

The Tudor Turn: The Poetics and Politics of Englishness in Contemporary Historical Novels

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the interrelationship between contemporary Englishness and historical fictions. It responds to two coeval elements of English culture that started to emerge around the beginning of the present century: a revival of national consciousness that arguably underpinned the 2016 vote to leave the European Union, and a turn towards fiction set in the world of Henry VIII. Through a close reading of six Henrician texts by Philippa Gregory, C.J. Sansom and Hilary Mantel, all of whom are leading authors in the field, it aims to establish the reasons for this setting's prevalence and commercial success in the English historical fiction of the pre-Brexit period, and to determine what this might tell us about the nature of English identity at this time. Drawing on theories of nationhood and postmodernism, my analysis of the ways in which these texts write England applies a postcolonial reading of English identity and explores their interplay with nationalist discourses by mapping their themes and preoccupations to contemporaneous polemical texts on the state of the nation. In so doing, I identify a common focus on loss, melancholia, grievance and decline, and find that in their re-writing of each other the novels illuminate the divisions and competing instincts that have characterised English society before and since the EU referendum.

In taking this cultural materialist approach to a corpus of texts that re-work the same elements of England's past in different ways, the project contributes significantly to the understanding of how fiction, cultural memory and politics intersect, highlighting the ways in which they reflect, reinforce, or indeed undermine, the construction of national identity. My work demonstrates how these multiple re-imaginings of this specific historical period function as the 'mirror and the light' of the contemporary nation and draws attention to the particularities of the English imaginary.

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Publications

Parts of Chapter Two appear in an essay, 'Brexit and the Tudor Turn: Philippa Gregory's Narratives of National Grievance' in Habermann, Ina (ed.), *The Road to Brexit: A Cultural Perspective on British Attitudes to Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020) pp. 179-186.

Parts of Chapter Four appear in an essay, 'History, Nation and Self: *Wolf Hall* and the Machinery of Memory' in Pollard, Eileen and Ginette Carpenter (eds), *Hilary Mantel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018) pp. 27-40.

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The Tudor Turn: The Poetics and Politics of Englishness in Contemporary Historical Novels

Introduction

This project responds to two coeval elements of English culture that started to emerge around the beginning of the present century: a revival of national consciousness that arguably culminated in Britain's departure from the European Union, and an upsurge of imaginings of the Tudor world, particularly that of Henry VIII. Through a close reading of six Henrician texts by Philippa Gregory, C.J. Sansom and Hilary Mantel, all of whom are leading authors in the field, it sets out to address the following questions: why have there been so many novels written about this monarch's reign in recent decades? Why have they achieved commercial success? And what might they tell us about English identity along with the role of historical fiction in helping to shape a nation's understanding of itself? My analysis of the ways in which these texts write England applies a postcolonial reading of English identity, mapping the novels' themes and preoccupations to contemporaneous polemical texts on the state of the nation and identifying a common discourse of loss, anxiety and grievance. As such, I aim to contribute original insights to current debates on the relationship between fiction, cultural memory and national identity at a time of significant political and demographic change.¹

The findings of my research suggest that the Henrician turn of the early twenty-first century reflects some of the anxieties associated with these changes, and contests the positivist continuity narratives of England that have typically ascribed to its people a stable, evolutionary and understated sturdiness which has not heretofore

¹ See for example, Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) Kindle ebook.

required explicit expressions of nationhood. Contemporary re-imaginings of the English Reformation re-shape the national story as one of trauma and rupture afflicting an oppressed population. In different ways, the work of all three authors examined here engages with the processes of historicising and the erasure of inconvenient truths. I suggest that in inculcating in their readers a consciousness of past subjugation and an awareness of historical change that impacts on the way lives are lived, the novels articulate what Paul Gilroy terms the 'postcolonial melancholia' of England as it approached the 2016 EU referendum (though Mantel's novels deconstruct the notion of stable national identity and deny the certainties upon which it depends).²

Following the referendum, there have been a number of attempts to gain insights into the cultural manifestation of English national identity and the factors that may have contributed to the majority vote for Leave.³ Prior to this event, however, a number of scholars and commentators from across the political spectrum were already engaging with the nature of Englishness, attempting to delineate its culture and diagnose the problems associated with its adjustment to a postcolonial and multicultural existence. Examples of this work include that of Gilroy, Tom Nairn, Krishan Kumar, Arthur Aughey and Simon Featherstone as well as that of the writers examined in Chapter One: Roger Scruton, Peter Hitchens and Paul Kingsnorth. The thesis draws on the ideas of both sets of critiques but focusses primarily on the analyses and discourses of the latter, considering them in relation to their conjunction with contemporaneous literary re-imaginings of the Henrician world. Collective

² Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005) Kindle e-book.

³ Some of these are discussed in this thesis and include: Stephen Haseler, *England Alone: Brexit and the Crisis of English Identity* (London: Forum Press, 2017), David Goodhart, *The Road To Somewhere: The Populist Revolt And The Future Of Politics* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017), Robert Eaglestone (ed.), *Brexit And Literature: Critical And Cultural Responses* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018) and Ina Habermann (ed.), *The Road To Brexit: A Cultural Perspective On British Attitudes To Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), a book to which I contributed a chapter.

identities, perhaps especially national ones, are grounded in shared perceptions of the past and it is in this respect that the historical novel can be seen both to contribute to, and to contest, the construction of the nation's cultural memory. Accordingly, in addition to those of postcoloniality, my study draws on theories of nationhood, and employs critical methods of close reading in order to determine the role played by these texts in writing pre-Brexit England.

I have chosen to focus on Henrician novels specifically, because since the early years of the present century, this period has been a dominant topic in both England's public history and its historical fiction. By the middle of 2016, the "Tudoring" of English culture had been overtly acknowledged in the mainstream media with the *Guardian* columnist Charlotte Higgins noting little more than a month before the EU referendum that 'now, the Tudors hold the nation in an especially fearsome grip'.⁴ Higgins' claim is confirmed by data: a search of Amazon UK's website, for example, reveals that well over five hundred books about Henry VIII's court have been published since 2000 whilst in 2015, *The Bookseller* reported that 'Tudor-themed' titles were earning '36% of the top 100's value – far more than any other historical era' and that the two best-selling Tudor authors that year were Philippa Gregory and Hilary Mantel.⁵

My work integrates nationhood studies with two other areas of theoretical and critical scholarship: historical fiction as a genre, and, as indicated above, Henrician historical fiction specifically. Debates around the notion of the nation are apposite to

⁴ Charlotte Higgins, 'Tudormania: Why can't we get over it?', *Guardian*, 4 May 2016, section Journal, Tudormania: Why can't we get over it?/History books/The Guardian <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2016/may/04/tudormania-why-can-we-not-get-over-it> [accessed 27 Oct 2020] para 3 of 36.

⁵ Amazon UK, Henry VIII book https://www.amazon.com/s?k=henry+viii+book&i=stripbooks-intl-ship&s=date-desc-rank&page=15&crd=1CH2OXJU9JAV2&qid=1599826786&srefix=Henry+VIII+%2Cstripbooks-intl-ship%2C217&ref=sr_pg_14 [accessed 27 Oct 2020]; 'In the Spotlight' in *The Bookseller*, 29th May 2015, p. 11. Author unknown.

the contemporary context and increasingly abundant as recent developments in mainstream politics have prioritised the understanding of collective identities and the extent to which they are shaped by cultural memory. In this respect, elements of my textual analysis are informed by Pierre Nora's notion of the 'acceleration of history', whereby repositories of memory are collapsed into a historical past that is gone for good, thus engendering a collective sense of loss and disconnection. Writing in the context of French nationhood, Nora links this to the revived popularity of the historical novel.⁶ Historical fiction itself is as yet relatively under-theorised, though much of my research is underpinned by the ideas of postmodernist thinkers such as Linda Hutcheon, Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur, all of whom highlight the 'emplotment' of history and the privileging of narrative form over past reality. Consequently, they suggest, stories of the past are constructors of meaning that interact with the contexts of their production rather than being objective sources of information.⁷ I also draw on the work of Beverley Southgate, who similarly connects historical narrative with fiction, Michael Gardiner, who illuminates the constitutionalising function of the English novel, Jerome de Groot who considers the implications of England's marked turn to the past, and, of course, Georg Lukács who, writing from a Marxist perspective in 1937, connects the rise of the historical novel to an emergent acknowledgement of history as a phenomenon that impacts upon ordinary people's lives.⁸ There has been very

⁶ Nora, Pierre, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7-24 (p. 24).

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988). Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987). Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol 1, 2 & 3, trans. by Kathleen Mclaughlin and David Pellauer, (London: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁸ Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, 2009), Michael Gardiner, *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, the Nation, and the Canon* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Jerome de Groot, *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) and Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962).

little scholarship in relationship to the contemporary fictionalising of Henrician England nor the concurrence of its popularity with the upsurge of English nationalism. It is in this last area that the project extends existing debates.

As indicated above, this attempt to establish the nature of the relationship between the contemporary Henrician novel and the nationalist aspect of its cultural context is informed to a considerable extent by the theories of Gilroy as well as those of Svetlana Boym: specifically, their respective concepts of postcolonial melancholia and restorative nostalgia.⁹ For Gilroy, post-imperial England's sense of its own malaise and decline is linked to a discomfort, in some quarters, with the multiculturalism that has resulted both from the immigration of former colonial subjects and, more recently, globalisation. The melancholia he identifies is associated with a racialised desire for lost homogeneity and fixed identity, which in turn engenders a sense of grievance arising from perceptions of downward social mobility and stolen privilege. Boym's notion of restorative nostalgia encompasses the longing for a lost and imaginary home that exists outside time: indeed, Boym contends that nostalgia equates to a desire to escape temporality altogether. Restorative nostalgia attempts to recreate what Nora would term *milieux de mémoires* (environments of memory), and to restore (or invent) traditions that have been supposedly lost. Melancholia and nostalgia are integral to the discourses of Englishness examined in Chapter One, and emerge, in particular, within the texts to which I attach the term 'Condition of England'. This term is borrowed from Stefan Collini, who employs it in a review of Roger Scruton's *England: An Elegy*: one of the books that I analyse in some detail.¹⁰ The ensuing chapters read a corpus

⁹ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', *The Hedgehog Review*, 2, 9 (2007)

¹⁰ Collini, Stefan, 'Hegel in Green Wellies', *London Review Of Books*, Vol. 23 Issue 5, 8 March 2001, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n05/stefan-collini/hegel-in-green-wellies>> [accessed 27 October 2020] para 1 of 34.

of Henrician novels by Philippa Gregory, C.J. Sansom and Hilary Mantel in dialogue with these nationalist polemics that attempt to define Englishness as a primarily territorial and exceptionalist identity.

A central premise of the thesis is that Englishness is a construction: one that has been *re-constructed* in the years leading to the vote to leave the EU, and that is underpinned by imaginings of the nation's past. Modernist theories regarding nation, epitomised by those of Benedict Anderson, are based on a constructivist approach. Their premise is that the concept of nation, as it is now understood, only came into being in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and that, rather than resulting from inherent factors, it is formed from a collective *belief* in naturally ordained characteristics such as language, ancestry, territory and habits that confer belonging to a group, most of whose members will never meet or know of each other's individual existences.¹¹ This is what is meant by Anderson's well-known term 'imagined communities', and as Caspar Hirschi remarks, 'the term's glorious career in nationalism studies has much to do with its suitability for the denunciation of the nation as an "illusion" or "fabrication"'.¹² Anderson's constructivist theory is widely shared and has been applied to the English/British context in order to draw attention to its democratic deficit. Tom Nairn, for example, has referred to Britain as 'a land of the mind', as a 'set of mental map-survey points implanted in the communal psyche', whilst Michael Gardiner suggests that Britain's present is 'made of impossible and interpolated pasts' that are 'the very stuff of British constitutional culture'.¹³ Craig

¹¹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edn (London: Verso, 2016), p. 6.

¹² Caspar Hirschi, *The Origins of Nationalism: An Alternative History from Ancient Rome to Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 10.

¹³ Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain And Its Monarchy* (London: Radius, 1988), p. 91. Michael Gardiner, *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, The Nation and The Canon*, ebook (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 11.

Calhoun is less sceptical and has argued that for many societies, national construction has been progressive and emancipatory.¹⁴ This is particularly true of a number of modern European nations that largely came into being as a consequence of the Enlightenment and its emergent discourses of popular entitlement. Cultural memory was a crucial factor in their development: their inception was marked by what Anderson terms a romantic 'awakening from a chronologically gauged, A.D.-style slumber'.¹⁵ Despite Calhoun's assertions, the construction of identity has not always been found to work in the public interest, and it has been acknowledged more recently that the motives underlying the national constructions of nineteenth-century Europe were not entirely democratic. As Perry Anderson points out, in these cases the older ruling classes helped to engineer a sense of 'romantic nationalism' in their subjects in order to mobilise popular resistance to Napoleonic expansion. In this, he identifies the paradox of nationhood: that in order to preserve established, often supranational, interests, it has to be underpinned by popular perceptions of geopolitical distinctiveness and self-determination.¹⁶ This understanding of national construction as expedient fictionalising emerges particularly strongly in the highly self-aware meta-narratives of Hilary Mantel.

Crucial to the national imagination is the novel and, in particular, its role in reimagining the past. Recent work, in relation to different British contexts, has developed Anderson's notion of the form as a crucial driver of the intended nation. Writing about Scotland, Cairns Craig, suggests that the nation imagines its future through the novel's reconfiguration of the past as a source of national values that have

¹⁴ Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History and the Cosmopolitan Dream*, ebook (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), pp. 486-493 Kindle ebook

¹⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 195.

¹⁶ Anderson, Perry, 'From Progress to Catastrophe' in *London Review of Books*, 33(15), 28 July 2011, <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe>> [accessed 12 December 2020] p. 25.

endured through time and should continue to do so.¹⁷ Craig suggests that the novel contributes to national consciousness through ascribing to its readers a collective identity and transmitting traditions.¹⁸ A similar viewpoint is articulated by Kirsti Bohata in relation to Wales. She advocates a re-thinking of postcolonialism whereby the past can be re-imagined in ways that bring to light suppressed and marginalised histories with the aim of '(re)constructing the present'. For Bohata, the concept of a 'usable past' fosters a sense of 'distinctive identity' and 'constituting difference'.¹⁹ Writing in the English context, Patrick Parrinder identifies the novel as 'the source of some of our most influential ideas and expressions of national identity' and as 'a largely untapped body of evidence to historical enquiry into the origins and development of our inherited ideas about England and the English'.²⁰

Contemporary Englishness and Cultural Memory

Whilst English nationhood, in common with others, may well be predicated on a collective memory that is fictionalised, it nevertheless differs from its modern counterparts in a number of ways. Firstly, its origins are not in modernity - it did not 'awaken' in the post-Enlightenment period as other European nations are said to have done, partly because it remained relatively untouched by Napoleonic imperialism and therefore there was no strategic benefit for its rulers in stirring communal consciousness. Secondly, English global imperialism required a universal as opposed to territorial subjectivity that occluded overt nationalism and, as Simon Featherstone

¹⁷ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and The National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 32.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 14-5.

²⁰ Patrick Parrinder, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel from Its Origins to The Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 6.

remarks, 'produced a resilient, contradictory anti-nationhood allowing strategic assertions of national power'.²¹

There is reason to suspect that elements of England's political culture have now changed and that these shifts gathered momentum under the New Labour government and the acceleration of integration with the rest of Europe. As the rulers of nineteenth-century Europe fostered nationhood as a means of halting Napoleonic expansion, so there is evidence of an English identity being constructed in the twenty-first century by some on the right, in opposition to Europeanism and multiculturalism. It is possible to argue that the post-Thatcherite landscape has engendered a receptive climate to this recreation of a collective identity and revival of myths of origin.²² Furthermore, the denial until relatively recently of a collective identity, rooted in geography, has led to what Arthur Aughey calls 'an anxiety of absence' or an absence of reflection on English self-definition which means that, in a sense, the English have not existed, have been wiped off the map.²³ Changing spatiality, and an accompanying sense of loss, are common themes of the texts examined in this thesis.

Amongst lamentations on national decline by those Condition of England writers, who are intent on defining Englishness and restoring or re-inventing its traditions, Gilroy notes 'an obsessive repetition of key themes – invasion, war, contamination, loss of identity' and suggests that 'an anxious, melancholic mood has become part of the cultural infrastructure of the place, an immovable ontological

²¹ Simon Featherstone, *Englishness: Twentieth Century Popular Culture and The Forming of English Identity* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p. 9.

²² See, for example, Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever, 'Racism, Crisis, Brexit', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41:10 (2018), 1802-1819. De-industrialisation, for instance, has resulted in the downward mobility of the traditional working-class. A sense of national grievance might also be the consequence of austerity policies that have coincided with perceived increases in immigration

²³ Arthur Aughey, 'Anxiety and Injustice: The Anatomy of Contemporary English Nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 16:3 (2010), pp. 506-24., p. 508.

counterpart to the nation-defining ramparts of the white cliffs of Dover'.²⁴ These 'key themes' similarly dominate much of the Henrician fiction analysed in the thesis, though as previously noted, Mantel's meta-narratives work to undermine the certainties on which such sentiments are founded. Gilroy identifies a need among English nationalists for re-orientation, a compulsion to 'get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings'.²⁵ In practice, this has meant that a mere handful of periods - points of possible nation-defining caesura - are repeatedly re-visited, whilst much of its history is excluded from narratives about who and what the English are. The two World Wars are enduringly popular in public history and fiction, with a particularly pronounced focus on World War II. As indicated earlier, the Tudor world, especially that of Henry VIII, has also flourished, alongside those of the Plantagenets, the Victorians, the Anglo-Saxons, and Roman Britain. I could have addressed any one of these other turns but have elected to focus on the Henrician, largely because, with the exception of World War II, it seems to have been the most dominant in the pre-Brexit period. A further reason for choosing Henrician fiction is that, like World War II, Henry VIII's reign tends to be seen in terms of England's relationship with the continent, and the break from Rome has similarly been regarded by some as a demonstration of English exceptionalism and superiority. I argue that as the end of World War II is now often portrayed as a starting point of national decline, so too is England's early modern schism. The selectivity of the drive to recapture a purer, simpler past has arguably contributed in England to a marked trend of retrospection, as well as to an incoherent and fragmented public history. In addition to being episodic (as opposed to being a linear narrative of progress), history is now

²⁴ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 14.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 89.

being encountered in more visceral and experiential ways than has previously been the case. As de Groot points out, it is being *consumed*; with pedagogical practices related to the past increasingly merging with those of restorative nostalgia.²⁶

This nostalgia can be seen at work in the school curriculum. In their account of history teaching in state schools over the course of the twentieth-century, *The Right Kind of History* (2011) David Cannadine, Jenny Keating and Nicola Sheldon argue that, following the introduction of the National Curriculum, history as a subject has been marginalised within school study programmes and is delivered in a disjointed fashion. They suggest that the contraction of classroom time available for History, together with greater teacher accountability, has led to increasing conservatism in the choice of topics. The consequence of this is that the Tudors, the two World Wars and Nazi Germany are repeatedly encountered by learners throughout their schooling to the exclusion of everything else and at the expense of chronological coverage.²⁷ Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon suggest that this results in students lacking an overview and an ability to make connections. Moreover, Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon find that history teaching tends to be repetitive: students report encountering the same topics at each key stage of their schooling (and, as publishing data suggests, go on to find those topics dominating the historical fiction shelves of bookshops).²⁸

According to Cannadine, Keating and Sheldon, technology has also had an impact on the public understanding of history. They argue that the effect of the widespread integration of ICT within teaching and learning has been 'to change fundamentally the whole process of classroom learning about the past, away from the

²⁶ de Groot, *Consuming History*, pp. 248-50.

²⁷ David Cannadine, Jenny Keating, Nicola Sheldon, *The Right Kind of History: Teaching the Past in Twentieth-Century England* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011) p. 217.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

written word and towards visual images, which are now available in almost limitless supply'. They remark that 'Nowadays as never before, history is instantly, everywhere available, all day, all night, 24/7, and learning about it in school is only part of the process of encountering and, increasingly, 'experiencing' the past'.²⁹ They link the effect of technology to the rise of the heritage industry (epitomised by the fact that membership of the National Trust exceeds that of the three main political parties collectively), and the increasing popularity of television history in the 1990s and 2000s.³⁰ Heritage practice itself contributes to the ahistorical *nowness* of history; for example, the kitchens of Hampton Court are branded on the visitor website as 'Henry VIII's Kitchens' despite the fact that they functioned in the service of royalty for a further two centuries after his death.³¹

These experiential and repetitive approaches are at the heart of what de Groot identifies as 're-enactment culture'. They can be seen, for example, in the sentiments evoked by promotional slogans for historical festivals such as – 'See History, Hear History, Feel History...#AmazingHistory' and in the existence of events such as the annual '1940s Weekend' in the Lancashire town of Ramsbottom or 'Harborough at War' in Market Harborough, Leicestershire, where buildings are dressed and residents don wartime regalia to participate in 1940s-style activities.³² The rise of such pseudo-traditions implies that localism is most effectively expressed through collective imagination and immersion in the supposed everyday customs and routines of a bygone age. It is a trend which is inherently conservative and nostalgic. Moreover, as de Groot remarks, 'the agency of historical investigation is found in the individual and

²⁹ Ibid., p. 210.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Website: *Historic Royal Palaces: Hampton Court Palace* <https://www.hrp.org.uk/hampton-court-palace/?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIr8bWv73s5gIVC7TtCh2_MAOcEAAYASAAEgLT6_D_BwE#gs.psgzz0> [accessed 5 January 2020].

³² Website: Chalke Valley History Festival, <https://cvhf.org.uk/> [accessed 27 October 2020].

their experience of the everyday' as opposed to 'any grander, totalising conceptualisation of meaning, purpose or progress'.³³ 'Living history' is also manifested through historical novels and through the period drama that has proliferated in film and television to the extent that 'the 'historical' has become a commonplace in contemporary culture'.³⁴ Heritage and historical performance elide past and present to portray a history which is static and contained whilst the nation is increasingly characterised within the framework of a fictional, bygone but always present-tense aesthetic.

These imaginaries of England's past have also tended to consolidate an understanding of English communities as provincial and homogenous: the contemporary English aesthetic, a legacy of Orwell's *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941), centres on the socially stratified familiarity of the village rather than the urban cosmopolitanism and industrial heritage of much of the country and its population. This is likely a legacy of the nineteenth-century distaste for its own modernisation, which was instrumental in the making of national identity. For the Eurosceptic historian Robert Tombs, Victorian England was 'a pioneer' in most respects and for a time, seemed to be a world leader 'in its economy and technology, its social conditions and living standards, its political organizations, its ways of thinking about man, nature and religion, and its role as the core of a global empire'.³⁵ According to Tombs, England's history 'was generally understood as Progress', but contemporaneous with this Whiggish optimism was a familiar melancholia: 'from the 1880s, or even earlier, something seemed wrong: it was as if England's apogee had come and gone without

³³ de Groot, *Consuming History*, p.105.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³⁵ Robert Tombs, *The English And Their History* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 584.

anyone noticing'.³⁶ Tombs' observation highlights a longstanding conflict between the radical and conservative instincts that can be seen as equally integral to English culture: a conflict that is articulated in the Henrician novels examined in the following chapters.

It is possible that the very factors responsible for England's success were also the roots of its discontent. England was the first country to industrialise but industrial heritage is largely occluded from popular history and in many respects, contemporary culture shuns this aspect of the past.³⁷ The reason for this omission may lie in the fact that industrial history highlights the class divide, thereby threatening to subvert the One Nation narrative, but an additional cause could be the trauma of rapid social and cultural change. The demographic shifts that fed the factories and combined with new work patterns to disrupt communities and traditions can be likened to the consequences of monastic dissolution, ecclesiastical change, and land enclosure. England's industrialisation made it a world leader but this brought a sense of spatial disconnection, a changed landscape of mills, factories and dense housing along with waves of immigration which were regarded by many with distaste, both then and now. As a result, industrial change gave rise to the familiar, national nostalgia for a pastoral 'village England'. As will be seen in Chapter One, the conservative Condition of England writers articulate this nostalgia, and exhibit similar distress in relation to the spatial transformations of the post-war period which resonate with the language of the Henrician novels.

³⁶ Ibid, p. 585.

³⁷ As Melvyn Bragg complains in a Radio 4 programme about the legacy of the north: 'when you think of all we once made in this country, the brilliance of makers and innovators in the north, it's amazing that we don't seem to regard them as national heroes: why shouldn't they be as much part of our national mythology as the Tudor monarchs?' - 'Northern Inventions and the Birth of the Industrial Revolution', *The Matter of the North*, BBC Radio 4 Extra, 8 August 2018.

Nineteenth-century England also generated ground-breaking milestones in the progress towards democracy which have had global impact on political thought. These included the establishment of the Trade Union movement and campaigns for universal suffrage. Radical figures are nevertheless under-represented in popular public history and cannot be said to figure prominently in the national consciousness: there is a noticeable lack of historical fiction that tells the stories of past political activists. This contrasts markedly with the cultural memory of many other countries which foreground the relationship between actions and outcomes. France, for instance, marks its revolutionary legacy, Ireland commemorates its anti-colonialism, and there is a reverence in America for progressive figures like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. In contrast, democracy and the rule of law are presented as an organic component of the English land and its people: things that have always existed and come naturally to the English, rather than being the consequence of activism. This may go some way towards explaining the tendency of much popular historical fiction to focus either on narratives of royalty and dynasty or on the socially stratified dynamics of the rural village.

To conclude this section, England's cultural memory has tended to occlude a historical narrative that attributes progress to collective activism or the pursuit of competing interests. England's radicalism, industrialisation and imperialism have largely been obscured and history has been experienced as an aesthetic that plays out as costume, re-enactment and repetition. It has upheld the certainties provided by class and place and foregrounded continuity at the expense of acknowledging change. Emphasis on the commonality between past and present rather than history's difference can be seen as having denied a coherent, emancipatory national story with the focus instead on what Gardiner describes as 'an intuitive understanding of things

as they always are, should be, and have been'.³⁸ This in turn may have engendered a hostility to, rather than acceptance of change as both inevitable and desirable, giving rise to the narratives of decline that inform the postcolonial period.

Englishness, Royalty, and Tudor Turns

In outlining previous imaginings of the Tudors and their relationship with different constructions of English identity, this section considers both fictional accounts and those of historians. The reason for this approach lies in the contention of many postmodernist thinkers, some of whom are mentioned above, that history and fiction intersect. Because, as Nairn argues, English identity is uniquely bound up with the Crown, I will also consider evolving discourses around royalty which can be seen, in turn, as important influences upon fictional depictions of monarchs and court politics. In this latter respect, I regard the construction of Princess Diana as being particularly significant in shaping the national psyche: the turn to melancholy Henrician narratives not only coincided with a resurgence of conservative complaint, but also ran alongside a popular fixation upon her story. England remains divided along the lines of social class and, as has been shown above, the cultural memory arising from its mainstream popular culture, largely reflects conservatism and deference. These instincts manifest both in preferences for the history of bygone monarchies and in the enduring fascination with present-day royalty. The legacy of Diana is reflected particularly in the work of Gregory, whose royal protagonists can arguably be seen as fictional versions of the 'People's Princess'. In terms of the strategic self-revisionism and mythologizing that underpins it, however, it also resonates with Mantel's historiographical concerns.

³⁸ Gardiner, *The Constitution of English Literature*, p. 14.

Gregory's transition to Henrician narratives followed the Princess's death and the consequent unleashing of what the journalist Jonathan Freedland has referred to as an 'anti-establishment rage', which he regards as having been 'a foretaste of something' which would eventually lead people to the Brexit vote.³⁹ It is in fact unlikely that the public rage felt on Diana's behalf was ever 'anti-establishment'. As Featherstone and Nairn have both pointed out, the function of the British royalty is to maintain 'oligarchic caste rule' and quell the democratic instincts of nationhood.⁴⁰ This demands 'a monarchy replete with the signs of tradition and continuity but also endlessly adaptable to the changing circumstances of the modernity it apparently denied'.⁴¹ To some extent, this finely-tuned blend of mystery and relatability had eluded the Windsors in the increasingly egalitarian 1960s and 70s, and whilst the vocal Diana exposed their dysfunctionality, it was she who would rehabilitate their stature and allure. As Featherstone remarks, Diana's romantic narrative positioned her 'as a royal at odds with the stodgy compromises of royal pageantry and bourgeois family life visible elsewhere' so that she appeared to challenge the status quo, but in fact her drama was played out within parameters that denied political change.⁴² The loss of Diana inspired a mass public outpouring of grief which, in the sense of being a shared experience associated exclusively with being British, amounted to a summoning of national collectiveness and an invocation of Benedict Anderson's simultaneity.⁴³ However, the articulation of this communion was retrospective: it took the form of yearning for something that had been taken away. The national feeling engendered

³⁹ Jonathan Freedland, 'Diana's life shaped Britain. But in death she's changed us too', *Guardian*, 5 August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/05/diana-life-shaped-britain-death-1997-populism> [accessed 27 October 2020] para 14 and 15 of 17

⁴⁰ Simon Featherstone, *Englishness*, p. 172 and Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass*, p. 136.

⁴¹ Featherstone, *Englishness*, p.172.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 23.

was therefore synonymous with grievance, and the imagined community that emerged from it left the underlying principles of monarchy unquestioned. The object of royal maltreatment was not an ordinary subject but one of their own number: popular empathy was with an affronted aristocrat and her family. In time, as Freedland notes, 'the royals deflected that anti-establishment rage away from themselves' and 'the anger was directed instead at the political class.'⁴⁴

Despite her real-life cosmopolitanism (she was an international celebrity and embraced global causes), the posthumous Diana became an icon of melancholy Englishness. At her funeral, Elton John sang of her as 'England's rose' and 'our nation's golden child'. Evoking the sense of a nation in pain, his lyrics proclaim Diana to have 'called out to our country' and 'whispered to those in pain' while her 'footsteps will always fall here/ Along England's greenest hills'. England itself is 'a country lost without your soul'.⁴⁵ This conflation of royal tragedy with national pain indicates the turn in English popular culture away from progressiveness and towards the conservative, hierarchical, reactionary politics that sustain the privileges of monarchy and class and present cultural change as disintegration.

This is the context in which Gregory's narratives of Henry VIII's spoliation of England and cruelty towards heroic royal females emerged, alongside Sansom's mournful depictions of a corrupted English Reformation and Mantel's counteractive deconstructions of history and identity. In an article marking the twentieth anniversary of the Princess's death, Mantel charges the Diana cult with 'exploiting the nation's

⁴⁴ Freedland, 'Diana's life shaped Britain', 5 August 2017.

⁴⁵ Bernie Taupin and Elton John, *Candle in the Wind 1997*, *BBC News*, www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/diana/lyrics.html [accessed 31 May 2018].

infantile needs, equating history with the history of a few titled families'.⁴⁶ She regards Diana as having been an active participant in her own self-mythologizing and in death, as one of those who 'reshape themselves, taking on a flexibility in public discourse'.⁴⁷ Mantel notes that, like her Thomas Cromwell for whom it 'matters what name we choose, what name we make', in press interviews, Diana 'seemed to be reading from her own obituary'.⁴⁸ Her account of Diana's re-creation reflects the meta-narratives of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*, both of which are texts that unpick myth-making processes and the instrumental construction of unitary historical truths.

The subsequent chapters of the thesis demonstrate the extent to which twenty-first century Henrician novels are in dialogue with the contemporary politics of Englishness. It is important to note, however, that the Tudors have enjoyed cultural prominence at other points in the nation's past and I will briefly outline previous ways in which the period has been used to underwrite ideas about England and Englishness. The legacy of the Henrician Reformation and its impact on English national identity has long been contested. The associated debates at different points in subsequent history were comprehensively explored by Rosemary O'Day in *The Debate on the English Reformation* (1986) and her work provides much of the framework for the account that follows.

The goals of sixteenth-century writers were typically English in that they aimed to provide continuity narratives. This is evident in Polydore's Vergil's *English History*, commissioned by Henry VIII, which in familiar fashion frames English history around royalty, thus emphasising the Tudors' ancient line of descent. In relation to the work

⁴⁶ Mantel, Hilary, 'The princess myth: Hilary Mantel on Diana' in *The Guardian*, 26th August 2017 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/26/the-princess-myth-hilary-mantel-on-diana> [accessed 5 December 2020] (para

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (Fourth Estate, London, 2009), p.178; Mantel, 'The princess myth'.

of John Foxe, Andrew Escobedo asserts that ‘one of Foxe’s goals in providing “the light of history” was to reveal the continuity that ran through England’s religious history’ and O’Day concurs, remarking on Foxe’s argument that the Church of England was not a new church but a renewing of the ancient Church of Christ.⁴⁹ This search for origins within the Henrician age itself led to a preoccupation with Arthurian narratives. Later, John Foxe became a major justificatory influence in Elizabethan perceptions of the Reformation and in fact, as O’Day suggests, his work ‘was itself an *agent* [sic] of reformation in England’, transposing events into a story-form which gave them meaning.⁵⁰ Foxe was, in fact, writing historical fiction and his work is an early illustration of Southgate’s suggestions about the genre’s agency in shaping the future. O’Day suggests that his *Book of Martyrs* invoked an early form of nationalism, influenced as he was by the biblical progress narrative ‘of the history of a single, chosen people with a sense of their identity as a nation set aside from all others by their particular destiny, and its emphasis upon God’s grand design’.⁵¹ That there has been division and ambiguity from an early stage around attitudes to Henrician government is suggested by his failure in the Elizabethan period to attain the iconic legacy of other monarchs, including that of his daughter.

The Tudors were relatively popular subjects for historical fiction throughout the nineteenth-century. As Susan Bordo notes, these nineteenth-century narratives tended to reinforce both notions of Protestant (therefore English) superiority and Victorian morality. Accordingly, they tended to be shaped by the moral agendas and

⁴⁹ 1) Andrew Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 3. 2) Rosemary O’Day, *The Debate on the English Reformation* (London, Methuen & Co., 1986), p. 17.

⁵⁰ O’Day, *The Debate on The English Reformation*, pp. 29-30.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

biases of the time.⁵² These agendas were not limited to the gender and sexual politics that have inflected portrayals of Henry VIII's wives, and especially those of Anne Boleyn. O'Day points out that nineteenth-century debates on the Reformation were also related to the crisis facing the Church of England following the Repeal of the Test Acts (1828) and Catholic Emancipation (1829). These changes in the law broke the established Church's exclusive hold over the institutions and offices of state, paving the way for Catholics and Protestant Dissenters to participate fully in the life of the nation and breaking the link between English identity and adherence to the Reformation. This led to attempts by the Church of England to locate afresh the source of its authority and this in turn generated divisions within the institution itself. The Oxford Tractarians, for example, looked back to the power and authority of the medieval church stressing 'the unbroken traditions of the English church – the Catholic faith, the Catholic heritage, the apostolic succession'.⁵³ The Reformation was keenly contested throughout the century and seen by some as the key to 'the crisis of identity' experienced by the established church.⁵⁴

In the 1930s and 40s, the Tudor monarchs were enlisted in fiction as patriotic icons in the face of continental turbulence and the threat of Nazi German occupation. Alexander Korda's *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, released in 1933 and starring Charles Laughton, makes light of his marital record and situates him as an embodiment of the 'blunt Englishness' associated with 'Merrie England'.⁵⁵ The 1937 film *Fire Over England*, directed by William K. Howard and starring Flora Robson, exemplifies the alignment of Elizabeth I with Englishness and in turn with hostility

⁵² Susan Bordo, *The Creation of Anne Boleyn: In Search of the Tudors' Most Notorious Queen* (London: Oneworld, 2014), p.158.

⁵³ O'Day, *The Debate on The English Reformation*, p. 86.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁵⁵ *The Private Life of Henry VIII*, dir. by Alexander Korda (United Artists, 1933).

towards the continent – ‘I am England’, she proclaims. The film employs a recurring motif of fire to signal the threat of European contamination, an example of which can be seen in the foregrounding of the Spanish Inquisition who burn a high-ranking English captive. Elizabeth refers to ‘smoke drifting over England and the necessity of stopping it, of ‘fighting fire with fire’. Philip II of Spain is portrayed as both brutal and superstitious. The crucifix on his desk is a reminder of his association with the Inquisition and he proclaims that ‘only by fear can the people be made to do their duty’.⁵⁶ His tyranny is contrasted with Elizabeth’s service of her subjects (for example, she serves Lord Burleigh ‘good English broth’ and Burleigh later compares himself to the ‘upper servant in a house’). Spanish piety is contrasted with the buccaneering opportunism of the English with a pragmatic Elizabeth claiming profit from Drake’s (El Draco) theft of Spanish treasure: again, the sea is made a key component of nationhood. The smallness of England in comparison to Spanish might is emphasised, as is its freedom – ‘free England’ - and its people’s status as God’s chosen which is indicated by the fact that the film ends with a prayer.⁵⁷

In the mid-twentieth-century, historians debated the extent to which Henry VIII personally was responsible for the changes that took place during his reign. G. R. Elton assigns a much greater degree of agency to Cromwell: Cromwell, he suggests, was the architect of the Reformation, which was in itself the essence of independent national sovereignty. Henry himself was not personally involved and was exclusively focussed on his own interests.⁵⁸ This view was disputed by Joel Hurstfield who argued in 1973 that Henry was a despot aided by Cromwell’s work and that the people did *not* want the Reformation. The existence of no less than nine treason laws during his reign

⁵⁷ *Fire Over England*, dir. by William K. Howard (United Artists, 1937).

⁵⁸ O’Day, *The Debate on The English Reformation*, pp. 116-24.

is taken as evidence of this. Everything Henry did, in Hurstfield's view, was to secure his own despotic power.⁵⁹ Writing in 1984, J. J. Scarisbrick takes a similarly anti-Reformation and anti-Henrician stance. Recognising it as 'a supreme event in English history', he claims that 'on the whole, English men and women did not want the Reformation and most of them were slow to accept it when it came'.⁶⁰ Rejecting the 'basically Whiggish and ultimately Protestant view of things', Scarisbrick characterises the Reformation as a violent and traumatic rupture whereby 'thunderbolts arrived suddenly and out of a clear sky', meaning that 'society was required to cope with change on a scale and of an intensity which it had never before encountered'. Scarisbrick describes a state of 'topsy-turveydom' and the 'destruction and plunder in England of beautiful, sacred and irreplaceable things on a scale probably not witnessed before or since'.⁶¹ This experience of trauma is apparent in the work of Gregory and Sansom though the latter's work also details the everyday venality inherent to the pre-Reformation Church.

The best-known post-war portrayals of the Henrician court tend to focus on Henry VIII's psychological and emotional turbulence as manifested in his personal relationships. Thomas More and Anne Boleyn are especially prominent, with Boleyn undergoing a range of incarnations that largely link to their social and cultural contexts: particularly the growing liberalisation of attitudes towards family life and sexuality. In her account of the various constructions of Boleyn over time, Bordo shows that over the course of the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, Boleyn is variously portrayed as a naïve teenager, a scheming femme fatale and a tragic romantic heroine. She also notes that, during both the pre and post-war periods, significant depictions of Henry VIII

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-8.

⁶⁰ J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 82, 85.

consciously challenged the comedic notion of a monarch whose behaviour is reflective of a larger-than-life joviality and good humour: a perception that pre-dated Laughton's performance (it is evident, for example in Ford Maddox Ford's 1906 novel *The Fifth Queen*) but was so persuasively realised by him that many came to accept it as the "real" Henry. Referring specifically to the work of Francis Hackett – *Anne Boleyn* (1939) and *Henry the Eighth: The Personal History of a Dynast and His Six Wives* (1945) – along with that of Maxwell Anderson who wrote *Anne of the Thousand Days* (1948), Bordo notes that Henry VIII is portrayed as a tortured ruler, haunted by what he has done to his country.⁶²

These accounts of Henry VIII and the break from Rome link national decline and loss to the individual weakness and venality of the monarch. In their acknowledgment of the consequences for England, they anticipate the twenty-first-century narratives of national grievance analysed in this thesis, specifically those of Gregory and Sansom, but their perspective is that of the royal couple and the Reformation is largely a background issue: a consequence of the doomed infatuation that is at the forefront of the story. In this latter respect, Gregory, Sansom and Mantel also differ, in that they portray the Reformation as both cause and symptom of wider cultural change. Previous Tudor turns were also linked to their contemporary contexts. Charles Jarrott's 1969 film version of *Anne of the Thousand Days*, for example, concludes with a defiantly triumphant speech from the doomed Boleyn who predicts the future greatness of her daughter Elizabeth who 'shall rule a greater England than you could ever have built!'⁶³ Bordo regards this as an assertion of female empowerment in a climate of social liberalisation. The film was not well received by

⁶² Bordo, *The Creation of Anne Boleyn* p. 188.

⁶³ *Anne Of the Thousand Days*, dir. by Charles Jarrott (The Rank Organisation and Universal Pictures 1969).

critics, probably because, as Bordo notes, 1969 'was not a time to romanticize the privileged'. Despite this, Fred Zinnemann's 1966 film of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, whilst being 'actually much more reverential towards its subject', was acclaimed.⁶⁴ Bordo attributes this to the fact that increasingly liberalised 1960s audiences identified with his witty anti-establishmentarianism: ironic perhaps, given her claim that 'the real Thomas More, a ferocious heretic hunter, certainly was not'.⁶⁵

Early twenty-first-century portrayals of Henry VIII in film and television, for example in Showtime's *The Tudors*, which ran from 2007-10, have been marked by their revisionism. According to Bordo, the creator of *The Tudors*, Michael Hirst, intended to 'open up a fresh understanding of the Reformation, so often simply glorified as leading to the "golden age" of Elizabeth and Shakespeare. But in Hirst's view, it left deep "psychic wounds" in England'.⁶⁶ In its revisionist imaginary of the Reformation and its legacy of 'psychic wounds', *The Tudors* is thematically consistent with other twenty-first-century Henrician fiction. Hirst's evocation of national trauma signals an engagement with the troubled mood of the English imaginary that was its cultural backdrop, and aligns thematically with much of the literary work examined in this thesis.

The varied reception over time to the Tudors and their legacy illustrates one of the central principles of this thesis: certain narratives of the nation's past are both frequently revisited and contingent upon the imperatives of the present. Tudor England, particularly the Henrician period, has consistently occupied the foreground

⁶⁴ *A Man for All Seasons*, dir. by Fred Zinnemann (Columbia Pictures, 1966).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 193-4.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

of English cultural memory and as such, this most useable of pasts is a barometer of its evolving national identity.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter One, 'Fiction and Lamentation: The Melancholic Imaginary of Postcolonial England', offers a detailed examination of twenty-first century discourses of Englishness. It builds on the definitions above in relation to the key concepts of postcolonial melancholia, restorative nostalgia and national grievance. These are the notions that underpin the textual analysis that follows. The postcolonial dimension of English subjectivity is established, and the chapter identifies the connection of this to both a sense of national awakening and to attendant feelings of loss. The chapter identifies the Condition of England genre, outlining the typical concerns and characteristics of this type of text. It contends that scrutiny of such books provides illuminating insights into the current state of the national imaginary. Condition of England texts tend to be predicated on an understanding that there exists a national malaise and attempt to define a set of quintessential English characteristics. The genre spans the political spectrum, with Condition of England writers towards the left diagnosing the habits and traditions of a class-based, rural hierarchy as the cause of national deterioration. Those on the right conversely celebrate these legacies, whilst at the same time regarding them as being under attack from progressive forces and seeing their loss as precipitous to the nation's cultural disintegration. Common to all these texts is a narrative of decline and grievance. Significantly, the chapter establishes that this publication boom coincided with that of the Henrician novel and notes the thematic alignment of both types of text.

Whilst engaging with Condition of England writing from across the political spectrum, I analyse in detail three examples from the Tory-radical tradition that encapsulate the discourses of the nationalist, Eurosceptic right. These texts are Roger Scruton's *England: An Elegy* (2000), Paul Kingsnorth's *Real England: The Battle Against The Bland* (2008) and Peter Hitchens' *The Abolition of Britain* (2008).⁶⁷ Through an examination of these texts, I demonstrate the link between multiculturalism and its emerging discourses of entitlement, with their assertions of cultural victimhood, and with their contention that English distinctiveness is being suppressed. What also emerges from the analysis is the contraction of the nation's psycho-geography and a renewed sense of England as a place. This postcolonial spatiality combined with diminished international status, is likely to have contributed to Euroscepticism and a resentment of immigration. In the post-war settlement, the Tory Condition of England writers discern an end to Whiggish positivism. They regard this gradualism as having been integral to an essentialist and exceptional Englishness that, until now, has not required overt articulations of national character, or an understanding of history as social and institutional change. Their lamentation of what has been lost is reflected in the concurrent depictions of Henrician disruption analysed in subsequent chapters. Accordingly, I argue that both types of text function as vehicles to articulate, or (as in the case of Mantel) invalidate, postcolonial melancholia. Though I recognise the emancipatory potential of nationalism *per se*, I set out to establish the specifics of the Brexit-era English imaginary, which locates the nation in class distinction, whiteness, a rural aesthetic, and illiberal values.

⁶⁷ Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), Paul Kingsnorth, *Real England: The Battle Against The Bland* (London: Portobello Books, 2008) Kindle ebook and Peter Hitchens, *The Abolition Of Britain: From Winston Churchill to Princess Diana*, 2nd edn (London: Continuum Books, 2008).

Chapter Two, 'Narratives of National Grievance: The Spoiled England of Philippa Gregory's *The King's Curse* and *The Taming of the Queen*', turns to Gregory's popular historical fiction, focussing specifically on her re-imaginings of the life of Margaret Pole in *The King's Curse* (2014), and Henry VIII's sixth wife, Kateryn [sic] Parr in *The Taming of the Queen* (2015).⁶⁸ Through close analysis of these texts, I argue that the dominant themes of Gregory's work have much in common with those of the Condition of England writers. Gregory's protagonists articulate a similar perception of loss and cultural disintegration, which they attribute in large part to an assault on class privilege and the meritocratic rise of modernising men 'from nowhere' like Wolsey, Cromwell and Wriothesley, who disrupt the feudal hierarchy that has benefitted the older ruling families.⁶⁹ The novels employ an immersive first-person narrative technique whose dialogic voice appeals to the reader's aspirational imagination by implied ascription of aristocratic status: the reader is assumed to be the royal protagonist's social equal. This position makes the reader feel complicit in feudal values and assumptions: in particular, the conferring of what Gilroy terms 'infrahumanity', whereby differential levels of personal value are accorded on the basis of class or ethnicity.⁷⁰ The reader's participation in this self-absorbed perspective is reinforced by a succession of paratexts that frame the novels' narrative and spatiality in ways that deny plurality.

I go on to argue that Gregory's Tudors are portrayed as invading usurpers who have come from the Continent to snatch a throne that doesn't belong to them and, in so doing, have contaminated English land and materiality with their presence. Whilst

⁶⁸ Philippa Gregory, *The King's Curse* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014) and Philippa Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

⁶⁹ For example, see Gregory, *The King's Curse* p. 260.

⁷⁰ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 10.

Plantagenet England is depicted as a prelapsarian idyll, the Tudor realm is haunted by division and disease. Henry VIII is reimagined as a gothic figure who is excessive, unstable and cruel. In *The King's Curse*, his emotional and mental capriciousness is shown to accelerate throughout his reign and is exacerbated by his reliance on the new men. In *The Taming of the Queen*, he is increasingly monstrous. The disintegration of England is linked to a rotting royal body, whose disease emanates from his ulcerated leg. There are graphic descriptions of his medical and sexual incapacity that associate him with unnaturalness and a culture of excess. Like the Condition of England writers, Gregory intersects aristocratic identity with that of England's geography and elevates the rural. Conversely, the Tudors are shown to be fatally disconnected from this land and its traditions, thus precipitating its ruination. Overall, Gregory's narratives normalise a perception of long-standing national disintegration and discontent. They associate pluralism and social mobility with society's fracture, implying that advancement in society is usually gained at somebody else's expense, that those moving upwards are generally determined to steal the privileges of others and that outsiders generally constitute an encroachment on an idealised space. Furthermore, they imply that the past is usually better than the present, that history's progress amounts to loss, and that only past and place can confer personal identity and authenticity. In Gregory's Henrician world, identity is always under attack.

Chapter Three examines the first two novels of C.J. Sansom's Shardlake series: *Dissolution* (2003) and *Dark Fire* (2004).⁷¹ Its title is "Built on an edifice of lies and monstrous brutality": C.J. Sansom's Historical Detective Fiction and the "Wicked

⁷¹ C.J. Sansom, *Dissolution* (London : Pan MacMillan, 2003) and C.J. Sansom, *Dark Fire* (London: Pan MacMillan, 2004).

World” of Reformation England’. The chapter establishes that Sansom’s work shares the melancholy of Gregory and the Condition of England writers, depicting a Reformation world of cruelty, chaos, corruption, upheaval and cultural loss. However, the original aims of the reformers are viewed favourably and associated with enlightenment, emancipation and modernity. This underlying integrity is demonstrated by the protagonist, Shardlake, a lawyer and detective who solves cases of murder which invariably turn out to be linked to the social deterioration of the age. He himself is both a proponent and product of Henrician reform who has advanced socially. Initially an enthusiast, he becomes increasingly sensitised to the associated damage. The chapter applies Nora’s ideas about cultural memory to its analysis of the novels, and suggests that the abbeys and monasteries, whose rapid demolition is a constant backdrop to the plot, represent those *milieu de memoirés* that embody the transformation of a remembered past into history. As both detective and lawyer, Shardlake articulates the urgency of re-capturing a receding past in order to solve the problems of the present, as well as being a representative of modernity’s values. In his progressive and rational world view, he can be seen, in some sense, as a time traveller who transmits an impression of an alienating past through twenty-first-century eyes. Sansom’s novels are set outside the parameters of the royal court and are concerned less with royal narrative, and more with the impact of court politics on the general population. In interviews and in the ‘Historical Note’ at the end of *Dissolution*, he discloses his alignment with the anti-Whig counter-narrative that, far from being embraced, the Reformation was imposed from above on ordinary people, and the texts depict the suffering that this entails.⁷² In this respect, Sansom’s work, like Gregory’s contributes to discourses of England’s national decline.

⁷² C. J. Sansom, *Dissolution* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003) pp. 442-3.

My analysis demonstrates that spatially, Sansom's novels portray a country that is falling apart and rotting away. Shardlake's world is one of topographical instability, of encroaching marshlands, receding coasts, polluted rivers, waste-strewn streets and ground on which human body parts are left to decay in public view. Neglected buildings lean, tilt and subside whilst once awe-inspiring ecclesiastical architecture is transformed into mismanaged slum dwellings. Sansom's cityscapes are populated with chaotic, disorderly crowds in which vulnerable individuals are frequently subjected to casual brutality. This retro-dystopia is contrasted with the harmony of the monastic life which is being rapidly obliterated. Profit is shown to be a driving force of change and the intended illumination and progressiveness of the Reformation has instead engendered an ignorance and greed which is at least partially associated with the rise of the new man. The chapter argues that, in all these respects, Sansom's work ultimately reflects the conservative hostility to change and disillusionment with progressive politics that characterised the pre-Brexit era.

Chapter Four considers the first two Henrician novels of Hilary Mantel. Entitled "The glass of truth has shattered": Past, Nation and Meaning in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies*', it reads these novels as postmodern meta-narratives and as companion pieces, demonstrating the ways in which Mantel refuses the certainties, the idea of a single unified truth, on which national construction rests.⁷³ Whilst conservative writers such as Scruton and Hitchens promote the role of culture (and particularly literature) in transmitting supposedly lasting national values across time, Mantel's work disrupts the imaginary of an enduring England and unchanging past. I argue that through two narratives of Cromwell and the iconic Henrician world

⁷³ Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009) and Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012).

that retain chronology whilst simultaneously re-writing each other, Mantel shows cultural memory to be contingent upon the present, with the changing nature of contemporaneity resulting in shape-shifting identities. This notion is supported by her presentation of a turbulent spatiality and emphasis on the instability of textual meaning. In this respect, the novels are shown conclusively to negate the nostalgic basis of nationalist grievances and desires, suggesting that history and geography are in constant motion. At the same time, her meta-narratives highlight the appeal of *fictive* nationhood and history's role in imparting meaning to the present, with those who control cultural memory able to define identity and rationalise structures of dominance. The chapter argues that, through its self-revision, and a complex narrative technique that, among other things, highlights the expedient performativity of self, Mantel's work unpicks the process of re-working the 'wreckage' of the past to confront the emptiness and opportunism at the heart of national construction.⁷⁴

Finally, in my conclusion, I argue that working through these different imaginaries of the Henrician past affords an insight into the nature of English identity in the years leading to the 2016 referendum. All four chapters are aligned in the sense that they analyse the presentation of English society and English space. The texts differ from one another in terms of genre and possibly, anticipated audience, but the basic historical content around which their narratives are shaped is the same. I would contend that, despite the differing perceptions and status accorded to them in the public sphere, all the texts are equally deserving of close examination and afford important insights into English cultural memory and its role in shaping pre-Brexit nationhood. Gregory's resentful narratives of supplanted dynastic status and a contaminated society reflect the affronted and melancholic discourses of the right and

⁷⁴ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012) p. 399.

the experience of downward mobility encountered by many in the post-Thatcher era. Sansom's work evokes a similar melancholia but links it to the cynicism and sense of corrupted ideals often contemporaneously associated with the New Labour government. Both convey the notion of a country that is not itself anymore, whose structures and institutions have been over-turned, of things having gone terribly wrong. In their self-revision and unpicking of the historicising process, Mantel's narratives enact the theories through which historical fiction in general might be approached. Whilst I show that historical fiction, in imagining the nation's past, might contribute to its identity, Mantel's Henrician novels suggest that nation and identity themselves are figments of fantasy and in so doing, highlight the essential inauthenticity of selfhood, awareness of which underpins English grievance.

Chapter One

Fiction and Lamentation: The Melancholic Imaginary of Postcolonial England

Introduction

As indicated in the introduction, this thesis reads historical novels set in the world of Henry VIII in dialogue with the debates surrounding Englishness in the period leading to the EU Referendum (from around the end of the 1990s to 2016). In order to establish my critical approach, this first chapter investigates key elements of the national self-image and its associated anxieties: elements that become increasingly apparent when viewed from a post-2016 perspective. In order to evaluate the specific contribution to national subjectivity made by contemporary representations of the Henrician world, this assessment of the national picture was preceded in the introduction by an outline of the differing ways in which the English past was being experienced and understood prior to the EU referendum. It will be followed in this chapter by a discussion of how these factors might have contributed to a pre-Brexit imaginary of the nation predicated on a sense of grievance, loss and nostalgia. In acknowledgement of Patrick Parrinder's contention that the English novel affords important insights into English nationhood, an evaluation of the continuing significance of the Tudor past within English cultural memory is integrated throughout, alongside a consideration of how England's shifting sense of nationhood might account for the burgeoning popularity of Henry VIII's court as a setting for fiction written in the early decades of the twenty-first century.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Patrick Parrinder, *Nation and Novel: The English Novel From Its Origins To The Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) p. 6.

Nation & Memory

The chapter takes as its starting point Benedict Anderson's theory of nation as an 'imagined community' in which collective identity is constructed, at least partly, through shared perceptions of the past and a sense of awakening to lost glory. This emphasis on the constructivist role of cultural memory has met with broad and sustained acceptance among scholars, many of whom are also conscious of the growing significance of identity in the contemporary political landscape. Beverley Southgate, for example, writing in 2009, points out that it 'has become a truism, a platitude of contemporary life, that history underpins identity' and that 'there is wide agreement that we cannot know who or what we are without some awareness of our pasts'. Noting that this is the case at both individual level 'and for communities, nation-states (and their constituents)', he observes that 'for the latter, self-interested appeals to justificatory histories grow by the day'.⁷⁶

The limits to which Anderson's work, published in 1983 and emerging from its own specific historical/national conditions, can be applied to the contemporary English context require acknowledgement. In the introduction to the 2006 revised edition of *Imagined Communities*, Anderson himself expresses recognition that the book was a 'period piece'. In 'having traced the nationalist explosions that destroyed the vast polyglot and polyethnic realms which were ruled from Vienna, London, Constantinople, Paris and Madrid', Anderson's work largely focusses on the emergence of national feeling within societies that were colonised.⁷⁷ England, conversely, is a former colonial power but, despite this, it is apparent that there is a postcolonial dimension to its

⁷⁶ Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2009) p. 126.

⁷⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edn (London: Verso, 2016) pp. xi-xii.

contemporary subjectivity as its national imaginary detaches from empire and, in the wake of devolution and growing Scottish nationalism, becomes distinct from the larger concept of Britain in which it has been subsumed. The diminishing scope of its territorial consciousness and influence means that England's self-image and psycho-geography is transitioning from expansive empire to intact island. Unlike the nations of Anderson's study, however, in coming to see itself as a distinct place and people, post-2000 England seems to be awakening not to a long-buried greatness within, but rather to an overwhelming sense of loss.

It seems likely that this loss is associated to a considerable extent with the increasing pluralism of British society, together with the partial democratisation of systemic privilege that has followed World War II and the dismantling of Empire. As the post-war and post-imperial period has seen Englishness become territorially defined, its colonial legacy has, in turn, become an increasingly material reality through what could be seen as a reverse colonisation of the former homeland. Writing in 2005, Paul Gilroy points out that the multiculturalism associated with the immigration of citizens from the old imperial territories has helped to engender a sense of change, and in some quarters, a sense of cultural loss. In addition, demands for reparation in relation to colonial atrocities such as Caribbean slavery, or more recently, discussion of systemic brutality in 1950s Kenya, has compelled an awareness of the guilt and culpability attached to the forceful acquisition and retention of power.⁷⁸ This heightened consciousness of the price paid by others for English supremacy has led in turn to demands in some quarters for the decolonisation of England's culture and curriculum: demands which are contested by some on the political Right and which have contributed to a melancholic resentment of what the Conservative writer, Roger

⁷⁸ Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

Scruton termed in 2000, the 'forbidding of England'.⁷⁹ Such national grievances have been further exacerbated by the United Kingdom's integration with the rest of Europe and, indeed, seem to have found their expression in Euro-Scepticism. Increased contact with the Continent, though welcomed by some, has for others deepened anxieties around identity and furthered the sense that England has undergone what another right-wing commentator, Peter Hitchens called in 1999, a 'cultural revolution'.⁸⁰ With these issues in mind, a second theoretical text, Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* (2005), informs this analysis of contemporary English consciousness.

Since the 2016 referendum, attempts to gain insight into the nature of English identity and culture have proliferated. Though a number of scholars and commentators, including Gilroy, were engaging with the phenomenon of rising English nationalism prior to this event, it has become subject to more urgent and more mainstream critique. Much of this has concluded that, along with renewed veneration of the country as a distinctive place and landscape (described by Gilroy as 'geopieté'),⁸¹ English nationalist feeling is widely associated with the rejection of globalisation, multinational markets and social liberalism.⁸² In addition to the theories of Anderson and Gilroy, this chapter therefore draws on more recent work published both before and since the 2016 referendum. Such critiques include Michael Gardiner's *The Constitution of English Literature* (2014), Krishan Kumar's *The Idea of Englishness* (2015), Stephen Haseler's *England Alone* (2017), and Stefan Collini's *The Nostalgic Imagination* (2019). It also engages with Svetlana Boym's notion of

⁷⁹ Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, 3rd edn (London, Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 244.

⁸⁰ Peter Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain: From Winston Churchill to Princess Diana* (London: Continuum Books, 2008), p. 314.

⁸¹ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 114.

⁸² David Goodhart, *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics* (London: Hurst & Company, 2017), p. 52.

'restorative nostalgia'.⁸³ The democratising potential of nationalism is recognised and Boym herself acknowledges the 'emancipatory possibilities' of re-inventing validatory traditions.⁸⁴ As Craig Calhoun asserts, nationalism has proved in many cases to be 'the greatest success that ordinary people have had in catching up to capital and power' and is under-pinned by a 'forward-looking' practice where 'traditions must be reconstructed – sometimes purified and sometimes enhanced – whether this is explicitly announced or not'.⁸⁵ Boym nevertheless argues that restorative nostalgia 'can also be politically manipulated through newly created practices of national commemoration with the aim of re-establishing social cohesion, a sense of security, and an obedient relationship to authority'.⁸⁶ This chapter aims to demonstrate that the restorative nostalgia of the Brexit era, as a crucial driver of what Cairns Craig calls the 'intended nation', has sought to re-inscribe Englishness as white, rural and reactionary.⁸⁷

Condition of England Writing and The Tudor Turn

Writing in 2005, Gilroy finds the 'aching loss' of England's 'postmodern nationalism' to be characterised by a longing for 'restoration of the country's long-vanished homogeneity' and 'the unchallenging moral architecture of a Manichaeian world'.⁸⁸

⁸³ Michael Gardiner, *The Constitution of English Literature: The State, the Nation, and the Canon* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), Krishan Kumar, *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), Stephen Haseler, *England Alone: Brexit and the Crisis of English Identity* (London, Forum Press, 2017), Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019) and Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and its Discontents' in *The Hedgehog Review*, (2007), pp. 9-18.

⁸⁴ Boym, 'Nostalgia and its Discontents', p. 14.

⁸⁵ Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History and the Cosmopolitan Dream* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), Kindle ebook pp. 493,551.

⁸⁶ Boym, 'Nostalgia and its Discontents', p. 14.

⁸⁷ See Cairns Craig, *Intending Scotland: Explorations In Scottish Culture Since The Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

⁸⁸ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 88.

Significantly, he notes that the ‘cultural disorientation that accompanies the collapse of imperial certainties into postcolonial nihilism’ was answered in one way by ‘a publishing bonanza dominated by books that either seek to diagnose or remedy the national pathology’ and that this was ‘a huge phenomenon’.⁸⁹ Such texts belong to what Collini has termed ‘Condition of England writing’, a genre he traces back to the nineteenth-century when writers such as ‘Cobbett, Carlyle and Ruskin identified unprecedented change, which appeared to threaten a whole way of life’.⁹⁰ As Collini has more recently observed, since the 1820s there has been an English tradition of social criticism that opposes the mainstream Whig narrative of progress and focusses instead on the negative, even traumatic, impact of historical change. Originally associated with the Anglo-Catholic Tractarian movement (one that sought to rediscover ancient English rites, rituals and worship practices), this ‘Tory-Radical critique of English society’ rejected the triumphant continuity between past and present and instead, offered narratives of decline.⁹¹ Quoting J.W. Burrow, Collini asserts that:

‘...The Tory-Radical critique of English society, as it had developed from the 1820s onwards, was essentially based on a primitive social history of England’. That is to say, by shifting the focus from constitutional or religious matters to ‘the condition of the people’, a far less rosy picture could be painted, taking in the destruction of the monasteries, the dispossession of the small farmer, and the degraded living and working conditions of the machine age.⁹²

On examining the work of contemporary Condition of England writers, it becomes apparent that they are inheritors of this critical tradition and, indeed, see themselves

⁸⁹ Ibid, pp. 113-4.

⁹⁰ Stefan Collini, ‘Hegel in Green Wellies’, *London Review Of Books*, 5, 23 (2001) <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v23/n05/stefan-collini/hegel-in-green-wellies>> [accessed 27 October 2020]

⁹¹ J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) p. 240, quoted in Stefan Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination: History in English Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), Kindle ebook, p. 3.

⁹² Collini, *The Nostalgic Imagination*, p. 3.

as such. Paul Kingsnorth for example, whose book *Real England: The Battle Against The Bland* (2008) is the source of the infamous phrase ‘citizens of nowhere’,⁹³ explicitly acknowledges this legacy of complaint:

For better or for worse, people like me have been around for centuries [...] If I look over my shoulder I can see them all lining up to intimidate me: William Cobbett; Clough Williams-Ellis; Ian Nairn; J.B. Priestley; George Orwell. Angry, every one, at the same process which now angers me.

These were writers who, in their day, railed too against the plastic world that was ruining what they valued, against the rape of the landscape, the primacy of the market, the power of thoughtless ‘developers’, the unholy alliance of big business and big government that was chewing up people and places.⁹⁴

In his 2001 review, Collini highlights the role played by Condition of England writing in defining and delineating Englishness, declaring that the genre:

has become increasingly self-conscious and prone to advertise its literary affiliations. It’s a style of writing that lays claim to a certain dignity: it aspires to rise above journalistic opportunism in order to delineate enduring characteristics. Where it once spoke of ‘national character’, it now, less psychologically but no less prescriptively, speaks of ‘national identity’.⁹⁵

Critical analysis of three examples of such texts – Hitchens’ *The Abolition of Britain* (1999), Scruton’s *England: An Elegy* (2000), and Kingsnorth’s *Real England* (2008) – reveals a shared ‘narrative of decline’ that rests on an idealised imaginary of a lost past but struggles ‘to pin down where exactly things went wrong’.⁹⁶

Concurrently, a second ‘publishing bonanza’ occurred around the turn of the century, in the years spanning New Labour government, European integration and the

⁹³ Paul Kingsnorth, *Real England: The Battle Against The Bland* (London: Portobello Books, 2008) Kindle ebook, p. 1.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 263-4.

⁹⁵ Collini, ‘Hegel In Green Wellies’, para 2 of 34.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

increasing liberalisation (both social and economic) of British institutions: that of historical novels set in the England of Henry VIII. Significantly, at one point in *England: An Elegy*, Scruton hints at the Reformation as an origin of England's wrongs and like the 'Condition of England writing', these novels are reflective of an accelerated re-thinking of English identity and its malaise.⁹⁷ This emerges through narratives of Tudor England which situate it as a similar period of rapid change and cultural displacement. The novels are concerned with loss, the impossibility of recovering the past, the rise of the new man, social transformation and its associated traumas. The work examined in this thesis ranges in approach from that of Philippa Gregory, who uses historical fiction to mask the act of re-imagination, to that of Hilary Mantel who foregrounds the process of re-telling: presciently in view of the post-truth landscape that began to emerge in the years following publication of her first two Thomas Cromwell novels. In between are the texts of C. J. Sansom, who blends historical fiction with the detective genre in a way that foregrounds the work of the historian in solving mysteries, establishing irrefutable facts, and in so doing providing apparently definitive answers to current dilemmas: certainties affirmed by Gregory's immersive first-person narratives and refused by Mantel's postmodern historiography. I aim to demonstrate that contemporary 'Condition of England' writing, infused as it is with the discourses of grievance and lamentation widely identified with the Brexit vote, is thematically aligned with the portrayals of Henrician England explored in this thesis' subsequent chapters and that within the genre of historical fiction, the Reformation has served as a vehicle to articulate contemporary anxieties and discontents around cultural displacement and indeterminacy of identity. In his review of *England: An Elegy*, Collini suggests that Scruton's work 'prevent[s] people gaining a proper understanding of the

⁹⁷ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, pp. 213-4.

relation of their society to its past' and observes presciently that, at the time of writing – 2001 – 'Philosophical Toryism' is 'the new chic'.⁹⁸ In its resonance with the preoccupations of conservatism, I suggest that this makes the Tudor Turn a fellow contributor to the cultural and political discourses which were in evidence prior to the 2016 referendum result.

Cultural Memory and The Displacement Of The Whiggish Narrative

Narratives of the past are crucial to shaping the 'intended nation'. As indicated in the introduction, critics such as Cairns Craig and Kirsti Bohata, writing about Scotland and Wales respectively, have identified the role played by 'useable pasts' in the construction (or re-construction) of national identities and Southgate draws attention to the fact that 'national leaders, as they witness accelerating political fragmentation, look to the past in their search for shared values that they hope will serve as inspiring models for future integration'.⁹⁹ As he remarks, however, identities are not 'static entities that persist through history and through individual lifespans' but are 'our own social and personal, and *provisional* [sic], constructions'.¹⁰⁰ Thus, as national identities are re-shaped by contemporary circumstances, shared imaginaries of the past also change. Southgate asserts that whilst historical narratives may be used to justify the actions and institutions of the present, this reveals them to be 'an arbitrary construction, shot through with choice and contingency, and, for all the claims to the contrary, a blend of evidentially based 'facts' and imaginative 'fictions'.¹⁰¹ These

⁹⁸ Collini, 'Hegel in Green Wellies', para 24 of 34

⁹⁹ Kirsti Bohata, *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2004), pp. 14-5.

¹⁰⁰ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, p. 127.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid* pp. 149-50.

useable pasts are justificatory or confirmatory ones that consolidate existing power. They are largely narratives that chart the ‘teleological development’ towards ‘some predefined end’, offering reassurance about the present and optimism about the future.¹⁰² Mainstream accounts of the English nation have tended to reinforce a triumphant sense of national exceptionalism and, as Gardiner observes, have derived from what is commonly termed a ‘Whiggish’ notion of incremental, evolutionary progress: a positivist process of gradual adaptation rather than historical turning points. Such a narrative promotes the sense of a stable identity which is linked to pride and contentment. For Gardiner, Whiggish England is manifested in its literature through ‘the persistence of realism, the positivist insistence on an intuitive understanding of things as they always are, should be, and have been’.¹⁰³ He regards the Whiggish understanding of England to be ‘ahistorical’, whereby the ‘absolute certainty’ of the British constitution can be seen as ‘a realism joining up silent coups through an excision of the present which insists that no action is taking place’. Constitutional authority, he argues, ‘relies on the avoidance of the visible crash, and of any registration of any sovereignty based on personal experience’.¹⁰⁴ Taking a similar viewpoint, David Marquand complains of Britain’s ‘incurious “presentism”’, of a national culture in which history ‘no longer counts’ and ‘life started yesterday, or at the very most the day before yesterday’.¹⁰⁵

The gradualist progress narrative is largely associated with the United Kingdom and the intended construction of a *British* rather than specifically English identity. It is possible to regard the latter as having been fatally suppressed by the creation of this

¹⁰² Ibid, p. 151.

¹⁰³ Michael Gardiner, *The Constitution of English Literature*, p. 14.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 17.

¹⁰⁵ David Marquand, *Mammon’s Kingdom: An Essay on Britain, Now* (London: Penguin, 2014) Kindle ebook, p. 65.

multi-national state: for example, Kumar asks, ‘Were the English, the original creators of the United Kingdom, also in some sense, and in some measure, its victims?’¹⁰⁶ An understanding ‘that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it has a direct effect upon the life of every individual’ is associated with the type of national consciousness that arose in other European countries during the nineteenth-century. As noted by the seminal theorist of the genre Georg Lukács, the historical novel arose around the time of Napoleon’s collapse and during the period when the people of continental territories, emerging from ‘more upheavals than they had previously experienced in centuries’, underwent ‘the awakening of national sensibility and with it a feeling and understanding for national history’. Historical narratives in this context charted points of ‘collision’, of ‘parting-of-the-ways’ and “calling to account”: they were about points of trauma and disruption and the historical novel depicted the impact on individuals’ lives.¹⁰⁷ I suggest that the turn to the Henrician past within twenty-first century historical fiction is symptomatic of a shift towards an oppositional and distinctively English historical narrative signifying a process of nation-building that has much in common with those of the nineteenth-century continental nations. I suggest, however, that the emerging subjectivity largely contradicts the progressive vision of many other nationalisms which, according to Craig Calhoun, ‘provides a rhetoric for demanding equity and growth’ and has ‘underwritten most successful projects of economic redistribution’.¹⁰⁸

As exemplified by the Condition of England texts with which this chapter engages, in opposition to Whiggish triumphalism, there has long been a mournful

¹⁰⁶ Kumar, *The Idea Of Englishness*, p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962) p. 23. Ibid. Ibid. p. 25. and Ibid. pp. 100-1.

¹⁰⁸ Craig Calhoun, *Nations Matter: Culture, History And The Cosmopolitan Dream* (Abingdon: Routledge 2007), Kindle ebook, loc. 484-8.

counter-narrative of the English nation. Southgate acknowledges that an opposite to the justificatory history is also possible, and that:

From an alternative standpoint, doom-laden histories could (and sometimes did, and do) chart a steady decline, whether in terms of 'culture' (however defined) or human sociability or some other yardstick by which their authors are impressed, But dentistry usually gains the day, with few wishing to venture, even imaginatively, for their treatments back in time.¹⁰⁹

As previously stated, my contention is that 'doom-laden histories' from both the conservative 'Condition of England' writers and those of the Tudor turn flourished in the years prior to the 2016 referendum, as English national consciousness adjusted to a postcolonial future. I argue that these counter-histories were as useable as their Whiggish counter-part had previously been and played a justificatory role in constructing a new English identity that opposed supra-nationalism, social and (some aspects of) economic liberalism and, at a more mundane level, the politics of New Labour. Ultimately, I would suggest that the discourse of national grievance to which they contributed may have helped to justify the subsequent political shift to the right and to the socio-cultural divisions that emerged in the Brexit era.

There have been other useable pasts in recent decades. Against a 1990s backdrop of conservative political rhetoric calling for a return to Victorian values, a reaction to the growing social liberalism of the time, the meta-historical neo-Victorian novel enjoyed prominence. These texts tended to foreground marginalised histories and deconstruct the sanitised imaginary of this highly politicised era in order to unpack Victorian England's legacy of trauma and repression. In the twenty-first century, they have been succeeded by historical fiction which centres on myths of national origin: the War of the Roses, the Anglo-Saxons and Roman Britain have enjoyed popularity,

¹⁰⁹ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, p. 443.

whilst the Second World War remains a lasting preoccupation. These pasts, which have flourished alongside the Tudor turn, are undoubtedly significant contributors to contemporary constructions of English nationhood. Given the particular prominence of its iconography in the national self-image, there will be some consideration of World War II's significance below, but it is beyond the remit of this thesis to explore these other imaginaries. It is also recognised that imagined pasts are used to validate other forms of identity besides that of the national. Sarah Waters' novels, for example, foreground lesbian experience and Gregory, in common with many other female authors of historical fiction, sets out to reprise the stories of women. Nevertheless, this particular project's aim is to determine the role of the fictional Henrician world as a useable past in the construction of contemporary Englishness.

English nostalgia engages repeatedly with a mere handful of periods and the prevalence of the Tudors and the World Wars (periods of tyranny, persecution and conflict with the rest of Europe) has persisted. These periods represent turning points in the English past. They are moments of historical caesura destined to be followed by trauma, disruption and the loss of established certainties. In particular they are associated with cultural upheaval: the Henrician Reformation is linked to the rise of upstarts such as Wolsey and Cromwell. The promotion, on the basis of ability, of technocratic functionaries from lower levels of the social order appears to have supplanted to some degree the established authority derived from inheritance and tradition. The connection between bloodline and entitlement is an intersectional marker of identity which, in addition to class, spans race, gender and nation, thus

allowing the 'new men' to stand as proxy for the articulation of a range of contemporary resentments.¹¹⁰

The post-war period is similarly linked to the loss of imperial authority and the transition to social diversity. In relation to World War II, Gilroy notes 'that there is something neurotic about Britain's continued citation of the anti-Nazi war' and argues that:

making it a privileged point of entry into national identity and self-understanding reveals a desire to find a way back to the point where the national culture – operating on a more manageable scale of community and social life – was, irrespective of the suffering involved in the conflict, both comprehensible and habitable.¹¹¹

Gilroy suggests that the binaries offered by World War II mythology have transmuted into an 'ethnic myth' which can be 'understood as a rejection or deferral of its present problems'. Britain (England) has a 'need to get back to the place or moment before the country lost its moral and cultural bearings' and:

Neither the appeal of homogeneity nor the antipathy toward immigrants and strangers who represent the involution of national culture can be separated from that underlying hunger for reorientation. Turning back in this direction is also a turning away from the perceived dangers of pluralism and from the irreversible fact of multiculturalism.¹¹²

It is this antipathy to otherness and the accompanying perception of stolen privilege that Gilroy identifies as the root of England's 'postcolonial melancholia'. I suggest that narratives of the Henrician world offer a similar opportunity to that of World War II to 'get back to the place or moment' of loss and, crucially to express the mourning

¹¹⁰ C.J. Sansom, 'Historical Note' in *Dissolution* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003) p. 443.

¹¹¹ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 89.

¹¹² *Ibid*, pp. 89-90.

associated with cultural change. The Tudor texts read in this thesis employ a similarly experiential and empathic approach through the employment of first-person present-tense narratives. The sense created, of something like a live unfolding of events, simultaneously presents and denies alternatives (Margaret Pole might survive, the monasteries might not be destroyed) to documented history. As such, it also offers an alternative present which is decoupled from the fatal turning points of the past. The re-living of history and contemplation of other possibilities, coupled with an underlying understanding of what must inevitably come to pass, helps to underpin the national imaginary with a sense of destiny and imparts a realist narrative to English history.

The legacy of the Reformation, which originated, and was perhaps most dramatically enacted, in Henry VIII's reign has been contested over the subsequent centuries and, as Rosemary O'Day shows, the nature of English national identity tends to be inflected by how it is perceived. Its associated social and political transformations are widely acknowledged to have been pivotal in shaping the English nation-state. It remains a subject of contemporary debate and perspectives differ according to ideological stance. For the Protestant historian, Alec Ryrie, for example, it is 'one of the engines driving modern history': responsible for the notions of limited government and freedom of the individual. He asserts that the socio-political structure of Protestantism, founded as it is on principles of liberty and consensus, is favourably disposed towards market economics.¹¹³ Liah Greenfield is similarly approving and identifies the English Reformation as the origin of all modern nationalisms and the principle of individualism.¹¹⁴ On the other hand, as indicated in the introduction, those

¹¹³ Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals Who Made The Modern World* (London: HarperCollins, 2017), Kindle ebook, p. 4.

¹¹⁴ Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads To Modernity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 30-1.

such as J.J. Scarisbrick, writing in the Thatcherite 1980s, regard it as an imposition.¹¹⁵ Rejecting the 'basically Whiggish and ultimately Protestant view of things', Scarisbrick characterises the Reformation as a national trauma and points to the 'destruction and plunder in England of beautiful, sacred and irreplaceable things on a scale probably not witnessed before or since'.¹¹⁶ Such divergent interpretations are indicative of the conflicting ways in which England and its legacy is understood.

Patrick J. Geary has defined what he regards as the 'typical process' of national construction which includes the necessity of a sense of subjugation. He identifies 'three stages in the creation of 'these imagined communities'. For him:

They include, first, the study of the language, culture, and history of a subject people by a small group of 'awakened' individuals; second, the transmission of the scholars' ideas by a group of 'patriots' who disseminate them throughout society; and finally, the stage at which the national movement reaches its mass apogee.¹¹⁷

Out of an ahistorical preoccupation with the past has emerged a discourse of national discontent that can be seen in both mournful Condition of England books and the Tudor historical fiction that appeared alongside them. From the following analysis of contemporary Tory-Radical Condition of England writing, three aspects of the construction of English cultural memory emerge: a sense that the spirit of England lies in its rural landscape, a resentful perception of stolen privilege that is ultimately connected to postcolonialism, and an understanding that the nation's best moments lie behind it.

¹¹⁵ J.J. Scarisbrick, *The Reformation and the English People* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), p. 1.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 85.

¹¹⁷ Patrick J. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Woodstock: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 17-18.

Condition of England Writing: The Nationalism of Place

Contemporary Condition of England writing is not solely confined to the politics of the Right and can be roughly grouped as two types of imaginary: the reactionary and the progressive. Both, in their ways, are resentful and melancholic, articulating feelings of loss and grievance and are in dialogue with each other. In *England: An Elegy*, Scruton describes being taught at school about England as a place of duty, 'quiet cooperation' and 'service'. This view, he claims, was contradicted 'in later years' by 'books of history and social criticism written by people of my parents' generation'.¹¹⁸ As he 'listened for the last breath of England amid the clamour of voices which denounced her', he claims to have concluded that the prevailing view was that:

England was not the free, harmonious, law-abiding community celebrated in boys' magazines, but a place of class divisions, jingoism and racial intolerance. Look behind every institution and every ideal, I read, and you find the same sordid reality: a self-perpetuating upper class and a people hoodwinked by imperial delusions into accepting their dominion.¹¹⁹

Writers of this persuasion who are cited by Scruton include Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Perry Anderson, who 'dismissed English culture as a sham, fabricated by a wave of 'white emigrés,' and, 'from the Celtic fringe', Tom Nairn 'who expressed the old grievance against the English in an updated Marxian idiolect'.¹²⁰ Since publication of *England: An Elegy*, it would be possible to imagine that this body of thinkers might be extended to include Gilroy and Gardiner, and, since the 2016 referendum, a considerable number of others such as Stephen Haseler, whose perspective helps to inform what follows. In many respects, Scruton's account can be regarded as an

¹¹⁸ Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), pp. 20-1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 21.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

accurate summary of their progressive critique of Englishness in the pre-Brexit period. As has already been demonstrated, writers such as Nairn, and later Gilroy, expressed frustration at postcolonial England's stasis, melancholy, inequality, imperialist instincts, sense of exceptionalism and embedded racism. Discussion of the liberal, leftist view is therefore also included as a counterpoint to the reactionary depiction of England's past and present.

The 'self-image' promoted by what Haseler describes as 'a powerful combination of aristocracy and literati' that has 'defined Englishness in terms of its own narrow reality' is constructed in the polemics of Scruton, Hitchens and Kingsnorth through representations of English space and society that are infused with a sense of victimhood and, in keeping with realist convention, portents of impending destruction.¹²¹ The objectives identified at the opening of all three texts are strikingly similar in terms of language and sentiment. In his preface, Scruton describes his work as 'a memorial address' and as 'a personal tribute to the civilisation that made me and which is now passing from the world'.¹²² Stating in the introduction to the 2008 edition, that the 'abolition of a great and famous nation is now virtually complete', Hitchens suggests that 'all that remains to be done is to shovel earth on to the coffin' and that his polemic 'might now at least serve as a headstone'.¹²³ Kingsnorth complains of 'landscapes being levelled, colour being drained and character being driven out' and of 'the 'small, the ancient, the indefinable, the unprofitable, the meaningful, and the quirky' being 'scoured out and bulldozed'.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Haseler, *England Alone*, p. 181.

¹²² Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. vii.

¹²³ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, p. 16.

¹²⁴ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, pp. 6-7.

This supposed death of England is linked to a renewed sense of geography. The decline of its imperial hegemony has led to a renewal of its territorial identity and its re-discovery as a place which is distinct, not just from mainland Europe and its former empire, but also from the rest of Britain. This is illustrated by the following passage from Scruton's text:

The English thought of their country – the place itself, and not just the people – in personal terms [...] Their identity was formed through a *personal* relationship with a *place* – a place enchanted precisely by that personal relationship.¹²⁵

Condition of England writing is infused with this spatial imaginary and Scruton's assertion of a grounded nationhood is echoed throughout the other texts. This identity is often articulated through a privileging of Englishness over Britishness. For example, Kingsnorth asserts that 'England is a nation; Britain is a political convenience', describing the former as 'the place I was born and grew up in' and as 'the place I belong', claiming to 'know its landscapes and its history, and feel connected to both' and that he 'couldn't write about Scotland or Wales in anything like the same way, because I am not part of them and they are not part of me'.¹²⁶ Hitchens refers to 'The very geography in which tradition, custom, respect and experience were rooted'.¹²⁷ Scruton, whilst acknowledging Anderson's theory of nation as a construction of the modern state and rejecting the 'anti-British history' of those such as David Cannadine, Nairn and Perry Anderson, argues for British exceptionalism. His use of 'Britain' and 'England' as interchangeable terms nevertheless proves to be indicative of a belief in English superiority when he claims that 'the ideal' of British 'pride and loyalty' was

¹²⁵ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 15.

¹²⁶ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, pp. 12-13.

¹²⁷ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, p. 296.

'made in England' and that there 'was no 'nation-building' in the United Kingdom'. Dismissing Greenfield's argument that 'nations emerged in Renaissance Europe, he asserts that the 'loyalty that preceded and transcended the modern state' was 'the loyalty to England: not a nation or a doctrine or a state, but a *country*, the place where we belong'.¹²⁸ This imaginary embodies a pre-industrial, blood and soil notion of nationalism as opposed to the progressive model advanced by those such as Calhoun, omitting as it does, the urban, industrial and intellectual dimensions of English heritage: in mystical fashion it imagines a land rather than a nation and rejects constructivist notions of identity. However, in attempting to define the nature and delineations of the country, an identity *is* constructed. As David Harvey notes, place, unlike territory, is linked to experience and identity: people shape their places (especially those they regard as home) and in turn are shaped by them.¹²⁹

Of importance is Scruton's argument that England is understood 'through the experience of home' because this sheds light on the nature of contemporary national nostalgia and its potential impact on social attitudes.¹³⁰ Boym defines nostalgia as 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed'.¹³¹ For her, nostalgia is 'a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy'.¹³² Nostalgia, she points out, 'is not always retrospective; it can be prospective as well' because the 'fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future'.¹³³ Nostalgia is moreover, 'about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations,

¹²⁸ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 5.

¹²⁹ David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism And The Geographies Of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p. 175.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 5.

¹³¹ Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', p. 7.

¹³² *Ibid*.

¹³³ *Ibid*, p. 8.

between personal and collective memory'.¹³⁴ In this sense, she argues, it has 'a utopian dimension' but is ultimately divisive because:

Modern nostalgia is paradoxical in the sense that the universality of its longing can make us more empathetic towards fellow humans, and yet the moment we try to repair that longing with a particular belonging – or the apprehension of loss with a rediscovery of identity and especially of a national community and unique and pure homeland – we often part ways with others and put an end to mutual understanding.¹³⁵

Boym identifies two distinctive types of nostalgia: restorative and reflective, and it is the first of these with which this thesis is largely concerned. Restorative nostalgia 'stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home'. It is 'at the core of recent national and historical revivals' and crucially it is associated with invented tradition as distinct from the actual habits and practices of the past. It 'knows two main plots: the restoration of origins and the conspiracy theory' and it can be 'politically manipulated through newly recreated practices of national commemoration with the aim of re-establishing social cohesion, a sense of security and an obedient relationship to authority'.¹³⁶

English nostalgia exemplifies Boym's definition but is paradoxically exclusionary. According to Krishan Kumar, attempts 'to define a cultural Englishness' (of which the Condition of England texts examined here are examples) is 'a worthwhile and revealing exercise'.¹³⁷ Kumar concludes, however, that dominant notions of 'cultural Englishness – a love of the countryside, an aversion to cities, a distrust of intellectuals' are in the main, 'nostalgic and backward-looking, heavily slanted towards the middle and upper-middle class outlook that has been so dominant in modern

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid, pp. 13-4.

¹³⁷ Krishan Kumar, *The Idea of Englishness: English Culture, National Identity and Social Thought* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2015), p. 101.

England' and exclude 'too many groups to make it very serviceable for a national identity'.¹³⁸ Cultural Englishness 'as the basis of an English nationalism', Kumar argues, 'is almost bound to be reactionary'.¹³⁹ The conservative construction of cultural Englishness is hostile to intellectualism and expertise, instead extolling amateurism. Haseler, for example, writes of the conservative construction of a 'theme park Englishness' which rejects 'abstract theories' in favour of 'history, tradition and "accumulated wisdom"'. He points out that:

In the world of contemporary commentary it has taken a foreigner, the American Irving Kristol, to attempt to set the record straight by commending the British on their contribution to the age of reason. He argued that the Protestant Reformation, 'a British mood if there ever was one', played a seminal role in advancing secular ideas by severely weakening the irrational authority of the church; that Francis Bacon 'exemplifies perfectly' the primacy of reason; and that Britons have taken the lead in 'modern scientific modes of thinking about natural phenomena'.¹⁴⁰

It is possible to argue that the aim identified by Boym, of 'an obedient relationship to authority', is furthered by this anti-intellectualism; evident for example, in Scruton's insistence that 'Things at home don't need an explanation'. For him, it has been 'one of the most remarkable features of the English that they required so little explanation of their customs and institutions'. Instead, he claims, they 'bumbled on, without anyone asking the reason why or anyone being able, if asked, to provide it'.¹⁴¹ This is problematic because the national subjectivity he evokes is organic, intuitive and therefore exclusionary. Its inexplicability means that it cannot be learned and so cannot be attained by outsiders. Moreover, as David Harvey argues, place is the

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid, p. 104.

¹⁴⁰ Haseler, *England Alone*, p. 181.

¹⁴¹ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 16.

oppositional other, a site of resistance to outside forces.¹⁴² Scruton's vision of an unquestioning, 'bumbling' Englishness resists progress in its apparent determinism and stubborn self-affirmation.

This instinctive, organic and largely pastoral re-invention of Englishness as an 'experience of home' is inevitably most pertinent in relation to issues surrounding both postcolonial immigration and the Maastricht Treaty of 1992, which effectively created the European Union and introduced free movement across its member states. As Kumar suggests, English identity has historically been that of "missionary" or "imperial" nationalism. He asserts that the English did not so much celebrate themselves as identify with the projects – the "mission" – they were, as it were providentially, called upon to carry out in the world'.¹⁴³ The imperative of imperial dominion necessitated a notion of universal, placeless Englishness which was theoretically conferred upon any inhabitant of its colonies across the globe. In his depiction of Churchill's funeral in *The Abolition Of Britain*, Hitchens points to the 'leaders who came from the old dominions' who were 'old and grey, survivors of the time when the people of these countries automatically thought of Britain as "home", and saw it as their duty to defend her when she was in trouble'.¹⁴⁴ This extension of Britishness was, however, always an illusory identity for the colonised. Hitchens' 'survivors' are, in fact, examples of Homi Bhabha's 'translators', those 'partial presences' who are 'the appropriate objects of a colonialist chain of command, authorized versions of otherness'.¹⁴⁵ As Bhabha shows, the colonial subjects' mimetic Anglicization actually highlights and reinforces the imbalance of power and the

¹⁴² Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism And The Geographies Of Freedom*, p. 46.

¹⁴³ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. x.

¹⁴⁴ Hitchens, *The Abolition Of Britain*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁵ Bhabha, Homi, 'Of Mimicry And Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' in *October, Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis*, 28 (Spring 1984) pp. 125-133, pp. 127-9.

inherent alienation of their status. Framing of the nation as home and place renders the colonial subject's 'almost but not quite' otherness *unheimlich*, as was highlighted in 2018 by the experiences of the so-called 'Windrush generation'.¹⁴⁶ Scruton's views on the entitlements of those from British dominions confirm the imperial homeland as a fantasy and contradict Hitchens' sentimental assumptions about colonial allegiances. He explains the hostility towards immigration in terms of his notion of home. Pointing out that for 'seven centuries there was no other official test of Englishness than the fact of being born here', he concludes that the 'disquiet over immigration was the result, it seems to me, not of racism, but of the disruption of an old experience of home, and a loss of the enchantment which made home a place of safety and consolation':

The Nationality Acts of the twentieth century were emergency measures. They built upon and modified the ancient loyalty of the English by extending citizenship to people who had come 'here' from abroad. These new citizens were 'naturalised British subjects' – in other words, not really Englishmen at all, but people who had become *British*, by a strange process which overcame the *unnaturalness* that distinguishes foreigners.¹⁴⁷

Ultimately, a naturalistic, place-based mode of identity is exclusive by definition, and Gilroy suggests that 'problems have multiplied where the idea of culture has been abused by being simplified, instrumentalized, or trivialized, and particularly through being coupled with notions of identity and belonging that are overly fixed or too easily naturalized as exclusively national phenomena'.¹⁴⁸ The organicism of right-wing commentators like Scruton rejects the kind of conscious re-construction observed by Kumar and instead frames Englishness in familiarly positivist terms. 'But who are we?',

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 126.

¹⁴⁷ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁸ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 5.

he asserts, 'is the question that the English have never needed to ask themselves' because 'they instinctively knew who they were'.¹⁴⁹

For Scruton, England is 'not just a place' but is also defined by 'what goes on there' with habits and customs comprising a supposedly unique and primordial essence.¹⁵⁰ English common law, for example, is 'not an invention but a discovery'. It is 'the habit, the "being at ease"', which turned the place into a home'. 'Common law', Scruton notes, 'was understood from the beginning as the *law of the land* [sic]'. He attributes English imperialism to this same amateurism and homeliness. Making colonialism seem almost accidental, he suggests that the 'empire was acquired by roving adventurers and merchants who, trading with natives whom they could not or would not trust, summoned the law of Old England to conclude the deal and, in the wake of the law, the sovereign power that would enforce it'.¹⁵¹ Scruton rejects notions of systemic power, suggesting that English people act as private individuals, 'outside the control of the state' and moreover 'refuse to be bossed about by those they regard as outsiders'.¹⁵² This veneration of a common 'law of the land' self-evidently opposes the transnational alignment of laws and practices demanded by European integration and global trade. Kingsnorth observes that:

We are discovering that a global market requires a global identity; that not just goods, but landscapes and cultures must be branded and made safe for the universal act of consumption. We are discovering that a global market requires global tastes – that it needs us to want the same things, feel the same things, like or dislike the same things, see in the same way.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid*, p. 9.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, pp. 16-7.

¹⁵² *Ibid*, p. 17.

¹⁵³ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 8.

It is also illuminating in relation to depictions in the Henrician novels of Thomas Cromwell and the approaches to the professionalism and constitutionalism he can be seen to represent. Cromwell's technocratic qualities stand in opposition to the organic positivism of Scruton's imagined 'land'. As the historian G. R. Elton has argued, Cromwell 'believed in statute above all else and would proceed nowhere without its sanction'. He is credited with the systemisation and centralisation of political and administrative power.¹⁵⁴ It is also possible to draw parallels between contemporary processes of supranational cohesion and the centralisation promoted by Tudor reforms. The loss of local autonomy and the centralising of authority is a recurring theme in the Tudor novels and since, according to Elton, Cromwell 'ended the kingdoms within the kingdom typical of the middle ages and made possible full national government', subsequent chapters will consider his portrayal in the light of these contemporary lamentations about the suppression of feudalism and free speech.¹⁵⁵

The English home for Scruton in particular, is a place of enchantment, spirituality and intuition. He points to:

the easy-going magic attached to day-to-day observances. The English lived in a world that had been mystified, and they accepted this mystification as an evident improvement on the natural order. Ordinary things and everyday customs possessed a nimbus of authority, a quasi-divine and in any case mysterious given-ness, which was all the more remarkable in being accepted as a human artefact. The world of the English was a world of rituals, uniforms, precedents and offices. In any serious business they would spontaneously adopt another and higher tone, borrowing legal and biblical words, addressing their colleagues not directly but through some real or imaginary chairman, and creating a mystical body out of a mere gathering of people.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ G. R. Elton, *England Under The Tudors* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1974), p. 169.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 179.

¹⁵⁶ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 11.

Of significance in terms of the fictional depictions of the Dissolution examined in subsequent chapters (especially those of Sansom, where the destruction of sacred things is a point of sustained focus), is his ascription of homely enchantment to objects, often functionless, which are 'valued for other reasons: their associations, their beauty, their way of fitting in'.¹⁵⁷ These objects, he suggests, are 'an expression of ourselves and our common dwelling place' and 'are endowed with a soul'.¹⁵⁸ He identifies enchantment as 'a personalising force' which 'endows objects, customs and institutions with a moral character, so that we respond to them as we respond to one another' and which promotes a tradition of shared 'membership'.¹⁵⁹

Despite Scruton's denial of constructivism, it would appear that a reconstruction of Englishness has in fact been taking place and that integral to the process has been a kind of manufactured enchantment linked to a fantasy of home and reflective of the conservative discourses of his critique. Deriving as it does from ritual, tradition and class, it can be seen in the general English turn to the past and an aesthetic of nostalgia that has permeated many public spaces. One example can be seen in the popular *Keep Calm and Carry On* paraphernalia. Though not in circulation during World War II, the slogan imparts a wartime flavour to the minutiae of every day contemporary life. It can be imagined as an ancestral command that, in its amusingly antiquated style, cosily fuses past and present. It evokes a gently ironic pride through its codifying of the supposed English qualities of stoicism, ordinariness and unquestioning doggedness.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 12.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

The experience of home which underpins the re-discovery or invention of traditions, is associated with inheritance and stratification. Scruton suggests that hereditary privilege is consensually accepted as 'not an economic but a spiritual fact'. The English aristocrat, he suggests, is 'the heart and soul of the landscape where he resided, bearing a title that ennobled the country as much as it ennobled himself'.¹⁶⁰ In his critique of evolving Englishness, Nairn identifies the 'familial' nature of English national identity and the historical nature of the British state, both of which are bound up with class and crown. He suggests that the fealty of nation-as-family and the inheritance of power intrinsic to the monarchic state system renders Englishness essentially organic rather than geopolitical or constitutional. The experience of home thus paradoxically upholds the legitimacy of a ruling class for whom power is conferred dynastically but with popular support because participation is felt to be innate. For Nairn, restorative nostalgia is strategically constructed to shape a national subjectivity that is docile and undemocratic. He cites the 1969 Investiture of the Prince of Wales (portrayed as ancient tradition whilst in fact dating only from 1911, having lapsed centuries before) as an example of how a 'synthetic pastness' that has 'turned into a version of national identity' has been manifested. Nairn suggests that monarchy has 'played a vital part' in 'the formation of a traditionalism quite distinct from mere feudal or folk tradition: an ism in which the past was re-synthesized as contemporary identity'.¹⁶¹ This conferred subjectivity, he argues, occludes the political and ideological dimensions of class-struggle by fusing national identity with caste:

The Crown stands for a national community-family known and felt to be primary (without a trace of stupidity or 'illusion' on anyone's part); and it does so in a way that simply occludes stratification, by joining the numinous

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 11- 12.

¹⁶¹ Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (London: Radius, 1988), p. 127.

or super-national to the 'ordinary' or sub-national – supra-ethnic spirituality to the instant, polaroid humanity of 'They're just like us!'¹⁶²

The supposed dissolution of England is linked for the Condition of England writers, not only to the homogenizing forces of postmodern capitalism but also to the decline of class and inheritance. Scruton suggests that the English of bygone times 'threw in their lot with ordinariness' and believed in 'differences of station and degree': crucially they saw 'a great divide between the somebody and the nobody, and they both renewed and chafed at the boundaries which held the two apart'. Whilst social mobility was theoretically possible, those 'striving to ascend the social ladder' nevertheless 'looked with pity on those who had reached the top of it': Scruton identifies 'the sentiment of class' as 'one of the most important and least understood manifestations of the English in their apartness', claiming that the class system has been widely regarded as 'part of the enchantment that lay over England' and that this 'enchantment was crystallised not merely in the fact of good breeding, but in the ideal of the gentleman'.¹⁶³ His assessment of gentlemanly characteristics, quoted below, exemplifies the feudal instincts, resentment of the upstart and aspirational self-ascription linked to the fantasy of cultural Englishness:

The gentleman is defined in terms of the manners, culture, virtue and aloofness of an old aristocracy; but defined independently of lineage and wealth. You can become a gentleman, therefore, without becoming an upstart. The gentleman rises to the upper regions of society without polluting them with anything from below [...] His rise leaves the social order unaffected, and he radiates the image of a society every single member of which can aspire to the upper class, a society of rigid hierarchical order, the lower echelons of which are entirely unoccupied.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 231.

¹⁶³ Ibid, pp. 64-5.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 65.

The English experience of home for the Tory-radicals is rural, feudal and epitomized by the material architecture of class. Scruton asserts that 'the country house came to represent an ideal of civilisation – one in which hierarchy was softened by neighbourliness, and wealth by mutual aid'.¹⁶⁵ The English subsidise the National Trust, he suggests, because they recognise the value of these 'aristocratic corpses' with which the countryside is 'scattered' and which, 'rather than any parliament or palace, breathe the mysterious magic whereby power becomes authority, and authority power'.¹⁶⁶ He claims that:

They are memorials to the force that maintained English society and English politics in being, and which became incarnate in them, as part of the landscape. They are the last signs of what England was like, when those who governed it also dwelled in it.¹⁶⁷

At the other end of the ideological spectrum, Nairn also acknowledges the importance of home as a metaphor for the English imaginary. For him, it is the metonymic dominion of crown that sets the framework of English psycho-geography as well as its socio-economic priorities. This, he suggests, is reflected in the name given to the south-eastern area which constitutes royalty's territorial base – the Home Counties. The geographical identity of the nation-family is therefore exclusive of actual land and is instead predicated on the notion of 'the stately home':

For Great Britain herself is the stately home: the State which is also Home, a power-structure which could not so convincingly be either of these things without the Crown, and a family still in residence.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 239.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 240.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Nairn, *Enchanted Glass*, p. 110.

This organic, familial, territorially void Englishness not only upholds boundaries of social class, but also occludes region. Nairn views Englishness as a nationalism rooted by its own empiricism firmly 'in early-modern times' and in one region.¹⁶⁹ The 'extra-territoriality' of the South-East maintains a hold on the English subjective imaginary while the national story, with its emphasis on continuity, inheritance and hierarchy is frequently synonymised with the kings and queens history that underpins the royal dynastic saga.¹⁷⁰ The increasing muscularity of this national vision in the years leading to the EU referendum is one possible explanation for the ascendancy at this time of the dynastic novel which to some extent seems to have succeeded the postmodern historiographical fiction popular in the 1980s and 90s.

Scruton's elegiac conservatism is echoed by Hitchens, who decries 'the unfinished English revolution which the Left now wishes to complete' and traces it through most aspects of public life. His yearning for a social order he regards as bygone is clear throughout and is exemplified by the chapter 'Forty Years On', in which he denounces 'the anti-deference, anti-hierarchy, anti-privilege humour movement', accusing so-called 'alternative' comedians of the 1980s such as Ben Elton and Harry Enfield of having 'created an attitude which provides millions of people with a crude moral justification for crime, seen by many modern thieves as a form of taxation levied upon the greedy by the rest'. This, he asserts, is because 'Jokes about 'loads-a-money' and caricatures of 'Fat Cats' have mobilized an ancient British envy of wealth and harnessed it to a political purpose' and because the 'association of the Tories with something called 'greed' had gone deep into the minds of the young'.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 236.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 246.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, pp. 158-9.

Kingsnorth venerates the established social structures of rural and village life. Whilst his focus tends towards those at a distance from the top of the social scale, his discourse nevertheless extols the values of inheritance and the organic relationship between people and place. *Real England* pays homage to those termed by David Goodhart as ‘Somewheres’: people whose families have been in an area for generations, who embody traditions passed down through the ages and who are notable for their reluctance to travel.¹⁷² The book opens with an account of Fergus Drennan who as ‘one of England’s few professional foragers’, is intimately connected to land and place. Drennan has ‘been doing it since he was young’ and sees his work as being ‘kind of about belonging’. He claims to ‘feel such a part of it through this that I could never leave. I suppose it ties me to England’.¹⁷³ Another example is the owner of The Luppitt Inn in Devon, ‘85-year-old Mary Wright’, whose ‘traditional pub’ has ‘been in her family for over a hundred years’ and ‘has long been the only watering hole in this little village in the Blackdown Hills’. According to Kingsnorth, ‘Mary has run the pub all her life, and has rarely left it or the village’.¹⁷⁴ *Real England* shares the melancholia of Scruton and Hitchens, portraying an England that is being obliterated. Mary Wright’s ‘village, like the pub, seems to be on its last legs’¹⁷⁵ and Drennan complains that ‘These days we don’t know where we are, or what happens in our landscape’.¹⁷⁶ Kingsnorth himself asserts that the distinctiveness of place is being obliterated ‘to make way for the clean, the sophisticated, the alien, the progressive, the corporate’ and that it feels ‘like a great loss – a hard-to-define but biting loss’.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² David Goodhart, *The Road To Somewhere: The Populist Revolt And The Future Of Politics* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2017), p. 3.

¹⁷³ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, pp. 2-3.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 21-2.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.2.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7.

He notes that globalisation has destroyed national distinctiveness everywhere and whilst he suggests that ‘the world used to be – could be – a more diverse, colourful, interesting place’, the implication of *Real England* is that such global diversity is to be achieved by the preservation of tradition and so by extension, the homogeneity of different localities.¹⁷⁸ To recall Gilroy’s observations, such a view is inevitably underpinned by a racial dimension and I would argue that the discourses around class, culture and tradition explored above and below ultimately stand as proxy for this fundamental concern.

In Nairn’s view, the United Kingdom’s ‘unique, familial patriotism’ and its substitution of ‘folk-lore from above’ for ‘democratic or an ethnic assertiveness from below’ also results in territorial indeterminacy.¹⁷⁹ Great Britain is a ‘family country, hence ideologically ‘small’ in the sense of having no relationship to actual geography’.¹⁸⁰ He suggests that it is a ‘land of the mind, distinguishable from the mundane counties and peoples of these islands’.¹⁸¹ This has been noted more recently by Simon Featherstone who points out that familial metaphors and geographical vagueness characterise George Orwell’s homage to Englishness, *The Lion and the Unicorn*, in which ‘images and associations’ take the place of the social and territorial. Orwell’s definition of ‘ordinary England’, quoted by the Conservative Prime Minister John Major in a speech given in 1993, includes ‘solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar boxes’.¹⁸² Orwellian

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, pp. 136, 184.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 97.

¹⁸¹ Ibid, p. 91.

¹⁸² Mr Major’s Speech to Conservative Group for Europe – 22 April 1993 in ‘Sir John Major KG CH’, <<http://www.johnmajorarchive.org.uk/1990-1997/mr-majors-speech-to-conservative-group-for-europe-22-april-1993/>> [accessed 25 November 2020].

England is very much a 'land of the mind' and yet it remains influential in national consciousness.

Restorative nostalgia is central to this contemporary conservative English imaginary. Kingsnorth, for example, recounts an episode he witnessed on St Edmund's Day in 2005 whereby a group of affronted residents of Bury St Edmunds, dressed up as knights and monks and calling themselves the 'Knights of St Edmund', enacted a torch-lit procession from the cathedral. This culminated in the laying of a curse on Debenhams PLC (or the 'accursed altar of Mammon) in the town's old Cattle Market car park. The curse was a response to planning for a major new retail park on the site. Kingsnorth explains that these people 'see Bury as a medieval town, in character and spirit'. The words of the curse reflect the cultural melancholia of Gregory's narratives, imputing to developers an intention 'to desecrate your hallowed town with false gods and idols! In order to trample your right and liberties! In order to enslave and impoverish your people!' Kingsnorth is at pains to point out that the leader of the group is 'a respectable middle-aged man' who 'believed that "the Christian heritage" of his town – and, I suspect, his country – was under threat'. Kingsnorth emphasises that the Knights of St Edmund, have been *reformed* rather than formed as 'the original Knights of St Edmund guarded the Abbey after the Norman Conquest'.¹⁸³ Such aesthetics of magical antiquity are apparent in the works of Sansom and Gregory: in the notion of an ancient curse upon the Tudors in Gregory's *The King's Curse* for example, and in Sansom's work, the mystery of 'dark fire', long buried in a Crusader's grave. Pseudo-antiquity is also a theme of *Wolf Hall* where Cromwell is shown, among other things, to invent ancient precedents and to have

¹⁸³ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 94.

'antiqued a statue'.¹⁸⁴ Kingsnorth's admiring account of the weaponizing of re-invented heritage and tradition against international capital therefore finds an echo in the magical thinking that infuses these narratives.

The polemics of Englishness are further marked in their depiction of England as a ruined and contaminated space with language associated with violence and attack a prominent feature: progress, like the Reformation in the Henrician novels, is associated with trauma. The Condition of England texts are particularly preoccupied with threats to the rural landscape and they share a distaste for modern architecture. They align their geo-piety and reverence for old buildings with patriotism and conflate urban regeneration with foreign influence. Whilst acknowledging the squalor and misery of the industrial slums that modern town-planning eradicated, Hitchens objects to 'the desire to build a new world, to act as if Britain were starting again from year one' along with the ascendancy of 'the sweeping, sunlit concrete visions of the continental architects and their disciples among the planners'. He compares these planners to 'some modern Ozymandias' and disparages their tower blocks that look 'like rotting teeth or broken bones', highlighting 'the un-English nature of the things, their hostility to the love of flowers and gardens and having your own front door'.¹⁸⁵ Scruton gives an account of his father's return to the Manchester area of Ancoats where he grew up. Finding 'a waste of asphalt roads and trodden mud, from which blocks of concrete rise twelve storeys high' he describes how his father 'wept with indignation at a community destroyed, and a piece of English earth now

¹⁸⁴ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 329.

¹⁸⁵ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, pp. 96-7.

disenchanted'.¹⁸⁶ In language that resonates particularly with that of Sansom's and Gregory's portrayal of Henrician Reformers, he complains that:

those post-war planners and ideologues who plotted this outrage believed that it was they who had finally freed the working classes from their chains, and not the churches, chapels, schools, institutes, friendly societies, youth clubs, cadets, brass bands, and temperance societies which did the job without the condescending help of intellectuals.¹⁸⁷

Kingsnorth deploys the resentful metaphor of a 'beast which crushes all before it and calls that crushing progress' which he proclaims is 'the real enemy now'. This unsettling dynamic of people versus progress and culture under attack is, he claims, a long-standing feature of English life. The beast 'existed before Marx, before Adam Smith, before trades unions, before the stock market. Back in the 1830s, Cobbett called it simply "the Thing", but it was ancient even then'.¹⁸⁸ Evoking the nationalism of soil and blood, Kingsnorth announces that his book 'is about what happened when I took my eyes off the horizon and focussed them on the ground beneath my feet.' His concerns, he asserts, are with 'the sort of country I live in, and the sort of people who inhabit it' and with the 'on-going homogenisation of that country, the wiping out of its culture and character: why it's happening, why it matters and what can be done about it'.¹⁸⁹ Like Scruton and Hitchens, Kingsnorth implies the presence of a faceless and sinister authoritarianism, of a deliberate erosion of distinctiveness by a powerful elite. The following passage exemplifies this imaginary of national oppression:

In local papers and local pubs, in community centres and shopping centres, you'll hear people talking about the individual components of this machine: this new housing development, that new megastore, this street market closing down, that pub disappearing. People feel that something is wrong; they just don't know quite what, or why, or what to do about it or how to

¹⁸⁶ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 145.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 269.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid, p.10.

bring it all together. They don't have the language, or the permission, to discuss it.

If they do bother to complain, it is usually patiently explained to them that these are small, insignificant local issues, of no import in the grand scheme of things. They are told to think about something more important: economic growth, perhaps, or the War on Terror. And if they persist, they are called 'Luddites' or 'nimbys', pigeonholed as reactionaries or nostalgic grumblers. No one, runs the subtext, has the right to take up arms in defence of their place, their sense of belonging, their attachment to a locality.¹⁹⁰

For Hitchens, a countryside consisting of 'tiny and irregular' fields, 'small' villages, 'compact' towns and 'narrow and winding' roads symbolises the 'country's unchanging, rural core'. He proceeds to note that 'fifteen years after the end of the war, air travellers would already have seen the skeleton of an entirely new Britain', describing the expansion of the suburbs resulting from population growth and rising living standards as an 'infection'. He bemoans a 'complete agricultural revolution' that 'was meanwhile tearing up the hedges and bringing ancient pasture under the plough', the destruction of rural 'trades and services' and 'the end of an established village life which had lasted for centuries until now, the century when we suddenly knew better'. Hitchens describes 'a world transformed', an 'upheaval in our physical surroundings, mostly concentrated into two or three frenzied decades' and an 'urban poor' that 'have been uprooted and displaced as thoroughly as if they were refugees, the networks of family, trade, friendship and habit bulldozed away'.¹⁹¹ The following melancholic passage closely echoes the sense of historical loss and discombobulation that runs through fictional depictions of the Henrician Reformation:

We were not asked if we wanted this change, though many of us wanted our own little portion of it. Now that we have it, it is surely reasonable to suggest that it has helped to uproot us, to cut the ties which once bound us to a past which was crucially different. And so it has sped the revolution, a revolution founded upon ugliness, upon bypassing history and preserving

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, p.12.

¹⁹¹ Hitchens, *The Abolition Of Britain*, pp. 96-103.

a little of it beneath a kind of bell-jar, while constructing a new world which owed almost nothing to what had gone before.¹⁹²

The historical loss described by Hitchens whereby the 'lore of our tribe, the stories of our ancestors' have 'simply ceased to be' and 'the bridges which once linked' people 'to the past, have been fenced off, blocked or even blown up' is also articulated through images of boundaries and borders.¹⁹³ English individualism is associated with a topography which is demarcated and enclosed: significantly, it is also a theme in Mantel's work. In addition to the country house and 'small family farm, intact over generations and able to secure its boundaries', Scruton identifies the hedgerow as 'a symbol of Englishness' and condemns post-war 'government policy to subsidise the uprooting of hedgerows, in the misguided search for an efficient and competitive agriculture'.¹⁹⁴ The result, he asserts, 'was the sudden appearance in England of that previously unknown and deeply troubling thing: a landscape without boundaries' leading to 'desolate prairies of East Anglia and the Midlands'. He claims that 'the English began to revolt against the destruction', arguing that the 'hedge became a symbol of Englishness, therefore, at the very moment when its function was being lost'.¹⁹⁵ He concludes that:

The landscape where their ancestors dwelled is one which they are merely passing through. And sensing this, and sensing that they no longer truly belong in the land which made them, they have lost their self-confidence as a people.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² Ibid, p. 104.

¹⁹³ Ibid, p. 44-5.

¹⁹⁴ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, pp. 240-1.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 241.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, pp. 242-3.

Scruton's dismay at 'a landscape without boundaries' would also seem to symbolise his distaste for the dissolution of cultural boundaries and in general, the bordered psycho-geography of the Brexit imaginary.

His aversion to those similarly borderless ideologies and identities that are linked to the increasingly postmodern nature of English institutions, is signalled by the now familiar interplay of indefinite pronouns that has come to characterise those discourses around England and internationalism and which are epitomised by Kingsnorth's phrase 'citizens of nowhere'. Scruton's former schoolteacher, Mr Chapman, for example, is described as 'one of the many high-ranking colonial officers who had come home after decolonisation' and as 'a poignant embodiment' of 'an old ideal', who lived in a 'dreary' block of flats which 'could be built anywhere and which would always look like nowhere'.¹⁹⁷ The final chapter of *England: An Elegy* is entitled 'The Forbidding of England' and in it Scruton complains that 'England is becoming a no-man's-land, an 'elsewhere', managed by executives who visit the outposts only fleetingly, staying in multinational hotels on the edges of floodlit wastelands'.¹⁹⁸ He bemoans 'the desecrated townscape of High Wycombe' whose 'streets of half-timbered houses' have been transformed into 'a soulless waste of empty office blocks'.¹⁹⁹ In the opening chapter of *Real England*, Kingsnorth proclaims 'Welcome to everywhere. Welcome to nowhere' and complains that the 'different, distinctive or special are being eroded, and replaced by things which would be familiar anywhere' due to 'the accelerating forces of homogenisation and control'.²⁰⁰ This is another manifestation of the preoccupation with inheritance and belonging as an integral facet

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, pp. 27-9.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 254.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 255.

²⁰⁰ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, pp. 6-7.

of English identity. Contempt expressed by characters in the Henrician novels for the rootless functionary, often referred to in Gregory's work as the man 'from nowhere', resonates with this concern.

Since the landscape is revered as a totem of Englishness, it follows therefore that those who alter the land are enemies of the nation. This notion of the enemy within extends to the reformers of English institutions as can be seen in the following passage from Hitchens' text which deploys a topographical metaphor to extol English gradualism and express hostility to change:

The British Constitution grew like a forest, requiring long centuries and fertile earth to flourish and come to maturity. It was not built like a temple, deliberately designed and constructed in a short span of years [...] Yet a forest that has taken centuries to grow can be cut down in weeks, or even hours, especially if the foresters have grown indolent and slack, and take their charge for granted [...] As the chainsaws whined and howled, and the great trees crashed down one by one, an indifferent public and a complaisant Fourth Estate looked on without lifting a finger to save the forest of law and custom which had protected them for so long [...] Some even cheered as it fell, unaware of the cold harsh winds that would soon blow across the bare landscape [...] But the puzzle is why this country of all countries, free, generous, just, democratic, cultured, honourable in its dealings, should have won the enmity of so many of its own citizens.²⁰¹

Hitchens' account of England's death is infused with the imagery of iconoclasm and demolition which is also a familiar feature of the Henrician novels. The destruction of his 'forest' is attributed to 'decades of cultural revolution' which he links to social liberalism, cosmopolitanism and modernity. This diagnosis of the British malaise, like others, takes in the perceived demise of the traditional family, sexual equality, the Welfare State, multiculturalism, modern architecture, a changing rural landscape, changes to education, the decline of traditional hierarchy, the devolved parliaments of Wales and Scotland and the prospect of being 'swallowed whole into the bland blend

²⁰¹ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, pp. 289-300.

of the new multicultural Euroland'.²⁰² Hitchens' construction of Englishness is typically hostile to the intellectual radicalism represented by the Reformation. His metaphor of the slow-growing forest ignores past ruptures and England's impact on 'theory and speculative thought'.²⁰³ It is a further example of the hardened insistence on the value of English continuity and employs a familiar rhetoric of trauma and lamentation. Hitchens characterises the legacy of social liberalism with metaphors of 'cold, harsh winds' blowing across a 'bare landscape'.²⁰⁴ This bleak imagery finds something of an echo in the words of Mantel's Wriothesley who, towards the end of *Bring Up the Bodies*, refers to England as 'a burning plain' claiming (figuratively) to 'smell burning buildings' and perceive 'Fallen towers', 'ash' and 'Wreckage'.²⁰⁵ Hitchens' portrayal of what he calls a 'cultural revolution' not only implies parallels between England's modernisation and the ruptures of Maoist China but also resonates with an imaginary of a Reformation England that is, to quote the words of Gregory's Margaret Pole, God's 'own special country' that 'has gone all wrong'.²⁰⁶ In identifying 'so many of its own citizens' as enemies, Hitchens plays to tropes of the 'citizen of nowhere' and 'unarmed invasion' identified by the Irish journalist, Fintan O'Toole (2018) as a significant element in the appeal of Brexit.²⁰⁷

It is significant that these and similar accounts of an entropic England, along with attempts to define the nature of Englishness itself, emerged during the period of New Labour government which emphasised Britishness as an identity over Englishness and promoted a youthful, urban and progressive model of nationhood –

²⁰² Ibid, p. 299.

²⁰³ Haseler, *England Alone*, p. 181.

²⁰⁴ Hitchens, *The Abolition Of Britain*, p. 295.

²⁰⁵ Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up The Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p. 399.

²⁰⁶ Philippa Gregory, *The King's Curse* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014), p. 536.

²⁰⁷ Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit And The Politics Of Pain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018), Kindle ebook, loc.1375.

'Cool Britannia' – over rural traditionalism. Though their discontents have earlier origins (and seem, certainly in the case of Scruton and Hitchens, at least partially, to be a resentful response to the advent of cultural theory and postmodernist perspectives that challenged certainties with which they were comfortable), they can be seen as a counter-narrative to the egalitarian and aspirational discourses surrounding the emergence of new elites, the democratisation of hierarchy and the foregrounding of an increasingly globalised value-system that characterised the politics of this time. Michael Kenny suggests that:

During the New Labour years, Englishness offered a language of inheritance and tradition that expressed a deep opposition to the metropolitan hubris and state-led managerialism with which those governments were often associated.²⁰⁸

For those such as Hitchens, the conclusion of World War II was, as Gilroy suggests, the moment of loss, because the national communality required to survive undermined the class system. However, the acceleration of this cultural change is attributed to the progressive politics of the 1990s, a legacy of earlier upheavals which is seen to have ended the deference and distinctions of background that was associated with pre-war society. Hitchens expresses distaste for 'the suburban revolutionaries who protested in the 1960s and 1970s, but occupied the corner offices in the 1990s' while 'the surviving representatives of the older way of life hobbled towards the obituary columns'.²⁰⁹ His specific (and highly class-conscious) disapproval of New Labour politicians is further indicated by his contemptuously worded description of the immediate aftermath of Princess Diana's death, when the Blair government directly intervened in the management of the royal family's public response. He complains that

²⁰⁸ Kenny, Michael, 'The Many Faces of Englishness: Identity, Diversity and Nationhood in England', *Public Policy Research*, 19:3 (2012), 152-9 (p. 156.).

²⁰⁹ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, p. 25.

'the Queen and her family were urged to snivel in public' and 'Buckingham Palace was forced to fly the wrong flag at half-mast to placate a supposedly enraged populace'.²¹⁰

As I suggested earlier, one reason for the boom in Henrician fiction may be that the ascendancy of a usurping Tudor monarchy, which challenged the sovereignty of feudal dynasties, promoted 'new men' like Cromwell and embarked upon the Reformation, provides a literary space in which to articulate the melancholia associated with the social and cultural changes that were entwined with the emerging hegemony of New Labour politics: the liberalisation of English institutions, Europeanising and globalising policies and the promotion of the state as an engine of change. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, hostility towards socially mobile technocrats who acquire, rather than inherit, wealth and status is echoed in narratives of Henrician England published concurrently with these Condition of England critiques. Resistance to the decline of feudal power and resentment of what Gregory terms 'the men from nowhere' are common themes. As Boym makes clear, intrinsic to restorative nostalgia is the conspiracy theory which both arises from and reinforces grievance, binarism and 'an unending sense of victimhood'.²¹¹ The plots of the Henrician novels addressed all engage with the undermining of established privilege and are therefore linked to conflicts of class and culture. In a broad sense, they chart the usurping of feudal birth-rights.

It is certainly clear that Hitchens regards the New Labour government as enemies of England. The passage below, which attacks initiatives to widen access to elite universities, invites further comparisons between New Labour reforms and fictional portrayals of the Dissolution:

²¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 25-6.

²¹¹ Boym, 'Nostalgia And Its Discontents', pp. 14-5.

The Blair government has been sharply hostile to the ancient universities, not exactly because they are good at what they do but very nearly for this reason [...] these same people, failing to understand that their principles clash with their professionalism, have resisted some of the destructive anti-elitism which has pulled the rest of the system down [...] the behaviour of the 1997 Labour government must have come as a nasty shock [...] they were immediately penalized with damaging attacks on their funds and their tutorial system, and with cutting words in a Labour conference speech from the Chancellor, Gordon Brown. It is hard to imagine any other advanced country in which votes could be won and political reputations made through attacks on that nation's finest universities, but there are few better illustrations of the way in which education symbolizes the unfinished English revolution which the Left now wishes to complete.²¹²

This perspective is shared by Scruton. Recalling his Labour-supporting father's 'early lessons in discontent', he claims to be 'impressed by a feature that is seldom mentioned by the historians of radical thought, and unnoticed by our modern reformers'. This is the 'proof that England is in the hands of her enemies'. Scruton observes that his father regarded the 'old Establishment of England', of which the 'Tory party' was the embodiment, as 'an alien presence, a usurping class of hypocrites, who had stolen the birthright of the English people'. For the conservative Scruton, whilst his father's hostility to the Tory party was 'mythopoeic', the 'dissenting tradition in England' is nevertheless associated, not with radicalism and speculative thought, but with a love of 'what was local, collegial and attached to the land' and an understanding that 'the soul of a man is a local product, rooted in the soil'. Associating the Labour Party with reactionary rather than progressive politics, he asserts that its role for previous generations was to 'stop things'. Thus, he deplores the 'spectacle of a Labour Party committed to 'globalisation', indifferent to the fate of rural England, and managed

²¹² Hitchens, *The Abolition Of Britain*, pp. 72-3.

by smooth 'consultants' who might next year be working for the other side, which is in fact only the same side under another description'.²¹³

Conclusion

Throughout the years following the Maastricht Treaty of 1992 and spanning the New Labour government (1997 to 2010), an underlying conservative narrative of decline and discourse of restorative nostalgia ran counter to the progressiveness of the mainstream imaginary. Such expressions of national grievance were marked by their resistance to democratisation, social mobility, spatial change, urbanisation, internationalism, and the state as an engine of progress, theory and radical thought. Whilst the end of World War II may be regarded by reactionaries as the moment of fatal change (and by others as a progressive triumph), revisions of the Reformation have also provided a vehicle for articulating the postcolonial melancholia of Brexit-era conservatism and reinforcing a sense of Englishness under attack from forces within. To different degrees, the Henrician novels to be examined in this thesis echo the concerns of Condition of England writing and, in re-casting their discontents into historical narrative, help to re-construct cultural memory, reversing the triumphant, Whiggish account of England's incremental progress. The Henrician narrative also sheds light on the cultural fault lines of the nation and the contested nature of Englishness. With their dichotomies of papist versus protestant, new man versus nobility and past versus present, they present England's early modern past as a series of binaries, though in doing so, they simultaneously highlight the inevitable and troubling liminality around choosing identities and beliefs.

²¹³ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, pp. 254-7.

The thesis as a whole is predicated on an understanding that historical fiction plays a role in constructing national consciousness through its shaping of cultural memory by creating popular imaginaries of shared pasts. This chapter has examined the acceleration of interest in English identity in the twenty-first century that is thought by many scholars and commentators to have led to the referendum in 2016. Through its critique of *Condition of England* writing, which is positioned alongside the Henrician historical novels to be analysed in the next chapters, this section argues for an understanding that revisionist representations of the Henrician court and the English Reformation reflect a climate of melancholy and grievance in certain quarters of the national psyche. It suggests that the Dissolution and the rise of the 'new man' stand as proxies for anxieties around race, liberalisation, globalisation, multiculturalism and a sense of authenticity being lost. The preoccupation with English space shared by all the novels maps to a similar fantasy of a prelapsarian landscape in *Condition of England* writing which, in turn, dates back to a nineteenth-century distaste for industry that remains extant in contemporary national culture. It also testifies to the post-imperialist consciousness of England as a place.

I suggest that recent decades have seen a consolidation of monarchism and a resurgent deference towards inherited privilege which has gone hand in hand with a growing popular disapproval of technocracy and middle-class aspiration. A re-iterating preference for the certainties of bloodline (which, I might suggest, is also inherent to the boom in personal ancestry research) is reflected in the move away from the postmodern historiography associated with neo-Victorianism towards the dynastic royal novels, exemplified by the turn to the Henrician narratives with which this project is concerned. Dynasty and inheritance are not new themes in popular English historical fiction: the dynastic saga was also popular in the 1970s and 80s but tended

to centre upon entirely fictional families of wealth and power rather than royal personages from the distant past.²¹⁴ The succession of this genre by the royal Tudor narrative with its veneer of veracity demonstrates, I would argue, a more overt, more conscious and more racially inflected turn to writing the nation. This encompasses a desire to connect people with the places they supposedly come from in a bid to overcome anxieties related the fluidity of identity highlighted by Gilroy. It can be argued that the Tudor age itself experienced similar anxieties around the elusiveness of history and about the need to construct a new identity and a new understanding of the collective past following deep and rapid cultural and institutional change. This is one possible reason why it seems to resonate so strongly with contemporary concerns and why its representations appear to codify them.

This first chapter has established the framework for the textual analysis that follows. The chapters that follow take Gregory's work as their starting point and conclude with exploration of Mantel's novels. This is not to make a value judgement about the relative merits or otherwise of the texts, but to reflect the differences between a type of historical fiction whose verisimilitude is used to mask its re-imagining of the past and that which foregrounds the processes of revision and re-telling: in talking to itself and to the other texts, the latter destabilises the national self-image that the former helps to create. Sitting between the two is Sansom's detective fiction, a genre that resembles the work of historians in its quest for facts: for the definite answers and indisputable truths that Mantel refuses. It concludes that, in ways that differ with each writer, the Tudor accession and Henrician Reformation are reimagined as fatal turning

²¹⁴ See for example, the novels of Susan Howatch – *Penmarric* (1971), *Cashelmara* (1974), *The Rich are Different* (1977), *Sins of the Fathers* (1980) and *The Wheel of Fortune* (1984). *Penmarric*, *Cashelmara* and *The Wheel of Fortune* re-tell the story of the Plantagenets whilst the other two are versions of *Julius Caesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra* set in the world of twentieth-century American banking. See also Philippa Gregory's own *Wideacre* trilogy (1987, 1989 and 1990) that pre-dates her Tudor and Plantagenet novels.

points in England's past and function as a conduit for the expression of current national grievances and anxieties.

Chapter Two

Narratives of National Grievance: The Spoiled England of Philippa Gregory's *The King's Curse* (2014) and *The Taming of the Queen* (2015)

Introduction

Reading Philippa Gregory's *The King's Curse* (2014) and *The Taming of the Queen* (2015) in the context of the English vote to leave the EU in 2016, this chapter argues that they evoke the postcolonial melancholia and nostalgia of the Tory-Radical Condition of England writing explored in Chapter One. In accordance with the project's rationale, the proximity of these novels' publication to the EU Referendum makes them an effective gauge of the intersection between cultural memory and national disenchantment in this crucial period. Approached in this way, they are interpreted as narratives of national grievance, permeated by yearning for a lost hegemony and a desire to return to a bygone age with protagonists who resent the diminishing of their power and the success of outsiders like Henry VIII's advisors, to whom they attribute a perceived national decline.

Through an extended close reading that focusses on narrative technique, the presentation of space and the use of the gothic, along with a consideration of the role played by the novels' paratexts, I will establish the thematic alignment of Gregory's work with the discourses of Brexit-era English nationalism. First, I will demonstrate that the voices of her first-person narratives of the past are fixated on the disempowerment and downward mobility of the feudal class and that their expressions of resentment in relation to the rise of talented individuals from lower down the social order, though voiced by characters within a very select social sphere, resonate with contemporary discourses around the perceived marginalisation of more monocultural social groups.

Second, I will consider the texts' 'geo-piety': their conflation of Englishness with place and elision of spatial identity with that of aristocratic dynasties. Ironically given their French origins, the Plantagenets, defeated in the War of the Roses, are presented in *The King's Curse* as the organically ordained but supplanted rulers of England whose existence is entwined with its materiality. Third, I will suggest that, through characterising the Tudors as invaders from overseas, associating them with an unfamiliar disease (the Sweating Sickness) and with motifs of corruption and decay, Gregory transplants the lamentation of post-imperial multiculturalism identified by Gilroy into cultural memorising of the Henrician period. I will contend that the early modern England that Gregory portrays is a country that is, to use Roger Scruton's words, 'in the hands of her enemies' and that this sense of subjugation is reinforced by Gregory's depiction of Henry VIII as a gothic monster.²¹⁵

In order to highlight these aspects of Gregory's imaginary, I will begin with a discussion of her narrative technique, before considering the social and cultural perspectives revealed by the voices of her protagonists. This section will be succeeded by close analysis of the presentation of space and place, while the concluding part of the chapter will explore the portrayal of Henry VIII's monstrosity along with that of the royal body as grotesque and linked to the disintegration of England itself.

The King's Curse is narrated by the Plantagenet matriarch, Margaret Pole, cousin of Henry VIII and a figure of dynastic importance who was an active member of the Tudor court for much of her life. As a prominent member of the former royal family, now displaced from the succession by the Tudors, she was often subject to

²¹⁵ Roger Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), p. 255.

close surveillance and at various times her life was at risk.²¹⁶ Pole, along with her family, moved in and out of royal favour throughout her life and was eventually executed in 1541 at the age of sixty-seven. According to Hazel Pierce, whose work Gregory identifies in the novel's Bibliography as one of her sources, the Poles had both the means and the inclination to pose a very real threat to Henry VIII's throne. Pierce concludes that it is therefore unsurprising that most of their lives ended with execution.²¹⁷ The narrator of *The Taming of the Queen* is 'Katelyn' [sic] Parr, Henry VIII's sixth and final wife and the novel's plot spans the period of her royal marriage. For much of this period, Parr was in danger of being imprisoned or executed. She was a committed religious reformer which made her unpopular with the more conservative factions of Henry VIII's court and at times her theological stance was at odds with the King's own beliefs. Furthermore, evidence suggests an attachment to the King's brother-in-law, Thomas Seymour.

Philippa Gregory is a significant figure in the world of historical fiction and a key proponent of the Tudor turn, having published ten novels about the Tudor court between 2001 and 2017, six of which centre upon the reign of Henry VIII and have enjoyed mass market appeal.²¹⁸ She claims that the appeal of the Tudors for contemporary audiences lies in the extraordinariness of their characters and their role as a usurping power in an England of rapid change, which confirms her interest in the

²¹⁶ Hazel Pierce, *Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury, 1473 – 1541: Loyalty, Lineage and Leadership* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), Kindle ebook, loc. 329.

²¹⁷ Ibid, loc. 3647.

²¹⁸ According to *The Bookseller*, *The King's Curse* and *The Taming of the Queen* both took number one spot for Original Fiction and Mass Market Fiction and she has sold 5.5 million books in the UK for £36.3m - Lisa Campbell, 'Philippa Gregory takes a new direction in four-book deal' in *The Bookseller*, (21 April 2017) <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/philippa-gregory-takes-new-direction-four-book-deal-540061>> [accessed 11 December 2020] para 9 of 14.

themes outlined above.²¹⁹ Her fixation on royal lines of the past typifies the more general and marked fascination in historical fiction with the dynastic family saga and court narratives. This focus is further indication that popular interest in the English past is entwined with a revived reverence for the aristocracy and monarchy. In this respect, it is significant that Gregory's work also coincides with the obsession with the celebrity royal that has emerged alongside the devaluation of working class identity in the post-Thatcher period and that was discussed in some detail in the introduction.²²⁰ Originating in the fascination with Princess Diana, it has come to centre on her sons and their wives, reinforcing Englishness as what Tom Nairn terms 'the metaphorical family unity of a Shakespearian (or pre-modern) nationalism'.²²¹ As 'people's princess' and 'queen of people's hearts,' Diana resembled the queens of early modern England who acted as 'intercessors', standing between the powerless and the untrammelled authority of the monarchic state.²²² Ultimately, the notion of a 'people's princess,' in both contemporary and early modern contexts, is a conservative one which serves to legitimise established power. As queenship scholars, Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz suggest:

female intercession was approved of as consistent with patriarchal monarchy when it involved the solicitation of mercy for individuals or, possibly groups. Such solicitation served the purposes of patriarchal monarchy by endowing it with flexibility and crowd-pleasing mercy.²²³

²¹⁹ Trisha Ping, 'Philippa Gregory: Henry VIII's final queen steps into the spotlight', 25th August 2015 in *Book Page* < <https://bookpage.com/interviews/18610-philippa-gregory> > [accessed 26 November 2020] para 6 of 10.

²²⁰ See for example, Virdee, Satnam and McGeever, Brendan, 'Racism, Crisis, Brexit' in *Ethnic And Racial Studies*, Vol.41, 10 (2018) pp. 1802-19.

²²¹ Tom Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and its Monarchy* (London: Radius, 1988), p. 90.

²²² Bashir, Martin (1995), Transcript of Martin Bashir's *Panorama* interview with the Princess of Wales, broadcast in November 1995, <www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/diana/panorama.html> [accessed 26 November 2020].

²²³ Robert Bucholz and Carole Levin, 'Introduction: It's Good to Be Queen' in Carole Levin and Robert Bucholz (eds) *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), p. xxv.

The emphasis placed by the popular press upon the maternal heritage of Diana's sons has helped to maintain this association of aristocracy with magnanimousness and righteous transgression whilst also sustaining its tragic inflection.²²⁴

Grievance And Decline: The Patrician Perspective of Gregory's Narratives

Gregory's Tudor protagonists to some extent reflect the re-invention in popular culture of the troubled and transgressive female aristocrat: a figure epitomized by Diana. Gregory's self-ascribed feminism and the implication that she writes untold histories in which she transposes this notion onto the Tudor world could be read as an emancipatory critique of the British establishment and a mainstream heritage that has traditionally marginalised female experience. However, her focus reflects a wider culture, of which Diana's construction is an illustration, that confers individuality through class. In other words, those who are not aristocratic are diminished through their conglomeration into collective identities. This thinking is exemplified by the famous term 'People's Princess' to which I have already given some consideration, and which was ascribed to Diana by Tony Blair following her death in 1997. In its interplay between collective and singular nouns it ultimately reflects an outlook that accords differing levels of status to human lives and this same dynamic is evident in Gregory's novels.²²⁵ The argument of this chapter is predicated on an understanding of discrimination as intersectional, and that fiction, particularly historical fiction with its claims to truth, can help to reinforce what bell hooks defines as the 'culture of

²²⁴ This has perhaps been particularly evident in coverage of Prince Harry and his marriage as well as both princes' public disclosures of difficult personal experiences.

²²⁵ 'Tony Blair comments on Princess Diana's Death', *BBC News* 31st August 1997. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yX8nuyI9WJY>> [accessed 26 November 2020].

domination'.²²⁶ Gilroy's postcolonial melancholia centres on contemporary attitudes to race and multiculturalism but I would suggest that an over-arching belief in the existence of all forms of biologically designated supremacy underpins these resentments. Gregory's apparently feminist history gives the appearance of emancipation but addresses only the experiences of courtiers. In so doing, it reinforces a system of valuation by birth and bloodline that is as much about race and nationality as it is about class. Crucially, through their narrative techniques, the novels confer upon their readers the elevated identity of their protagonists. This assumes a shared sense of stolen privilege, contempt for 'out-groups', and hostility to cultural change: emotions that have been found to resonate with the present-day, ethnocentric grievances of England's 'identity-conservatives'.²²⁷

The 'People's Princess' motif is particularly marked in Gregory's versions of Pole, Parr and Catherine of Aragon in *The King's Curse* and *The Taming of the Queen*. In the latter text, for example, Henry's betrayal is revealed to Parr gradually and in stages: an aspect of the narrative that calls to mind Diana's account of her husband's long-standing infidelity with a lover from his past. Moreover, it is apparent in Parr's intercessions with the King on behalf of the 'simple people' in which she simultaneously champions and infantilises her subjects. For example, when the King seeks to deny them access to the Bible, Parr declares that 'the piety of simple people is beautiful' and, using language that evokes the patrician paternalism advocated by Scruton, asserts that they 'were brought up in your England, they know you make the laws that keep them safe', 'protect their country' and 'love you as their holy father'.²²⁸

²²⁶ bell hooks, *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1994), Kindle ebook, p. 27.

²²⁷ Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), Kindle ebook, p. 46.

²²⁸ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, pp. 325-6.

This hierarchical condescension also pervades *The King's Curse* as Pole revels in the popular acclaim she receives as she travels around the country. On her way to Catherine of Aragon's funeral in Peterborough, for example, she finds that:

The urchin children and beggars clearing out of the way ahead of the soldiers turn and cheer, though they know nothing of who I am. But out of the little roadside shops, stepping out of workhouses and tumbling out of church and ale-house alike come men pulling off their hats and one or two men even kneeling down in the freezing mud as I go by, and they call out blessings on the late queen, on her daughter, and on me and my house.²²⁹

The social structure which ascribes to Pole this adulation is one in which dignity and power is entirely determined by 'house', bloodline and inheritance. As might be expected of the actual Pole, the narrative voice does not question the appropriateness of people 'clearing out of the way', 'tumbling' or kneeling in the mud. She concludes that 'they cheer for me as one of the old royal family who would never have led them so badly astray'.²³⁰ In both cases, those of the lower social order are presented collectively without individual delineation. In the passage above, some are economically categorised as 'urchin children' or 'beggars' whilst the indistinctiveness of the 'tumbling' men is indicated by the vagueness of 'one or two'. This contrasts with the precise identification of those from Pole's own circle which follows.

In both novels Gregory employs a highly empathic first-person narrative which, as noted above, assumes the reader's affiliation with the protagonists' exclusionary perspective. First-person narrative is a form of role play – a direct invitation to the reader to empathise with a single character, to become present within their minds and to experience their understanding of the storyworld. According to Alan Palmer, a reader's understanding of a fictional mind derives both from their own self-knowledge

²²⁹ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 402.

²³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 403.

and their observation of others' behaviour. Both generate experiences which then enable the ascription of thoughts and feelings to third parties. Thus a novel and its characters are read through the lens of the reader's personal experience and their own personality is mapped to that of the protagonist. As Palmer puts it, 'when we study *Emma* what we are studying is the me that is Emma'.²³¹ The act of reading then, is one of 'qualia' – the experience of what the world is like for someone else.²³² For Palmer, 'this empathetic activity can be thought of as a kind of adult play'.²³³ When writing the narratives of characters who actually existed, the author transforms the apparently objective storyworld of historical study into the subjectively experienced fictional one. In engaging with the minds rather than the actions of historical characters, in imagining what it is like to be them, the reader must bring into play their understanding of their own world, intersecting their subjectively experienced world of the present with a subjectively presented world of the past that is simultaneously imagined and real. In these texts, they experience the Tudor world as a version of themselves that is Pole or Parr.

In the case of first-person narratives, this merging of the reader's subjectivity with that of the protagonist is more complete, being seemingly less mediated than it would be in the third person: ascription of thoughts and motives to other characters is based on what is filtered through the perspective of the narrator who is also part of the storyworld. It means that the narratives of other characters are what Palmer calls 'doubly embedded': the reader encounters them through the interpretations ascribed to them by the narrator.²³⁴ This is further complicated in the case of Gregory's novels

²³¹ Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds* (London: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), p. 141.

²³² *Ibid*, p. 142.

²³³ *Ibid*, p. 146.

²³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 230-1.

by two factors. First, the narratives of Pole and Parr give an impression of veracity that is partly conferred by the paratexts discussed in more detail later in the chapter: the inclusion of family trees, a bibliography and Author Note all work to confer authenticity to the narrators' accounts. Second, they employ the present tense, which conveys a sense of events unfolding in real time and excludes reader experience of other viewpoints.

The experiential nature of Gregory's narrative technique is exemplified in the opening to *The King's Curse* where qualia is evoked both cognitively and physically, inviting the reader to become immersed in Pole's consciousness. The reader is made to wake up with Pole and is immediately situated inside her mind as it moves from oblivion to comprehension – 'In the moment of waking I am innocent, my conscience clear of any wrongdoing. In that first dazed moment, as my eyes open, I have no thoughts'. This immersion extends to the body – 'I am only a smooth-skinned, tightly muscled young body' and 'I am so deliciously, lazily sleepy, that I hardly know who I am'. The sensory language continues with Pole stretching 'luxuriously like a cat' and a foregrounded adverb guides the reader through her movements – 'Slowly, I open my eyes and realise that the light coming through the windows means that it is late in the morning'.²³⁵ The reader therefore reaches self-awareness with and within Pole and this waking scene signals a transformation of the reader into her.

The double embeddedness of other narratives is apparent in the opening. Pole calls herself a member of the 'old royal family', the adjective associating her immediately with stability and tradition. The current king, Henry VII at this point, is conversely termed 'a usurper'. Historical events that have occurred recently in the

²³⁵ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 1.

storyworld are described through a series of emotive metaphors and imagined dialogue that ascribe strategic malevolence to the Tudors. In answer to the questions Pole imagines them asking – ‘what should be done with the York princesses?’, she claims to have been ‘married into obscurity’, ‘wedded to shadows’, ‘cut down by degrees, until I am small enough to conceal under a poor knight’s name’ and ‘stuffed into obscurity like an embroidered emblem into a forgotten clothes chest’.²³⁶ This outrage at being denied status and agency is obviously ironic when considered alongside Pole’s disregard for the individuality of the ordinary people in the streets noted above, but the narrative does not invite such a comparison. The reader is further alienated from the Tudors through the third-person-plural pronoun which can be seen, for example, in Pole’s account of her brother Edward’s treatment at their hands: ‘they took his fortune and his lands. Then they took his liberty’.²³⁷ This pronoun is an inevitable component of first-person narrative but nevertheless works as a device to other Plantagenet opponents.

Pole’s third-person ascription of malevolence to her Tudor rivals is demonstrated by her account of her brother’s imprisonment and eventual execution, where her voice evokes the grievance and melancholia familiar in contemporary discourses of Englishness. The Tudors are said to pack Edward Plantagenet ‘away like a forgotten banner, among other worthless things’ and he is described as a ‘living constant reproach to the Tudors who captured that throne and now call it their own’.²³⁸ Though, the actual Pole is unlikely to have known him well, Gregory’s character refers to her brother by the anachronistic pet name, ‘Teddy’ which invokes pathos and

²³⁶ Ibid, p. 2.

²³⁷ Ibid, p. 3.

²³⁸ Ibid.

implies the informality of close family bonds.²³⁹ The description of his execution reinforces this by evoking intimacy with him at the point of death through the prism of Pole's own empathetic re-imagining. As with the awakening scene, this is achieved through the use of sensory language depicting physical experience.

He had not felt meadow grass under his feet for thirteen years. Then he walked out of the Tower, perhaps enjoying the smell of the rain on the wet earth, perhaps listening to the seagulls crying over the river, perhaps hearing beyond the high walls of the Tower the shouts and laughter of free men, free Englishmen, his subjects.²⁴⁰

The immersive nature of the narrative deflects the possibility of questioning the values underpinning Pole's account of events. There are no distancing mechanisms such as framing or irony in either text. Instead there are devices to emphasise the apparent verisimilitude of the narrative, such as journal-style chapter headings that evoke real space and temporality, creating the impression that the historical personage is confiding her private thoughts and feelings across time as events unfold.²⁴¹ Any sense of irony derives solely from the reader's prior knowledge of the historical record and likely invokes pity rather than detachment from the narrative voice. An example of this comes in *The Taming Of The Queen* when the Tudor family portrait is unveiled. This dynastic portrait of Henry VIII, which in real life, was presented to him in 1545 and was originally attributed to Hans Holbein but is now thought to be by an unknown British artist, depicts the King flanked by his three children and his third wife, Jane Seymour.²⁴² In Gregory's novel it is Parr who has sat for the painting. Because of this

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ For example, 'Westminster Palace, London, 29 November 1499' in *The King's Curse*, p. 1.

²⁴² Website: *Royal Collection Trust: British School, 16th Century: The Family of Henry VIII c. 1545*, <<https://www.rct.uk/collection/405796/the-family-of-henry-viii>> [accessed 10 December 2020].

she is convinced that she will be the consort shown at Henry's side and anticipates it triumphantly as an affirmation of her value and legacy:

This picture will hang in Whitehall Palace for years, perhaps for centuries. People will copy it and have the copies in pride of place in their own homes. It will show the royal children with their father, and me: seated at his side. It will mark my achievement – a great achievement – of bringing the royal children to their father.²⁴³

As is evident in the book jacket design, which reproduces this painting with the 'ghost queen' Jane Seymour shown in black and white, the wife who actually appears is the one who has produced the heir to the throne and the painting can be seen as an indicator of the two consorts' relative value to the King.²⁴⁴ The episode is used to create a sense of heightening danger. The scene's description extends over three pages. Parr's initial unknowingness and gradually dawning comprehension of her situation is symbolised by the slow drawing back of the gold cloth which is 'hiding the full picture'. Her exclusion from it, which becomes apparent in a series of stages, signals her vulnerability to the capriciousness of the King and the manoeuvrings of the court. At one point Gregory employs a series of incomplete minor sentences to emphasise Parr's horrified incredulosity:

The English hood that Nicholas de Vent chose from the royal wardrobe is perfectly rendered, the girdle at my waist done in fine detail, my skin as pearly and as pale as the king's magnificent legs. But my face...

But my face...

My face...²⁴⁵

²⁴³ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 245.

²⁴⁴ See fig. 12.

²⁴⁵ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 249.

This assumption of a shared perspective with the reader bears some similarity to that of the Condition of England texts: the narrative voices of Scruton, Hitchens and Kingsnorth also seem to presume the reader's affinity with their aggrieved outlook. For Gregory's readers especially, such complicity likely derives from a delusory self-ascription, since most people are in reality excluded from aristocratic circles, but it does serve to normalise the hierarchical value system. As is the case with speech, the inner voice, both real and fictional, is dialogic. As Palmer notes:

the word is always oriented toward an addressee. In the absence of a real addressee, as in the internal world of inner speech, the presupposed addressee is a normal representative of the speaker's social group.²⁴⁶

The reader is both internal and external to Pole and Parr. When they are external, they are being addressed and the assumption is that that they are socially equivalent: in other words, the reader is ascribed aristocratic status. This perspective differs from the kind of historical fiction examined by Lukács which centres on the experiences of unremarkable characters whose lives are shaped by a history over which they have little influence.

The implication in Gregory's narrative that the reader shares the protagonists' ambivalence about the lives of those outside her social group is demonstrated in *The King's Curse* by Pole's unquestioning aloofness from the suffering of her servants and tenants. For example, during a plague epidemic from which she and her family are 'hiding behind the high walls of my great estate', she reflects 'that we will get through this summer with nothing worse than a few deaths in the village and a kitchen boy who was probably sick but ran away to his own home and died there'.²⁴⁷ This indifference

²⁴⁶ Palmer, *Fictional Minds*, p. 153.

²⁴⁷ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 263.

to the lives of others recalls Gilroy's concept of 'infrahumanity' which he describes as 'the calculus that assigns differential value to lives lost according to their locations and supposed racial origins'.²⁴⁸ Whilst infrahumanity is not conferred on racial grounds in these texts, the implied reader is fully complicit with a perspective that regards some as more human than others.

This diminishment of others' agency is linked to the notion of *noblesse oblige*: a belief that hereditary privilege is acceptable because it entails responsibility for those over whom power is exercised. Gregory links it to the devolved sovereignty of the feudal estate that was being undermined by Henrician reform. It is apparent in Pole's words to the villagers opposing a 'visitation' by Cromwell's agents to Warblington priory when she addresses them as 'my people', tells them that 'this is my priory. I cannot save the priory but I can save you' and concludes with a command to 'Go to your homes. Let the visitation finish.'²⁴⁹ Her description of their departure which compares them to a herd of cattle confers differential levels of humanity and the reader's assumed complicity with such an accordance:

Unwillingly, uncertainly, like cattle that have broken through a hedge into a strange field and then don't know what to do with their freedom, they allow themselves to be chivvied out of the priory chapel and down the road to the village.²⁵⁰

As noted previously, for Gregory's Pole, ordinary people have no individual distinctiveness and no personal rights. She does not question, for instance, her right to 'cuff one of my men around the head with a hard backward slap of my hand'.²⁵¹ Whilst she exults in the adulation of her family by the crowds, she is seemingly

²⁴⁸ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, p. 10.

²⁴⁹ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 417.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 417-8.

²⁵¹ Ibid, p. 415.

ambivalent about subjecting these same supporters to violence or harsh treatment in the cause of self-preservation. An example of this comes when, following her reinstatement as Princess Mary's governess, she returns to London with her son Montague and thousands of people shout out in support of her family. In reaction to this, Montague 'nods to one of the guards who rides into the crowd, crushing people with his big horse, and takes the flat of his sword and delivers a thudding blow to the young loyalist'.²⁵² His reason for violently inflicting injuries on his supporters is the fear that their shouts of loyalty will dangerously offend the King. This would be 'the sort of criticism that he cannot bear to hear', potentially causing his family to fall from favour which would put their safety and prosperity at risk.²⁵³

The Poles' ruthless pursuit of their own interests is evident throughout *The King's Curse* but is presented in such a way as to evoke pathos. For example, at an earlier stage of the novel, during a period of relative impoverishment imposed by Henry VII, Pole cruelly exploits her tenants. 'I do everything I can to wring more money out of my lands', she says, and this means ruthlessly extracting the benefits of land ownership:

I forbid the tenants from taking any living thing from the land – even rabbits, even old eggs that the hens have laid away – and I hire a gamekeeper to prevent them taking trout from my rivers [...] I become terrified that people are stealing from me, and I start to steal from them as I insist on my dues and more.²⁵⁴

Gregory sympathetically depicts a character who seems to regret the hardship she inflicts and attributes it to the fact that she has 'become half-mad with worry about money'.²⁵⁵ Pierce's account contradicts this: based on evidence, she describes her as

²⁵² Ibid, p. 438.

²⁵³ Ibid, p. 439.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 86.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 87.

'an active and enthusiastic landlord' who 'took draconian measures' to extract money from tenants irrespective of her financial condition.²⁵⁶ Gregory concurs with the historical facts but, as Jerome de Groot points out, novelists 'are important for their ability to take dry facts and information and invest them with fictional life, to somehow communicate what the past was like'.²⁵⁷ The draconian landlord suggested by the historical record is transformed by Gregory into one who understandably inflicts suffering on others because of her personal state of worry and desperation. The text omits the consequent suffering of her tenants. Representation of the non-elite in this text, by assigning differential value to human lives, under-writes the race-based othering identified by Gilroy because it subscribes to the principle of birth-right, of genetics as a basis for discrimination. Focussing here on class rather than race, the novel is nevertheless reflective of the thinking that some 'human bodies are more easily and appropriately humiliated, imprisoned, shackled, starved, and destroyed than others' and that less privileged groups 'cannot be reciprocally endowed with the same vital humanity enjoyed by their rulers'.²⁵⁸

Wealth, both its acquisition and loss, is an important theme of the novel and evidence suggests that it was a key driver of the historical Pole's actions. According to Pierce, Pole was a conspicuous consumer whose lavish lifestyle underscored her power by revealing the extensive resources which could be deployed should her authority be flouted. As always, her imperative was the preservation of her family's position.²⁵⁹ Gregory's version is consistent with the facts as presented by Pierce, but Pole's motives are presented differently. The narrative voice highlights, with

²⁵⁶ Pierce, *Margaret Pole*, loc. 1655.

²⁵⁷ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010) Kindle ebook, loc. 1887.

²⁵⁸ Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, pp. 10-11.

²⁵⁹ Pierce, *Margaret Pole*, loc. 1249.

melancholic regret, the natural beneficence of feudal power and correlates old money with virtue. 'My mother was the richest heiress in England, my father was brother to the king', she claims, and they 'kept followers, retainers and adherents by constant, open-handed generosity'.²⁶⁰ Pierce acknowledges that Pole seems to have adhered to this familial principle and inspired a similar loyalty but is clear about her instrumentalism: she 'operated successfully as a "good lord" because 'most importantly, she made service to her worthwhile'.²⁶¹ In Gregory's novel, Pole's loss of soft power under the rule of Henry VII is emotively presented as an understandable source of grief, thus reinforcing the conservatism of the novel's narrative impetus. In both novels, this conservatism is articulated in the antagonism of the narrative voice towards the 'man from nowhere'.²⁶²

The decline of the feudal order, of which Pole is a member, parallels the ascendancy of the new man. According to Benedict Anderson, the formation of nations was tied to the development of absolute monarchies and, in turn, this political system was dependent on functionaries. For Anderson, the professionalisation of government was essential to early nation-building in Europe as it helped to create a 'unified apparatus of power' that supported central rule 'over against [sic] a decentralized, particularistic feudal nobility'.²⁶³ New men lacked independent power, thus depending for their status on their ruler and, promoted as they were on the basis of merit rather than birth, helped to foster the human interchangeability necessary for absolutism. The novels present the process of rationalisation as an entropy for which the new men are responsible. A preoccupation of both texts is the growing absolutism of the Crown

²⁶⁰ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 87.

²⁶¹ Pierce, *Margaret Pole*, loc. 1800.

²⁶² For example, Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 260.

²⁶³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* Revised edn (London: Verso, 2016) p. 55.

which is framed (rather similarly to the 2016 anti-EU campaign) as a threat to virtuous feudal sovereignty, though it is unfavourably associated with Henry VIII's personal instability rather than political expedience. For example, Pole reflects that the 'king has been seduced and entrapped by bad advisors' and that 'we have to win him back from them'.²⁶⁴ Later, she tells the villagers who oppose the Warblington visitation, that 'we must beg the king to dismiss his wrong-thinking advisors' which will 'put the country to rights again. As it was in the old days'.²⁶⁵ In *The Taming of the Queen*, advisors are shown to be duplicitous and self-interested whilst having 'enormous power' which makes it 'easy for them to withhold information that he should have, or cast the law in a way that suits themselves'.²⁶⁶ They are linguistically diminished: in *The King's Curse*, for example, Richard Layton and Thomas Legh, who inspect the priory at Warblington, are said to 'scuttle' and to be 'cowering'. Legh makes 'a funny little nodding gesture with his head'. Their untrustworthiness is implied by a 'quickly suppressed smile'.²⁶⁷

Pole's conservative organicism is evident in her preoccupation with the usurper figure and her distaste is repeatedly articulated in ways that recall the 'citizen of nowhere' trope discussed in Chapter One. The upwardly mobile Cromwell is repeatedly referred to as a 'man from nowhere' and this lack of fixedness in terms pedigree and status is linked to being 'without principle'. For Pole, 'Thomas Cromwell, is neither of the Church nor of the nobility. He's a man from nowhere without education, like an animal. He seeks only to serve the king, like a dog'.²⁶⁸ The Tory-radical positioning implied by this depiction is brought into focus through a comparison with Hilary Mantel's characterisation of Cromwell as an intelligent and cultivated polymath

²⁶⁴ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 332.

²⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 417.

²⁶⁶ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 120.

²⁶⁷ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, pp. 413-17.

²⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 332.

whose rise signals a new 'world of the possible'.²⁶⁹ For Mantel, Cromwell is part of 'how the world changes: a counter pushed across a table, a pen stroke that alters the force of a phrase'.²⁷⁰ He helps drive the transformation of the state from a chaotic, fragmented theocracy to an efficient, secular bureaucracy requiring 'new men, new structures, new thinking'.²⁷¹ Mantel highlights Cromwell's networking skills and mastery of micropolitics. As the third novel in the trilogy *The Mirror and the Light* shows, his power does derive entirely from the King and is used exclusively in his service, but Mantel's Cromwell is nevertheless credited with agency and a superior intellect to those of breeding. Gregory's version of the 'dog' is more in keeping with ideas about Henry VIII as an active ruler and of Cromwell as merely an obedient servant. This reflects the preference for amateurism and distaste for expertise that characterises dominant discourses of Englishness.

This viewpoint is expressed by several of Gregory's noble protagonists and their associates who speak pejoratively of meritocratic success. Instinct and generalism is accorded superiority over the rationalism and skill of the King's advisors: Wolsey's strategic thinking and managerial ability are disparaged. Whilst Mantel's Cromwell reflects that the 'king – lord of generalities – must now learn to labour over detail, led on by intelligent greed', Pole's assessment of Wolsey in *The King's Curse* expresses contempt for a pedantry that would be beneath an aristocrat's notice.²⁷² In describing preparation for war with France, she observes that the 'detail, the constant orders about transport, supplies and timing – which no nobleman can be bothered to follow – is all that Wolsey thinks about, and he thinks about nothing else'.²⁷³ He is portrayed

²⁶⁹ Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009), p. 205.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 610.

²⁷¹ *Ibid*, p. 611.

²⁷² *Ibid*, p. 610.

²⁷³ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 128.

here as limited, joyless and, like Cromwell, self-serving - somebody who, in the words of Catherine of Aragon, 'always seems to get what he wants'.²⁷⁴ Similarly, Gregory's Duke of Norfolk, who, in common with his fellow aristocrats favours the 'old ways', expresses his dislike of Wolsey's modern methods of government.²⁷⁵ Norfolk is described as having 'a dogged limp', as 'the most loyal subject in the kingdom' and as being 'as uncomplicated as a mastiff': attributes indicating steadfastness and the peculiarly English anti-intellectualism noted in Chapter One.²⁷⁶ Unsurprisingly given this context, the following account highlights Wolsey's formidable ability, but portrays it as a defect:

'Since the king stopped taking the queen's advice he is prey to any clever talker who can put an argument together', the duke says scathingly. 'And this Wolsey has nothing to boast of but a library of books, and the mind of a goldsmith. He can tell you the price of anything, he can tell you the names of every town in England. He knows the bribe for every member of parliament and every secret that they hide.'²⁷⁷

Norfolk resents the passing of a world in which 'we knew where we were' and that was 'ruled by the nobility'. He is disturbed by the erosion of unitary identities meaning that 'we have no idea who is our friend or our enemy, and no idea where we're going'.²⁷⁸ Pole and her kin resent Wolsey's success because of their belief in breeding: a view with which the implied reader is made complicit through the embedded first-person narrative. They are horrified when Wolsey deputises for the absent king. In a letter, Catherine of Aragon tells Pole that he 'writes to him on special paper from Richmond Palace and is living there, ruling like a king himself. He hears pleas from all over the

²⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 188.

²⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 324.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 137.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 138.

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

country and decides on them in the royal presence chamber, seated on a throne'.²⁷⁹ In conversation with Norfolk, Pole remarks 'disapprovingly' of Wolsey's 'growing very great' and is offended that he has risen from 'very small beginnings'.²⁸⁰ In a similar vein, she laments when 'the bastard Henry Fitzroy, is honoured beyond belief' and finds it unimaginable that Anne Boleyn, 'the daughter of my steward' has 'walked before a princess born'.²⁸¹ In lamenting the rise of the Boleyns, Pole's language links pedigree with English land and its fertility. For example, as she reflects on Thomas Boleyn's trajectory, she remarks that it 'seems like a long time since I was pruning back the vine and hoping for English wine' and Thomas Boleyn was her steward. Pole associates Boleyn's over-reaching with the destruction of this idyll, with 'how much more danger we are all in'.²⁸² Her incredulity at the overthrowing of social convention is expressed through a series of outraged rhetorical questions that situate England as victim of the aspirational usurpers.

Who would have thought that a Boleyn could advise the King? Who would have thought that the daughter of my steward should threaten the Queen of England? Who would ever have dreamed that a king of England would overthrow the laws of the land and the Church itself to get such a girl into his bed? ²⁸³

The melancholia of *The King's Curse* is linked to the suppression of an identity which conflates class with Englishness. The idea of being 'nowhere' and 'nobody' is horrifying to Pole, although for her the majority of people are just that and should remain so. This elevated sense of entitlement is signalled by metaphors of live burial to describe the social descent of her marriage that occur in the novel's opening. Of her

²⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 181.

²⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 138.

²⁸¹ Ibid, pp. 239, 292.

²⁸² Ibid, p. 327.

²⁸³ Ibid.

marriage, she remarks, in language evocative of the French Revolution, that 'I am buried in him, my name hidden in his. I am cut off from my title as sharply as if my name had been beheaded and rolled away into a basket'.²⁸⁴ She is 'married to obscurity, wedded to shadows, hidden in wedlock'.²⁸⁵ She declares that she and her cousin, Elizabeth of York, have been required to 'deny our breeding, our childhoods, our pasts' though the latter is in fact, the mother of the King.²⁸⁶ This obliteration extends to the King's oldest daughter, Mary who, on hearing that she is to be excluded from an Anglo-French summit, complains that her 'own father wants to make me into a nobody, as if I had never been born to him. Or never lived'.²⁸⁷ This sense of marginalisation exists alongside the sense of entitlement apparent in the following passage where Pole mourns the glories of her family's past:

Mine is the most dangerous name in England: Plantagenet, and once I carried it proudly, like a crown. Once I was Margaret Plantagenet of York, niece of two kings, the brothers Edward IV and Richard III, and the third brother was my father, George Duke of Clarence. My mother was the wealthiest woman in England and the daughter of a man so great that they called him 'Kingmaker' [...] and nothing, nothing in the world was too good or too rich or too rare for us.²⁸⁸

The narrative voice in both texts conflates noble identity with Englishness which invites a further comparison with Princess Diana. Despite a real-life cosmopolitanism shared with Pole, Diana and her romantic betrayal narrative became associated very strongly with Englishness and, as noted in the Introduction, her posthumous role as nationalist focal point is explicit in the lyrics of the song performed at her funeral by Elton John.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁴ *ibid*, p. 2.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid*.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 7.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 339.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 2.

²⁸⁹ The former was an international celebrity and in the main embraced global causes such as the eradication of landmines and the de-stigmatising of AIDs sufferers whilst the Pole family were affiliated with continental interests and efforts to restore Rome's supremacy.

The words that were sung associate English identity with grief and deference to the nobility, specifically to the royal female intercessor figure.²⁹⁰ It is this sense of the nation that informs Gregory's portrayal of Pole and Parr. As in the case of Diana, the narrative voice in both texts is strongly correlated with Englishness. The words 'England' and 'English' occur frequently and usually at points when the protagonists are expressing opposition to the Tudor monarchy. In recounting the execution of her brother for being 'the true heir to the throne of England', for example, Pole claims that 'half of England would turn out just for that haunting flicker of white embroidery, the white rose' and that at the point of death he would have heard 'the shouts and laughter of free men, free Englishmen, his subjects'.²⁹¹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given that anglicization was a central principle of the Reformation, the sanctity or otherwise of the English language is a theme that links all the texts examined in this thesis and Parr's role as an icon of Englishness is signalled through the portrayal of her Protestantism and her determination to distribute vernacular religious texts. She is positioned as a champion of the English language and its capacity to enlighten ordinary people who are misled and beguiled by foreign tongues. In exchanges between Parr and the King that recall reports of contemporary English hostility towards multilingual public spaces, Latin is dismissed as 'yammer yammer yammer' whilst prayers in the 'simple language' of English are described as 'both true and beautiful' and Anne of Cleves' German accent is likened to 'the cawing of a crow, even after all these years in England'.²⁹² Repeatedly, Parr's narrative conflates the English language with truth and extols its simplicity. It is 'beautiful but

²⁹⁰ Bernie Taupin and Elton John, *Candle in the Wind* 1997, www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/politics97/diana/lyrics.html [accessed May 31st 2018].

²⁹¹ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 3.

²⁹² Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, pp. 122, 265.

simple words that anyone can read' (this would be unlikely as less than 20% of the adult population are estimated to have been literate in sixteenth century England).²⁹³ Possession of this 'simple language' promises liberty, self-determination and equality to its people: the 'more that I study, the more certain I am that men – and equally women – can take charge of their own souls, can work for their own salvation, and can pray directly to God'.²⁹⁴ Her vernacular texts promise to foster the simultaneity that Anderson identifies as key to the imagined community of nation, as she predicts that 'all of England will read them a thousand times, they will be read every day in church' whilst the spiritual self-reliance she advocates corresponds with Liah Greenfield's argument that modern nationhood originates in the individualism engendered by the English Reformation.²⁹⁵ Parr's association with these perceived roots of English nationalism is deepened when the King calls her 'my helpmeet and my partner' in 'leading the people from darkness into light'.²⁹⁶ In having Parr predict a state that the reader knows will come to exist, Gregory heightens the sense of her prescience, virtue and greatness. For Gregory, the most important aspect of Parr's legacy is the fact that 'she was the first woman to publish in English as we speak it today' therefore making her 'an extraordinary contributor to the culture of the country'.²⁹⁷ Parr's narrative associates the English language with virtue, authenticity and agency, reflecting the contemporary belief held by some, including the Condition of England writers examined in Chapter One, in England's linguistic and literary superiority.²⁹⁸ She is

²⁹³ Max Roser and Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2016) – 'Literacy' in *Our World In Data*, <<https://ourworldindata.org/literacy/>> [accessed 11 August 2017] and Gregory, *Taming of the Queen*, p. 160.

²⁹⁴ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 283.

²⁹⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 22-31. Liah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 31.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 200.

²⁹⁷ 'Philippa Gregory introduces *The Taming of the Queen*', <<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=-KwBigYIQ3M>>, [accessed 30th May 2018].

²⁹⁸ This can be seen in, for example, the inclusion of 'Language Change Over Time' as a compulsory element of A Level specifications, in Brexit rhetoric about so-called CANZUK- based alliances, in the

horrified by the prospect of 'the English Church' returning to Rome 'despite all the advances that we have made' and religious reform is directly correlated with national identity when she declares that the 'power of Spain should not dictate the beliefs of English men and women'.²⁹⁹ Gregory's portrayal of Parr's beliefs corresponds to those of historians and the evidence of her own writings. The real Parr is described by Susan James as:

a strong-willed and outspoken woman, a committed player of power politics, an active patron of a multitude of arts taking shape in the emerging English Renaissance, a vigorous contributor to and supporter of the English Reformation and arguably the first Protestant queen of England.³⁰⁰

James confirms Parr's intelligence and her commitment to the provision of religious material in the vernacular but in Gregory's version, her embrace of Protestantism is explicitly synonymised with Englishness rather than with theology.³⁰¹ The dissidence of both Parr and Pole is linked by Gregory to a national identity threatened by state authority. The portrayal of royal tyranny in her work does not undermine the underlying principle of monarchy. Instead, the problems are attributed to occupation of the throne by the wrong king and to the ascendancy of modernising upstarts. Greenfield connects the advent of English nationalism with the Plantagenets' defeat at Bosworth Field which led to the dissolution of feudalism.³⁰² For Gregory's Pole, conversely, this means disorientation and loss. For her, England is now ruled by an imposter whose 'throne

populist prescriptivism of right-wing media personalities like John Humphreys and in the metaphorical triumphalism of narratives such as Melvyn Bragg's televised documentary series, *The Adventure of English*, ITV, 6-30 November, 2003. It is also a theme that runs through Scruton's *England: An Elegy* (2000) and Hitchens' *The Abolition of Britain* (2008). In the former see for example, Chapter Five, 'Community as Person', pp. 43-67. and Chapter Nine, 'English Culture', pp. 199-233. In the latter see for example Chapter Nine, 'The Queen's English', pp. 177-189.

²⁹⁹ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 389. and p. 283.

³⁰⁰ Susan James, *Catherine Parr: Henry VIII's Last Love*, ebook edn (Brimscombe Port Stroud: The History Press, 2011) Kindle ebook, loc. 68.

³⁰¹ Ibid, loc 78.

³⁰¹ Ibid, loc 78.

³⁰² Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*, p. 44.

was won on a battlefield by chance and by treason' and this means the disintegration of the English nation.³⁰³ The narrative of *The King's Curse* suggests that tyranny is the consequence of transgressing the boundaries of class and bloodline, presenting the Tudor kings, particularly Henry VIII, as fascinating aberrations rather than the regrettable outcome of a systemic risk.

The cultural positioning of Gregory's work - her portrayal of an English past that is exclusively white, dynastic, personal and shaped by loss and decline - is reinforced by its paratexts. For Gérard Genette, the role of the paratext is to 'surround' and 'extend' the text. To 'ensure the text's presence in the world, its "reception" and consumption in the form [...] of a book'. It is a 'threshold' through which the reader steps inside the storyworld.³⁰⁴ These 'paratexts', as in many other historical novels, include visual material such as maps, family trees, the book jacket design and other pictorial features. They also include supplementary written texts such as the 'Author's Note' and bibliography which, in ascribing scholarship and veracity to the work, help to deflect the fictionality of the narrative. The reader's reception of Gregory's narratives is shaped before the actual novel begins. The front matter of both these texts contain illustrations that appear to be topographical maps. In *The King's Curse* there is a representation of 'London 1499' [fig. 2.1] followed on the next page, by one of 'Tudor England' [fig. 2.2]. Similarly *The Taming of the Queen* contains a map of 'London 1543' [fig. 2.3], followed by one of 'England And France 1543' [fig. 2.4]. In these maps, London's topography is shown to comprise solely of the River Thames, the Tower of London and the Tyburn gallows along with various royal palaces and residences associated with the protagonists. The remaining space, (presumably where the rest of

³⁰³ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 529.

³⁰⁴ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 1-2.

the population live), is represented by very faint symbols of trees and hills. By omitting all other cultural and social landmarks and depicting instead a natural landscape that is homogeneous and uncharted, these paratexts decontextualize the narratives from their wider historical contexts and do not acknowledge the existence of other English histories and geographies. The maps of 'Tudor England' and 'England and France 1543' are devoid of any topographical features apart from the residences and locales with which the characters are directly associated and a symbol for the sea around the coastline. The titles of the maps give the impression of being genuine, historically accurate representations of geographical space at this time but delineate this England of the past solely with royal landmarks. By implication, this defines its significant population as aristocratic. Moreover, the exclusion of all but the natural topography elsewhere, conjures familiar Scrutopian images of an unspoilt rural idyll.

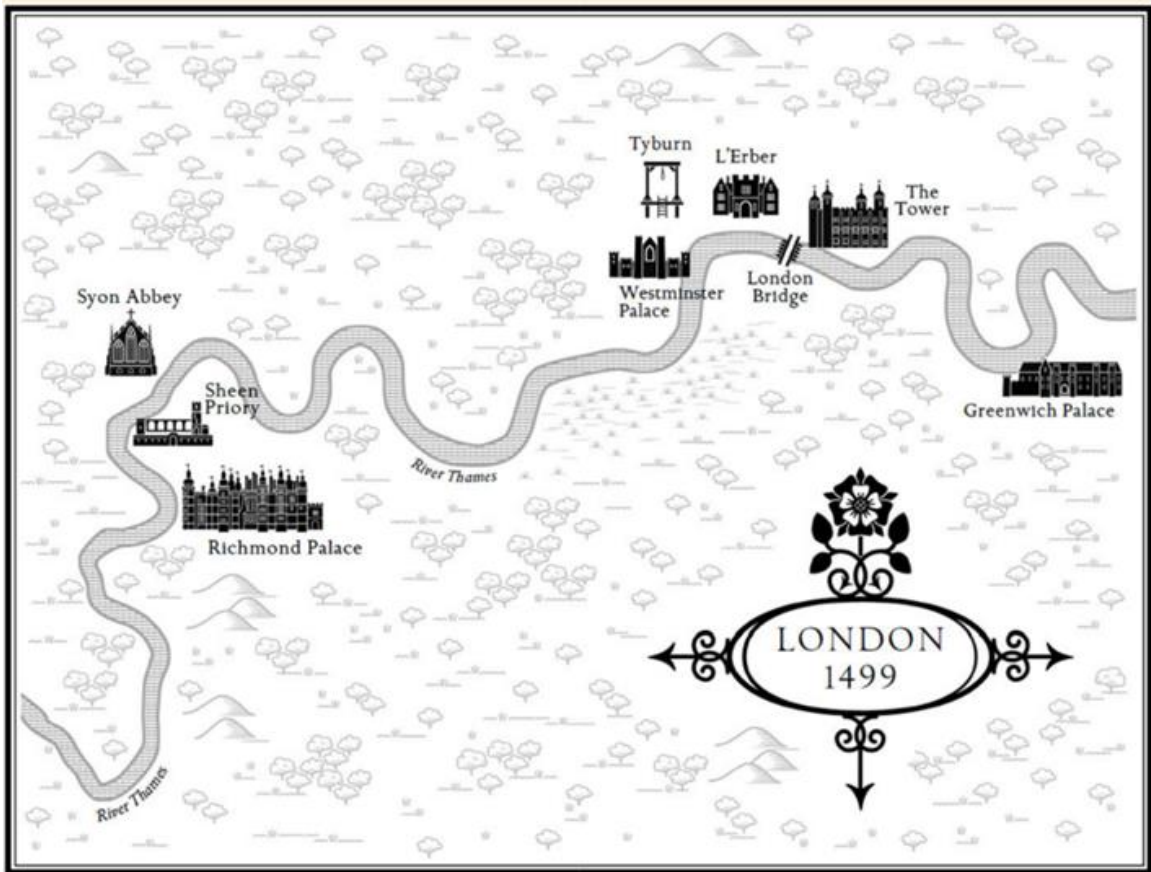


Figure 2.1 'London 1499' in Gregory, *The King's Curse*, pages unnumbered

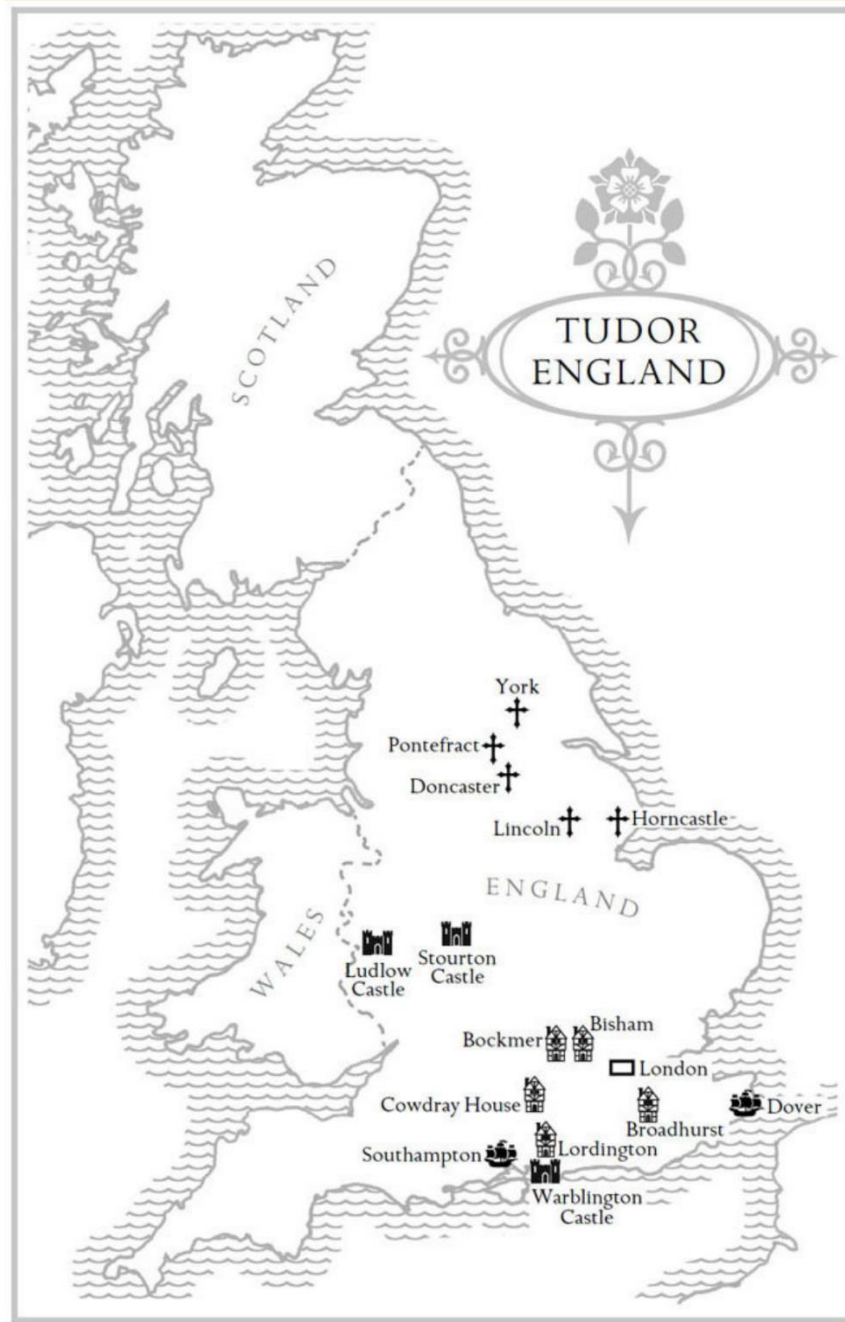


Figure 2.2 'Tudor England' in Gregory, *The King's Curse*, page unnumbered

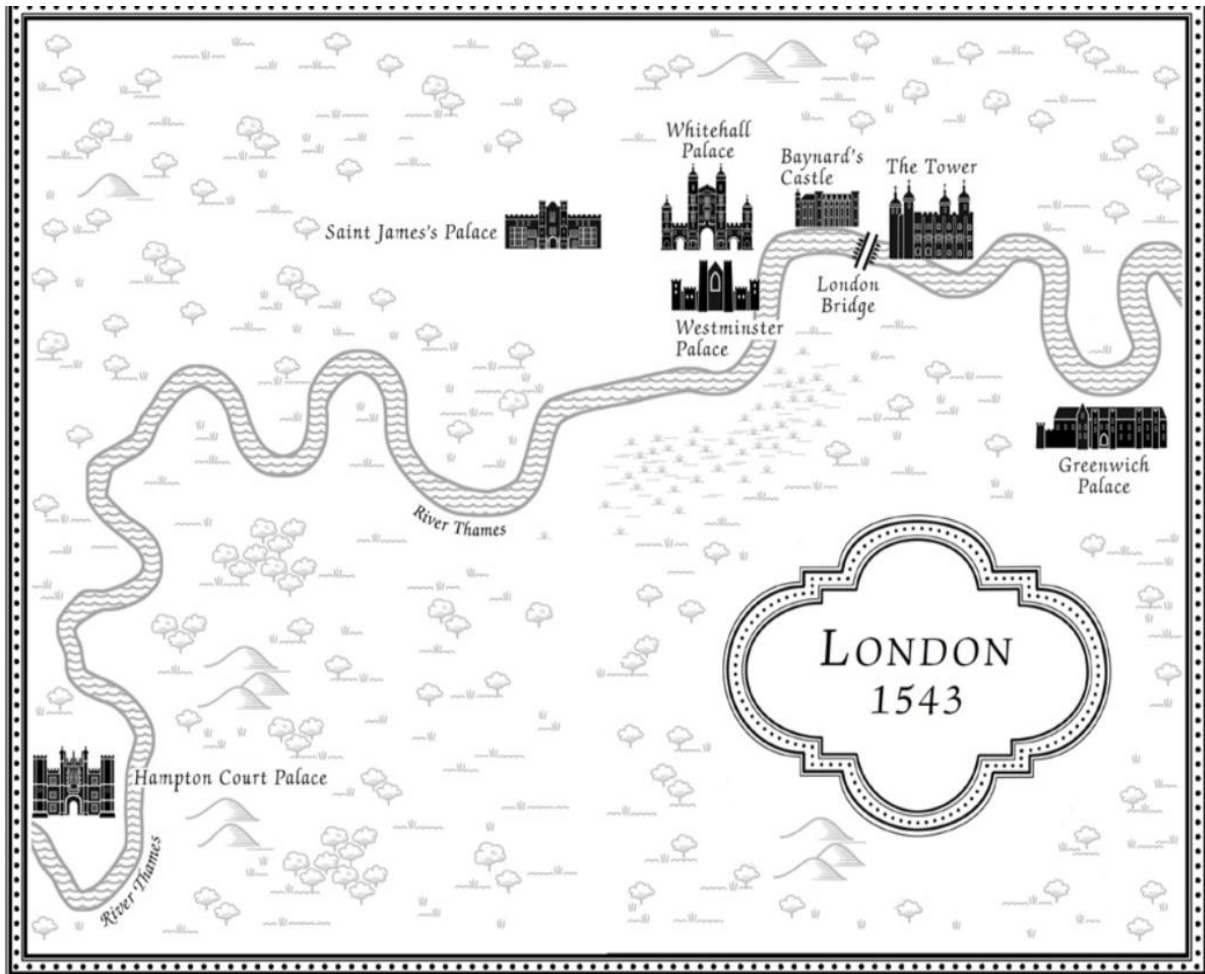


Figure 2.3 'London 1543' in Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, pages unnumbered

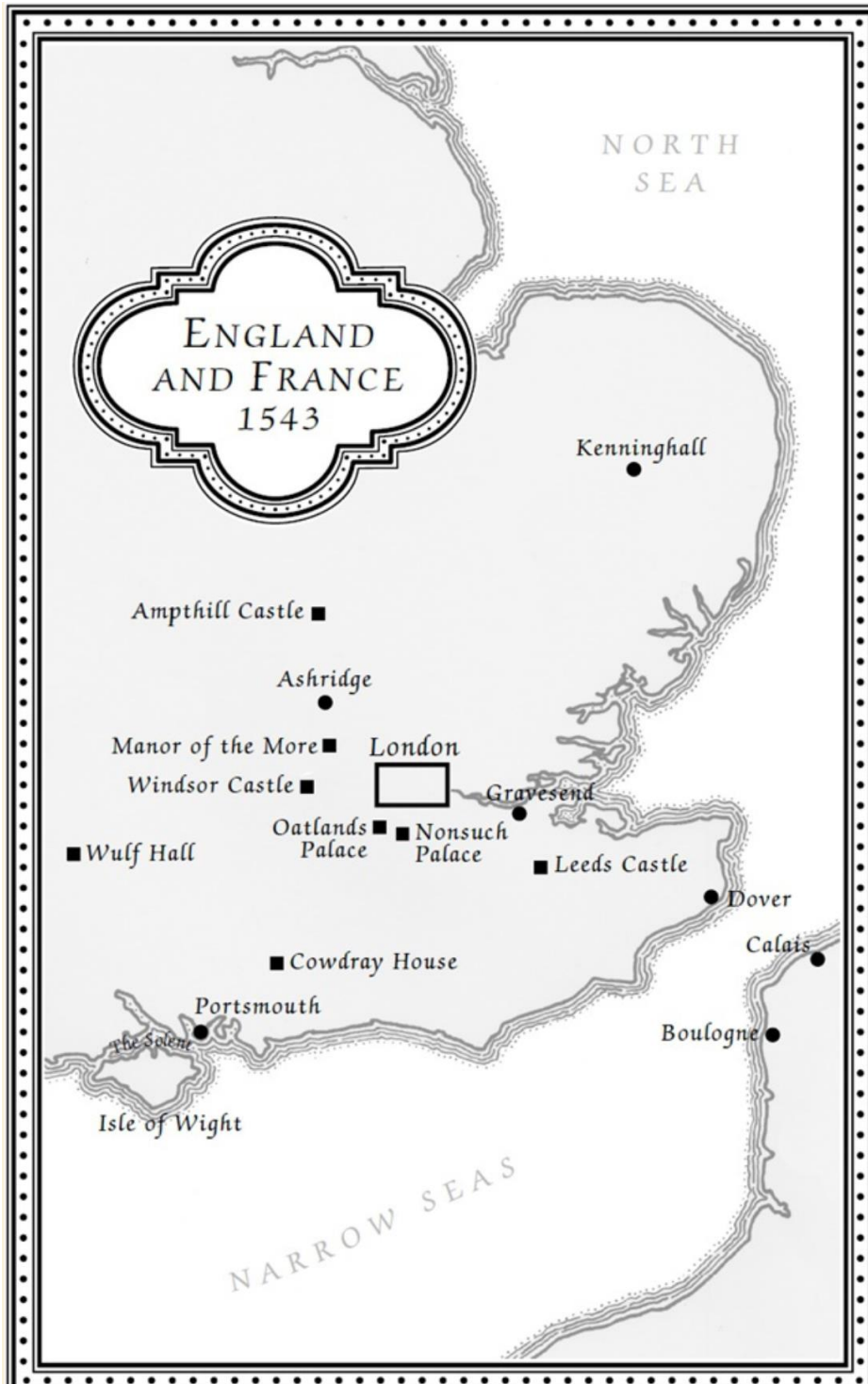


Figure 2.4 'England and France 1543' in Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, page unnumbered

As David Harvey suggests, map-making is a crucial psychological factor in national consciousness and politics as it defines a space.³⁰⁵ This visual representation of the texts' spatial imaginary erases those beyond Court circles and aligns with the narratives' proscription of agency and particularity for those lower in the social order. The conflicts and injustices of England's past are presented solely in terms of Court factions so that the history empathically experienced by the reader is one which excludes them. However, as implied readers, they participate vicariously in the narrators' melancholia.

Also to be found in the front matter are (diagrams of) family trees, or in the case of the Tudors, Plantagenets and Stuarts, the lineage of their 'Houses'. These are headed with dates: 'The Tudor and Plantagenet Houses in November 1499' [fig.2.5], 'The Tudor and Stuart Houses in 1543' [fig.2.6] and 'Katelyn Parr's Family in 1543' [fig.2.7]. The precise dating along with the meticulous mapping of births, marriages and deaths confers credibility to what will follow and in *The King's Curse*, the pairing of the family names indicates Pole's status as royalty, as does the choice of the word 'house' rather than family. This indicates a dynastic rather than familial saga which enhances the sense of historic significance and also, in helping to emphasise the degree of Pole's fall, adds to the sense of tragedy. Inserted at various stages in the same text, three family trees provide a parallel narrative which validates that of Pole but also implies authorial comment on the text's plot. In addition to the 1499 diagram of the front matter, one for '17 May 1521' [fig.2.8] is inserted in the body of the text on page 234, following the execution of Pole's cousin, Buckingham and one for '27 May 1541' [fig.2.9] comes on pages 581 and 582 at the end of the narrative and

³⁰⁵ David Harvey, *Cosmopolitanism and the Geographies of Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) pp. 48-9.

immediately preceding the 'Author Note': a paratext that expresses Gregory's unalloyed admiration for Pole.³⁰⁶ These last two diagrams are populated by rose-like symbols for the different families. In the 1521 tree there are light-coloured roses to represent 'Plantagenet heirs' and black ones for 'Executed Plantagenet heirs'. In the final tree, these are joined by a more boldly-drawn type of rose to represent the 'Tudor heirs'. The increasing number of black roses highlights the extent of the Plantagenet death toll, implying a Tudor policy of systematic familicide and therefore bypassing historical evidence of the family's treasonable behaviour. At the end of the novel, the relative scarcity of Tudor roses compared to an abundance of living Plantagenets suggests the undiminished superiority of the latter and confirms the frequently alluded to weakness of the Tudor stock.³⁰⁷ The roses resemble the emblems of the Houses of York and Lancaster and the Tudor rose appears, like a royal seal, under every chapter heading in *The King's Curse* evoking the authority of English heritage and reinforcing the royal mystique. In *The Taming of the Queen*, each chapter is headed by the initials KP in a font that appears to resemble sixteenth-century calligraphy [fig.2.10]. Both paratextual devices invoke the authenticity of the archive but this is likely to be illusory. The real artefacts would in probability alienate the lay reader as their antiquated formatting and calligraphy, the unfamiliarity of their punctuation, word usage and other language features, together with their appearance of physical fragility would highlight the otherness of the past.

³⁰⁶ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, pp. 585-588.

³⁰⁷ For example, see Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 22.

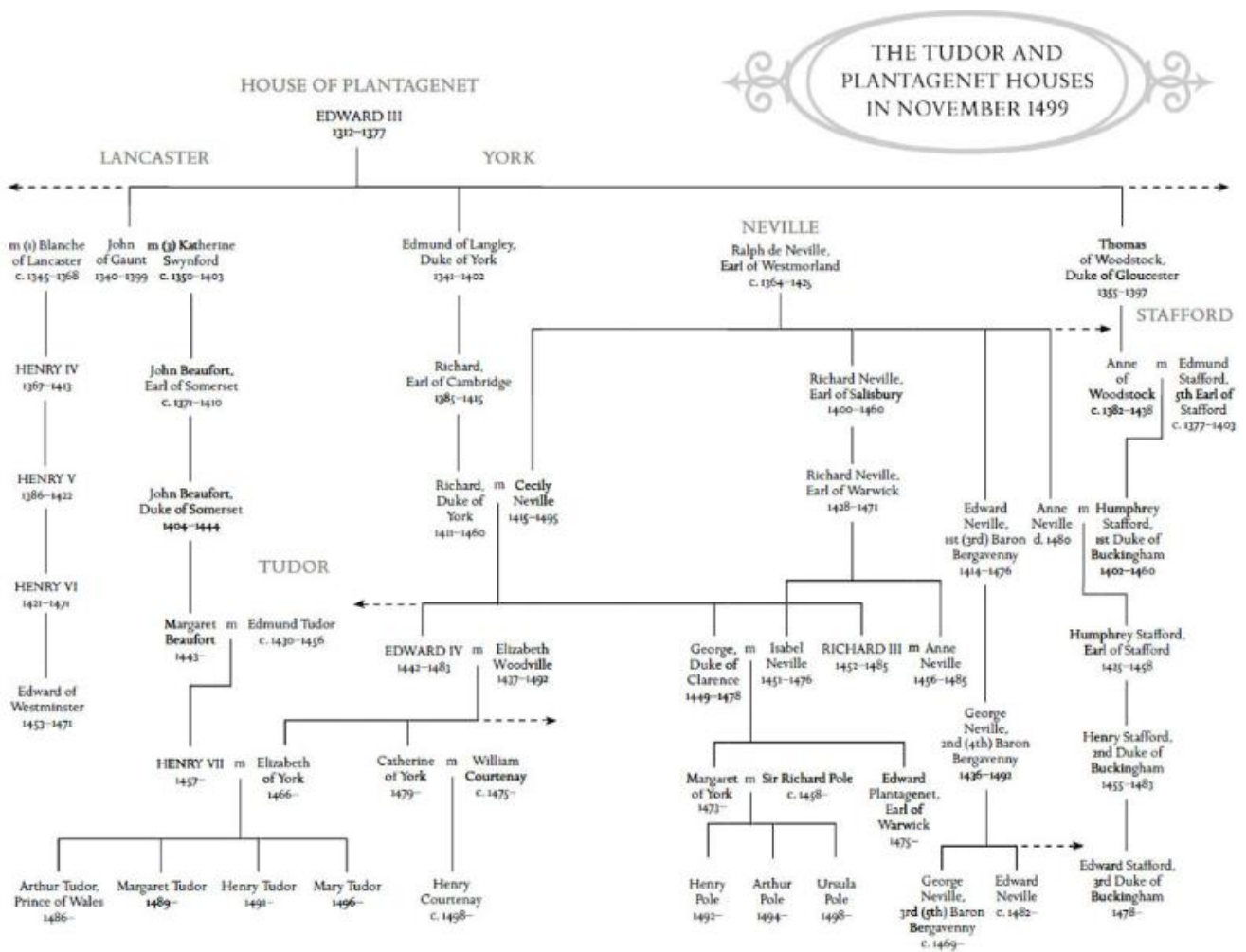


Figure 2.5 'The Tudor and Plantagenet Houses in November 1499' in Gregory, *The King's Curse*, pages unnumbered

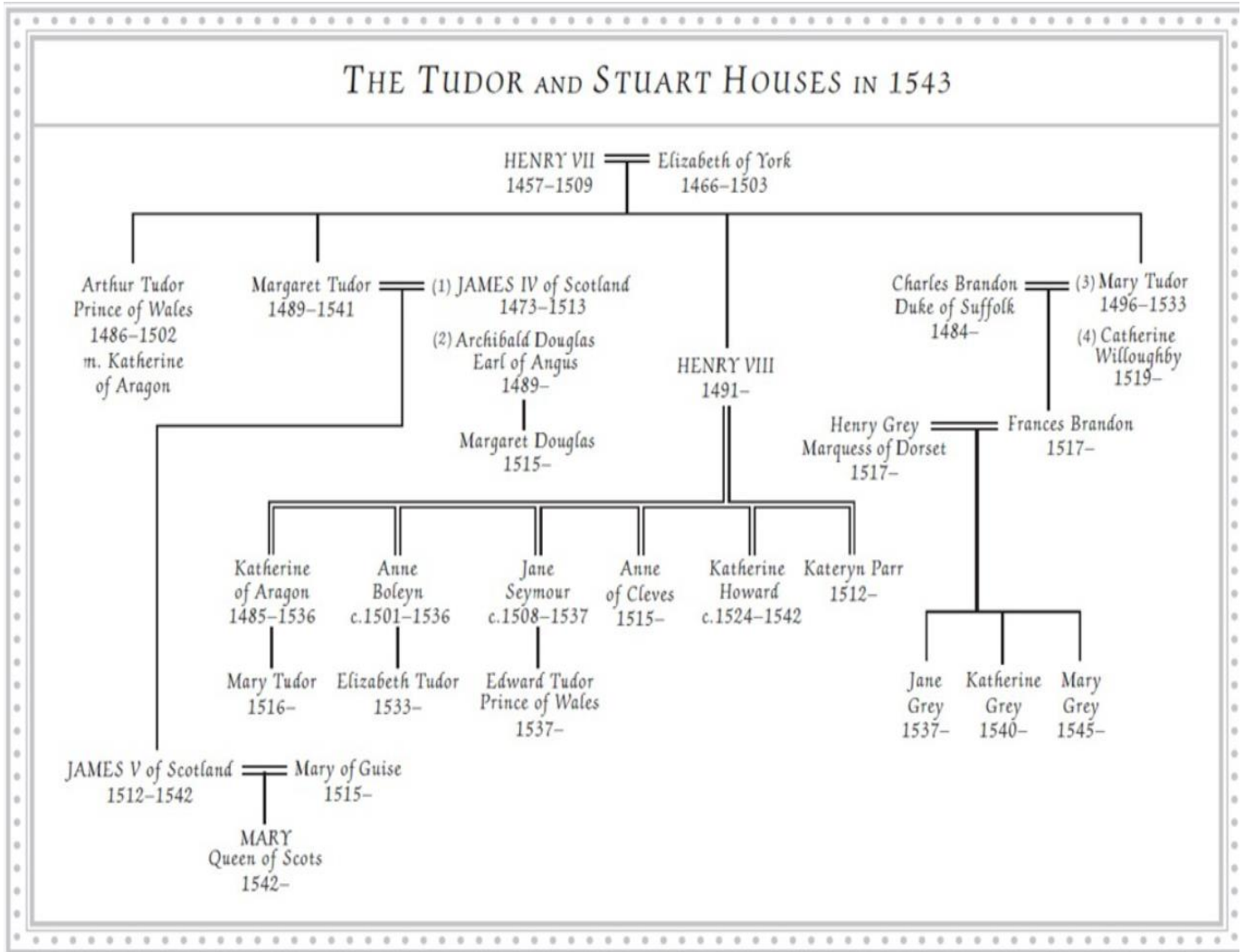


Figure 2.6 'The Tudor and Stuart Houses in 1543' in Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, page unnumbered

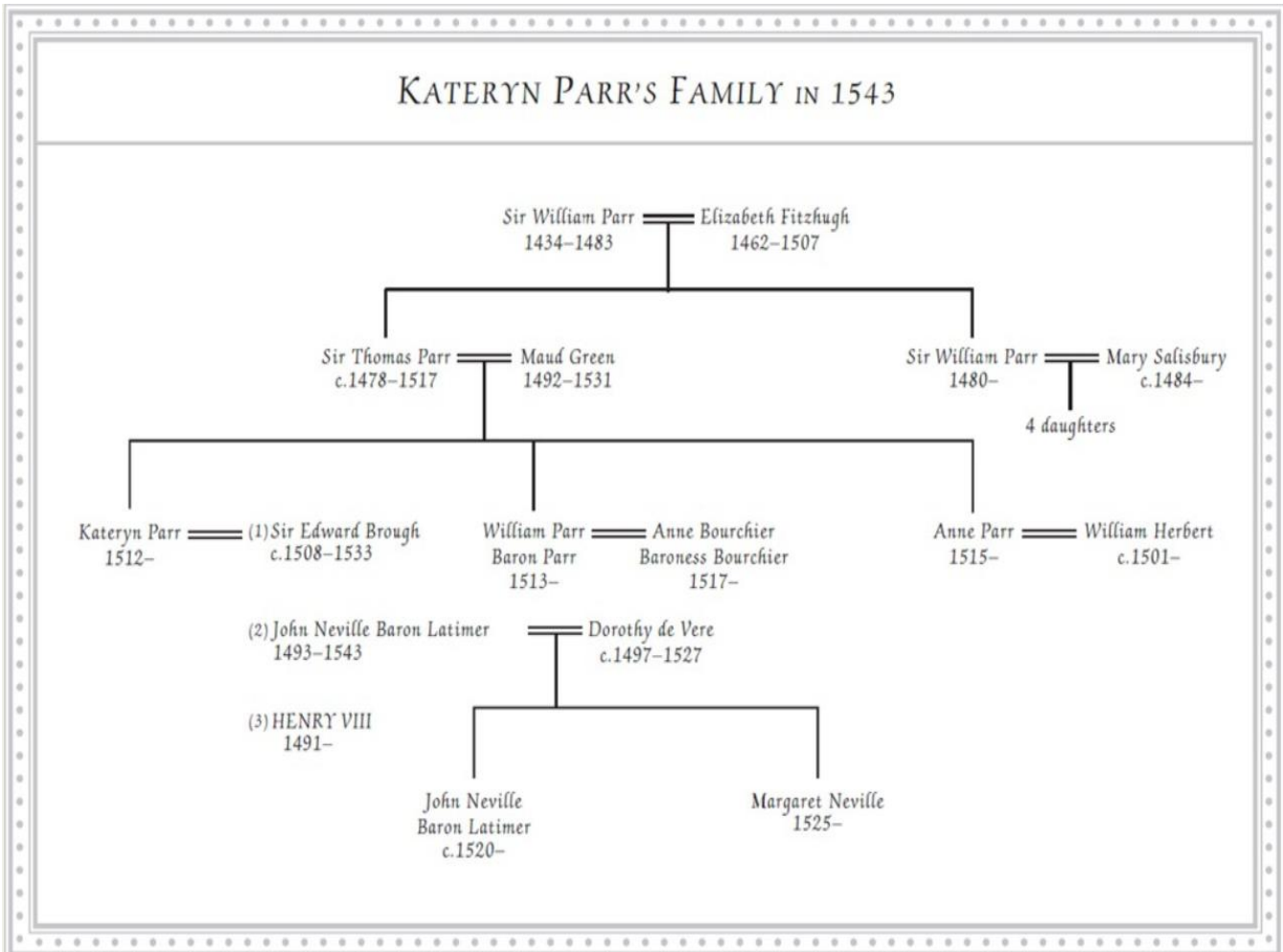




Figure 2.7 'Kateryn Parr's Family in 1543' in Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, page unnumbered

-  Plantagenet heirs
-  Executed Plantagenet heirs

THE HOUSE OF PLANTAGENET
ON 17 MAY 1521

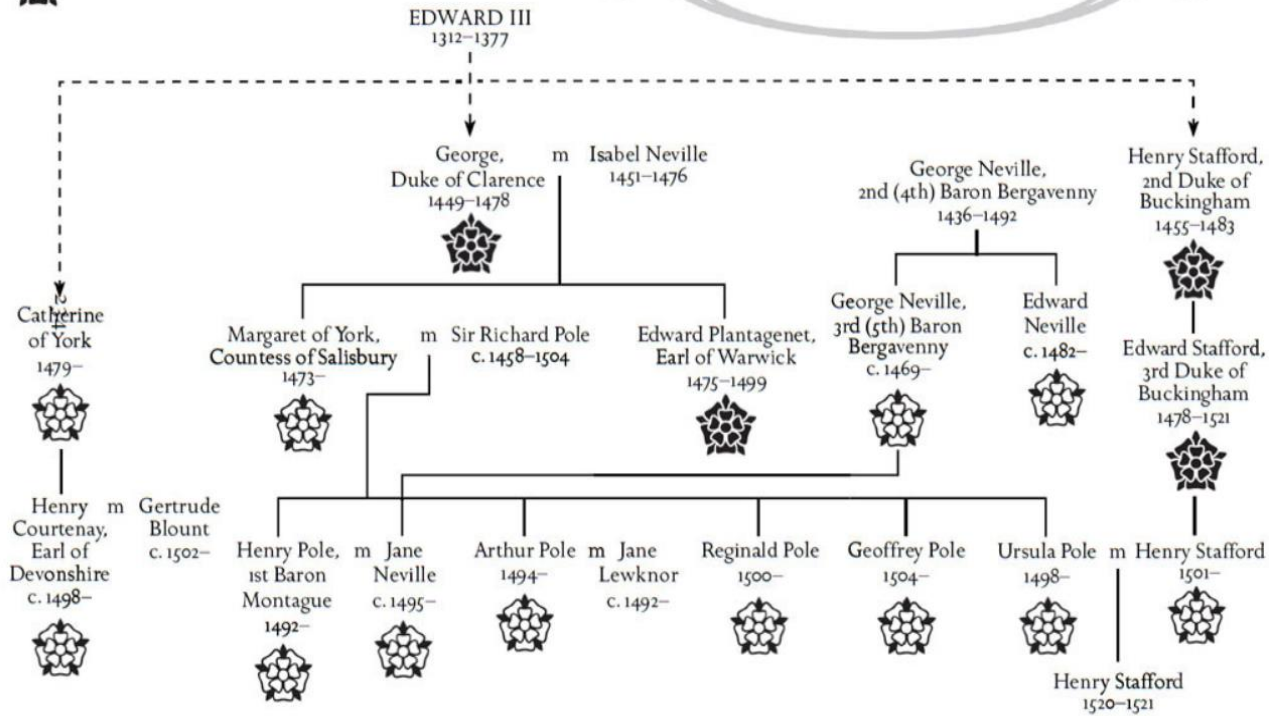


Figure 2.8 'The House of Plantagenet on 17 May 1521' in Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 234.

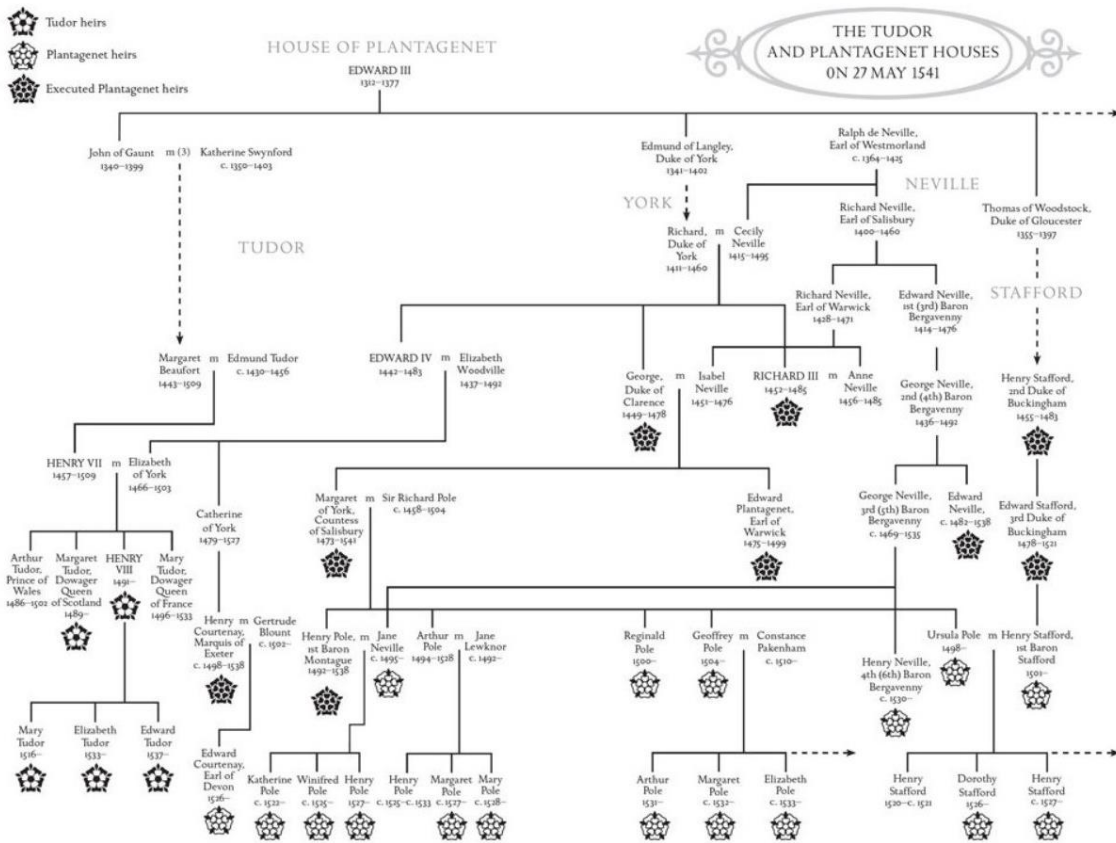



Figure 2.9 ‘The Tudor and Plantagenet Houses on 27 May 1541’ in Gregory, *The King’s Curse*, pp. 582-3

HAMPTON COURT PALACE, SUMMER 1543



They tell me I must put aside mourning for my wedding day and wear a gown from the royal wardrobe. The groom of the wardrobe brings one sandalwood chest after another from the great

Figure 2.10 Example of a chapter heading in Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 30.

An image of Henry VIII, derived from well-known portraits, appears on the book jackets of both novels: a relatively recent development in Gregory's branding which foregrounds her melancholic themes of oppression and loss. Gregory's earlier Tudor novels, such as *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001) and *The Constant Princess* (2005) feature images of anonymous female models in Tudor costume which would seem to signal a focus on the female characters and a more apolitical romance narrative. The covers of the 2014 and 2015 texts as well as the subsequent *Three Sisters, Three Queens* (2016) reveal an increasing preoccupation with Henry VIII and his destructiveness.³⁰⁸ At promotional events, Gregory's language evokes a sense of Henry's 'aliveness' and suggests a highly personalised and emotional response to him: 'I hate Henry VIII', she proclaims in one talk, vowing to 'expose him as the war criminal he was'.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ See figs. 10 – 15.

³⁰⁹ 'Author Talk: Philippa Gregory - *The King's Curse*', <<https://vimeo.com/109057836>> [accessed 12th April 2018].

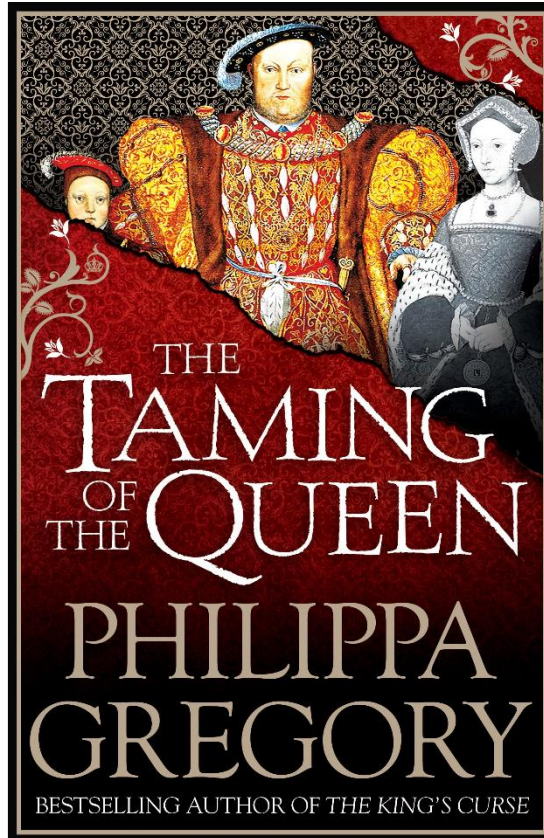


Figure 2.11 Front Cover, Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*

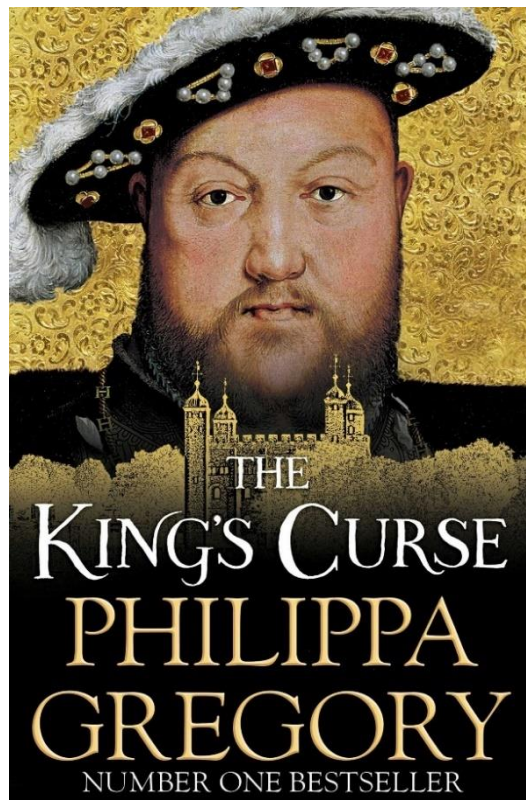


Figure 2.12 Front Cover, Gregory, *The King's Curse*

In *The Taming of the Queen*, the symbolic importance of the scene in which the Tudor family portrait is unveiled is made apparent by another paratext: an appendix to the novel entitled 'The Story Behind The Jacket Design', in which it is explained that the 'story behind the painting' and 'the final – shocking – unveiling, was to form a key fictional scene in *The Taming of the Queen*'.³¹⁰ This paratext reveals that Gregory was extensively involved in decisions about the jacket design and provides an insight into her intentions regarding narrative structure and the novel's focus. In rejecting her designer's initial proposition of a portrait of Parr because it 'did not give enough sense of the drama and scope of the novel, and suggesting a 'curtain idea' in order to 'highlight the central figures, with particular focus – at Philippa's suggestion – on Henry', Gregory reveals the true concern of her novel to be Henry VIII rather than marginalised female history.³¹¹ The central figure of Parr is absent from the front cover [fig.2.11] as she is from the original portrait, whilst a monochrome image of Jane Seymour, the 'ghost queen' is inserted on Henry's left, replacing the original painted representation of this figure and thus signalling the gothic narrative which will be discussed later in this chapter.³¹² The front cover of *The King's Curse* [fig. 2.12] is also dominated by Henry's image, with his gigantic head and shoulders rising over a gold silhouette of the Tower of London, and omits Pole. Since the King is the body politic, this suggests that the novels' primary concern is with the upheavals of the English state as seen from the perspective of those who have lost hegemonic dominance. The ubiquitous, looming figure of Henry VIII, stands for disruption of the English way of life and its potency as a trope of oppression is heightened by its association with invasion

³¹⁰ Gregory, *The Taming Of The Queen*, following p. 441. pages unnumbered.

³¹¹ Ibid.

³¹² Ibid, p. 251.

within the novels. It reflects tyranny: Pole's 'special country' that 'has gone all wrong'³¹³ or Parr's court that 'has become a monster that is devouring itself'.³¹⁴

As Genette asserts, the 'effect of the paratext lies very often in the realm of influence – indeed, manipulation – experienced subconsciously'.³¹⁵ In this case it serves Gregory's repeatedly stated objective to revise (or 'expose') Henry and to challenge popular imaginaries of the past. For example, she claims that *The King's Curse* tells:

a very dark story of Henry and in a way, I think it's time that we looked at him in this way. I think the Victorian' idea of this kind of wonderful unifier of England and this glamorous, eccentric, sort of comical monarch: it's time we re-addressed that, it's time we re-visited it.³¹⁶

When questioned on why 'people love this history so much' Gregory replies that it is 'a time where, in a sense, you're making early modern Britain' and that 'it's a story of power' and 'a story about the rise of tyranny'. Tellingly, she claims that in writing *The King's Curse*, 'I was thinking about other tyrannies that are rising' and that 'it's a historical novel which I think is very powerfully applicable to the world we live in today'.³¹⁷ Such pronouncements suggest a preoccupation with the abuse of political power (personified in the novels by Henry) and imply that her narratives are indeed those of national grievance and resistance to change, because the English history she writes is one of a tyrannised nation. This is reinforced by her persistent positioning of the Tudors as foreign (more detailed discussion of this comes later in the chapter) and by Gregory's own account of writing *The King's Curse*. Having remarked that she

³¹³ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 536.

³¹⁴ Gregory, *The Taming Of The Queen*, p. 267.

³¹⁵ Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 409.

³¹⁶ 'Author Talk: Philippa Gregory - *The King's Curse*', <<https://vimeo.com/109057836>> [accessed 12th April 2018].

³¹⁷ 'Kobo in Conversation: Philippa Gregory', https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z_Q-zn9_JdQ [accessed April 12th 2018].

thought she was going to write a fictional biography of Pole, she claims instead to have found, almost as though impelled by forces outside herself, that:

I started to write a novel about all her family, about the rebellions, about the rise of the whole country against the tyranny of Henry VIII, the rise of the king as a tyrant and someone who reformed the religion, really against the consent of his country [...] the country was not willing to be a Tudor Protestant kingdom dominated by this despot.³¹⁸

In ways that recall nationalist awakenings to the past and the resentments of postcolonial melancholia, Gregory's public commentary on her work suggests that she is engaged in the work of recovering suppressed cultural memory. For example, in a lecture to an American audience on *The King's Curse* given in 2014, she suggests that they 'won't have heard' of the Pilgrimage of Grace and that 'the English haven't heard of it very much either'. She declares subsequently that it is surprising that 'there is no biography about her [Pole] at all. There's one very scholarly biography which looks at her as a landowner but there isn't one that really deals with her political life and her part in the Tudor rebellions'.³¹⁹ In making this latter claim, Gregory is being slightly disingenuous given that Hazel Pierce's *Margaret Pole, Countess of Salisbury 1473-1541: Loyalty, Lineage and Leadership* (2003) is listed in the novel's bibliography. She makes the now familiar assertion that history was written by men about male concerns and that 'behind a lot of these decisions there are women', suggesting that her role as novelist is to rescue the repressed, and restore historical memory to English readers who have been denied their national story.³²⁰ Thus the book jacket designs, with Henry's disproportionately large figure either appearing to

³¹⁸ 'Philippa Gregory introduces *The King's Curse*', <<https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=8py3PR3Zt-w>> [accessed April 12th 2018].

³¹⁹ 'Author Talk: Philippa Gregory - *The King's Curse*', <https://vimeo.com/109057836> [accessed 12th April 2018].

³²⁰ Ibid.

emerge from shadow (*The King's Curse*), or partially revealed behind a falling curtain (*The Taming of the Queen*), visually position the texts as both revelatory revisionism and tales of tyranny. In both respects, they signal national grievance and work in conjunction with the spatial imaginaries which will be the focus of the next part of the chapter.

Ruined Space and the Rotting Royal Body: Gregory's Melancholic Materiality

Having established the hierarchical and aggrieved perspective of Gregory's narrative voices - their resentment of meritocratic success, their sense of their own exceptionalism and indifference to the individuality of those outside their social sphere - I now turn to the ways in which this nostalgia and melancholia is articulated through the novels' representation of the Tudor world's materiality. The fictional spaces of both the pre-Henrician past and the remaining feudal domains of the texts' present are depicted as a wholesome, prelapsarian idyll, whilst post-Plantagenet England is figured as a contaminated space. The trope of environmental decline is accompanied by portrayals of Henry VIII himself as a gothic monster who is linked to the legends of Bluebeard and the Mouldwarp. *The Taming Of The Queen* in particular, focussing as it does on the final years of his reign, associates the physical decay of the King's body, along with his declining mental health, to the cultural disintegration of the body politic. In both novels the King is associated with disease and this in turn is connected with foreignness and with a perception of the Tudors as an invading force. Such alignments evoke the familiar discourses of the Tory critique whilst the idealised imaginary of a contented pre-Tudor land conjures nostalgia's longing for a lost home decoupled from the shifts of time. Furthermore, given that Henry embodies the royal bloodline (which

can be seen to represent national continuity across time), and that much of his story and its consequences for England revolve around his attempts to shape the future of the nation through securing his dynasty, it is significant that he and his family are associated with decay, corruption and miscegenation. This sense of a contamination persisting through time and that is destructive to the English idyll is compounded by the essential banality driving the dramatic changes inflicted upon the country. This is something Gregory highlights with her emphasis on Henry's sexuality, its warped nature, and its disproportionate influence on political decision-making.

Gregory's avowed disruption of the notion of 'Merrie Englande' and characterisation of Henry VIII as a tyrant forcing unwanted change on his people for his own 'selfish needs' invoke emotions such as loss, melancholia, powerlessness and anger.³²¹ The concerns of Gregory's historical figures resonate with the contemporary discontents expressed in the Condition of England texts: the notion of a 'real England' facing existential threat from a remote and unaccountable elite. For example, her tyrannous Henry VIII resembles Kingsnorth's metaphor, discussed in Chapter One, of the 'beast' of progress 'which crushes all before it'.³²² As previously noted, Kingsnorth claims to document the resentments of the ordinary, describing the 'sound of people who care about the place they live in – who feel they belong to it, who understand why it matters and who are prepared to fight for it' and his discourse of loss and the returning repressed resembles Gregory's accounts of Henrician England at promotional events for the novels.³²³ For example, in one 'Author Talk' she describes the Pilgrimage of Grace as 'a massive uprising by the north, by the poor men of the

³²¹ 'Author Talk: Philippa Gregory - *The King's Curse*, <https://vimeo.com/109057836> [accessed 12th April 2018].

³²² Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 269.

³²³ *Ibid*, p. 15.

north', defining their cause as one of 'respecting the old religion and restoring the lords to the King's Council'. These 'passionate rebels', she claims, 'didn't want the middle class, what they regarded as upstarts coming in advising the king. They wanted the traditional lords to rule England and advise him'.³²⁴ This reactionary rhetoric of a forbidden England is echoed in the language of Pole and Parr. For example, as Pole reflects on the arrest of her son Geoffrey, she claims solidarity with 'the hundreds, thousands of mothers on their knees in England tonight, praying for the safety of their sons' and links her personal downfall with the ravages of the Reformation and the sacrilegious actions of Cromwell, proclaiming 'that there is too much to put right and that England, His [God's] own special country, has gone all wrong'.³²⁵

As noted earlier, part of what is seen to have gone wrong in England is the rise of placeless professionals from the lower orders. Henry's delegation of responsibility to Wolsey for example, is associated with an alien decadence. Wolsey is left in charge because the King is fleeing the sweating sickness. Henry's cowardice in the face of the epidemic is contrasted with the pious stoicism of the English people and he is shown to be alienated by the materiality of English land, roaming the countryside 'as if he fears that the very air and streams of England are poison to the man whose father claimed them against their will.' The King's lack of patriotism is further signalled by the fact that he 'does not want English goods, fearing that they are contaminated' and by his abandonment of the 'common people' who sustain the country 'fainting as they walk behind the plough' and 'resting their burning heads on their workbenches'.³²⁶ His dereliction of duty is directly linked with the promotion of the new man, Wolsey. Noble

³²⁴ 'Author Talk: Philippa Gregory - *The King's Curse*', <https://vimeo.com/109057836> [accessed 12th April 2018].

³²⁵ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 536.

³²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 181, 177.

families like the Poles, on the other hand, are seen as organically enmeshed with England and Englishness. For example, during an epidemic, Pole is horrified by the ‘thought of the court of England, my family’s court, hiding like outlaws from the natural lords and advisors’ and choosing to ‘buy food from foreigners’ rather than the ‘honest fare’ of England. She chooses to ‘celebrate the turn of the year at the heart of my newly built home’ and to ‘ride around the fields where my people are walking behind the plough, and the ploughshare is turning over the rich earth’.³²⁷ Pole claims familial ownership of ‘the court of England’, uses the adjective ‘natural’ to describe those who inherit proximity to the King and locates herself on the fertile land in ‘the fields’ and amidst the ‘rich earth’. Thus, she and her fellow aristocrats are shown to be integral to English materiality. Henry VIII, on the other hand, is placed on the margins of the land ‘near a port’ and is shown to prefer the food of foreigners, rejecting the ‘honest fare of England. His apparent lack of authentic Englishness is correlated with his dependence on one who is not a ‘natural’ advisor and who, in being ‘dedicated to his own rise’, displays an individualism which is the opposite to her politics of kinship.³²⁸

The motif of ploughing further elides the identities of Pole and Parr with an English land from which Henry is fatally disconnected. Parr’s description of her love-making with Thomas Seymour – ‘as if I were his field and he a plough’ – infers an affinity with nature which has been disrupted by marriage to the wrong man: the King.³²⁹ This displacement is apparent in her reflection on the day of accepting Henry’s marriage proposal that if ‘I were at home we would start ploughing on a day like this and the sound of the curlews would ring out as loud as the ploughboy’s whistle’.³³⁰

³²⁷ Ibid, pp. 177-81.

³²⁸ Ibid, p. 181.

³²⁹ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 131.

³³⁰ Ibid, p. 9.

When the King, uneasy in the middle of the night, asks her to perform the duties of a 'housewife' including making a fire and cooking his breakfast whilst insisting that she 'slam the window closed on the fresh cool air', Parr reminds him that, as the wife of a feudal lord, she commanded 'all our lands in the North when my husband was away from home'.³³¹ This associates her aristocratic heritage with an expansive landscape, with space and scope and makes an unfavourable contrast with the claustrophobic atmosphere that surrounds the King who, as Pole declares in *The King's Curse*, is 'usually travelling between his rich palaces, mostly by barge, always heavily guarded'.³³² Parr's reminiscences about her previous marriage echo Pole's melancholic longing for a past based on the feudal unity of land and dynasty:

I remember the days and the nights very well when the desperately poor men in rags came against the castle and begged for a return to the good days, the old days when the churches were free with charity and the king was guided by the lords. They wanted the church restored and the monasteries back in their former glory. They demanded that my husband Lord Latimer speak for the king, they knew that he agreed with them.³³³

The conflation of tradition and dynasty with the national good permeates both texts.

As she watches the ploughing of her own 'rich earth', Pole declares that:

I would not choose to live anywhere but on my own lands, I would not eat anything that we have not grown. I would not be served by anyone but my own people. I am a Plantagenet born and bred in the heart of my country.³³⁴

Whilst the King eats imported food and locks himself away from 'the rumble of a thousand critical whispers', Pole chooses, whenever possible, to 'stay at my home while the court is on progress and walk in my fields, and watch the wheat turn

³³¹ Ibid, pp. 46-7.

³³² Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 462.

³³³ Gregory, *The Taming Of The Queen*, p. 47.

³³⁴ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 181.

golden'.³³⁵ She is associated, not just with agricultural bounty but also with rural tradition: the generational continuity of the Plantagenets which is constantly attacked by the Tudors, is linked to social cohesion and welfare. This is exemplified by the passage below where dynamic verbs such as 'stride' and 'race' along with adjectives like 'brawny' suggest, that, in contrast to the Tudor in-comers who bring plague and disease, Plantagenets confer strength, health and natural bounty:

I go out with the reaping gang on the first day of harvesting and watch them stride side by side across the field, their sickles slicing down the waving crop, the hares and the rabbits darting away before them so the boys race after them with yapping terriers.

Behind the men come the women, embracing great armfuls of stooks and tying them with one practised movement, their gowns hitched up so that they can stride, their sleeves rolled up high over their brawny arms. Many of them have a baby strapped to their back, most of them have a couple of children trailing behind with the old people gleaning the fallen heads of wheat so that nothing is wasted.³³⁶

The system of conferring aristocratic titles elides personal identity with place: a tradition signifying the peculiarly English variation of blood and soil nationalism that is shaped by internal as well as external gradations of human worth. The affirmation of this bio-political fusion of geography and genetics further aligns Gregory's imaginary of the past with contemporary discourses of the right. Scruton, for example, claims that the peerage system endows the land with 'another grade of man-made enchantment, with place-names being absorbed into the pyramid of dignities whose apex was the crown'.³³⁷ In *The King's Curse*, this logic leads to the explicit intersection of the Plantagenets with England's geography. For example, in explaining the success

³³⁵ Ibid, p. 471.

³³⁶ Ibid.

³³⁷ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 151.

of her dynasty, Pole likens it to the spread of a resilient, even aggressive, form of vegetation:

Plantagenet blood is fertile; they named the family for the *planta genista*, the broom shrub, which is never out of flower, which grows everywhere, in the most unlikely soil, which can never be uprooted and even when it is burned out will thrive and grow again the very next spring, yellow as gold though it is rooted in the blackest charcoal.³³⁸

Pole's dynasty then, is shown to be integral to England's existence. Furthermore, her family's ability to flourish in adversity evokes a sense of national indomitability: the Plantagenets' indestructability is associated with the durability of the country itself and thus with patriotic pride. Pole's account of her origins also recalls the supernaturalism of fairy tale. Whilst Henry VIII is the Mouldwarp, the Plantagenets apparently 'trace our line back to Fulk of Anjou, husband to a water goddess', thus associating power with a heritage that is simultaneously natural and supernatural.³³⁹ Entitlement is conferred through being part of 'a well-recorded, well-known network of cousins and kinsmen tightly interwoven by marriage and blood'.³⁴⁰ Fertility is conflated with virtue and gender roles are traditionally defined in Pole's account of how the 'Plantagenets spread across all England, a thrusting, courageous, seemingly endless family of ambitious boys, warrior men and fertile women': a proclamation that, in its celebration of conquest and heredity, affirms the ideologies of colonialism and racial supremacy.³⁴¹

The domesticity Gregory applies to early-modern politics also evokes Scruton's nostalgic notion of Englishness as 'an old experience of home' and Nairn's concept of

³³⁸ Ibid, p. 53.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 22.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

a 'family-country' which filters national feeling through attachment to the Crown and conflates state power with the politics of kinship.³⁴² This outlook means that the Tudors' genetic unfruitfulness renders them unfit to rule and positions them as a potential blight on the nation's essentialism. Plantagenet fecundity is contrasted to the relative barrenness of 'only four Tudors; one old lady, her anxious son, and their heirs Arthur and Harry'.³⁴³ The King tells Parr that she 'will make us into a family of England, a true family' where 'everyone shall see us together: the father – and the son that will come after him'.³⁴⁴ He is shown to be driven by the need to 'have a son for England' and his failure to do so is attributed in *The King's Curse* to a curse cast on his line.³⁴⁵ The account of this, voiced by Elizabeth of York, ascribes a notion of mystical destiny to the Plantagenet family: further demonstrating Gregory's association of royal succession, and English heritage with primeval myth and magic:

We spoke to the river, to the goddess...you know!... the goddess who founded our family. We said: 'Our boy was taken when he was not yet a man, not yet king – though he was born to be both. So take his murderer's son while he is yet a boy, before he is a man, before he comes to his estate. And then take his grandson too and when you take him, we will know by his death that this is the working of our curse and this is payment for the loss of our son.'³⁴⁶

As previously noted, Pole is a supremacist whose narrative is permeated by frustration at being unable to voice what she regards as her genetic superiority. In her view, England has been stolen from her family. 'We own these lands', she proclaims in discussing a property dispute with the crown, 'we own the whole of England by right. But we never say such a thing, or even suggest it'.³⁴⁷ For Pole, her family are

³⁴² Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 7. Nairn, *The Enchanted Glass*, p. 97.

³⁴³ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 22.

³⁴⁴ Gregory, *The Taming Of The Queen*, p. 87.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 69.

³⁴⁶ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, pp. 8-9.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 196.

synonymous with an England that has been disrupted. Henry VIII is not the rightful king because he 'did not inherit it'.³⁴⁸ Unlike the Plantagenets, who are 'the old royal blood of England', he is not biologically entwined with the country.³⁴⁹

The language of home and inheritance is used extensively to signify the un-Englishness of the Tudors and this again, maps to the Tory-Radical critique. As was seen in Chapter One, Scruton attributes contemporary English hostility to immigration to 'a loss of the enchantment which made home a place of safety and consolation'.³⁵⁰ The motif of the stately household is a feature of both novels by Gregory and signifies the superiority of England's old families (the true English) in contrast to the Tudor usurpers who, in tracing their origins to Wales and conquering from Brittany, are positioned as an alien presence. As previously mentioned, chapter headings in both texts frame historical process within familial space collocating the names of royal palaces and stately homes with dates. The fitness of the Plantagenet family to rule is signified by their well-run houses, firm family ties and care of their peasantry, all of which contrast with Henry's familial disunity. For example, Parr declares to Henry proudly that 'I know how to command a kitchen and a brewhouse and a dairy. I used to make my own physic from herbs, and perfumes and soaps'.³⁵¹ Pole expresses 'pleasure in the well-run business that is my home'³⁵² and describes 'my obligations as the lady of Stourton. I have to care for everyone in my domain, not just my children'.³⁵³ The stately home is presented as a kingdom in microcosm and Pole's

³⁴⁸ Ibid.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, pp. 7-8.

³⁵¹ Gregory, *The Taming Of The Queen*, p. 46.

³⁵² Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 418.

³⁵³ Ibid, p. 28.

conduct as royal exemplar. Having returned to her estate from Ludlow in order to nurse her children through the Sweat, she declares:

Only when I have stood at the front of the church and seen it filled with a congregation no thinner, no dirtier, no more desperate-looking than usual, only when I have ridden through the village and asked at each ramshackle door if they are all well, only when I have confirmed the health of everyone in our household from the boys who scare the birds from the crops to my head steward, only then do I know it is safe to leave my children, and go back to Ludlow.³⁵⁴

The dutiful rootedness of Pole is unfavourably contrasted with the performativity of the Tudors who 'shore up their royalty with the trappings of wealth as if they hope that playing the part will make it real'. They are portrayed as alien, 'always on alert for a hidden attack' and 'still like invaders, uncertain of their safety, doubtful of their welcome'.³⁵⁵ Parr remarks on Henry's distortion of country estate traditions: for example, the hunt, 'which was once a pageant of excitement, has become a shambles where animals are driven and slaughtered'.³⁵⁶ The wholesome language of nature that is associated with Pole's estates becomes a sinister metaphor of machinery when applied to the Tudor household signifying Henry's decadent unnaturalness and rampant consumerism. According to Parr, Henry is 'the great cog that turns everything, and the machine that is the court becomes once more a huge clockwork engine that takes in food and grinds out amusement'.³⁵⁷ Both this metaphor, which, as will be seen below, is used more than once, and descriptions of sporting events where tradition, contest and spontaneity has been replaced with an efficient system for killing, associate Henry with the advent of industrial process and the depersonalisation that this entails. As can be seen in the Condition of England texts, tropes of industry and

³⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 29.

³⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 11.

³⁵⁶ Gregory, *The Taming Of The Queen*, p. 57.

³⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 388.

mechanisation hold a particular horror for many advocates of Englishness and 'machine' is frequently used as a pejorative metaphor.³⁵⁸ Gregory's deployment of it, therefore links Henry to what Kingsnorth calls 'the ongoing destruction of place, meaning and culture in this country'.³⁵⁹ Furthermore, her portrayal of Henry's unbelonging resonates with representations of the other supposed agents of cultural disintegration: those immigrants who have disrupted the home, who have failed to integrate and whose lack of national authenticity means they can never be the real families of a real England. These latter parallels are heightened by the texts' association of the Tudors with miscegenation which is indicated by Elizabeth of York's fear that in marrying Henry Tudor, 'I have cursed my own boy' and by Parr's belief that a child by Henry VIII 'might be a monster' because 'Anne Boleyn gave birth to her own fate. Her death sentence was the little monster'.³⁶⁰

These tropes of monsters, curses, consumerist excess and even hostile mechanisation, signal the gothic element of Gregory's narratives and it is on this aspect that the remainder of my analysis will focus. A key function of the gothic is to codify social anxieties that are often unarticulated or suppressed and I would suggest that Gregory's early twenty-first century re-invention of Henry VIII as a gothic figure (similarly perhaps, to Bram Stoker's fin de siècle Dracula) engages with particularly English fears about cultural decay, economic development and loss of identity. The presence of gothic tropes in her work is perhaps unsurprising, as Gregory started writing the Tudors at a time when gothic genres were enjoying a resurgence in popularity. Indeed, popular fiction of the early 2000s was marked by a re-invention of

³⁵⁸ See Chapter One for analysis of Condition of England attitudes to industrialisation and consumerism. Kingsnorth, for example, refers to 'the real England that still lives and breathes beneath the spreading plastic of the consumer machine' (Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 16.)

³⁵⁹ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 263.

³⁶⁰ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p.10 and Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 32.

the vampire as sympathetic hero rather than as symbol of past tyranny. It is possible that this romanticised version of the undead aristocracy contributed to the more general rehabilitation of the upper class in popular culture noted earlier in the chapter, and of which Gregory's novels are a demonstration. In the texts addressed by this chapter, dynastic rivalry and religious difference facilitate conflict between royal heroines (who are synonymised with England), and the gothic figure of Henry VIII, proffering an emotive re-imagining of England as a beleaguered female tyrannised by an invading monster: an image that resonates with Kingsnorth's reactionary metaphor of the 'Thing'.³⁶¹ Traditionally, the Gothic centres upon the resurgence of forces which have been suppressed, buried and partially forgotten. Despite an association with transgression, the genre often reinforces conservative ideology and this is true of Gregory's re-casting of national history into gothic romance.

The novels discussed in this chapter are notable for the gothic tropes employed. For example, Henry VIII is characterised as both Bluebeard and Mouldwarp, existing in the liminal zone between life and death. The presence of these elements is particularly noteworthy in *The Taming of the Queen* which shows a persistent concern with Henry's rotting flesh and suppurating wound. The King is also associated with cruelty, violence and excess whilst the female protagonists of the novels (again, particularly in the case of Parr) are redolent of the classic gothic heroines of Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. Spectrality is deployed in relation to the King's past wives – 'the ghost queen(s)' – and, as previously noted, Gregory also incorporates overtly supernatural elements such as the supposed curse that has been placed upon the Tudors.³⁶² Generically, historical and gothic fiction frequently overlap. Lukács, for

³⁶¹ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 269.

³⁶² *Ibid*, p. 251.

example, refers to Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* as the most famous historical novel of the eighteenth-century, though ultimately he rejects it as a proper historical novel on the grounds of superficiality: it is 'mere costumery' and 'not an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch'.³⁶³ In promoting her work however, Gregory emphasises the extent and quality of her research, describing herself as a historian who is dedicated to historical truth. Her blend of the gothic with perceived historical veracity therefore has the potential to be both disruptive and conservative in inflecting perceptions of England's past. Importantly, Gregory's work is characterised by a biopolitical approach: the texts abound with organic imagery, and narrative developments tend to be accounted for in terms of the sexual, medical or genetic. This generates a sense of organic rightness that has been displaced, of something (literally) being rotten in the state of England.

The changing social order of early modernity and accompanying loss of 'the old ways', is seen as a threat to the communality and the natural rhythms of English life and is associated with a malevolent Henry VIII who transforms those he raises into monstrous and bestial versions of themselves.³⁶⁴ The mourning expressed in the novels for the ancestral hegemony of class can be seen as contradictory. Pole, for example, is a staunch Catholic and so, by definition, her ultimate identity is European and her primary authority is the Pope. This is implicit in her support for the Spanish Catherine of Aragon who is 'a princess born'.³⁶⁵ Gregory, however, correlates the fixed identity of inheritance with that of nation by associating it with the words, 'England' and

³⁶³ Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, p. 19.

³⁶⁴ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 324.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid*, p. 293.

'old'. This can be seen in Pole's rejection of Henry's claim to the throne and Tudor centralisation.

He did not inherit it, he's not of the old royal blood of England. And young Henry is first among equals, he is not above us, he's not above the law, he's not above challenge. We call him 'Your Grace', as we would call any duke, as we call your cousin Stafford. He is one of us, honoured; but not above us. He is not beyond challenge. His word is not that of God. He's not the Pope.³⁶⁶

In keeping with the Tory-Radical critique, prelapsarian Englishness is also associated with pre-Reformation life and with a nostalgic longing for homely safety. One example of this comes when Pole recounts a conversation with some fishermen who complain that it is 'those who love the old ways and who pray to the Virgin and honour the queen who are drowning themselves in the new tide'.³⁶⁷ In *The Taming Of The Queen*, Parr, though an advocate of Protestantism, admires those such as her clerk, William Harper, who is 'a thoughtful man, monastery trained and with a great love for the old ways'.³⁶⁸ The social cohesion associated by Pole with Plantagenet rule and her own custodianship of her feudal estates, is shown in *The Taming Of The Queen* to give way under Henrician rule to a state of fracture and self-interest which is characterised in this text by a repeated metaphor of dog-fighting. For example, having humiliated both Parr and Wriothesley by making each believe they were participating in the arrest of the other, Henry claims to be 'the dog-master' and to 'watch you all'. He relishes his power to 'set you all at each other's throats. Poor curs. Poor little bitch'.³⁶⁹ Henry's correlation of kingship with being a 'dog-master' suggests an absolutism that

³⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 196.

³⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 324.

³⁶⁸ Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 346.

³⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 383.

factionalises rather than unifies the nation and contradicts Pole's concept of the king as 'first among equals'.³⁷⁰

For conservative commentators such as Scruton, the class system generates social cohesion through its association with land, its 'corporate identity' and the fact that it has 'more authority than power'.³⁷¹ In disrupting lines of inheritance, the usurping Tudors of Gregory's novels break these tenets. Henry's singularity and the combination of power and authority that comes with modernisation are shown to create a brutal, predatory and fractured society, characterised by unending conflict between ambitious individuals. Henry proclaims that 'when any single dog becomes big and strong' he 'lets the others pull it down' and when Parr points out that, owing to this outlook, 'you will never have great men about you', he concurs.³⁷² His legacy is shown to be a world of symbolic double negatives in which 'Nobody gives nothing away, Nobody loves no-one', 'filled with people seeking only their own ambitions and working for their own causes'. Henry claims to 'know that every smiling friend is an enemy, every advisor is pursuing his own interest'.³⁷³ When Parr flatteringly evokes the metaphor of the English lion by claiming to 'cleave to the greatest lion there is', he inflects this traditional symbol of greatness with violence: the 'old lion still has his teeth and claws. You will see I can draw blood. You will see I can rip a throat'.³⁷⁴ The texts' reductive portrayal of early modernity's emergent meritocracy, its evocation of a world in which the certainty and stability of class has given way to 'people seeking only their own ambitions and working in their own causes', reinforces English cultural conservatism.³⁷⁵ The rise of individualism, centralisation and social mobility, as

³⁷⁰ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 196.

³⁷¹ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 151.

³⁷² Gregory, *The Taming of the Queen*, p. 414.

³⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 415.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid*, p. 77.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p. 415.

conceived by these novels, therefore aligns closely with the Tory Condition of England narratives of disintegration.

Hostility to the new ways of the Tudors is most apparent in the idea that they have literally infected the nation and this is signified by their repeated associations with disease; specifically with the Sweating Sickness. The origins of this condition, of which the last epidemic occurred in 1551, are unknown but Gregory draws on one theory (that it might have been brought to England by French mercenaries fighting for Henry VII at the Battle of Bosworth), to re-cast it as 'the Tudor disease'.³⁷⁶ For Gregory's Pole, the Tudor monarchy is synonymous with 'the new illness that we all fear, the disease that followed the Tudor army and nearly wiped out the City of London when they assembled to welcome him'³⁷⁷ and her response to her son's observation that for Henry, 'the Sweat is his particular dread', again evokes superstition:

'No wonder, since it was his father who brought it in, and it killed his brother Arthur', I remark. 'They called it the Tudor curse even then. They said that the reign had begun in sweat and would end in tears.'³⁷⁸

The association of Tudor rule with the Sweat can also be seen in *The Taming of the Queen*. Parr recounts that it 'is a Tudor plague; it came in with this king's father'. What is regarded as Henry's capriciousness and unpredictability as a ruler, is correlated with the disease and it serves as metaphor for the precariousness of life in his circle: Parr's ladies, for example, 'are all terrified of the Sweat. It can kill a man in four hours, and there is no easy way to tell if he will die'.³⁷⁹ For Pole, in *The King's Curse*, 'this tyranny

³⁷⁶ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 55.

³⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 25.

³⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 174.

³⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 226.

is like the other Tudor disease, The Sweat. It comes quickly, it takes those you love without warning, and you cannot defend against it'.³⁸⁰

As part of a pattern of organic motifs that play on the polarity of belonging and not belonging, the notion of a 'Tudor disease' consolidates Gregory's conservative sense of a blood and soil nation delineated by exclusive dynastic networks. This idea of an England, threatened by the figure of the usurper and described by protagonists who rail against their disinheritance, resonates with contemporary discourses of lost identity, resentment of the outsider and affronted entitlement. As Shakespeare's plays often attest, the body of the monarch is both a physical entity and a symbol of the state. The concept of the King's two bodies, which originated in the Tudor era and is a familiar Shakespearian theme, unified the identities of monarch and state, with the consequence that the wrong king would inevitably corrupt the whole state. The King was seen to have two bodies: one was physical and the other was the body politic, and, as the narrative of *Hamlet* illustrates, they were inextricably joined.³⁸¹ In *The Taming of the Queen*, the grotesqueness of the king's body is depicted frequently and in detail, synonymising Henry's physical deterioration with that of that of the State. Like the 'Tudor disease'- the Sweat - Henry's leg ulcer and the pus that emanates from it come to symbolise his corrupting effect on England. After her first night in his bed, Parr tells her relative Nan that the King smells of both 'the corruption of the body', and of 'a corrupting body'.³⁸² The enactment of this corruption can be seen, for example, in his perversion of hunting rituals, where his physical inability to participate normally is

³⁸⁰ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 543.

³⁸¹ For example, see Johnson, Jerah, 'The Concept of the "King's Two Bodies" in *Hamlet*', in *Shakespeare Quarterly* (1967) 4, 8 (1967) 430-4 .

³⁸² *Ibid*, p. 51.

linked with disturbing levels of cruelty towards animals and Parr's belief that 'suffering pleases him'.³⁸³

Henry's bodily identity is conflated with that of the gothic Bluebeard at an early stage of *The Taming of the Queen*, when, on her wedding night, Parr has her first dream of Tryphine. As she struggles to escape 'that miasma of stink', she awakes but finds that 'the smell still floods over me'. Henry's incongruity is emphasised by the juxtaposition of his physical affliction with the splendour of his surroundings. She soon realises that the 'suppurating wound on his leg is leaking, and yellow and orange pus is oozing through the bandages, staining my gown as if he had pissed the fine linen sheets, making the best bedroom in England smell like a charnel house'.³⁸⁴ It is not the wealth and luxury of court and privilege that is implicitly criticised, but his pollution of it. His monstrosity is reinforced by the fact that when Parr awakens from her nightmare, he boasts, with pleasure, of his plans to burn three men the following week. Parr claims that 'I have never smelled a stink like this before. It is a fog of rotting flesh, like a charnel house' and that her 'bed smells of death and shit'.³⁸⁵ Henry's servants 'try to hide that the King of England is slowly rotting away'.³⁸⁶ In a moment of intimacy, Parr is repulsed by 'the stink of his rotting leg, like decaying meat, the sweet, sickly smell of old sweat on old skin, the bad breath from his mouth, his constipated flatulence'.³⁸⁷

The rottenness of the royal body is accompanied by multiple references to Henry's sexual impotence and physical incapacity. The first not only places Seymour's vigour in sharp relief but also contrasts with the strength and fecundity of the

³⁸³ Gregory, *The Taming Of The Queen*, p. 398.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 44.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p. 104. and p. 51.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 104.

³⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 355.

Plantagenets, emphasised in *The King's Curse* and highlights the unnaturalness of the Tudor dynasty. On their wedding night, Parr has 'to try to straddle his body. But his fleshy hips are so wide that I cannot get across, and he pulls me down so that I squat on him as if I were astride a fat horse'. Whilst he is 'excited at his own potency', Parr remarks that he 'is soft, a half-formed thing'.³⁸⁸ His final 'taming of the Queen' comes in the form of a violent, sadistic 'parody of abuse' in which he forces her to have oral sex with 'the ivory silk codpiece from the portrait strapped on his fat naked belly'. The result of this for Parr, is that 'My will is broken indeed' and her identity, like that of Pole, is erased.³⁸⁹ For example, when her absence from the Tudor portrait becomes apparent, she reflects that 'I might as well never have been'.³⁹⁰ This physical obliteration extends to her opinions. According to the King 'she can never have an opinion that is not mine, for she is my wife' and this causes Parr to suffer because she 'cannot see that God would give me a brain and not want me to think for myself'.³⁹¹

A notable aspect of *The Taming of the Queen* is its correlation of disability with malevolence. Henry's immobility becomes a signifier of his unfitness to rule and of the wider disabling of the nation. His existence is shown to be contrapuntal to the seasons and natural rhythms of national life and his illness a barrier to communion with his people and with the land. For example, in the spring of 1546, the King's decay stands out against the surge of new life:

The lenten lilies swell and then flower beside the paths, their bright trumpet blooms like a shout of joy and hope, but the king keeps to his rooms with a table crowded with draughts and tinctures and herbs and jars of leeches, the shutters tightly closed against the dangerous fresh air.³⁹²

³⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 42.

³⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 378.

³⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 249.

³⁹¹ Ibid, p. 124.

³⁹² Ibid, p. 281.

Another example of the King's unnaturalness comes when he dismounts from his horse: an act which requires 'four men' 'to get him out of his saddle' and a 'wheeled platform'.³⁹³ In a possible nod to contemporary leaders' pursuits of ineffective and divisive conflicts such as that in Iraq, Henry's wars are presented as acts of personal vanity which he has no ability to conduct. Following a campaign against the French, Thomas Seymour confides to Parr that 'he had no idea what to do, he had no idea what should be done' and that 'It is all vanity, a vain conquest. He has no idea that it isn't a great victory. He knows only what he wants to know'.³⁹⁴ Seymour concludes that 'he has no idea of the value of life. He has no idea of the value of anything'.³⁹⁵ Following the sinking of the *Mary Rose*, Sir Anthony Denny invokes the spirit of 'Englishmen' and Agincourt, whispering 'For God and for Harry'. Parr reflects, however, that 'the king is not stirred by the battle cry of an earlier, greater king. He is shocked, his great carcass beached in his bed like his great ship is beached on the seabed, underwater in the Solent'.³⁹⁶ The fate of the *Mary Rose*, becomes synonymous with that of an England under Henry in irreversible decline:

They say that they will raise the *Mary Rose*, that it will be no more than a matter of days before they have hauled her to the surface and pumped out the water. But after a while they stop boasting that she can be reclaimed from the sea, and the beautiful ship and her sailors, and the fighting men – four hundred of them, five hundred, nobody knows how many were enlisted – will be left to the chantry of the tides and the singing of the sea.³⁹⁷

³⁹³ Ibid, p. 164.

³⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 171.

³⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 170.

³⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 224

³⁹⁷ Ibid.

Henry's corruption also manifests itself in a culture of excess which extends from his own habits to the whole of the English court. Much of this is conveyed through descriptions of his eating habits. For example, following his supposed victory in France, he 'eats and eats', he drinks wine from 'a huge glass', 'beckons dish after dish' and 'wipes the glistening fat from his mouth'. While his 'favourites' must 'mime their delight at yet another dish' the 'king goes on eating with relish', having feasted from mid- morning to sundown.³⁹⁸ At a subsequent feast, Parr hears him 'eat, grunt, belch, pant and eat again', noting that she has 'become ridiculously sensitive to the noise of him dining'.³⁹⁹ The grotesqueness of Gregory's portrayal is apparent in the following passage:

I hear the snuffle that he makes when he is tipping a bowl to drink the juices of the meat, the crack of the bones of little birds in his strong jaws, and the loud sucking on sweetmeats and sugar. He makes another noise when he drinks his wine, great gulps and then a sort of pant into the bowl of the wineglass as he catches his breath, as if he is swimming and drinking to the lake.⁴⁰⁰

Henry's monstrosity is clear but Parr goes on to note that it has spread and that 'this court has become a monster that is devouring itself, a dragon that eats its own tail for greed'.⁴⁰¹ This self-devouring greed is then explicitly attributed to the Reformation with the wealth generated by Dissolution shown to be cravenly squandered on industrial levels of court consumption. Despite her Protestant convictions, Parr reflects that:

I am afraid of the cost of keeping this bloated household, the thousands of servants to run after the hundreds of lords, their ladies, their horses, their dogs. It is not that I am cautious – I was raised to run a noble household; I don't like anything mean - but this is extravagance and luxury fuelled by the destruction of the churches. Only the wealth of a thousand years of the

³⁹⁸ Ibid, p.168.

³⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 266.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, p. 267.

church could pay for this excess. It is as if the court is a great clockwork toy, with a gear and a great wheel that takes in holy wealth and throws out dross every hour, every minute, just as the king will feast now but will vomit later, or strain in pain on the close-stool.⁴⁰²

This passage, which in its portrayal of a 'bloated household' stands in contrast to the good housekeeping of both Parr and Pole, illustrates the fact that in Gregory's Reformation England, the orderliness, nobility and good taste of the Catholic Plantagenets has been discarded in favour of debauchery and division. Again, the metaphor of the machine heightens the horror of modernity's onset and the King's bodily patterns of excess, consumption and waste are transposed onto an economy that transmutes priceless ecclesiastical treasure into disposable 'dross'. Gregory's deployment of the Gothic in her narrative of the closing years of Henry's reign further confirms the alignment of her imaginary with the melancholic discourses of postcolonial Englishness.

Conclusion

In the concluding chapter of *England: An Elegy*, Scruton makes the following complaint, which aligns strikingly with the themes addressed in this chapter. It merits quoting at length:

The loss of traditional virtue and local identity has occurred throughout Europe and its diaspora. England was part of Christendom, one branch of a spiritual tree which was struck by enlightenment and died. The global economy, the democratisation of taste, the sexual revolution, pop culture and television have worked to erase the sense of spiritual identity in every place where piety shored up the old forms of knowledge and local custom fortified the moral sense.

⁴⁰² Ibid.

[...] When your fundamental loyalty is to a place and its *genius loci* [sic], globalisation and the loss of sovereignty bring a crisis of identity. The land loses its history and its personal face; the institutions become administrative centres, operated by anonymous bureaucrats who are not *us* but *them* [sic]. The bureaucratic disenchantment of the earth has therefore been felt more keenly in England than elsewhere. For it has induced in the English the sense that they are really living nowhere.⁴⁰³

This passage expresses the discontents around multiculturalism, radical thought, centralisation and democratisation identified by Gilroy as components of the postcolonial melancholia that underpinned pre-Brexit Tory critiques of the state of England. These same concerns emerge in Gregory's coeval narratives of the Tudor past. Her empathic, and highly anachronistic, first-person narratives induce the reader to identify with the resentments of downwardly mobile feudal characters, with their disregard for life outside their networks and their hostility to the aspirations of bureaucratic 'men from nowhere' who threaten to displace their influence and power. Her portrayal of ruined or corrupted spaces and associations of the Tudor court with debauchery, excess and disease similarly resonate with the contemporary lamentations of the right. For Scruton and his peers, the threat to an English idyll stems from an enlightenment which arguably has its origins in the Reformation and subjugates piety, hierarchy and tradition to rationalism and liberalism. Their nostalgic imaginary, which is reflected in the accounts of Gregory's beleaguered narrators, privileges belief over reason and precedent over progress.

Gregory re-imagines the Tudor accession and Henrician Reformation as fatal lapses in England's past and the ensuing national entropy is reflected in her depiction of the King's rotting body. Her fiction decouples notions of English exceptionalism from anti-Catholicism and codifies the present-day national grievances explored in Chapter

⁴⁰³ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 246.

One. Her Tudor England, severed from its history by invading forces, links cultural disintegration with foreign influence and promotes bio-power as a force for good. Gregory writes a nation rooted in class and ethnicity (ultimately the basis of racist thinking) that is hostile to change and to those deemed outsiders. In this respect, it aligns with the monocultural longing theorised by Gilroy. In keeping, however, with Boym's conceptualisation of nostalgia, by implication, a pure, unspoilt England endures beneath the effacements of history and there remains the possibility that the 'old ways' can be restored.

Given her sales, there is every reason to regard Gregory's historical fiction as influential and certainly as a barometer of the Brexit mind-set. As suggested earlier in this thesis, there is wide acceptance of the idea that historical narratives are largely constructed to articulate or justify the concerns of the present. Gregory's novels contribute to the long-standing narrative of England's decline which has opposed the Whiggish story of progress and, in the pre-Brexit period, threatened to over-write it. The voices of Gregory's aristocratic characters invite parallels between the perceived losses of past and present and articulate regressive demands for change. In establishing this sense of continuity and national solidarity through time, Gregory's work helps to consolidate the nostalgia, melancholy and grievance that, I suggest, are important dimensions of contemporary national identity.

Chapter Three

'Built on an edifice of lies and monstrous brutality': C.J. Sansom's historical detective fiction and the 'wicked world' of Reformation England.

Introduction

In this third chapter, I turn from Gregory's royal sagas to C.J. Sansom's Henrician detective fiction. Set within the period of monastic dissolution, land enclosure, legal reform and social change, Sansom's writing resembles Gregory's in the sense that its depiction of the past reflects the melancholic discourses of present-day England. The world it portrays is one of brutality, conflict, corruption, cultural upheaval and loss. It does not, however, idealise the pre-Henrician past in the nostalgic fashion of Gregory's work. Sansom's protagonist, the lawyer and detective Shardlake, personifies the long-standing debate on the English Reformation. He is a reformer with a genuine desire to build a better, kinder world. The old regime of Church and feudalism is not depicted as a golden age but rather as one of repression in which most of society has been systematically mired in superstition, ignorance and unmerited hierarchy. Like Gregory's Parr, Shardlake is driven by ideals of democracy and enlightenment but, on encountering the venality and vandalism associated with the enactment of his progressive values, soon becomes disillusioned as to the possibility of a better England: new ideas are shown to be appealing in abstract form but damaging in practice.

In examining Sansom's novels in this chapter, and looking forward to the reading of Mantel's in the next, I will relate his work to that of Pierre Nora on the relationship between memory and history. Sansom's novels, arguably like the Reformation itself, reflect Nora's concept of the 'acceleration of history' which he

defines as 'an increasingly rapid slippage of the present into a historical past that is gone for good'. Nora distinguishes between *milieux de mémoire* (environments of memory) and the *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) that have displaced them. Environments of memory consist of the 'concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects' whilst sites are associated with the recorded evidence of the archive or museum. For Nora, memory and history are oppositional concepts, whereby the former is alive and dynamic because it is woven into the patterns of daily life whereas history is a reconstruction, a piecing together of what no longer exists, and as such, is doomed to be incomplete. He attributes the conquest of memory by history to societies' compulsion to change and to shape different futures from what has gone before. I suggest that Sansom's novels associate the Reformation with the loss of '*milieux de mémoire*' in which the past is 'experienced as the ritual repetition of a timeless practice in a primordial identification of act and meaning'.⁴⁰⁴ As a lawyer, detective, and indeed, historian, whose work rests upon evidence-based reconstruction, Shardlake himself is a product and proponent of this cultural shift, despite the fact that he becomes increasingly sensitised to the losses incurred as a result of modernity's onset. In its defiance of temporality and culture of repetition and ritual, the Church, and more specifically the monasteries, embody the fulfilment of nostalgic longing identified by Boym, and also, perhaps counter-intuitively, the timeless enchantment of the English 'experience of home' where identity is inherently understood through habit and tradition. The latter, discussed in Chapter One, is perceived by the Condition of England writers to have been lost.⁴⁰⁵ I contend that the texts analysed in this chapter hinge on the tension between change and continuity,

⁴⁰⁴ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations* (1989), 7-24 (pp. 7-9).

⁴⁰⁵ Scruton, Roger, *England: An Elegy*, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2006) p. 7.

memory and history, which characterised both the age in which they are set and the associated discontents of contemporary Englishness. Sansom's depiction of society and space evokes a country that is falling apart and rotting away, its decline accelerated by the very radicalism that purported to halt it. As such, I argue that his narratives are essentially conservative ones that, despite significant divergences from those of Gregory, ultimately resonate similarly with the emotions of the pre-Brexit Tory-radical critique.

The chapter examines the first two novels of the *Shardlake* series: *Dissolution* (2003) and *Dark Fire* (2004).⁴⁰⁶ The series as a whole has enjoyed commercial success and the acclaim of reviewers. Prior to publication of the seventh instalment, *Tombland* (2018), Heloise Wood noted in *The Bookseller* that its sales totalled 3.3 million for £22.6m.⁴⁰⁷ Examples of this favourable reception include a review of *Dissolution* in *Publishers Weekly* which acknowledges that 'readers might wonder if this is a knock-off *Name of the Rose* set two centuries later', but concludes that 'Sansom's debut is a compelling historical mystery in its own right' that 'paints a vivid picture of the corruption that plagued England during the reign of Henry VIII'.⁴⁰⁸ Reviewing *Dark Fire* for *The Guardian*, Stella Duffy describes it as 'a strong, intelligent novel which, while it will undoubtedly please historical crime fans, deserves a wider readership' and which discusses 'questions not merely of good and bad, old church versus reform, but also of the perils of change, where reforming zeal has the potential

⁴⁰⁶ C.J. Sansom, *Dissolution* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2003) and C.J. Sansom, *Dark Fire* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004).

⁴⁰⁷ Wood, Heloise, 'C J Sansom's next Shardlake novel set during peasant revolt', *The Bookseller*, 17 May 2018, <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/sansoms-7th-shardlake-novel-features-peasant-revolt-786466>> [accessed 29 November 2020]

⁴⁰⁸ 'Dissolution', *Publishers Weekly* <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-670-03203-7> [accessed 29 November 2020] para 1 of 1, date and author unknown.

to be more dangerous than its predecessor'.⁴⁰⁹ It is notable in the context of this thesis, that Gregory proclaims Shardlake to be 'a convincingly real Tudor detective' in 'an utterly convincing world [...] drawing the reader into the darker corners of history'.⁴¹⁰ Sansom's Tudor output spans the period both before and after the 2016 EU referendum with *Tombland* moving the storyworld beyond the reign of Henry VIII into that of his son, Edward VI. I have chosen to analyse the two earliest texts for three reasons. First, with the exception of Gregory's *The Taming of the Queen*, all the novels analysed in this thesis are set in the decade that saw the inception of the Henrician Reformation. Secondly, *Dark Fire* ends with Cromwell's execution and he is an underlying presence in both novels (albeit mostly off-stage), enabling me to compare the approaches of all three authors to both his legacy and the wider implications of the emerging meritocracy which he personifies. Thirdly, in terms of their early twenty-first-century context, they are relatively early examples of the Tudor turn in historical fiction, which allows me to trace the trend's development over a period of around ten years and to map it to the unfolding discourses of the pre-Brexit era.

Sansom's *Dissolution* is set in 1537 (described on the cover of the 2007 paperback edition as 'a time of revolution that sees the greatest changes in England since 1066') and *Dark Fire* in 1540. As in the case of Gregory and the Tory Condition of England writers examined in Chapter One, his England is a site of decay, destruction and cultural loss. As in Gregory's and Mantel's novels, Cromwell is instrumental in driving the plot but whilst Gregory offers the perspective of an aggrieved aristocrat who looks down on him fearfully, and Mantel that of the man

⁴⁰⁹ Duffy, Stella, 'A wherry across the Thames', *Guardian*, 6 November 2004, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/nov/06/featuresreviews.guardianreview22> > [accessed 29 November 2020] paras 7 and 8 of 8.

⁴¹⁰ Merritt, Stephanie, 'C.J. Sansom: a bestselling mix of Tudor history and mystery', *Guardian*, 26 October 2014, < <https://www.theguardian.com/theobserver/2014/oct/26/profile-cj-sansom-crime-fiction-history-shardlake> > [accessed 29 November 2020] para 24 of 24.

himself, Sansom's Cromwell is presented from the workplace-level view of a junior colleague who regards him as a superior. Shardlake himself is a 'new man' with a conscience, and the Cromwell with whom he interacts is a demanding, ruthless but ultimately human employer who inspires a mixture of fear and respect. Their encounters take place beyond the parameters of the royal court amidst the realities of commoner life and their interactions are mostly operational, with Cromwell, for the most part, immersed in the day-to-day practicalities of implementing Crown policy. Sansom's Cromwell occupies a position somewhere between Gregory's monstrous 'man from nowhere' and Mantel's cultivated, humane, cosmopolitan pragmatist.⁴¹¹ He is capable of exquisite cruelty (as can be seen in the execution of Friar Forest discussed below) but at the same time genuinely shares Shardlake's aspirations to a commonwealth. Whilst formidable, he is not the innovative and insightful genius portrayed by Mantel, but someone whose judgement is often flawed and who is vulnerable to being duped.

Concerning my over-arching aim to trace the development of the Tudor turn in the years leading up to and beyond 2016 – these novels were published contemporaneously with the Tory Condition of England texts and during the period of New Labour government. This was the interval that preceded austerity and was marked by rising consumerism and apparent consensus on globalisation and liberalism whilst being over-shadowed by controversial military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Aspects of Sansom's plots appear to engage with these issues, and with those on-going debates of the time that arguably led the way to wider disillusionment in England with the New Labour project and globalisation.

⁴¹¹ For example, see Philippa Gregory, *The King's Curse* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014) p. 260.

In terms of Sansom's plots, the project to dissolve the Catholic monasteries, led by Cromwell, is underway, with commissioners being sent to larger institutions to carry out audits and uncover corruption as a precursor to their destruction. In the fictitious monastery of St Donatus in Scarnsea, one such commissioner has been found murdered and Shardlake is sent by Cromwell to solve the crime. In the course of his enquiries, he encounters further crimes whilst his experiences of Scarnsea and monastic life lead him to question his reformist zeal. *Dark Fire* is set three years later in the summer of 1540, in the weeks prior to Cromwell's fall. The fire in question is Greek Fire, an ancient and potentially devastating substance that is probably not dissimilar to the notorious weapons of chemical warfare deployed in twentieth and twenty-first conflicts. Its formula (lost for centuries) has been discovered in a dissolved monastery by an official of the Court of Augmentations, the legal entity responsible for processing ecclesiastical assets. Cromwell believes that he has been shown evidence of what it can do and wishes to present it to Henry VIII in order to regain the favour he has lost as a result of his part in the Cleves marriage. He has commissioned an alchemist, a brother of the Augmentations official, to produce more of it and promised to show its powers to the King within twelve days. However, since the aborted demonstration, the formula has disappeared and its makers are subsequently discovered to have been murdered. Shardlake is charged with recovering the formula. In return for his services, a young client, accused of murder, is given a short stay of execution in order to allow him to find evidence of her innocence. Shardlake must solve both mysteries within two weeks. He is additionally burdened with a court case involving the unscrupulous development and rental of a former monastery by a lawyer colleague. In this case and that of the Greek Fire, murderous corruption is discovered

to permeate state institutions with ultimate culpability resting at the highest levels of the ruling class.

Whilst Gregory's novels are exclusively concerned with the experiences of royalty, Sansom sets his novels in the world outside the royal court, though certain members of this circle are important characters in his plots. The intrigues and imperatives of the Henrician court are both a constant backdrop and a driving force in the narrative but it is the impact of these on the general population with which Sansom is primarily concerned. In marked contrast with Gregory, his narratives are not overtly nostalgic: they are positive about diversity and tend to highlight the fundamentally oppressive nature of the old English hierarchy.⁴¹² Ultimately, however, they reject the Reformation as a solution to the country's problems. In the Historical Note at the end of *Dissolution*, Sansom expresses the revisionist, anti-Whig view that the 'common people' are likely to have viewed the Reformation as 'changes ordered from above by the ruling classes, who told them what to do and how to think, as they always had'. He suggests that they silently complied because 'of course, nobody was interested in what they thought'.⁴¹³ In this respect, his work, despite its apparent sympathy with the underlying ideals of the Reformation, contributes to the discourses of decline identified in earlier chapters and articulated through other fictional depictions of the Henrician period.

In order to evaluate the contribution of Sansom's Tudor imaginary to English cultural memory and identity in the pre-Brexit period, this chapter will begin by exploring his use of historical detective fiction and inflection of generic features to

⁴¹² Shardlake's second assistant, Jack Barak, is ethnically Jewish and his best friend Guy is a former Catholic monk of Moorish and Muslim origin. Shardlake himself is disabled with a hunchback.

⁴¹³ Sansom, *Dissolution*, pp. 443-4.

produce a bleaker social vision than that with which the form has been traditionally associated. It will then proceed to consider how the novels' melancholic portrayal of English space aligns with the Condition of England writers' vision of a place from which history, meaning and identity are being erased. The final part of the chapter will examine Sansom's representations of the fractured, brutalised and disorderly society that results from the severance of people from place and past: the England of the Tory-radical critique, in which the promise of greater egalitarianism has given way to a chaotic version of individualism that is linked to greed, exploitation, selfish ambition and cultural disintegration.

Sansom's Historical Detective Fiction: A Good Man in a Bad World

As indicated above, Sansom's novels are examples of a hybrid known as historical crime fiction (a 'recognised sub-genre' of crime fiction and generally seen by critics to be innately conservative).⁴¹⁴ More specifically, Sansom writes historical *detective* fiction but given the overlap within the broader genre and its related criticism, both terms will appear below. The texts employ a number of the generic conventions associated with the wider field of detective fiction but they also differ from recognised norms in crucial ways. Before considering aspects of their distinctiveness and their political implications, I will first examine some key properties and critical perspectives on the genre as a whole and then proceed to assess the extent to which Sansom's fiction diverges from these standard characteristics.

⁴¹⁴ Heather Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 133.

Though its characters are often compelling and charismatic (as Franco Moretti asserts, this is, after all a genre that individualises deviance and thus makes it interesting), detective fiction regularly deploys stock figures and motifs.⁴¹⁵ The detective him or herself is a figure of modernity, embodying the qualities of rationality, scientific method and the subjectivity of individualism. For Stephen Knight, he or she contributes to 'the myth, so important for our period, that a single individual, if clever and patient enough, can unravel the world of experience'.⁴¹⁶ Knight argues that the detective emerged from the cultural shift of the Enlightenment whereby 'professionalism, specialisation and rigorous inquiry replaced the values of affection and mutual understanding as means of controlling deviance'.⁴¹⁷ In most detective fiction, guilt is personal, exceptional and rarely symptomatic of its context. Moretti identifies its cultural role in helping to preserve the status quo as a genre that 'exists expressly to dispel the doubt that guilt might be impersonal, and therefore collective and social'.⁴¹⁸ Ultimately, according to Knight, an 'optimistic ideology which is attractive and viable in terms of a culture group's expectations and beliefs is a major feature of popular, successful crime fiction'.⁴¹⁹

In the world of detective fiction, Moretti argues, the criminal is always motivated by a desire for money and property but 'the genre is wholly silent about *production*: that unequal exchange between labour-power and wages which is the true source of social wealth'.⁴²⁰ In a sense, the genre works through a subliminal cultural resentment of economic injustice but does so through a focus on individual deviance. Thus, for

⁴¹⁵ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 1997), p. 135.

⁴¹⁶ Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 23.

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁴¹⁸ Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 135.

⁴¹⁹ Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, p. 33.

⁴²⁰ Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 139.

Moretti, the 'indignation against what is rotten and immoral in the economy must concentrate on these phenomena' and not on the systemic causes of inequality.⁴²¹ For this reason, the criminal is often an 'upstart' whose aspirations to social mobility are punished as a means of destroying 'a memory painful to his philistine audience: the original sin of nineteenth-century legality'.⁴²² For Moretti, the genre decouples transgression from context and cause, attributing it to individualised desire rather than structural injustice. Worthington also notes this decontextualization, suggesting that the genre's customary portrayal of motives, crimes and perpetrators as essentially unchanging across the ages evokes 'a comforting sense of human continuity'.⁴²³ Knight concurs with this judgement, asserting that 'the politics of historical crime fiction are basically traditional'.⁴²⁴ In this respect, the form usually exemplifies Michael Gardiner's condemnation of English literature as a whole for its anti-historical, anti-constitutional properties and its 'positivist insistence on an intuitive understanding of things as they always are, should be, and have been'.⁴²⁵

Writing specifically about *historical* crime fiction, Worthington points out that 'the detective has often been linked to the historian in their common endeavour to construct a coherent narrative from the relics (evidence) of a previous time'.⁴²⁶ This resemblance to the historian also extends to the writer of fiction. As Beverley Southgate notes, history and fiction are both 'concerned essentially with the same task: with the construction of *meaning*, with making some sense out of what otherwise appears as the chaotic jumble of data that makes up human lives. Both, that is to say, need to tell

⁴²¹ Ibid.

⁴²² Ibid, p. 140.

⁴²³ Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, p. 140.

⁴²⁴ Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction Since 1800: Detection, Death, Diversity*, 2nd edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 225.

⁴²⁵ Michael Gardiner, *The Constitution of English Literature*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), Kindle ebook, p. 14.

⁴²⁶ Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, p. 130.

stories – construct *narratives*'. For Southgate, 'it is the function of both historians and novelists to provide just such stories, just such markers and signs, by which one thing leads on to another in what appears to be a comprehensible and meaningful way'.⁴²⁷ Historians however, can be distinguished from novelists by their work to retrieve and reconstruct a story that is already there, but this distinction blurs in the case of historical fiction and it is interesting to note that Nora attributes the contemporary renaissance of this genre to the 'successive deaths of memory-history and memory-fiction' and to the advent of history as 'our replaceable imagination'.⁴²⁸ The site of this retrieval is often the archive, the receptacle of evidence from the past. For Nora, the archive expresses the 'terrorism of historicized memory', its very necessity and existence testifying to the re-casting of memory's continuity and communal bonding into history's discontinuity and social fracture.⁴²⁹ Shardlake can be seen to embody and enact these ideas because he is an evidence-led investigator-protagonist who possesses contemporary sensibilities whilst inhabiting a series of historical novels. These novels centre on his quest to re-construct a narrative of a past, the ephemerality of which he is acutely aware.

Shardlake's retrieval of the past is a private and impersonal endeavour enacted through the accumulation of evidence rather than human interaction: because all are suspects for the detective, the latter is innately untrustworthy and lacking in value. This privatisation of knowledge is demonstrated in *Dissolution* when Shardlake receives a sealed document from the Tower of London, whereupon 'I turned my back to him and Bugge, broke the seal and read the three lines within. It was as I had thought.'⁴³⁰ This

⁴²⁷ Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2009), p. 12.

⁴²⁸ Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoires*', p. 24.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 14.

⁴³⁰ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 402.

missing ingredient enables him to complete the construction of a narrative which will only be revealed at a later date and its significance is only known to Shardlake himself.

Detective fiction, and in particular historical detective fiction, can thus be regarded as a meta-commentary on the narrative practices of both history and fiction. Drawing on the work of theorists such as Hayden White and Louis O. Mink, Southgate asserts that human life is essentially story-less and that narrative, with its selection, connection and omission, is the imposition of art and politics on life.⁴³¹ This can be seen in Shardlake's often skewed or blinkered responses to the events and communities he encounters whereby he is blinded to the guilt of some whilst wrongly construing the actions of others. As Sansom's narratives unfold, it becomes apparent that Shardlake's documentary and interpretive approach is framed by assumptions and prejudices that are progressively discredited: for example, his initial enthusiasm for reform leads to repeated mis-readings in *Dissolution*. Through the instability of Shardlake's comprehension, the novels demonstrate Linda Hutcheon's claim that 'both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past'.⁴³² The ultimate inaccessibility of a fixed and universal truth about the past is further emphasised by the portrayal in both novels of the disappearance of materialised memory which parallels Shardlake's investigations. As he works, buildings are simultaneously being obliterated and artefacts melted down: memory recedes before his very eyes to be replaced by new, historicised versions of the past that better suit the needs of the present regime but, as Nora points out, in the absence of *milieux de mémoire*, will always be incomplete.⁴³³ Shardlake, as

⁴³¹ Southgate, *History Meets Fiction*, pp. 14-15.

⁴³² Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 89.

⁴³³ Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 7.

both reformer and detective, historically reconstructs what has gone before in the midst of memory's conquest. Sansom's historical crime fiction therefore self-consciously draws attention to the role of historical narrative as commentary on and actual assemblage of a present which will inevitably be experienced with a sense of absence.

As worlds of habit and continuity, *milieux de mémoire* are nevertheless important to the detective genre as a whole and, in this context, can be seen to harmonise memory and history since the detective's drive to historicize restores stability. They also, of course, help to create the *frisson* which contributes to the reader's pleasure in the form. Writing about the genre's spatiality, Warren L. Chernaik, Martin Swales and Robert Vitain highlight its 'unmistakeable fondness for a setting which is not just an enclosed world but also a world of high sophistication'. They note that 'mini-societies (the monastery, the university) tend to be semiotically complex'.⁴³⁴ The city is a frequent milieu, its thronging anonymity redolent with danger but so also, are remote rural settings.⁴³⁵ Inaccessible or peripheral architectural space is a recurring motif and often signifies danger.⁴³⁶ Sansom makes full use of these conventional settings and motifs to convey both the embeddedness of England's corruption and the work of recovering a past constantly under the threat of obliteration. There are locked doors and drawers, secret passages, dark corners and buried artefacts. In *Dissolution*, clues lie in a locked drawer and at the bottom of the monastery's murky fish pond. This pond also conceals the corpse of the missing Orphan Stoneyard, whose mysterious disappearance some years before, turns out to

⁴³⁴ Warren L. Chernaik, Martin Swales and Robert Vitain, 'Introduction' in Chernaik, Warren, Swales, Martin and Vitain, Robert (eds), *The Art of Detective Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. xiv.

⁴³⁵ Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction*, pp. 2-8.

⁴³⁶ See Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 136.

be due to her murder at the hands of the fraudulent Brother Edwig. Similarly, in *Dark Fire*, the truth is hidden in the bottom of a well, where the corpses of Ralph Wentworth's torture victims are found.⁴³⁷ Here, the truth is also hidden in drawers, in books snatched from ruined libraries, and in the desecrated grave of a medieval monk which holds the formula for Greek Fire. Shardlake is pursued through the city (and ultimately attacked) by mysterious agents working on behalf of powerful interests. It is, however, not London itself that is threatening but rather what has been done to it by reformers. In many cases, the secrets in locked rooms, secret passages and crypts are not threatening but rather, as in the case of the Greek Fire, hold the key to salvation. Evidence is in constant danger of being lost and Shardlake must work against clock and calendar to save the past from extinction: to stop England's story from being wiped out before it is known. Shardlake's work, however, does not restore equilibrium but rather hastens its rupture because his investigations help to historicize the past. Spaces are under attack, are literally being torn down, and the answers they hold are destined to be buried in the rubble or smashed, melted down or burned. The absoluteness of such destruction and its power to obliterate England's culture is signified by Shardlake's account of 'Portinari, Cromwell's Italian engineer, who even now was demolishing Lewes Priory, was coming on to Scarnsea afterwards to take down the buildings'. On his previous assignment he has 'managed to undermine the foundations so the whole church came tumbling down at one go in great clouds of dust'.⁴³⁸ The overwhelming impression given by Sansom's presentation of England is one of a whole country 'tumbling down at one go', having had its foundations undermined. His representation of English space and place, in which history and

⁴³⁷ Both these cases are also a reminder of England's endemic social injustice: because of their lowly status, the disappearances of these destitute young people are largely unremarked and unpursued.

⁴³⁸ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 429.

identity are integrated but threatened, resonates strongly with both Nora's idea of the conquest of memory and the Tory geo-piety discussed in Chapter One, and will be considered in more detail later in this chapter.

A further characteristic of the form is that the detective tends to be an alienated, often melancholy, figure. As Chernaik, Swales and Vitain point out, 'often the detective is interesting by virtue of his or her relationships (or lack of them). In many examples, the detective is strangely celibate, seeking to keep the tainting world at arm's length'.⁴³⁹ The investigative process itself is marked by sacrifice: the detective is shown to suffer in his or her pursuit of trust and justice – for example, through lack of sleep, inability to eat, excessive drinking, illness or injury. According to Moretti, such hardships are metaphors for the detective's sacrifice of individuality for his or her work in restoring order and cohesion to the social body. The detective's sacrifice goes hand in hand with that of the criminal. 'In the figures of detective and criminal', suggests Moretti, 'a single renunciation, a sole sacrifice, is enacted in different ways'.⁴⁴⁰

Shardlake is alienated from society but this is the result of discrimination against his physical disability rather than because of a dissonant personality: his hunchback means that he is regarded by many with caution or derision. In *Dissolution*, Jerome, the disaffected Carthusian resident of St Donatus, who has survived torture, reminds him that 'to touch a hunchback means ill fortune' and calls him 'a mockery of the human form', adding for good measure that 'your soul is twisted and cankered'.⁴⁴¹ Despite the sympathy aroused by Jerome's suffering at the hands of the reforming authorities, his insults are a reminder of Catholicism's negative influence on society.

⁴³⁹ Chernaik, Swales and Vitain, *The Art of Detective Fiction*, p. xv.

⁴⁴⁰ Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 142.

⁴⁴¹ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 220.

In the same novel, Shardlake tells his assistant, Mark Poer, that 'I've seen men cross themselves at my approach often enough, for all my fine clothes'.⁴⁴² In *Dark Fire*, when speaking kindly to a beggar girl who steps in front of his horse, she retorts by calling him a 'shitting hunchback bastard' and the brother of a prostitute he wishes to question remarks that he 'didn't know they allowed hunchbacks to be lawyers'.⁴⁴³ Shardlake's isolation is indicated in other ways. He is clearly attracted sexually to female characters in both novels but these prove unattainable: *Dissolution's* Alice Fewterer is guilty of the murder and in any case is in love with Poer, and, for social and material reasons, he is also rejected by the aristocratic Lady Honor in *Dark Fire*. Thus, while those around him forge often illicit sexual connections, Shardlake remains alone and celibate. In this respect, and like Mantel's Cromwell, his perspective on English society is therefore that of the excluded.

The sacrificial suffering noted by Moretti is also evident in the Shardlake novels, but, rather than enduring for a greater good, Shardlake's pain arises from his sense of disempowerment in relation to the social wrongs he encounters in the course of his work. He is marked by a propensity to depression that is exacerbated by his investigations. In *Dark Fire*, when his friend and physician, Guy Malton draws attention to this, Shardlake claims to 'have a melancholy nature' which is 'settled in me'. In keeping with what is known of Tudor medicine he attributes this, fatalistically, to an imbalance of humours, saying that 'I have too much of earth. The imbalance is fixed in me'. However, a few lines later, in response to Guy's assertion that there is nothing that can't be changed, he remarks that his tendency 'to take less and less interest in the stirs of politics and the law, though once they were the heart of my life' has come

⁴⁴² Ibid, p. 34.

⁴⁴³ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 165. and p. 219.

about 'since Scarnsea'.⁴⁴⁴ Shardlake's melancholia is, therefore, shown to be less a clinical condition and more an understandable response to the state of the nation in which he finds himself.

Shardlake's mental suffering is matched by the increasing physical hardship he endures, his body mirroring England in its decline. His back condition means that he is prone to discomfort, but both books frequently draw attention to the heightened pain caused by the demands of his commissions. For example, as he and Barak investigate the well in which the boy Ralph has died, his 'back screamed in pain' as he helps Barak up from the bottom.⁴⁴⁵ His work necessitates long rides on horseback and in *Dissolution*, he remarks that 'those were becoming more difficult and painful every year'.⁴⁴⁶ During the course of the first novel, he is prescribed exercises by Guy which help to alleviate his suffering. Early in *Dark Fire*, as he empathises with the man in the pillory and shudders 'to think of the pain my back would have given me', he reflects that 'it gave me far less trouble these days, thanks to Guy'.⁴⁴⁷ As he becomes embroiled in his work, however, and has 'scarce time to turn around', he admits to Guy that he has neglected his prescribed self-care, with the result that an everyday action such as slipping the satchel from his back induces 'a stab of pain' and Guy observes that he seems to be 'strung tight as a bowstring'.⁴⁴⁸ In the course of his work, Shardlake is attacked on several occasions. In *Dissolution* he is locked for eleven hours in a cupboard, the cramped conditions exacerbating his back pain, and is thrown from the top of a church bell tower, improbably managing to save himself by first clinging to a bell and then hauling himself on to a balcony, landing with 'back and arms

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 22

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 312.

⁴⁴⁶ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 22.

⁴⁴⁷ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 18.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 196-7.

an agony'.⁴⁴⁹ In *Dark Fire*, he and Barak are victims of an arson attack using Greek Fire and are quite severely burned. Later, he is poisoned with Belladonna in an attempt to suppress the results of his investigations. Though exhausted throughout the course of both novels, Shardlake either cannot sleep or will not let himself because of the pressure he is under. However, whilst the sacrificial suffering in conventional detective fiction helps ultimately to restore society's equilibrium, the endings to Sansom's novels are unremittingly bleak: Shardlake solves the crimes but not their causes. *Dissolution* closes with his melancholic rejection of ontological certainty as he concludes that God (like history and nation) is constructed 'in whatever image happens to suit our shifting needs' and that in England all 'is dissolving, Brother Guy, all is dissolution'.⁴⁵⁰ The final image of *Dark Fire* is of Shardlake and Barak walking away from where 'Cromwell's head stood fixed on its stake' towards 'the roiling city, ever in need of justice and absolution'.⁴⁵¹

As an individualistic detective figure inhabiting a transitioning world still only on the threshold of modernity, Shardlake prefigures the Enlightenment future and, like all the narrators examined in the thesis, offers a contemporary perspective on the world of the past which nevertheless possesses a degree of historical authenticity. Sansom himself does not regard Shardlake as an anachronism, pointing out that 'the sixteenth century was the time when rational, sceptical enquiry was beginning. I'm not saying a man like Shardlake did exist then, but he could have, where even 20 years earlier he couldn't. That's enough for me'.⁴⁵² In comprehending his world through reason, curiosity and a deductive consciousness, Shardlake can nevertheless be regarded as

⁴⁴⁹ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 426.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 439.

⁴⁵¹ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 576.

⁴⁵² Merritt, 'C.J. Sansom: a bestselling mix of Tudor history and mystery', para 7 of 24

a temporally extraneous figure whose perspective on the past might align with that of the contemporary reader: his narrative portrays sixteenth-century England through a twenty-first century lens, thus projecting a present-day national consciousness on to its account of the country's past. This viewpoint is demonstrated in a number of ways. In an example of ekphrasis from *Dark Fire*, whilst examining a piece of the parchment from which the formula for Greek Fire has been torn, he remarks on 'a richly painted picture without perspective, such as the old monks used to illustrate their books'.⁴⁵³ This shows an understanding of the history of art and the unfolding of Renaissance thought that a figure like Shardlake, who would be living through the development of subjectivity, would have been unlikely to possess. He has a capacity for empathy that also seems to be linked to modernity, to the science of psychology and advent of individualism. This is apparent throughout both novels. For instance, in *Dark Fire*, he understands that beggars are 'displaying their sores and deformities in the hope of charity' and on being given details of the boy Ralph Wentworth's death through falling down a well, he has 'a sudden picture of a fall into darkness, a scream echoing off dank brick walls. I shivered despite the heat of the day'.⁴⁵⁴ He is disturbed by public punishment: in *Dissolution*, when the novice monk, Simon Whelplay is forced to stand in shame during meal-time in a cold corner without food or drink, Shardlake is distracted from his meal despite his hunger, acutely aware of and affected by the other's suffering.⁴⁵⁵ In *Dark Fire*, on seeing a middle-aged man enduring the pillory while 'the passers-by paid him little attention', he notices 'his face contort with pain' and reflects that it is 'a painful position for one no longer young; I shuddered to think of the pain my back would have given me were I put in his place'.⁴⁵⁶ Shardlake is

⁴⁵³ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 66.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid, pp. 4 and 10.

⁴⁵⁵ Sansom, *Dissolution*, pp. 98-100.

⁴⁵⁶ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 18.

haunted by the pain of others (including that of animals), dwelling frequently, for example, on the physical sensations of torture and execution, thoughts which cause him distress. He has a restless intellect, often at odds with the superstitions of early modernity, recognising for instance that 'we do not know what half the things in the world signify. And sometimes they signify nothing' and that religious doctrine is probably 'no more than a jangle of words'.⁴⁵⁷ When he expresses a desire to leave London, Guy asks, 'Would you not become bored without cases to sharpen your wits on, problems to solve?'⁴⁵⁸ As Catherine Belsey has shown through her investigations of English Renaissance drama, such a concept of unified subjectivity is associated with the liberal humanism that emerged subsequently to the early-modern period. She asserts that the 'subject is held in place in a specific discourse, a specific knowledge, by the meanings available there'.⁴⁵⁹ As such, Shardlake's sensibilities align with twenty-first-century subjectivity and he brings to the storyworld 'an understanding formed by the present'.⁴⁶⁰

In keeping with generic convention, there is a detective/helper dynamic that illuminates aspects of the former's character and contributes to the sense of their social dissonance. Shardlake's companions are marginalised figures who exist 'in threatening proximity to the swamp of criminality and aberration' but the causes of their distance from society are linked to historical context.⁴⁶¹ In *Dissolution*, Shardlake is assisted by his younger relative, Poer. At the beginning of the novel, Poer shares Shardlake's home, 'looking after my affairs in my absence'. Shardlake has 'a family obligation' which means that he has found him work and promoted his interests in

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid, pp. 17 and 22.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁹ Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 5.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 1.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid.

London. Prior to the start of the novel, Poer has transgressed the boundaries of class through involvement with a Knight's daughter and Cromwell, perhaps demonstrating solidarity with a younger 'new man', assigns him to help with the Scarnsea case in the hope that it may help him to regain employment in the courts.⁴⁶² Poer also lacks religious faith and towards the end of the novel, when his complicity with the murderer Alice is revealed, proclaims 'with sudden wildness' that 'I have never agreed with your religion' and that 'there is no justice or order in this world'.⁴⁶³ His determination to pursue a relationship with Alice, and his eventual elopement with her to France by means of her connections with the smuggling world, indicates the ambivalence of his national allegiances and confirms his status as one beyond the confines of social acceptability. Longer-term relationships are established in the second novel when Shardlake acquires the services of Jack Barak, a former beggar of Jewish descent, who is initially described as 'sharp-faced' and 'insolent' and is distinctive for his frequent use of the word 'arsehole'.⁴⁶⁴ Barak is familiar with the London underworld, frequenting brothels and taverns. As previously mentioned, Shardlake also enjoys a close friendship with Guy, a former monk and infirmarian at St Donatus' monastery, the setting for *Dissolution*. Following the destruction of St Donatus at the end of the previous novel, Shardlake has helped Guy to establish himself as a London apothecary. Moretti notes the significance of the doctor figure within the genre, of which Conan Doyle's Watson is perhaps the best-known example. Guy brings scientific rationalism and method to the narrative as well as an outsider's perspective. He is a trained physician but because he is a Morisco he can only practise as an apothecary due to racial prejudice. He is a skilled healer and a curious scientist who

⁴⁶² Sansom, *Dissolution*, pp. 17-8.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 411.

⁴⁶⁴ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, pp. 55 and 87. For 'arsehole', see for example pp. 56, 61 and 98.

experiments in chemistry and pre-figures the modern pathologist in being able to determine causes of death through examining corpses. In addition to his skin colour, his Catholicism and his transnational identity render him an outsider within English society. He uses the name Malton as a means of playing down his foreignness but he is in effect a 'citizen of nowhere' who experiences prejudice and abuse. Like Shardlake himself, his associates can all therefore, be regarded as misfits within the English society of the novel's setting, and the perspective arising from this positioning helps to emphasise the dysfunctionality of the Tudor world Sansom portrays.

Ideologically, important aspects of Sansom's fiction diverge from generic norms. The Henrician world functions as more than an aesthetic: the plot unfolds in parallel with historical events and the crimes committed are shown to relate directly to the wider historical context. Rather than being exceptions, criminals are shown to be products of the social conditions in which they live and as Duffy points out in her review of *Dark Fire*, 'Sansom gives us a broad view of politics'.⁴⁶⁵ In this respect, his novels contradict Moretti's claims regarding the conservative function of detective fiction and this is a characteristic of the sub-genre as a whole, which Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr suggest, 'registers the actions of the people of the past, recording how they influenced, both good and bad, their future – and our present'.⁴⁶⁶ Sansom's novels use their historical setting to comment upon present ills. Neoliberal and rentier forms of capitalism are implicitly condemned through portrayal of the corrupt and hypocritical complicity between the law, money and property and its

⁴⁶⁵ Duffy, Stella, 'A wherry across the Thames'.

⁴⁶⁶ 1) Moretti claims that this is to create 'a problem, a 'concrete effect' – the crime' and to declare 'a sole cause relevant: the criminal'. Contrary to Moretti's assertion, in Sansom's novels 'the doubt that every choice is partial and subjective' is anything but dispelled - Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 144. 2) Ray B. Browne and Lawrence A. Kreiser, Jr, 'Introduction' in Browne, Ray B. and Kreiser, Jr, A. Lawrence (eds), *The Detective as Historian: History and Art In Historical Crime Fiction Volume II* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), p. xiv.

consequences for ordinary people whose own beliefs and traditions are actively suppressed. His preoccupation with judicial brutality, with a system that judges a human life to be worth less than a shilling's worth of property, that will inflict horrific mutilations for the most petty (and often unavoidable) offences, and thinks nothing of crushing a terrified teenager to death because she will not plead in court, reflects the sub-genre's tendency to deal 'more with the lower aspects of historical life than does historical fiction'.⁴⁶⁷

In linking criminality to particular historical conditions, his characters shaped by the times in which they live, Sansom's work resembles the kind of historical fiction described by Georg Lukács.⁴⁶⁸ However, the power dynamics that engender their transgression cross chronological boundaries. In keeping with Browne and Kreiser's assessment of the genre, this historical crime fiction engages with life at street-level but in doing so, Shardlake offers a commentary that implicitly links this past horror to contemporary English concerns. Sansom shows that then as now, many crimes arise from the social disadvantage associated with capitalism and class. For example, the seemingly demonic and motiveless beheading investigated in *Dissolution* turns out to be a mimetic act of revenge for the execution (also by beheading) of Mark Smeaton. Smeaton was a court musician of humble origin and foreign birth, who confessed to adultery with Anne Boleyn. There are various accounts regarding the truth of the charges brought against him. Elton, writing in 1955, is doubtful of their authenticity and concludes that 'Henry had now so far discarded scruple that to get his way he was prepared to appear as a cuckold and a victim of witchcraft'.⁴⁶⁹ In a 2018 biography of

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, p. xvii.

⁴⁶⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin Press, 1962).

⁴⁶⁹ G.R. Elton, *England Under The Tudors* (London: Methuen & Co, 1955), p. 153.

Cromwell, Diarmaid MacCulloch, is similarly ambivalent, suggesting that Smeaton's confession may have arisen from a combination of fear and wishful thinking, and probably resulted from 'unspecified pressures physical and psychological at [Cromwell's house] Stepney'⁴⁷⁰ Mantel, in *Bring Up the Bodies*, implies that the charges were groundless and hints that Smeaton was tortured in Cromwell's house.⁴⁷¹ Sansom's narrative concurs with this latter suggestion: in fact, this version of the musician's fate is pivotal to the central murder plot. The murder of Cromwell's fictitious commissioner Robert Singleton is perpetrated by Smeaton's cousin, the aforementioned fictitious character, Alice, who works with diligence and compassion as a servant/nurse in the monastery's infirmary. Her victim, who embodies a law which attacks those it is supposed to protect, is killed for his instrumental role in the entrapment, torture and execution of an innocent but powerless young man who has the added disadvantage of not being English. As Alice recounts, Smeaton 'told me that when he was first arrested he had a crazy notion that as he had done no wrong the law would protect him!' He discovers that in fact 'England's law is a rack in a cellar!' and he is racked 'till his whole world was nothing but a scream'.⁴⁷² Her crime and eventual confession are acts of political protest. She tells Shardlake that 'when it comes to what is happening in England now you are as blind as a newborn kitten' and urges him to 'see things through the eyes of common people, but your kind never will'.⁴⁷³ Shardlake himself develops self-awareness and comes to recognise the connection between crime and the English society he has helped to create. At the end of the novel, he reflects that 'Alice would not have been a murderess but for the times

⁴⁷⁰ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Life* (London: Penguin Random House, 2018), Kindle ebook, p. 338.

⁴⁷¹ Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), pp. 281-2.

⁴⁷² Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 407.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid*, pp. 411-12.

we live in' and that you 'might as well ask what a country England has become. And I have been part of it'.⁴⁷⁴ In contrast to Moretti's assertions about classic detective fiction, the 'guilty party' here is not 'an exception' but rather, the product of a country that has been ruined by those who 'fashion beliefs which you force the people to follow on pain of death, while you struggle for power and lands and money, which are all any of you truly want'.⁴⁷⁵ This extends to the other, more venal and acquisitive murderer, the embezzling Brother Edwig, who 'would never have got away with this fraud had things been more stable' and who attributes his acts of homicide to the fact that he 'saw too much killing as a child'.⁴⁷⁶

In dwelling on the social and political causes of crime, Sansom's narratives also confront Moretti's 'original sin' of 'primitive accumulation'.⁴⁷⁷ The novels are populated with 'upstarts', referred to in markedly twenty-first-century terms as 'rapacious land speculators buying up the dissolved monasteries'.⁴⁷⁸ The use of contemporary phrases invites parallels with present-day grievances. The 'new men' is a theme that is consistent across the work of the three writers examined by the thesis and which, as previously noted, is considered by many scholars to be a significant factor in the process of nation-building. In the 'Historical Note' at the end of *Dissolution*, Sansom sets out the revisionist, post-Marxist view that:

Those who benefitted the most from the Reformation were the 'new men', the emerging capitalist and bureaucratic classes, men of property without birth. I think there were many Copyngers in mid-Tudor England; the Reformation was about a changing class structure as much as anything. That is an unfashionable view nowadays; it is naughty to mention class when discussing history.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 417.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 411.

⁴⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 417 and 424.

⁴⁷⁷ Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 140.

⁴⁷⁸ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 1.

⁴⁷⁹ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 443.

As much as anything else, the novels are about the privatisation of the public realm. The decade of dissolution was a time in which land and property, which was supposed to have passed from the Church to the Crown (both, in a sense, forms of public ownership), transferred instead to the hands of private investors: many of them the upwardly mobile functionaries employed in the King's service and taking advantage of royal inattentiveness.⁴⁸⁰ The novels address the corruption and injustice associated with the mass transfer of property and wealth from collective to individual possession which represented a failure to implement successfully the emancipatory ideals of many reformers. The texts confront the social consequences of a value system that favours running a country for profit. One of these consequences – the expansion of London's population – is attributed in the novels to the displacement caused by land enclosures and monastic dissolution and Sansom presents an urban landscape marked by suffering, decadence and squalor, presided over by the venal 'new men'. An example of this comes in *Dark Fire* where one of Shardlake's lawyer colleagues, 'a false and greedy rogue named Bealknap', has 'got hold of a small London friary' and 'converted it into a hotchpotch of unsavoury tenements' with 'a common cesspit for his tenants' that is 'a botched job'.⁴⁸¹ Shardlake is mysteriously penalised for pursuing a legal case against Bealknap by Richard Rich because, as Cromwell himself explains, 'influential people have bought monastic properties in London' and 'there are so many on the market now that the value of land has fallen'.⁴⁸² Bealknap's prosecution would set a precedent that would 'make life difficult for the new owners, some of whom can only turn a profit by converting their properties into housing of the cheapest type'.⁴⁸³ In

⁴⁸⁰ See Elton, *England Under The Tudors*, pp. 149-50.

⁴⁸¹ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁸² *Ibid*, p. 473.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid*, p. 474.

Dissolution, the local judge, Copynger, whose ‘unctuous fawning’ towards Cromwell and his agents ensures that he receives grants of monastic land, talks hypocritically about ‘how the monks oppress the poor’, refers to Guy as a ‘black goblin’ and complains that ‘You’d think all Englishmen had work, giving a post to a man like that’: a statement that resonates clearly with much of the hostile early twenty-first-century rhetoric (for example, politicians’ repeated conjuring of the so-called ‘bogus asylum-seeker’) that preceded the Brexit era.⁴⁸⁴ Shardlake recognises the profiteering that results from reforms, noting that ‘more duties meant more profit even in a poor town, as Copynger’s wealth bore witness’. He observes that ‘his ostentation sat ill with his humourless, pious air’ and that he ‘lives richly while turning people off their land’.⁴⁸⁵ Shardlake’s initial faith in Cromwell’s intention to use monastic wealth for the public good is steadily eroded. As his investigations proceed, he realises that the redistribution of wealth he anticipated is a futile dream: too many of those in privileged positions take ‘their cut’, leaving little left for the people.⁴⁸⁶ As Poer remarks, the Court of Augmentations is ‘such a sewer. Half the lands go to Richard Rich and his cronies’.⁴⁸⁷ Moreover, guilt is shown to be collective and often reaches to the highest echelons; for example in *Dark Fire*, the Duke of Norfolk turns out to be behind the Greek Fire hoax and his promotion of Cromwell’s downfall is aided by the duplicity of a colleague, Grey, operating from within the legal establishment, which Shardlake fails to see until it is too late. His reflection on this expresses a highly negative view of public institutions and a melancholic sense of things being “rigged” that resonates with present-day attitudes: ‘when we were wondering who was working against us we

⁴⁸⁴ Sansom, *Dissolution*, pp. 209, 214 and 207.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 203 and 214.

⁴⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 36.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 29.

should have thought of someone at the court, someone in that great cesspit [...] Norfolk's won'.⁴⁸⁸

The equivalence between established aristocrats such as Norfolk and 'new men' like Rich is significant. As noted in earlier chapters, the emergence of English nationhood in the sixteenth century has been attributed by Leah Greenfield to the supposed flattening of the class structure at this time. The case she puts forward is that the sale of monastic land created opportunities for a new middle class to acquire property and, by extension, social mobility (this belief in the transformative power of ownership was also a key component of Thatcherism).⁴⁸⁹ Krishan Kumar counters Greenfield's view, however, with the argument that while people 'of humble origin, such as Thomas Cromwell, did indeed rise from among the ranks', they 'were additions to, not a replacement of, the old aristocracy'. Kumar points out that those who had successfully advanced through the social order tended eagerly to embrace the customs and outlook of the nobility.⁴⁹⁰ Thus, as I go on to discuss below, Cromwell adopts aristocratic customs such as the distribution of doles to the poor, while in *Dark Fire* the aspirational Wentworth family attempt to secure their 'advancement' by concealing the young Ralph's cruelty towards his dependent cousin and murder of a destitute child through falsely accusing a poor relation. In Sansom's novels, social advancement and geographical mobility are associated either with exclusion and loneliness (as exemplified by both Guy and Shardlake), or with lost virtue and concealed criminality. As she attempts to poison Shardlake and Barak, the Wentworth matriarch articulates the values of self-aggrandisement:

⁴⁸⁸ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 559.

⁴⁸⁹ Leah Greenfield, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (London: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 47-50.

⁴⁹⁰ Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 98

'My family has come far,' she said quietly. 'If Edwin had been like Joseph we would all still be country clods, working at that dreary farm. But Edwin has brought us advancement, wealth, the chance for his children to mix with the highest in London'.⁴⁹¹

When Shardlake asks her if she feared that 'Ralph was growing into a monster', she replies, 'If Ralph did not grow out of his cruelties he would have learned to conceal them. People do'.⁴⁹² In contrast to his London family, the farmer Joseph Wentworth, who has not advanced from his social position, is notable for 'his goodness, such natural goodness and charity as few men have'.⁴⁹³

Whilst Sansom equates the acquisition of wealth with the debasement of England, unlike Gregory, he does not exonerate the established aristocracy. The 'changing class structure' that he depicts is one in which much of the nobility expands and consolidates its power, though some (of whom the Vaughans and the extinct Hastings are examples) do indeed decline. In keeping with Kumar's argument, Sansom's 'new men' are additions to the existing aristocracy, not standard-bearers for a new middle-class. The books are concerned with English hierarchy, about how power and wealth is gained and maintained and how inequality is systematised through an enforced cultural amnesia. Though Sansom's portrayal of Reformation upstarts confronts Moretti's 'spectre of primitive accumulation' it does not offer the possibility of its eradication. Shardlake becomes increasingly aware of how the people have been irrevocably wronged.

Shardlake's developing understanding of social injustice is accompanied by a growing recognition of his own faults and of his complicity with a brutal and repressive

⁴⁹¹ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 540.

⁴⁹² *Ibid*, pp. 541-2.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 549.

state. Events disillusion him and he loses his religious zeal. He proves to be an unreliable judge of character and, in some cases, those to whom he is initially hostile, for example Guy, become close friends and helpers. The crimes investigated by Shardlake not only arise from their contexts but their solutions are given added urgency by the fact that they have consequences. The concluding details provided by Shardlake are part of a larger narrative. For example, part of his mission in the first text is to hasten the dissolution of the monastery at Scarnsea. In the second, he must solve the mystery of dark fire in order both to save Thomas Cromwell's career (and life) and to rescue the innocent Elizabeth, niece of his friend, from being pressed to death. Sansom does not offer coziness or positivism. He presents an England that is structurally and endemically unfair, and in which hopes for a better society have been crushed. Shardlake is shown to transform over the course of the narrative from ardent, reforming nationalist to one whose ambitions have been reduced, by the end of *Dark Fire*, to bringing 'a little order into this wicked world. A tiny bit'.⁴⁹⁴ The 'notion of 'a tiny bit' is crucial, however. Whilst traditional detective fiction individualises crime, Sansom's fiction institutionalises it and offers little hope of an overarching solution: Shardlake works in isolation against organisational barriers. This is illustrated by the following encounter between the speculator Bealknap and Shardlake which comes towards the conclusion of *Dark Fire*:

'The system works to all our advantage and there is much gold to be made with little effort if one chooses the easy path.'

I thought of those hovels, the people made to use that stinking cesspit, the neighbouring houses spoiled. And all the houses like it, mushrooming all over London from the shells of the old monasteries.

'You are a son of sin and death, Bealknap,' I said. 'And I shall fight you every way I can.'⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁴ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 576.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 558.

Shardlake's melancholic assessment of this upwardly mobile profiteer rejects the contemporary ideology of the private shareholder and dismisses the notion that the privatisation of ecclesiastical land in early-modern England was a stage in the transition to democracy.

In conclusion, Sansom makes full use of generic conventions but inflects them towards an overtly political stance not usually associated with historical detective fiction. He maintains the genre's sense of continuity between past and present but in harnessing it explicitly to a moment of historical change, he frames the Henrician reformation as a fatal lapse with an on-going legacy of cultural and historical loss. The continuity proffered by these novels, then, lies less in comforting notions of human commonality across time (the always-has-been) and more in seeing this period as both a parallel of the contemporary moment and an origin of its current ills. The closing lines of *Dark Fire* describe Henrician London as a 'roiling city, ever in need of justice and absolution' and this plays to the growing sense of turbulence and indeterminacy of English consciousness at the time of publication.⁴⁹⁶ Sansom has said that:

I find the free-market ideology that has dominated the world for the past 30 years, and brought us to our present ruin, a dogma that has failed repeatedly and disastrously, but politics based on national identity is even more dangerous; anti-rational, demagogic, assuming individuals should be defined by their nationality, and, always, against an enemy.⁴⁹⁷

The narratives are implicitly critical of both individualism and popular nationalism, though the latter reflects a conservative opposition to Scottish nationalism rather than

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 576.

⁴⁹⁷ Merritt, 'C.J. Sansom: a bestselling mix of Tudor history and mystery', para 23 of 24

a pro-European stance (Sansom campaigned to retain the union in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum).

The next section of this chapter will examine the novels' deployment of spatial motifs in order to evoke the grim consequences of the Henrician recalibration of history and culture. These elements will be considered in relation to the potential of the detective form with its tropes of disclosure and redemption to create a sense of righting past wrongs and, at the same time, the impossibility of restoring an identity effaced by the Reformation's replacement of memory with history. I suggest that ultimately the crime Shardlake investigates is one committed against England itself by its rulers.

Sansom's Reformation Spaces: Sites of Loss

Sansom's melancholic portrayal of England as a place of ruin and decay very clearly reflects the themes of the Condition of England writers who eulogise the ancient customs, rituals and laws of the land. Despite his lamentation for England's lost *milieux de mémoire*, Scruton refutes the notion of the Reformation as a historical breach, claiming it merely to be the settlement of a long-standing dispute about national sovereignty. He rejects the label Protestant to denote the national religion and insists on England's continuity of doctrine and tradition which he sees as being under threat by contemporary forces of progress. From this standpoint, he nevertheless offers nostalgic descriptions of 'sleepy hamlets and half-vacant villages, each with its Norman or Early English church of flint and stone' within whose interiors 'a peculiar silence had been stored, along with the sweet damp smell of plaster' and writes of the delight he shared with his father in 'country lanes and shady churchyards, where you could contemplate the beauty of a landscape made in the image of the Anglican God,

who in turn had been made in the image of the landscape'. This, he makes clear, is an Eden under threat, complaining of 'the ever-expanding exurbia' that has turned country towns to places of 'office blocks and motor-mad vandals' and pointing to 'a whole generation of people who were seeing the last of England'.⁴⁹⁸ Hitchens bemoans 'a landscape of change, change and more change' and suggests that evidence of England's 'cultural revolution' can be found by looking at 'how many things are no longer being used for their original purpose': for example 'rectories and old village schools are rich businessmen's houses, old churches are 'arts centres', old markets are knick-knack-infested tourist traps'. Like Scruton, he writes of historical loss, of 'people seeking in vain for a door into the lost past'.⁴⁹⁹ Kingsnorth similarly laments 'the rape of the landscape, the primacy of the market, the power of thoughtless "developers", the unholy alliance of big business and big government' that is 'chewing up people and places and spitting them out like used-up tobacco'.⁵⁰⁰ Their discontents resonate strongly with Andrew Escobedo's contention that Reformation England experienced an overwhelming sense of historical loss and destruction of the nation's past and, despite Scruton's insistence to the contrary, reflect the trauma associated with the conquest of memory by history that arguably began with the Reformation.⁵⁰¹ It is interesting to note that Scruton in particular, in order to attribute cultural loss to his more contemporary sources of resentment, effectively "nationalises" God in order to emphasise the continuity of English religion and deny that the Reformation represented any meaningful change for the country. This appropriation of the divine

⁴⁹⁸ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, pp. 89-90.

⁴⁹⁹ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, p. 294.

⁵⁰⁰ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 263.

⁵⁰¹ Andrew Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss In Renaissance England: Foxe, Dee, Spenser, Milton* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 4.

for nationalistic purposes recalls Shardlake's reflection, quoted earlier, that God's image is constructed 'to suit our shifting needs'.⁵⁰²

In depicting the Reformation as an upheaval and cause of distress, Sansom's work refutes the positivism of the Condition of England writers, but the country he portrays is strikingly similar to theirs in other respects. It is a place of 'cultural revolution' and this is signalled by the novels' spatiality.⁵⁰³ The systematic destruction of ecclesiastical heritage is depicted as hooliganism, plunder, and greed, as well as being the gateway to a wholesale cultural obliteration. For example, *Dissolution* concludes with the breaking-up of St Donatus' monastery, and the description of the church, at the point where reformist objectives are being achieved, contrasts negatively with earlier depictions of calm, order and mystery. In the Epilogue, when Shardlake returns three months after solving the murder cases, he finds that the 'great bells' have been removed from the church tower.⁵⁰⁴ Earlier in the novel, he has learned from Guy that these bells have a history that spans centuries and connects different nations. They 'originally hung in the ancient cathedral of Toulouse' but when the 'cathedral was destroyed in an Arab raid eight hundred years ago', they were 'taken as a trophy' and subsequently 'found at Salamanca in Spain when that city was reconquered for Christ and donated to Scarnsea when the monastery was founded'.⁵⁰⁵ At the novel's close the bells 'now sat waiting to be melted down. They were in pieces, huge shards of ornamented metal piled in a heap'.⁵⁰⁶ Their breakage has been caused by being 'cut from the rings holding them to the roof and left to drop to the floor of the church' whilst a furnace is 'swallowing lead'.⁵⁰⁷ In contrast to the order and calm of the

⁵⁰² Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 439.

⁵⁰³ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, p. 294.

⁵⁰⁴ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 428.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid*, p. 94.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 428.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid*.

monks' ancient rituals, there is 'a gang of men on the church roof' and the cloister walk is 'dirty and muddy from the passage of many booted feet'.⁵⁰⁸ Instead of 'the beautiful scene' of ritual processions there are 'men scrambling' and in place of the 'beautiful, elaborate polyphony, accompanied by organ music', there is now 'the sound of hammering and voices' and 'even the great organ had been removed'.⁵⁰⁹ Coppynger, one of the 'new men', who has acquired monastic lands, looks forward to having 'a fine view over the Channel' when 'the monastery is down' and 'making a paddock for my horses' on the site of 'the monks' cemetery, where men were busy digging up the headstones'.⁵¹⁰ The auditor from Augmentations receives 'a constant stream of plate and gilded statues, gold crosses and tapestries, copes and albs and even the monks' bedding – everything that might have value in the auction'. All the gold and silver is to be melted down, dismissed by the auditor as 'baubles of papist ceremony'.⁵¹¹ The implications for the secular community of this cultural eradication are implied when Shardlake notices that 'in the lay churchyard the family vaults had been broken up into piles of rubble'.⁵¹² These acts of destruction represent the material eradication of memory, the effect of which, as Nora points out, is the breaking of 'an ancient band of identity'.⁵¹³

Whilst the word 'reformation' might suggest the creation of new forms and structures, this is in fact a world in which formal integrity – and by extension, distinctiveness and identity – is disappearing. Social breakdown is reflected in the physical environment that is portrayed, for example, by an extended motif of waste and pollution. Bealnap's transformation of a friary into a slum dwelling is in itself

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 431-2.

⁵⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 432 and 74.

⁵¹⁰ Ibid, p. 430.

⁵¹¹ Ibid, p. 431.

⁵¹² Ibid, p. 437.

⁵¹³ Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 8.

unsavoury but it is the wider ramifications that are important: the ‘botched’ common cesspit leads to others ‘suffering grievously from the penetration of filth into their cellars’.⁵¹⁴ As will also be seen in Mantel’s *Wolf Hall*, the river Thames is a signifier of the state of the city. Shardlake observes a Thames ‘alive with wherries and white-sailed tilt boats’ but ‘the breeze that came from it was tainted; the tide was still out, the filth-strewn mud stewing in the sun’.⁵¹⁵ As he rides through the streets, he is offended by ‘the mighty stink’ of ‘the sewer channel’ and, later, a storm turns the same channels ‘into streams, fed with refuse’ whilst in its aftermath ‘a malodorous steam rose from heaps of rubbish washed down from the alleyways’.⁵¹⁶ Jack Barak informs Shardlake that his father, a cleaner of cesspits, drowned in one.⁵¹⁷ Sir Edwin Wentworth’s house, scene of his son Ralph’s supposed murder, is next to ‘a narrow alley, stinking of piss’.⁵¹⁸ The well in which the boy died and which is now covered and padlocked, has a ‘dreadful stink’ and the ‘miasma of decay’.⁵¹⁹ This proves to be the ‘rotten, meaty smell’ of tortured corpses: victims of Ralph himself, who is revealed to be a degenerate torturer and murderer of children and animals.⁵²⁰

The re-formation of architectural space, associated as it is, with degradation, historical loss and the effacement of collective identity, results in the bland ephemerality redolent of the Condition of England writers’ distaste for contemporary architectural development. The description of Bealknap’s priory conversion emphasises its ugliness, flimsiness and its compartmentalisation of the public sphere, portraying it as an act of desecration. It is ‘so rickety it looked as though the

⁵¹⁴ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 1.

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 74.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 3 and 276.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 101.

⁵¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 307.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 310.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 312.

construction could come down at any moment'.⁵²¹ What was once a church has become a slum dwelling and, as the following passage shows, its light, beauty and antiquity have been replaced by darkness and constriction :

Both sides of the nave had been blocked off with tall, flimsy-looking wooden partitions. There was a series of doors at ground-floor level and rickety steps led up to more doors, making a dozen apartments in all. The centre of the nave had become a narrow passage, the old flagstones strewn with dirt. The passage was dark, for the partitions blocked off the side windows and the only light came from the window at the top of the quire.

Beside the door a couple of iron rings had been hammered into an ancient font. From the piles of dung on the floor I could see this was where horses were tethered.⁵²²

Shardlake's exploration of the building reveals 'a poorly furnished room where cheap furniture was lit by rich multi-coloured light from the stained-glass window that now formed the apartment's outside wall' from which a 'thin old woman' with 'a sharp northern accent' steps out on to a staircase which 'wobbled slightly under her weight'.⁵²³ As she complains to him of her poor living conditions, he wonders 'whether her family was one of the thousands being forced off their land in the north to make way for sheep'.⁵²⁴ A door 'hung drunkenly from loose hinges'. In the cloister yard there are 'more wooden partitions between the pillars to make a quadrangle of tiny ramshackle dwellings' where rags 'hung at the windows in place of curtains'. Where 'once the friars had paced', there are now 'hovels for the poorest of the poor' and, as referenced earlier, the 'dark, evil-smelling' cesspit which leaks.⁵²⁵

⁵²¹ Ibid, p. 294.

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Ibid.

⁵²⁴ Ibid, p. 295.

⁵²⁵ Ibid, p. 296.

Within the materiality of the built environment lies England's lost history, which itself often offers solutions to the problems of the moment and is linked to the practice of antiquarianism which was increasingly popular in the Renaissance and which Escobedo attributes to the period's sense of historical loss.⁵²⁶ For example, at St Bartholomew's priory, Richard Rich informs Shardlake and Norfolk that they are 'digging up the monks' graveyard in the cloister, to make a garden' and remarks on the community's 'old custom' that 'when a man died some personal possession was buried with him'.⁵²⁷ According to Rich, they 'have found some interesting items' that are 'of antiquarian interest'. Despite this, Rich announces that when he has 'finished with the monks' he will 'start on the hospital graveyard. I might have some houses built there'.⁵²⁸ The sense of loss that accompanies this re-appropriation of space is made clear when Shardlake recognises correctly that the answers to his investigation are likely to be found in the violated ground and 'drew a sharp breath as I realized what might have been buried with the old soldier St John. Someone was going to great lengths to conceal all signs of Greek Fire, but what if some was still here at Barty's, buried under the ground?'.⁵²⁹ Elsewhere, a collapsed wall, part of 'the ancient gatehouse that held the debtors' prison', reveals a 'dozen ancient flagstones', one of which is inscribed on its inner surface with Hebrew: 'a strange script of curved lines and half-circles'. Shardlake deduces that 'this stone must have come from one of the Jews' synagogues after they were expelled near three hundred years ago', and dissuades workmen from breaking it up on the grounds that is 'of antiquarian interest'.⁵³⁰ The inscription attests to England's transnational past, suggesting that

⁵²⁶ Escobedo, *Nationalism and Historical Loss in Renaissance England*, p. 8.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

such multiculturalism has been integral to the national fabric even if this is no longer widely acknowledged. Its discovery leads Shardlake to reflect on the elitism of a recorded history that is selective in its preservation of legacies.

I heard a great rush of water beneath me, and it made me think of all the generations who had lived in this City, dashing and scurrying through their lives, some to leave great monuments and dynasties of children, others rushing only to oblivion.⁵³¹

As the detective/antiquarian who seeks to right wrongs by uncovering the past, Shardlake draws together the present-day anxieties of English nationhood and those of Renaissance England that are identified by Escobedo and resonate with Nora's notion of the conquest of memory. He gains access to St John's grave to recover a sample of Greek Fire through mentioning the earlier find of the Hebrew inscriptions and claiming to be 'an antiquarian' with an interest in 'all ancient things'.⁵³² In having Shardlake pluck vital (fictional) artefacts from the on-going destruction surrounding him, Sansom's narrative explicitly locates England's loss of cultural memory in the Reformation and because the almost-lost is crucial evidence, key to overcoming present evils, he emphasises the inevitable danger of cultural amnesia. In one sense, Shardlake's contemporary consciousness operating in the Tudor world offers a type of wish-fulfilment: the fantasy of being able to return to the point of the fatal lapse, right past wrongs and reunite history with memory in order to complete the recovery of the past.

In both storing recorded history and memorialising the long-dead, the monasteries are both sites and environments of memory. The former function is

⁵³¹ Ibid, p. 278.

⁵³² Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 417.

demonstrated in *Dark Fire* when, in order to solve his case, Shardlake must turn to the texts he has previously dismissed as ornate and distracting. It is just such 'illustrated manuscripts written by old monastic writers' which give 'vivid descriptions of the use of Greek Fire'.⁵³³ Further irony can be found in the fact Cromwell's life is dependent on information that is written in Greek and can only be found in the artefacts he tries to destroy. Vital clues are contained in texts that have been taken from 'what must once have been a large, imposing library' within the wreckage of St Bartholomew's priory. Now its 'very beautiful' books have been burned and its shelves are empty, its floor is 'strewn with broken cupboards and torn manuscripts' and only 'a few skeletal roofbeams still stood, casting lines of shadow on the floor'.⁵³⁴ The papers, along with a barrel of the substance, were originally entrusted by a librarian to the care of an English soldier called St John, immediately before the fall of Constantinople to Ottoman forces in 1453. Prior to his death, St John is nursed by the friars of St Bartholomew's and passes the 'terrible secret that could bring much ruin and bloodshed' to them.⁵³⁵ As he reads St John's account, Shardlake recognises the monks' role in safeguarding future generations: they 'had hidden the papers, and the barrel, away, realizing the potential for danger and destruction they had in their hands'.⁵³⁶ This background narrative invites parallels between the fall of the Byzantine Empire - regarded as a pivotal point in European history and described by Shardlake as 'that great tragedy of our age' - and the English Reformation with its similar strategy of destroying libraries and their knowledge base in order to bring about a cultural recalibration.⁵³⁷ As Shardlake points out, the friars did not know 'that ninety years later

⁵³³ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, pp. 107-8.

⁵³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 175.

⁵³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 109.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid*, p. 110.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid*.

King Henry and Cromwell would come and clear them all out' thus implying an equivalence between Henrician England and the 'soldiers and officials and citizens fleeing the doomed city, making for the dock and the boats to Venice to the sound of booming artillery and the roars of the Turks outside'.⁵³⁸ The potential of the past to wreak havoc on the present, if it is not remembered properly, is made clear.

Shardlake is initially oblivious to the importance of the monasteries' other role as environments of memory. In *Dissolution*, he observes disapprovingly that in 'the side chapels monks stood intoning private Masses. Local people of wealth, terrified of the pains of purgatory awaiting them, would have left great portions of their assets away from wives and children to the monks, for Masses to be said until the Last Judgement came'.⁵³⁹ As a detective, Shardlake sees monastic spaces such as the 'side chapels, filled with railed-off altars, statues and biers', the 'shadowy doorways' and hidden passages and crypts, as 'good hiding places' and there are frequent reminders of the past's potential for malevolence.⁵⁴⁰ This is exemplified by the fish pond in *Dissolution*, and, in *Dark Fire*, the Wentworth's well and the grave of St John which holds a sample of Greek Fire. In Scarnsea's cemetery, among the tombstones, however, Shardlake merely finds the histories that the Dissolution will efface:

I tried each crypt in turn, but there was nothing hidden among the white marble tombs. The stone floors were dusty and there was no sign any of them had been visited for years. One belonged to a prominent Hastings family whose name I remembered as another ancient line wiped out in the civil wars. And yet those buried here would be remembered, I reflected, recalling the monks reciting their private masses; remembered as names memorized and chanted to the empty air every day.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁸ Ibid.

⁵³⁹ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 145.

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid, pp. 145, 128 and 159.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid, p. 159.

The ephemeral nature of cultural memory is highlighted by the fact that the tombs are unvisited but this physical presence of the ancient dead, together with the monks' ritual enactment of their continued existence, mean that the past lives on (at least for those who, in life, were wealthy enough to pay for it). The fact that the Hastings family (their name, incidentally, redolent of 1066) are 'another' dynasty curtailed at the end of the War of the Roses by the Tudor accession is a further reminder of the latter's extensive assault on history, the word suggesting as it does, a succession of erased lines of descent. Three years later, in *Dark Fire*, the cultural changes enforced from above, mean that the tradition of memorial chanting is popularly regarded as a criminal act and public memory has been conquered. A clerk at the Court of Augmentations (which, as Shardlake remarks, is now violating tradition by embracing Sunday opening: a strategy reminiscent of contemporary changes to working patterns) complains to Shardlake of 'a wicked scandal, sir, the chantries being allowed to stay open, priests still mumming Latin prayers for the dead day after day'.⁵⁴²

The portrayal of the material world in the Shardlake novels seems to anticipate the national feelings of despair and dereliction that would prompt, over a decade later, remarks such as that of the journalist John Harris. Writing on Brexit in 2019, he noted 'the inescapable sense that just about everything in Britain is riven with unfixable cracks'.⁵⁴³ Sansom consistently depicts Tudor buildings as being in a state of disrepair, decay or near-collapse and general architectural decay is, in turn, symbolically linked to the spoliation (or imminent spoliation) of Church buildings. In *Dissolution*, Shardlake's initial impression of the town of Scarnsea is of a locale in decline. In its

⁵⁴² Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 123.

⁵⁴³ Harris, John, 'The Tories have forgotten their pro-EU voters. And they'll pay for it', *Guardian*, 20 May 2019, < <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/may/20/middle-class-angst-threat-tory-party-brexit-conservatism> > [accessed 29 November 2020] para 11 of 12

'cobbled main street, where the tops of ancient houses overhung the road', he notices that 'the plaster and timbers of many houses were decayed, and the shops seemed poor places'. He goes on to observe that the town square contains 'more dilapidated houses'.⁵⁴⁴ In contrast, he finds the doomed monastery itself to be a place of opulent beauty and splendour. The refectory is 'an impressive chamber' which is 'lent a comfortable air by the tapestries lining the walls and the thick rattan matting on the floor'.⁵⁴⁵ The church is 'a magnificent simulacrum of heaven' in which there are 'great vaulted arches' rising to 'nearly a hundred feet'. It is 'richly painted', and a 'great window' at one end 'flooded the nave with a gentle umber light, peaceful and numinous, softening the kaleidoscope of colours'.⁵⁴⁶ However, the wall of the church has 'a great crack, stained round with damp, running from roof almost to ground level'.⁵⁴⁷ The elusiveness of the English past and fragility of its culture and traditions is evoked by Shardlake's remembering 'that Norman churches and cathedrals were not in fact the solid edifices they appeared'.⁵⁴⁸ In symbolic language that resonates with Escobedo's account of a historical 'breach', Shardlake notes, with metaphorical resonance, that 'the crack could only widen, eventually threatening the whole structure. The imagination reeled at the thought of the great building falling on one's head'.⁵⁴⁹

As noted earlier, the disintegration of the monasteries is shown to spread outwards to the living space that surrounds them and as increasing numbers are brought down, the sense of dilapidation and instability accelerates. In *Dark Fire*, Shardlake and Barak traverse streets 'full of old houses, decayed-looking cheap shops

⁵⁴⁴ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 42.

⁵⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 97.

⁵⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 144.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 145.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 146.

and lodging places' and encounter buildings 'in dire need of repair', such as the alchemist Gristwood's dwelling where 'plaster was peeling from the walls and the overhanging roof lacked several tiles' and where 'Like many houses built on the Thames mud, it had a pronounced tilt to one side'.⁵⁵⁰ Gristwood's wife confirms that 'the house is falling down' and in words that recall Shardlake's reflections on the cracked church at Scarnsea, she wonders if 'the whole place will fall on my head'.⁵⁵¹

The decline of England and the acceleration of its history is represented topographically through descriptions of a changing landscape that also emphasise the country's increasing isolation from the rest of the world. On arriving at the town of Scarnsea, Shardlake notices that one side of the town square 'consisted of a wide stone wharf'. Shardlake reflects that in the past 'it had fronted the sea, but now it faced the mud and reeds of the marsh, sullen and desolate under the grey sky and giving off a mingled smell of salt and rot'.⁵⁵² The receding sea and its separation from the land by an impassable marsh evokes England's increasing isolation from the continent lying across the Channel and adds to the atmosphere of closure and entrapment. This is echoed in the London of *Dark Fire*, where Shardlake observes a Thames where the 'tide was out and the Thames mud, stained yellow and green with the refuse that poured every day from the northern shore, lay exposed like a great stain'.⁵⁵³ Sailing out beyond Deptford, he sees further signs of decline:

Wastes of marsh and reeds crowded to the water's edge. The occasional wharves we passed were mostly abandoned, for shipworking was concentrated upriver now. [...] A little way off I saw a crumbling jetty rising on wooden piers. Behind, a space of weed-strewn earth cleared from the surrounding reed beds fronted a large, tumbledown wooden shed.⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵⁰ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 74.

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid*, p. 156.

⁵⁵² Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 42.

⁵⁵³ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 59.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 114.

The Thames connects London with the continent and the rest of the world: further inland, Shardlake has seen that 'big seagoing ships lay docked' at Billingsgate and 'stared in wonder at the king's great warship *Mary Rose* in for repair'.⁵⁵⁵ However, a sense of insularity is signalled by the increasing dilapidation as the river flows towards the coast and even in the fact that the *Mary Rose* is in need of repair. Further irony lies in the reader's knowledge of this ship's eventual fate: she sank in the Solent, in full view of the shore, whilst leading an attack on the French (a disaster emotively depicted by Gregory in *The Taming of the Queen*). Though the novels suggest England's aspiration to be a sea-going power, the dominant impression within *Dissolution* in particular is of a continent (and those aspects of England's past that are entwined with its geography) eerily receding. In the landscape of this first novel, the tidal river reaches the sea through 'a great swathe of marshland' which makes any route from Scarnsea to the coast treacherous.⁵⁵⁶ Shardlake observes that the town 'was once a prosperous seaport' and that the 'marshland has built up from silt and sand in a hundred years or so' with the result that Scarnsea is now poor.⁵⁵⁷ References to the marsh significantly contribute to the sense of decline that pervades both texts. For example, Brother Edwig scoffs at the impracticality of Brother Gabriel's desire to import 'great blocks of limestone from France' in order to carry out building repairs, saying he 'would be interested to know how he p-p-plans to ferry them across the marsh'.⁵⁵⁸ The origins of the monastic community can be found out on the marsh on 'the little island of higher ground, where the ruins of the founders' church stands'.⁵⁵⁹

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁶ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 41.

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 43.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 102.

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 152.

As the land has turned to 'stagnant pools' and 'stinking mud' with a 'cesspit odour', the monastery has had to retreat inland, further away from contact with the continent.⁵⁶⁰ When Shardlake ill-advisedly ventures beyond its wall, he reflects that he 'had not realized it came so close' and remarks that 'the mire had advanced right up to the wall, undermining it so it had had to be rebuilt'.⁵⁶¹ The marsh increases the distance between coast and habitation and in so doing evokes a sense of topographical shrinkage. The lawless space between land and sea is a place of danger, populated by smugglers who know the paths through it and whom Shardlake suspects in connection with the monastery murders. The shadowy presence of smugglers is a reminder of the importance of trade and by extension, of contact with other countries. On an excursion from the monastery to the town, Shardlake remarks on a 'drear landscape' where 'the grey sea' is 'in the distance'.⁵⁶² At the wharf he finds that 'a small boat was pulled up, an official in a black coat inspecting bales of cloth'.⁵⁶³ The actual 'large ship', the instrument of trade and internationalism is, however, remote and inaccessible, being 'at the mouth of the channel through the marsh'.⁵⁶⁴ As the sea is an iconic element of an English consciousness that attaches totemic value to sea-power, Sansom's portrayal of a decaying marine infrastructure adds to the sense of national disintegration.

In conclusion, Sansom presents architectural spaces that are cracking, leaning, tilting, sinking and crashing to the ground. His topography is one which is silting, choked with pollution and decay, where banks and coasts are changing shape and shifting their positions. I suggest that this signifies what Nora terms 'a rupture of

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 162-3.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid, p. 162.

⁵⁶² Ibid, p. 201.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 202.

equilibrium', which manifests in 'a general perception that anything and everything may disappear'.⁵⁶⁵ Memorials to the dead are being smashed up and body parts carelessly exhumed, so that life and the legacies of the past lose meaning. Cultural memory is being erased and identities literally destroyed. Even as Shardlake reiterates the ideals of commonwealth, individualism and enlightenment, these ideals are disappearing before his eyes. These nightmarish images of impending ruin, as well as the presence of Greek Fire, a weapon of mass destruction, also speak to unease about military interventions of the time where the professed aims of Western political leaders, most notably the New Labour government of the United Kingdom, were to emancipate the oppressed populations of other countries. Scenes broadcast from Iraq, such as the destruction of artefacts associated with the defeated regime, as well as the ensuing breakdown of the country's social and political structures, bear some resemblance to those of Sansom's Tudor novels. The final part of the chapter will therefore examine Sansom's portrayal of Reformation England's society and consider the extent to which his imaginary is symptomatic of the disillusion and melancholia of the pre-Brexit era whose sense of disintegration may have been, to some degree, exacerbated by military misadventures.

Sansom's Reformation Society: 'Man is wolf to Man'

Sansom uses the cityscape to signify the collapse of order and harmony in civic life. Between 1520 and 1600, London's population grew by approximately 300% and the human geography of the city was transformed. A survey of the city conducted in the 1590s notes that 'Men of trades and sellers of wares in this city have oftentimes since

⁵⁶⁵ Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', p. 7.

changed their places' and observes 'encroachments on the highways, lanes and common grounds' due to 'the number of cars, drays, carts and coaches, more than hath been accustomed'.⁵⁶⁶ This historical phenomenon is reflected in Sansom's consistent portrayal of the city as a chaotic space, full of 'jostling, noisy crowds' which make it difficult to navigate.⁵⁶⁷ At the beginning of *Dissolution*, returning from a commission in Surrey, Shardlake rides through 'the throng of travellers and traders, cutpurses and would-be courtiers, into the great stew of London'.⁵⁶⁸ In *Dark Fire*, which is set entirely in the capital, against a backdrop of an intensely hot summer, there are frequent references to 'over-crowded London'.⁵⁶⁹ As he traverses the urban environment, Shardlake's way is often blocked by an excess of people and activity. For example, he and Barak have 'to pause in the gateway as a long procession of sulky looking apprentices wearing the blue and red badges of the Leathersellers' Company marched past'.⁵⁷⁰ On the same journey he finds 'progress slow through the lunchtime crowds'.⁵⁷¹ Earlier in the book, on the way to a meeting, 'people crowded the lanes, slowing my passage' and further on, the 'river was crowded again and we had to wait at the steps for a boat'.⁵⁷²

More often than not, the crowds are associated with a malevolent culture in which, as Shardlake says in Hobbesian fashion to Barak after rescuing a beggar from bullies, 'man is wolf to man'.⁵⁷³ They are linked to endemic cruelty, violence and death. For example, at a bear-baiting, 'armed men kept the throng waiting to cross to the bear

⁵⁶⁶ John Stowe, 'A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster' in Kate Aughterson (ed) *The English Renaissance: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* (London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 177-8.

⁵⁶⁷ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 86.

⁵⁶⁸ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p.2.

⁵⁶⁹ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p.2.

⁵⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 73.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid*.

⁵⁷² *Ibid*, pp. 3 and 243.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid*, p. 245.

ring at a distance, watchful for cutpurses'.⁵⁷⁴ Shardlake is distinguished by his sensibilities which mean that he 'had ever disliked the huge, terrified animals torn apart to the roars of the crowd' and Lady Honor complains about the 'crush and noise' of the event.⁵⁷⁵ This urban mob can be heard 'shouting and cheering' as 'the old, blind bears were already in the ring, the dogs loosed on them', and their xenophobia is implied by the main attraction being 'a fine bear from Germany called Magnus'.⁵⁷⁶ The crowd are partial to the 'halfpenny sensation' of a scurrilous pamphlet accusing the innocent Elizabeth Wentworth of murder and their presence is a constant at public spectacles of injustice, torture and death.⁵⁷⁷ The assize at which Elizabeth's case is heard is marked by 'the rabble crowding the benches', giving rise to a 'stench' that is 'dreadful'.⁵⁷⁸ Similarly, as a martyr, John Lambert faces 'a cruel burning' at the stake, and he walks to his death 'with head bowed, refusing to answer the taunts of the crowd'. Shardlake, exhibiting typically modern sensibilities, prefers to 'avoid these spectacles'.⁵⁷⁹

The disorder of urban crowds contrasts markedly with the ordered peace and communality of pre-Reformation life and Sansom establishes the role of Church and monastery as *milieux de mémoire* and thus as agents of social cohesion. Shardlake, who has 'been a pupil of the monks' but claims early in *Dissolution* to be 'the enemy of all they stood for'; remembers 'the old Mass' and reflects that 'it is hard to convey the sense of mystery it communicated; the incense, the rising Latin cadences, then the ringing of the censing bell'.⁵⁸⁰ Rather than a 'crowd', there is a 'congregation'

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 362.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid, pp. 364-5.

⁵⁷⁶ Ibid, pp. 365-6.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 5.

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid, pp. 47 and 50.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 106.

⁵⁸⁰ Sansom, *Dissolution*, pp. 31 and 38.

whose faces are 'quiet and respectful'. Prior to England's break from Rome, Shardlake 'had come to see the Church as a great community binding the living and the dead, transforming people if only for a few hours into the obedient flock of the Great Shepherd'.⁵⁸¹ Sansom undermines the credibility of Shardlake's narrative through the revelation that his reforming sentiments stem from his resentment at being rejected for entry to the priesthood because of his hunchback, thus implying that this harmonious community life is indeed what England has lost.⁵⁸² Within the monastery, groups move 'in procession' and Shardlake's descriptions of monastic routines evoke a calm and quietness that is absent from those of the secular environments replacing religious communities. For example, when he sees the monks leaving church, he remarks that the 'sight made an impression that comes clearly to mind all these years later' and that it 'was a beautiful scene and despite myself I was moved'.⁵⁸³ Later in *Dissolution*, Shardlake watches the celebration of a Mass at which one of the suspects, Brother Gabriel, conducts the music. Shardlake finds that he 'could not but admire the skill with which he led the monks in the chanting of the psalm, their voices rising and falling in harmony'.⁵⁸⁴ As he listens he remembers the abbot's 'despairing whisper: 'Dissolution''.⁵⁸⁵ This and other references to the novel's title, link the destruction of the monasteries to a wider breakdown of English life and identity. In the Epilogue, Shardlake tells Guy that 'there is nowhere safe in the world now, no thing certain' and that all 'is dissolving, Brother Guy, all is dissolution'.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸¹ Ibid, p. 39.

⁵⁸² Ibid, pp. 38-9.

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 297.

⁵⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 439.

In *Dark Fire*, the Reformation is explicitly associated with division, injustice and displacement. Outside Cromwell's gate crowd the 'outcasts of London, shoeless and in rags'. On seeing them, Shardlake reflects on their pitiful situation:

Some supported themselves on makeshift crutches, others had the pits and marks of disease on their faces. The number of workless poor in London was growing beyond control; the dissolution had cast hundreds of servants from the London monasteries, and the unhappy patients from the hospitals and infirmaries too, out onto the streets. And pitiful as the doles given by the Church had been, now even those were gone.⁵⁸⁷

Despite Cromwell's avowed commitment to establish a commonwealth in place of the Church and the 'talk of charitable schools and hospitals, and schemes for state works', Shardlake notes that 'nothing had been done yet'.⁵⁸⁸ Rather than promoting a systemic redistribution of wealth as Shardlake once anticipated, Cromwell appears to have been absorbed into the elite and, for self-serving reasons, to be participating in its customs and practices. He has 'adopted the wealthy landowner's custom of distributing his own doles' because 'it strengthened his standing in London'.⁵⁸⁹ Sansom depicts an atomised and distrustful society. Poer, for example, complains of 'always having to think when one talks to a stranger, lest something slips an enemy could turn to treason' and remarks that it 'did not used to be like this'.⁵⁹⁰ At an inn, he and Shardlake encounter some 'Abbey-lubbers from the priory dissolved last year' and are reminded by the innkeeper that when the 'King says the little houses of prayer must go', the 'servants are put out on the road' where 'there's no labour for them', leaving them with no option but to beg. Their suffering and that of others is further emphasised by the fact that one of them has had his ears cropped for turning to crime in order to survive,

⁵⁸⁷ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, pp. 87-8.

⁵⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 88.

⁵⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁹⁰ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 36.

and by the innkeeper's observation that 'It's not their fault they were thrown out. Them and hundreds more'.⁵⁹¹ In the London of *Dark Fire*:

Everywhere there was a crashing of stone as the old buildings fell: so much land had become vacant that even in over-crowded London the courtiers and other greedy men of spoil into whose hands it had fallen scarce knew how to handle it all.⁵⁹²

This transfer of resources from the church into private hands means that there are 'more beggars every year'. Shardlake wonders why 'people flock to the City' and 'the ratlike scabble for subsistence that so often ended in begging on the streets' and concludes that it is the 'lure of money', of 'hopes of scraping a living and dreams of becoming rich'.⁵⁹³

Sansom consistently portrays the 'courtiers and other greedy men of spoil' as callous and indifferent to the consequences of mass displacement.⁵⁹⁴ At a gathering hosted by Lady Honor, for example, one of the guests complains that 'so many houses are let out as poor tenements now' and describes the collapse of such a house killing 'fourteen tenants and four passers-by'. He is interrupted by a drunken Duke of Norfolk, who pronounces that 'The more houses fall on the diseased populace of this great cesspit the better. Perhaps that will scare some into going back to their parishes where they belong, to work on the land as they did in our fathers' time.'⁵⁹⁵ Norfolk exemplifies the old elite's indifference to the plight of the poor, their nostalgia for traditions that they themselves have helped to obliterate, and their resistance to the social mobility that, to some extent, Shardlake himself represents. When Shardlake responds with a statement that people 'must all aim to work for the common good', Norfolk dismisses

⁵⁹¹ Ibid, p. 34.

⁵⁹² Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 2.

⁵⁹³ Ibid, p. 166.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 2.

⁵⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 265.

'your *work*' as 'Pen-pushing' thereby exhibiting the aristocracy's customary contempt for technocracy that was discussed in previous chapters.⁵⁹⁶ In *Dissolution*, Alice observes that 'evil is everywhere' and that 'it seems to me the wish for money and power can turn men into roaring lions, seeking what they might devour'.⁵⁹⁷ As an evicted tenant whose 'landlord demolished the house and enclosed our bit of land for sheep', she is a victim of both the market capitalism denounced by Sansom and Moretti's 'original sin' of acquisition.⁵⁹⁸ The enclosure of land (much of it originating from monastic property) for sheep fed England's burgeoning wool trade but impoverished and displaced much of the population. Shardlake acknowledges that 'enclosures ruin the countryside'. He tells Alice that it is 'a matter of concern to Lord Cromwell' but privately associates his master with 'greed and cruelty and ambition'.⁵⁹⁹

The process of conscious nation-building, refuted by the Condition of England writers on the grounds that the English 'instinctively knew who they were', is associated in Sansom's novels with the loss of cultural memory and therefore communality.⁶⁰⁰ In the 'Historical Note' to *Dark Fire*, Sansom makes it clear that the country he portrays is one 'now isolated in Europe' with a 'genuine fear of invasion' which, of course, pre-envisages post-referendum England.⁶⁰¹ Though Sansom's Tudor England resembles the disintegrating place and culture presented by the Condition Of England writers, and evokes similar emotions, the decline is not attributed in his work to European integration. Elsewhere, as seen above, he has expressed distaste for nationalism. In an exchange with Shardlake in *Dissolution*, Guy articulates similar sentiments, suggesting that in 'worshipping their nationhood men worship

⁵⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 266.

⁵⁹⁷ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 178.

⁵⁹⁸ Ibid, p.179. NB. For Moretti reference, see note 19.

⁵⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 178-9.

⁶⁰⁰ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 5.

⁶⁰¹ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 577.

themselves and scorn others'.⁶⁰² He recounts his experiences of being attacked because of his race and asks what will become of him without the protection of the monastery. When Shardlake replies that he 'has a poor view of England', Guy claims instead to have a 'realistic view of fallen mankind'.⁶⁰³ Guy understands that individual dignity is compromised by nationalism and by the very ethos of individualism itself because when a 'doctrine tells each man to find his own individual salvation through prayer and the Bible. Charity and fellowship then are lost'.⁶⁰⁴ According to Guy, the pan-European commonality of the Church means that:

a man from Granada, or anywhere in Europe, could go into a church in England and be immediately at home, hear the same Latin services, be comforted. With that international brotherhood taken away, who will now place a halter on the quarrels of princes? What will become of a man like me when he is stranded in a hostile land?⁶⁰⁵

The loss of 'international brotherhood' is linked to the loss of links with the past and the dead. The connection of people across both space and time, rather than eroding identity, is shown to dignify and protect it.

The religious debates of the novels therefore codify those around nation. In his initial dedication to advancing the Protestant cause, Shardlake's vision is of an ordered simplicity. He retrospectively likens the Reformation imaginary to his garden:

Its design was simple; squares of flower beds divided by trellised paths shaded by climbing roses. No knot gardens with complex designs in the form of puzzles for me; there were puzzles in my work and my garden was a place of quiet order. Once I had thought reform might similarly order the world, but that hope was long gone.⁶⁰⁶

⁶⁰² Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 253.

⁶⁰³ *Ibid*, p. 252.

⁶⁰⁴ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 252.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid*, p. 107.

This austerity is associated spiritually with direct democracy. In *Dissolution*, he tells Brother Gabriel that ‘the Mass should be a simple ceremony in good English, so men can reflect on their relationship with God, rather than be distracted by magnificent surroundings and ornate Latin’.⁶⁰⁷ The adjective in the phrase ‘good English’ recalls Gregory’s reverence for the national language and conveys a sense of inherent linguistic virtue and authenticity as opposed to the decorative duplicity of a transnational tongue. In his emphasis on English as a direct channel to God, Shardlake at this point seemingly suggests that God Himself is English, an assumption that reflects the sense of superiority that underlies, for example, Scruton’s assertion that ‘God, as expressed in the sacred text and liturgy of the Anglican Church, was an Englishman’.⁶⁰⁸ It suggests that England’s religion is expressive of and synonymous with its national identity but, despite Scruton’s denial of constructivism, this re-working of biblical texts and re-imagining of God in a national image, makes both nation and deity constructions in themselves and denies spatial and temporal communality. Furthermore, the understanding of God through words alone and the destruction of environments of memory increases the capacity of religion, like history, to be a tool of manipulation. Shardlake’s initial belief in Englishness as communion with God is in alignment with Greenfield’s understanding of nationhood and individualism as emancipatory but the dangers of this national auto-elitism are consistently made clear through Sansom’s depictions of an England that grows increasingly degenerate as the novels progress.⁶⁰⁹ At this early stage, the sacrist, Brother Gabriel, guardian of the Scarnsea monastery’s heritage, draws attention to the role of art and ceremony in mitigating the ‘wicked world’ that he repeatedly encounters:

⁶⁰⁷ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 150.

⁶⁰⁸ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 91.

⁶⁰⁹ Greenfield, *Five Roads to Modernity*, p. 57.

Our life of prayer and worship is an effort to approach Christ, to come nearer to his light and further from this sinful world. Every prayer, every Mass is an attempt to come closer to him, every statue and ritual and piece of stained glass is a reminder of his glory, a distraction from the world's wickedness.⁶¹⁰

The monastery increasingly comes to be seen as a unifier of time and space, secular and divine, at least partly because it is the repository of the past and bypasses the limitations of language. Its literary artefacts, destined to be destroyed by Cromwell's forces, predate the printing press and are irreplaceable. Many are illustrated histories that provide universally accessible visual narratives. They include 'copies of Greek and Roman works' and 'an illustrated history of the monastery's treasures, set down two hundred years ago'.⁶¹¹ For Brother Gabriel, these 'innumerable shelves stacked with ancient volumes' recall the lost days 'when copying was an art'.⁶¹² He regards technology as a debasement because 'since printing came in no one wants illustrated works, they are happy with these cheap books with their ugly, square letters all squashed together'. Shardlake rebuffs his distaste, claiming that, though 'less beautiful', the advent of printing means that 'God's word can be brought to all', to which Gabriel replies 'But can it be understood by all?' and asserts the importance of 'illustration and art to stimulate our awe and reverence'⁶¹³.

Gabriel's defence of participatory ritual and the value of sense-experience is in part a protest against the early modern shifts in subjectivity identified by Belsey. For Gabriel, language and art, in and of themselves, are the sources of understanding due to their evocation of emotion and intuitive connection to divine truth. As noted, the

⁶¹⁰ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 153.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 156.

⁶¹² *Ibid*.

⁶¹³ *Ibid*.

benefits of this are signalled by Shardlake's observations of the continuity, orderliness and beauty of a disappearing ecclesiastical life. According to Belsey:

The ideological and institutional uncertainties which immediately followed the breakdown of control by the Catholic Church offered a space in which empirical knowledge, not apparently in conflict with either Catholic or Protestant orthodoxy, was developed and modified to the point where experience was finally to supplant discourse as the source of truth.⁶¹⁴

If language is an intrinsically valid experience which privileges the spiritual over the literal, and the organic over the symbolic, then concrete understanding is unnecessary and potentially limiting. As 'language ceases to be the location of knowledge and becomes its instrument' and as 'Discourse is no longer constitutive but expressive', then meanings become increasingly constrained by socio-linguistic parameters: both the origin and the availability of labels for experience are defined and narrowed by power.⁶¹⁵ Gabriel's query as to whether words can be understood by all is therefore significant and calls into question contemporary institutional values founded on data and empiricism that have their origin in the advent of the printing press and the privileging of the vernacular over what Anderson identifies as universal truth languages such as Latin, which are shared across space and time.

As Belsey goes on to point out, 'knowledge leads to virtue but also to wealth and power'.⁶¹⁶ There are barriers to knowledge for many and Shardlake's dreams of the benefits of printing prove unattainable. Given the literacy levels of the time, Gabriel is probably correct to point out the necessity of telling stories in pictures. Furthermore, it becomes increasingly apparent that universal enlightenment is not the Henrician government's objective. In *Dark Fire*, Shardlake learns that the King, unnerved by

⁶¹⁴ Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy*, p. 65.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid.

⁶¹⁶ Ibid, p. 69.

revolt in other parts of Europe, now 'wants the lower classes forbidden from reading the Bible' for fear that it might lead to insurrection.⁶¹⁷ State-imposed ignorance and compliance are perhaps most powerfully symbolised by the presence in the narrative of imported talking birds. Early in *Dissolution*, Shardlake comes across a large crowd 'murmuring excitedly' outside a tavern and, significantly, wonders whether 'this was another apprentice moonstruck from a half-understood reading of the new translation of the Bible and turned prophet.'⁶¹⁸ He is tellingly dismissive of the consequences of what he advocates: access to God's word for all, and reflects sanguinely that such a figure 'had better beware the constable'.⁶¹⁹ He discovers that, instead of a half-comprehending human, the attraction is an uncomprehending bird from the Indies called 'Tabitha' who has been taught to speak without comprehension and is being displayed by an old woman for money. The bird recites phrases to order such as 'Death to the pope!' and 'God save King Harry!' Its function as metaphor for a disenfranchised English population is made apparent when Shardlake notices that its wings have been 'cut cruelly short halfway down their length; it would never fly again'.⁶²⁰ His companions are impressed but Shardlake dismisses it as 'a trick', pointing out that 'One can speak without understanding' and suggesting that 'the bird just responds to the crone's words by repeating them'. One of his companions agrees that this is possible because 'the people in church respond to the priests' Latin mumblings without understanding them'.⁶²¹ The role of exploited birds in symbolising a compliant population in thrall to the ideological whims of their rulers becomes clear later when, passing a warehouse, Shardlake is alerted to their presence by 'screeches

⁶¹⁷ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, p. 91.

⁶¹⁸ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 3.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁶²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

and yells and a host of voices in strange tongues'. On entering the warehouse, he finds a large number of birds imprisoned in 'iron cages'.⁶²² His description of their squalor and disorder anticipates *Dark Fire's* retro-dystopian portrayal of the urban population, and the birds' mechanical yet desperate recital of rote-learned phrases, together with the discordant mix of Latin and English, encapsulates the divisive and traumatic consequences of an authoritarian project that decouples people from their past and replaces memory with history:

The worst thing was their shrieking; some of the poor birds simply made harsh piteous cries as though appealing for an end to their suffering, but others cried out over and over again in a variety of tongues; I heard words in Latin, in English, in languages I did not understand. Two of them, clinging upside down to the bars, shrieked at each other, one calling out 'A fair wind', over and over again, while the other answered '*Maria, mater dolorosa*' in the accent of a Devon man.⁶²³

These are exotic birds, imported from those parts of the world that are destined to be colonised and there are allusions to the exploitation of other populations that will follow in the future. For example, following the exhibition of the talking bird, Tabitha, Shardlake's companion Pepper talks of having 'heard of many wonders from this Peru the Spaniards have conquered'.⁶²⁴ Later in the text, Shardlake watches cargo being unloaded from ships and notices men 'who were as dark as Brother Guy'. Looking at a 'great ocean-going carrack', from which 'men were hauling crates and boxes', he wonders 'from what far reach of the globe it had come'.⁶²⁵ As seen above, one of the birds recites a seafaring phrase and the sailor who imported them explicitly links the marketing of these creatures that 'the gentry all want now for playthings', to the slave

⁶²² Ibid, p. 379.

⁶²³ Ibid, p. 380. NB. There will be a discussion of the term 'retro-dystopian' in the Conclusion.

⁶²⁴ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 5.

⁶²⁵ Ibid, p. 379.

trade. The same Portuguese merchant who has ‘realized there’s a market in Europe’ for the birds, also ‘ships boatloads of black Negroes from Africa as slaves for the Brazil colonists’. The sailor’s indifference towards the birds’ welfare – ‘There’s plenty more where they came from’ – and his account of their sea voyage – ‘Some always die on the voyage. More will die from the cold’ – recalls both the horrors of the Middle Passage and the wider exploitation of colonized peoples.⁶²⁶

Sansom’s England is a country that has become complicit in the erasure of its own story through a duplicitous programme of radicalisation. The country’s past has been re-framed as a kind of conspiracy theory – as ‘papist plots’ and ‘papist shit’ - and its society has become polarised.⁶²⁷ The terms ‘papist’ and ‘reformer’ are used as identity markers to articulate a perceived social divide in much the same way that ‘leaver’ and ‘remainer’ have been used in the Brexit period. The label of ‘papist’ has the power to brutalize normally gentle and generous characters. For example, Shardlake’s colleague Godfrey is a courageous and sensitive man of reformist conviction who both stands up to the Duke of Norfolk and gives up his own time to help a time-pressed Shardlake with his caseload. In a late-night exchange with Shardlake, he remembers the public burning of his fellow Protestant John Lambert as ‘an awful thing’, wondering ‘if I would have the stomach for the fire’ and dwelling on how ‘a breeze got up, blew terrible greasy smuts at the crowd’.⁶²⁸ Within an instant, however, he declares that ‘some deserve it’ and recalls the immolation of Father John Forest, confessor to Katherine of Aragon, who was suspended in chains above the fire to prolong his suffering. For Godfrey, he is simply a ‘papist renegade’ and though the ‘blood sweated from his body till his soul fell down to hell. Sometimes it is necessary’

⁶²⁶ Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 380.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 93 and 174.

⁶²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 229.

because the ‘papists will *not* triumph [sic]’. Listening to him, Shardlake ‘shivered that a man could turn thus from gentleness to brutality in a moment’.⁶²⁹ As mentioned above, the duality engendered by identity politics is further evidenced by Cromwell’s studied cruelty in using a treasured saint’s statue to burn Forest.⁶³⁰ Shardlake’s account of the saint’s statue being used to fuel the fire derives from historical accounts such as that of the nineteenth-century Catholic, John Morris, who quotes the testimony of a ‘Spanish informant’ that ‘a great wooden saint which eight men could scarcely carry, so big indeed that it looked like a giant’ was ‘hoisted’ on ‘to the platform where Dr Forest was, and three men had as much as they could do to keep it upright’.⁶³¹ Such a spectacle would have symbolised both at the time, and subsequently, a determination to eradicate not only dissent but cultural and temporal continuity. The intersection between identity and cultural practice is indicated by the novels’ depiction of the persistent desecration of bones.

In *Dissolution*, when Cromwell first declares his intention to burn a ‘papist traitor’ with ‘his own images’, Shardlake has been summoned to his office to be briefed on his mission at Scarnsea.⁶³² As he arrives, he notices a group of former monks watching with ‘horrified expressions’ as large wagons unload ‘glass-fronted caskets, wooden and plaster statues, and great wooden crosses, richly decorated’. These are ‘piled up in the rain’ and ‘stripped of power’.⁶³³ He finds Cromwell standing at a table piled high with gold and silver caskets which contain the supposedly holy relics of saints. It is clear that most of the relics are fakes: Cromwell shows Shardlake two children’s skulls, both of which purport to be that of St Barbara. However, during their exchange,

⁶²⁹ Ibid, p. 230.

⁶³⁰ Ibid, p. 167

⁶³¹ John Morris, *Lives Of The English Martyrs: Declared Blessed By Pope Leo XIII, In 1886 And 1895* (London: Longmans Green And Co, 1914), p. 318.

⁶³² Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 37.

⁶³³ Ibid, p. 7.

Cromwell's mocking treatment of the dead contrasts sharply with that of Shardlake. Cromwell holds up a child's skull 'and shook it, so that some teeth that had come loose rattled inside', then announces that 'the skulls will go to the dunghill'.⁶³⁴ Shardlake, on the other hand, sees the bones' humanity and is appreciative of the fact that the caskets contain the remains of real people whose lives are otherwise unrecorded. Because of this, he does not join in with Cromwell's 'harsh laugh', but instead 'peered in at the skulls'. In the case of one, he notices that a 'few hairs still clung to the pate' and he wonders 'whose they were'.⁶³⁵ Cromwell's casual disregard for the dead is quickly shown to pervade the civic environment. On travelling back from his office, Shardlake sees that 'a smashed skull lay by the piers. Picked clean by the birds, it had fallen from its pole and the pieces would lie there till souvenir hunters, or witches looking for charms, fetched them away'.⁶³⁶ In *Dark Fire*, outside the gatehouse of the dissolved St Bartholomew's and immediately following his reflection on the suffering of Father Forest, he witnesses a scene which exemplifies the loss and desecration, the wiping out of past generations and portions of English history:

I saw the boxes were full of bones, brown and ancient. A group of apprentices was delving inside them, casting pieces of tattered winding sheets onto the pavement, hauling out skulls and carefully scraping away the greenish moss that clung to some of them. The watchman, a huge fat fellow, watched indifferently. [...] and pulled out a little gold trinket in the shape of a crescent. 'There's some strange things buried with them – this monk had been on the Crusades.' He winked. 'My little bonus for letting the boys scavenge.'⁶³⁷

As in the case of Cromwell, the attitude towards the dead and their history is dismissive and, in fact, gives rise to opportunistic personal greed. Cromwell laughs and the

⁶³⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

⁶³⁵ Ibid, p. 10.

⁶³⁶ Ibid, p. 32.

⁶³⁷ Sansom, *Dark Fire*, pp. 167-8.

indifferent watchman shrugs and winks.⁶³⁸ The apothecaries harvest the grave moss for profit and the watchman takes as a 'bonus', a memento from the Crusades that embodies England's Catholic legacy. Later in the novel, Shardlake passes a cart that is 'full of ancient bones, ribcages and sharp pelvises and limb bones piled together in an unholy jumble, skulls peering out with their mocking grins' and 'knew that many skeletons from the monastic graveyards were driven out to the Lambeth marshes and quietly dumped'.⁶³⁹

Through this nightmarish portrayal of posthumous degradation, the stripping away of personal identities and legacies that amounts to the casual erasure of individual lives, Sansom confronts the sense of English loss which lies at the heart of Brexit-era discourse and is exemplified by Kingsnorth's statement 'about what is being done to my country, about what is being lost and what is being deliberately erased'.⁶⁴⁰ Kingsnorth's assertion that 'we are not a society that appreciates value' and that 'We are losing sight of who we are and where we have come from' can be seen in the eradication of the past depicted by Sansom and in the attitude he attributes to Cromwell as well as the workers who carry out his orders.⁶⁴¹

Conclusion

Like Gregory, Sansom writes a Henrician England that is marked by an over-whelming sense of disintegration and loss. It is a country under-going immense cultural change: a re-setting of national identity which both writers present as an imposition from those

⁶³⁸ Ibid, p. 168.

⁶³⁹ Ibid, p. 415.

⁶⁴⁰ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 262.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid, p. 263.

in power. In this respect, both writers' work reflects the resentful discourses of those Condition of England writers to the right of the political spectrum whose attempts to delineate English identity emerged at roughly the same time and express what Gilroy defines as postcolonial melancholia. At this stage of the thesis, having analysed the Henrician fiction of Gregory and Sansom alongside these contemporaneous nationalist polemics, I have established that the melancholia noted by Gilroy pervades these narratives of the English past, which seem to transplant present-day anxieties into the period of Reformation and early modernisation.

There are, however, significant differences between Sansom's fiction and that of Gregory. Loss for Gregory's narrators is linked to their personal grievances and those of their class. They resent the diminishing of their privileges and feudal power. They look down on Cromwell and the other new men whilst Shardlake, though increasingly dissonant in his thoughts and emotions, counts himself among them. Sansom's depiction of the Reformation and the associated ascendancy of statutory law, of which Shardlake is a representative, is more complex than that of Gregory. He recognises the honourable ideals that drive reformers such as Shardlake but shows how their principles become corrupted in their implementation. He depicts a Catholic Church that simultaneously embodies both virtue and venality, that is both a malevolent influence on society and a source of its cohesion. Gregory's narrators synonymise England's good with their own interests: they are concerned exclusively with their own spheres of power – the royal court and their estates – and detached from the experiences of the wider population. (Whilst it is true that Parr seems to share many of Shardlake's beliefs, her desires for a Protestant future are shown to be related to national sovereignty: her concerns for the commoners are less concerned with social justice and more with the anglicization of religion and a sense of national

identity). Shardlake occupies a different position in the social order and his perspective is street-level. Whilst the anger of Gregory's narrators largely arises from resentment of the ascendancy of those they regard as intruders, Shardlake's is more nuanced. He is distressed by the suffering of the people and the country as a whole, regretting both the failed enactment of his ideology and the demise of that which he wanted to replace. As such, whilst sharing the melancholy of both Gregory and the Condition of England writers, Sansom seems to reject their polarised and simplistic positioning. His Shardlake suffers personally, both physically and mentally and this increases as the narratives progress: his pain parallels that of the England of the novels. His fragility and uncertainty, along with that of the country, is reflected in the precarious condition of the storyworld's landscape and architecture.

As previously stated, Sansom shares the melancholy of the Condition of England writers and, like them, his fiction links it to the loss of *milieux de mémoire*: the disappearance of those habits, traditions and spaces that seamlessly connected past and present. For Sansom, these environments lie largely within the monasteries whose on-going destruction under-pins the narrative and creates its mournful tone. He uses the detective trope to interrogate the concepts of history and memory and Shardlake's pursuit of evidence to reconstruct an already inaccessible past is an act of historicization that takes place in a race against time and alongside the destruction of those spaces that unite memory and history. Like the Condition of England writers, he links the ensuing cultural amnesia to loss of identity, but unlike them, he does not link these lost connections and sense of selfhood to the demise of nationhood.

In Chapter One, I suggested that melancholia characterises discourses of Englishness on both the left and right of the political spectrum. From both perspectives, England is seen as a country in decline, as losing its identity and losing

its past. The fiction examined in this chapter, published as it was, in the immediate wake of New Labour's first term and the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, can be seen to codify through its portrayal of lost ideals, spatial destruction and social disintegration, the disillusionment of many contemporary progressives which, in turn, I would argue, resonated emotionally with the lamentations of the right. In depicting the process of loss and decline, I argue that Sansom's novels contribute to the growing cultural conservatism of the pre-Brexit landscape.

Chapter Four

'The glass of truth has shattered': Past, Nation and Meaning In Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up The Bodies* (2012)

Introduction

This final chapter turns to the first two novels of Hilary Mantel's trilogy about the life of Thomas Cromwell: *Wolf Hall*, which was published in 2009 and its 2012 sequel, *Bring Up The Bodies*. In some respects, the concerns of these texts overlap with those of Gregory and Sansom. They use the Henrician period, and, to varying degrees, the story of Cromwell, to examine themes of cultural change, the loss and recovery of the past, class and identity. Mantel's work differs, however, from that of Gregory and Sansom in its representations of national identity. Framed around the postmodern recognition that fixed and unitary truths about culture, history and identity do not exist, Mantel's self-aware meta-historical-narratives draw attention to the imaginarity of nation. These narratives nevertheless acknowledge the presence and power of *fictive* nationhood and are underpinned by an understanding that the construction of identity rests on belief in the very certainties the books refuse. As such, they interrogate the values, assumptions and processes that underpin the stories the English tell themselves and each other about who and what they are.

Mantel published the final instalment of the trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light*, in 2020. While, as Mantel suggested prior to its publication, the reading of this third novel inflects that of the earlier novels, this thesis is concerned with the period before 2016 and therefore my analysis focusses on *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* and is based mainly on research carried out before the final novel's appearance. The discussion is

nevertheless informed by my subsequent reading of *The Mirror and the Light* and there are references to this text where it illuminates or reinforces key points of the discussion.

Mantel's work is explicitly concerned with the intersection of memory, history and fiction. She has repeatedly argued that history is as unstable and subject to change as the present, and that the constantly shifting nature of contemporaneity results in shape-shifting pasts.⁶⁴² I suggest that in this understanding of the past's contingency, her work responds to (and in some of its aspects, reflects) the melancholy and nostalgia of nationalist discourse, but ultimately undermines the basis of its grievances and desires. In these works, there is no lost world to return to, no single, unchanging experience of home, no possibility of living outside time. Instead the work suggests limitless possibilities because, as Mantel puts it, 'we move on, our own construction of the past changes. Our memories rewrite themselves'.⁶⁴³

The understanding of the past as dynamic and negotiable is rejected by the Condition of England writers, who charge postcolonial revisionism with having contributed to their nation's disintegration. This is because plurality of perspective disrupts their preferred interpretations of England and monocultural Englishness. Scruton, for example, complains of listening 'for the last breath of England amid the clamour of voices which denounced her'.⁶⁴⁴ Hitchens, who regards English literature as one of the most important ways in which 'values are transmitted unchanged from

⁶⁴² For example see Hilary Mantel, 'Booker Winner Hilary Mantel on Dealing with History in Fiction', *Guardian*, 17 October 2009, < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/17/hilary-mantel-author-booker> > [accessed 30 November 2020] and Eileen Pollard, 'Between the Real and the Imagined: Hilary Mantel's Craft, An Interview with Hilary Mantel' in Eileen Pollard and Ginette Carpenter (eds), *Hilary Mantel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 147-55, p. 149.

⁶⁴³ Eileen Pollard, 'Between the Real and the Imagined: Hilary Mantel's Craft, An Interview with Hilary Mantel' in Eileen Pollard and Ginette Carpenter (eds), *Hilary Mantel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 147-55, p. 149.

⁶⁴⁴ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 21.

generation to generation', writes of 'a country which ploughs under its own culture' and condemns the radical 'cultural revolutionaries' for whom 'the British people had to be separated from their roots'.⁶⁴⁵ Mantel rejects this reverential and sanitised view of the past and its literature, pointing instead to the 'obscenity' of other periods and claiming that immersion in history 'makes you want to run like hell towards the future'.⁶⁴⁶ At the same time, she insists upon the vital role of history in contextualising and navigating the present, engaging with and challenging contemporary constructions of nationhood in her fictionalising of England's past. This idea is articulated in the words Mantel has Wolsey speak to Cromwell at an early stage of Anne Boleyn's relationship with the King, 'You can't know Albion [...] unless you can go back before Albion was thought of', words which also position the nation as imagined and constructed on the basis of *ideas* about the past.⁶⁴⁷ Those who control the nation's cultural memory, therefore, are able 'to say what England is, her scope and boundaries' and thus convenient histories rationalise structures of dominance in the present.⁶⁴⁸ In this respect, Mantel's work has much in common with the contemporaneous historical fiction of other countries, such as the American TV series *Mad Men*, which, as Jerome de Groot puts it, 'points out – while outlining a narrative of nationhood – the flaws and cracks in that edifice and, fundamentally, the problems inherent in the whole idea of nation and a national history'.⁶⁴⁹ Mantel's Cromwell, portrayed as the architect of Henry VIII's new England, is himself nationally indeterminate and multicultural. As Mantel noted in an interview with Eileen Pollard, this Cromwell reconstructed himself as an Italian in his younger

⁶⁴⁵ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, pp. 177- 82.

⁶⁴⁶ Mantel, 'Booker Winner Hilary Mantel on Dealing with History in Fiction', *Guardian*, 17 October 2009,

< <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/17/hilary-mantel-author-booker> > [accessed 30 November 2020] paras 3 and 5 of 9

⁶⁴⁷ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 94.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 338.

⁶⁴⁹ Jerome de Groot, *Remaking History: The Past In Contemporary Historical Fictions* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) Kindle ebook, pp. 79-80.

days before returning to England in later life to reclaim it and change it.⁶⁵⁰ In showing him to have multiple iterations that admit him to numerous cultural groupings, and by employing a complex narrative technique that foregrounds the expedient performativity of self, the novels confront the emptiness at the heart of national construction.

Wolf Hall opens with a scene of domestic violence precipitating the young Cromwell's departure from England to the continent in 1500 but then immediately moves forward to the period between 1527 and 1535, charting his career from being city lawyer and assistant to Thomas Wolsey to his position as chief royal functionary and architect of the break from Rome. *Bring Up the Bodies* depicts a much shorter time scale – July 1535 to September 1536 – and centres upon Cromwell's role in the downfall of Anne Boleyn. Cromwell's (and England's) past intervenes throughout the narrative. Despite the apparent omission of twenty-seven years, Cromwell's memories of life on the European mainland are interwoven with the novels' chronology and help to drive and contextualise the main plot. Similarly, details of his life prior to *Wolf Hall's* opening scene emerge and are shown to shape the Cromwell of the novels' present. His father's opening abuse is initially without context but as it is re-visited at various points in both books, and in the third instalment, *The Mirror and the Light*, this context is gradually disclosed, both within Cromwell's own memory and in the narrative. These factors are among the ways in which the texts explore the symbiotic dynamics between past and present, unpick the mechanisms and motivations behind the creation of useable pasts, and chart the transformation of memory into history and, from there, into both mythology and historical loss.

⁶⁵⁰Pollard, 'Between the Real and the Imagined', p. 149.

Both novels invite their readers to evaluate the assumptions under-pinning their constructions of their own and others' identities. As Mark Lawson asserts, Mantel offers a 'sympathetic and even heroic reassessment of Cromwell' which is 'politically radical' and he appears to embody many values of the contemporary age.⁶⁵¹ Renate Brosch argues that *Wolf Hall* 'tells the success story of capitalism and the transformation of the incipient nation state's financial administration'.⁶⁵² However, as Brosch notes, it is equally true that these factors are undermined by the texts' insistence on active reader participation in constructing Cromwell's identity and their self-interrogation of narrative technique. According to Brosch, readers are gradually led to realise that they 'have been complicit in constructing a hero to our liking' and 'we are reminded that our judgements can be misled, and that they may be based on false values'. She suggests that '*Wolf Hall* asks us to examine our values in the construction of identity'.⁶⁵³

Bring Up the Bodies is more explicit than its predecessor in foregrounding Cromwell's ambiguity and casting doubt on the assumptions that underpin subjectivity. Whilst *Wolf Hall* depicts the construction of expedient narratives (and the elimination of others) as a slow and careful process, *Bring Up the Bodies* emphasises the accelerated pace at which these revised versions of the past are subsequently unpicked to align with rapidly transforming political imperatives. As such, it retains *Wolf Hall*'s historiographical concerns but highlights issues that lie beneath its surface. This chapter therefore reads the second novel as a companion piece to the earlier text, as fiction re-writing fiction. Both novels anticipate what has come to be called the 'post-

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, p. xi.

⁶⁵² Brosch, Renate, 'Reading Minds – *Wolf Hall*'s Revision of the Poetics of Subjectivity' in Eileen Pollard and Ginette Carpenter (eds), *Hilary Mantel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 57-73. p. 70.

⁶⁵³ Ibid.

truth age'.⁶⁵⁴ Cromwell, who in *Wolf Hall* re-combines the past to justify Henry VIII's monarchic supremacy and elevate Boleyn, now more explicitly seeks 'the truth little by little and only those parts of it we can use'.⁶⁵⁵ *Wolf Hall's* 'long slow revelation in which we become increasingly aware that we are being misled by seeing only one side of things', gives way in *Bring Up the Bodies* to the intensified pace and brutality of Cromwell's machinations.⁶⁵⁶

In order to assess the contribution made by Mantel's Henrician work to debates and discourses of English national identity prior to the 2016 EU referendum, this chapter explores three broad aspects of the novels. It begins by considering the construction of personal identity and the notion of what I will refer to as meta-selfhood. This first section will discuss the construction and re-construction of history, Cromwell's relationship with memory and with the people of his past, and the processes of biographizing and auto-biographizing. It will proceed to consider the performative and reflexive nature of Cromwell's identity by analysing Mantel's narrative technique, use of theatrical tropes, ekphrasis and paratexts. The plurality and indeterminacy of Cromwell's individual subjectivity will be considered in relation to that of the national. The second section will address the ways in which Mantel uses spatial and material motifs to undermine narratives of national history and myths of English exceptionalism. It will demonstrate how her work disrupts the conservative understanding of England first and foremost as a place, and the English themselves as a distinct people who, in Scruton's words, have 'never needed to ask themselves'

⁶⁵⁴ 'Post-truth' was the *Oxford Dictionaries Word of the Year* in 2016. The *OED* defines it as an adjective 'relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief'.

⁶⁵⁵ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 285.

⁶⁵⁶ Brosch, 'Reading Minds', p. 67.

who they are.⁶⁵⁷ The third section will deal with the instability of the historical, of the shifting meanings inherent to language and the written record. It will consider the ways in which Mantel's work challenges conservative assertions that the English language and its literature is sacred, unchanging and inherently virtuous, and how the primacy of text as the temporal bridge between different ages is undermined.

The Command of Time: Nation and the Self-Made Man

A distinctive feature of Mantel's historical fiction is her connection of history with memory: her 'attempts to duplicate not the historian's chronology but the way memory works in leaps, loops and flashes'.⁶⁵⁸ In this way, she establishes a meta-narrative: a text that is concerned with how the stories of history are constructed and with the political power of those who shape the national memory. Through her depiction of Cromwell's thought processes, Mantel shows the mechanisms by which memories are re-configured as convenient national stories that rationalise present structures. As scholars such as Lina Bolzoni and Frances Yates have shown, memorial art enjoyed cultural prominence in the Renaissance, which was a time of political and intellectual transition, and Cromwell himself was an agent of national change who made strategic use of the perceived past to justify transformations to the state.⁶⁵⁹ Mantel uses these factors to explore the processes by which history is created out of memory and used as an instrument for controlling the present and future.

⁶⁵⁷ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 5.

⁶⁵⁸ Hilary Mantel, 'How I Came to Write Wolf Hall', *Guardian*, 7 December 2012. Available online: <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/07/bookclub-hilary-mantel-wolf-hall>> [accessed 15 May 2016].

⁶⁵⁹ Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery Of Memory: Literary And Iconographical Models In The Age Of The Printing Press*, trans. by Jeremy Parzen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), Frances Yates, *The Art Of Memory* (London: The Bodley Head, 2014), and G. R. Elton, *England Under The Tudors*, 2nd edn (London: Methuen & Co., 1974) pp. 160 -1.

The re-structuring of memory, which had previously been experienced through sensory channels such as visual images, into text began the social transformation of the mind, as described by Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish*, whereby a communal 'civilization of spectacle' evolved into one of individuals divided and ruled by the state.⁶⁶⁰ As was discussed in Chapter Three, the English Reformation's iconoclasm destroyed collective legacies (*lieux de mémoire*) as Catholic images and artefacts were replaced with texts written in the vernacular that made spirituality a private experience and conferred national identity through the anglicization of God. This enabled the modernising English state to undermine the universal authority of Christendom in ways that have been linked to its present-day departure from the European Union.⁶⁶¹ Mantel's consistent emphasis on the continental origin of these texts and their links to the roots of free trade and democracy, however, highlights English opportunism (both early-modern and contemporary) in hijacking global movements for domestic political purposes. In the novels, Tyndale and Cranmer, credited by Scruton with the creation of an 'extraordinary idiom' which enabled the English to speak of complex things in simple ways and enabled them 'to endow the objects and institutions of their world with a nimbus of home-grown sanctity', are indelibly associated with the continent and part of a pan-European network of reformers.⁶⁶² Tyndale, for example, is 'somewhere in Germany' from where Cromwell's books arrive alongside 'Castile soap', 'packaged as something else', whilst Cranmer is secretly married to a German wife who does not speak English.⁶⁶³ By

⁶⁶⁰ Michel Foucault, *Discipline And Punish: The Birth Of The Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 216.

⁶⁶¹ For example see Bilal Hafeez, 'Here's how Boris Johnson is using the Henry VIII playbook', *Business Insider*, 3 November 2019, <https://www.businessinsider.com/boris-johnson-is-using-the-henry-viii-playbook-on-brexit-macro-hive-2019-11?r=US&IR=T> [accessed 27 October 2020].

⁶⁶² Scruton, *Real England*, pp. 99-100.

⁶⁶³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, pp. 100, 37, 478.

exploring the ways in which heritage is invented, *Wolf Hall* demonstrates Mantel's self-referential awareness of the historical novel's own role in this continuing process. Integral to its historiographical perspective is its challenge to the notion of English exceptionalism. Emphasis is placed throughout the text upon Cromwell's connection with the culture of Renaissance Europe. He is fluent in many languages, an integral member of international networks – Thomas More refers to him as 'a coin that has changed hands so often' –and has built numerous national identities as signalled by the different versions of his name – 'Thomas, also Tomos, Tommaso and Thomaes Cromwell' – and the tension between 'his past selves and 'his present body'.⁶⁶⁴ At one point, Thomas More tells him: 'you are an Italian through and through, and you have all their vices, all their passions'.⁶⁶⁵ Cromwell's memories of Italy and his Italian identity are particularly pervasive and will be examined in more detail later in the chapter. Despite its extensive and often implausible national mythology, England itself is also shown to be entwined with the continent through trade, finance and culture, with a king who is 'one part bastard archer, one part hidden serpent, one part Welsh, and all of him in debt to the Italian banks'.⁶⁶⁶ Antwerp, the hub of trade and finance and one of the places from which 'the world is run', is another frequently referenced location.⁶⁶⁷

Cromwell builds both his own and the nation's identity by shaping the past, and this is shown in the novels through his apparent mastery of memory. The Henrician Reformation was facilitated by the rise of print culture, which systemised the preservation of what would now be called data. It was marked by its de-familiarisation and re-memorising of preceding times to consolidate the monarchic state's

⁶⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 567 71.

⁶⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 567.

⁶⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 99.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 378.

supremacy. The sixteenth century saw a surge of attempts to create effective systems for the access, retention and utilisation of memory. For practitioners of memorial art, a common objective was possession of a single gaze over all that has ever been known over the whole of time. As Bolzoni observes, they aimed to gather in one place the entirety of human expression, to bring order to disordered recollection and then to recombine established knowledge to create anew.⁶⁶⁸ Command of time was seen as the essence of power and in its efforts to re-claim and instrumentalise the past, the Tudor regime is shown in *Wolf Hall* to participate fully in the movements of the European Renaissance. Mantel has confirmed that a source for the novel was Yates' 1966 study of classical and Renaissance memory systems, *The Art of Memory*, and that this 'rich book' supplies two of the novel's key metaphors – Cicero's Method of Loci and the Memory Theatre of Giulio Camillo (significantly termed by Mantel's Cromwell as a 'machine').⁶⁶⁹ Reading the first novel through the lens of Yates' work illuminates Mantel's use of these motifs to trace the morphing of experiential memory into expedient historical narrative: a process in which Cromwell is shown to be a leading participant.

Cromwell's ability to control and construct the past is partly associated with the skills in memorial art he has acquired in Italy. According to Mantel, the historical Cromwell was credited by his contemporaries with possession of a powerful memory and at points in *Wolf Hall* this is associated with super-human menace.⁶⁷⁰ This is evident in accountancy metaphors such as Cromwell's claim to 'have a very large ledger. A huge filing system, in which are recorded (under their name, and also under

⁶⁶⁸ See Lina Bolzoni, *The Gallery of Memory: Literary and Iconographic Models in the Age of the Printing Press*, trans. by Jeremy Parzen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

⁶⁶⁹ Hilary Mantel, personal communication, 17 May 2016.

⁶⁷⁰ Mantel, personal communication, 17 May 2016.

their offence) the details of people who have cut across me'.⁶⁷¹ Mantel has remarked that Cromwell 'had spent time in Italy, so I wondered if he learned some tricks'.⁶⁷² One of these tricks is the classical art of imaginative reconstruction, exemplified by Cicero's account of the poet Simonides' use of spatial memorising to identify the bodies of banqueters crushed by a collapsing roof. The second is that of sixteenth-century compartmentalisation which, according to Yates, 'represents a new Renaissance plan of the psyche'.⁶⁷³ The new-found command of memory was associated with a divine power which Mantel's Cromwell seeks. He is a master of surveillance and in his attempts to systematise memory, seeks also to manage the past, aspiring to be like Foucault's panoptic ruler 'who looms over everything with a single gaze which no detail, however minute, can escape'.⁶⁷⁴

Renaissance practice often used animal symbols for human characteristics and memory was often shown as a wolf.⁶⁷⁵ This is reflected in the first novel's title and at various points, Cromwell is associated with this creature. When, for example, he strikes out the name of his dead wife's first husband in her book of hours, the 'moon gapes in' and his servant, Christophe, asks if there are wolves in the kingdom.⁶⁷⁶ The connection is reinforced by a predatory metaphor at More's trial, where he reflects that 'You never even saw me coming', and by his reflection that the living 'turn and chase the dead'.⁶⁷⁷ In merging Cromwell's identity with the wolf of *memoria*, Mantel links him with two inventors of memorial art – Simonides and Camillo.

⁶⁷¹ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 481.

⁶⁷² Mantel, personal communication, 17 May 2016.

⁶⁷³ Yates, Frances, *The Art of Memory* (London, Random House, 1992), p. 173.

⁶⁷⁴ Foucault, *Discipline And Punish*, p. 217.

⁶⁷⁵ Yates, *The Art Of Memory*, p. 165.

⁶⁷⁶ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 499.

⁶⁷⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 640, 649.

According to Cicero, the Method of Loci is the artificial memory system invented by Simonides: it is used by Cromwell, who is said to have ‘learned a memory system’ in Italy ‘so he can remember everything’.⁶⁷⁸ The technique involves the placing of imaginary objects at various points within a fictional space, attaching words or images to them, and then mentally travelling from one to the other. It is part of a larger pattern within the novel of pictures as memory triggers, and its classical function as rhetorical aide-memoire affords insight into a pre-literate imagination where language and sensation were integrated into what Yates terms ‘faculties of intense visual memorization which we have lost’.⁶⁷⁹ The notion of history/memory as a carefully plotted journey through imaginary space is evident in Cromwell’s belief that the system helps him to ‘remember everything: every stage of how he got here’.⁶⁸⁰ Later on, however, this claim of an infallible memory is discredited, as he wonders ‘why is it that his life as a child doesn’t seem to fit, one bit with the next?’⁶⁸¹ The instability of his recollection is further illuminated in *Bring Up the Bodies* when Gardiner reveals the cause of the paternal beating with which *Wolf Hall* opens. Cromwell has forgotten that he stabbed a boy to death.⁶⁸² The details and significance of this crucial event in his life subsequently come to the forefront of his memory in *The Mirror and the Light*. The discrepancy between Cromwell’s self-ascribed and reputational command of time and the reality of its frailty undermines the authenticity of historical account and the authority of those who confidently claim knowledge of the past.

In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell’s identity is elided with that of Simonides by means of an embedded narrative that centres upon a hall. This room has multiple meanings related

⁶⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 156.

⁶⁷⁹ Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 20.

⁶⁸⁰ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 156.

⁶⁸¹ Ibid, p. 357.

⁶⁸² Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 72.

to space, time and memory; among them, invention of the Method of Loci. The story of how the art of memory came to be invented originates with Cicero and is reproduced, via Yates, at various points in the novel. At a nobleman's banquet, a poet called Simonides chants a poem in praise of his host, but because he includes a passage praising the twins Castor and Pollux, his host will only agree to pay half the agreed fee. Later, Simonides receives a message saying that two young men wish to see him outside. He duly leaves the banqueting hall but finds no one.⁶⁸³ As he turns back inside, he hears 'the cries of the dying as the roof of the hall collapsed. Of all the diners, he was the only one left alive.' The dead are 'broken and disfigured' to the extent that they cannot be recognised. In order to help relatives to retrieve their kin, Simonides is able to identify the dead of the collapsed hall by recalling location – 'linking the dead to their names, he worked from the seating plan in his head'.⁶⁸⁴ Mantel's version stresses the relationship of memory with the moment of historical change. Simonides is said to remember 'exactly where everyone was sitting, at the moment the roof fell in' but this is itself a story, a claim that cannot be verified.⁶⁸⁵

The collapsing hall develops as extended metaphor through the association of the falling roof with the subsidence of Christendom and the merging of Cromwell with Simonides. Following a supper at the house of the merchant Bonvisi with Thomas More, Chapuys, and others associated with the old order of Christendom (an event whose 'whole purpose', Cromwell realises, has been 'to warn him off' his impending alliance with the Boleyns), Simonides' story is re-enacted.⁶⁸⁶ In this case, Cromwell is in the role of Simonides while Richard Cromwell and Rafe Sadler take the parts of

⁶⁸³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, pp. 157-8.

⁶⁸⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 158.

⁶⁸⁵ Mantel, *Wolf Hall* pp. 158.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 196.

Castor and Pollux. Like Simonides' host Scopas, Bonvisi objects to Cromwell's divided allegiances. At the end of the evening, Cromwell 'looks around the room', remembering the positions of the guests at the table: 'That's where the Lord Chancellor sat. On his left, the hungry merchants' and imagines the placement of other key players in unfolding events: 'There is a place set for Lady Anne [...] There is a place for William Tyndale, and one for the Pope'. Mirroring, almost exactly, the words of the Simonides narrative, a servant tells him that 'two young gentlemen are outside, master, asking for you by name'.⁶⁸⁷ Cromwell reflects at this point that:

He will remember it, the fatal placement: if it proves fatal. That soft hiss and whisper, of stone destroying itself; that distant sound of walls sliding, of plaster crumbling, of rubble crashing on to fragile human skulls? That is the sound of the roof of Christendom, falling on the people below.⁶⁸⁸

The overlapping identities of Simonides and Cromwell imply the latter's aspiration to control what is remembered and how. The hall at this point represents 'Christendom', and its place in the novel's title suggests reader participation in Cromwell's 'one last look' before the medieval world of European cohesion is brought down in favour of the nationalism he engineers. The image of a collapsing building resonates with Sansom's spatialised depiction of cultural collapse, and the imagined obliteration of the banqueters in Mantel's novel recalls what Bolzoni terms 'the art of forgetting'. These were techniques recommended by the teachers of memory for deliberately clearing the mind of unwanted images consisting of imagined scenarios 'characterized by a crescendo of destructive violence' and subsequently given material form by Protestant iconoclasm.⁶⁸⁹

⁶⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁸⁹ Bolzoni, *Gallery of Memory*, p. 143.

Cromwell's collapsing hall is used to show that history is not just remembered but is often planned in advance. The hall is what Yates terms 'his memory building' but it is also his inner theatre where he envisions what he hopes is to come.⁶⁹⁰ An example of this occurs in *Bring Up the Bodies*, when, following a meeting with Norfolk and Surrey, he 'closes his eyes. He sits, his breathing calm. In his mind, a picture appears. A lofty hall. Into which he commands a table'.⁶⁹¹ Around this mental table, Cromwell assembles the figures he will destroy – the Courtenays and the Poles. He is again identified, this time by the seating arrangements, with the humble Simonides: in contrast to 'the weighty chair' occupied by each of the guests, Cromwell sits on 'a humble three-legged stool, down at the end of the table' and 'he 'gazes up at his betters'. At this point, the scope of Cromwell's imagination has shrunk from the collapse of Christendom to the internal obstacles to national construction:

He glances up at the beams. Up there are carved and painted the faces of the dead: More, Fisher, the cardinal, Katherine the queen. Below them, the flower of living England. Let us hope the roof doesn't fall in.⁶⁹²

The 'magnificent hall' of *Wolf Hall* now amounts to more than Cromwell's memory: it represents his intended England. Cromwell visualises it as he makes pragmatic, temporary alliances with the feudal establishment in order now to bring down the woman he raised. He acknowledges to himself the 'simulated regard' of these people who despise him and recognises that his 'whole career has been an education in hypocrisy': the world he has helped to create is one in which the 'glass of truth has shattered'. In the following lines, the words 'spin' and 'spun' highlight the rapidity of narrative change, his reformulation of what is known or supposed.

⁶⁹⁰ Yates, *Art of Memory*, p. 18.

⁶⁹¹ Hilary Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (London: Fourth Estate, 2012), p. 194.

⁶⁹² *Ibid*, pp. 195-6.

He has spun his enemies to face him, to join him: as in a dance. He means to spin them away again, so they look down the long cold vista of their years: so they feel the wind, the wind of exposed places that cuts to the bone: so they bed down in ruins, and wake up cold.⁶⁹³

The metaphor of ruin, with its connotations of dissolved monasteries, as well as its link to the collapsing hall, further consolidates Cromwell's destructive intention to 'rework the past' to align with Henry's requirements.

In linking Cromwell with Camillo, a preeminent moderniser of memory and 'one of the most famous men of the sixteenth century', Mantel further explores the political power intrinsic to owning memory.⁶⁹⁴ According to Bolzoni, Camillo's planned theatre of memory would 'mean celebrating the entire potential of *imaginatio*; to build the images of memory would also mean recreating the world'.⁶⁹⁵ There are references throughout *Wolf Hall* to Camillo and his structure. For example, Cromwell 'thinks about Guido [*sic*] Camillo in Paris, pacing and fretting between the wooden walls of his memory machine' and claims to 'remember Calais, the alchemists, the memory machine'.⁶⁹⁶ During an illness, he has hallucinations about Camillo's 'enfolded boxes of wood' and as he recovers, his nephew and protégé, Richard Cromwell, tells him that he has 'made a thinking machine that marches forward as if it were alive'.⁶⁹⁷ Cromwell understands that re-creating England means re-building national images of memory.

Camillo's planned structure 'is a theatre on the ancient Vitruvian plan', a description of which is quoted in the novel's preliminaries.⁶⁹⁸ According to Yates, it

⁶⁹³ Ibid, p. 352.

⁶⁹⁴ Yates, *Art Of Memory*, p. 135.

⁶⁹⁵ Bolzoni, *Gallery Of Memory*, p. 140.

⁶⁹⁶ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 494, 614.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 615.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid 472.

rises in seven grades divided by seven gangways. On each gangway are seven gates and on each gate are many images. The structure unites the classical and Renaissance memorial arts. It starts with the images on the doors, but under the images are drawers or boxes containing masses of papers on which are speeches by Cicero on subjects related to the images. In ordering, categorising and linking image to text, the Theatre dispenses with the ephemerality of classical remembrance by assigning knowledge to 'eternal places'.⁶⁹⁹ It encapsulates the transition from *milieux de memoiré* to cognitive order and literacy and the instrumentalism of Cromwell's attempted appropriation of the device is signalled by his substitution of the word 'machine' for 'theatre'.

Mantel's allusions to Camillo's planned invention and the Method of Loci, highlight the practice of breaking down and ordering historical narrative for political and economic expediency such as the King's objective 'to make good use of the money that flows yearly to Rome'.⁷⁰⁰ Deconstruction was a principle of the Renaissance memory systems that attempted to harness and then mechanise creativity.⁷⁰¹ The close association of early modern memory systems with alchemy is reflected in their processes of assembly, analysis and recombination. Mantel has stated that alchemy is 'a recurring theme in my stories' and Cromwell can be seen in this sense as the alchemist who re-forms the English state to suit the interests of its ruler.⁷⁰² These practices also resemble the use and power of data in the contemporary context.

⁶⁹⁹ Yates, *Art Of Memory*, p. 148.

⁷⁰⁰ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 220.

⁷⁰¹ Yates, *Art of Memory*, p. 190.

⁷⁰² Mantel, personal communication, 19th October 2016.

Bring Up the Bodies, a more terse and economical text than its predecessor, is largely divested of *Wolf Hall*'s leisurely mnemonic metaphors and Camillo is entirely absent. It is more stark in its portrayal of the past being re-constructed for the political purposes of a state which itself operates for the advancement of individual interests. In the second novel, Cromwell reflects on what 'you have always believed, believed without foundation', as he proceeds to dismantle the stories that were painstakingly established in *Wolf Hall*. *Bring Up the Bodies* can be read, therefore, as a meta-commentary on its partner text. As will be seen later in the chapter, this is evident in the way that it disrupts the stability of the written word, the permanence of what has been committed to paper, thus questioning by implication the authority of the written record. In talking to its predecessor, the sequel continues its self-conscious anatomising of the historical novelist's craft, but it also questions the work of the historian because what is known (or believed) about Cromwell and his world stems from the archival documentation.

The meta-narrative which repeatedly and self-consciously re-calibrates England and its past is linked to Cromwell's changing inner iterations of his own self. As *Wolf Hall*'s narrator says of the dead, 'we rewrite their lives', so Cromwell is shown in this text to edit his own life story.⁷⁰³ This selective consciousness is one element of what I would call his *meta-selfhood*. It is intrinsic to Mantel's narrative technique, which is unusual in its deployment of the third person in conjunction with what appears at some points to be internal focalisation, and at other times the view afforded by "the camera behind his shoulder". Critics have attributed this to the fact that Mantel's Cromwell is more interested in the thoughts and actions of others than his own, that he watches others. However, the use of third-person narration also suggests that he

⁷⁰³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 649.

also watches and constructs himself, that the narrative perspective is reflexive: a dialogic narrative voice in which the protagonist reads himself. This self-curation is signalled by hints of alternative personalities and behaviours to the one foregrounded by his internal narrative. An example of this comes in the chapter 'Master of Phantoms' where, sleepless, he reflects that 'you cannot separate them, your public being and your private self'.⁷⁰⁴ At this point, it is implied that as Cromwell muses in bed, his staff torture Mark Smeaton within earshot in order to assemble the evidence that will destroy his former ally Boleyn. Cromwell's self-deception is highlighted by his similarity to Thomas More, whom he condemns for having 'men he called heretics dragged to his house in Chelsea, so he could persecute them conveniently in the bosom of his family'.⁷⁰⁵ The hypocrisy of his stance against More becomes apparent when in 'the depth of the night he hears screaming' and realises that 'it must be Mark' but 'does not stir' because he 'does not think his household would go against his orders'.⁷⁰⁶

Cromwell's narrative blurs or omits the truths that are inconvenient and the reader is positioned in such a way as to be complicit in this curation. Mantel, in postmodern fashion, avoids an authoritative approach by which knowledge is imparted hierarchically and instead draws attention to the participatory role of readers. At certain points, they are reminded that they are following one particular narrative path and that there are a range of possibilities; some of which might include details that are incompatible with their emotional investment in the protagonist. An example of this can be found in the chapter 'Crows' in which, on 'his ride into middle England' to visit the exiled Katherine of Aragon, Cromwell sleeps with the wife of an inn landlord. In this 'watery place, where soil and marsh are the same colour and nothing is solid under

⁷⁰⁴ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 281.

⁷⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282.

your feet', his indeterminacy reflects that of the space in which he finds himself. In this new context, the narrative switches from the third-person pronoun 'he', instead referring to Cromwell by his job title: 'far from London, the King's deputy in church affairs can perhaps relax his caution?'⁷⁰⁷ This shift has a distancing effect and along with the use of the question-mark, denies narrative certainty. It signals Mantel's overarching intention, declared in the Author's Note at the end of *Bring Up the Bodies*, of 'making the reader a proposal'.⁷⁰⁸ When Cromwell wakes the next morning, he 'remembers where he is and what he is', consolidating this sense of memorial fluidity.⁷⁰⁹ The chapter ends with another 'proposal' for Cromwell: one which positions him as a ruthless and mendacious murderer:

The rumour in the country is that Master Secretary has brought a woman back from his recent trip to Hertfordshire, or Bedfordshire, and set her up in his house at Stepney, or at Austin Friars, or at King's Place in Hackney, which he is rebuilding for her in lavish style. She is the keeper of an inn, and her husband has been seized and locked up, for a new crime invented by Thomas Cromwell. The poor cuckold is to be charged and hanged at the next assize; though, by some reports, he has already been found dead in his prison, bludgeoned, poisoned, and with his throat cut.⁷¹⁰

These speculative accounts are framed in the language of uncertainty. Phrases such as 'the rumour in the country' and 'by some reports', along with repetition of 'or' and lists of alternative locations and methods of killing, qualify their credibility but at the same time, implant an alternative story within the main narrative. Hints like this, of a far less attractive Cromwell, mean that a sense of other possibilities are embedded within the text. The 'reports' are believable in relation to previous information about Cromwell's night in the inn and signal that readers (and historians) make emotionally

⁷⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 80.

⁷⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 409, 'Author's Note'.

⁷⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 80.

⁷¹⁰ Ibid, p. 100.

inflected choices in their judgements of the past. The implication that Cromwell is a murderer has already been established in *Wolf Hall* through what Brosch refers to as ‘a startling use of ekphrasis, which the novel utilizes for giving an outside view of Cromwell’.⁷¹¹ Everyone agrees that Cromwell looks like a murderer and it subsequently emerges that he is one, both through Gardiner’s account in *Bring Up the Bodies* and, in *The Mirror and the Light*, through his recollections of stabbing the ‘eel boy’.⁷¹² These enfolded narratives enact the idea proffered in *Wolf Hall*, of there being ‘Beneath every history, another history’ and disrupt his attractiveness as a hero.⁷¹³ As Colin Burrow observes in his review, the novel’s mode of narration (present-tense and focalised through a single character) would be ineffective if Cromwell was unsympathetic because ‘if a fiction represents the sensorium of one character’s feelings, then an inert or insensitive sensorium would probably generate inert fiction’.⁷¹⁴ However, he suggests that this ‘is where the actions and events and people who are ghostly presences on the edges of the novel’s vision come into their own’, because they require the reader to consider Cromwell alternatively as a monster who ‘has things done which he can’t bring himself to think about, who wants to keep his worst actions beyond the edges of his own consciousness’.⁷¹⁵ Burrow’s reading of this single character’s narrative can, in turn, be applied to that of the nation which underpins it. National subjectivity depends equally upon keeping the worst aspects of its history ‘beyond the edges of consciousness’.

⁷¹¹ Brosch, ‘Reading Minds’, p. 66.

⁷¹² Hilary Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light* (London: Fourth Estate, 2020), Kindle ebook p. 660.

⁷¹³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 66.

⁷¹⁴ Colin Burrow, ‘On your way, phantom’, *London Review of Books*, 11, 34 (7 June 2012), pp. 19-20. <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v34/n11/colin-burrow/on-your-way-phantom> > [accessed 1

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⁷¹⁵ Ibid.

In re-writing her previous *Cromwell*, Mantel explicitly signals that the hero of *Bring Up the Bodies* is a different 'version' from the one in *Wolf Hall*.⁷¹⁶ In revising her own revision, she emphasises that historical understanding is always an act of imagination. Early in the second novel, she unpicks the idea of Cromwell's memory skills when, during the King's visit to Wolf Hall, Edward Seymour challenges Cromwell to a game of chess: his opportunity to avenge his defeat in their previous game of three years earlier in which Cromwell checkmated him. Seymour attributes this earlier victory to the fact that his opponent distracted him at a crucial stage by asking a question about his sister, Jane. On this subsequent occasion, Cromwell offers to set up the board as it was before this distraction. It is clear that Seymour believes this to be within his opponent's capabilities as 'incredible things are related of Cromwell's memory'.⁷¹⁷ Given Mantel's synonymising of Cromwell with Simonides in *Wolf Hall*, and her emphasis on his mastery of the Method of Loci, it seems plausible to the reader also, that he would be able to memorise the location of the pieces at the decisive moment of change. Mantel, however, proceeds to destabilise what was suggested in the earlier text. She implies that Cromwell's invincible memory is a fiction, that the reader has been previously misled and that Cromwell himself perpetrates this notion of his abilities opportunistically, to deceive and intimidate others through their belief in his unusual abilities. He 'smiles to himself', because he knows Seymour's 'carefully expressionless' look indicates that his self-mythologizing strategy is successful and because the offer is based on pretence. He knows he 'could set up the board, with only a little guesswork', not because of his powerful memory, but because 'he knows the type of game a man like Seymour plays'.⁷¹⁸

⁷¹⁶ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 7.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 20.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid*, pp. 19-20.

Signalling the status of both novels as historiographical metafiction, and emphasising the fluid and discursive nature of history, Mantel's new version of Cromwell tells Seymour that, in relation to their game of chess, they 'should begin afresh' because 'the world moves on'.⁷¹⁹ This endemic inconclusiveness, confirmed by the final lines of the novel which state that there 'are no endings' and that endings 'are all beginnings', is signposted in the first chapter of *Bring Up the Bodies* by repeated references to 'becoming'. During supper at Wolf Hall, for example, the King asks Cromwell 'how will tomorrow be better than today?', explaining to the other guests that his servant 'cannot sleep unless he is amending something' and thereby implying that such amendment amounts to progress.⁷²⁰ On falling asleep that night, Cromwell 'senses something in the act of becoming'.⁷²¹ As in *Wolf Hall*, ekphrasis is used to highlight the instability of identity, with the Holbein portrait once more an important signifier. It 'broods on the wall' of Cromwell's home at Austin Friars and since 'he will not part with the original' because he has 'got used to' looking like a murderer, copies are being made for his friends and 'his admirers among the evangelicals in Germany'. Thus, when 'he comes into his hall', there are multiple 'versions of himself in various stages of becoming'. He is 'a tentative outline, partly inked in' and different copiers have different starting points that reflect the conflicting subjectivities at play in creating perceptions of the past.⁷²²

Unbeknown to them, the beliefs of the admiring Lutherans who have commissioned the pictures are belittled by their hero in conversation with the more conservative Seymour. In a discussion on the Protestant doctrine of justification,

⁷¹⁹ Ibid.

⁷²⁰ Ibid, p. 15.

⁷²¹ Ibid, p. 26.

⁷²² Ibid, p. 7.

Cromwell disrespectfully refers to Martin Luther as 'Fat Martin'.⁷²³ This is an example of his strategic pluralism as he stage-manages a diverse range of public personalities. In displaying his pragmatism, Mantel's depiction seems again to concur with the preeminent Tudor historian G.R. Elton's view of Cromwell as one whose 'temper was secular' and who was 'virtually devoid of passion' in relation to theological debates.⁷²⁴

The disparity between the Cromwells of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* is again made apparent when Wolsey is spoken of disparagingly at the Wolf Hall supper table. The reader is reminded that the imagined Cromwell of the first novel 'loved the cardinal'. However, with a simile that alludes to the iconoclastic effacements he oversees, the reader learns that, as the King gauges his reaction, this Cromwell's 'expression is as carefully blank as a freshly painted wall'.⁷²⁵ The first chapter concludes that he 'is not the same man he was last year, and he doesn't acknowledge that man's feelings; he is starting afresh, always new thoughts, new feelings'.⁷²⁶ As the second Cromwell dismantles the fictions set up by the first, so Mantel, like the copiers of Holbein's portrait, builds a new 'version' of her protagonist. In *The Mirror and the Light*, an alternative reading of Cromwell's relationship with Wolsey emerges which calls into question Cromwell's apparently foundational loyalty to his former master and proffers a new reading of the first two novels. Wolsey's daughter, Dorothea, tells him that at the time of his death, her father believed Cromwell to have betrayed him.⁷²⁷ Following this revelation, Wolsey, who has hitherto acted as his spectral advisor, no longer speaks to him.⁷²⁸ Dorothea Wolsey's account, irrespective of its factual accuracy, shows the nature of this key relationship in Cromwell's life to

⁷²³ Ibid, p. 20.

⁷²⁴ Elton, *England Under the Tudors*, p. 127.

⁷²⁵ Ibid, p. 16.

⁷²⁶ Ibid, p. 30.

⁷²⁷ Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, p. 286.

⁷²⁸ Ibid, p. 350.

be fictional: Cromwell (or the reader) has imagined the Cardinal's trust and regard for him.

Similarly, the portrayal of Walter in *Wolf Hall* is substantially revised in the second novel. In contrast to the brutal, drunken bully of *Wolf Hall*, the father that Cromwell remembers for much of *Bring Up the Bodies* is both mentor and craftsman. This is particularly evident following Gardiner's revelation that Walter had taken action to protect his son from the consequences of the murder which the adult Cromwell forgets he has committed: information which leaves him 'dumbfounded'.⁷²⁹ Prior to this, Cromwell takes pleasure in the disparity between himself and his parent, reflecting that in 'a generation everything can change'.⁷³⁰ He recalls communication between them as 'grunts'⁷³¹ and he 'doesn't want the kingdom run like Walter's house in Putney, with fighting all the time and the sound of banging and shrieking day and night.'⁷³² Following Gardiner's revelation, while going over the dead Katherine of Aragon's accounts and finding that tales of her youthful poverty are without substance, he is led to question his interpretation of his own past.⁷³³ Accordingly, he revises his beliefs about his father:

What if, he thinks, Walter didn't hate me? What if he was just exasperated with me, and showed it by kicking me around the brewery yard? What if I deserved it? Because I was always crowing.⁷³⁴

In *Bring Up the Bodies* the characteristics of father and son are reversed. Instead of remembering Walter's abuse, Cromwell now recalls an episode when as 'a boy he had

⁷²⁹ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 72.

⁷³⁰ Ibid, p. 43.

⁷³¹ Ibid, p. 46.

⁷³² Ibid, p. 70.

⁷³³ Ibid, p. 160.

⁷³⁴ Ibid.

been in a rage against his father Walter and he had rushed at him intending to butt him in the belly with his head'. As Walter is trying on 'one of his creations' - some body armour he has just made in his forge - the child hits his head on an 'iron belly'. Walter's response is resonant with paternal wisdom – "'That'll teach you", his father said, phlegmatically'.⁷³⁵ When the King rages at him following a meeting with Chapuys, claiming that Cromwell believes that he is king and Henry the lowly 'blacksmith's boy', he muses on Henry's inferiority to Walter –'He thinks, you could never be the blacksmith's boy. Walter would not have you in his forge. Brawn is not the whole story'. Walter is now credited with a 'cool head'. It seems he has taught him how to allay the effects of a burn with a gesture that 'confuses the pain': it is this gesture that Cromwell uses to deflect the threat of the King and 'he is glad his father is with him'.⁷³⁶ Later still, he remembers Walter telling him that 'you learn to do things the way your father taught you and not by some foolish method you hit upon yourself'.⁷³⁷ The revision of Walter further reinforces the that history is in constant flux, that there are no certainties. The novels thus work together to, in Hutcheon's words, 'contest art's right to claim to inscribe timeless universal values' and 'to render unstable the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character'.⁷³⁸

As with national myths of origin, Cromwell's re-invention of his father confers a preferable legacy by lending a sense of essentialism to his character: the stories he tells himself about his paternity confirm what he wishes to see in himself. In a similar way, he revises other dead members of his family. The opening sentence of *Bring Up the Bodies* states that Cromwell's 'children are falling from the sky'.⁷³⁹ It transpires that

⁷³⁵ Ibid, pp. 225-226.

⁷³⁶ Ibid, pp. 232-233.

⁷³⁷ Ibid, p. 278.

⁷³⁸ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 90.

⁷³⁹ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 3.

Cromwell has named his hunting birds after his dead family: however, this act of memorialisation is not a mere act of sentimentality because their identities have merged with those of the birds. For Cromwell, his wife, sisters and daughters, these 'dead women, their bones long sunk in London clay, are now transmigrated'.⁷⁴⁰ Their souls now inhabit the bodies of falcons and they have acquired the creatures' power and predatory instincts. The bird is Anne Boleyn's emblem and in synonymising it with his dead family, Cromwell retrospectively assigns to them, Boleyn's (and his own) characteristics. He inscribes them with an identity that they are unlikely to have possessed in life, re-inventing his past family to align with his present self (he is also, of course, a wolf). Boleyn's power at this point is still ascendant, as is that of Cromwell, the man who helped to put her there. The description of the falcons and their world view is representative of these two and their positions in the Tudor milieu:

Weightless, they glide on the upper currents of the air. They pity no one. They answer to no one. Their lives are simple. When they look down they see nothing but their prey, and the borrowed plumes of the hunters: they see a fluttering, flinching universe, a universe filled with their dinner.⁷⁴¹

Cromwell's memorialising of his family includes Grace who 'lived and left no trace' and who, by the end of the novel, has slipped further from him.⁷⁴² The passage is an early indicator of how the dead are re-formed in ways that affirm the priorities of the living.

Cromwell's meta-selfhood is further signalled in *Wolf Hall* by the title of the chapter 'Arrange Your Face'⁷⁴³ in which he reflects that from 'the day he was sworn into the king's council, he has had his face arranged'. Cromwell follows Erasmus' advice to 'put on a mask' each morning and ascribes his own performativity to potential

⁷⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁴¹ Ibid.

⁷⁴² Ibid, p. 405.

⁷⁴³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 287.

adversaries, 'watching the faces of other people [...] to catch that fractional moment before they settle into the suave lineaments of the courtier, the facilitator, the yes-man'.⁷⁴⁴ This notion of contingent self-presentation is indicated by extension of the mask metaphor. For example, on meeting the King of France, Anne Boleyn 'wears a strange half-smile, not quite human, as if behind the mask were another mask'.⁷⁴⁵ In another example, 'More's face, smiling, is a mask of malice'.⁷⁴⁶ It is also emphasised through a recurring trope of clothing or, more precisely, what lies beneath people's garments. For example Wolsey encourages Cromwell 'to find out what people wear under their clothes' and it is suggested that under her gowns, Katherine of Aragon 'wears the habit of a Franciscan nun' whilst More secretly 'wears a jerkin of horsehair'.⁷⁴⁷ According to Wolsey, 'what people wear under their clothes' is 'not just their skin'.⁷⁴⁸ This sense of a palimpsest of selves is reflected in Cromwell's musing on the subject's infinite capacity for pluralism, of 'spaces' and 'humming chambers like beehives' opening up inside the skull.⁷⁴⁹

Cromwell, the architect of the new England, is himself, transnational in his identity, effectively a 'citizen of nowhere' who is culturally and intellectually connected to the continent. The authorities he deploys to legitimise Henry's claim to sovereignty – Marsiglio of Padua, Machiavelli – are Italian and his grasp of the economic realities in relation to national self-determination resonate with contemporary perceptions of globalisation: he understands that the 'world is run from Antwerp, from Florence, from places he [Lord Harry Percy] has never imagined'.⁷⁵⁰ Cromwell's cosmopolitanism is

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 320-1.

⁷⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 408.

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 565.

⁷⁴⁷ Ibid, pp. 84, 87.

⁷⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 99.

⁷⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 482.

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 378.

spatially signposted by depictions of his home. His 'house is full of people every day'. They include 'solemn Dutch scholars', 'Lubeck merchants', 'agents for the Italian banks' and 'lonely Polish fur traders who've wandered by to see if someone speaks their language'.⁷⁵¹ Cromwell has little personal allegiance to England: the 'something that pulled at him' to return is family rather than nation – 'a desire to see his sisters again, and laugh'.⁷⁵² When, on his return, his father accuses him of looking like a foreigner, Cromwell replies 'I am a foreigner'.⁷⁵³

As in the case of Sansom's Shardlake, Cromwell's perspective is always that of an outsider. In addition to being transnational, he straddles different levels of the social order: just as he speaks the languages of different countries, he also speaks those of different social groups. For example, the 'argot' of boatmen was his 'mother tongue' at the age of twelve, and when talking to them, 'it flows back into his mouth, something natural, something dirty'. At the same time he has mastered 'tags of Greek' that he exchanges with the likes of Cranmer and Wriothesley.⁷⁵⁴ His plurality has the contradictory effect of both admitting him to a range of social groups whilst at the same time, excluding him. At times, he seems to collapse under the strain of his own plurality and, 'tired out from the effort of deciphering the world', falls victim to a mysterious illness that is associated with being bitten by a snake in Italy.⁷⁵⁵ This incident, in which the snake's poison painlessly penetrates 'the private, white, English flesh of his inner arm' is alluded to repeatedly throughout the three novels and can be read as the internalising of his Italian identity.⁷⁵⁶ Like individual selfhood, nationhood is shown to

⁷⁵¹ Ibid, p. 93.

⁷⁵² Ibid, p. 110.

⁷⁵³ Ibid, p. 111.

⁷⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 295.

⁷⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 614.

⁷⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 99.

be choice rather than destiny. For example, he tells Sadler to 'choose' his prince and suggests that if he doesn't like Henry he can 'go abroad and find another'.⁷⁵⁷

The interchangeability of identities derives in turn from the identity of the watcher and this notion is reinforced by the theme of mirrors in the third novel. In *The Mirror and the Light*, it is made clear that self-ascription changes according to the different mirrors (relationships) in which the self is encountered. In assuring Dorothea Wolsey of her personal attractiveness, for instance, Cromwell tells her that up to that point, 'no good man has held up a mirror for you to see yourself through his eyes'.⁷⁵⁸ Later in the novel, as Cromwell senses the waning of his status, he reflects that if 'Henry is the mirror, he is the pale actor who sheds no lustre of his own, but spins in a reflected light. If the light moves he is gone'.⁷⁵⁹ His ultimate insubstantiality and lack of agency in his own self-determination is signalled by his assessment of his personal history as a succession of lives and deaths. In the chapter 'Salvage', Cromwell asks himself 'how many lives have we, where we sleep and dream, and lost languages flow back into our mouths?' and muses on his different nationalities. He concludes that the moment of thinking that you have arrived in your 'real life' is the one where 'you are due to take up your bundle again', confirming once again that identity cannot be fixed in a single reality.⁷⁶⁰

The novels' innovative narrative stance consists, to an unusual degree, of thought report and free indirect thought. For the most part, the reader is positioned within Cromwell's mind but while he is a member of the 'Cast of Characters', the novel is not exclusively preoccupied with him or his psychological state. Speech category

⁷⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 293.

⁷⁵⁸ Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, p. 284.

⁷⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 617.

⁷⁶⁰ Ibid, pp. 67-8.

techniques are combined with the present tense and are largely observational: as noted, Cromwell watches others and, crucially, himself in relation to those others who reflect him back to himself. He watches events unfold and the narrative method effectively dramatizes his interior commentary. In order to convey an empathic sense of being present as history is made, there are occasional shifts to the first-person plural 'we' as well as deployment of the subjunctive tense. This is the tense, indicated by the conjunction 'if' at the start of a clause that signals the conditional or speculative: along with the future tense, it emphasises his unknowingness. An example of this comes when Cromwell and Cavendish attempt to settle the doomed Wolsey at Esher – 'If we can get partridges we can slice the breasts, and braise them at the table. Whatever we can do that way, we will: and so, if we can help it, my lord won't be poisoned'.⁷⁶¹ The feeling of being in the moment is further consolidated by the second-person pronoun - 'Whichever way you look at it, it all begins in slaughter'.⁷⁶² At some points, this second-person address is directed to the reader – 'you must understand that he is not really dead'.⁷⁶³ Cromwell's own feelings are mainly ambiguous because, despite his objective to steer subsequent narratives, he cannot know the future. The present tense gives the sense of life being lived and events being 'spun' as they occur, suggesting two things: the inevitable subjectivity of memorialisation and the impossibility of translating individual experience into authentic literary form. Lived life cannot have the historical perspective, the sense of dramatic irony, enjoyed by the reader who has foreknowledge of the characters' fates. These narrative techniques evoke a theatrical sense of history being choreographed to favour particular perspectives. At times, the narrative voice takes on the mantle of Chorus and this

⁷⁶¹ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 64.

⁷⁶² Ibid, p. 66.

⁷⁶³ Ibid.

enhances the sense of Cromwell's dialogic voice and the narrative's self-awareness as he moves between different versions of himself. Examples of this feature can be found in *Wolf Hall* in the opening sections of 'An Occult History of Britain' and 'Alas, What Shall I Do For Love?'⁷⁶⁴ Contextualisation of plot and character is the traditional choric function and so too is scene-setting. Both functions are evident in the passage below:

Time now to consider the compacts that hold the world together: the compact between ruler and ruled, and that between husband and wife [...] Imagine debating these matters with George, Lord Rochford. He is as witty a young man as any in England, polished and well read: but today what fascinates him is the flame-coloured satin that is pulled through his slashed velvet over-sleeve.⁷⁶⁵

The Chorus is traditionally a non-diegetic intervention and in these texts it works alongside the other switches of pronoun to distance the reader from the otherwise immersive narrative and draw attention to its fictionality. The effect is the same whether the changes of voice are understood to be Cromwell himself or not.

The novel's theatricality and fictionalising is also signalled by its paratexts. Its front matter contains both a 'Cast of Characters' and 'Family Trees'.⁷⁶⁶ The former is a reminder of history's choreography whilst the latter represents official history and is generally used to lend authenticity to popular historical fiction. Significantly, the only family trees are those of the royal dynasties. Cromwell's name, like those of the other commoners, appears only as a member of the 'Cast'. This situates him as a 'man from nowhere', a fictional creation: his elusiveness further heightened by the fact that, as the biographer Diarmuid MacCulloch points out, Cromwell's archive consists almost

⁷⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 65-6, 338.

⁷⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 338.

⁷⁶⁶ Ibid, pp. ix-xiv

exclusively of documents addressed *to* him rather than *from* him, meaning his voice is largely omitted from the record.⁷⁶⁷ The lack of commoners' family trees also emphasises history's unknowns, the absence of the majority from the national past that supposedly identifies them. Elsewhere in the preliminaries, an extract from 'Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, on the theatre, c.27BC' authenticates Camillo.⁷⁶⁸ Below this is the list of players from 'Magnificence: an Interlude, John Skelton, c.1520'. The emphasis on theatricality reinforces the ephemerality of past figures since theatre is present-tense story-telling with differences in every enactment – a reminder of the instability of historical narrative consolidated by many instances where the recent past is pragmatically revised. For example, Katherine of Aragon has 'half a lifetime waiting to be expunged, eased from the record'.⁷⁶⁹ Wolsey 'never lives in a single reality, but in a shifting, shadow-mesh of diplomatic possibilities' and 'the recent past arranges itself only in patterns acknowledged by his superior mind, and agreeable to his eye'.⁷⁷⁰ By recalling the structural discipline of theatrical technique and linking it with her own novelistic method, Mantel acknowledges her form's participation in the re-working of history for the purposes of the present. This acknowledgement is consolidated in *The Mirror and the Light* when Cromwell's story is linked to both fictional vehicles. As Cromwell's execution approaches, 'the pages of the book of his life' are said to be 'turning faster and faster' and the 'book of his heart is unscrolling, the lines erasing themselves'.⁷⁷¹ He also instructs his servant Christophe to sweep his cell when he departs it, remembering George Boleyn telling him that at the end of a performance,

⁷⁶⁷ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cromwell: A Life*, p. 1.

⁷⁶⁸ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. xvii.

⁷⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 30.

⁷⁷⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 27, 28.

⁷⁷¹ Mantel, *The Mirror and the Light*, p. 872.

a generic character called Robin Goodfellow ‘comes with broom and candle, to show the play is done’.⁷⁷²

This section has demonstrated the various ways in which Mantel’s work disrupts notions of unified identities, thus drawing attention to nation as an imagined community which can be envisioned in multiple ways. It has established that the novels self-consciously examine the processes through which expedient narratives of England and its past are constructed to consolidate political and economic power. Mantel destabilises notions of memory and history as fixed truths and in so doing, she refuses the idea of an unchanging, monocultural English exceptionalism that characterised pre-Brexit discourse. The novels are nevertheless conscious that amnesia and uncertainty can be experienced as loss and that the constant imperative to re-invent both self and community denies the comfort offered by habit and tradition. In this respect, they respond to the melancholia of postmodern England. Building on this analysis of Mantel’s approach to issues of identity, memory and loss and their relationship with nationhood, the next part of the chapter will turn to the novels’ treatment of space and materiality.

Space and Materiality

Like the work of both Sansom and the Condition of England writers, Mantel’s novels use images of disrupted or decaying spaces and, in particular, the spatial trope of ruin to signal cultural change. As in the case of the collapsing hall of Christendom, ruin is often associated with the abrupt transition between eras with the moment of collapse

⁷⁷² Ibid, p. 871.

signalling a singular point of change. On the other hand, ruin, like history, is also a process: formally dynamic and in permanent flux. Its relationship with its context constantly changes: it fuses with its surroundings but it also shifts. Parts of ruins are sometimes taken as souvenirs or artefacts to places such as museums: new contexts in which they are given new meanings. Form can be destroyed but the matter from which that form has been composed cannot be. This is neatly illustrated in *Wolf Hall* when, following the burning at the stake of the Loller Joan Boughton, Cromwell's hand is physically inscribed with her material remains in the form of 'a smear'.⁷⁷³

According to Robert Ginsberg, ruin creates 'a fresh world (that) dissolves the mundane'.⁷⁷⁴ In liberating form from function and substance from form, the ruin enables both creativity and understanding. Substance, for example can be seen in its own right and can be re-formed into other things whilst understanding of a form such as a window is intensified when it is encountered separately from its functional context. As a constantly moving, changing and re-imagined collection of remnants from the past, ruin aptly illustrates Mantel's concern with the changing nature of history.

In Mantel's novels, the theme of ruin is thus used to explore issues around the revision of history and the re-construction of identity. This is reflected in the first novel's polysemous title. The eponymy of *Wolf Hall*, Jane Seymour's home, anticipates a 'past future' in imposing the reader's retrospective knowledge on the substance of the past. Henry and Cromwell's planned and then actual visit to this residence is the bridge between the two novels and they are connected by an understanding of what is to come. As in the novels of Gregory and Sansom, this heightens the sense of destiny and narrative choreography. The reader, unlike the characters in the novel, knows

⁷⁷³ Ibid, p. 357.

⁷⁷⁴ Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (New York: Rodopi, 2004) google ebook p. 3.

where events are leading and the title is a reminder of this, framing their response to the text's emplotment. In terms of ruin it is associated with the recurring image of the collapsing hall: the point of abrupt transition discussed earlier in the chapter. Further significance, however, lies in the fact that the actual Wolf Hall fell into ruin just forty years after it was built and no visual representation of it as an intact structure survived, though fragments of it remain *in situ*. This means that subsequent accounts of both its existence and appearance, including Mantel's imaginative reconstruction, have been based on the written record. It is, therefore, a place of the mind that can take different forms and, like history itself, can change and be shaped by the contexts in which it is imagined. As a ruin, Wolf Hall remains dynamic and filled with the potential for historical plurality: in its indeterminacy, it functions as a counterpoint to nostalgia's yearning for an unchanging home. In this sense, *Wolf Hall's* title indicates its dissection of form on multiple levels while the ruin trope running through both texts suggests the release of lived experience (the matter of the past) from the static narrative forms imposed upon it. In re-imagining the spaces of the past, Mantel deconstructs heritage and mobilises the substance that tradition defines and contains. Cromwell himself is shown to grasp the dynamic possibilities of ruin: in *Wolf Hall*, he tells Henry Wyatt that in Italy he blew up buildings for recreation with his friend, Portinari, whose ability to bring churches and priories 'tumbling down at one go' is fictionalised in Sansom's *Dissolution*.⁷⁷⁵ In *Bring Up the Bodies*, he dismantles 'the new world of the possible' that he painstakingly built in the first novel, and, following Boleyn's execution, Wriothesley, speaking figuratively and melancholically, claims to smell 'burning buildings', 'Fallen towers', 'ash' and 'Wreckage'. He envisages himself 'upon a

⁷⁷⁵ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p.329 and Sansom, *Dissolution*, p. 429.

headland, my back to the sea, and below me a burning plain'. For Cromwell however, this is 'useful wreckage' that 'can be fashioned into all sorts of things'.⁷⁷⁶

In pursuing the notion that ruins can become fresh things, a perspective that Mantel aligns with an account of the advent of capitalism, the novels focus on the themes of building and buying. Protestantism is associated with aspiration and the acquisition of property and Cromwell, who is accused by More of being 'Wycliffe, Luther and Zwingli rolled together and tied up in string – one reformer stuffed inside another' is depicted as constantly building and procuring properties.⁷⁷⁷

He has his eye on plots in Hackney and Shoreditch, and is taking in leases on the properties around Austin Friars, which he intends to enfold in his building plans; and then, build a big wall around the lot [...] It's nothing to what he intends to have, or what Henry will owe him.⁷⁷⁸

Cromwell's intention to build a wall around his property signals the individualist values of ownership underpinning both Protestantism and the kind of Englishness extolled by Scruton and Hitchens. It also reflects the Tudor policies of enclosure which are depicted negatively in Sansom's novels. Whilst Cromwell's households are portrayed as hospitable, multicultural, spaces, the accounts of his expanding property portfolio reflect the sense of melancholy and loss found in the work of Gregory and Sansom. The ultimate purpose of acquisition is unclear and Cromwell's own motivations change according to circumstances, leaving him unsure at points of why he is accumulating property and what he wants to do with it. His notional objective is to be part of the history

⁷⁷⁶ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 399.

⁷⁷⁷ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 434.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 584.

of the future, to be known as the founder of a dynasty. For example, when he is granted the Master of the Rolls' House in Chancery Lane, he reflects that his great-grandchildren will inherit Austin Friars, but his reflections on generational distance draw attention to the futility of such objectives. He has no personal connection to such descendants because he will never meet them: to him they can only be 'some unknown Londoners'.⁷⁷⁹ Cromwell dreams of segregating his personal life from his work, to create a private space in which he can retreat from the pressures of public life and of time. This is the nostalgic dream of home, and like the wall that he plans to build around his properties, it is delineated by its exclusion of others. Cromwell's first intention has been 'to move clerks and papers to the Rolls, then Austin Friars will become a home again' but the realisation immediately dawns that there is nobody for whom to make a home and that, in fact, it is unrealistic to try and live outside the demands of the present.⁷⁸⁰ Cromwell reflects that 'all his houses will become places of business. My home will be where my clerks and files are'.⁷⁸¹ This melancholic understanding that work is an end in itself, and that life amounts to an unending process, reinforces the unattainability of the nostalgic dream of home. Cromwell's attempts to create a legacy and heritage of his own only reveals the impermanence of the concept.

Since Cromwell is a character under constant revision, Mantel also imputes to him alternative, perhaps more mundane, motives. In emphasizing his property interests, she draws on the work of the historian Mary Robertson, to whom all three novels are dedicated. Robertson notes Cromwell's marked policy of land

⁷⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 583.

⁷⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁸¹ Ibid, p. 584.

acquisition and its acceleration towards the end of his life. She suggests however, that unlike the old aristocracy, his motivation was not the prospect of political power but rather that he viewed land and property 'primarily as a good financial investment and as a useful source of revenue'.⁷⁸² Cromwell's capitalism is therefore devoid of emotional connection to place and by extension to community. In this respect, his activities resemble those of Kingsnorth's 'wealthy urban bourgeoisie' whose business interests are destroying 'our places, our national character and our cultural landscape'.⁷⁸³ In *Bring Up the Bodies*, which spans the period when, according to Robertson, Cromwell rapidly acquired assets⁷⁸⁴, he is shown 'buying land in the lush parts of England' though 'he has no leisure to visit it'.⁷⁸⁵ In the following passage Mantel emphasises the gulf between the experiential and the commercial relationship with place:

so these farms, these ancient manors in their walled gardens, these watercourses with their little quays, these ponds with their gilded fish rising to the hook; these vineyards, flower gardens, arbours and walks, remain to him flat, each one a paper construct, a set of figures on a page of accounts: not sheep-nibbled margins, nor meadows where kine stand knee-deep in grass, not coppices nor groves where a white doe shivers, a hoof poised; but parchment domains, leases and freeholds delimited by inky clauses, not by ancient hedges or boundary stones⁷⁸⁶

This account of the conversion of place into property, into 'notional acres, sources of income', a process given a sense of a momentum by the lack of full stops in Mantel's elongated sentence, is reminiscent of the Condition of England

⁷⁸² Mary L. Robertson, 'Thomas Cromwell's servants: the ministerial household in early Tudor government and society' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1975), pp. 104-5.

⁷⁸³ Kingsnorth, *Real England*, p. 13.

⁷⁸⁴ Robertson, 'Thomas Cromwell's servants', p. 118.

⁷⁸⁵ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, pp. 101-2

⁷⁸⁶ *Ibid*, p. 102.

writers' complaints.⁷⁸⁷ Cromwell himself is made more insular and hostile by ownership:

he thinks not of the freedom his holdings allow, but of the trampling intrusion of others, their easements and rights of way, their fences and vantage points, that allow them to impinge on his boundaries and interfere with his quiet possession of his future.⁷⁸⁸

As Cromwell buys and builds, and 'the corners are knocked off the certainties of this world and the next world too', England's (and Europe's) landscape and topography is shown to be increasingly indeterminate, turbulent and transient.⁷⁸⁹ In *Wolf Hall*, on Halloween, 'the world's edge seeps and bleeds' and on being selected by Sir Henry Wyatt to be his estate's executor, the administrator of his affairs, because of his steady hand, Cromwell reflects that 'nothing in his world seems steady to him'.⁷⁹⁰ During a supper at Austin Friars, as talk turns to the new knowledge associated with scholars such as Copernicus, he thinks of 'the world turning on its axis' and of geological disruption such as 'oceans tilting', 'the giddy lurch of Alpine passes' and German forests 'ripping at their roots to be free'. He senses that the 'world is not what it was'.⁷⁹¹

Contrary to the assertions of writers like Scruton and Hitchens, England itself is shown to be a place of shifting spatial and temporal realities, whose people 'may be afraid of the future' and 'may not know what England is'.⁷⁹² For example, as *Wolf Hall* draws to a close, details emerge of 'a chronicle of Britain, which omits King Arthur on the ground that he never existed'.⁷⁹³ This troubles

⁷⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁸⁹ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 39.

⁷⁹⁰ Ibid, pp. 154, 327.

⁷⁹¹ Ibid, p. 495.

⁷⁹² Ibid, p. 611.

⁷⁹³ Ibid, p. 650.

Gregory Cromwell who protests against the loss of England's enchantment – in this case the national myths of Avalon and the sword in the stone – and his dismay resonates with the lamentations of Scruton.⁷⁹⁴ History is changed by More's execution: in witnessing the death of his opponent, Cromwell is aware that the 'past moves heavily inside him, a shifting of ground'.⁷⁹⁵

As I have pointed out before, psycho-geography is an important element of national consciousness to which map-making makes a significant contribution, and in *Wolf Hall* Cromwell is engaged in the project to map England, to replace maps that are 'prettily inked, their chases and parks marked by lines of bushy trees, with drawings of harts and bristling boar' with ones that are not 'deficient in all practical respects', that 'tell you which way is north', 'where the bridges are' and 'the distance between them'.⁷⁹⁶ However, such certainties are shown to be elusive because space and time cannot be fixed and the national imaginary changes. Cromwell reflects that 'maps are always last year's' and that 'England is always re-making herself', re-affirming the idea that the relationship between nation and territory is in constant flux:

They re-group themselves while we sleep, the landscapes through which we move, and even the histories that trail us; the faces of the dead fade into other faces, as a spine of hills into the mist.⁷⁹⁷

At the end of *Wolf Hall*, as Cromwell plots the King's summer itinerary, the consequences of which will be the 'wreckage' of the next book, the inter-

⁷⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 650.

⁷⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁹⁶ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 648.

⁷⁹⁷ Ibid, p. 649.

dependence of time and space is made clear. Cromwell's sketch map of England is 'a drizzle of ink' with 'his calendar, quickly jotted, running down it'.⁷⁹⁸

In contrast to the Condition of England writers' images of permanence (for example Hitchens' metaphor of the slow-growing forest), Mantel's narratives therefore depict England's geography as unstable and disordered. In doing so they share some of the melancholy of the other texts. There are references to 'cliffs eroding', 'sandbanks drifting' and 'springs bubbling up in dead ground'.⁷⁹⁹ The narrative's depiction of an unsettled landscape reflects the disruptiveness of historical events, such as the execution of More, who lays claim to an authority 'stretching back for a thousand years'.⁸⁰⁰ On the day of his trial, 'rivers breach their banks' and 'the Thames itself rises, bubbling like some river in Hell, and washes its flotsam over the quays'.⁸⁰¹ As Cromwell and his proteges walk in his garden on the evening of his death, it is windy and Rafe Sadler remarks that 'it's like being at sea'. The precariousness of the nation's situation is indicated by the fact that they walk 'as if there were danger from whales, pirates and mermaids'.⁸⁰² It is as though there is a latent danger, even anger, within the country's geology.

This notion of spatial menace is meshed with temporality and is reinforced by Cromwell's consciousness of 'another landscape', 'a buried empire' that exists 'beyond and beneath this whole realm of England' and which his commissioners cannot reach'.⁸⁰³ England is depicted as a multi-layered site of historical loss

⁷⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 650.

⁷⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 645.

⁸⁰¹ Ibid, p. 637.

⁸⁰² Ibid, p. 641.

⁸⁰³ Ibid, p. 575.

which is nevertheless haunted by an embedded past that is hidden from view. There are 'loose rattling bones under the paving of the Tower, those bones bricked into staircases and mulched into the Thames mud'.⁸⁰⁴ The river signifies the interdependence of past and future: its water is 'always moving' but it is full of the debris of the past such as 'the drowned men with bony hands swimming' and frequently discharges it. Cromwell knows, for example, that on 'the mud and shingle there are cast up belt buckles, fragments of glass, small warped coins with the kings' faces washed away'.⁸⁰⁵ In terms of this mobile temporal dynamic, the river is a similar signifier to ruin and this is demonstrated by the story of the banker Agostino Chigi's banquet in Rome where to 'save the washing-up', the guests throw their golden plates 'out of the open window and straight into the Tiber': an act that recalls Reformation iconoclasm. However, in a reminder that nothing disappears completely and that matter will always be recycled or reformed, Chigi has netted the banks and employed divers to recover his property. A 'sharp-eyed servant' checks off an inventory of 'each item retrieved as it came up from the deep'.⁸⁰⁶ Chigi's story is an example of feigning to discard old things whilst surreptitiously reinstating them. This process of making old things seem new can be expediently inverted when it is necessary to claim the authority of precedent, and is illustrated by Cromwell's account of having beaten a statue with hammers and chains to make it look like an antique and sold it to a cardinal for a fortune.⁸⁰⁷ Both this story and that of Chigi's banquet are suggestive of Cromwell's reflection that 'there cannot be new things in England. There can be

⁸⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 97.

⁸⁰⁵ Ibid, p. 571.

⁸⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 313.

⁸⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 292.

old things freshly presented, or new things that pretend to be old'.⁸⁰⁸ This notion of re-presentation is signified by the obliteration of signs and emblems as the traces of people whose narratives are inconvenient, are erased and sites of memory re-purposed. Examples of this include 'Gardiner's arms [having] been burned off the paintwork' of his barge and Anne Boleyn's own vessel being Katherine's 'old one, rebadged'.⁸⁰⁹ Badges are unpicked and Wolsey's arms are painted out to 'leave a space'.⁸¹⁰ The shifting materiality of the past is signalled in *Wolf Hall* by an extended metaphor of textiles. Jo Williamson, for example, is found 'unsewing' a pomegranate border which is a remnant of Queen Katherine and, after his death, Wolsey's clothes are 'cut up and become other garments'.⁸¹¹ In relation to the fate of the cardinal's crimson attire, the choric narrator asks, 'Who knows where they will get to over the years?' and predicts that 'in the glint of a ruby, in the colour of blood, the cardinal is alive and speaking'.⁸¹² In *Bring Up the Bodies*, when Boleyn claims there is 'a new England' that 'cannot subsist without me', Cromwell replies that if 'need be, I can separate you from history'.⁸¹³

The malevolence of a state which excludes from its history those identities not aligned with the national project is most powerfully depicted materially through the novels' graphic depictions of public execution. Whilst Sansom's novels dwell more on the physical desecration of the already dead (though they also depict torture and execution), Mantel offers disturbing and meticulously detailed representations of the agonising process of dying by judicial decree. State bio-power is demonstrated through reductive and humiliating methods of

⁸⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 118.

⁸⁰⁹ Ibid, pp. 570, 462.

⁸¹⁰ Ibid, p. 271.

⁸¹¹ Ibid, p. 501.

⁸¹² Ibid, pp. 263-4.

⁸¹³ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 110.

killing that, literally and publicly, dis-integrate the body and obliterate personal dignity. In *Wolf Hall*, the recalcitrant Charterhouse monks, for example, are 'unmanned' by 'the most horrible of deaths' in which 'pain and rage and humiliation' is 'swallowed to the dregs'. They are hung, drawn and quartered and 'before each one dies he watches his fellows and, cut down from the rope, he crawls like an animal round and round on the bloody boards'.⁸¹⁴ Public burnings are also depicted at regular intervals and the extent of their cruelty is explicitly conveyed. For example, when as a child Cromwell witnesses the execution of Boughton – 'the oldest person he had ever seen' – her screaming seems to last until there is 'nothing left to scream' and there are merely 'remnants of flesh, sucking and clinging' to the chains which have bound her to the stake.⁸¹⁵ As in the work of Sansom, crowds of people are associated with a latent malice that is stoked by state violence. Cromwell's adult companion, who shows him kindness, becomes 'like a demon' in anticipation of the spectacle, and expresses a hope that the wood and straw is damp so as to prolong the old woman's death, revelling in the fact that 'in the fire they bleed'. The crowd as a whole are associated with threatening verbs such as 'seethed', 'surged' and 'roaring' and shout 'Smell the old sow' and seek a good view.⁸¹⁶ At the end of the process, Boughton is 'mud and grit, fat and ash'.⁸¹⁷ In another example, whilst the King enjoys a hunting expedition, the scholar, John Frith, along with an unnamed boy, suffer at the stake as a result of the wind blowing in the wrong direction. As 'Henry, laughing, spurs away his hunter', Frith 'is being shovelled up, his youth, his grace, his learning and his beauty: a compaction of mud, grease, charred

⁸¹⁴ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 623.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 353-5.

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 354-5.

⁸¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 357.

bone'.⁸¹⁸ Death by beheading, which is largely reserved for members of the elite, is nevertheless shown to dehumanise. More's corpse, for instance, seems to have 'folded itself like a stack of old clothes – inside which, he knows, its pulses are still beating'⁸¹⁹ whilst in *Bring Up the Bodies*, Boleyn's alleged lovers end as 'a heap of entangled bodies without heads' who cannot be distinguished from each other.⁸²⁰ On the scaffold, Boleyn herself is reduced to 'a tiny figure, a bundle of bones' and at the point of death her 'body exsanguinates, and its flat little presence becomes a puddle of gore'.⁸²¹ Throughout the three novels, there are many more examples of horrors perpetrated by the state and seemingly relished by the masses. In this respect, Mantel's novels share with those of Sansom, a sense that nation-building is underpinned by terror and coercion and results in the loss of identity and individual dignity. The spectacle and choreography of execution erases identity by deflecting attention and association away from a person's beliefs and values in life, and towards the gruesome physicality of their death. What Foucault calls 'the art of unbearable sensations' functions as a reminder that humans are ultimately 'flesh', 'fat' and 'bone', whose status and very existence depends on the permission of the state.⁸²² It re-writes a person's history and, through the routineness of its process, negates individuality by rendering each victim the same as the ones 'last time' and 'next time'.⁸²³ Whilst Scruton asserts that the Reformation was not concerned with religious doctrine

⁸¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 479-80.

⁸¹⁹ Ibid, p. 650.

⁸²⁰ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 389.

⁸²¹ Ibid, pp. 395, 397.

⁸²² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth Of The Prison*, p. 11 and Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 357.

⁸²³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 354.

and was instead a *popular* effort to avoid surrendering the country ‘to the rule of Mediterranean despots’, both novelists’ work suggests the opposite.⁸²⁴

The authority of disciplinary repetition extends to other aspects of the reconstruction of identity. Cromwell complains to Henry that the monks ‘do not invent, they only repeat’.⁸²⁵ However, repetition (or the appearance of repetition) is necessary to advance the project of national construction. In order to achieve legitimacy, the Tudor dynasty must make a claim to historical continuity. Thus, on reading *Le Morte d’Arthur*, Cromwell’s son Gregory reports that Henry ‘takes his descent from this Arthur’ and that he ‘was never really dead but waited in the forest biding his time, or possibly in a lake’.⁸²⁶ The pattern of re-inventing and recombining the past is manifested in a cycle of repetition. For example, Cromwell has a succession of dogs named Bella. These small dogs are very similar to one another other: one of them is present at the novel’s opening ‘barking, shut away in an outhouse’ during the assault by Walter⁸²⁷ and another is referred to as ‘the Bella that is now’.⁸²⁸ The generational affinity of the dogs links to a more general theme of incest suggesting a future stunted by repetition and closure. Henry VIII’s sexual relations are kept within a small circle of kinship. He marries first his brother’s widow and subsequently the sister of his former lover, with whose mother he is also rumoured to have had sexual relations. Wolsey’s fate is shown to be part of an established cycle. Lamenting his master’s downfall, George Cavendish remarks that ‘one dog sated with meat is replaced by a hungrier dog who bites nearer the bone’. Wolsey in his decline is referred to

⁸²⁴ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 103.

⁸²⁵ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 219.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 222.

⁸²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 1.

⁸²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 257.

as 'a dog grown fat'.⁸²⁹ When Cavendish complains of the English liking change for the sake of it, Cromwell remarks that people 'always hope there may be something better': a narrative denied by the novel.⁸³⁰ Despite his vision of 'a world of the possible' in which 'you cannot return to the moment you were in before', Cromwell himself repeats and replicates: for example, he has an affair with his dead wife's sister and he re-enacts the behaviours that he condemns in others.⁸³¹ These include having prisoners interrogated in his home like More, and taking boys into his household to train as his assistants, an act which recalls the monasteries' tendency to 'take in children and use them as servants'.⁸³²

The capacity of history to reformulate the past is highlighted by the dialogue that exists between the novels. In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell is shown to recombine memory into new histories to shape the intended nation. In the sequel, he must unpick his 'edit' to appease a monarch who expostulates in *Wolf Hall*, 'What is the country for, but to support its prince in his enterprise?'⁸³³ In the first novel, Cromwell is shown to instigate a revolution of the old whereby 'new things are made to look old', reflecting that if 'people don't like new ideas, let them have old ones. If they want precedents, he has precedents'.⁸³⁴ This has the sense of a grand project, a re-setting of national consciousness for the dawn of modernity: a portrait of his work that corresponds to G.R. Elton's view of Cromwell as the creator of a new England: the architect of a 'Tudor revolution' of which the 'essential ingredient' was 'the concept of national sovereignty' founded on 'the

⁸²⁹ Ibid, p. 55.

⁸³⁰ Ibid.

⁸³¹ Ibid, p. 205.

⁸³² Ibid, p. 219.

⁸³³ Ibid, pp. 649, 182.

⁸³⁴ Ibid, p. 588.

authority of ancient prescription'.⁸³⁵ Elton, like Scruton, emphasises English continuity and suggests that Cromwell's achievement was the paradox of a conservative 'revolution', which 'proceeded by safe stages', never 'breaking its lifeline with the past'.⁸³⁶ Elton's assessment does two seemingly conflicting things. On the one hand, it identifies the Henrician reformation as a turning point in English history, as a moment of transformation. At the same time, it reflects English positivism: the evolutionary view of historical process based on continuity and precedent which, as Mantel's novels imply, is fictional. *Wolf Hall* undoubtedly suggests the underlying duplicity of Cromwell's manipulation of history but, in its more consistent focus on his personal self-interest, the second novel is more explicit in its deconstruction of national myth-making. Meanwhile, in Mantel's own words, the third 'tells a new story but it mirrors what has gone before and it sheds new light upon it'.⁸³⁷

In *Bring Up the Bodies*, the same mechanisms are applied on a smaller, more personal and more destructive scale, suggesting the ways in which beliefs about the past can be expediently disrupted. This is signified early in the novel by Cromwell's reflection that the whole summer has been 'a riot of dismemberment'.⁸³⁸ Though at this point he is thinking about the recreational hunting of animals, the phrase anticipates his accelerated destruction of the power structure he has previously established and links with the metaphor used to denote the resulting state of England. When Wriothesley remarks, following

⁸³⁵ G.R. Elton, *England Under the Tudors* 3rd edn (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 160.

⁸³⁶ Ibid.

⁸³⁷ Pollard, 'Between the Real and the Imagined', p. 152.

⁸³⁸ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 3.

Boleyn's execution, 'Now we shall have peace in England', Cromwell remembers

Thomas More's description of such a peace:

'the peace of the hen coop when the fox has run home'. He sees the scattered carcasses, some killed with one snap of the jaw, the rest bitten and shredded as the fox whirls and snaps in panic as the hens flap about him, as he spins around and deals death: the remnants to be sluiced away, the mulch of scarlet feathers plastered over the floor and walls.⁸³⁹

Cromwell, himself has now transmuted in this image, from wolf to a panicking fox. The carnage he has dealt seems unplanned and reactive. The Cromwell who inhabits this second text is a character who operates in panic at pivotal moments, and makes rapid adjustments, quickly revising earlier revisions in response to the King's caprices.

This section has explored some of the ways in which *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* use space and materiality to disrupt notions of national essentialism and perceptions of English continuity. Through the use of tropes such as ruin, recycling and palimpsest, the novels suggest that history is a matter of arrangement and representation, with its substance in a permanent state of transition. In her portrayal of England's turbulent and unstable topography, Mantel's work reflects the melancholy of Sanson, Gregory and the Condition of England writers: England is shown to be a place without fixed meaning and tradition and is thus in a permanent state of dissolution and transition. Cromwell's soulless property acquisition suggests his lack of attachment to place and indeed, he is portrayed as one in continuous transit, ultimately detached from the nation he attempts to create. His inability to separate his home from his work denies Scruton's idea of England as a timeless and enchanted home, as indeed,

⁸³⁹ Ibid, p. 400.

do depictions of the deaths of dissidents. Overall, Mantel's portrayal of space and materiality emphasises the contingency of place, denying the Tory-Radicals' claims of an enduring England which has transmitted unchanged values and traditions across time. For Mantel, the past remains alive, dynamic and disruptive, constantly under revision and denying contemporary certainties.

Language, Text and The Intended Nation

The chapter now turns to Mantel's treatment of language and text, examining it from the perspective of Pierre Nora's notion of the acceleration of history. For Nora, this is a process associated with the construction of nation whereby memory and tradition are transformed into a past that is gone for good. The sites of memory that emerge from this include text and archive.

The significance of the English language and its texts is a consistent theme in all the work examined in this thesis. Gregory's Parr and Sansom's Shardlake associate it with virtue and truth. Previous chapters have noted that, for them, England's vernacular is 'simple', 'plain' and 'honest', whilst the pan-European, trans-temporal Latin tongue is exclusionary, duplicitous and overly ornate. This reverence reflects the discourse of the Condition of England writers who attribute to it a timeless sacredness whilst at the same time characterising it as something under attack by progressives and consequently in terminal decline. Hitchens, for example, describes the English as a 'people who spoke the tongue, and held the faith, of Shakespeare and Milton'. This legacy, he claims, is under attack from both 'the hamburger and soap opera culture which now has the British working class in its greasy grip' and 'the anti-British 'Europeanism' which has so beguiled much of the educated elite'. He regards English literature as the most powerful

of the British people's roots.⁸⁴⁰ In Hitchens' view, it is 'the richly woven English of the sixteenth century' which is of particular cultural importance and in the gravest danger of being lost.⁸⁴¹ Scruton regards sixteenth-century texts with similar reverence, describing the words of Cranmer's Prayer Book as being 'saturated with the common store of religious utterance, a reminder that the English Church will be always one and whole, so long as its words remain unaltered'.⁸⁴² Mantel's work refuses such notions of language as an unchanging vessel of truth, meaning and unity. Like history itself, her novels portray language as something in constant flux that is both manipulative and open to being manipulated. Furthermore, the novels suggest that, in attempting to translate memories into words, the past is both changed and lost.

In interviews, Mantel has stressed repeatedly the importance of sensory connections with the past. She has claimed that memory is 'all about Proust and the madeleine – something sensory will trigger a glimpse of the past'.⁸⁴³ This intuitive approach opposes some academic orthodoxy but reflects those aspects of the popular historical imagination, outlined in the Introduction, that seek a visceral experience of history. The evocativeness of image is highlighted throughout both novels. For example, looking at the pictures in his dead wife's illuminated prayer book conjures a sensory connection between Cromwell and his dead daughter – 'Grace liked to look at it, and today he can feel the imprint of her small fingers under his own'.⁸⁴⁴

⁸⁴⁰ Hitchens, *The Abolition Of Britain*, p. 177.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 179.

⁸⁴² Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. 102.

⁸⁴³ Elmhurst, Sophie, 'The unquiet mind of Hilary Mantel', *New Statesman*, 3 October 2012, <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/culture/2012/10/unquiet-mind-hilary-mantel>> [accessed 4 December 2020] para 26 of 56

⁸⁴⁴ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 155.

Despite his claims to be reclaiming English history for the ordinary people, Cromwell obscures the experiences of much of the population. At certain points, he tells himself that he is bringing enlightenment, a fuller view of history, to people who do 'not know the manifold miracles and sayings of Christ, nor the words and deeds of the apostles'. These are 'simple men who, like the poor of London, pursued simple wordless trades'.⁸⁴⁵ In this acknowledgement of the 'wordless' dimension of experience however, the pre-eminence of text is undermined. Cromwell tells his nephew, Richard that 'the story is much bigger than they ever thought it was' and insists that 'you cannot tell people just part of the tale', that for those who 'have seen their religion painted on the walls of churches, or carved in stone', 'God's pen' is now 'poised', and will write 'in the books of their hearts'.⁸⁴⁶ Cromwell's ultimate objective is nation-building, which, rather than being emancipatory, seeks to displace Rome's power and make it 'more natural to obey an English king'.⁸⁴⁷ The ominous and fragmenting nature of his project to anglicize 'the tale' is suggested by his 'feeling of a power in reserve' which is 'like the shiver you sense in the shaft of an axe when you take it into your hand'. Cromwell reflects that he can 'strike' or 'not strike' and that 'if you choose to hold back the blow, you can still feel inside you the resonance of the omitted thing'.⁸⁴⁸

Cromwell promotes the primacy of text but is repeatedly drawn to images which trigger powerful memories, for example, the tapestry representing the court of Solomon in which Sheba resembles Anselma, his former lover in Antwerp and mother of a daughter whose existence only becomes known to him

⁸⁴⁵ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 516.

⁸⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 517.

⁸⁴⁸ Ibid.

in the third novel. Images are important conveyors of messages and are appropriated by the Tudor regime which is well aware of the inadequacy of language alone. Solomon and Sheba, for example, not only evoke powerful personal memories for Cromwell, they are also an important component of Crown propaganda, 'an allegory' of 'the king receiving the fruits of the church and the homage of his people'.⁸⁴⁹ The following words, spoken by the Protestant Lucy Petyt following More's imprisonment of her husband for heresy, embody the essential contrast between the Protestant and Catholic imaginaries and anticipate a significant consequence of the Reformation in terms of the comprehension of England's past:

He can close the booksellers, but still there will be books. They have their old bones, their glass saints in windows, their candles and shrines, but God has given us the printing press.⁸⁵⁰

Petyt's proclamation highlights the dichotomy of the sensory and the symbolic. Catholicism with its iconography, its sacred language and its mysticism promoted sensory and emotional connections with the past. Protestantism, on the other hand espoused empiricism and privileged the authority of scripture over tradition.⁸⁵¹ I would argue that Mantel's portrayal of the Protestants' veneration of print – and in this her work is in line with Sansom's – suggests a degree of naivety on the part of these characters and implies complicity with the destruction of *milieux de mémoires*.

⁸⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 600.

⁸⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 301.

⁸⁵¹ For example, see Susan Doran and Christopher Durston, *Princes, Pastors And People: The Church And Religion In England 1529-1689* (London: Routledge, 1991).

The written word is mediated through the printing press and through vernacular languages that, unlike the unchanging 'truth' languages, transform with the passing of time. A history that is filtered entirely through the shifting structures of language becomes reliant on interpretation and, as Beverley Southgate remarks, such interpretation is inevitably politicised.⁸⁵² This is signalled in *Wolf Hall* where the vernacular bible is always referred to as 'Tyndale's Bible' rather than simply '*the Bible*', suggesting that it is a version rather than an unchanging truth. This idea of the text as a vehicle of propaganda, a means of embedding particular hegemonies, is consolidated by Cromwell's reflection that More's written accounts will be constructed to ensure that 'in the eyes of Europe we will be the fools and the oppressors, and he will be the poor victim with the better turn of phrase.'⁸⁵³ For Cromwell, the Catholic Church has suppressed the English past by its appropriation of linguistic power. In conversation with the King, he claims that for 'hundreds of years the monks have held the pen, and what they have written is what we take to be our history' and that 'they have suppressed the history they don't like, and written one that is favourable to Rome'.⁸⁵⁴ The King's response suggests that, rather than democratising the past, the re-writing of England's history has the purpose of consolidating his own power. Cromwell is ordered to consult with Henry's 'learned gentlemen', to 'put a little direction into their efforts' because he 'could make good use of the money that flows yearly to Rome'. Henry's history will supersede that of the monks in order to give him control of resources.

⁸⁵² Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fiction* (Pearson: Harlow, 2009), p. 151.

⁸⁵³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 568.

⁸⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

As previously noted, it is likely that Mantel consulted Mary Robertson's PhD thesis on Cromwell's household, and the details given of Cromwell's work and personal life correspond closely to her findings. In turn, Robertson's work more than once defers to Elton as an authority on Cromwell. This suggests that Mantel's depiction, at least on one level, adheres to his perspective. Elton's view of what he terms the 'Tudor Revolution' is that the written word was crucial: that it was largely propelled by the printing press and embedded in the national culture by written statutes produced mainly by Cromwell. Whilst medieval government 'discovered the law and then administered it', he argues, 'modern government first makes and then administers laws'.⁸⁵⁵ The end of medievalism was thus, according to Elton, brought about by the ascending authority of writing and this, he attributes largely to Cromwell's innovations in statecraft. For Elton, 'Cromwell's whole attitude was consistent: he believed in statute above all else and would proceed nowhere without its sanction. His natural reaction to any problem of government was to draft a bill'.⁸⁵⁶ Mantel's Cromwell is shown to have a corresponding attachment to statute. For example, when Jane Rochford insinuates an incestuous relationship between the Boleyn siblings, Cromwell attributes her motives to marital unhappiness, suggesting that 'you would like it to be a crime to be a fond brother and a cold husband. But there is no statute that makes it so'.⁸⁵⁷ In musing upon the poetic talent of Wyatt, he reflects that, while a poem is unconstrained, a 'statute is written to *entrap* meaning' [my emphasis].⁸⁵⁸ Nevertheless, statutes and the authority of the written word, are shown to be pliable, to align with the present needs of those in power: Cromwell

⁸⁵⁵ Elton, *England Under The Tudors*, p. 168.

⁸⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p. 169.

⁸⁵⁷ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 265.

⁸⁵⁸ *Ibid*, p. 348.

promises Cranmer, for example, that ‘within a few months’, he ‘shall have wiped out all remnants of Rome from the statute books’.⁸⁵⁹ The Act of Supremacy, to which More refuses to swear, actively re-presents the past: rather than making the King head of the church, it ‘states that he is head of the church, and always has been’.⁸⁶⁰ When people tell Cromwell that ‘treason by words’ is new, Cromwell claims that it is old because it casts common law into ‘statute law’.⁸⁶¹

In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Cromwell’s reflections on the qualities of Wyatt’s work are used to question the integrity of written language and undermine the pedagogy with which the historical novel is usually associated. The text’s own narrative is shown to be unstable and the correlation of fixed truths with the recorded word is broken. Cromwell admires Wyatt’s talent for semantic mobility and ambiguity: a talent which enables him to evade indictment in Boleyn’s alleged adultery. Cromwell tells Wriothsesley that Wyatt is ‘the cleverest man in England’ because:

He leaves us all behind. He writes himself and then he disclaims himself. He jots a verse on some scrap of paper, and slips it to you, when you are at supper or praying in the chapel. Then he slides a paper to some other person, and it is the same verse, but a word is different. Then that person says to you, did you see what Wyatt wrote? You say yes, but you are talking of different things.⁸⁶²

Cromwell’s assessment highlights a number of significant issues. His choice of verbs – ‘slips’ and ‘slides’ – suggest surreptitiousness, a notion that the writer connects to their readers by stealth and that language is therefore used to

⁸⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 384.

⁸⁶⁰ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 588.

⁸⁶¹ Ibid, p. 589.

⁸⁶² Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 347.

manipulate. In presenting imperceptibly different versions of his poetry to different people, Wyatt highlights the context-dependent nature of text and the impossibility of unified signification. The writer's power lies in his subtlety and the tendency of many readers to reject ambiguity and pursue futilely, a fixed set of meanings. Wyatt understands that truth is elusive, that it hinges on perspective and interpretation and that evidence is intrinsically unreliable. He 'will declare, you must believe everything and nothing of what you read' and points out that, in any case, a writer is constrained by form and 'must keep to the rhyme'.⁸⁶³ Within an extended metaphor of birds that permeates the whole of this second novel, Mantel's Cromwell reflects that meaning is purposely elusive in the literary text. Like the predatory falcons that open the narrative, Wyatt's compositions 'dive below their meaning and skim above it'.⁸⁶⁴ Apparently, they 'tell us that the rules of power and the rules of war are the same, the art is to deceive; and you will deceive, and be deceived in your turn, whether you are an ambassador or a suitor'.⁸⁶⁵

One implication of Cromwell's assessment is that Wyatt deceives others in terms of his relationship with Boleyn. In a more general sense, however, it draws attention to the mendaciousness of dominant discourses and the way in which literature can be appropriated to reinforce them. In this way, she critiques both her own craft and Cromwell's project to align the record to his preferred truth. To search for a single meaning is to occlude others and to be deceived because 'if a man's subject is deception, you are deceived if you think you grasp

⁸⁶³ Ibid, p. 348.

⁸⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁵ Ibid.

his meaning. You close your hand as it flies away'.⁸⁶⁶ Wriothsesley suggests that Wyatt's verses should be printed in order to 'fix them' but Cromwell rejects this idea.⁸⁶⁷ In becoming archived, language becomes divorced from its context and thus cannot be fixed in a single truth. Elton's idea of a 'revolution' driven by the spread of the written word is founded on an illusion to which Cromwell seems to subscribe. At the end of the second novel, he anticipates being 'stuck like a limpet to the future' because he will leave behind 'a great mountain of paper'.⁸⁶⁸ However, he knows that he 'may vanish before the ink is dry' and reflects that, on finding 'an old deed, an old draft, an old letter from Thomas Cromwell's time', they will 'turn the page over, and write on me'.⁸⁶⁹ The phrase 'write on me' has more than one possible meaning. The reader has just been reminded that in sixteenth-century England, 'paper is precious' and that its 'offcuts and remnants are not discarded, but turned over, re-used'. Cromwell's own writing lies on top of 'the jottings of chancellors long dust, of bishop-ministers now cold under inscriptions of their merits'.⁸⁷⁰ Thus Cromwell can quite literally be written *on* and thus *out* of history. He can be re-written and written over, in the same way as the King re-works the references in love songs originally intended for Boleyn so that they can be re-purposed for Seymour.⁸⁷¹

The novel's closing paragraph, in which the 'word 'however' is compared to 'an imp coiled beneath your chair' which 'induces ink to form words you have not yet seen, and lines to march across the page and overshoot the margin' highlights both the ambiguity of language and the ever-changing nature of the

⁸⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 406-7.

⁸⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 407.

⁸⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 406.

⁸⁷¹ Ibid, p. 310.

past. In a shift to directly addressing the reader, the narrative destabilises itself, concluding that there 'are no endings' and that if 'you think so you are deceived as to their nature'. Instead, endings 'are all beginnings'.⁸⁷² In conclusion, the texts reject the premise (originating in the Reformation, and promoted in contemporary conservative discourse) that the written record represents fixed truths and meanings. The eradication of images and traditions and the pursuit of text, is largely shown to be a process of loss which reinforces cultures of dominance. It is a process which can obliterate the stories of those who are inconvenient, who find themselves outside the parameters of the nation-building project.

Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated a number of ways in which Mantel's novels of Henrician England de-stabilise conservative and nationalist notions of history, culture and identity. Through association of Cromwell with the arts of memory, the texts illustrate the changeability of history and the power accorded to those who shape cultural memory through the assemblage, re-combination and re-presentation of knowledge of the past. Themes of wreckage and collapse that are present in all three novels, suggest that the creation of one history necessarily entails the destruction of other pasts. This is exemplified by the recurring image of the collapsing hall where Cromwell, like Simonides, re-imagines the past and visualises his intended England as well as by allusions to a 'buried empire' and 'generations of the uncounted dead, breathing through the living'.⁸⁷³ *Bring Up the Bodies*, which revises the revisions of the first novel,

⁸⁷² Ibid, p. 407.

⁸⁷³ Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, p. 575.

reinforces the idea that history is expediently shaped and re-shaped in the interests of the powerful. In this respect, the novels embody the postmodernist narratives of which the conservatives discussed in Chapter One complain.

Like the past, identity is shown to be indeterminate and contingent. Cromwell himself, the architect of the English nation-building project, is effectively a 'citizen of nowhere', a transnational, multicultural polymath who inhabits different national and class identities and who at times falls ill as a result of the pressures of plurality that constantly require him to perform his multiple selfhoods. Mantel's narrative technique highlights the inherent performativity of identity and the necessity of omitting inconvenient aspects of self. In hinting at other, less attractive, versions of Cromwell, it also requires the reader to question the values and assumptions underpinning their own constructions of identity. In these respects, the novels undermine beliefs in fixed identities and their value and as such, draw attention to the inevitable fictiveness of nation and the danger of a national imaginary.

Far from being the enchanted land of the Scrutopian imagination, Mantel's England is a turbulent, shape-shifting space which is haunted by past atrocities and constantly re-forming itself: attempts to map it accurately are futile because it refuses to be fixed. This topographical disruptiveness is complemented by the trope of ruin which itself is an on-going process of re-making from the remnants of the past. For Mantel, both history and geography are in constant motion. Cromwell's intermittent, wistful reflections on his own past testify to the attractiveness of nostalgia but deny its validity: in these texts the past is actually always waiting to be invented. This is indicated early in *Bring Up the Bodies*, when Cromwell reflects that it's 'not the past you think of as you ride these fields'

but rather 'the days to come' that, 'like seeds, the soil of England is keeping warm'.⁸⁷⁴ The future lies latent in the soil because it is composed of what has gone before and this is illustrated by the story of Chigi's banquet in which discarded treasures are carefully recovered from the river in which they have been thrown to be, presumably, re-presented as new. This incident is also suggestive of the wider theme of repetition and recycling that spans the novels. Cromwell's attempts to construct a home are ultimately meaningless, because, like ruin (and history), building is a process and he is unable to stop it at any one point. He realises that work is all he will ever know and that his ambition to create a new legacy will never be achieved. This idea that, as Mantel has said, history changes behind us, is also reinforced by the revisions of key characters. The Cromwell of *Bring Up the Bodies* is said to be a different man from the previous year, and this notion is consolidated by his changing relationships with people from his past, for example, Wolsey and Walter.

Mantel's novels challenge the sanctity accorded by conservatives to the English language and its literature. Her treatment of language and text as inherently unstable undermines the Condition of England writers' positivism, their claims of a fixed heritage and pure, unchanging culture that is now under attack from progressives. The contingent nature of language is also supported by Mantel's use of ekphrasis, whereby images prove to be powerful memory triggers and gateways to other possible truths. This undermines the Protestant and conservative belief in the primacy of text and the anglicization of religion.

⁸⁷⁴ Mantel, *Bring Up the Bodies*, p. 8.

Mantel's imaginary of Henrician England is more complex and ambiguous than that of Gregory and even that of Sansom. Gregory suggests the brutal and accelerated spoiling of an idyll, a fatal lapse in history. Whilst Sansom depicts a similar level of disintegration, his narratives nevertheless acknowledge the corruption of preceding times. For Mantel, destruction and creation are part of the same constant process of making, un-making and re-making the past. Her work suggests that narratives of the nation and its past are products of the imagination that change with the needs of those who control the times.

Conclusion

Concerned with the nature of Englishness and its dialogue with the historical, this thesis aimed to offer insights into the interrelationship between national consciousness and literary imaginaries of a national past in the years preceding the 2016 vote to leave the European Union. In order to determine the extent of interaction between the present-day imagined community and the fictionalising of imagined communities of the past, I chose to take a cultural materialist approach and to focus on the interplay between the political culture of the pre-referendum period, that is to say the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, and fictional representations of the reign of Henry VIII. Given the widespread consensus among scholars, as outlined in the introduction, that retrospective imaginaries are, at least to some extent, fictional, together with the agreement among many, including Benedict Anderson, that the novel plays an important role in shaping nationhood, my focus was on the historical novel. For contextualising purposes, I also examined a selection of nationalist texts whose nostalgic visions of a bygone England, despite their improbability, are categorised as non-fiction. My close analysis of six Henrician novels published between 2003 and 2015 sought to determine the extent of thematic alignment between these contemporaneous books that fictionalise the same events and circumstances. In so doing, I establish the extent to which they can be seen to reflect (and contribute to) the prevailing nationalist discourses that accompanied their emergence: discourses that are thought by many to have influenced the majority (and mainly English) vote for a changed national future. As Cairns Craig notes, the novel brings the disparate people of a nation together by binding their individual lives into an over-arching narrative 'by which a common past and a common stock of cultural memories can be

defined, and by which a possible route towards [the] future can be charted without loss of continuity with the past'.⁸⁷⁵ With this in mind, a key objective was to identify possible reasons for the popularity of the Henrician novel prior to this time of national reckoning, and thus to consider what its themes and narratives might tell us about the anxieties and preoccupations associated with postcolonial Englishness.

In answering this question, my case studies demonstrated that fiction and cultural memory do indeed reflect and contribute to the construction of national identity. I found that the concerns of the Henrician texts align closely with those of the nationalist polemics (usually referred to in this thesis as Condition of England texts). Moreover, the national narratives and values they foreground, correspond closely to the qualitative data that has emerged from concurrent research carried out by political scientists. An example of such work is Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford's *Brexitland* (2020).⁸⁷⁶ Among sections of the population Sobolewska and Ford uncovered many of the same anxieties and grievances that are expressed by Gregory and Sansom's narrators and observed by Mantel's Cromwell. Finding these discontents to be particularly prevalent among those who are older, less educated, more geographically rooted, and white, Sobolewska and Ford attribute them largely to rapid cultural and demographic change. These grievances relate to a sense of displacement which is largely attributed to the encroachment of outsiders (especially those who are not white), perceived loss of identity and cultural change which is experienced as decline. The society they observe is a fractured one, divided along the lines of liberal, multiculturalist modernisers and social conservatives who nostalgically crave the

⁸⁷⁵ Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative And The National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 11.

⁸⁷⁶ Maria Sobolewska and Robert Ford, *Brexitland: Identity, Diversity and the Reshaping of British Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

authority and simplicities of the past. Other researchers from the political sciences have reached similar conclusions, pointing, for instance, to the downward mobility experienced by blue-collar white people in the post-Thatcherite period, which has engendered in many a resentment of the unfamiliar and a sense of stolen privilege and loss.⁸⁷⁷ The contemporary Henrician novels examined in this thesis position the early Tudor world as one of similar division, change and contestation of the national: a milieu that can be seen as the 'mirror and the light' of current times. In drawing attention to this resonance between fiction, politics and national consciousness, my thesis thus makes an original contribution to interdisciplinary and cultural materialist approaches to literature and deepens the understanding of how the nation at a given time can be "read" through its novels, and, in particular, through its historical fiction. This opens up many possibilities for further research. Before considering the implications of my project for future study, however, I will first take stock of what it has brought to the study of nation, history and fiction by re-visiting my main findings.

I began by establishing the research questions to be answered and the areas of theory that would underpin my investigations: those of nation, postcolonialism and postmodernism with Anderson's widely-accepted constructivist idea of nations as 'imagined communities' being central to my approach. Drawing on the theories of Anderson, alongside the more recent work of Cairns Craig, Kirsti Bohata and Patrick Parrinder on the role of the novel in articulating the intended nation, I affirmed the validity of using close critical reading of a corpus of Henrician texts as the route to determining the relationship between historical fiction and national construction. Framing this analysis would be Gilroy's concept of England's postcolonial melancholia,

⁸⁷⁷ See for example, Satnam Virdee and Brendan McGeever, 'Racism, Crisis, Brexit', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 41:10 (2018), 1802-1819

Boym's notion of restorative nostalgia, and Nora's assertions about the acceleration of history. Though Englishness has historically differed from other nationalisms, being shaped by an individualism and sense of its own exceptionalism that rejected overt displays of communal allegiance, I noted a shift in the pre-Brexit period towards a more geographically and ethnically defined form of nationhood which responded to factors such as devolution, European integration, and the globalised liberalism associated with the New Labour and Coalition governments that held power until 2015. As Gilroy observes, key themes of these more overtly nationalist discourses proved to be invasion, war, contamination, and loss of identity: themes that are reproduced in the Henrician fiction I would go on to analyse.

In relation to the collective cultural memory that is foundational to all nationalisms, I would suggest that the majority of English people encounter history as fragmented, episodic and experiential, with pedagogical practices merging with those of restorative nostalgia and that, in terms of understanding the past, the heritage industry, along with performance and re-enactment, largely functions as a present-tense, conservative strategy of containment. I contend that the emphasis on the commonality between past and present denies a coherent and *progressive* national narrative. Alongside historical practices, I drew attention to England's 'geo-piety': its sentimentality about the rural, and distaste for the urban and industrial. I noted that this, in turn, is associated with a rejection of radicalism that belies the political activism and speculative thought of the country's past. I also linked the revived mystique of royalty, and in particular, posthumous re-imaginings of Princess Diana, to both the reconstruction of Englishness and the onset of the Henrician turn. In comparing the more favourable treatment of the Tudors at other junctures of England's past with the darker narratives of the pre-referendum years, I discerned a marked shift towards the

victimhood that has been associated with Diana, and more generally, towards representing Henry VIII's reign as a national legacy of suffering and oppression

These mournful counter-narratives of England that explicitly reject notions of progress can be found in the Tory Condition of England writing that enjoyed a publishing boom alongside that of the Tudor novel. Chapter One, 'Fiction and Lamentation: The Melancholic Imaginary of Postcolonial England' showed the origins of this genre to be in the nineteenth-century, Tory-Radical critiques of England that challenged Whiggish accounts of improvement and continuity. The thematic alignment between millennial Condition of England texts and the millennial Henrician novel, initially suggested in the introduction, was confirmed, suggesting a clear connection between useable pasts and the intended nation. In charting national disintegration, there is, after all, an implied need for resistance and re-building, and the nationalism being re-assembled from the supposed ruination of England is one that shuns the perceived contamination of the global in favour of the politics of place and monoculturalism. I contended that millennial Englishness rests on a narrative of subjugation that is attributed to liberalism and postcolonialism and is infused with a longing for an idealised past. Its discontent is common to the critiques of both right and left, with the latter complaining of the nation's stasis, ingrained inequality and unfounded belief in its own superiority. The right take the opposite view, seeing the roots of England's decline in the onset of modernity, the advent of multiculturalism and the collapse of inherited traditions. A close reading of three prominent examples of conservative nationalist texts: Roger Scruton's *England: An Elegy* (2000), Peter Hitchens' *The Abolition of Britain* (1999), and Paul Kingsnorth's *Real England: the Battle Against The Bland* (2007), revealed their melancholia, their language of destruction and loss, and their implied distinction between Englishness (seen as a

nationalism of place and belonging) and the multi-national political abstraction of Britishness. This rejection of politically (as opposed to ethnically) structured multi-national identity anticipated later objections to the idea of the EU and marked a departure from the placeless universality that was latterly required by imperialism. I showed that the Englishness of these writers is linked to concepts of home, habit and local heritage, and is characterised by an intuitive, organic and anti-intellectual subjectivity that embraces hereditary authority and intersectional inequality. Its spatial imaginary centres on aged architecture and a pastoral idyll that is threatened by the aesthetics of modernity. I concluded that all three books discern a faceless and placeless authoritarianism that is draining the life from the country and destroying its ancient institutions. They are markedly hostile to the social mobility and globalised outlook vigorously promoted in the years of New Labour and Coalition government. This is indicated in their recurrent use of contrasting indefinite pronouns of place – ‘anywhere’, ‘nowhere’, ‘somewhere’ – to signpost anxieties around dislocation: anxieties to which the former Prime Minister Theresa May played when she famously appropriated Kingsnorth’s phrase, ‘citizen of nowhere’ in 2016. Overall, I noted a prevalence common to all three texts of language denoting attack, encroachment and destruction: of the desecration of ancient institutions and legacies, and the terminating of a way of life that had supposedly endured for centuries. This language and these ideas, whose overall concerns are place, race and class, are clearly reflected in the millennial Henrician novel.

It is these concerns that shape the pre-Brexit work of Philippa Gregory explored in Chapter Two, ‘Narratives of National Grievance: The Spoiled England of Philippa Gregory’s *The King’s Curse* (2014) and *The Taming of the Queen* (2015).’ My close analysis of these two novels found her fictional accounts of the lives of Margaret Pole

and Kateryn Parr to be preoccupied with the experiences of downward mobility, stolen privilege and cultural disintegration. The first-person present-tense narrative voices repeatedly express a sense of lost identity and hegemony, a desire to return to the past, resentment of those talented usurpers who have come from 'nowhere', a distrust of foreign influence, and ideas of contamination. In their fixation upon the disempowerment of their social group and their resentment of those rising from elsewhere in society on the basis of merit and expertise, Gregory's conservative voices of the past reflect the resistance to cultural change, immigration and liberalism found in coeval nationalist discourses. Her immersive, dialogic narrative method (discussed in more detail below) invites the reader to be complicit in an ethnocentric set of values that cleave to a belief in hereditary power and consign members of out-groups to inhuman status. In empathically encountering the Tudor world as a version of themselves that is Pole or Parr, that is to say as an aggrieved, supplanted aristocrat within a setting divested of the pluralism and diversity that characterises both past and present societies, the reader is engaged in a similar outlook to that which devalues the foreign, the non-white, the 'not like us.' This outlook is manifested in Pole's justificatory accounts of the expedient infliction of violence and hardship on the less socially advantaged in order to safeguard dynastic interests. The narrators' contempt for the 'men from nowhere', whose technocracy and expertise they perceive to have displaced them from prominence, resonates with contemporary dismissals of the expert: the long-standing, and particularly English, wariness of theory and speculative thought that exists alongside a preference for amateurism and intuition. The repeated deployment of the word 'nowhere' also reflects the interplay of pronouns noted above, that centres upon the binaries of rootedness and liberal cosmopolitanism. This hostility to the wider world can be further seen in Gregory's

elevation of the English language (another theme to which I return below) which her protagonists extol for its simplicity and honesty, thereby implying that foreign tongues are duplicitous and obfuscating.

Gregory's narratives are framed by the novels' paratexts within a spatial imaginary demarcated exclusively by court circles, thereby heightening the monocultural perspective on the past being offered to the reader and exemplifying the colonised history whose contestation is resented by conservatives. Gregory's melancholic materiality, which positions Henry VIII's father as an invader from mainland Europe, evokes the familiar theme of nationalist discourse alongside its indeterminate nostalgia, by situating Plantagenet England as a prelapsarian idyll of health, harmony and fertility and conversely, Tudor England as a space of disease, deprivation and division. In their respective battles to secure the future of their dynasties, the Tudors and Plantagenets can be seen to be attempting to shape the future nation and to embody competing visions of what that future should be. In this respect, it is significant that the latter, who might be viewed as the losers of this contest, are characterised as fertile and natural, their identity entwined with that of the land and enshrined in ancient folklore and magic. The prevailing Tudors, on the other hand, are presented as usurpers who have imported the sweating sickness from the continent and who, especially in the case of Henry VIII, indulge in displays of unnatural excess and capricious cruelty that alienate them from the land and population. Whilst the feudal figures of Pole and Parr are associated with *noblesse oblige* and the orderly running of home and estate, Henry VIII's court is shown to consume rampantly and thoughtlessly the proceeds of ancient monastic treasure. The King himself is re-imagined as a gothic figure, as a version of both Bluebeard and the Mouldwarp, and *The Taming Of The Queen* in particular is preoccupied with his rotting body, the

corruption of which is shown to seep through his realm. Overall, Gregory's work links cultural disintegration to foreign influence and transgression of the social order. It is implicitly approving of power that is biologically conferred and empathetically depicts resistance to change. As such, it embodies an ethnocentric understanding of the past that underpins blood-and-soil nationalism and ultimately forms the basis of the racialised thinking that is widely thought to have troubled pre-Brexit England.

The melancholic retrospection of Gregory's narrators can also be discerned in C.J. Sansom's street-level Henrician protagonist, Shardlake, though his values can be regarded as more emancipatory. Chapter Three, "Built on an edifice of lies and monstrous brutality": C.J. Sansom's Historical Detective Fiction and the 'wicked world' of Reformation England', turned from Gregory's royal sagas to the first two novels of Sansom's Shardlake series – *Dissolution* (2003) and *Dark Fire* (2004) and identified within them a concern with what Nora perceives as the collapse of lived memory into recorded history. As a detective figure, Shardlake is comparable to the historian in his pursuit of evidence, his attempts to piece together and reconstruct what no longer exists. Nora links historicization to societies' compulsion to construct futures that are different from what has gone before and I found Shardlake to epitomise this dilemma: he desires a future that is better than the past but discerns in the loss of that past, a corresponding loss of hope in the future. As such, the texts hinge on the tension between change and continuity, memory and history which characterised both the age in which they are set and that in which they were published. As a result, I concluded that Sansom's narratives are ultimately conservative ones that, despite their differences from Gregory's work, similarly resonate with the emotions of the pre-Brexit Tory-radical critique. Shardlake himself embodies debates on the Reformation in his desire for a more just and enlightened society but in encountering the enactment of

his ideals as brutality, corruption, upheaval and loss, he becomes disillusioned. This reflects the nature of English conservatism, whereby radical ideas are typically seen to be appealing in abstract form but dangerous in practice.

Sansom's Tudor world, in contrast to Gregory's, is one that exists in proximity to, but beyond, the parameters of the court. Despite their aloof existence, court figures frequently interact with and control this world, and Sansom's portrayal of the interface between rulers and ruled emphasises the part played by politics in shaping everyday life. As one who has migrated to the capital and risen through the professional ranks, Shardlake himself embodies in many ways the new men of Henrician government. Though many of them are associated with unsavoury characteristics, Sansom's new men are not presented as homogenous but as diverse and complex individuals. Cromwell, for example is shown to be humane, vulnerable and desirous of social justice whilst at the same time being capable of the most studied cruelty towards those opposed to his wishes. More often, however, aspirational people who have climbed the social ladder are shown to be as venal (or more so) as the nobility they join, and advancement is linked either to isolation (as in the case of Shardlake), or the criminality of families like the Wentworths in *Dark Fire*. Many of the new men are shown to be greedy speculators, exploitative landlords and opportunists who become additions to the existing elite rather than standard-bearers for a new, meritocratic middle-class. Overall, I contended that the England presented by Sansom is one that is endemically and systemically unfair, and where the transgression of social and political boundaries, more often than not, leads to moral dissipation.

In outlining the typical features of detective fiction and evaluating the extent to which Sansom's narratives diverge, I showed that they differ in the sense that they contextualise crimes, linking transgression to wider historical factors and injustices:

Sansom's criminals are products of their time. The work of the detective can be linked to that of the historian in its activities of retrieval and reconstruction and I put forward the idea that historical detective fiction in particular can be regarded as meta-narrative, a commentary on the narrative practices of both history and fiction. As the novels' plots unfold, Shardlake's interpretative approach is shown to be framed by assumptions that come to be discredited and this instability of comprehension demonstrates Linda Hutcheon's understanding of history and fiction as discourse, signalling the absence of a universal truth about the past. In this sense, Sansom's novels undermine the unitary perspectives of Gregory's work and anticipate the postmodern approach of Mantel. As if to illustrate this, Shardlake's work of reconstruction is paralleled by the destruction of materialised memory: his detective work taking place against a backdrop of the demolition of ancient church buildings, the very spaces within which the answers to present-day puzzles are buried. Shardlake himself, in looking back through time on events earlier in his life, offers a more distanced perspective on the past than that of Gregory's dialogic, immersive narratives. His past tense narratives position him outside the events he describes. Moreover, withholding the disclosure of his solutions to the mysteries until near the novels' ends enables a more nuanced and sceptical reader-response to plot and characterisation. The reader is alert to potential clues throughout and is keenly aware that things cannot be taken at face value. This scepticism is heightened by the fact that the narratives also embrace the conspiracy theory: crime often turns out to be an 'inside job' and judicial processes are shown to be compromised by powerful interests. This portrayal of the system as rigged resonates with the disillusionment with progressive politics that followed in the wake of New Labour's first term and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan: disillusionment that may well have contributed ultimately to the EU referendum result.

As in the work of Gregory, the melancholy of Sansom's novels is heightened by his portrayal of English space as a place of ruin and decay, one that is contaminated in ways redolent of nationalist lamentations. The monastic Dissolution is configured as the barbaric plunder and vandalism of the ancient and irreplaceable. Disorder and disrespect for heritage and the dead is threaded through both novels and is repeatedly contrasted with the calm, order and mystique of the old world that is under attack. Ecclesiastical space and monastic ritual is shown as active memorialising, a visceral connection with the past that is violently severed. This connects with Sansom's depiction of a polluted and filthy topography which is common to all three writers' work: his is a land choked by mud, marsh and debris with human remains often lying disregarded on the ground. Buildings are shown to be in a state of neglect and disrepair, leaning, tilting and subsiding. The portrayal of this unstable world can be linked to Nora's notion of the 'rupture of equilibrium', the perception that anything and everything can disappear at any moment.⁸⁷⁸

The ruptures of what G. R. Elton has called the 'Tudor Revolution' are further reflected in the society of Sansom's novels which is disordered, brutalised and fractured.⁸⁷⁹ London crowds are intimidating and chaotic, blocking smooth progression from one place to another. In contrast with the (mainly) communal harmony of monastic life, secular people *en masse* are shown to enjoy spectacles of torture, execution and cruelty to animals. This debasement is linked in the narratives to the poverty and displacement brought about by Henrician policies to centralise and modernise the state. The disdain and indifference with which members of the nobility regard the people's suffering can be compared to the contemporary perception of

⁸⁷⁸ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7-24, p. 7.

⁸⁷⁹ G.R. Elton, *England under the Tudors* 2nd edn (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 160.

remote, self-serving elites. The theme of language which is common to the work of all three writers emerges in these texts through Shardlake's cherished belief that the ignorance of the masses can be alleviated by disseminating religion through the medium of English. This, however, is framed as a matter for debate. The value of art and ritual and of languages that transcend temporal and national boundaries are extolled by characters such as Shardlake's friend Guy and the conscientious Brother Gabriel. Their disagreements draw attention to the constructivist nature of religious anglicization (and by extension the nation), and can be linked to Catherine Belsey's contention that language ultimately narrows perception, framed as it is within parameters defined by power. This is illustrated by the scene in *Dissolution* where caged birds recite rote-learned phrases whilst trapped in terrible living conditions: a metaphor, I would suggest, for a misled and exploited populace who in being separated from their history and heritage, have lost both dignity and identity. Perhaps inevitably given the period in which the books are set, judicial violations of the human body are yet another common focus of all three writers' work and Sansom's picture of injustice is supported by portrayals of public punishments and executions together with the casual desecration of the dead. In evoking this retro-dystopia in which change engenders trauma and loss, his fiction reflects the growing cultural conservatism of the pre-Brexit landscape.

Chapter Four, "The glass of truth has shattered": Past, nation and Meaning in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*', reads Mantel's Tudor novels as meta-narratives that present the nation in multiple ways as an 'imagined community'. They enact Mantel's repeatedly expressed argument that the past is contingent: that

is to say, it is always understood in terms of the present and changes with the times.⁸⁸⁰ This view is an unequivocal challenge to those conservative objections to postcolonial revisions of England's past, the insistence upon a fixed and unchanging national story explored in Chapter One. In her understanding of the appeal of *fictive* nationhood and the role of the past in shaping the identities of the present however, Mantel highlights the problems inherent to the idea of nation and national history. Her protagonist, Cromwell, is an embodiment of pluralism and multiculturalism (albeit within the parameters of European whiteness) whilst being simultaneously the architect of the nation. This transgressive figure has multiple iterations within the books and Mantel's narrative method foregrounds the expedient performativity of self. Cromwell evades all the boundaries and constraints of identity, remaining, as Mantel herself puts it in an Author's Note, 'densely inaccessible'.⁸⁸¹ Nevertheless, categorisations are repeatedly ascribed to him by others according to their own needs and positions.

The novels are read in this thesis as companion pieces that re-write each other. As such they are reflexive meta-narratives that, through their inter and *intra*-textuality, depict the processes by which cultural memory is constructed, dismantled and re-constructed, thus anticipating the age of what has come to be known as 'post-truth'. In terms of this connectivity, Mantel's work can be seen to enact the wider premise of my work which is that all millennial Henrician novels function in relation to one another: a symbiosis indicated for example, by the fact that Gregory and Mantel's work has been referenced to promote that of Sansom.⁸⁸² Mantel's depiction of the assemblage

⁸⁸⁰ For example see 'Booker Winner Hilary Mantel on Dealing with History in Fiction', *Guardian*, 17 October 2009, < <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/17/hilary-mantel-author-booker> > [accessed 30 November 2020], para 7 of 9

⁸⁸¹ Mantel, *Bring up the Bodies*, p. 410.

⁸⁸² See Pan MacMillan's promotional website where the synopsis headings for Sansom's Shardlake novels, describe them as being 'for fans of Hilary Mantel and Philippa Gregory', <<https://www.panmacmillan.com/authors/c-j-sansom/dissolution/9781447285830>> [accessed 22 November 2020]

and re-assemblage of Cromwell's personal identity works as a prism through which to consider nation. Her meta-narratives are under-pinned in *Wolf Hall* by the association of Cromwell with Renaissance and classical arts of memory and the elision of his identity with those of their prominent practitioners, Simonides and Camillo. As in the novels of Sansom, architectural ruin and destruction is an important signifier of national change. In *Wolf Hall*, the repeated image of a collapsing hall is read both as a spatialised portrayal of the disintegration of Christendom and feudal England and as Cromwell's mental theatre in which he configures his intended nation. In conjunction with this, *Wolf Hall's* recurring motif of Camillo's memory theatre (or machine as Cromwell thinks of it) can be seen in relation to Nora's notion of the acceleration of history whereby memory is effectively archived and in being captured, is essentially lost.⁸⁸³

Connected to Mantel's frequent focus on self-fashioning is her exploration of meta-selfhood, an idea with which she engages through her distinctive use of the third person. In this way, she is able to create an impression of Cromwell watching and reading himself as much he does others, of repeatedly editing his own past and thus inventing himself afresh. His indeterminacy is further suggested by hints of other stories about him that are occluded by his internal commentary: stories of his possible involvement in murder, torture and betrayal. The inconclusiveness of his characterisation is also indicated by Mantel's various uses of ekphrasis to imply alternative histories to those proffered by her novels, and by her revised portrayals of Cromwell's formative relationships with figures such as Walter Cromwell and Wolsey. Such revisions also point to the ways in which the dead are used to confer a sense of essentialism, of biological destiny to present-day identities: we read in our ancestors

⁸⁸³ Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*', p. 7.

what we want to see in ourselves. The notion of contingent self-presentation is also indicated by the motifs of masks and clothes which hide what lies beneath. This idea of palimpsest extends to the many references to histories (and futures) buried within the materiality of England itself.

Mantel's work rejects notions of England as a separate entity from Europe: I noted for example, that she draws attention to the continental affiliations of iconic English figures like Tyndale and Cranmer. Cromwell himself is shown to be transnational and also to straddle social classes: he is multilingual and multi-dialectical with identity seen as choice rather than destiny. Identity is also shown to be contingent upon audience. As the third novel, with its theme of mirrors suggests, the self that is projected is dependent upon who is watching. Ultimately, Cromwell's intrinsic insubstantiality leads him to perceive his personal history as a succession of lives and deaths. Though the novels chart the construction and re-construction of national stories and their uses by the powerful, nation itself is shown to be ephemeral and illusory.

Unlike those of Gregory which seek to confer a sense of textual veracity, the paratexts of Mantel's novels draw attention to their theatricality and their fictionality through their emphasis upon the performativity and elusiveness of historical figures, and in this sense they work in conjunction with Mantel's narrative technique. As such they further highlight the imaginariness of nation and the processes by which expedient narratives of England and its past are constructed. This is furthered by Mantel's presentation of English space and materiality as inherently unstable and turbulent: the trope of ruin, for instance, signals the loss of the past but because ruin is an on-going, dynamic process of transformation as well as collapse, it also stands for the re-contextualising and re-forming of history. In this sense, there are further

meanings attached to the first novel's title since the actual Wolf Hall fell into ruin forty years after it was built and no visual record of it remains. As a house of the imagination, it functions as a counterpoint to the conservative nostalgia for an unchanging home. The trope of ruin works in conjunction with other spatial motifs of building and buying property. Property is shown to be equally ephemeral and its acquisition in the hope of creating a future legacy is shown to be futile. Unlike his King, who is prepared to revolutionise the state in order to bind the future nation with his dynasty, Cromwell recognises the absence of connection between past and future generations and with the spaces he comes to possess. The presence of multiple alternative realities is further suggested by the presence of shifting ground and changing maps, together with the Tudor re-writing of national myths such as the Arthurian legends. The erasure and re-invention of history is also signalled by iconoclastic tropes of recycling, 'unsewing' and painting over, by new things being made to look old and vice versa. The ruin of inconvenient figures is perhaps most powerfully signified by Mantel's graphic depictions of public executions. These processes obliterate particularity by their ritual repetition, reduce the legacy of individual lives to the gruesome physicality of their deaths and function as a reminder that all existences are ultimately conditional upon the consent of the state. This disciplinary repetition is also reflected in the cyclicity of various characters' lives. Wolsey's rise and fall for example is seen as a familiar journey and Henry VIII's sexual relationships, like those of Cromwell himself, are confined to a small circle of kinship: both commune with sisters. Overall, I argued that Mantel's treatment of space and materiality, in its emphasis on the contingency of place, disrupts the conservative understanding of an enduring 'real' England that is a vessel of unchanging values and beliefs and that is the basis of their nationalism of place.

In examining Mantel's treatment of language, textuality and the authenticity or otherwise, of the historical record, I recalled the Condition of England writers' veneration of sixteenth-century texts, their particular reverence for the writings of Cranmer and Tyndale and what they claim to be the unalterable truth of their words. Mantel's work refuses these certainties and instead shows language to be in constant flux, to be both manipulative and manipulable. Cromwell, like Shardlake, is shown to promote the primacy of text whilst being drawn to images and objects that are often the gateways to other truths. The English language, a preoccupation of all three writers, is shown by Mantel to be far from the embodiment of simple, honest truth extolled by Gregory's Parr, Sansom's Shardlake and the fervent Protestants of her own novels. In having Cromwell express his admiration for Thomas Wyatt's poetry and the elusiveness of its meaning, Mantel foregrounds the idea that when the past is filtered through the shifting structures of language, history becomes an act of interpretation: given the innate instability of the relationship between language and meaning, there can only be versions of the past, just as there can only be versions of the self. This ambiguity extends to legislative practice: Cromwell's statutes are intended to 'entrap' rightness but are wholly aligned with the needs of those in power. The Act of Supremacy itself amounts to a re-writing of history and the refusal to sign is a gesture of resistance to its revisionism. Ultimately, Mantel's postmodern novels are about writing and story-telling: they highlight the context-dependent nature of all narratives and draw attention to the mendacity of dominant discourses that lay claim to fixed truths. As such, they undermine the whole concept of nation whilst acknowledging the expediency and appeal of this most imagined of communities.

As stated above, my contention in this thesis is that the millennial Henrician novels published in the pre-Referendum years work with and against each other

through their re-writing of the same historical period from different perspectives and through the prism of different values and concerns. They all respond to the discourses around nation, culture and identity that prevailed at the time of publication, and in their divergences from and between one another, embody the divided identities of postcolonial England. As Roger Scruton puts it in the preface to *England: An Elegy*, 'it is only at the end of things that we begin to understand them'. In depicting the past nation seemingly at a similar 'end of things' to the one that Scruton and others allege was materialising around the turn of the century, the novels offer a reiteration of national values and national character.⁸⁸⁴ Gregory, Sansom, and even Mantel, offer competing narratives of resistance and adaptation that help to reinforce a perception of English resilience. The protagonists of Gregory's and Sansom's novels in particular doggedly maintain their integrity and agency in the face of tyranny. Their resistance takes the form of sustaining their authenticity by staying true to themselves whatever circumstances they face, and their attributes are explicitly signposted as being both English and associated with the past. The novels end on notes of resistance, the most extreme of which is the refusal of Gregory's Pole to submit to the executioner's axe and her closing cry of 'No! No! No!'.⁸⁸⁵ This example of 'heroic failure', a national characteristic noted and mocked in 2018 by the Irish journalist Fintan O'Toole, evokes a notion of indomitable Englishness and thus a form of aggrieved continuity that can be projected on to the present.⁸⁸⁶ What these protagonists also model is a very English ability to adapt without fundamental change. Shardlake, Parr, Pole and Cromwell navigate these retro-dystopias (a term to which I return below) with skill, diplomacy and a talent for survival. Whilst the latter two are eventually executed, they evade

⁸⁸⁴ Scruton, *England: An Elegy*, p. xvii.

⁸⁸⁵ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 580.

⁸⁸⁶ Fintan O'Toole, *Heroic Failure: Brexit And The Politics Of Pain* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018).

danger many times before their deaths and, in this sense, their stories are ones of endurance, of an essential national character that suffers but survives the upheavals of modernity by means of agility and perseverance. For the most part, they enact the motif that enjoyed national popularity prior to the referendum - 'keep calm and carry on'. In these respects, the novels, particularly those of Gregory and Sansom, simultaneously articulate subjugation and model potential modes of endurance, resistance and recovery.

In different ways, the novels are preoccupied with the loss of tradition (the 'old ways' as Gregory's Pole puts it), holding on to a vanishing past, and the effacement of identity⁸⁸⁷ Essentially, the texts can be seen to be about class and social change, and about what might happen when the boundaries between different social groups are exploded, when borders come down. This is what enables their fictional worlds to stand proxy for what scholars and commentators have belatedly realised was an increasingly divided society in the years before the Brexit vote. In the case of Gregory's work, the protagonists' identities and myths of origin are made synonymous with those of England itself and the steady elimination of members of their circle, paralleled by the upward social mobility of those outside it, evokes the sense of what Peter Hitchens' calls a 'cultural revolution'.⁸⁸⁸ As an investigator of crime, Sansom's Shardlake embodies the compulsion to recover the past in order to make sense of the present and remedy its wrongs. Shardlake is typically English in the sense that his desire for social justice, a consequence of his decency, is nevertheless tempered by his rejection of radicalism. As the apparent enactment of such radicalism, the Reformation and other Henrician initiatives are presented as an un-English threat to national values.

⁸⁸⁷ Gregory, *The King's Curse*, p. 324.

⁸⁸⁸ Hitchens, *The Abolition of Britain*, p. 314.

Conversely, Mantel's meta-narratives use the period of Tudor myth-making to disrupt the national imaginary, to question the basis of the stories England tells itself and thus the validity of its communal identity. Her novels suggest that the nation is very much an imagined community whose cultural memory is entirely contingent upon the needs of those in power. In this respect, her historiographical writing enacts the postmodernist theories through which I have approached historical fiction in this project. In different ways, the novels interrogate the mechanisms by which the past is lost, recovered and re-made. For Gregory's Pole, it is through the eradication of her family and kin on the executioner's scaffold, through being deprived of economic agency, and through miscegenation: the absorption of the Plantagenet bloodline into those of the Tudors and their allies. Gregory's fictionalising of the Plantagenets' supposed downfall (their descendants have, to date at the time of writing, retained their wealth and aristocratic status) codifies the racialised anxieties documented before and since 2016 by Gilroy and others. Shardlake is the detective-historian who races against time to recover a past that is being demolished all around him and to assemble the narratives that will restore some order to his world. The Cromwell of Mantel's novels recycles myths, invents ancient precedents and seeks expertise in the memorial arts to control the ways in which the past is remembered and used.

The novels present their readers with what I am terming retro-dystopias. Whilst dystopias tend to be forward-looking imaginings that project the anxieties of the present onto nightmarish futures, these historical novels project backwards, re-inventing the past to embody perceived contemporary threats. Futuristic narratives, significant examples of which have been published contemporaneously with the Tudor turn, tend to centre upon authoritarian regimes, the erasure of identities, surveillance cultures, and environmental disaster. These same themes are found in millennial

Henrician fiction and are perhaps most disturbingly manifested in the depictions of lethal division and state violence that can be found in all the examples examined here. Graphic scenes of public torture and execution are tropes that are shared with futuristic dystopian fiction and also reflect re-insertion of the victims into national narratives. The sexual servitude of both Gregory's and Mantel's royal females similarly signals the horror of state bio-power. This departure from positive progress narratives (incidentally noted in 2008 by David Herman in relation to the writing of history more generally) that re-frames the past as confirmation that decline and subjugation have long prevailed, indicates a deep pessimism about the future and risks instilling a cultural resentment of both what has been and what is to come.⁸⁸⁹ As has been shown in the preceding chapters, the millennial Henrician novel reflects nationalist discourses about overbearing elites who are disconnected from the people, about authoritarianism and the loss of agency and status caused by the encroachment of outsiders. It also reflects the 'geo-piety' that characterises the kind of environmentalist nationalism most explicitly exemplified in this thesis by the work of Paul Kingsnorth. This is a discourse associated with place and belonging which is hostile to spatial and social change and sees it everywhere.

The role of the Henrician world as proxy for the present country is further underpinned by immersive narrative techniques which depict history through the prism of a twenty-first-century consciousness. In Gregory's novels, the reader is transformed into something of a time traveller, absorbed completely into the perspectives of Pole and Parr by means of a first-person, present-tense narrative. In so doing, they acquire

⁸⁸⁹ Herman, David, 'History's New Pessimists' in *Prospect* (26 July 2008), <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/historynewpessimists> [accessed 22 November 2020]

the world-view of an aristocrat: the history they experience is that of the privileged, titled and *entitled* rather than that of the wider national populace, and so the history of the nation is conflated with that of the elite. In this respect, Gregory's imaginary can be seen to reinforce present-day structures of dominance and resonates with the hierarchical structures sentimentalised in the work of Scruton and Hitchens. In the case of Sansom's work, the narrative voice is more egalitarian (though it retains a latent reverence for the higher social orders) and offers a greater degree of distance from events through deployment of the past tense rather than the present. Shardlake shares the retrospective standpoint of the reader in the sense of looking back on earlier times through something resembling twenty-first-century eyes. He reflects on events with the sensibilities of the time of publication and a sense of lessons learned. In this respect, he, rather than the reader is the time traveller who sees in the past, the precedents of contemporary problems. Despite empathic appeal and narrative intimacy, the reader's response to Mantel's *Cromwell* is destabilised by her inter-textual and *intra*-textual revisionism, which means that he, and by extension the nation, are repeatedly *deconstructed* and *reconstructed* within each novel and across them. This emphasises the inherent performativity, pluralism and instability of identity. The reader travels in time but is aware of the multiplicity of ways in which that time can be iterated and constructed and thus of the ultimate otherness and inaccessibility of that past in the form of a singular truth. This is in fact illustrated by the thesis as a whole which, as indicated above, examines the ways in which the work of each of the different authors revises that of the others. Mantel's third, post-Brexit Henrician novel, *The Mirror And The Light* was published in 2020 and therefore falls outside the time-frame of texts considered within this thesis. Nevertheless, it does similar work to that of the project in re-evaluating and contextualising prior narratives in the light of events

subsequent to their construction. As Mantel told Eileen Pollard in 2018, it 'tells a new story, but it mirrors what has gone before and it sheds new light upon it'.⁸⁹⁰ Clearly, there is further work to be done on Mantel's Henrician trilogy, not least to explore its inter-textual interplay in relation to nation, history and identity. Gregory and Sansom have also published Tudor novels since 2016, and it would be interesting to determine the extent to which these texts also have been inflected by the changed national context: whether, in fact, post-Brexit historical fiction can be seen to exist as a distinct phenomenon.

My original questions were as follows: first, why were so many Henrician novels published in the pre-Brexit period. Second, why did they enjoy commercial success and third, what can they tell us about English identity at this time? In conclusion, I would contend that the Henrician world functions as mirror and proxy in relation to the period in which the novels were written and published. Both worlds were experienced as times of rapid cultural and social change, as a time of transition between one type of nation and another, of perceived loss of privilege and encroachment of the unfamiliar. This familiarity is one of the reasons why they achieved commercial success: it should be remembered that comparisons of the break with Rome to Brexit tended to come after the EU referendum result. My research suggests that prior to this, readers are likely to have recognised in these Henrician narratives, the turbulence, conflicts and fears of their own age and discerned in their voices of the past a contemporary melancholy and resentment that now appears to have run counter to the globalising and liberalising politics of the time. This is particularly true of the work of Gregory and Sansom but to some extent is also reflected (albeit

⁸⁹⁰ Eileen Pollard, 'Between the Real and the Imagined: Hilary Mantel's Craft, An Interview with Hilary Mantel' in Eileen Pollard and Ginette Carpenter (eds), *Hilary Mantel* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 147-55, p. 153.

debunked) in that of Mantel. It is possible that there are significant differences between certain constituents of Mantel's readership and those of Gregory and Sansom: a demographic in the latter case, to which their conservatism would be more likely to appeal. Again, mainly in relation to the former writers, I would suggest that the Henrician protagonists offer a set of national values that give the appearance of originating in England's past but, in actuality, respond to the contemporary world. Pole, Parr and Shardlake appear to embody decency, integrity, endurance, authenticity and stalwart loyalty to country and tradition. They are retrospective in their gaze, valuing continuity and heritage over radical change. Mantel's meta-narratives are in dialogue with these contemporaneous portrayals and function as a postmodern counterpoint to a realism that emphasises the commonality between the imagined communities of England's past and present. This partly answers my third question, which relates to what the texts show about English identity during this period. In their mirroring of the contemporary concerns explored in Chapter One, this corpus of Henrician novels suggests a nation that is profoundly divided, highly conscious of its own decline and discombobulation and resentful of cultural change. This is apparent in the texts' thematic alignment: ideas around ruin, spatial and material change, language, state violence, foreignness, transgression, excess, revisionism and loss of the past, identity, and oppression connect the novels with each other. Moreover, in their re-writing of each other's narratives as well as those of other contemporaneous writers of Henrician novels such as Elizabeth Fremantle, Suzannah Dunn and Tony Riches, they point to a society that is fascinated with national origin and is actively looking backwards in order to understand its present and shape its future. In the recurrence of the Henrician theme, and its repeated literary re-visioning through the differing prisms of religion, class, politics, and gender, it is possible to discern a compulsion to repeatedly re-write

the past to align with divergent contemporary narratives and identities. As those such as Gilroy have observed, during the pre-Brexit period there was a resentment in some quarters of post-imperial multiculturalism that was manifested in a sense of lost identity and encroachment from outsiders. Equally, as implied by the left-liberal critiques of Englishness explored in Chapter One, there was an opposing frustration with English conservatism and corresponding embrace of liberal cosmopolitanism. I set out to explore the extent to which the fictionalising of a specific historical period might align with the findings of Gilroy et al and have concluded that such work did indeed write the contemporary nation and, in significantly different ways, contributed to the period's understanding of what Englishness might mean.

I have established the interaction between fictional imaginaries and national construction, and there are a number of ways in which this work might be developed further. Indeed, given the tensions that have emerged in the second decade of the twenty-first century between nationalism and globalisation, alongside contestations within and between nations of what nationalism might actually mean, I would argue that there is an urgent need for further interventions in this field. As mentioned previously, the novels selected for study in this project embody in themselves the social divisions and competing instincts of England's national psyche. Gregory's protagonists for example, crave the certainties of class, status and ethnicity and are appalled by the rapid transgression of norms and boundaries that comes with Henrician reform. Even Gregory's Parr, a fervent advocate of Protestantism, shows a respect and regard for the 'old ways' that makes her ultimately hostile to the rampant iconoclasm and effacement enacted by the King and his functionaries. This qualified conservatism also characterises Sansom's *Shardlake*. Conversely, Mantel's postmodern deconstruction of historical narrative, and the identities it underpins, aligns

with the liberal relativism and cosmopolitanism of other social groups. As suggested above, this may point to differences between these authors' respective readerships. It is equally possible, as indeed Sansom's publishers assert, that their audiences overlap but that, based on the writers' different reputations, readers approach the texts with different requirements and expectations that reflect their own plurality and conflicting instincts. In this respect, the fact of their co-existence undermines the certainties and belief in fixed identities that underpins English nationalism. All three writers enjoy high levels of commercial success and the cross-readership marketing strategy of Sansom's publishers suggests that the wide appeal of the texts lies in both their shared Henrician theme and in the fact that they can be read alongside one another by an audience who are receptive to multiple tellings of the same period. While historical textbooks might be placed in competition with each other, advancing different theses that can be seen as incompatible, these novels can be read, for all their differences, without this overt criticism. As such, they provide an insight into a key function of historical fiction which is to fill the spaces between documents and artefacts, to repeatedly re- imagine the past, to re-construct cultural memory and in so doing, re-shape the national imaginary. Mantel's postmodern work challenges and complicates notions of the nation's past. The fiction of Gregory and Sansom, on the other hand, embraces the apparent simplicities of realist narrative and to differing degrees, articulates the reactionary impulses noted by those such as Sobolewska and Ford. Gregory's narratives in particular are immersive and can be regarded as less demanding in the sense that they occlude their own construction. In the singularity of their perspectives, they are relatively unchallenging of the values they convey and this factor has been illuminated through studying them in conjunction with the work of Mantel. It is the very absence of self-conscious meta-narrative that, I would argue,

makes it important to study popular fiction, and especially popular historical fiction, more widely. Whilst the Condition of England writers claim that supposedly unchanging national values are transmitted across time by writers such as Shakespeare and Cranmer, I would suggest that these contemporary mainstream texts which appeal to a broader demographic, are more illuminating repositories of the ideas and perceptions that informed Englishness at the time in which they were published. They are also worthy of attention as literary creations: my work on Gregory and Sansom has drawn attention to the craftsmanship and complexity of their novels. The project could have focussed entirely on popular fiction, taking account of other authors like Fremantle, Dunn and Riches who are mentioned above. It could also have encompassed other popular forms such as film and television. Possible future research could integrate close reading of historical novels with a study of sales data revealing the demographics of their readerships which could in turn be tracked to voting patterns. Such an interdisciplinary approach, which would utilise the databases of online retailers such as Amazon UK and bring together approaches from data analytics, the social sciences and literary studies, would enable greater insight into the relationship between reading and national identity.

A comparative approach that incorporated the popular historical fiction of other nations could yield significant insights. Ascertaining which periods are prevalent in other national imaginaries and determining what these may reveal about their current cultural preoccupations could perhaps reveal whether Englishness as a cultural and political phenomenon is so distinctive after all. It would also be useful to track changing iterations of Englishness through readings of Henrician fiction across a much broader expanse of time. Another possibility would be to compare the fictionalising of different periods in the pre-Brexit era. Above all however, and as indicated previously, I believe

there is much more to be done in relation to popular fiction, a creative field that contributes much to the writing of identities and transmission of cultural values but is possibly regarded with less seriousness than it should be. I would suggest that my work has made an initial intervention in this area and that part of the originality of my approach lies in the equal significance I have accorded to all the books in the corpus, and in my understanding of them as interactional and in dialogue with the national politics of their time. In conclusion, I would argue that my work has drawn attention to the role played by imaginaries of the past in the construction and re-construction of national identity and to the specific contribution made by the contemporary Henrician novel in articulating the divisions and discontents that eventually found expression in England's contested, marginal vote to break with mainland Europe.

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