

Hilary Mantel's *Anne Boleyn*: Locating a Body of Evidence

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Abstract The recent influx of popular culture surrounding the Tudors suggests that something about the time period and the saga of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn is particularly relevant to our modern sensibilities. Critical scholarship seems to be catching on to Tudor fever slowly; in her recent monograph, Susan Bordo explores Anne Boleyn's fame and the way she has been represented culturally over time. Still, though the time period continues to be a popular subject, little has been written about recent adaptations, particularly in the realm of historical fiction. This paper explores the way that Hilary Mantel, in her novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, paints the body of Anne Boleyn through battle imagery that maps her rise and subsequent decline over the course of the novels. The argument further explores the way this imagery prevents the reader from sympathizing too deeply with Anne; rather, I suggest that Mantel portrays Anne as the master of her own fate. Ultimately, I argue that through the imagery surrounding Anne Boleyn, Mantel creates a body of evidence where historically we have no body.

Key words Anne Boleyn; Susan Bordo; body; imagery; death; agency

Henry VIII's unfortunate queen Anne Boleyn stars in myriad works of historical fiction, from the literary fiction of Hilary Mantel to the perhaps less historical potboilers of Philippa Gregory. Natalie Dormer smolders intelligently (both in and out of low-cut dresses) in Showtime's *The Tudors*, and Natalie Portman schemes and glowers in the film adaptation of Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*.

Though Anne has long been a figure of popular interest, this interest seems to have been renewed late, and the Annes we see now fall into distinct camps. They are beautiful and seductive, like Dormer's and Portman's Annes. They can be identified by their uncontainable sexuality and smoldering eyes, by their scheming brains. These women are smart, no question about it, but their sexuality seems to be at the forefront of their narratives. On the other end of the spectrum are the victimized Annes, the

Annes who are so caught up in romance and love that they fall into ready traps, helpless. In his book *The Historical Novel*, Jerome de Groot identifies this binary that we have created in the second half of the twentieth century: “either Anne as political and problematic or Anne as romantic, passionate, and mistreated...For every work in which she is independent and articulate there is a book such as Gregory’s *The Other Boleyn Girl* which suggests that she was in fact guilty of incest and attempting witchcraft” (74). This inconsistency occurs precisely because we do not have a solid body of evidence for Anne — we have little to actually base our narratives on, and so we must conjecture.

That is, although her reputation looms large in modern culture, we know maddeningly little about the historical Anne Boleyn, in large part because Henry set about abolishing records of her existence almost as soon as he’d condemned her to die. What bibliographic information we do have comes from letters written by the Spanish ambassador Eustace Chapuys, who was in a position to dislike Anne intensely; from biased legal documents and testimonies taken from people who were quite probably under threat of torture; from literature and paintings possibly created by artists with strong anti-Protestant sentiments. Retha Warnicke notes that John Foxe’s sympathetic treatment of Anne’s character in his *Book of Martyrs* may have spurred Catholic writers to pen alternate narratives of the church’s schism (qtd. in Warnicke 19), resulting in histories like Nicholas Sander’s (1585), in which Sander describes Anne as “rather tall of stature, with black hair...[with a] projecting tooth under the upper lip, and on her right hand six fingers” (23-5). Apart from these heavily biased narratives, we don’t actually know what Anne looked like: of the portraits and paintings that bear her name, only one, a portrait in the National Public Gallery, has been largely agreed upon by art historians as a painting of Anne Boleyn, and even this is not necessarily a faithful rendering because of what Tudor historians call symbolic iconizing, or translating an argument about someone’s character into visual text.¹

Not unnaturally we seem primarily to fixate our attentions on Anne’s head, on the circumstances surrounding her death, in a way that might close us off to certain interpretations of her character. In the preface to his biography of Anne Boleyn, Eric Ives discusses the way that we have traditionally looked at Anne through “the prism of her final hours” and the way in which this causes distortion; surely, a woman for whom the King of England would throw away a long-term marriage has importance that extends far beyond the scandal of the chopping block. Still, there is something about her demise that is incredibly seductive to us, perhaps precisely because so much of what led up to it is a mystery. This lack of reliable bibliographic information has led to a huge amount of conjecture, much of which has been incredibly damaging to Anne’s historical reputation.

As a result, the ways in which Anne has been represented are largely problematic, and even the best representations of her seem to fall into one of the two categories mentioned above. In her recent monograph, Susan Bordo examines our relatively consistent fascination with Anne Boleyn as well as the many ways Anne has been portrayed. In what follows I will extend Bordo's work by looking at the first two novels in Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell trilogy, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, in an attempt to determine how Anne's character is treated. Bordo admires Mantel's work, but ultimately finds that she, too, relegates Anne to the scrap heap of calculating women. Mantel is explicit in her author's note to *Bring Up the Bodies*: she does not attempt to rewrite an authoritative history, and neither does her project focus on Anne Boleyn at all — she attempts to resurrect Thomas Cromwell instead, and to see the situation as he might have seen it. It is important to note that in Mantel's novels, the information we receive about Anne is filtered through either the figure of Thomas Cromwell or a narrator who more often than not aligns himself with Cromwell.² As such, we cannot read the information we receive about Anne as necessarily indicative of Mantel's particular feelings about the historical woman so much as we must read them as the biased ruminations of a fictional Thomas Cromwell who was historically set against her. Still, as Bordo points out, Mantel's choice to include and omit certain historical documents and pieces of evidence that could sway her readers' opinions of Anne indicates a decision to portray a stereotypical, predominantly negative Anne Boleyn.

Ultimately, though, I disagree with Bordo's reading of Hilary Mantel's Anne Boleyn as primarily negative. Though this text paints Anne as largely responsible for her own death, I think this responsibility is respected, impressive — Anne is given agency here in a way that breaks the binary de Groot identifies in recent fictional representations. She is, in many ways, the only true opponent for a very shrewd, very watchful Cromwell. Mantel's texts pays a remarkable attention to bodies, and the way those bodies are presented have an incredible effect on the way we respond to characters. Anne's body in particular is presented to readers in a way that allows us to map her rise and fall onto her body; her body is a weapon that she introduces into the game, and it is through this weapon that she meets her demise. In the beginning, Anne is the author of her own text. She acts like a general, is in full command of her body and its interpretation. In *Wolf Hall*, in particular, Anne's body and brain function distinctly: Anne is the "cold slick brain" while her body remains "so small, her bones so delicate, her waist so narrow" (*WH* 185). In this way, Mantel creates an Anne who is simultaneously sensual and strategic, both puppet and puppet master. Essentially, the true Anne resides in her brain, while her body is a weapon to be her alone, when and how she sees fit. I will argue that Mantel creates this distinct separation between

Anne's brain and her body in order to show how Anne's body was created, and later taken up by parties who opposed her power, as a weapon.

Anne as Master General

In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel introduces Anne Boleyn's body as scrupulously controlled. According to Susan Bordo, "[Mantel's Anne] exudes the nervous energy of a modern-day anorexic, her true self and laser focus carefully hidden away, constantly calculating how to keep up appearances lest her secrets be exposed" (Bordo 236). During Anne's first audience with Cromwell, she is described as "sallow and sharp... her fingers tugging and ripping at a sprig of rosemary" (*WH* 184). Later in the novel, Anne's anxious habits lead people to suspect that she has a deformity she is attempting to hide: "sometimes her fingers pull at [her crucifix on a gold chain] impatiently, and then she tucks her hands back in her sleeves" (*WH* 223).³ Mantel's Anne throws fits, she paces, she all but vibrates with nervous energy. Her anxiety points to a constant calculation, a keen mind intent upon calling its own shots.

In keeping with this image of control, Mantel paints Anne and her body through images of battle in which Anne is the master general. Her deployment of her body is primarily, if not solely, strategic. According to Cromwell, "Anne is not a carnal being, she is a calculating being, with a cold slick brain at work behind her hungry black eyes" (*WH* 323). In *Wolf Hall*, Anne is shown to gain plenty of ground based on her body and how much of it she is willing to give over to Henry, yet through Cromwell's sharp observation, we understand that this is no way indicates emotional abandon or a lack of control; rather, Anne coldly uses the tools at her disposal — here, her body — for personal gain without attachment. Her body is parsed out, used strategically in order to gain ground in her affair with Henry. Mantel's narrator notes that "she uses her body like a soldier, conserving its resources; like one of the masters in the anatomy school at Padua, she divides it up and names every part, this is my thigh, this is my breast, this is my tongue" (364). Mary Boleyn reports that when Henry and Anne are alone, "she lets him unlace her bodice" (188). Though the subject matter here is incredible suggestive, Anne's association with it is decidedly nonsexual and atypical of traditional gender stereotypes; the language leaves no doubt that Anne has agency here, and that this agency allows her a very untraditional control over her body that Cromwell can't help but respect.

Further emphasizing Anne's agency, Mantel's narrator specifically links her body to her strategy to usurp Katherine, placing physical descriptions alongside mentions of her plans to displace the queen. Her strategy purposefully and deliberately employs her body to exert control. After Henry names Anne Marquess of Pembroke, she sits beside him on the dais, and we are given a clear picture of the way she uses her body

to her political advantage:

...when she turns to speak to him her black lashes brush her cheeks. She is almost there now, almost there, her body taut like a bowstring, her skin dusted with gold, with tints of apricot and honey; when she smiles, which she does often, she shows small teeth, white and sharp. She is planning to commandeer Katherine's royal barge, she tells him. (357)

The particular attention to Anne's appearance here is arresting. The mention of her black lashes, along with the sweet apricot and honey of her skin, is almost unbearably sensual, while her teeth are animalistic, nearly canine. Further, her body is directly associated with weaponry here. Mantel paints her as a bowstring, poised and waiting, strategic, so that when Anne articulates what it is she wants of Henry here — to commandeer the royal barge — her request is an arrow unleashed. As such, her body is the vessel by which she delivers her greatest attacks.

Though her body is intended for public consumption, Anne herself decides how it is consumed, and by whom — Mantel's language specifically gives us to understand that Anne alone has control over who has full access to it. Even Cromwell, a master of deception and of reading others' deceptions, is at a loss to break through the barrier her body presents to understanding: "Anne's face wears no expression at all. Even a man as literate as he can find nothing there to read" (276). Precisely because of the control Anne has over her body, her face, her own emotions, Cromwell cannot find a foothold. Further, Mantel makes certain that we see Anne's own hand in her control, and in the coldness she presents. It would be easy enough to read Anne sympathetically, as operating only or even primarily under the orders of her father and uncle — a pawn — yet Mantel chooses to deliberately foreclose this reading; her Anne Boleyn has the mental capacity to control her own family. According to the narrator, "[Anne's father and brother] think they are fixing her tactics, but she is her own best tactician, and able to think back and judge what has gone wrong; [Cromwell] admires anyone who can learn from mistakes" (317). Anne herself has agency here, making decisions about her body and maintaining a firm, impenetrable barrier. Her body becomes her weapon: a weapon of mass destruction, as it were, that she alone can command — for the time being.

Though it would make sense to assume that Anne relinquishes control the moment she and Henry fully consummate their affair, her loss of control does not really become apparent until she is visibly pregnant, suggesting further that Anne's agency is intimately tied to the physical appearance of her body in these texts. During Anne's coronation, she is presented as virginal, almost angelic: "The queen is in

white, her body shimmering in its strange skin, her face held in a conscious solemn smile, her hair loose beneath a circle of gems” (429). The ethereal quality the narrator attributes to Anne here along with an acute awareness gives her the air of a sacrificial lamb willingly being led to the slaughter; Anne is offering something up here, and she’s offering it willingly. When she moves to lie facedown in prayer before the altar, Cromwell notes his first real access to her body after years of scrutiny:

Anne is lying in her shift. She looks flat as a ghost, except for the shocking mound of her six-month child. In her ceremonial robes, her condition has hardly showed, and only that sacred instant, as she lay belly-down to stone, had connected him to her body, which now lies stretched out like a sacrifice; her breasts puffy beneath the linen, her swollen feet bare. (432)

The description of Anne here is shockingly feminine and drastically unlike the descriptions we have thus far been privy to. As Cromwell gains access to Anne’s body through her pregnant belly, so do we as readers who are intimately connected with Cromwell’s thoughts and observations. It is important that it is ultimately Anne’s pregnancy that causes her to relinquish her control: in fulfilling her primary duty as consort, essentially taking on the only task that will cement the position she has been feverishly working toward and allowing her fortunes to be dictated by her body and by traditional female roles, Anne sets in motion her own downfall.

Anne’s Queenship and Public Consumption

Though Anne’s body is repeatedly mentioned throughout both of Hilary Mantel’s Thomas Cromwell novels, after her coronation in *Wolf Hall*, there is a shift in the way it is written/spoken about. While in *Wolf Hall*, Anne’s body is her own weapon, deployed to win her own battle, in *Bring Up the Bodies*, it becomes available for public consumption; Mantel crafts Anne’s body as an open-source text: as vulnerable to the interpretations and interrogations of others, and therefore as uncontrolled by Anne. This second novel’s Anne is one who changes based on the characters and circumstances around her; she is described, at various points, as a grotesque creature of excess, a puzzle, and dead meat. In shifting the kind of language she uses to describe Anne’s body, Mantel creates a space for Cromwell to bring Anne down using her body, the very weapon Anne herself introduces into the war, and which, I will argue, ultimately places the blame for Anne’s demise upon Anne’s own shoulders.

The shift in Mantel’s descriptions of Anne’s body is subtle, and it begins with an allowance for interpretation of Anne’s body by other characters. In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell sees Anne’s body but has difficulty in identifying what its various modes

and parts signify — he admittedly doesn't know how to read what he sees. Her face and body are even presented in terms of texts and literacy, and they elude him: "Even a man as literate as [Cromwell] can find nothing there to read" (276). In *Bring Up the Bodies*, he is tapped in her body in a way that allows him to interpret it, to draw connections between it and his own memories and experiences. He notes:

Anne was wearing, that day, rose pink and dove grey. The colours should have had a fresh maidenly charm; but all he could think of were stretched innards, umbles and tripes, grey-pink intestines looped out of a living body; he had a second batch of recalcitrant friars to be dispatched to Tyburn, to be slit up and gralloched by the hangman...The pearls around her long neck looked to him like little beads of fat, and as she argued she would reach up and tug them; he kept his eyes on her fingertips, nails flashing like tiny knives. (38)

This passage is significant on several levels. First and foremost, it shows Cromwell making connections and associations related to Anne's body, which is a sign that he is beginning to solve the puzzle she presents — and it is her body, the very thing that has heretofore eluded him, that allows him to do so. This is particularly important for Cromwell, who needs access to his enemies in order to bring them down. His dawning access to Anne's body is also the dawn of her downfall at his hands. Further, Anne's body reminds Cromwell of innards, of dead meat and the brutality done at his behest, in a way that suggests her own fate. Anne's hands, ever anxious, tugging and ripping at whatever's in reach, are emphasized, and her fingertips are weapon-like, but this time Cromwell is wary of them, seriously mitigating their threat.

Whereas in *Wolf Hall*, Anne's body is depicted as separate from her mind and as operating under her own control, in *Bring Up the Bodies*, it seems to operate of its own accord, displaying the excess of Anne's emotions. In short, her body betrays her confidence and her control, allowing others to look at her and track her social progress and her state of mind at any given moment. Her body becomes a body of superfluity, and it marks her triumph over Katherine physically; when Anne becomes pregnant, Cromwell links her rise with Katherine's fall, noticing "Anne blossoming as Katherine fails...he pictures them, their faces intent and skirts bunched, two little girls in a muddy track, playing teeter-totter with a plank balanced on a stone" (*BUTB* 96). In comparing the two women's physical states, Mantel paints Anne's body as not only expanding with child, but also as essentially feeding off of Katherine's life force in a nearly vampiric way — she is the physical beneficiary of Katherine's ill fortune. Certainly, Mantel's Anne would not conceive of trying to hide her pregnancy, and neither would she want to hide her triumph over Katherine. But this blossoming is

indicative of a lack of control over the way she uses her body to portray her thoughts and feelings, and it is striking in comparison with the control she exerts over her body's reception in *Wolf Hall*. Anne no longer has the authority to determine who has access to her body and who is denied; the access is written in the expanding lines of her body.

The excessiveness of Anne's body is further drawn out and emphasized in the figure of Mary, Anne's fool, who appears at key moments in *Bring Up the Bodies*. Perhaps most notably, after one of Anne's miscarriages, Mary sits outside the queen's suite and feigns labor in a grotesque display. When Cromwell arrives, she stares right at him and pulls her skirt up, and he notes that "she has shaved herself or someone has shaved her, and her parts are bald, like the parts of an old woman or a little child" (180-1). Mary's shaved genitals render her oddly ageless, but unique and obscene — she flashes them to Cromwell, airing what is traditionally secret and forcing him to look. Because her farcical labor recalls Anne's recent labor, and because she plants herself directly outside of Anne's door during her show, her body is directly related to Anne's in its "rocking and moaning" available for all to see. She is a grotesque, a distorted representation of Anne herself who has taken the private moments of labor and of grief and put them on tasteless display. Thus, she has made Anne's body only further available for public consumption. The link between Mary the dwarf and Anne Boleyn emphasizes just how available Anne's body has become — it has lost its copyright and can be read, interpreted, and even mimicked widely.

Finally, it is Anne's unguarded body, and Cromwell's relatively newfound ability to access it, that offers the key for Cromwell to orchestrate her fall from grace. Once he knows how to read the weapon of her body — once she no longer controls it, but is controlled by it — he can use that weapon against her. Cromwell becomes vigilant in his reading of the text Anne provides: "He is looking very closely at the queen, he feels he knows her as a mother knows her child, or a child its mother. He knows every stitch in her bodice. He notes the rise and fall of her every breath. What is in your heart, madam? That is the last door to be open." Anne's body is described as a puzzle, a closed door just waiting for someone to find the key — and doors are meant to be opened. Cromwell knows Anne even beyond the physical details (which he knows very well indeed, given the attention to the stitching on her bodice), and he watches her closely and steadily enough to catch each of her breaths; he is patient, intimate, connected to Anne in a way that cannot be fabricated. He watches as though, with enough attention to her physicality, he will find a way to break in, and in a sense, he does: "He imagines himself entering Anne, not as a lover but as a lawyer, and rolled in his fist his papers, his writs; he imagines himself entering the heart of the queen. In its chambers he hears the click of his own boot heels" (*BUTB* 240). Here,

Cromwell uses Anne's body — the very organ that keeps Anne alive — to gain an intimate understanding of what makes her tick in order to use the information against her. That he hears his footfall serves both as a sign that Cromwell and Anne are alike — he hears echoes of himself in Anne's innermost heart — and a sign that he has defeated her: he is walking on her heart and destroying its peace. The language of these passages paints Anne's body as accessible to the careful reader — as mysterious, certainly, but as able to be traversed and interpreted and unscrambled. In short, Anne's defenses have been undone.

Even later, after Anne is dead, Cromwell will associate the affair with lawyerly text, open-sourced and maddening and messy, emphasizing that he handled the Boleyn affair by reading Anne's body like a text. He recalls:

It was a triumph, in a small way, to unknot the entanglement of thighs and tongues, to take that mass of heaving flesh and smooth it on to white paper: as the body, after the climax, lies back on white linen. He has seen beautiful indictments, not a word wasted. This was not one: the phrases jostled and frothed, nudged and spilled, ugly in content and ugly in form. The design against Anne is unhallowed in its gestation, untimely in its delivery, a mass of tissue born shapeless; it waited to be licked into shape as a bear club is licked by its mother. (367)

Here, Cromwell's plan against Anne is itself a shapeless fetus, both natural and grotesque. Perhaps nowhere in the novel is the conflation of body and text more apparent or more disturbing. This passage makes Cromwell's method of reading Anne clear as it emphasizes the method of Anne's defeat: her body became readable, a weapon to be used against her by whoever was willing to unknot it, and Cromwell proved himself to be up to the task. Her body, and the accusations of infidelity surrounding her body, is ultimately her undoing.

Anne's Body as Remnant

Early in *Bring Up the Bodies*, Anne says to Cromwell, "We are condemned to fight until the breath goes out of our bodies" (147). In this novel, however, Anne is not even allowed to fight for that long. After Cromwell gains access to her body and innermost desires, Anne's body is painted in the imagery of death, as though she is already dead from the moment Cromwell can control her. Through these descriptions, we see her body as finally and ultimately out of her hands, and as wrenchingly incongruous with her own thoughts and impressions; while Anne has hope that she might be saved, Cromwell knows otherwise, and through his eyes, we look at her body as little more

than dead meat. This imagery is particularly strong at her trial: “She is tainted now, she is dead meat, and instead of coveting her — bosom, hair, eyes — their gazes slide away” (367). Later, Cromwell observes, “She is a tiny figure, a bundle of bones” (393). This imagery suggests that Anne no longer has any say over her body, the weapon she wielded so successfully, at all — she is condemned to die, and that condemnation is written on her very self.

In the end, Anne’s belongings are painted over, replaced, destroyed, all to make room for Jane Seymour. The novel seems to suggest that the dead remain relevant based on what we have left of them: Cromwell’s daughter Grace is relevant while he has her wings to look at, but his wife Liz fades over time. If this is true, then the burning of Anne’s belongings might render her irrelevant, trivial. Ultimately, it is possible to read this novel as portraying Anne Boleyn unfairly, even downright negatively. Anne herself is responsible for her own demise; had she never begun to use her own body as a weapon, it perhaps would not have been used against her in quite the same fashion. Still, Mantel’s own understanding, relayed in her author’s note, of the way that Anne Boleyn carries the projection of the writers who take her up makes me think that Mantel is granting Anne at least a modicum of agency while pointing to the difficult position she inhabited — if Anne’s body was simultaneously the thing she could control and the thing that could get her what she needed, she would have been forced to relinquish control in order to achieve anything at all. Through imagery, Mantel constructs a body of evidence where previously we had no body, and in the process, she shakes up the binary that imprisons Anne Boleyn in one of two equally negative extremes.

Notes

1. See *Anne Boleyn*, NPG 668.
2. “Hilary Mantel Talks About Anne Boleyn,” YouTube video, 4:50, posted by “4th Estate Books,” April 26, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ohx2Lec6dko>.
3. Cromwell sees this as a sign that Anne “doesn’t like to show her hand” — here, the idea of Anne showing her hand is both physical and suggestive of Anne’s control over her current situation. She does not want to show the full degree to which she is orchestrating everything around her, so she hides her metaphorical hand, much like she hides her physical hand to avoid detection of her anxiety.

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