

THE
MIRROR &
THE LIGHT

A READING GUIDE TO
HILARY MANTEL'S *THE MIRROR*
& *THE LIGHT*

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Immediately after Anne Boleyn's execution, Henry marries Jane Seymour. Cromwell takes over from Anne's disgraced father as Lord Privy Seal. The Boleyn faction is broken and 'Uncle Norfolk' is in disgrace. The missing gentlemen, who were among Henry's closest attendants in his privy chamber, are replaced by Rafe Sadler and other Cromwell supporters

A spectator at Anne's execution is Henry's illegitimate son, the Duke of Richmond, a promising, able young man who has provided Henry with a fall-back position – perhaps he could be legitimised, if parliament and the country would accept it? A few weeks later, Richmond is dead after contracting a pulmonary infection. Henry now considers he has no heir at all, as his two daughters are both the products of tainted marriages.

Summer 1536: Persuading a Princess to Live

The next crisis Cromwell has to face blows up within weeks. The princess Mary will not take the oath to recognise her father as head of the church, and so is in danger of execution. Jane begs Henry to be reconciled with his daughter, but he will not soften. This comes as a terrible shock to the girl, who had blamed all her troubles on Anne Boleyn, and was convinced that her father loved her. She is willing to die, and Cromwell sets himself to find a way to keep her alive: a way for her to satisfy the king's demands, without shredding every inch of her self-respect. Even the Spanish ambassador, speaking on behalf of Catholic Europe, advises her to give way. But Cromwell is, as she writes, 'my only friend;' she believes he is the only person who really cares about Mary – Mary with a headache, Mary with toothache – as opposed to the Mary the princess; and it is when he threatens to withdraw his support – and stop writing to her – that she crumbles, and signs an abject letter, drafted by Cromwell. Henry insists on her complete submission; but then father and daughter are reconciled. Mary comes back to court. Her conscience is troubled, but she is young, she wants to dance, to ride, to have a normal life; she blossoms, touchingly, seeing life open up before her. And Queen Jane is expecting a child ...

Pilgrims v. Cromwell: England in Arms

In the autumn of 1536 the nation is plunged into what seems like civil war, with the outbreak of the ‘Pilgrimage of Grace.’ This movement begins in eastern England and spreads through the north. The ‘pilgrims’ adopt the banner of the Five Wounds of Christ. On the face of it, their protest is against the new religious practices, the break with Rome and the dissolution of the monasteries, now proceeding under Cromwell’s guidance.

He understands that they have grievances. The north of England, to him, is almost a foreign country; he is more at home in France or the Low Countries. What he sees is a region sunk into a feudal mindset, and resisting the centralising state. He wants one law, equally administered, throughout England and Wales, and he is determined to impose it, whatever the short-term cost. Local feuds and local loyalties must give way. He knows the revolt is dangerous because it has aristocratic backers. Some of them are in touch with the Emperor; they hope to use this movement as a spearhead for invasion. Building England’s defences is a project Cromwell and Henry have hardly begun; they know they are vulnerable. The rebels plead loyalty to Henry; Cromwell, in their eyes, is to blame for all the changes in England; they want the king to jettison him. And as he knows, they want him dead. The aristocracy hate him for usurping their power; the common people hate him because they don’t understand him. They ask, how did he, from his background, get power in the first place? He must be a sorcerer.

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From his city house at Austin Friars, he feeds 200 poor people twice a day. No one is more ambitious for a fairer society, or keener to make England prosperous. But the crowds at his gate, though greedy, are silent. All people see his increasing personal prosperity. And it is true, he is a rich man. He has snapped up every title and office going. His men are all over the offices of government. He has a finger in every pie. But he has no illusion that the people he has promoted will be loyal to him. In the emergency, he is urged to attend court wearing body armour under his robes. It feels like a crushing weight.

The king withdraws to the fortress of Windsor. Cromwell keeps the government running. The course of the rebellion is complicated, but the story concentrates on events seen from London, as news comes in hour by hour. Richard Cromwell, Thomas's nephew, is in the north with the royal commanders, but the noblemen try to cut him out of their strategy meetings.

This is the Duke of Norfolk's great moment; he gets to do what he loves best – cutting up peasants and hanging them. The King is outraged by the pretensions of the rebels. In particular, he will not have the common people dictate to him over his choice of advisors. The rebellion is suppressed, Henry making the rebels promises that he sees no need to keep; it breaks out again, but by now the government has marshalled its forces. The affair ends with Cromwell more firmly in power than ever. It also marks the temporary ruin of the ancient and powerful Percy family. Long ago Cromwell had said, 'I think I will have that earldom off him,' and now the crown takes over Harry Percy's title.

Fathers & Sons

The summer of 1537 finds Cromwell negotiating a marriage between his son Gregory and the queen's sister, Elizabeth. Gregory's education has been attended to as carefully as if he were a prince. Now the blacksmith's grandson is going to marry into the royal family. Gregory Cromwell is often spoken of as 'the virtuous and gentle Gregory.' He has no instinct for politics and no appetite for it, but like his cousin Richard, he is a formidable opponent in the joust and in the dangerous sport of single combat on foot, a fact that endears him to the king. In a generation, Cromwell thinks, his family will be indistinguishable from the gentlemen who now look down on them; Gregory will be a great landowner and he will be rich. The marriage is very important to him as a mark of status and acceptance. Grumbling acceptance will do.

The Seymour brothers had disposed of Jane to the king without asking after her own wishes in the matter. Their negotiations over her sister, Elizabeth, are similarly clipped and elliptical and brief – so truncated that they give rise to a disastrous misunderstanding. Elizabeth – who is a young widow – believes she's going to marry the father, not the son. Several conversations with him have not unconfused her; the age gap is not unusual, Cromwell is an amiable man in private life and she knows he'll take care of her. But then she finds out that she's meant for Gregory – a boy, whom she hardly knows. Like a good Tudor daughter, she bites her lip and gets on with it. But Gregory works out what's happened. He thinks, I can't even have my own *wife*, without my father

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standing between us. It's in a sad moment that Gregory confronts him: 'You do everything. You have everything. You are everything. What is left for me?' Cromwell realises that he's crushed his son far more effectively than his own brutal father crushed him – and that he has done it without knowing, without meaning to.

Then Jane dies, in giving Henry – at last – his heir, Edward. Cromwell's feelings can be imagined because of an uncharacteristic outburst in which he blamed her medical attendants. He must have known that no one was to blame; it was a blow of fate. A gain is paid for by a loss. And the Seymours, while Jane's child is the heir, will not lose influence. His new daughter-in-law Elizabeth soon makes him a grandfather. He isn't, though, thinking of retirement. It is Henry who is ageing rapidly, his ulcerated legs causing him pain, his hair receding, his face blotchy, his temper uncertain. It is in honour of Prince Edward's birth that Henry has Holbein paint the great 'Whitehall mural,' a picture of himself, his wife Jane, and his long-dead parents.

Henry Magnified

This life-sized Henry – vast, padded, and with an overstuffed codpiece which acts as both a promise and a warning – is designed, not for display to the world, but to be placed in the king's private rooms. Who sees it there? The king himself – as daily reassurance. His closest servants. And his closest advisor, Cromwell. Is it a warning to him too? The longer he works with Henry, the less he understands him. The king can

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know and not know things at the same time. For instance, Henry is deeply opposed to married clergy; yet he knows that Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, has been married for some years and hides his German wife in the country. Henry has initiated structural changes in the church, laughs or swears when the pope is mentioned, but he will not have doctrinal change. Cromwell knows what disadvantages he labours under – he never has a free hand in foreign policy, not the way Wolsey once did. Parliament mangles his innovative poor law, his measures for social welfare. And his own convictions will compromise him, unless he treads very carefully; in supporting religious reformers, many of them Lutherans, he goes further towards disobedience to the state than he would countenance in any other man. Relations between him and the king are sometimes strained. Total subservience might be wise, but Cromwell knows it doesn't get them through the day's agenda. He has always recognised the need to stand up to Henry, and on at least one occasion they have quarrelled in public. Henry both accepts and resents his dependence on Cromwell. It's Cromwell who tells him where he can marry. Cromwell got rid of Katherine, made Anne possible. He got rid of Anne, made Jane possible. Who will he allow the king of England to marry next?

1538: The Marriage Markets of Europe

Without a queen – and so without women – the court is a miserable place. Within weeks Henry begins offering himself on the marriage market, but the eligible women of Europe are

wary. Henry is soon sending Hans Holbein off to paint portraits of the candidates. England badly needs allies in Europe, and Cromwell doesn't want to be pulled into the perpetual game between France and the Empire. He soon has an eye on Cleves, a strategically situated dukedom which is, like England, sympathetic to reformed religion but neither papist nor Lutheran. A relationship with this non-aligned state would suit England, and the Duke of Cleves has two unmarried sisters. Also, surely this alliance will edge Henry, in time, closer to protestantism, or at least move him towards toleration?

When Henry agrees at last to the issue of a bible in English, Cromwell doesn't hesitate; he pays the printers himself. This is the moment he has worked towards for years. In 1538 direction is given for the Great Bible to be placed in every parish church, accessible to anyone who can read it. Henry knows – and people are very keen to tell him – that Cromwell is at heart an evangelical in religion. Cromwell's friends are not particularly careful; perhaps they think they will push him into the public statements he is slow to make. Calais, England's last possession in France, is a particular problem, with continual faction fighting and intrigue. Cromwell is endlessly adroit – but he is constantly spied upon and he knows that Stephen Gardiner, back from abroad since summer 1538, studies his every move.

Most of the old aristocracy – Norfolk especially – joined keenly in the land grab after the monasteries were dissolved, and they are indebted to Cromwell for looking after their interests. But in 1538 the long-simmering treason of the 'old families' can no longer be ignored. The Courtenay family and

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the Pole family both have a strong claim to the English throne. They are both Roman in their allegiance, and the Poles are further compromised because Reginald Pole, a renegade scholar, has written a ferocious polemic against Henry. Reginald is careful to stay abroad, out of Henry's reach. While Cromwell makes futile attempts to capture or kill him, the pope makes him a cardinal, and he tours the courts of Europe trying to secure support for an invasion of his native land.

The Poles and the Courtenays are the people whom Cromwell gave a second chance when they were suspected of treason in 1534, around the time of Thomas More's arrest. But now there is a trial and a spate of executions. The year takes its toll on Cromwell. Till now seemingly indestructible, he is forced to stay away from parliament during crucial debates, beset by illness and crippling exhaustion. And yet, to the despair of his enemies in the council and the country at large, he uses his time out to come up with strategies that further secure his hold on the king.

1539: A Bride for Christmas

The new wife, Anna of Cleves, arrives as the year turns, with Gregory Cromwell among her escort. The first English noblemen to see her find no fault in either her manner or her looks. Henry is so keen to be a married man again that he rides down the country to meet her. Their first encounter is a disaster. Henry dislikes her on sight – perhaps because she is so evidently shocked at the sight of him. He goes through

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with the marriage under protest, so as not to cause an international scandal. Because the Cleves court is very conservative, Anna has been given little education, and speaks no language beyond her own German dialect. This isn't seen as a great problem; all Henry has to do is to make her pregnant. But after the wedding night, Henry makes a humiliating confession to Cromwell; he has found himself impotent. Moreover, he doubts Anna is a virgin.

Cromwell's first concern is to sooth Henry somehow, and stop him making this startling claim public. Another week or two, and Anna may charm him ... but it's obvious that's not going to happen. Henry has set his face against her, and no ready way out of the marriage presents itself.

Spring 1540: The New Earl of Essex

It's the Cleves debacle that allows Cromwell's enemies the opportunity to move in on him. Norfolk brings to court his young niece, Catherine Howard, 'a very little girl,' and she has soon enraptured Henry. At this point, Gardiner and Norfolk combine their forces. In April 1540 it looks as if they will succeed in bringing Cromwell down. Then Henry, with almost perverse delight, creates him an earl. The post of secretary has now become too much work for any one man, and the office is split between his protégés, Wriothesley and Rafe Sadler; Cromwell becomes Lord Chamberlain. As vicegerent in the church of England, Lord Privy Seal, master of the royal household, member of the order of the Garter, and now Earl of Essex, he has almost made a clean sweep of the great offices

and honours England has to offer. What next, his opponents say: king?

By July, destructive rumours spread through Europe. His enemies use Cromwell's protestant connections to present him to the distracted Henry as an enemy of the state. The gossip is that Cromwell has said in public that if the king shows any sign of turning away from religious reformation, then he, Cromwell, will take the field against him, 'my sword in my hand.' Years earlier, a rumour had run around Europe that Henry intended to marry his daughter Mary to Cromwell, to put her under his minister's permanent control. Now the rumour surfaces again, with an even uglier twist; it is Cromwell himself who means to marry the princess, in order to make her a puppet queen if her father dies. It isn't true, of course. But the fact that it can be believed for a moment – and by Henry himself – is an indication of how astonishing Cromwell's career has been.

On a day of high drama Cromwell is arrested in the council chamber. His house at Austin Friars is raided and his papers impounded. Wriothesley immediately deserts and offers evidence against him. Rafe Sadler sticks by him, as Cromwell had once stuck by the Cardinal. Henry keeps Cromwell alive long enough to work out a method by which he can divorce Anna. In the Tower, he does the paperwork, broods on his career, and attempts to answer, without recourse to documents, the dozens of intricate questions about state business which his opponents put to him. Henry could change his mind; he is nothing if not changeable. Rafe Sadler takes to Henry Cromwell's petition for mercy. He reads it out loud. The king commands it to be read again. There are tears in his eyes. But he doesn't relent. He

is busy planning his wedding to Catherine Howard, which will take place on the day of Cromwell's death.

Cromwell waits to know if Henry will burn him as a heretic or hang or behead him as a traitor. There is no trial. An act of parliament is brought in to convict him of treason. What most incenses him is the waste – I must have in me, he thinks, another ten years, fifteen years, and so much still to do ... Perhaps it is unrealistic to think that anything would be different; maybe politics is a game you don't learn to play till you've lost it. But he thinks of the days, the years, he has woken in the morning and demanded, what's new? His curiosity about the future has always been much greater than that of his fellow countrymen. They have been afraid of the future, flinched from it, whereas he has run towards it, shouting out its name. He can make some guesses as to what will come next ... Henry's new bride, he already has suspicions there, and surely it will end badly ...

He imagines the day after his death. Morning will come and Henry will be expecting him. He will be wanting him back, as he wanted Wolsey back. It is only a matter of time before the king sees he has been duped by Cromwell's enemies. He will be incredulous, purple with rage, when he finds he cannot raise the dead.

He wonders what his legacy is. The goods, lands and titles of a traitor are automatically forfeit to the crown. Will Gregory and Richard lose everything he has built for them?

But even now, Henry may change his mind ... "The Duke of Urbino, Federigo di Montefeltro, was asked what it took to rule a state. "Essere umano," he said: "To be human." He wonders if Henry has ever attained it.'

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The end comes by the axe on July 28th 1540. The last scene of *The Mirror & The Light* reflects the first scene of *Wolf Hall*: Cromwell bloodied, half-dead, waiting for his death to arrive. Then he was a boy of fifteen, and it was his father standing over him. Now he is a man of fifty-five succumbing to butchery by a nervous executioner. The reader has followed him from childhood to the edge of extinction.

He has been utterly ruthless in the pursuit of power, but at every step we can see why; once launched on a career like his, to hesitate is to lose everything. And I hope the reader will admire his fierce cleverness, his fluid and dark imagination, and the way he holds his nerve: his sheer determination and grit. His rise to power – and the narrative of what he did with his power, when he got it – is one of the strangest stories in English history, and is charged with his complex intelligence, his black humour, and his unfailing confidence that there are better worlds than this. To one of which, on the last page, he hopes he is going.

BOOKCLUB QUESTIONS

- Thomas Cromwell is now in his fifties, ‘the same small quick eyes, the same thickset imperturbable body; the same schedules.’ But to what extent is he a different man to the one we know from *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*? How has his character developed?
- Discuss Hilary Mantel’s use of the present tense in *The Mirror & the Light*. She allows us to follow her characters in real time as they make decisions the consequences of which they cannot be sure. Does this change how we think of history?
- What echoes are there in *The Mirror & the Light* of contemporary politics and Britain’s relationship with Europe? To what extent is Thomas Cromwell a thoroughly European character?

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- ‘The burden of kingship,’ Henry says, ‘no man can imagine it. All my life, to be a prince: to be observed to be a prince; all eyes to be set on me; to be an exemplar of virtue ... to unmake myself as a man in order to make myself as a king.’ What picture does Hilary Mantel paint of Henry VIII, as a man and as a king? Consider the trajectory of his relationship with Thomas Cromwell.
- Consider Cromwell as a father and as a son. And the paternal relationships he develops.
- *The Mirror & the Light*’s cast of characters includes those who have died in the course of the previous two novels. Consider the role of ghosts in the novel.
- Discuss the relationship of men and women. Do the female characters have power? How familiar are the gender inequalities to the world we live in now?
- From the descriptions of Henry’s leg wound, to the river Thames which flows through the story, *The Mirror & the Light* is carefully and vividly drawn. Consider the use of texture and physicality in the novel. How successfully does Hilary Mantel paint a picture of 1540s London?
- Is Thomas Cromwell’s downfall inevitable? When and how does he become conscious of the fate that awaits him? How does Cromwell react to his own demise?