "rhetorical fireworks," "deliciously ironic verbal and intellectual play." Brendan Bradshaw is less willing than James Simpson to admit that More lost some control over his last literary endeavors, although both historians acknowledge that the evangelicals and their apologists had gained an advantage that More struggled to overcome. The early English reformers, that is, had turned influential heads by insisting that their "good news" could liberate the laity long tethered to superstitions. So to turn those heads back, More urgently argued that the evangelicals were, in intent and effect, chaining the laity to a set of tendentious and non-negotiable – sometimes easily impeachable interpretations of biblical passages. More's alternatives to what Simpson calls reformers' "idolatry of the book" amounted to a proto-pragmatic, "communitarian" approach to texts, which, by consensus, adjusted their meanings to changing times and needs. Arguably, to More, a coherent, calm, unrepentive reaffirmation of Catholic authority looked considerably less promising at the time than "spirited" or energetic warnings that the evangelicals who were rapturously proclaiming emancipation were, in reality, selling enslavement to a "rigid reading culture."¹⁹

¹⁸ See Donald Gilman, "Dramatic Debate: Vividness and Verve in Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*," *Moreana* 40 (2003), 41-47 and William J. Rogers, "Thomas More's Polemical Poetics," *English Literary Renaissance* 38 (2008), 397-404.

¹⁹ Bradshaw, "The Controversial Sir Thomas More," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985), 555-56, 563-64; Simpson, *Burning*, 31-33, 223.

Historians generally acknowledge that those evangelicals – William Tyndale, Thomas Bilney, John Frith, Robert Barnes, and others – along with Thomas Cromwell assaulted rights that the clergy “held to be fundamental” and provoked “what amounted to a constitutional crisis.”²⁰ The announced objective was to undermine, in England, “the usurped power of the papacy,” but, by necessity, if not also by intent, diocesan initiatives to preserve the religious settlement turned out to be collateral damage.²¹ Cromwell choreographed what most of the realm’s bishops construed as a catastrophe. They apparently did not appreciate that he also “water[ed] down the violence” of some anticlerical factions in the Commons, for he was the king’s chief whip in and out of Parliament, in both senses of that term. That is, he organized opposition to the current prelates and helped evangelical critics flog them. The Catholics in Lancashire and Yorkshire credited Cromwell with “pull[ing] down all our churches” not long after More’s execution.²² *Wolf Hall* concedes that he looked like a thug (164). Still, it would be unfair to blame him for what historian John Guy calls “the cut-throat world where evil counsels were measured only by the standard of success,” although his skill at intimidating the bishops, managing the Commons, and counseling the king, before More’s death and some years after, make him one of that world’s most dexterous helmsmen. Infuriating many at the time, his “policy of persuasion and coercion” fascinates many now.²³

²⁰ For example, see Rockett, “Wolsey,” 143-45.

²¹ *Letters and Papers* 8: 311.

²² See *Letters and Papers* 11: 332, for “pulling down and G.W. Bernard, *Henry VIII and the Remaking of the English Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 59-61 for “watering down.”

²³ Elton, *Policy and Police*, 232; Guy, *Daughter’s Love*, 214-15.

It may be churlish to complain that Mantel misses so much of what was infuriating and fascinating about her man when she invents so much that is captivating –and when she hits the mark in her discussion of More’s final flaw. In *Wolf Hall* and in history, Cromwell joined others interviewing More in prison to persuade him to acknowledge the king’s new title (and power over the English church), to accede to the accession through Anne Boleyn (rather than through Katherine of Aragon and her daughter Mary), to commit to all acts passed by Parliament since 1529, and to refuse obedience to “foreign authorit[ies].”²⁴ He hid in silence; More declined to take the oath required of all the king’s subjects, and he declined to explain why. He was tried, as mentioned, by a jury that Cromwell had vetted. And a single witness, Richard Riche, whom Cromwell may have prepared, testified that More had broken silence and disputed the king’s title with him in prison. In Mantel’s narrative, as in Bolt’s, More indignantly tells the jury of his contempt for Riche. “I did not say what Riche alleges,” he insists but adds perplexingly, “or if I did say it, I did not mean it with malice.” *Wolf Hall*’s jury “want[s] the truth” and instead gets “a lawyer’s argument” (526-27). The argument is sound, because the indictment specified that More maliciously kept silent, and lawyers had reason to believe that the Act of Treasons would be inapplicable without proof of malice.²⁵ Nonetheless, the “or if I did say it,” which follows so closely on his emphatic denial that he did say so, is enough to arraign Mantel’s More, perhaps not for treason, but certainly for obfuscation. And obfuscation (“words, words, just words”) is, in this context, perilously close to arrogance.

²⁴ For More’s account of the last interview, Rogers, ed., *Correspondence*, 555-59.

²⁵ J. Duncan M. Derrett, “The Trial of Sir Thomas More,” *The English Historical Review* 79 (1964), 459-62 and 467.

Mantel sees that, and her Cromwell offers suggestive appraisals of More's character and conduct. Yet we learn neither from the novel nor from history whether More seriously believed that he could prove absence of malice and that it might save him. Conceivably, those historians who argue that he did not want to be saved are right. He confided that he was terribly fatigued (*sub eius pondere fatiscentem*) when he resigned as chancellor.²⁶ Still, Peter Ackroyd seems to overplay his hand, intimating that More "relished his fall from power," although something like that notion appeals to scholars who imagine that More was reclusive by nature, "dragged" into public service and glad to relinquish his office and his freedom. But I believe that John Headley has the condiments to More's career correctly measured: "More lacked the relish ... the almost animal-like fervor for the political that Thomas Cromwell possessed."²⁷



Notwithstanding his execution as a religious radical, Cromwell's "fervor for the political" finds favor with many "secular critics."²⁸ As for More, "it is enough for secular criticism to argue that [he] should have acted differently," James Wood explained, on the threshold of the twenty-first century, adding that "asserting only this, secular criticism gives birth to itself."²⁹ What Bolt, Wood, and

²⁶ *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, vol. 10, ed., H.M. Allen and H.W. Garrod (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 32.

²⁷ Headley, "The Problem of Counsel Revisited: More, Castiglione, and the Resignation of Office in the Sixteenth Century," *Moreana* 40 (2003), 119. Also review Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 313-332 and 368-76.

²⁸ Bernard, *Henry VIII*, 573-74 discusses the charges against Cromwell.

²⁹ Wood, *The Broken Estate: Essays on Literature and Belief* (New York: Random house, 1999), 15.

Mantel's Cromwell fail to appreciate, however, is that, for More, the church, which the secular critics consider a threat to both the integrity of the individual and the peace of the state, was the guarantor of both.

In the 1520s, he coupled personal conviction with the church. "On the heart and in the church of Christ there remains inscribed the true gospel of Christ," he averred, stipulating that the "true gospel" was written in the hearts of the faithful and in their church before evangelists composed their gospels. In Christians' convictions and in their church, "God has inscribed his faith so indelibly that no deception of heretics can erase it, no matter how many texts they produce from the books of the gospel[, texts] that are apparently contrary to the true faith (CW 5: 100-101). So-called secular criticism and *Wolf Hall's* Cromwell find it hard to conjure formidable intelligences earnestly maintaining that individual conscience could merge with ecclesiastical consensus without becoming submerged in it. As for the church's support for secular states, the history of Christianity from its origins to the 1530s exhibits examples of precisely that, although there is ample evidence of mutual antagonism. Much depends on where and how historians excavate. More preferred to dig into late medieval and sixteenth-century English practices. He concluded that English church courts had sufficient procedures, laws, and discreet judges to preserve public order (CW 6.1: 261-64). But across the Channel, he noticed, religious reformers dissatisfied with their Catholic churches' apparatus were quick to turn "against all their governors" (CW 6.1: 368-69). Catholicism, in theory, was on friendly terms with any and all who valued obedience. Political authorities were beneficiaries of the behaviors prized and prescribed by bishops and their deputies. If, as evangelicals preached, faith alone saves, what might their religion

possibly contribute to public order? And “what harm shall they care to forbear that believe Luther” (CW 6.1: 373)?

More’s purposes were misrepresented early on. Near contemporary chronicler Edward Hall put him down as “the great persecutor of such as detested the supremacy of the bishop of Rome.”³⁰ There is some truth to that, but “great” greatly inflates the magnitude of the former chancellor’s efforts, and Hall’s statement is hardly the whole truth. Historian Richard Marius is notorious for having scraped away the halo hagiographers added to their narratives of More’s life and death, yet he also documents More’s “reluctance to extol papal authority.”³¹ Current events in Rome interested More but only rarely preoccupied him. He agreed to become King Henry VIII’s chancellor to help the English bishops defend the church, the faith, and “the state” against dissidents who “devised new sects and schisms to the pleasure of new fangle folk” and maligned what traditional religion – “the known church” – had long countenanced. He believed that heretics conspired with the devil to “induce good and simple souls so far into wrong ways that they shall at length well like and commend the things which now their uncorrupted conscience[s] abhor” (CW 6.1: 425-26). Hence, heretics would not just “swarm” through London’s streets unless stopped; they would seduce others and multiply.³²

What we get in *Wolf Hall*, among so many brilliantly imagined conversations, is an excellent example, in John Frith’s determination, of what troubled Thomas More. Mantel’s Cromwell

³⁰ Hall, *Chronicle*, 817.

³¹ Marius, *Thomas More* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 432-33.

³² For the intention presented here and alternatives, see Kaufman, “To Assist the Ordinaries: Why Thomas More Agreed to Become Chancellor,” *Moreana* 45 (2008), 171-92.

took a special interest in Frith, who had been arrested and interrogated by several bishops. He sees to Frith's comfort in prison and sends him ink so the accused heretic has the means to answer accusations and hurl insults at church authorities. "More means to dine on me," Frith tells Cromwell who tried to persuade him to ask the king for mercy and who, later, arranges an escape. But Frith deliberately misses his chance. He is adamant that he will not go into hiding or exile. If ever free, he says, he would rejoin the "swarm," as More feared – would "walk to Paul's Cross and say before the Londoners" – "simple souls" and easily seduced, More grieved – "the Eucharist is but bread, of Penance we have no need, purgatory is an invention ungrounded in scripture" (355-56).

In More's telling, Frith played the underdog to near perfection. He berated bishops for having hounded him, an ostensibly innocent youth who could not comprehend why they – and More – had "a cruel desire" for his death. Mantel features Frith's protest ("More means to dine on me") and apparently discounts the chancellor's insistence that he would have had the whole affair end happily with Frith's repentance and was "very heavy to hear the young foolish fellow should bestow such labor" on an enterprise that would overturn the reigning order. Pride and malice, More concluded, stirred Frith to import blasphemies from abroad "to poison the realm with the pestilent heresy against the sacrament" (the Eucharist). Pride and malice prompted a small squadron of English evangelicals "to quench and put out that faith" in the effectiveness of Penance and in the existence of purgatory that had inspired "simple souls" to please God for so many centuries (CW 9: 121-25). More's admirers are tempted to trust the expressions of regret embedded in his indictments of the reformers. They may also be tempted to read remorse into his later reflections on Christ's

counsel that violent responses to threats against the faith were inappropriate (CW 14.1: 495). But by then, More was brooding on his own execution, not the fate of his adversaries in the early 1530s. Still, *Wolf Hall* makes him a butcher without a word for the defense that does not savor of religious fanaticism.

“More practically turns the rack himself when it comes to heretics,” *Wolf Hall*’s dustjacket proclaims, borrowing an incriminating line from one of its reviews, which rightly represents what his enemies were saying at the time and what the novel uncritically repeats. Mantel has Cromwell summarize the story of a young servant who was punished for religious skepticism (285), but the author and protagonist forget to mention – as More did not – that the youngster “began to teach another child in my house” (CW 9: 117-18). More’s Utopians were tolerant, one recalls, as long as the religiously committed discuss doctrine discreetly. But when the impetuous among them grow so impassioned (*incallescere*) trying to teach others that they condemn others’ beliefs and create public disturbances, the zealots are exiled (CW 4: 218-19). More’s story of the servant he punished for proselytizing “in my house” is followed in his *Apology* by another admission. Approached by devout and distressed neighbors, he had a local man whipped. That offender apparently made lewd noises “in the time of most silence, while the priest was at the secrets of the Mass, about the elevation” and, spotting a woman at worship, kneeling before a saint’s image, this rather demented fellow “would labor to lift up all her clothes ... over her head.” As noted, More was accused of worse but professed that, aside from having had one impudent man and one imprudent servant flogged, he had never given an insolent dissident a “stripe or stroke,” not “so much as a flip on the forehead” (CW 9:118). One can hardly complain that *Wolf Hall* suppresses More’s denials and

contextualizations. Mantel's Cromwell, presumably, would have been unimpressed by them. Nonetheless, they reveal that the villain of this piece has a case to make.

More's reputed ruthlessness, however, serves Mantel's purposes. She and "secular critics" are kinder to Cromwell because – as *Wolf Hall*'s dustjacket also announces – he "fits snugly in the world as it is." More did not. Nor did the doomed Carthusians interrogated by Cromwell and executed months before More. Named Vicegerent, a new title giving him the power to translate the king's supremacy in the church (and the king's irritation with anyone who rejected it) into a small yet arguably ruthless purge, Cromwell might have tried friendly persuasion at first, as Mantel suggests; "he has spoken gently." But her man could be "blunt" and cruel as well and less transparent, she admits; "he threatened and cajoled," "set[ting] "disaffected" Carthusians "against the[ir] brethren. It is all to no avail." Neither More nor the monk-martyrs "fit snugly" into Cromwell's world. "Their response is, go away, go away and leave me to my sanctified death" (509).³³

But readers of *Wolf Hall* come to expect that Cromwell will try to tease some advantage from the Carthusians' pain and public disemboweling. He allows More's daughter and confidant Margaret to visit her father for the first time in months to observe the condemned monks taken from the Tower to Tyburn, the killing grounds. He presumes that the scene and his daughter's tears will break More's resolve. But More does not melt, and Mantel's protagonist remembers that he "always forget[s] how More neither pities himself nor takes pity on others" (511).

³³ Bernard, *Henry VIII*, 160-64 collects the references that place Cromwell at the center of the Carthusians' arrests and interviews, but see especially *Letters and Papers* 8: 606.

Yet both Mantel and her Cromwell appear to have gotten More wrong – again. Pity and not self-importance or fanaticism spurred him to assist the English bishops, pity for the easily seduced who, he believed, would eventually come to miss the consolations provided by their sacraments and saints. Pity moved him to write against evangelicals promoting a “reformed polity” that tended, as Brendan Bradshaw has astutely observed, “to establish the absolute sovereignty of the secular power.”³⁴ “Simple souls” were better served, More believed, by English Catholic churches and by Roman Catholic soteriology, which preserved social order more humanely than any secular sovereign’s whim or biblical scholar’s discontent with the current religious settlement. More pitied the souls on earth and in purgatory (CW 7: 170-71) who would be deprived by “false prophets” intent on “mak[ing] sedition and sects” – deprived of the church God made “so open and so well known” in history (CW 8.2: 611-13). When the secular critics miss that pity, they miss More, much as *Wolf Hall*’s Cromwell does.

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³⁴ Bradshaw, “Controversial,” 562.