



The Mirror & the Light, by Hilary Mantel
Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy, June 2020

Historical novelist Hilary Mantel had won the prestigious Booker Prize for each of the first two books in her Wolf Hall trilogy about Thomas Cromwell. It remains to be seen if *The Mirror & the Light*, her new third novel in the Tudor-era series, will complete the hat trick.

The Mirror & the Light begins where the second book, *Bring Up the Bodies*, had left off. Thomas Cromwell, the son of a lowly blacksmith, had risen through the ranks to become King Henry VIII's trusted chief minister. Through ruthless ambition, Cromwell did the king's bidding at his will. When Henry had tired of his second wife Anne Boleyn, Cromwell dispatched the queen on trumped up charges, taking her brother George and four ill-fated courtiers down with her.

"It is I," Cromwell mused, "who tell (the king) who he can marry and unmarry and who he can marry next, and who and how to kill." Cromwell then plotted Henry's third marriage to pale and complacent Jane Seymour, the polar opposite of dark and mercurial Anne Boleyn.

As Cromwell's influence over Henry grew, he used guile and flattery to secure his position. He told the vain Henry, who owned 100 looking glasses, that he was "the mirror and the light," outshining all other kings. However, a man willing to sell his soul in service to his king risks losing his life in the process. Powerful enemies, who seek to undermine Cromwell's standing with Henry, lurked about.

Soon after the dutiful Jane Seymour succumbed giving birth to Henry's long-desired son, Cromwell was tasked with finding a fourth bride for the now corpulent Henry. Seeking a political marriage to solidify England's standing with the Protestant Reformation, Cromwell suggested a match with Anne of Cleves, a German princess. Instead of vetting the young woman in person, Cromwell based his recommendation on a flattering portrait of Anne of Cleves, painted by the renowned artist Hans Holbein. Alas, art did not imitate life; Henry was repulsed by his

ungainly bride-to-be. "I like her not!" –Henry's interjection upon their first meeting—sealed Cromwell's fate.

The *Mirror & the Light* might not be every reader's cup of tea. Even Tudor enthusiasts may agree that Ms. Mantel included too many obscure characters in her novel. However, her ability to keep the narrative suspenseful, although we know what will happen, is a mark of her brilliance.

It is interesting to note that Hans Holbein also had painted portraits of Thomas Cromwell and his nemesis Sir Thomas More, whose Cromwell-engineered demise is depicted in Ms. Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. Those famous paintings currently are part of the Frick Collection in a mansion on Manhattan's Fifth Avenue. Mortal enemies in life, Cromwell and More now face one another on opposite sides of a fireplace in the elegant museum. Five centuries later, Thomas Cromwell continues to hold court.