

Mantel, Hilary. *Bring Up the Bodies*. London: Fourth Estate, 2012. 414 pp.

Noémi Albert

Bring Up the Bodies is the second volume of a planned trilogy, the first one being *Wolf Hall*, published in 2009. Both are historical novels treating the period of the reign of Henry VIII, depicting the notorious king and his court. Hilary Mantel's talent for writing historical fiction earned her the title of the first woman writer to receive the Booker Prize twice, for the two above-mentioned novels. The reader of these novels enters the world of the kings and queens of England, becomes acquainted with their most secret thoughts and problems, as well as with their follies and hidden dreams.

Bring Up the Bodies is a powerful title which befits the story of King Henry VIII's love life and tumultuous reign that are central to the novel. A reader acquainted with the intricate events of the period in which the novel is situated may easily recognize whose bodies the title might refer to, and also is not surprised that the work will conclude with deaths. Hilary Mantel's style, however, offers a fresh view of the events that happened several centuries ago and vividly depicts a sequence from Henry's life ending with the beheading of Anne Boleyn. The first part of the planned trilogy bears a title adopted from the name of the Seymour family seat, Wolfhall, and addresses the rapid rise to power of Thomas Cromwell at the cost of the death of Sir Thomas More. Following in its track, *Bring Up the Bodies* focuses on Henry VIII's first wives and presents their tragic fates, but Cromwell does not cease to be a character of great importance throughout. As Mantel highlights in the author's notes,

This book is of course not about Anne Boleyn or about Henry VIII, but about the career of Thomas Cromwell, who is still in need of attention from biographers. Meanwhile, Mr Secretary remains sleek, plump and densely inaccessible, like a choice plum in a Christmas pie; but I hope to continue my efforts to dig him out. (413)

Throughout her novel, it is Mantel's intent to draw attention to the character of Cromwell, a man whose personality is veiled in mystery even today, and which is filled with intrigues for both the author and the reader. After reaching the height of his power, Cromwell becomes the most powerful of Henry's ministers, a faithful follower and adviser whose voice and character dominate the novel. While the king himself and Anne Boleyn both occupy essential positions, the novel's main focus is placed on the character who possibly played the greatest role at Henry VIII's court.

The novel's style is accessible, easy to digest and enjoy. It is a work that offers an interconnection of history and fiction while recreating the fascinating story of King

Henry VIII and his numerous marriages. Hilary Mantel presents the historical events in a vivid manner that brings the historical figures close to us. She places emphasis on historical authenticity, paying attention to details carefully collected from historical records, yet she provides an alternative to the approach of the events as presented in histories. Mantel is very careful to avoid contradicting historical data, but at the same time provides an exciting survey of events and personages. Despite her concern with authenticity, the novel is written in a style whereby the account of historical events never becomes baffling, and it offers such a captivating story that the reader finds himself/herself in a fantasy world, the world of fiction. In this manner, the historical events enjoy a new life in the sphere of fiction in an exciting compound of authenticity and magic. Mantel, through the sphere of fiction in which her book resides, adds a liveliness, a vitality to historical authenticity.

Although the novel leads us into the sixteenth century, the language adopted is contemporary and close to us as twenty-first century readers, which enhances the timelessness of the story. It abounds in intimate detail, giving us insight into the complicated lives and thoughts of all those surrounding the king, showing their struggles to please him and thereby to remain alive despite all of the king's caprices and follies. Even taboo subjects and delicate questions like sexuality, adultery, treason, entangled relations, bedroom secrets, closed doors, and so on, are put in the limelight.

Thus the novel proves to be a perfect blending of historical authenticity and the subjectivity of the characters based on the historical accounts. Personal feelings and carefully arranged fact meet in the novel, which readers will find powerfully compelling. The subjectivity of the characters never becomes excessive: it validates the story and enhances the reader's commitment. The novel places emphasis on accuracy but balances this with its humorous style, by incorporating details which cannot possibly be known today. Although the king becomes rather childish and tyrannical, and Anne Boleyn's death sentence is presented in such a comic way that we cannot feel compassion for her, the main effect of the story does not suffer. The theme remains captivating and the style provides new perspectives for its re-evaluation.

The dialogues between the characters play a central role in the novel, serving as the best device to report on their internal struggles, concealed thoughts and the minutest details of all the actions they take, all the decisions they make. This method brings the novel close to drama, in which tensions are revealed through monologues and the numerous exchanges that take place among the characters. The style of Mantel's novel brings the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries together, her idiomatic, present-tense discourse heightens the sense that the characters inhabiting a long-past century walk among us; they think and speak as we do. Every scene, every character is alive and actively present, reborn before our own eyes. Through the use of present tense and free indirect speech Mantel draws lively portraits of her characters.

Another clever device is the ironical stance the narrator adopts. One of the most ironical parts of the book is probably the confession of Mark Smeaton,—one of the many men paying visits to Queen Anne's bedroom—when he is summoned for his adulterous behaviour. Mark is so frightened that he tends to confess everything, unlikely details included:

‘Norris’ is somewhere in the babble, ‘Weston’ is there, so far so likely: and then Mark names courtiers so fast that their names merge and fly, he hears Brereton and says, ‘Write that down,’ he swears he hears Carew, also Fitzwilliam, and Anne’s almoner and the Archbishop of Canterbury; he is in there himself of course, and at one point the child alleges Anne has committed adultery with her own husband. ‘Thomas Wyatt...’ Mark pipes... (319)

Henry, the king, is also treated with irony and humour: often he is more like a caricature or a clown than the mighty king we probably know him as from different historical sources. The often jocose portraiture of his character surfaces through claims like the following: “The king – it would be three or four years back and to justify his first divorce – put out a book called *A Glass of the Truth*. Parts of it, they say, he wrote himself” (323). The great ruler and writer is represented as no more than a barely literate, uneducated person who can barely write his love letters himself, who engages in searching for silly rhymes for a song intended to captivate his new lover, Jane Seymour. We see a king desperate to sire a male heir, but incapable of the task, who, in his desperation and fear of failure, looks for a solution in replacing his wives with new ones. These elements and, for instance, his plans to annul his current marriage to Anne Boleyn (by admitting his relationship with Anne’s sister Mary, which before his wish to end his marriage was a taboo) are all presented in a light that makes them hilarious, almost silly. Although from history books Henry appears to us as “one of the most charismatic rulers to sit on the English throne” (John Guy. *The Tudors: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford UP. 2000. 41), King Henry becomes rather a puppet, easily impressionable, whose egotistic means to reaching his goals blind him.

The theme of the book is not new: for several centuries much literature and other art forms have been preoccupied with the adventurous life of Henry VIII, with the personality and fate of Anne Boleyn, and with the brave, noble, but dangerous Thomas Cromwell. Henry’s portraiture as a mighty, charismatic king might follow in the footsteps of William Shakespeare’s play treating his reign. In Shakespeare’s work the king appears as a powerful character who always gets what he wants and who cannot be easily manipulated by his subjects. Anne and Cromwell, who play central roles in Mantel’s novel, are of only secondary importance in the play, in which they are weak subjects dependent upon their king. While Mantel’s novel approaches the issues with a comic tone, the Prologue of *Henry VIII* warns the audience about the play’s sad and weighty theme, with “such noble scenes as draw the eye to flow” (Shakespeare. *Henry VIII*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962. 3). The theme appears in the writings of Jane Austen, Philippa Gregory and others; Donizetti’s opera *Anna Bolena* is considered a masterpiece, with its duet “Sul suo capo aggravi un Dio” being one of the finest in the entire operatic repertoire. A great number of motion pictures use the character of Anne Boleyn as their protagonist in such films of great success like *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1969) or *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2008).

Every work of art, every film dealing with the reign of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn provides us with a new facet of these contradictory figures and reveals new dimensions of their personalities. One might suppose that there is nothing new about them to offer, but as Mantel claims about Anne Boleyn, “A mercurial woman, elusive

in her lifetime, Anne is still changing centuries after her death, carrying the projections of those who read and write about her” (412). Besides Mantel’s new approach to these two characters, what makes the novel differ from other works of art presenting the same period is the figure of Thomas Cromwell himself, standing probably for the first time at the centre of a novel. Hilary Mantel has managed to produce a thrilling and exciting book so that her readers eagerly anticipate the sequel, *The Mirror and the Light*, which is set to be published in 2015.