At last, serious television: *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light*

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Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light: available to watch here for 11 months on the BBC iplayer—for UK-based viewers only.

A television highlight of 2024 was the BBC's second series of *Wolf Hall*, concluding the adaptation of Hilary Mantel's critically acclaimed trilogy of historical novels about Thomas Cromwell (c. 1485–1540) . Like the first series, it successfully advanced Mantel's artistic engagement with history.

In its first week, the first episode of *Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light* attracted 4 million viewers. There is an evident yearning for serious work.

Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up The Bodies* (2012) were adapted by Peter Straughan for an award-winning six-part series directed by Peter Kosminsky, broadcast in 2015. Mark Rylance's phenomenal performance as Cromwell was universally applauded.

The same production team adapted the concluding novel, *The Mirror and the Light* (2020), for the second series. The whole production deserves note.

Its seriousness is encouraging. *Wolf Hall* tackles a critical historical period, the Reformation, through one of its key actors, Cromwell, without reducing his biography to domestic melodrama or making the characters simply ciphers for the history.

It unfolds a knife-edge situation with real tension. Its hour-long episodes are carefully paced, with an intensity that conveys the movement of events better than any frenzied attempts to impress. The second season may not at times match the tempered pace of the first, but the whole is consistently compelling and truthful.

Straughan and Kosminsky follow Mantel's lead for artistic creation involving historical situations. She wanted, she said, to give a sense of developments "moving forward with imperfect information and perhaps wrong expectations, but in any case moving forward into a future that is not predetermined." Her characters are active participants in an historical process, with nothing inevitable about it. They are its champions and victims, often simultaneously.

There is some political awareness about the company. Kosminsky has worked on many politically themed documentaries and dramas, and he and Rylance have recently protested anti-Palestinian censorship in Britain.

Kosminsky's politics seem earnest but limited. In 2017, he said he had welcomed the emergence of Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn and Bernie Sanders. He also expressed concern that people found "the centre ground" boring, saying, "This fleeing to the margins is very dangerous."

Wolf Hall is a different vehicle to Kosminsky's other work, and possibly the better for it, but it fits his view that "most of the time, we use [television] for escapist tosh. I believe that it should be used to ask awkward questions of society."

Rylance seems more aware of a changed political situation and the need for a different political response, but this has also been limited by prevailing national perspectives.

He told BBC's *Radio Times*, "The Reformation was really about the Catholic Church dominating a nation's identity and how England demanded the right to choose its own course. I feel we face the same kind of thing now, from corporate power—the inability of a village to say we don't want a Tesco ruining the character, or this new Transatlantic Trade Agreement being pushed through.

"I thought a number of times during *Wolf Hall*, my country could really use a Cromwell now—someone that tough and clever to help us retain our democratic rights to determine our own culture here."

Straughan also seems aware of bigger issues he has rarely tackled successfully, perhaps because he has worked material as limited as *Our Brand Is Crisis*, and *The Men Who Stare At Goats*.

The Reformation marks a step towards the development of capitalism and the bourgeoisie's emergence from feudalism. Religion was the expression of its politics.

The machinations involved in abolishing papal authority and appointing Henry VIII the Supreme Head of the Church of England proceeded unevenly. Frustrated at failure to produce a male heir, Henry sought annulment of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon. When Pope Clement VII refused, Henry looked for other solutions.

Moving to replace Katherine with Anne Boleyn, Henry sought to balance his domestic political power against the might of the Holy Roman Empire. Henry's Church of England remained Catholic, although agreeing to the annulment.

The main theological turn to Protestantism came under Henry's successor, Edward VI. This was followed by further Catholic reaction under Mary before Elizabeth I—Henry and Anne Boleyn's daughter—consolidated a Protestant Church of England.

A developing culture of Protestantism provided political expression for a rising layer outside the feudal aristocracy. Despite Henry's own religious inclinations, political logic forced him to look to those layers to resolve his crises.

Yeoman's son Thomas Cromwell, who had travelled and fought abroad, was representative of that layer.

The process is summarised in some acute dialogue. Anne Boleyn's betrothed, Henry Percy, Earl of Northumberland (Harry Lloyd), must be removed as an obstacle to the king's ambitions. Cromwell has to explain that the world is changing.

Percy has "borrowed all over Europe," says Cromwell, who knows his creditors and that "one word from me and all your debts will be called in". Percy responds that "Bankers don't have armies," and the

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king “respects all ancient titles.” Cromwell is brutal replying, “Neither will you without any money” .

Cromwell warns Percy, “How can I explain this to you? The world is not run from where you think it is. From border fortresses. Even from Whitehall. The world is run from Antwerp, from Florence, from Lisbon. From wherever the merchant ships set sail off into the west. Not from castle walls, from counting houses. From the pens that scrape out your promissory notes. So believe me when I say that my banker friends and I will rip your life apart...”

This is a new future. (The scene is available to view here).

The first series opens in 1529, with Cromwell lawyer to Cardinal Wolsey (Jonathan Pryce). Cromwell’s manoeuvres for Wolsey—about to be dismissed as Lord Chancellor for failing to secure papal assistance—bring him into the orbit of Henry (Damian Lewis).

Series one finishes in 1536, with Cromwell now dominant at court. His loyalty to Henry makes him subtle and pragmatic, facilitating marriage to Anne (Claire Foy) while not allowing a papal faction to form around Katherine of Aragon (Joanne Whalley).

Cromwell heads off Anne’s enemies when she fails to produce a son, but still incurs her displeasure for not persecuting the loyal Catholic Thomas More (Anton Lesser). We see undercurrents of Cromwell’s own Protestantism, compromised through expediency.

This satisfies Mantel’s aim of placing the reader in “that time and that place… not to judge with hindsight, not to pass judgement… when we know what happened.”

There could be no better actor for this than Rylance. His stillness defines the series, showing a man at the centre of difficult conditions, bringing his own character to them but still responding to them on their terms. When he ultimately erupts into violence on being accused of treason, it shows both his personal biography and the tensions of office.

Straughan’s adaptation, particularly in season one, works well. Lewis is a fine counterpoint as the increasingly terrifying monarch seeking political ways of effecting his divinely appointed status.

Aristocratic families jockey for position, arranging assignations for their daughters as part of that. The Duke of Norfolk (Bernard Hill in series one, Timothy Spall in series two) is both aristocratic soldier and uncle to attractive women—Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard.

The women are not just flirtatious pawns. Foy is excellent as Anne. Her petulant and demanding self-importance reflect those assumptions about the inevitability of royal patronage. That also covers genuine religious sentiment, as the climax of season one, with Anne’s execution in 1536 to make way for Jane Seymour (Kate Phillips), movingly reveals.

Despite the gap in production, much of the same cast was reassembled. Younger actors admirably meet the standards set by some extraordinary talents. Thomas Brodie-Sangster is particularly impressive as Cromwell’s adopted ward Rafe.

Cast replacements were of comparable or, in one case, better quality. Alex Jennings gives the conservative bishop Stephen Gardiner’s hostility to Cromwell more power than the rather limited Mark Gatiss could in season one.

This is important, as the period leading up to Cromwell’s fall involved reaction by older aristocrats like Norfolk and conservative pro-Pope clerical factions.

Season two spends more time on Cromwell’s inner reflections. The arrival of an unsuspected daughter from Antwerp, and flashbacks to Anne and Wolsey, are used to counterbalance Cromwell’s apparent ascendancy. Although not always as successfully intense as the earlier more focused narrative, they do build the sense of Cromwell’s impending overthrow.

Rylance is astonishing throughout. His tears after Wolsey’s daughter says he betrayed her father is the first time we have seen such a display of emotion. It is extremely powerful.

Cromwell’s position was unsustainable, and we see him caught between the factions he is trying to negotiate. He runs out of room to manoeuvre almost without realising it.

The dissolution of the monasteries is shown as a complex of political and financial calculations as much as religious dispute. The strongest monastic establishments had to be prevented from becoming potential oppositional bases, while their assets were needed for Henry’s profligate expenditure.

Cromwell is pragmatic, saying, “War is not an affordable thing.” When Henry protests, “You want a king to huddle indoors like a sick girl?”, Cromwell replies, “That would be ideal, for fiscal purposes.”

Again, this is the convergence of politics and religion. Cromwell says his experience of the monasteries has been “largely one of corruption and waste… I think they have suppressed our true history and written one that is favourable to Rome.”

Henry is angry that the French king has greater power to tax. Cromwell says François “likes war too much, and trade too little. There are more taxes to be raised when trade is good.” If the church resists taxes, “other ways can be found.” All arguments point to the monasteries.

Cromwell’s political negotiating thus proves a focal point for the old aristocracy and conservative clerics like Gardiner, who accused him of extreme Protestantism.

After Anne Boleyn’s execution, Henry married Jane Seymour. She finally provided a male heir, dying shortly afterwards. Cromwell, seeing royal marriages primarily as political alliances, moves Henry to wed Anne of Cleves. With Norfolk advancing his niece Catherine Howard, Cromwell’s miscalculation is evident to everyone but him.

Cromwell ends on the same executioner’s platform where he saw Anne die. As in his adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011), Straughan uses a sequence of cutaways, of Cromwell’s friends and relatives, to convey emotion. It works better here than there, because here it makes sense of what has been developed through the episodes.

Wolf Hall deserves credit for its respect for its historical subject and its determined commitment to seriousness in artistic creation. It is an impressive and rewarding work.

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