

A Meta-Historical Study of Character Reconstruction in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*

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Abstract: Drawing on Hayden White's meta-historical theory, this thesis examines the logic of character reconstruction in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. While existing scholarship on the novel has fruitfully explored Cromwell's image, marginal figures, and narrative technique, it has tended to treat characters either as reflections of the archival record or as autonomous literary creations, leaving under-examined the meta-historical principles that govern Mantel's construction of character at the intersection of fact and imagination. This thesis addresses that gap by deploying White's tripartite framework of actuality, possibility, and reality. Actuality refers to the anchoring of characters in verifiable historical persons, events, and contexts; possibility designates the imaginative filling of archival silences with plausible experiences and motives; reality denotes the achieved effect of lived emotional truth, produced through sensory immersion and the restricted narrative perspective that positions the reader as a virtual witness within Cromwell's consciousness. The thesis argues that Mantel's character construction proceeds through an integration of these three modes, and that this integration embodies a meta-historical consciousness in which historical truth is understood as a constructive interplay rather than a passive inheritance from the archive. The study aims to move beyond the fact-versus-fiction binary and to offer a more precise account of how contemporary historical fiction generates its distinctive kind of truth.

Keywords: Hilary Mantel; *Wolf Hall*; Hayden White; Meta-history; Character reconstruction

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1. Introduction

1.1. Hilary Mantel and the Cromwell Trilogy

Hilary Mantel, twice awarded the Booker Prize, is among the most critically acclaimed historical novelists of the present era. Her Cromwell trilogy, inaugurated by *Wolf Hall*, represents a sustained act of re-imagining the Tudor past, centered on Thomas Cromwell—a figure whose received image has been largely hostile. Mantel's Cromwell is neither villain nor anachronistic hero but a psychologically complex human being, and it is precisely this mode of characterization, suspended between documented fact and imaginative elaboration, that calls for sustained theoretical investigation.

1.2. *Wolf Hall* and its critical reception

Wolf Hall has attracted extensive critical attention internationally and within China. Anglophone scholarship has explored Mantel's rehabilitation of Cromwell, her treatment of gender and the body, and the occult elements in the novel. Chinese scholarship has similarly concentrated on Cromwell's image, marginalized figures, narrative technique, and the application of theoretical frameworks such as New Historicism and spatial theory. However, a significant lacuna remains: most studies treat characters either as reflections of historical personages, evaluated by archival fidelity, or as autonomous literary creations, analyzed through narratological lenses. Both approaches presuppose a separation between fact and fiction. What is missing is an account of how Mantel constructs characters precisely through the interplay of documentary anchorage and imaginative supplementation—the meta-historical logic that governs her act of re-creation.

1.3. Research gap and thesis structure

Hayden White's meta-history, most fully expounded in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, rejects the positivist assumption that historiography is a transparent window onto past reality. White insists that historical narratives are always "emplotted" ^[1]. As Frank Ankersmit further argues, historical representation does not reproduce the past but constructs meaningful narrative substitutes for it ^[2]. And that their truth claims rest on a combination of factual data and imaginative construction. His terms "actuality," "possibility," and "reality" describe, respectively, the documentary raw material, the narrative strategies that fill inevitable gaps, and the fuller sense of lived experience that a well-crafted historical representation can achieve. Although White was primarily concerned with historiography, his categories are remarkably adaptable to the analysis of historical fiction, where the interplay of fact and invention is placed centered stage ^[3].

This thesis applies White's tripartite model to the characterization in *Wolf Hall*. It argues that Mantel's character-construction proceeds through three interrelated modes of writing: writing actuality, writing possibility, and writing reality. The thesis demonstrates that these three modes are not merely additive but interdependent: actuality provides the stabilizing framework, possibility supplies narrative coherence, and reality generates readerly identification and conviction.

The structure of the thesis reflects this argument. Following this introduction, Chapter Two reviews the existing scholarship on *Wolf Hall* and identifies the unresolved tension between fact and fiction in studies of character. Chapter Three elaborates Hayden White's meta-history, with particular attention to the concepts of actuality, possibility, and reality. Chapter Four then applies these three categories in an integrated analysis, examining in turn the writing of actuality through real-name references and documented historical events, the writing of possibility through Mantel's imaginative reconstruction of Cromwell's early life and private motives, and the writing of reality through sensory immersion and the "virtual witness" effect that draws the reader into the characters' inner worlds. The Conclusion summarizes the findings, reflects on what Mantel's practice reveals about contemporary historical consciousness, and suggests directions for future research. By placing the characters of *Wolf Hall* within a systematic meta-historical framework, this thesis aims to move beyond the fact-versus-fiction binary and to offer a more precise account of how historical fiction achieves its distinctive kind of truth.

2. Literature review

The critical reception of *Wolf Hall* since its Booker victory has been substantial. Early Anglophone criticism centered on Mantel's radical re-imagining of Cromwell, celebrating the departure from the villainous stereotype inherited from Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*. Subsequent studies broadened to examine gender and the body, investigating how female figures navigate the corporeal inscriptions of power, and to explore the occult or uncanny elements—prophetic dreams, pre-Reformation residues—that resist the novel's rationalizing surface.

Despite this richness, a lacuna persists. Studies overwhelmingly treat characters either as archival reflections or as autonomous literary creations, implicitly separating fact from fiction. What remains under-examined is the logic of construction itself—the principles by which Mantel simultaneously tethers her figures to the documentary record, fills the silences of that record with plausible life, and strives for an emotional authenticity no archive can verify. This thesis addresses that gap by deploying White's concepts of actuality, possibility, and reality as a framework for analyzing character reconstruction in *Wolf Hall*.

3. Theoretical framework

Hayden White's *Metahistory*^[4] challenged the positivist assumption that historiography transparently reflects past reality. White argued that the historian constructs a story by “emplotting” events according to narrative conventions that are, at root, literary. A chronicle becomes history only through this shaping, and the shaping is never neutral. This insight opens a space for understanding historical fiction not as a distortion but as a genre that makes visible the narrative operations historiography always performs.

To refine White's meta-history for character analysis, this thesis draws on three terms he consistently employs. Actuality refers to the documentary record—the verifiable events, names, and institutions that constitute historical representation's factual scaffolding. White never denies the existence of past events; he insists only that raw events do not constitute meaningful history. Possibility designates the imaginative labor that fills the inevitable gaps in the record. Archives preserve outcomes, not private motives; they record public acts, not interior deliberations. The historical novelist exercises possibility by inventing experiences that do not contradict known facts but give them coherence. Reality, in White's specific sense, is not synonymous with factual accuracy but its transcendence: “everything that can be truthfully said about its actuality plus everything that can be truthfully said about what it could possibly be”^[5]. It is the achieved effect of lived experience—the sensory density and psychological depth that make a reconstructed world feel true.

Applied to *Wolf Hall*, this tripartite model captures the movement of Mantel's characterization: actuality grounds her figures in the Tudor archive, possibility fleshes them into coherence, and reality delivers them to the reader as felt presences.

4. The tripartite writing of character: Actuality, possibility, and reality in *Wolf Hall*

4.1. Writing actuality

Actuality, in White's terms, designates the documentary record to which historical fiction must tether its inventions^[6]. In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel anchors her characters through real historical names, the documented framework of the English Reformation, and a network of attested relationships. Following Stephen

Greenblatt's concept of self-fashioning, historical identity is not an inner essence waiting to be revealed but a cultural performance shaped through continuous negotiation with dominant structures of authority. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt argues that individuals in the early modern period constructed their identities by internalizing social expectations, religious norms, and political hierarchies, fashioning a public self that both conforms to and subtly manipulates prevailing systems of power ^[7]. Identity therefore emerges as a dynamic process rather than a stable core: the subject becomes intelligible only within networks of surveillance, patronage, and ideological constraint. Applied to *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell's identity can be understood not as a recovered historical personality but as a strategically fashioned self, formed through his adaptive responses to royal authority, court politics, and shifting religious discourse ^[5]. Mantel's reconstruction thus mirrors the Renaissance process Greenblatt describes, presenting character as an effect of cultural negotiation rather than psychological essence.

Every major figure—Cromwell, Wolsey, More, Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, Katherine of Aragon—appears in state papers and chronicles. These names are not decorative but carry the authority of the archive into the fiction, generating productive friction between the reader's prior knowledge and Mantel's reinterpretation ^[6]. When her More burns heretics with legalistic zeal, the portrayal jars precisely because the historical More is so firmly established as the author of *Utopia* and the Catholic martyr. The novelty depends on the solidity of the actuality it revises.

The English Reformation—the break with Rome, the dissolution of the monasteries, the Act of Supremacy—provides the macro-historical structure within which characters act. More's execution, Cromwell's legislative role, Anne Boleyn's rise and fall all unfold within a framework the reader can verify. By embedding characters in these documented processes, Mantel ensures her interiorizing imagination is disciplined by the factual record.

Cromwell's documentary existence is particularly dense: letters, memoranda, and draft bills survive ^[3]. Mantel draws on this abundance, letting it shape the texture of his daily life. His web of relationships—Wolsey his patron, Henry his king, Rafe Sadler his ward—consists of historically attested individuals. Anchoring Cromwell in this network prevents him from becoming a solipsistic invention: he exists, in the novel as in history, through his entanglements with others who carry their own documentary authority.

4.2. Writing possibility

If actuality supplies the scaffolding, possibility provides the flesh. Archives preserve outcomes, not private thoughts. To create a character who is more than a name attached to datable actions, the historical novelist must enter the silences of the record and fill them with plausible life ^[8].

The early life of the historical Cromwell is sparsely documented. Mantel fills this silence with experiences that are psychologically illuminating and historically plausible. She scatters memories through the narrative: Cromwell learning arithmetic in his uncle's kitchen, acquiring languages as a soldier and merchant on the Continent, mastering banking in Florentine counting houses. None of these details can be verified, but they cohere with the known outcome—a minister of extraordinary financial and linguistic competence. The writing of possibility here explains what the documents merely record, bridging the gap between the blacksmith's son and the king's minister.

Similarly, the archive tells us that Cromwell served Wolsey loyally and defended his interests after his fall; it does not tell us why. Mantel supplies a motive by building on the psychological foundation laid in the novel's opening: Wolsey becomes the surrogate father who first valued Cromwell, and Cromwell's

loyalty is rooted in gratitude. His attitude toward More is rendered not as personal hatred but as complex ambivalence—a choice among possible motives that privileges psychological depth over melodrama. In both cases, possibility operates within the constraints of actuality: it does not contradict what is known, but shapes the unknown so that the character acquires coherence.

The domestic scenes—family meals, the death of Cromwell’s wife and daughters from the sweating sickness, his tenderness toward Rafe Sadler—are almost entirely invented. No archive records these moments, yet they are essential to characterizing Cromwell as a man of deep, if guarded, affections. These scenes never violate known facts; they inhabit the silences the record cannot fill, transforming the public functionary into a private human being.

4.3. Writing reality

Reality, in White’s formulation, transcends factual accuracy: it is the achieved effect of lived experience, a world rendered sensorily dense and psychologically coherent. In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel pursues this effect through visceral bodily immediacy, the recovery of marginalized agency, and sustained sensory immersion. The restoration of agency to historically marginalized figures plays a crucial role in the writing of reality because it transforms archival absence into experiential presence. Traditional historiography tends to record power from the perspective of institutions—kings, ministers, and official decisions—while subordinating women, servants, and politically defeated figures to passive roles within historical narrative ^[5]. By contrast, Mantel reimagines these individuals as perceiving and acting subjects endowed with emotional and moral interiority.

Granting agency to figures such as Katherine of Aragon does not merely fill historical gaps at the level of possibility; rather, it produces what Hayden White describes as historical reality—the sense that the past existed as a lived world inhabited by conscious human beings. When Katherine speaks, remembers her regency during the Battle of Flodden, and confronts Henry’s authority with dignity, the reader encounters not a symbolic obstacle in dynastic politics but a person experiencing loss, resistance, and moral conviction ^[5]. The effect is not the invention of new historical facts but the reconstruction of historical experience. Reality emerges precisely because the narrative restores subjectivity to those whom the archive renders silent, allowing the reader to perceive history as a field of competing human perspectives rather than a sequence of impersonal events.

The novel opens with young Cromwell being beaten by his father, a scene whose physical detail is rendered with clinical precision: “Blood from the gash on his head ... his left eye is blinded; but if he squints sideways ... he can see that the stitching of his father’s boot is unravelling ^[5]. The twine has sprung clear of the leather, and a hard knot in it has caught his eyebrow and opened another cut.” The prose places the reader inside a body registering pain at the level of sensation. The detail of the frayed boot-stitching is the kind of perception that belongs to consciousness under duress, lending the scene an authority that feels documentary. Moreover, this violence is narratively foundational: it is the wound that drives Cromwell from Putney, shaping his guardedness and his fierce protectiveness toward his own children. Reality here fuses factual truth with emotional truth, creating a character the reader knows from the inside.

Mantel also recovers figures whom traditional historiography has marginalized ^[2]. Katherine of Aragon, conventionally cast as the obstacle to Henry’s remarriage, is restored to agency: her earlier triumph as regent at Flodden is recalled, and her refusal to accept divorce is dramatized as moral courage rather than obstinacy.

Her voice carries the accumulated weight of queen, warrior, and mother dispossessed, and the reader experiences her suffering as a credible human ordeal—a fuller, truer Katherine than either the archival trace or the historical cliché can supply.

Throughout the novel, sensory saturation—the scratch of wool, the stench of the Thames, the clatter of hooves on cobblestones—operates alongside the restricted third-person perspective that adheres relentlessly to Cromwell’s consciousness. The reader sees what he sees, registers what he registers, and is drawn into an intense identification that transforms historical reconstruction into felt experience ^[5]. This “virtual witness” effect ^[9,10] is the culmination of the meta-historical process: actuality guarantees the reference to a real past, possibility supplies narrative coherence, and reality delivers the illusion of living through that past oneself.

5. Conclusion

This thesis has examined how Hilary Mantel reconstructs historical figures in *Wolf Hall* through the meta-historical interplay of actuality, possibility, and reality. Rather than treating Mantel’s characters as straightforward reflections of Tudor documents or as entirely free-standing inventions, the foregoing analysis has demonstrated that her mode of characterization proceeds through a layered synthesis: the factual anchorage of the archive, the plausible invention that fills archival silences, and the sensory and psychological density that transforms reconstruction into felt experience.

Several findings emerge from this analysis. First, the three modes of writing are not separate stages but mutually reinforcing operations. Actuality without possibility remains inert chronicle; possibility without actuality risks losing historical credibility; reality without the first two modes becomes unmoored emotionalism. Mantel’s achievement lies in her integration of all three, so that the documentary, the inferential, and the experiential are woven into a seamless narrative fabric. Second, this integrated mode of characterization embodies a distinct meta-historical consciousness. Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* does not merely use history as raw material for fiction; it reflects, in its very narrative procedures, on how history itself is made—through the selection and arrangement of archival traces, the filling of gaps with imagination, and the rendering of the resulting construct as if it were immediate experience. The novel thus enacts, in fictional form, the very argument that White advanced in theoretical terms: that historical truth is always a constructive interplay rather than a passive inheritance.

These findings carry implications beyond the single novel. The tripartite model of actuality-possibility-reality offers a transferable framework for analyzing character construction in other works of contemporary historical fiction, including the subsequent volumes of Mantel’s Cromwell trilogy. It may also prove productive for re-examining the relationship between historiography and the historical novel more broadly, providing a vocabulary that moves past the persistent binary of fact versus fiction. The present study is limited by its focus on a single novel and on characterization specifically; future research might extend the framework to narrative structure, spatial representation, or the handling of temporality. Nevertheless, by demonstrating how Mantel’s characters are constructed at the intersection of the verifiable, the plausible, and the experientially real, this thesis has sought to illuminate one of the central achievements of *Wolf Hall*—and to offer a tool for understanding how historical fiction, at its most powerful, generates a truth that is neither simply documented nor simply invented, but built from both. Scholars of historiographic metafiction such as Linda Hutcheon extend insights that resonate strongly with Hayden White’s meta-historical framework.

Hutcheon argues that contemporary historical novels foreground the constructed nature of historical knowledge rather than concealing it ^[11]; this emphasis parallels White's claim that historical narratives derive meaning not from transparent access to the past but from acts of narrative configuration. Rather than constituting an alternative theoretical model, historiographic metafiction can therefore be understood as a literary realization of the meta-historical principles White identifies at the level of historiography.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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