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Fictionalizing History: Hilary Mantel's New Historicist and Postmodern Reimagining of English National Narratives

Tarihin Kurgulanması: Hilary Mantel'in İngiliz Ulusal Anlatılarına Yeni Tarihselci ve Postmodern Yaklaşımı

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Abstract

This article examines Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy (*Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror and the Light*) through the theoretical framework of new historicism and postmodern historiography. Drawing on the ideas of Stephen Greenblatt, Michel Foucault, Linda Hutcheon, and other cultural theorists, the study argues that Mantel's historical fiction systematically challenges the authority of archival history, the notion of objective truth, and the singularity of historical narrative. The trilogy exposes history as a constructed, ideologically mediated discourse shaped by power, institutional interests, and narrative selection. Through its skeptical treatment of historical records, its emphasis on rumor, forgery, and apocryphal history, and its reimagining of key Tudor figures, most notably Thomas Cromwell, Mantel's fiction exemplifies historiographic metafiction and a distinctly new historicist sensibility. By destabilizing national myths, questioning religious and political historiography, and foregrounding the imaginative reconstruction of the past, the *Wolf Hall* trilogy redefines the relationship between history and literature. The article concludes that Mantel's work not only revises English history, specifically Tudor history, but also invites readers to reconsider how historical knowledge itself is produced, transmitted, and contested.

Keywords

New historicism, postmodernism, history, *Wolf Hall* trilogy, Hilary Mantel

Öz

Bu makale, Hilary Mantel'in *Wolf Hall* üçlemesini (*Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies* ve *The Mirror and the Light*), yeni tarihselcilik ve postmodern tarih yazımı kuramsal çerçevesi doğrultusunda incelemektedir. Stephen Greenblatt, Michel Foucault, Linda Hutcheon ve diğer kültür kuramcılarının görüşlerinden hareketle çalışma, Mantel'in tarihsel kurgusunun arşivsel tarihin otoritesini, nesnel hakikat anlayışını ve tarihsel anlatının tekilliğini sistematik biçimde sorguladığını ileri sürmektedir. Üçleme, tarihi; iktidar ilişkileri, kurumsal çıkarlar ve anlatısal seçilimler tarafından şekillendirilen, ideolojik olarak aracılanmış bir söylem olarak açığa çıkarmaktadır. Tarihsel belgelere yönelik kuşkucu yaklaşımı, söylentiye, sahteciliğe ve apokrif tarihe yaptığı vurgu ile özellikle Thomas Cromwell başta olmak üzere Tudor döneminin önemli figürlerini yeniden kurgulaması aracılığıyla Mantel'in kurgusu hem tarihsel üstkurmaca örneği sunmakta hem de belirgin bir yeni tarihselci duyarlılığı temsil etmektedir. Ulusal mitleri istikrarsızlaştırarak, dinsel ve siyasal tarih yazımını sorgulayarak ve geçmişin hayal gücü yoluyla yeniden inşasını öne çıkararak *Wolf Hall* üçlemesi, tarih ile edebiyat arasındaki ilişkiyi yeniden tanımlamaktadır. Makale, Mantel'in eserlerinin yalnızca İngiliz tarihini, özellikle Tudor tarihini, yeniden yorumlamakla kalmadığını, aynı zamanda tarihsel bilginin nasıl üretildiğini, aktarıldığını ve tartışmaya açıldığını yeniden düşünmeye davet ettiğini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Yeni tarihselcilik, postmodernizm, tarih, *Wolf Hall* Üçlemesi, Hilary Mantel

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Introduction

Stephen Greenblatt explains in his essay "Towards a Poetics of Culture" that his term new historicism stuck better than the other terms he carefully invented.[1] Greenblatt asserts that new historicism is a practice rather than a doctrine, and he adds that, in addition to Michel Foucault, some other anthropologists and social theorists, especially French thinkers, helped him shape his literary-critical practice. So, new historicism is a contemporary critical theory inaugurated in the 1980s and followed by prominent theorists such as Louis Montrose, Stephen Orgel, Harold Aram Veeser, Catherine Gallagher, Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore, and Hayden White. New historicism shares many concepts with Marxism and post-structuralism while diverging in others; it examines not only the text but also its cultural, social, and historical context. It keeps away from text-centered approaches and schools of criticism that believe a text can stand alone, even without looking at its author and context, such as formalism, New Criticism, and structuralism; instead, it believes in the co-text.

Clifford Geertz, one of the most influential cultural anthropologists, says that "there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture."[2] Culture should not be perceived solely as a collection of tangible patterns of conduct, practices, norms, and habitual clusters—as has been the predominant perspective thus far. However, it should be sensed "as a set of control mechanisms-plans, recipes, rules, instructions (what computer engineers call programs) for the governing of behavior."[3] Greenblatt talks about Geertz's control mechanisms and illustrates the three functions of literature in new historicism as follows:

> Self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment. Literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes. The interpretive practice that I have attempted to exemplify in the essays that follow must concern itself with all three of these functions.[4]

This tripartite function of literature is central to Mantel's narrative strategy in the *Wolf Hall* trilogy. The novels present Thomas Cromwell simultaneously as a historical individual shaped by his cultural moment, as a product of Tudor ideological codes, and as a reflective consciousness capable of interrogating those very codes. Mantel's fiction thus enacts Greenblatt's model by dramatizing how identity is fashioned through social constraints while also exposing the mechanisms through

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1 Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veeser (Routledge, 1989).

2 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973), 49.

3 Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures*, 45.

4 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), 3–4.

which such identities are produced and regulated. Literature, in this sense, does not merely reflect history but actively participates in the construction and critique of historical subjectivity.

This approach is fundamentally associated with the principles of new historicists, who reject the foundational principles of new criticism, which views the text as an autonomous artifact. New historicists also oppose the central tenets of liberal humanism, which regard the text as timeless and of enduring significance. Additionally, they seek to uncover alternative understandings and meanings that diverge from traditional perspectives. Montrose discusses the "textuality of history and the historicity of texts,"[5] and suggests that history is constructed and fictionalized. He argues that texts must be analyzed within their social and cultural contexts. Montrose indicates that achieving an authentic history is unattainable. On the other side, new historicism aligns with the poststructuralist view that reality and authenticity are produced, constructed, and diverse. It also resonates with Michel Foucault's theory of power, particularly his argument that power does not merely repress but actively produces knowledge and truth. As Foucault explains, "we are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth,"[6] and "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."[7] Mantel dramatizes this Foucauldian conception of power throughout the trilogy by depicting how institutions, monarchs, and legal authorities control historical narratives to legitimize their dominance. The manipulation of chronicles, accusations, and confessions illustrates how truth within Tudor society is not discovered but manufactured through institutional power. This reinforces the new historicist claim that history is inseparable from political authority. Further, Foucauldian new historians argue that literature emerges from a cultural moment rather than from the intellect of a single individual. They analyze literature and other cultural and social phenomena from a specific historical period to demonstrate how ideas, beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies influenced broader societal contexts. They aim to analyze academic history through literature and its historical and cultural contexts.

The connection between new historicism and postmodernism is particularly significant, as both challenge the notion of objective and unified historical truth. They both emerge and form in a similar intellectual climate. New historicism draws upon poststructuralist and postmodern insights, especially those articulated by Michel Foucault and regards the discursive production of knowledge and the pervasive operation of power. Likewise, postmodern theorists such as Linda Hutcheon emphasize the textuality and narrativity of history and argue that historical accounts are shaped by ideological and rhetorical frameworks rather than objective reality. Even though new historicism remains more historically grounded in its analysis of specific cultural contexts, it

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5 Louis Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," in *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. K. M. Newton (Bloomsbury Publishing, 1997), 242.

6 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (Pantheon Books, 1980), 93.

7 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (Pantheon Books, 1978), 93.

nevertheless shares postmodernism's skepticism toward universal truths, stable meanings, and objective historical representation.

New historicism emerged from the reanalysis of some of Shakespeare's plays from the Renaissance; in his book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Greenblatt laid the foundations of new historicism. As previously mentioned, Foucault is a prominent theorist of new historicism who has had a significant influence on critics in various academic disciplines, including medicine, sociology, history, psychology, anthropology, and sexuality. This influence stems from his interest in identity, knowledge, power, socio-cultural history, and ideologies. In this context, not surprisingly, new historicism is a multidisciplinary concept that rejects totalizing theories in furtherance of methodological pluralism. Furthermore, because of the new historicists' restraint on theorizing and totalizing theories, they have received occasional criticism.[8] We infer that new historicism can be considered an amalgamation of postmodern historiography, literary criticism, and power discourse analysis.

Greenblatt elaborates upon new historicism's perspective on literature in the following manner:

> If interpretation limits itself to the behavior of the author, it becomes literary biography … If alternatively, literature is viewed exclusively as the expression of social rules and instructions, it risks being absorbed entirely into an ideological superstructure ... Finally, if literature is seen only as a detached reflection upon the prevailing behavioral codes, a view from a safe distance, we drastically diminish our grasp of art's concrete functions in relation to individuals and to institutions, both of which shrink into an obligatory "historical background" that adds little to our understanding. We drift back toward a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal human essence or, alternatively as a self-regarding, autonomous, closed system—in either case, art as opposed to social life.[9]

New historicism does not draw a sharp distinction between history and literature; rather, it conceives their relationship as one between text and context, and, more essentially, it tries to locate literature in history. John Brannigan reckons that "literature is not, however, simply a medium for the expression of historical knowledge. It is an active part of a particular historical moment."[10]

Similarly, Jean E. Howard thinks that literature is a factor in telling the truth about the past, and he supposes that "literature is an agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality."[11] New historicism recognizes that literature is an intrinsic and inextricable part of making history and a

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8 Angela R. Erisman, "New Historicism, Historical Criticism, and Reading the Pentateuch," *Religion Compass* 8, no. 3 (2014): 71–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/rec3.12099

9 Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 4.

10 John Brannigan, *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (Macmillan International Higher Education, 1998), 3.

11 Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16, no. 1 (1986): 25, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.1986.tb00896.x

"part of a process of historical change."[12] Historical literary criticism and formalist literary criticism presume that literature is the greatest form of human discourse and a self-immortalized form. On the other hand, Raymond Williams believes that "we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice … They may have quite specific features as practices, but they cannot be separated from the general social process."[13] In this respect, Peter Barry observes:

> New historicism refuses at least ostensibly to privilege the literary text ... it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. ... it is an approach to literature in which there is no privileging of the literary.[14]

Consequently, new historicists assume that literature is one of many human creations, alongside art, philosophy, architecture, and others. All of them are prerequisites to interpreting the political, social, and cultural framework of the past.

Building on this theoretical framework, this article argues that Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy exemplifies a distinctly new historicist mode of historiographic metafiction, one that challenges the authority of archival history, dismantles national myths, and foregrounds the ideological production of historical truth through power, narrative, and imagination. In spite of its engagement with both new historicist and postmodern frameworks, this study primarily situates Mantel's work within a new historicist perspective and employs postmodern historiography as a complementary analytical lens.

Reimagining England's History in the *Wolf Hall Trilogy*

The *Wolf Hall* trilogy subverts and problematizes historical facts, reflecting contemporary perspectives on history. Mantel distances herself from conventional modes of writing about history since "new historians have distanced themselves from traditional historicism, and its conservative variety."[15] Peter Uwe Hohendahl also avers that "the New Historians challenge the underlying notion both of subjectivity (following Althusser and Foucault) and of totality (following Foucault and Derrida)."[16] Mantel considers history a mystery, and no one can reach an assured historical fact; therefore, "new men must forge themselves an ancient pedigree."[17] She adopts a new historicist approach in the *Wolf Hall* trilogy and offers the audience an avant-garde and broader perspective from which to understand and evaluate the events in the novels. This skepticism toward

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12 Brannigan, *New Historicism*, 203.
13 Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture: Selected Essays* (Verso, 1980), 44.
14 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester University Press, 2017), 146.
15 Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "A Return to History? The New Historicism and Its Agenda," *New German Critique*, no. 55 (1992): 90, https://doi.org/10.2307/488291
16 Hohendahl, "A Return to History," 91.
17 Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (Fourth Estate, 2010), 118.

historical certainty aligns with Linda Hutcheon's claim that postmodernist and new historicist approaches problematize the very concept of historical awareness. She writes:

> The postmodern, then, effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. This is another of the paradoxes that characterize all postmodern discourses today. And the implication is that there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of 'genuine historicity' as Fredric Jameson desires.[18]

Mantel's narratives embody Hutcheon's postmodern historiographic tension by meticulously reconstructing England's history while simultaneously undermining its reliability through competing narratives, rumors, and imagined alternatives. This convergence between new historicist and postmodern approaches becomes particularly visible in Mantel's use of historiographic metafiction, where the reconstruction of historical context operates alongside a sustained questioning of narrative authority and truth. Thereupon, writing historical fiction is inherently subjective, as each author applies their own narrative standards to historical records. Objectivity in history is impossible; each author is affected by their ideology and convictions consciously or unconsciously. Keith Jenkins considers that "history remains inevitably a personal construct, a manifestation of the historian's perspective as a narrator."[19] History, like fiction, is a personal construct.

Mantel, in the chapter "An Occult History of Britain," demonstrates that English history is made up of myths and folk tales. This part of her narrative also shows that she does not believe in the formal historical records of British history. Hutcheon offers insight into the line between myths and realities like this:

> Postmodernist discourses—both theoretical and practical—need the very myths and conventions they contest and reduce ... [they] question both in terms of each other. The myths and conventions exist for a reason, and postmodernism investigates that reason. The postmodern impulse is not to seek any total vision. It merely questions. If it finds such a vision, it questions how, in fact, it made it.[20]

New historicists and postmodernists scrutinize the rationales behind the presence of these myths in history, cast doubt on them, and investigate the manner and purpose of their existence. Furthermore, Barry holds the view that "whatever is represented in a text is thereby *remade* [emphasis added]. New historicist essays always themselves constitute another remaking, another permutation of the past ... so that a new entity is formed."[21] This idea is reflected in Mantel's historiographic metafiction through the re-presentation of past narratives within a contemporary fictional framework. Mantel does not recover an authentic past but produces a revised historical version shaped by present-day interpretive priorities. The trilogy thus becomes itself a remaking of history and reinforces Barry's claim that every historical re-presentation constitutes a new

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18 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (Routledge, 2004), 89.

19 Keith Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (Routledge, 2004), 14, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203426869

20 Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 48.

21 Barry, *Beginning Theory*, 148.

narrative entity rather than a transparent reflection of the past. Gregory, Thomas Cromwell's son, reads *The Golden Legend,* which is a combination of hagiographies from medieval times, compiled by Jacobus de Voragine in the 13th century. This book stands as a historical text within a historical text in *Wolf Hall*. Gregory comments on *The Golden Legend*:

> Our king takes his descent from this Arthur. He was never really dead but waited in the forest biding his time, or possibly in a lake. He is several centuries old. Merlin is a wizard. He comes later. You will see. There are twenty-one chapters. If it keeps on raining I mean to read them all. Some of these things are true and some of them lies. But they are all good stories.[22]

Gregory's response encapsulates the epistemological uncertainty at the heart of new historicism. His acknowledgment that historical narratives contain both truth and falsehood reflects a contemporary awareness that historical texts function as storytelling practices rather than objective records. Mantel, through privileging narrative value over factual certainty, aligns Gregory's perspective with postmodern historiography and suggests that the cultural power of historical myths often outweighs their empirical verifiability.

Sara L. Knox opines that Mantel is known for her distinctive exploration of both individual and public identity, as in King Arthur.[23] Further, Hsu-Ming Teo says that some writers like Andre Gide and Tim O'Brien "problematise identity and its relation to the past."[24] Gregory puts the legend of King Arthur's identity under the microscope, and by saying that King Arthur is immortal, he assumes that his character is not real but an invention. Gregory's analysis of *The Golden Legend* can be understood as arguing that every historical text contains certain facts but, at the same time, some uncertain fictional elements. In a similar vein, through the character of Merlin the Wizard, there is a query about the historical existence of sorcerers and their powers to change the fate of several historical figures.

Gertrude Himmelfarb argues that new historicists accept the notion of considering "history (the past itself as well as the writing about past) as inevitably fictive."[25] Mantel insinuates that the readers of the present century should be like Gregory Cromwell, aware of what they read. Gregory continues deciphering the essence of historical chronicles; toward the last page of *Wolf Hall*, he states that "just this last year a scholar, a *foreigner* [emphasis added], has written a chronicle of Britain, which omits King Arthur on the ground that he never existed. A good ground, if he can sustain it."[26] Then the narrator clears up Gregory's sight: "But Gregory says, no, he is wrong.

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22 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 222.

23 Sara L. Knox, "Giving Flesh to the Wraiths of Violence: Super-Realism in the Fiction of Hilary Mantel," *Australian Feminist Studies* 25, no. 65 (2010): 313–323, https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2010.504295

24 Hsu-Ming Teo, "Historical Fiction and Fictions of History," *Rethinking History* 15, no. 2 (2011): 320, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2011.570490

25 Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Telling It as You Like It: Postmodernist History and the Flight from Fact," in *The Postmodern History Reader*, ed. Keith Jenkins (Routledge, 2006), 164.

26 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 650.

Because if he is right, what will happen to Avalon? What will happen to the sword in the stone?"[27] The last passage pertains to the notion that grappling with the intricacies and inconsistencies of history is a challenging endeavor. It also highlights the notion that the scholar in question, as a foreigner, may possess a more impartial perspective than British scholars on the history of England. This foreign scholar may represent a new trend in narrating plausible pasts and factual histories. Gregory seems to have a conflicting policy toward believing or not believing in Arthur's existence; he admits that "some of these things are true [and] some not."

Nevertheless, it is hard for him to omit the charming story of Arthur, the sword in the stone, and Avalon. What Gregory is assured of is that these stories are "good stories" whether they are true or fake. It is not easy to change our perception of history, especially the tales we grasped in childhood. This could explain Gregory's ambivalent feelings toward his nation's past. The *Wolf Hall* trilogy does not praise or sanctify English national history or national legends. This is supported by Milda Danytė's confirmation that "the new historical novel does not celebrate the national myths or the national heroes."[28] Instead, Mantel treats English national history with ease, humor, and a kind of sarcasm. Danytė also affirms that "postmodern historical fiction is not nostalgic about the national past and aims to undermine the accepted images of national heroes."[29] Mantel questions the veracity and existence of the King Arthur legend and goes so far as to regard certain historical figures as mere myths and legends lacking any factual foundation.

Furthermore, *The Mirror and the Light* ridicules the habit in Canterbury of celebrating the death of Becket. Every year, people re-enact the death of Saint Thomas Becket (1118–1170), the Archbishop of Canterbury at Canterbury Cathedral during the reign of King Henry II. Mantel derides the monotonous annual tradition and the spectators who assemble to witness the spectacle as if expecting a different rendition of the narrative. However, it remains unchanged, adhering solely to the monastic version, as no alternative historical account has been presented thus far. José I. Prieto-Arranz states that "in her characterization of Cromwell, therefore, Mantel evokes the invented traditions."[30] Prieto-Arranz also characterizes the history of England as a collection of invented traditions. An allusion is made to two literary works, namely Geoffrey Chaucer's long poem *The Canterbury Tales* and T.S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*. Both of these works depict the scene of the murder of St. Thomas Becket. This allusion, together with many other parodic intertextualities in the trilogy, reinforces Hutcheon's assertion that historiographic

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27 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 650.

28 Milda Danytė, "National Past, Personal Past: Recent Examples of the Historical Novel by Umberto Eco and Antanas Sileika," *Literatūra* 49, no. 5 (2007): 40.

29 Danytė, "National Past, Personal Past," 35.

30 José I. Prieto-Arranz, "Hilary Mantel's Re-appropriation of Whig Historiography: A Reading of *The Wolf Hall Trilogy* in the Context of Brexit," *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies,* no. 65 (2022): 160, https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20226851

metafiction subverts and problematizes historical and non-historical texts not by rejection but by parody and irony.[31]

Mantel encourages readers to cultivate a skeptical mindset towards the information they encounter and to avoid blind faith in its accuracy. The fabrication of facts is often easier than assumed, requiring little more than intention and documentary form. Mantel poses a question to the reader: "Can you make a new England? You can write a new story. You can write new texts and destroy the old ones."[32] One may as well unravel Mantel's words as corroboration of the new historicist trend in interpreting historical texts. Mantel may also mean, by "New England," a new history of England. This allows for either disregarding the old history or revitalizing it with a new perspective. Replacing the old story of England with a new one is possible in postmodern historical fiction.

Mantel dramatizes this skepticism toward historical truth within the narrative itself. When Dorothea enquired about the paintings on the walls by Hans Holbein, Cromwell informed her that they depicted English Princes. However, he clarified that these portraits are not real re-presentations, but rather symbolic reminders of the transient nature of humanity, including even those in positions of power, such as kings, who will eventually succumb to mortality and turn to dust. The phrases "we have invented them"[33] and "ancient precedents" have been "invented these last months,"[34] suggest that every document and everything we have in history may be an invention by someone. The young men at Austin Friars used to act in some plays to have fun, and when they were playing the lion tale, the narrator remarked: "It is not that the boys don't believe the lion tale; it is just that they like to put their own words to it."[35] Mantel posits that even authentic historical facts are subject to augmentation and interpolation and that historically accurate narratives have been embellished. From such a perspective, Paul Lay debates that "history, by its nature, is a very uncertain practice."[36] The lion tale is an example; although the boys believe it is true, they add their own words to it. Stated differently: "It is true. No text stays clean."[37] Some books and documents are untrustworthy and contain sham materials, and some resources are fake and unreliable. In this regard, David Lowenthal posits that people yearn to retrieve the past, but history is irretrievable, so historians imitate it, replicate it, and rewrite it again to satisfy their desires and

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31 Linda Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History," in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. P. O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3–32.

32 Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light* (Fourth Estate, 2021), 709.

33 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 400.

34 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 289–90.

35 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 328.

36 "The Wolf Hall Effect," *The Economist*, September 1, 2010, para. 6, https://www.economist.com/prospero/2010/09/01/the-wolf-hall-effect

37 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 261.

escape from their disappointing present.[38] The aspiration to reclaim the past results in the alteration of history, regardless of its divergence from reality and accuracy, as exemplified by Lowenthal in the subsequent quote:

> People are normally aware that the actual past is irrecoverable. Yet memory and history, relic and replica, leave impressions so concretely vivid that we feel nonetheless deprived. … The hopes and fears aroused by the past are heightened by the conflict between knowing it is beyond reach yet craving it anyhow. We feel the present alone inadequate, not least because it is continuously dislodged to further enlarge the past. Disenchantment with an ever-dismembered today impels yesterday's recovery.[39]

Cromwell's repeated attempts to reshape narratives, whether through legal documents, oaths, or silences, mirror Lowenthal's assertion that historical reconstruction often serves present desires rather than past realities. The trilogy thus exposes historical writing as an affective and ideological act driven by loss, fear, and ambition. It is impossible to recreate the past without using forgery, distortion, omission, or addition. From this angle, Hugh Trevor-Roper presumes that "there is some danger in seeing the past through the present" because this may result in the intentional or unintentional distortion of history.[40] Avrom Fleishman as well considers that "history itself does not tell truths that are unambiguous or absolute; even the nature of historical fact is problematic."[41]

The *Wolf Hall* trilogy acquaints readers with the notions of historical revisionism, rewriting history, fabricated history, and skeptical history, thereby habituating them to the discourse surrounding these concepts. When Cromwell persuaded Harry Percy to take an oath that Anne Boleyn was not his wife and his past with her was chaste and without carnal knowledge, the narrator informs us that Cromwell was altering Harry Percy's personal history, as stated in the quote: "Cromwell, by rewriting the history of his infatuation."[42] Furthermore, when Dorothea astounds Cromwell by accusing him of betraying her father, the narrator notes that "Dorothea has rewritten his story. She has made him strange to himself."[43] Moreover, it seems that Cromwell is not satisfied with his past; therefore, he does not like to reveal it to others and says, "I don't have a history, only a past."[44] He cannot retrieve his history; therefore, he escapes from it, and "he can't fight history, so he runs, because what else can he do?"[45] Accordingly, history cannot be fought, but it can be rewritten and reworded.

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38 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country—Revisited* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139024884

39 Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, 78.

40 Hugh Trevor-Roper, "The Intellectual World of Sir Thomas More," *The American Scholar* 48, no. 1 (1979): 21, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41210475

41 Avrom Fleishman, *The English Historical Novel: Walter Scott to Virginia Woolf* (Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), 4.

42 Hilary Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies* (Fourth Estate, 2013), 423.

43 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 290.

44 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 102.

45 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 569.

Another noteworthy manifestation of new historicism in Mantel's historiographic metafiction emerges in her critique of the Catholic Church and its involvement in the falsification of history. The clerics write the history that pleases them and the Pope; they alter the facts of the people who oppose their doctrine and make them heretics. That is to justify their deeds if they were to be asked about the reason behind burning heretic people. The Catholic Church burned William Tyndale for translating the Bible into English, as Gail Fineberg explains below:

> Tyndale was tied to a stake, strangled with a rope and torched outside a castle near Brussels on Oct. 6, 1536. His crime: Translating the scriptures from Greek and Hebrew into vernacular English so that commoners could read the Bible for themselves, rather than having to depend on the church hierarchy to interpret the official Latin Vulgate.[46]

Cromwell, in one of his conversations with King Henry about monks and priests, insists that "for hundreds of years the monks have held the pen, and what they have written is what we take to be our history."[47] Then he reiterates his belief that "they have suppressed the history they don't like, and written one that is favorable to Rome."[48]

Cromwell argues that for centuries, the monks and priests held the position of the educated elite in European societies. They are responsible for documenting their communities' history, but their accounts are often biased and influenced by their interests and ideologies. Cromwell states:

> A lie is no less a lie because it is a thousand years old. Your undivided church has liked nothing better than persecuting its own members, burning them and hacking them apart when they stood by their own conscience, slashing their bellies open and feeding their guts to dogs. You call history to your aid, but what is history to you? It is a mirror that flatters Thomas More. But I have another mirror, I hold it up and it shows a vain and dangerous man, and when I turn it about it shows a killer.[49]

Cromwell accuses clergymen of being history falsifiers; their mirror shows them neither their hideous sides nor their deeds. The church used fake history to attain power and used this power to collect the crowds' money and burn those who opposed it. These monks exploited the illiteracy of poor people to counterfeit history and religion and to keep them under control. That explains why the priests were the first to resist the Reformation and the translation of the Bible into English. As Mantel emphasizes, they invoke history to their advantage and embellish it with ornate decorations while concealing its unsightly aspects. Certain beliefs of the new historicists align with those of Nietzsche, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

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46 Gail Fineberg, "Let There Be Light: Exhibition Spotlights William Tyndale, English Martyr," *Library of Congress,* 1997, para. 6, https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9707/tyndale.html

47 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 219.

48 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 219.

49 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 566.

> These are the services which history can carry out for living. Every person and every people, according to its goals, forces, and needs, uses a certain knowledge of the past, sometimes as monumental history, sometimes as antiquarian history, and sometimes as critical history.[50]

Nietzsche holds that people use history in line with their convictions, concepts, interests, and objectives, just as Mantel's historical characters do. They focus on what is consistent with their ideologies and dismiss what is contrary to their ideas.

In addition to this skepticism toward historical truth, an additional prominent new historicist element of the trilogy is Mantel's casting doubt on the deaths of several major characters. Greenblatt asserts that "the historical evidence is unreliable"[51]; therefore, while most chronicles claim that Cardinal Wolsey passed away from depression prior to his trial, Mantel offers an alternative explanation when she asks: "Do you not think it was Anne Boleyn who poisoned my lord cardinal?"[52] Richmond argues that Wolsey's death was not natural, but "it may be someone bribed his physicians."[53] A different account of Queen Catherine's death is presented as well in *Bring up the Bodies*, wherein Rafe informs Cromwell of rumors suggesting "that the poison was introduced to her in some strong Welsh beer."[54] Christophe also reports to his master that people "are saying on the streets that Catherine was murdered. They are saying that the king locked her in a room and starved her to death. They are saying that he sent her almonds, and she ate, and was poisoned."[55] What is more, some believe that it was Cromwell who killed her, as Christophe states: "They are saying that you sent two murderers with knives, and that they cut out her heart."[56] Similarly, the narrator of *The Mirror and the Light* presents an alternative variant of Jane Seymour's death: "The rumor outside the gates is that the king had her cut open while she was alive. She could not be delivered of her child, so 'Save my son!' he ordered."[57] Gallagher and Greenblatt confirm that "new historicist readings are more often skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial."[58] Mantel expresses skepticism regarding the veracity of the deaths of numerous individuals during King Henry VIII's reign. These instances demonstrate Mantel's mistrust of history and suggest the possibility of undiscovered facts and narratives concerning the deaths of these characters.

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50 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Use and Abuse of History for Life*, trans. Ian Johnston (Malaspina University-College, 1998), 14.

51 Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets," in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (University of California Press, 1988), 22.

52 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 86.

53 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 86.

54 Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, 213.

55 Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, 183.

56 Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, 183.

57 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 526.

58 Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9.

Dorothea also shares Mantel's opinion: she does not trust written or documented testimonies. Dorothea suspects that Cromwell placed certain servants in her father's residence to surveil him and manipulate him into actions contrary to the king's interests. Thus, when Cromwell proposed to furnish her with written confirmations of her error regarding the issue, she responded that forgery is easily accomplished and that she doubts the authenticity of his evidence. Through Dorothea's character, Mantel expresses her views on historical chronicles and formal records. In the last example, Cromwell could simply forge some documents to support his position. Cromwell's words to his daughter Jenneke: "I prefer the common history … certain themes must be elided" can be interpreted as his tendency to change facts and realities from the past.[59] Accordingly, "there can never be a whole comprehension of the past as there is no single reality but an altered one."[60] To reveal it differently, history and facts are subject to alteration; consequently, the narratives we encounter may have been revised to align with personal interests.

Mantel is of the view that the world that we read in books is not the real world, but there is another world behind it, and "within every book there is another book, and within every letter on every page another volume constantly unfolding; but these volumes take no space on the desk. Suppose knowledge could be reduced to a quintessence."[61] Namely, there is a letter behind each letter, a tale behind each tale, and a reality behind each reality. Nietzsche thinks that we should be "dragging the past before the court of justice, investigating it meticulously, and finally condemning it. That past is worthy of condemnation; for that is how it stands with human things."[62] Nietzsche dismisses the existence of any objective truth and emphasizes the importance of questioning before accepting something as true. Above all:

> What is the nature of the border between truth and lies? It is permeable and blurred because it is planted thick with rumour, confabulation, misunderstandings and twisted tales. Truth can break the gates down, truth can howl in the street; unless truth is pleasing, personable and easy to like, she is condemned to stay whimpering at the back door.[63]

The narrator opens a window onto the thin, obscured line between genuineness and falsehood; this line is foggy and blurry. Some impurities and pollutants always accompany truthfulness. Maria Mureșan indicates that "history is no longer conceived of as the non-problematic and truthful record of past events; it has been deconstructed as an act of language, a narrative following no other rules than the generic ones."[64] If the truth pleases the dominant party, it can obliterate barriers and function as a formidable force that clears all obstacles in its trajectory. Conversely, if the

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59 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 400.

60 Abdullah E. Yazıcı and Samet Güven, "Postmodern Historiography in Michael Ondaatje's *Running in the Family*," *ODÜSOBİAD* 12, no. 1 (2022): 16, https://doi.org/10.48146/odusobiad.997638

61 Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, 482.

62 Nietzsche, *Use and Abuse of History*, 13.

63 Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, 190.

64 Maria Mureșan, "Related Concepts: Cultural Materialism, New Historicism, Cultural Studies," *Editura Aeternitas,* no. 14 (2023): 275.

circumstances are inverted and the truth does not satisfy the strong group, it will remain restricted behind a diminutive barrier.

Such theoretical doubts about historical truth are embodied also in Mantel's treatment of key Tudor women. According to Mantel, neither historians nor biographers are sure about Catherine's virginity: "Who took Catherine's virginity, her first husband or her second? For all eternity we will never know."[65] In certain historical cases, such as the one mentioned earlier, one just cannot trust history. Furthermore, the trilogy puts Anne Boleyn's infidelity under investigation; it is illogical to assume that a queen could engage in sexual intercourse with one hundred men. Consequently, the reader occasionally perceives that Mantel is convinced of Anne's innocence. However, in the case that Anne was really promiscuous, Richmond postulates that "Elizabeth is not even the queen's child. They say she was smuggled into the bedchamber in a basket, and the queen's dead child carried out."[66] It is impossible to determine with certainty whether Elizabeth is Henry's daughter. In this vein, the narrator of *The Mirror and the Light* asserts that "there is a story beneath the story."[67] All these arguments align with new historicism and serve as testimonies to Mantel's new historicist approach in the trilogy. In drawing things to a close, Mantel challenges the perception of history as indisputable, unprejudiced, and incontrovertible. History can be disputable and doubtful in many cases. Conversely, there may be lost histories and neglected chronicles that need to be reconstructed.

Challenging the Singularity of Historical Narrative

Jeffrey Cox and Larry Reynolds argue that postmodernism "rejects the idea of 'history' as a directly accessible unitary past, and substitutes for it the conception of 'histories,' an ongoing series of human constructions."[68] History does not exist as a unified narrative but appears in multiple versions. C. Behan McCullagh deems "those who would confine history to little narratives of particular episodes from the actors' point of view would blind us to the structure of society and to the influence it can have on human experience."[69] Adhering to a singular historical narrative and perspective is akin to obscuring reality and constricting one's horizons. Mantel, in her "The Day Is For The Living," summarizes the theory of new historicism when she says that "evidence is always partial. Facts are not truth, though they are part of it—information is not knowledge. And history is not the past – it is the method we have evolved of organizing our ignorance of the past."[70] Historical accounts can in no way be unified around a solo subject; in other words, there are always different opinions and thoughts about any historical event or figure. Mantel has another engaging

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65 Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, 213.
66 Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, 381.
67 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 69.
68 Jeffrey Cox and Larry Reynolds, *New Historical Literary Study* (Princeton University Press, 1993), 4.
69 C. Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (Routledge, 2003), 309.
70 Hilary Mantel, "The Day Is for the Living," BBC Radio 4, June 13, 2017, 4, https://medium.com/@bbcradiofour/hilary-mantel-bbc-reith-lectures-2017-aeff8935ab33

work called "Can These Bones Live?" In it, she states that "mathematical truth may be pleasing, elegant. Historical truth is a rough beast—shapeless, blundering, hard to tame. It fights you every step. It cuts against storyteller's instinct. Your characters are never how or where you'd like them to be."[71] Historical facts are uncontrollable and prodigious forces. They may be unsatisfactory or not meet expectations. They consistently oppose, resist, and astonish you. They do not conform to the expectations of the writer or chronicler.

Consequently, the trilogy challenges the singleness of historical narrative through five central characters: Thomas Cromwell, Thomas More, King Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, and Cardinal Wolsey. Mantel eschews the stereotypical sketches of these historical figures. Instead, she employs lacunae and imbues them with her own imaginative and emotional interpretations. In prevalent historical accounts, Thomas Cromwell is depicted as duplicitous and cunning; yet, in Hilary Mantel's novels, he emerges as a fascinating figure, dedicated to his profession, loyal to his sovereign, and a proponent of reform. In history textbooks and biographies, there is insufficient information about Thomas Cromwell's childhood; therefore, the trilogy offers new details about his early life. Mantel depends on the power of imagination to fill in the gaps of Cromwell's childhood and other historical gaps. There is no alternative, and "we can't help but imagine the past; we have no choice. It is part of us and we must acknowledge that it is we who reimagine it."[72] Knowledgeable readers of these characters will find an immense difference if they compare them between the *Wolf Hall* trilogy and other fictional and non-fictional works.

The *Wolf Hall* trilogy challenges the notion of a singular historical narrative by incorporating metafictional engagement with historiography, highlighting the limitations of gathering historical information, and presenting a skeptical perspective on the acquisition of the historical record. Historical novels have the potential to confront and improve the study of history by employing literary methods, creatively filling in missing information in historical records, and offering alternative understandings of established historical archives. According to Özlem Sayar, the new historicist theory "allows multiple perspectives in historiography."[73] This means that there are multiple versions of history, which can be derived by examining contextual factors such as social, cultural, and economic factors.

To Mantel, "nothing is ever clear, and no truth is a single truth."[74] In this regard, Hutcheon questions "the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either *single origin* or

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71 Hilary Mantel, "Can These Bones Live?" BBC Radio 4, July 6, 2017, 4, https://medium.com/@bbcradiofour/can-these-bones-live-b015dc8397c6

72 Sarah O'Reilly, *PS Section for Wolf Hall: Hilary Mantel, Making It New* (Fourth Estate, 2010), para. 13.

73 Özlem Sayar, "Speaking with the Dead: New Historicism, Its Roots and Development as an Epoch-Making Approach," *RumeliDE Journal of Language and Literature Studies*, no. 14 (2024): 1234, https://doi.org/10.29000/rumelide.1455502

74 Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, 452.

simple causality."[75] She ridicules any idea of singularity. The primary challenge in the trilogy is the fresh image of Thomas Cromwell; his image of being a deceitful and deviant schemer is ruined in Mantel's story, and Thomas More's icon as a Catholic martyr is dismantled. Fighting the oneness in history is not restricted to the characters but also the religious institutions. The *Wolf Hall* trilogy represents the Catholic church as a corrupt and unscrupulous institution that exploits the poor crowds and seizes their properties, in addition to the use of its ecclesiastical power to achieve political prosperity.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that new historicism offers a productive framework for understanding Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy as a sustained interrogation of historical knowledge, narrative authority, and ideological power. Rather than treating history as a stable record of past events, Mantel's fiction exposes it as a culturally produced discourse shaped by institutions, belief systems, and competing interests. In alignment with new historicist and poststructuralist thought, the trilogy reveals how historical facts are selected, revised, suppressed, or fabricated, and how power determines which versions of the past attain legitimacy.

Mantel's reimagining of Tudor England foregrounds the inseparability of history and literature, and presents both as forms of narrative construction embedded in social and material practices. Through rumor, forgery, intertextual parody, and the strategic filling of archival gaps, the novels undermine claims to objectivity and challenge the singularity of national, religious, and biographical histories. The re-presentation of institutions such as the Catholic Church further underscores the Foucauldian insight that knowledge and truth are inseparable from power, while the revisionist portrayal of figures like Thomas Cromwell exemplifies the new historicist rejection of fixed identities and authoritative historical portraits.

This study extensively utilizes both new historicist and postmodern theories of historiography; nonetheless, Mantel's work is most effectively interpreted within a predominantly new historicist framework. Mantel's persistent emphasis on the relationship among power, discourse, and the creation of historical knowledge strongly corresponds with the issues raised by Stephen Greenblatt and Michel Foucault. Simultaneously, postmodern theories, especially Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, are crucial for elucidating the formal and narrative techniques through which Mantel problematizes historical truth. The trilogy occupies a hybrid perspective. Therefore, it is primarily analyzed in this study through a new historicist lens and augmented with postmodern insights into narrative structure and epistemological ambiguity.

By embracing ambiguity, multiplicity, and imaginative reconstruction, Mantel demonstrates that historical fiction can intervene critically in historiography rather than merely illustrate it. The *Wolf Hall* trilogy thus participates in a broader postmodern reconfiguration of historical narrative, one that resists closure and invites readers to question inherited truths. Ultimately, Mantel affirms

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[75] Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism*, 129.

the historical novelist's unique capacity to reanimate the past, not by claiming access to an absolute truth, but by exposing the processes through which history is continually written, contested, and reimagined.

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