

Adapting History, Remembering Thomas Cromwell

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Adapting History, Remembering Thomas Cromwell:

Screen Adaptation and Collective Memory

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Abstract

This paper examines how historical fiction and adaptation shape collective memory through the contrasting portrayals of Thomas Cromwell in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons* (1960) and Hilary Mantel's novel *Wolf Hall* (2009), added to their adaptations for film and television. Bolt's play and its 1966 film adaptation present Cromwell as a corrupt, manipulative figure defined against Thomas More's moral heroism, reinforcing a traditional negative image. By contrast, Mantel's novel and the 2015 BBC adaptation reconstruct him as a pragmatic, sympathetic family man, reflecting contemporary interest in nuance and revisionism.

Through an analysis of collective memory, adaptation, and authenticity studies, this paper explores how these texts challenge or reinforce cultural myths surrounding Cromwell and the resulting effects on the public perception of his character. It argues that adaptation is not a passive act of translation, but a dynamic process of reinterpretation shaped by ideology, audience, and medium. In reshaping Cromwell's image, these texts demonstrate the powerful role of historical fiction in influencing public understandings of the past.

Keywords: adaptation, historical fiction, Hilary Mantel, Robert Bolt, Thomas Cromwell

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Introduction

Historical fiction and its adaptations play a pivotal role in shaping the collective memory and public perceptions of historical figures. The contrasting portrayals of Cromwell as a ruthless secretary to King Henry VIII in *A Man for All Seasons* (Robert Bolt, 1960) and as a pragmatic reformer in *Wolf Hall* (Hilary Mantel, 2009) illustrate the ways in which literature and film adapt history to align with contemporary ideologies. These texts raise questions about the boundaries between historical accuracy, artistic license, and collective memory, which establishes them as ideal case studies for exploring how historical narratives evolve over time.

This paper will examine how *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall*, along with their screen adaptations, influence the collective memory of Thomas Cromwell. Through a comprehensive analysis of these texts within the frameworks of adaptation, authenticity, and collective memory studies, this research will investigate how historical fiction mediates the past for modern audiences. It will also consider the historiographical debates surrounding Cromwell, exploring the extent to which these works reinforce, challenge, or reconstruct his legacy. As adaptations navigate the balance between historical accuracy and dramatic engagement, they raise ethical questions about reinterpreting historical figures and events for entertainment purposes, and understanding their impact on public historical consciousness becomes crucial. This paper contributes to broader discussions on the role of historical fiction in shaping collective memory and, in doing so, situates *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall* within the discourse of the evolving nature of historical representation and collective memory.

Thomas Cromwell remains one of the most debated figures of the Tudor period, with interpretations of his character shifting drastically over time. As chief minister to Henry VIII, Cromwell played a key role in the English Reformation, orchestrating the annulment of the king's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, and enabling his marriage to Anne Boleyn. Cromwell is typically portrayed by historians as a ruthless political strategist, and is often disparaged for his role in dismantling monastic institutions – described by Simon Schama as a “detestably self-serving, bullying monster who perfected state terror in England, cooked the evidence, and extracted confessions by torture.” (Schama, n.p.). This negative depiction is sustained in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, which greatly aligns with the traditional view of Cromwell as corrupt and oppressive, contrasting him with the moral virtue of Thomas More. However, revisionist historians such as Geoffrey Elton have challenged this perception, arguing that Cromwell was both a charitable and capable government figure – “a statesman with real and even elevated purposes, a man of genuine understanding and affability, a tower of strength to those who sought his help.” (Elton, n.p.). This re-evaluation paved the way for more sympathetic, humanising portrayals, with Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* at the forefront. The historiographical debate surrounding Cromwell highlights how interpretations of his character and actions have shifted over time, and demonstrates how historical figures are reinterpreted to align with different cultural and political contexts. This dynamic is central to understanding the impact of *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall*, as both works contribute to the evolving perception of Cromwell. By situating these texts within the broader discourse on historiography

and collective memory, this paper will explore how historical fiction engages with and reshapes public understandings of the past.

To explore how these texts contribute to the public perception of Thomas Cromwell, this paper will draw on key theoretical concepts from collective memory, adaptation, and authenticity studies. These concepts will serve as a foundation for analysing how historical narratives are reshaped through adaptation, shedding light on their influence in shaping public perceptions of the past.

Collective memory refers to the shared pool of knowledge and interpretations that societies construct about their past, shaping the way historical events and figures are understood across generations. As theorists such as Amos Funkenstein argue, collective memory is not a static recollection of the past, but rather a dynamic process influenced by contemporary social, cultural and political contexts – “Even the most personal memory cannot be removed from the social context.” (Funkenstein, 6). Literary and cinematic representations intervene in this process by offering imaginative reconstructions of the past that circulate beyond academic studies of history and, over time, contribute to how historical figures are remembered. While individual works such as *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall* represent the specific creative visions of Bolt and Mantel, their prominence and widespread reception position them as influential contributions to broader cultural understandings of historical figures – ones that reshape historical narratives to align with the concerns and values of modern audiences. In the case of Thomas Cromwell, the differing portrayals in *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall* demonstrate how collective memory is influenced by shifting ideological perspectives, especially as the texts were written almost fifty years apart. Bolt’s *A Man for All Seasons* presents Cromwell as a scheming, corrupt politician – emphasizing the traditional view of Thomas More as a virtuous martyr. Bolt’s Cromwell is manipulative and power-hungry, particularly in his coercive interrogation scenes and ruthless ambition to serve the king. In contrast, Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* reconstructs Cromwell as a pragmatic and sympathetic figure, foregrounding his compassion and emotional depth – which can be seen clearly in scenes depicting his relationship with his family, and his experience with grief. By contrast, More is portrayed as dogmatic and, at times, cruel – particularly in his treatment of Protestants and his rigid, elitist moral stance. Rather than simply replacing one authoritative account with another, these divergent portrayals demonstrate how collective memory is continually shaped through the accumulation of competing interpretations – effectively reversing the moral polarity of traditional narratives and encouraging audiences to reconsider Cromwell’s legacy. The success of these texts demonstrates how collective memory is shaped not only by academic historiography, but also by popular media, which often has a broader cultural reach.

Adaptation theory is central to this study, as both texts have been reinterpreted across different media – from stage to screen and novel to television. In her book ‘A Theory of Adaptation,’ Linda Hutcheon describes the genre as “repetition, but repetition without replication.” (Hutcheon, 7). She highlights how telling the same story in a different medium can create “a manifestly different interpretation” – an idea that is highly relevant to my study of how Bolt’s and Mantel’s distinct assessments of Cromwell are both preserved and reshaped through

adaptation (Hutcheon, 8). This is especially evident in the adaptation process of *Wolf Hall*, where the complexity and psychological nuance of Mantel's narrative posed a significant challenge for the BBC series, requiring careful compression and visual storytelling to capture Cromwell's internal life. By contrast, *A Man for All Seasons* required comparatively little compression for its screen adaptation due to the contained structure of the stage play, which inherently mirrors the pacing and progression typical of cinematic storytelling. While the screen adaptations introduce their own formal and ideological priorities, both the literary texts and their adaptations contribute to shaping Cromwell's legacy through selective emphasis, omission, and dramatic reconfiguration. This paper is therefore concerned not only with the screen adaptations themselves, but with the relationship between Bolt's and Mantel's original representations and the ways in which these representations are altered for modern audiences. The changes made from page to screen in the adaptation process of both texts illustrate how adaptations negotiate historical accuracy with creative license, raising ethical questions about the representation of historical figures, and the resulting impact on audience perception. By considering these factors, this paper will examine how both the source texts and the screen adaptations of *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall* influence the public perception of Thomas Cromwell.

Closely linked to adaptation is the question of authenticity – a key concern in historical fiction. In his article 'The Authenticity Feeling: Language and Dialect in the Historical Film,' Mattias Frey describes authenticity as remaining "the most prominent element in historical films' reception discourse." (Frey, 2). He emphasizes how creative decisions – such as language, costumes, and soundtracks – contribute greatly to a sense of historical realism. In *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall*, 'authenticity' is achieved through different narrative techniques – with Bolt's play presenting a moralized, almost allegorical version of history, while Mantel's novel adopts an immersive, psychologically complex portrayal of Cromwell. By exploring the differing creative decisions made in each text and their screen adaptations, this paper will assess the impact of 'authenticity' on the collective memory of Thomas Cromwell.

1: A Man for All Seasons: Cromwell as the Corrupt Politician

Robert Bolt's representation of Thomas Cromwell in *A Man for All Seasons* has played a significant role in shaping the collective memory of the historical figure. Bolt's 1960 play and its subsequent 1966 film adaptation present Cromwell as a ruthless political operator, a stark contrast to the more sympathetic portrayal in *Wolf Hall*. By analysing both the play and the film, as well as the differences between them, this chapter will explore how each medium reinforces a particular version of Cromwell's character and how these portrayals contribute to the collective memory surrounding him.

While Cromwell does not act as a primary antagonist of Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, he is undoubtedly positioned as a foil to Thomas More, with an emphasis on his cunning, self-interest, and moral ambiguity. Sir Thomas More, who is depicted as a man of unwavering principle, is a stark contrast to Cromwell, who appears as a pragmatist willing to manipulate legal and political systems to serve Henry VIII's will. The play's dramatic structure relies on this moral opposition, portraying Cromwell as emblematic of political expediency over personal integrity. This portrayal aligns with the traditional historiographical view of Cromwell as an

unscrupulous statesman – who, for example, is described by Paul Lay as “brilliant like More, but in reality cruel and scheming.” (Lay, n.p.).

The 1966 film adaptation, directed by Fred Zinnemann, builds upon this characterisation, employing visual and performance techniques to further solidify Cromwell’s role as a foil to More. Through casting, cinematography, and dialogue delivery, the film accentuates Cromwell’s cold and ruthless nature, reinforcing the audience’s perception of him as a conniving political strategist. The transition from stage to screen also allows for a more nuanced depiction through close-ups and camera angles that highlight his calculating demeanour, further shaping how audience’s remember Cromwell.

This chapter will examine the ways in which *A Man for All Seasons* – both as a play and as a film – contributes to the collective memory of Thomas Cromwell, reinforcing the idea of him as a ruthless politician, devoid of any idealistic or ethical concerns. By analysing the techniques of each medium, as well as the changes made from stage to screen in the adaptation process, this chapter will explore the extent to which dramatic narratives influence public perceptions of historical figures.

From the beginning of *A Man for All Seasons*, Bolt firmly establishes Cromwell as a cold, unsympathetic character. In the dramatis personae of the play, Cromwell is listed as having a “self-conceit that can cradle gross crimes in the name of effective action” and being, in short, “an intellectual bully.” (Bolt, xxiv). Though Cromwell is absent from the first number of scenes, his distasteful reputation is disclosed to us by the other characters:

MARGARET. Do you like Master Cromwell, Master Rich?

ALICE. He’s the only man in London if he does!

RICH. I think I do, Lady Alice!

MORE. Good. ...Well, you don’t need my help now.

RICH. Sir Thomas, if only you knew how much, much rather I’d yours than his! (Bolt, 7).

Similarly, Bolt indicates the nature of Cromwell’s character early in the play through a brief but telling exchange between More and Richard Rich:

RICH. No, not a bit profound; it then becomes a purely practical question of how to make him suffer sufficiently.

MORE. Mm. And... who recommended you to read Signor Machiavelli? (RICH breaks away laughing; a fraction too long. MORE smiles.) No, who? (More laughter.) ...Mm?

RICH. Master Cromwell. (Bolt, 3).

This seemingly minor detail situates Cromwell within a tradition of political pragmatism and strategic manipulation. By linking him to Machiavelli’s principles of political ruthlessness, Bolt subtly foreshadows Cromwell’s role as a calculating architect of the power behind the throne. This interpretation is supported by scholar Anne-Marie Harvatt, who describes Bolt’s Cromwell

as a “thoroughly Machiavellian” character – a figure who embodies the merciless political realism that stands in direct opposition to More’s moral idealism (Harvatt, 71).

This ‘Machiavellian’ persona can be seen clearly when Cromwell describes himself as ‘The King’s Ear’ – “It’s a useful organ, the ear. But in fact it’s even simpler than that. When the King wants something done, I do it.” (Bolt, 21). This remark encapsulates Cromwell’s role as an agent of power – reducing his political function to a merely instrumental one, and indicating that he sees himself only as an extension of the king’s will. Bolt’s portrayal of Cromwell here aligns greatly with the qualities often attributed to him in historical fiction – he is efficient, obedient, and unperturbed by ethical concerns, valuing utility over principle. His likening of himself to an organ downplays personal agency and distances him from responsibility, reinforcing the idea of Cromwell as a tool of state power, rather than an individual guided by their conscience. In doing so, Bolt positions Cromwell as diametrically opposed to More’s moral and religious idealism, and solidifies the collective memory of him as a figure of remorseless expediency.

As the play progresses, Cromwell’s cunning nature becomes increasingly apparent, as he is described by King Henry VIII as a “jackal with sharp teeth” (Bolt, 32). Cromwell’s involvement and persistence in bringing about More’s downfall demonstrates his commitment to the machinery of state power, and his belief in the supremacy of royal authority over individual conscience. Completely unwavering, Bolt’s Cromwell exhibits a relentless focus on securing More’s compliance – or, failing that, his destruction:

CROMWELL. Sir Thomas is going to be a slippery fish, Richard; we need a net with a finer mesh.

RICH. Yes, Secretary?

CROMWELL. We’ll weave one for him shall we, you and I?

RICH. I’m only anxious to do what is correct, Secretary.

CROMWELL. Yes, Richard, I know. (Straight-faced.) You’re absolutely right, it must be done by law. It’s just a matter of finding the right law. Or making one. (Bolt, 61).

This moment in the play encapsulates Cromwell’s deeply pragmatic and ethically ambivalent approach to power. His description of More as a “slippery fish” implies that truth and morality are obstacles to be outmanoeuvred, not respected. The metaphor of weaving a “net with a finer mesh” suggests premeditated entrapment – an active desire not to uncover guilt, but construct it. The lines “It’s just a matter of finding the right law. Or making one.” are a chilling reflection of Cromwell’s willingness in this play to manipulate legal structures to serve political ends. This portrayal solidifies a perception of Cromwell as someone who prioritises results over principles – a man more concerned with consolidating royal power than with upholding justice. This scene adds to the audience’s understanding of Cromwell as a figure who is calculating, cold, and willing to weaponise the law to eliminate ideological opposition.

This cold depiction of Cromwell is further enforced in *A Man for All Seasons* as he is portrayed exclusively through a political lens, with minimal insight into his personal life,

motivations, or emotional complexity. This is shaped by the play's narrative structure: Bolt's protagonist is Thomas More, and Cromwell functions primarily as his political foil. As a result, Cromwell appears primarily as a calculating politician, defined by his ambition and loyalty to the crown rather than by interiority or personal relationships. While More can be frequently seen interacting warmly with his wife and daughter, which humanises him and allows the audience to connect and relate to him, Cromwell lacks this personal context. The absence of such contextual depth renders him cold and unsympathetic, reinforcing his role as a symbol of coercive authority rather than as a fully realised individual.

By contrast, *Wolf Hall* places Cromwell at the centre of its narrative. As the protagonist, he is grounded in a richly developed personal world – a father, widower, and a man shaped by childhood trauma and loss. The absence of such depth in Bolt's play reduces Cromwell to a one-dimensional symbol of authoritarian power, whereas Mantel's portrayal invites a more nuanced, human interpretation of his role in government. Bolt's dramatization thus contributes to the enduring image of Cromwell as an amoral functionary of the state – a perception that has long shaped cultural understandings of his historical legacy.

The 1966 film adaptation of *A Man for All Seasons*, directed by Fred Zinnemann and adapted for the screen by Bolt himself, skilfully reimagines the play's moral and political conflict for a cinematic audience. The dramatic, fast-paced form of the play allowed for few omissions in the adaptation process, with the film remaining largely faithful to the original script as a result. However, the shift in medium introduces subtle yet significant changes that reshape the portrayal of Thomas Cromwell. As Alison Patterson observes, the importance of adaptation lies not in how "faithful" it is to the source text, but rather in how it produces "interesting, viable, or useful readings of the preceding text." (Patterson, 168.) In this way, the film builds on the ideological framing of the play while using the tools of cinema – performance, costumes, and soundtracking – to reinforce Cromwell's image as a cold and calculating figure. These changes, though not radical, contribute significantly to the audience's perception of Cromwell. When such representations are circulated through popular media, they move beyond individual interpretation and begin to shape shared understandings of the past. In this sense, the film contributes to collective memory by reinforcing a particular image of Cromwell for audiences who are more likely to encounter history through film than through academic historiography. By analysing key cinematic tools such as casting, camera work, performance, and lighting, this section will explore how the film solidifies Bolt's depiction of Cromwell and contributes to the collective memory of him as a symbol of corrupt political power.

In the play, our first impression of Cromwell is shaped through remarks made by other characters before he appears on stage; however, these moments are absent from the beginning of the film. For example, the line indicating that it was Cromwell who recommended Machiavelli to Richard Rich immediately establishes his calculating and morally ambiguous reputation, and the absence of this reference removes a key piece of early characterisation from the film. Instead, our introduction to Cromwell in the film is more understated, relying on visual cues and performance rather than explicit commentary. This reconfiguration reflects the shift in medium:

while the play foregrounds characters through dialogue, the film allows the camera to reveal character in silence, through movement and framing.

Played by Leo McKern, Cromwell first appears as he greets Thomas More and lets him into Cardinal Wolsey's chambers. Both men are partially shrouded in darkness, until More steps forward into the light, and Cromwell disappears behind the curtain, lingering in shadow. This moment operates as a visual metaphor, subtly reinforcing their narrative roles: More as the man of principle, illuminated and clear, and Cromwell as the scheming figure who operates behind the scenes. This scene demonstrates how lighting and blocking can be used in place of dialogue to establish thematic tone and contrast – a cinematic strategy that invites viewers to interpret Cromwell's character through atmosphere rather than exposition.

This impression is emphasised moments later as Cromwell slips out of the door and leaves it slightly ajar, tilting his head towards the gap and listening as Wolsey insists, "Thomas, we're alone. There's no one here." (*A Man for All Seasons* 00:11:56). As More reveals that his preference for the next Chancellor after Wolsey would not be Cromwell, his expression is thoughtful, his smile wry. In this scene, Cromwell's opportunism and underhanded nature are conveyed clearly – rather than being introduced as a blunt villain, Cromwell is presented as an intelligent and observant figure, practiced at staying one step ahead of others. By the time More leaves the Chancellor, Cromwell is seated at his desk, absorbed in papers, then dutifully bows and sees him out – a performance of obedience and professionalism. This adaptation choice exemplifies the subtleties of film-making – as this fleeting moment deepens the impression of Cromwell as someone not overtly aggressive or forceful, but someone whose every action is deliberate and calculated.

Throughout the film, this strategic, cold facet of Cromwell's character is expertly portrayed by his actor, Leo McKern, who gave "a wonderfully paranoid performance." (Lay, n.p.). McKern brings a sharp, measured intensity to Cromwell, using restrained facial expressions and speaking bluntly to convey an air of menace. His performance is reserved rather than theatrical, which suits the film's realist style and adds to the perception of Cromwell as a distant, unsympathetic politician. Unlike stage performances, where gestures must meet the back row, McKern uses the camera's intimacy to his advantage, adding a sense of intimidation to the role. For example, this can be seen clearly in Cromwell's interactions with Richard Rich, portrayed by John Hurt in the film – a character who is highly susceptible to Cromwell's coercion. In an early scene, Cromwell abruptly turns towards Rich during a conversation, startling him so that he trips and lands in mud. As the crowd of people laugh, Cromwell looks down at Rich and smirks, establishing the power dynamic between them – Cromwell remaining composed and in control, Rich flustered and thrown off balance. Similarly, in a later interaction that remains almost exactly as it is in the original script, we see the psychological dominance that Bolt's Cromwell exerts – manipulating Rich with ease to admit he can be bought. What begins as an idealistic claim – that he would "never repeat or report a thing like that" – is steadily dismantled by Cromwell's probing questions and calm, conversational tone (*A Man for All Seasons* 00:51:40). Though Rich is initially confident in his claim, Cromwell deftly guides him towards concession through emphasis and tone – demonstrating his talent for psychological

manipulation. We witness the manifestation of Cromwell's agenda in this scene at the end of the play, as Rich commits perjury and stands against More in the trial. Through Cromwell's interactions with Rich, we see how the film uses pacing and performance to portray Cromwell as a cold strategist who exploits the vulnerabilities of others to serve his political ends. In doing so, the adaptation contributes to a lasting image of Cromwell as someone who corrupts not by force, but by persuasion.

Both the stage and screen versions of *A Man for All Seasons* offer a stylised interpretation of history, one that favours moral absolutes over the complexities of historical truth. Robert Bolt's depiction of Cromwell as cunning and unsympathetic and More as a virtuous man of conscience reflects not only traditional historiography, but also the cultural and political concerns of the 1960s. Described by Richard Marius as a time when Catholicism was made "mainstream," the sixties saw Catholicism becoming increasingly culturally visible and publicly acceptable in Britain and the United States, particularly in the wake of post-war liberalisation and the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. In this context, the sixties proved receptive to the portrayal of More as "an icon of purity and principle." (Marius, 70-72). However, in *A Man for All Seasons*, More's fervent hatred for heretics and his role in religious persecution is omitted, while his image as a principled martyr is foregrounded. This selective portrayal exemplifies what Linda Hutcheon describes as the socially constructed nature of historical fiction and its adaptations – a process shaped by contemporary ideological needs as well as factual accuracy – "An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context – a time and place, a society and culture; it does not exist in a vacuum." (Hutcheon, 142.) In this way, *A Man for All Seasons* constructs a compelling moral drama that reflects its own time, but in doing so, reinforces a reductive collective memory of Thomas Cromwell. This chapter has shown how Bolt's portrayal – in both the play and the film – contributes to Cromwell's legacy as a figure governed by ambition and strategic deceit. In my next chapter, this legacy will be reconsidered through an analysis of *Wolf Hall* – a text that seeks to revise and humanise Cromwell's image for a new generation.

2: *Wolf Hall*: Cromwell Reimagined

Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) marks a significant departure from traditional depictions of Thomas Cromwell, presenting a deeply humanised and nuanced version of the historical figure. As the first novel in Mantel's acclaimed trilogy, *Wolf Hall* offers an incredibly intimate portrayal of Cromwell's life, granting readers access to his inner thoughts, past experiences, and personal relationships – aspects that have been largely overlooked in earlier historical and dramatic accounts. While relatively little direct evidence survives to illuminate Cromwell's private emotional life – such as personal diaries or reflective journals – historians do have access to a substantial body of administrative papers, correspondence, and contemporary accounts that attest to his familial relationships, social mobility, and political conduct. Mantel's construction of Cromwell as a man grounded in vulnerability, intelligence, and compassion builds imaginatively upon this historical record, using fiction to explore the human implications of what the archive only gestures towards. This chapter explores how *Wolf Hall*, along with its series adaptation, functions as a revisionist narrative, reimagining Cromwell as a man who is both compassionate

and capable, shaped by personal loss and deep familial bonds. In doing so, Mantel not only disrupts binary narratives of the moral versus the immoral, but also contributes to the reshaping of Cromwell's image in contemporary collective memory. By analysing key scenes of Cromwell's private and public life, as well as the narrative and cinematic techniques used to portray him, this chapter will examine how *Wolf Hall* invites a more nuanced and sympathetic understanding of Thomas Cromwell, both on page and on screen.

A central way in which *Wolf Hall* reconfigures Thomas Cromwell's legacy is through sustained use of an in-depth third-person narrative – immersing readers in his consciousness, providing a detailed view into his inner thoughts and emotions. Through this lens, Cromwell's memories become key to building empathy, transforming him from a one-dimensional political strategist to a relatable, highly complex character. In her article 'How I came to write *Wolf Hall*,' Mantel mentions that rather than presenting events in a strictly linear pattern, the novel is structured around “not the historian's chronology but the way memory works: in leaps, loops, flashes” – a narrative technique that enables readers to experience Cromwell's life with immediacy and depth (Mantel, n.p.). This technique is particularly effective in scenes exploring Cromwell's childhood and his tumultuous relationship with his father. The novel opens with a visceral depiction of this relationship, as a fifteen-year-old Thomas Cromwell is beaten by his father, Walter, and left bloodied and disoriented on the cobblestones of Putney. This opening immediately signals Mantel's intentions to present a different kind of Cromwell – one whose humanity and vulnerability take centre stage. The physical violence in the scene is vivid and unsettling, as the narrator describes “blood from the gash on his head” trickling into his eyes, and the stitching from his father's boots bursting from kicking him so hard (Mantel, 3). This is not simply a dramatic opening; it is a narrative choice that positions Cromwell first and foremost as a victim – a young boy, defined not by political ambition but by survival. This early scene lays the foundation for a portrayal of power as something hard-won and deeply personal – establishing Cromwell as a man shaped by violence, instability, and a desire to control the chaos around him. Although this scene is necessarily imaginative, it draws on a well-established historical understanding of Cromwell's upbringing in a household shaped by violence and instability. The repercussions of this trauma are felt throughout the novel, as memories of his father's violence are unearthed decades later, by things as ordinary as the cold – “His face aches, as if his bones lie open to the weather, and nagging at his memory is that day when his father mashed him into the cobblestones: his sideways view of Walter's boot.” (Mantel, 611). By highlighting these memories and emotional responses, *Wolf Hall* challenges Cromwell's enduring reputation as being solely defined by political ambition and mercilessness.

This reputation is also greatly challenged in Cromwell's relationships with his family, as Mantel presents him as a loving father, who is deeply caring and emotionally engaged. Our initial glimpse into Cromwell's adult family life immediately establishes his capacity for warmth and affection, as Mantel depicts him in a moment of quiet devotion to his newborn son – “I shall be as tender to you as my father was not to me.” (Mantel, 43). This moment evokes profound sympathy, as it shows a Cromwell who is committed to protecting and nurturing his children rather than perpetuating the brutality he endured. This kind, caring nature is consistent throughout the novel, and can be seen clearly in his interactions with the many young people he

takes in at Austin Friars. For example, his compassion towards his orphaned niece Alice, who seeks his permission to marry, is both moving and admirable – ““You are a clever girl, Alice. Your mother,’ he says softly, ‘and your father, they would be very pleased with you, if they were able to see.’” (Mantel, 497). It is clear that Mantel’s Cromwell is a man who prioritises his family immensely, making his subsequent losses all the more devastating.

Cromwell’s profound experience with grief following the loss of his wife and daughters marks a pivotal emotional shift in *Wolf Hall*, further dismantling the perception of him as cold and unfeeling. Mantel depicts his mourning with quiet intensity, illustrating intimate, deeply personal moments of absence and memory that linger for the duration of the novel. Cromwell’s grief in the chapter ‘Make or Mar. All Hallows 1529’ of Part Two is incredibly distressing, as we see Cromwell’s life in upheaval; his world “seeps and bleeds,” grief “threatens to capsize him,” and, perhaps most poignantly, he lies awake, “wishing Liz back; waiting for her to come and lie beside him.” (Mantel, 154). The grief in this chapter is raw, as he still feels his family around him – feels “the brush of their fingertips” on his shoulders, sees “his daughter’s fingertips touching the page, or his wife’s hands holding the book.” (Mantel, 154-156). Although the intensity of his pain eases with time, he continues to carry it with him, and eventually reaches a place of healing – “It didn’t seem possible that weight would ever shift from inside his chest, but it has lightened enough to let him get on with his life.” (Mantel, 499). In providing such a detailed, personal account of Cromwell’s experience with grief, Mantel invites readers to consider the humanity behind the historical figure – not just the scheming secretary to the king, but a man irrevocably shaped by personal loss, vulnerability, and resilience.

The emotional depth revealed by Cromwell’s relationship with his family also informs the way he navigates the political world in *Wolf Hall*, suggesting that the empathy he shows in private extends into his public life. Far from the vindictive manipulator seen in *A Man for All Seasons*, Mantel’s Cromwell is portrayed as someone with immense empathy and compassion, while also being a capable and commanding statesman – “With animals, women, and timid litigants, his manner is gentle and easy; but he makes your creditors weep.” (Mantel, 91). This is particularly evident in his treatment of Thomas More towards the end of the novel – while Bolt’s Cromwell relentlessly pursues More’s downfall, and is willing to use any means necessary, Mantel’s version “far from engineering More’s death, goes out of his way to try and prevent it.” (Harvatt, 71). Though they stand on opposing sides of a religious and political divide, Cromwell expresses a sincere desire to find More a way out – giving him “every opportunity to live to rethink his position, show loyalty to [the] king, and go home.” (Mantel, 594). In Mantel’s narrative, Cromwell’s political manoeuvres are guided by emotional intelligence; as a man who understands suffering, he seeks to avoid inflicting it, opting for persuasion rather than brutality – “I don’t do that. I only threaten to do it.” (Mantel, 601). Cromwell’s capacity for empathy is not limited to loved ones or political adversaries; he is also consistently courteous and considerate to strangers – handing out coins to young boys working in the heat, setting aside money in his will for the dowries of local maidens, distributing excess food from his kitchens to the poor. These small but significant acts of kindness reinforce Mantel’s reimagining of Cromwell as a humane and sympathetic figure, further reshaping the collective memory of Cromwell from ruthless enforcer to a more complex, morally grounded leader.

The 2015 BBC adaptation of *Wolf Hall*, directed by Peter Kosminsky and adapted by Peter Straughan, plays a significant role in bringing Mantel's reimagined Thomas Cromwell to a wider audience, while also subtly reshaping that portrayal through the demands of serial television. Given the novel's psychological depth and narrative complexity, significant omissions are inevitable in the adaptation process. Subplots are condensed or removed, minor characters are absent, and Cromwell's internal reflections are reduced to what can be suggested visually or through dialogue. These omissions, while necessary to fit the time limitations of a series, inevitably influence the version of Cromwell that reaches viewers. As a result, the adaptation distils the novel's Cromwell into a more externalised figure – with his compassion and composure demonstrated through performance, cinematography, and atmosphere rather than the intricate internal narration that drives Mantel's text. This section will explore how the series adaptation communicates Cromwell's interiority, emotional life, and political conduct, and will assess the ways in which these choices influence how he is remembered by audiences.

One of the most striking challenges of adapting *Wolf Hall* lies in translating Mantel's deep psychological portrait of Cromwell into a visual medium – a challenge that is handled artfully in the series' depiction of grief. In the novel, Cromwell's mourning for his wife and daughters is rendered in rich detail, drawing on vivid recollections of family life and the disorientation that follows personal loss. On screen, these emotions are portrayed primarily through visual and performative subtlety. Rather than dramatizing grief through graphic breakdowns, this series favours stillness and silence. For example, Rylance's performance in episode one is incredibly haunting in this way – as he stands by, his expression stricken with disbelief, as Mercy and Johane plead with his daughters to wake up. The image of Anne's small hand in his, his soft, gentle voice as he whispers "It's alright. Go, go now," as well as the quiet sobs from the two women create a moment of profound sorrow, providing viewers with a sensitive insight into the weight of Cromwell's loss. (*Wolf Hall* 00:39:40). Similarly, in the same episode we are shown a brief but poignant flashback, in which we see Cromwell's daughter Grace tracing the artwork on a prayerbook. We first see this image at the beginning of the episode (00:14:27), in a scene tinged with warmth – Grace, sitting on her father's lap as they look at the prayerbook together. When the scene resurfaces later (00:47:04), the colouring has shifted – the lighting duller, the colours less saturated – visually reflecting Cromwell's emotional state in the absence of his family. The moment is fleeting and wordless, its brevity reflecting the series' broader approach: emotionally restrained and suggestive rather than exploratory.

While the series effectively captures Cromwell's grief in the immediate aftermath of these family deaths, it initially appears that this emotional thread fades into the background as the political narrative intensifies. In the novel, Cromwell's memories of his wife and daughters recur throughout the narrative, surfacing in quiet moments of reflection and continuing to shape his emotional landscape well into the later chapters – for example, both of his daughters visit him in dreams, years after their deaths: "His daughter Anne comes to him in a dream. She holds up her left hand, sorrowful, to show him she wears no wedding ring." (Mantel, 578). Mantel allows his grief to linger, making it a defining feature of his character's internal life. By contrast, these moments are absent from the adaptation, which confines most expressions of mourning to early scenes, after which Cromwell's emotional responses are largely subsumed into the political

narrative. However, the flashbacks at the end of episode four when Cromwell takes ill offer a poignant reminder of his loss. As he lies in bed, weakened and delirious with fever, he first asks for Gregory, and then dreams of Grace – wearing her angel wings, the warmth of the candlelight making her look ethereal as she smiles back at him (Wolf Hall 00:55:14). He then dreams of Liz – which is the first time we see her since her death in episode one. The moment is sunlit and soft, birds chirping in the background, as Cromwell gazes at her with wonder while she weaves (Wolf Hall 00:56:34). The image of her hands blurring and going out of focus is incredibly poignant – perhaps indicating the increasingly faded nature of Cromwell’s memories of her as time passes. The lighting when Cromwell wakes up is dark, harshly contrasting against the light of his memory, as he looks beside him to see Liz gone. These flashbacks serve as reminders for viewers that Cromwell’s political composure is underscored by enduring personal sorrow – especially given that these moments come at the very end of the episodes covering the first novel. In doing so, the series acknowledges the emotional intimacy and depth to Mantel’s portrayal, even as the demands of the visual medium shift the balance towards externalised storytelling.

As Cromwell’s private grief gives way to the demands of his public role, the series shifts its focus more firmly onto his political actions – a shift that reflects the trajectory of Mantel’s novel while also highlighting the adaptation’s own priorities. On screen, Cromwell’s growing political prowess is expressed brilliantly by Mark Rylance. His restrained physicality – his stillness, mild tone of voice, and prolonged eye contact – suggests a man constantly weighing his words, navigating a volatile court with caution and control rather than with the vindictive manipulation as seen in *A Man for All Seasons*. For example, in episode one when the Duke of Norfolk threatens the cardinal and loses his temper, Cromwell remains impassive, his voice amiable and inquisitive – “My lord, may I substitute the word ‘bite’ for ‘tear’?” (Wolf Hall 00:57:12). This composure can also be seen in Cromwell’s interactions with Thomas More. In the novel, Cromwell’s anger and frustration with More’s silence is plain – “You call history to your aid, but what is history to you? It is a mirror that flatters Thomas More. But I have another mirror, I hold it up and it shows a vain and dangerous man, and when I turn it about it shows a killer.” (Mantel, 566). In the series, however, these passionate words are absent; instead, Cromwell’s indignation in episode four is conveyed through Rylance’s seething, regretful expression and his piercing use of eye contact (Wolf Hall 00:24:31). This contrast highlights the impact of narrative form on characterisation – as Linda Hutcheon argues, in the adaptation process “change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change come corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories.” (Hutcheon, XVIII). The series, by necessity, translates Cromwell’s complexity into visual cues – relying on Rylance’s expressions and body language to suggest what the novel makes explicit. While this allows for a subtler, more atmospheric portrayal, it also inevitably compresses the depth of Cromwell’s emotional and political thought, reframing him as quieter and more inscrutable in this moment than in the original scene.

However, the series does not present Cromwell’s restraint as absolute. Later in the episode, when More claims that he has not done anyone any harm, Cromwell’s composure fractures. He erupts in frustration, his voice shaking, slamming his hands on the table and

naming those who More has had “beaten and abused.” (Wolf Hall 00:29:20). This moment of anger is striking precisely because it is so rare; it underscores that Cromwell’s fury is not driven by personal vendetta, but by a sense of justice and responsibility. His restraint breaks not when he is challenged or threatened, but when he witnesses moral hypocrisy. This scene enriches the adaptation’s depiction of his character, allowing his political conduct to be seen not only as strategic but as grounded in a deeply personal code of ethics.

In both the novel and the adaptation, Thomas Cromwell emerges as a thoroughly reimagined figure – no longer the cold, power-hungry enforcer, but a man shaped by his family, his loss, and his emotional depth. Through a blend of intimate narrative techniques and evocative visual storytelling, Mantel and Kominsky offer portraits of a Cromwell who is complex, compassionate, and deeply human. This chapter has demonstrated how both works contribute immensely to the reshaping of Cromwell’s image in contemporary collective memory, and how they encourage audiences to reflect on traditional performances and portrayals of historical narratives.

Conclusion

Ultimately, it is clear that historical fiction and its adaptations play a crucial role in shaping collective memory by mediating how historical figures are interpreted, evaluated, and emotionally understood by later audiences. Rather than offering a singular or objective account of Thomas Cromwell’s legacy, works such as *A Man for All Seasons* and *Wolf Hall* actively participate in the construction of public memory by selecting, emphasising, and dramatising particular aspects of his character and actions. In doing so, they demonstrate how collective memory is not simply an evolving record of historical knowledge, but a process through which dominant interpretive frameworks shift over time.

In *A Man for All Seasons*, both the play and the film adaptation reinforce the traditional view of Cromwell as a corrupt, scheming enforcer of the king’s will. Bolt’s depiction, shaped by the cultural climate of the 1960s and grounded in the portrayal of Thomas More as a martyr, casts Cromwell as the embodiment of political ruthlessness. The play and its 1966 film adaptation present a simplified moral binary, in which Cromwell represents state oppression and More, the voice of personal conviction and principle. This representation, though dramatically effective, supports a narrow and largely negative collective memory of Cromwell – one shaped by a focus on individual conscience and moral absolutism.

By contrast, Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, written in 2009 and adapted in 2015, reflects a contemporary interest in psychological realism, individual subjectivity, and historical revisionism – an approach clearly evident in both the narrative style and visual choices explored in this study. Mantel’s Cromwell is both gentle and commanding – a kind father, and an authoritative statesman. Both the novel and the adaptation are products of a cultural moment concerned with the nuance and complexity of human nature – values that resonate with twenty-first century audiences increasingly sceptical of black-and-white history.

Together, these works reveal how adaptation is not merely a process of translation from one medium to another, but a dynamic process of reinterpretation – shaped by form, audience, and ideology. Both adaptations demonstrate the immediacy and emotional intimacy offered by visual mediums through performance and cinematography, and how they can enhance audiences' engagement with historical narratives. In doing so, they affirm the central role of historical fiction in constructing collective memory, particularly when such representations reach wider audiences than academic accounts – as Gambarato and Heuman observe, “Fictional representation of historical events contributes to emotional involvement with the past through a more creative narration compared to academic historiography, which makes them powerful as a medium of cultural memory.” (Gambarato and Heuman, 805).

Further research could extend this analysis by examining how the rest of Mantel's trilogy, *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) and *The Mirror and the Light* (2020), and their screen adaptations, continue to develop Cromwell's legacy, especially as they chart his downfall. Additionally, future research could undertake a comparative study of how other controversial historical figures – such as Henry VIII, Mary Queen of Scots, or Marie Antoinette – have been reimagined through fiction and adaptation. Comparing these portrayals with that of Cromwell would offer valuable insight into broader trends in historical revisionism, and how popular media reconstructs complex legacies to reflect contemporary values.

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