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It's a Matter of Perspective:
History, Fiction and Narrative in
The Other Boleyn Girl by
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Abstract

This essay explores the relationship between 'history' and 'fiction' in Philippa Gregory's historical novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001). Taking a broadly New Historicist approach to that relationship, the essay examines how the fictional aspects of Gregory's text are handled in relation to historical 'fact', how Gregory's story illustrates the ways in which an historical novel can be used to address contemporary concerns, and how the choice of narrator plays a key role in both respects. Through close reading, the essay also describes feminist elements in Gregory's text which are rooted in the thoughts and actions of the main character and it situates these elements in relation to critical literature suggesting that the historical novel, as a genre, has often provided women with a vehicle for protest. The essay concludes with an assessment of the uses of the historical novel as a pedagogic tool, drawing in particular on the experience of history teachers in Australia.

Table of Contents

Abstract 0

Introduction..... 1

The Historical Novel..... 2

A Complex Relationship..... 3

Why Mary? 9

Conclusion 14

Works Cited 17

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to consider the narrative of a historical novel to see how the fictional elements are handled with regards to the history it is based on, how a fictive story can be used to question real-life problems and how the choice of narrator matters in doing that. In addition, it is my hope that this essay will be able to shed some light on the potential uses of the historical novel. The novel I have chosen to analyse is *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory which was first published in 2001 and which takes place between spring 1521 and May 1536, the period of the most famous and influential divorce in English history. The plot follows the life at the court of Henry VIII as he breaks away from the Vatican, creates a new Church of England in order to divorce his wife and marry Anne Boleyn and later beheads his new queen for treason, amongst other things. However, *The Other Boleyn Girl* is not Henry VIII's story nor is it the story of Anne Boleyn. Instead, the story is being narrated by Mary Boleyn, Anne's largely forgotten sister, and the reader sees through her eyes as she navigates the dangerous life of politics, intrigues and power struggles at court as the world changes around her. I chose this particular novel both because of its first person narrative, which gives the reader a woman's perspective on the 16th century, and because of Gregory's decision to use a lesser known person as narrator, which enables a measure of artistic freedom. Another factor in choosing *The Other Boleyn Girl* was its popularity, which indicates that something about it speaks to a wide range of readers.

I will begin with a short background section on the historical novel with some different suggestions on the genre's origin which I will follow up by considering how the historical information the novel is based on compares to some of its plot. I will discuss the relevance to the novel of New Historicist arguments about the relationship between fiction and historical 'fact'. The parts of the plot I have selected are mainly parts where I have discovered inaccuracies or where there have been discussions about inaccuracies in the past. I will follow up my initial analysis by considering possible reasons why Gregory chose to tell the story through Mary's eyes by considering the character's personality, situation and how well the readers can relate to her. I will argue that the novel can be read as a feminist text and that there are advantages to writing an historical novel rather than a conventional work of history. As I will be discussing facts and fiction for much of this essay, I believe it necessary to point out that while we know that fiction is not real we do not know which parts of history actually transpired and which are fabricated. I will therefore put fact, truth and the like within quotation marks when they are spoken of as undisputable facts.

The Historical Novel

Historical fiction has been used for centuries and uses fiction to retell past events often in the form of entertainment. The historical novel, however, did not come to be until the beginning of the 19th century and is generally considered to be the result of Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels. However, according to Jerome de Groot, Scott was just adapting an already well used concept into novel form (11-12). That is, he wrote historical fiction, which was old even in Scott's time, in the form of a novel. De Groot also argues that Scott's novels might not even be the first novels of the genre. He instead suggests that the earliest work of historical fiction that closest resembles what we today consider a novel is *The Princess of Cleves* by Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette from 1678 (12). Kari Lokke argues for Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* from 1792 as the first historical novel in England and that the historical novel 'was conceived in explicit opposition to the romance and courtship novel' (60). Novels in general were for a long time looked down upon as a genre for women and were therefore not considered to be proper literature. Sir Walter Scott is often credited with making the feminine genre of romance respectable again by introducing the masculine element of actual history. By joining the two modes, Scott creates a narrative that combines strong characters with history (De Groot 20-21).

According to Avrom Fleishman, the plots of historical novels usually revolve around, or are at least somehow connected to, historical events which concern and affect the characters. This is especially true when it comes to public events such as war or political changes. The events in the novel's plot normally take place far enough in the past that contemporary readers cannot have any personal experience about them. A novel must also include at least one 'real' historical person among the fictional ones to qualify as a historical novel. The realistic background already mandatory for a novel must also have a specific link to history and just including a real building or event is not enough; this is another role filled by the 'real' historical person (3-4). Fleishman further states that:

What makes a historical novel historical is the active presence of a concept of history as a shaping force – acting not only upon the characters in the novel but on the author and readers outside it. In the course of reading, we find that the protagonists of such novels confront not only the forces of history in their own time, but its impact on life in any time. (15)

Charlotte Smith's *Desmond* does not possess all the qualities that Fleishman states that a novel must have to be counted as historical. However, whether *Desmond* follows that pattern is not

what makes it interesting. Lokke argues that *Desmond* '[gave] rise to novels of social protest' (63) and gives Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Brontë as examples of authors whose novels, like *Desmond*, critique injustices in patriarchal society (63). The novels of social protest are a good example of novels that are written with the intention of affecting not only the minds and opinions of their readers, but the way society was structured at the time the novels were written.

From its early days up until today, the historical novel has continued to grow as a genre. The historical novel as a genre shares its territory with a multitude of other genres such as adventure narratives, detective stories, military stories and, perhaps most commonly, romance (Wake 82). The great diversity of the historical novel means that novels belonging to the genre are often sorted under and defined by whichever other genres they connect with. *The Other Boleyn Girl*, for example, is just as likely to be sorted under romance as under historical novels due to the nature of its plot.

A Complex Relationship

Texts of all kinds are usually categorised as being either literary or non-literary. Literary texts are usually said to involve a higher degree of figurative language and include novels, poetry, plays etc. Non-literary texts, on the other hand, are more focused on relaying information such as legal documents, magazines, scientific texts and so on. This categorisation does little more than telling the reader what kind of text they are dealing with.

When it comes to the historical novel there is a more serious division at work because the genre relates to both literature and history. History and literature have been divided into two separate fields that would appear to have little to do with each other, and yet they have a close but complex relationship. According to Beverly Southgate, this division has been especially defended from the historical side due to the historians' wish to present works that are non-fictional, "'true'" in a way that fiction does not aspire to be' (1). However, literary scholars have also contributed to the division. The old historicism model of literary criticism, when analysing literary texts drawing on historical data, laid more emphasis on the literary than the historical aspects, which were often seen only as providing the setting for the text (Barry 174). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, this way of viewing history and literature began to become outdated as there was a growing interest among literary critics in the relationship between the two and 'how literature reflected, shaped and represented history' (Brannigan 417). This interest eventually developed into a branch of literary criticism called new historicism of which a simplified definition is 'a method based on the *parallel* reading of literary and non-

literary texts, usually of the same historical period' (Barry 172). In new historicism, literary and non-literary texts have equal importance and always inform or question each other (Barry 172). What keeps this balance is the realisation that our knowledge of the past only exists because of texts that have survived to our time and all texts are connected to a social or cultural context (Brannigan 418). Therefore, all texts are history and all history is text. With historical novels, the interplay between history and fiction is clearly visible but that does not mean that it is easy to distinguish what is fact and what is fiction.

Some of the historical events in *The Other Boleyn Girl* are easy to confirm as being 'true', i.e. that the representation of the events in the novel is broadly consistent with accepted historical accounts. These are mainly large and public events, of which there are multiple contemporary records from different sources describing the same thing. We know, for example, that the Pope really was captured by the Spanish army, that both Mary and Anne Boleyn spent time in France in their early court-life and that Henry VIII created The Church of England to be able to marry Anne. However, the small things, the personal things, the little gaps in between the major events, are not generally known to us, and the truth is that we cannot know what was never written down or has been lost to us. Because our knowledge of the past is dependent on the texts of the past 'the word of the past replaces the world of the past' (Barry 175). Sometimes we do not even have texts, only rumours. De Groot states that 'history is clearly othered from us' (19). He means that the past will always be foreign and unknowable to us, which makes it impossible for us to fully understand it. What we do not know, the gaps in between 'facts', we fill with theories about what might have happened. This is part of the reason why people often believe in so many misconceptions, especially about individuals like Mary Boleyn, who has become famous in modern times, about whom we do not know much. Weir states that:

Many of the misconceptions [about Mary] come from novels like *The Other Boleyn Girl* and others of its kind, namely *The Last Boleyn* by Karen Harper (2006) and *Court Cadenza* by Aileen Quigley (1974), republished as *The Tudor Sisters* by Aileen Armitage—because people often make the mistake of thinking that what an author of fiction writes must be history—and accurate history. (xxii)

It is in these 'gaps of information' that *The Other Boleyn Girl* operates, by taking historical 'facts' and weaving them together with a fictive story that explores the people at court and how their lives are affected by the historical events. Of course, in such a story, it is not surprising that some of the 'facts' regarding the historical figures on whom the characters are based, might be questionable or downright incorrect. This does not have to mean that the novel is poorly

researched or written; it can be a matter of prioritising an interesting plot over historical accuracy or just a matter of there being multiple theories about the same subject.

There are several instances in *The Other Boleyn Girl* where the historical ‘facts’ do not seem to agree with the novel’s content. The one that is first encountered is also the one that changes the most from what the ‘facts’ suggests and concerns the siblings’ age. In the first chapter of the novel, set in spring 1521, Mary states that she is thirteen years old and has been married to William Carey for a year (Gregory 1). In the next chapter, set in spring 1522, Mary states that she is ‘the queen’s [Katherine of Aragon] favourite and youngest lady in waiting’ (Gregory 4). However, there is no evidence in historical documents of her being a permanent lady-in-waiting to the queen although she might have been called in as an extra servant on occasion given her status and lodging at court (Weir 105). We are also told that Anne, who has just returned from the French court, is fifteen years old (5). This would mean that Anne was born in 1507 and Mary in 1508. According to Kelly Hart, this date for Anne’s birth is supported by two contemporary sources, but she also states that it has been disproven by later research as there is plenty of evidence, albeit circumstantial, that supports an earlier date. The conflicting information provides two different versions of history and, therefore, shows how historical ‘facts’ are formed and can change depending upon which source is consulted. In addition to the conflicting birth dates, there is also evidence for Mary being the elder sister (51).

Thomas Boleyn and Elizabeth Howard, Mary’s parents, likely married sometime around 1498 or 1501 with the former date being more commonly suggested (Weir 14-15). Their children cannot have been born before that, given the Boleyn’s status at court. It is likely that both sisters were born relatively soon after their parents’ marriage. However, there is no exact date for either of them so all we have are guesses based on circumstantial evidence. We know that Anne was sent to the court of Archduchess Margareta of Austria in 1513 and would then only have been six years old if she had been born in 1507 (Weir 16-17). A letter from Anne to her father, written 1513-1514, shows ‘the well-formed hand of an educated teenager, not a child of seven’ (Weir 17). Alison Weir also puts forward Henry VIII’s 17th-century biographer, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, who had access to now lost sources, and who states that Anne was twenty when she left the court of France in early 1522, making it likely that Anne was born sometime between 1499 and 1502 with 1501 being the likeliest date (Weir 17).

If Mary was the oldest of the two sisters she must have been born sometime around her parents’ wedding. According to Weir, Mary’s date of birth is most commonly stated as 1498-1499 (17). Some of the evidence supporting the theory that Mary was the eldest includes: the unlikelihood of a younger daughter being married off first and the fact that Mary’s son,

Lord Hunsdon, petitioned for the return of the earldom of Ormonde to the family by stating that his mother was the eldest of the sisters. If Anne had been the eldest, the earldom would have belonged to Elizabeth I (Hart 51). It is unlikely that Hunsdon would have gotten away with such a bold claim if Mary had not been the eldest. Further indication of Mary's age is the rumour that she was a mistress to Francis I of France for a short time during her stay there in 1514-1515. According to Weir there is no mention of Mary at the French court after 1515 (84) and she was allegedly very 'loose' in general, for which the French king apparently called her 'a "hackney" whom all could ride' (Heart 53-54). Although this is never mentioned in the novel, had Mary been born in 1508 she would have been between six and twelve years old at the time, which seems too young to acquire such a reputation. The ages of the girls in *The Other Boleyn Girl* would therefore, given the evidence, seem to be wrong. However, Mary's young age in the novel does have the effect of making her very innocent, inexperienced and insecure for a large extent of the plot, something that prevents her relationship with the king from being her own idea. Because much of the early part of the novel's plot is built on the fact that Mary is an innocent child, many of the early elements of the plot would change if Mary had been portrayed as an older and more experienced woman. Despite the influence Mary's age has on the plot, however, it remains unclear whether this was a choice made by Gregory with the intention of bringing more drama to the novel or a case of her supporting the theory of the later birth dates.

One choice the author made was to make Henry VIII the father of both of Mary's children, Catherine and Henry Carey. However, there is no way we can know if that was the case. Hart states that Mary became pregnant with Catherine in either 1523 or 1524, and Henry sometime around June 1525. Therefore, she believes it possible that they were both Henry VIII's children, as the dates are within the period when Mary was apparently his mistress (62). For the duration of the king's interest in Mary in the novel, it is perpetually stated by the heads of the Boleyn family that Mary being the king's mistress and bearing his children is something that will grant them tremendous influence at court. This means that for as long as the king shows an interest in Mary she is the Boleyn's most valuable pawn in competing for the king's favour. However, Weir is of the opinion that there is 'no reliable contemporary assertion' (152) of Henry VIII's paternity of the two children and that the evidence supporting it is 'mostly circumstantial and inferential' (152). Making both children Henry VIII's could, therefore, be a conscious choice by Gregory to create an antagonistic element considering that Mary is made into a pawn. Of course, it could also be the result of relying on sources that support a version of history where the children actually were the king's.

An author of an historical novel is not writing a history book and therefore does not have to report one hundred percent historical 'fact'. In fact, some artistic freedom is required in order to make it a fictional story. However, as stated before, this can cause misconceptions; particularly when it comes to characters. De Groot argues that people who write historical fiction cannot know the characters of the historical people whom they write about but instead create believable characters from a framework based on facts, and write tales about them which will contain as much historical information as the writer deems necessary (19). This is something Gregory has managed to do very well with her characters based on what we know of the 'real' historical people.

The Boleyn siblings' parents, for example, are portrayed in the novel as cold, distant and seemingly uncaring. They are more concerned with their status and the family's reputation than their children's happiness, using them as pawns in the game of court politics. By today's standards, they are horrible parents, but this would not have been an unusual attitude and practice, especially among nobles, at the time. According to Weir, Andreas Franciscus, who was a visitor to England from the continent at the turn of the sixteenth century, observed that Englishmen did not show any love to their children and instead showered their love on their wives (48). Thomas Boleyn is constantly in on Uncle Howard's plans for the girls to further the family's power and their mother's disposition is made clear already in the first chapter where she, '[i]n a rare moment of interest' (Gregory 3), calls Mary a fool for believing that the king would pardon her just executed uncle and tells her that there is no room for error at court (Gregory 3). However, she is largely absent from the rest of the novel. The 'real' Thomas Boleyn seems to be portrayed accurately. Weir claims that he does not seem to have shown his children much love, but that he did care about education because it was the way to success and therefore he saw to it that all his children were properly schooled (48). Weir also states that the education would make it easier to find the girls suitable husbands and help them run a household, which would only benefit the family (23). The way the parents are portrayed makes Gregory's fictive version of Tudor England seem much more realistic, but it also creates a contrast with the warm and compassionate Mary.

Although they often agree with history, fictional stories should not be relied on as a source of historical information. This is particularly due to the fact that authors of such stories can take small facts or even rumours about an event, object or person and use it to make their stories more interesting or more important than historical evidence suggests. An example of this in *The Other Boleyn Girl* are the charges of adultery against Anne, George and several members of their circle of friends. It is never stated openly, but it is implied that Anne and

George might have committed incest in an attempt to provide Anne with the son she needs to secure her place as queen once and for all. George's wife gives voice to her suspicion that brother and sister might be a little too close to each other and that George at all other times never seems to be attracted to women (Gregory 449-450). Mary also becomes suspicious when Anne feels her baby move for the first time and in her excitement asks Mary to fetch George before correcting herself and asks for the king (Gregory p. 450). Anne was, indeed, charged with committing adultery with five men, including George. The main evidence for incest between the two siblings was the testimony of George's wife. However, '[t]he evidence strongly suggests that they were victims of a court coup masterminded by the King's principal secretary, Thomas Cromwell, who knew Anne and her faction to be his mortal enemies' (Weir 231). Another example of authors playing with the size of historical 'facts' or rumours is the rumour that Anne Boleyn was a witch who used magic to enthrall Henry VIII and make herself queen. In the novel, the rumour begins as a consequence of the queen's banishment from court and Anne taking her place, an act that has earned her the hatred of the common women, as pointed out in a conversation between Mary and George Boleyn:

George was silent for a moment. 'Do they do more than mutter?'

'We were caught in a riot in London. And the king says it's not safe for [Anne] to go into the City at all. She is hated, George, and they say all sorts of things about her.'

'Things?'

'That she is a witch and has enchanted the king by sorcery. That she is a murderess and would poison the queen if she could. That she has made him impotent with all other women so that he has to marry her. That she blasted the children in the queen's womb and put barrenness on the throne of England.'

(Gregory 304-305)

The novel depicts Anne having three miscarriages. There does not seem to be anything supernatural about the first one (Gregory 398-403). The next child she carries appears to have died in the womb but her body has not gotten rid of it so Mary and George go to a woman rumoured to be able to cast spells, who makes them a potion that will abort the baby (430-433). The potion takes effect and the whole thing is covered up (436-438). The third time is when the king gets evidence that Anne might be a witch. He has sent a 'witch-taker' to act as Anne's midwife and when she sees the monstrosity that is Anne's horribly malformed dead baby, she reports it. Even Mary thinks the baby is a monster and someone openly asks what is wrong with Anne because she cannot give the king a son (472-475). The malformation of the baby in addition to its death would have been seen as a sign that Anne had done something to displease

God; like witchcraft. The fact that Anne prior to the third miscarriage tells Mary that she has journeyed to the gates of hell for the baby and that '[n]o-one knows what went into the making of this baby, Mary. No-one will ever know' (Gregory 450), only strengthens the sensation that something unholy has been done. Although what Anne has done does not have to be witchcraft or dealings with the devil, her comment could also point to the alleged incest with George. Either way, it is a good example of a small factual detail, in this case the rumour about Anne using witchcraft, getting a major role in fiction. There is, of course, no evidence of Anne being a witch but there are records of her having a stillborn baby boy, and the secrecy surrounding the birth seems to have started many rumours (Weir 230). However, there does not seem to be any evidence that the child was malformed or that Anne had two miscarriages prior to that one.

The way historical 'facts' have been combined with a fictive story in *The Other Boleyn Girl* shows how close or how far apart history and literature can be. After all, our knowledge of historical events is shaped by which contemporary texts have been consulted. However, how a story is told is just as important as what it is about, and it is unlikely that the interplay between 'fact' and fiction alone would be enough to intrigue *The Other Boleyn Girl's* large number of readers. The core element of a novel is after all its narrative.

Why Mary?

What is perhaps the most curious aspect of *The Other Boleyn Girl*, considering that it entails one of the key events in the political history of the Tudor regime, is the author's choice of main character and narrator. If the same plot was told from Henry VIII's perspective or Anne's, we would suddenly have an entirely new story. A grown man as protagonist who seduces a fourteen-year-old, that he not only makes his mistress, but also has two children with while she is still little more than a child herself, is unlikely to be well received by modern readers. During the English renaissance, the age difference would not have been an issue. But as a Catholic, Henry VIII would have been expected to stay faithful to his wife and, therefore, having a mistress would not have been appropriate. Henry VIII's perspective could, however, have provided more insight into the politics of the era. With the right writing, Anne would have made a good protagonist as she appears to have possessed the strength, intelligence and independence favoured in many modern protagonists. However, with both Henry VIII and Anne there is the problem of them being very well known and very well documented people, therefore, leaving very little room for artistic freedom.

An author of fictional history must have some room to transform historical ‘facts’ into a believable narrative with believable characters. Gregory’s habit of using people who are not the centre of attention, about whom we do not know as much, is an effective way of working around that problem. According to Mieke Bal, the narrator is part of what determines the situation of the narrative i.e. the narrator helps determine the focus of the text (18). What this means is that the focus of a narrative is dependent on the narrator. The desired focus is therefore also a crucial element for the author to consider in their choice of narrator.

Gregory must have had a specific focus in mind when she picked Mary as narrator. If she had intended to write a story that focused on politics she could have chosen George Boleyn as the narrator. Like Mary, he is also something of an on-the-side-lines character in the novel and he often seems to know more about what is going on and what to do than Mary. The novel is, however, a romance which focuses on the relationships between the characters, their personal feelings, goals and achievements. Mary is, admittedly, the best choice of main character and narrator for that kind of focus because of her connection to Henry VIII and Anne, the influence of her family, her role as a woman of noble birth, and the fact that we know very little about her life. Our knowledge of Mary is, in fact, so limited that she had been largely forgotten and only seemed to resurface in studies of her sister. What we do know is that it is generally agreed by historians that Mary was less intellectual than rest of her family but the truth is that we know next to nothing about her intellect. From the two letters of Mary’s which have survived, we know that her handwriting was less elegant and grammatical than her sisters’, something she was aware of. However, the evidence suggests that she likely received the same kind of education as her siblings and we know that she could both read and write. Because we know that Anne was multilingual as well as a proficient musician it is a fair to assume that Mary might have been so too. There is even some evidence showing that Anne struggled with learning French in the beginning while Mary had no such trouble, proving that she was not ‘a dullard’ (Weir 48-50). In the novel, Mary is by no means stupid but she is not as cunning, deceiving and ambitious as her sister which is the greatest difference between them. The novel’s take on Mary’s intelligence compared to her sister’s is a plausible interpretation of the ‘facts’ but it is also impossible to confirm. Interestingly enough, it would seem that most, if not all, major studies of Mary resulting in a published work were published after *The Other Boleyn Girl*, hinting at the popularity and importance of the novel.

One thing that is clear about Mary is that she does not follow the norms of behaviour that would have been expected of a Renaissance girl of her rank. Her surroundings, the general attitude towards women and the social rules and politics of court life during the renaissance are

all very far from most people's life experiences. Yet, Mary herself is familiar enough for people to be able to relate to her and feel with her. For example, Mary's sorrow over being forced to stay at court and away from her children, only being permitted to visit them during summer, is something the reader can sympathise with. The distress Mary feels due to her conflicting interests and personal wishes upon first being offered to visit her children as a reward makes her seem even more human. The characters are what draws the reader into the story and '[w]hether we like them or not, we are compelled to read on because we respond to those paper people' (Bal 112).

To better understand why Mary is written the way she is we need to look more closely at what the text is conveying. A common reason for the writing of fiction is to entertain the reader and provide an escape from every-day life, but fiction can have other uses as well. Lokke claims that *Desmond* and other novels by later authors follow a pattern of having a married woman and mother as heroine and depicting how this heroine is victimised by her husband and by social norms (60-61). Lokke therefore puts *Desmond* forward as the instigator of a tradition of strong feminist novels and the most influential political novel of the 1790s (61). Marion Gymnich similarly argues that 'the use of female narrators in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels can be regarded as a subversive strategy' (708). She states in an era where women were kept from participating in public affairs and confined to domestic work, female narrators would have been a way to symbolically empower female perspectives and voices (708). Gymnich uses Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* from 1847 as an example and says that:

the narrator's voice is feminine and it repeatedly expresses a critical attitude towards traditional gender roles. Yet there is also a minor female character in the novel who is doubly marginalised according to the cultural discourses of the time and who seems to be deprived of every opportunity of expressing her voice: Bertha Mason/Rochester, Mr Rochester's first wife who is hidden away in a locked room in the mansion, is marginalised both as a woman and as a Caribbean Creole (708).

Although Mary is not nearly as outspoken as Jane Eyre or marginalised as Bertha, it is easy to see an echo of what Lokke and Gymnich are talking about in *The Other Boleyn Girl*. Even if Mary is still a child by our standards at the beginning of the novel, she is already married and seen as a young adult. She has been brought up from childhood to be a courtier and must conform to the norms and expectations of a young woman of an ambitious noble family on the rise. She has been taught that she has to be loyal to her husband and to God. Therefore, when

she is told to become the king's mistress, she protests against something that is not only against her beliefs but which also frightens her:

'I can't do it,' I said out loud. I gripped tightly on my brother's comforting clasp and looked down the long dark wood table to my uncle, as sharp as a falcon with black eyes that missed nothing. 'Sir, I am sorry, but I love the queen. She's a great lady and I can't betray her. I promised before God to cleave only to my husband, and surely I shouldn't betray him? I know the king is the king; but you can't want me to? Surely? Sir, I can't do it.' (Gregory 17-18)

Despite her protests her status as a young woman in the family means that she has no choice but to do as she is told. From a modern standpoint, a treatment such as this is unacceptable regardless of age or gender. But it is set almost five hundred years ago in a society where women did not have a say in much. Although Mary sometimes questions her lot in life, she is not much of a feminist. Nor would it be reasonable to expect her to be such, given the historical period in which the novel is set. However, it is possible to regard the novel itself as exhibiting feminist ideas. The novel does not actively speak out and demand equality for its characters, but it does provide an image of what it was like for women in those days. Although the focus is mainly on how it was like for women due to the narrator's perspective, the reader is also shown how it could have been for homosexuals at the time. When Mary grows increasingly suspicious about her brother's taste in bedfellows and confronts him about it, George admits that he has feelings for Sir Francis Weston, despite the risk of anyone finding out about it:

He laughed carelessly, but I heard the strain in his voice. 'I love Francis,' he confessed. 'I can't see a finer man in the world, a braver sweeter better man never lived – and I cannot help but desire him.'
'You love him as a woman?' I asked awkwardly.
'Like a man,' he corrected me swiftly. 'A more passionate thing by far.'
'George, this is a dreadful sin, and he will break your heart. This is a dangerous course. If our uncle knew...'
'If anyone knew, I'd be ruined outright.'
(Gregory 374)

However, it would seem that the attitude towards homosexuality displayed in this case is at least potentially a modern misrepresentation, at least when read alongside the fairly open engagements with the homoerotic and the homosocial which we find in Shakespeare's sonnets and plays like *Twelfth Night*. Seen in this context, Mary's acceptance of her brother's preferences is perhaps less unusual than the text would seem to imply.

The feminist element of Gregory's novel often surfaces when Mary is reflecting on something, or is being treated in a way that is not acceptable by today's standards. When joyfully reflecting on her new life and what she has gained and lost by marrying William Stafford, for example, she states that: '[i]n a world where women were bought and sold as horses I had found a man I loved; and married for love' (Gregory 413). Another moment when the novel's feminist inclinations appear is when Uncle Howard orders Mary to stay at the celebration of the former Queen Katherine's death, despite her thinking the whole thing disgraceful, William Stafford steps in:

'She's to stay here,' my uncle said. 'No wandering off.'
'She is to follow her own desires,' William said. 'I won't have her ordered.'
My uncle lifted his eyebrows. 'An unusual wife.'
'One who suits me,' William said. He turned to me. 'Did you want to stay or leave?'
(Gregory 449)

Perhaps one of the best examples of feminist elements in the novel is Mary's realisation that she and her family have been wrong in thinking herself a Boleyn and a Howard before everything else, that she is a woman first and must follow her own wants and desires (Gregory 351-352). On their own, these instances often come across as little more than the novel's romantic side but together they form a pattern that gives the novel its feministic tone. The one feministic value that Mary embodies the most is the right for everyone to choose whom they want to marry. We know that the real-life Mary Boleyn showed up at court in 1534 obviously pregnant and confessed that she had done the unthinkable, married William Stafford for love (Weir 212). It cannot have been for anything other than love as the man had nothing but himself to offer and the pair had not gotten permission from Mary's father (Weir 216-217). This knowledge makes it clear that Mary really is the perfect narrator for *The Other Boleyn Girl*, because breaking the rules in such a manner to be with one's beloved was not something someone from a highborn family could expect to do, yet it did happen. All things considered, the novel is not only meant to entertain the reader but also to educate them. The situation of both women and homosexuals portrayed in *The Other Boleyn Girl* and the main character's reaction to said situation leaves little doubt that this is the case.

The idea of using historical fiction for educating people is not a new one. Although historical fiction should not, as previously mentioned, be seen as absolute truth, it can serve a purpose. In 2010 it was reported that all states and territories in Australia would have to follow a set curriculum in history, amongst other things. Soon after, history teachers began warning

that the new curriculum would be a failure in the hands of bored and/or poorly trained teachers. Due to the new system, at least two generations of teachers would be untrained in teaching history. Not only that, but students were already responding poorly to the subject as it was. One suggested reason behind this poor response is the limited number of teaching methods which might not have managed to excite or challenge the students (Rodwell 15-16). Grant Rodwell suggests that historical fiction could be used as a 'learning strategy for undergraduate student teachers in pre-service teacher education units' (17). He states that one of the reasons for this is that 'the narrative of fiction provides the audience with a private statement that is able to communicate its meaning by *engaging* its audience' (17). Rodwell goes on to say that:

fiction generally, and historical fiction in particular, provides a double layer of meaning: first, there is the present and everyday meanings providing an *entrè* into the past; then there is the past that is used to interpret and add greater and more poignant understandings to the present (18).

What this means is that learning by reading historical fiction, including historical novels, goes two ways. It provides a window into better understanding of past events, people, morals etc., at the same time that knowledge of the past also allows for a better understanding of the present. So, while history books can tell us what we think happened at a certain time and place, they are not always the most exciting thing to read. Historical fiction, on the other hand, while not factually reliable, takes history and allows one to see it through the eyes of a person. Although it is pure fiction, historical fiction can serve to bring history to life in a way that history books seldom can. Due to it being historical fiction, *The Other Boleyn Girl* can fill the same role by retelling its version of Mary Boleyn's story and hopefully inspire its readers to read other versions of the history, either literary or non-literary.

Conclusion

The historical novel is a centuries old form of literature that utilises historical events and people to tell a story. The historical novel has been used by women in the past as a method to protest inequalities in society. The historical and literary fields of study have for a long time been divided because of historians wanting to be taken more seriously and literary scholars only seeing history as background information. The new historicist model of literary criticism views history and literature as being two sides of the same coin as all our understanding of history comes from texts and all texts have a social or cultural connection. Because we have no direct

access to the past, but only to various representations of it, we cannot absolutely verify historical 'fact'. Since all we have of the past is various representations of it, new historicism focuses on how different versions of history came to be written.

Authors of historical novels do not have to stick to what the history books say. In fact, they have to move away from it in some measure in order to create believable characters but they can also do it to make their novel more interesting or just make something fit better into the narrative. For instance, the adultery and incest charges against Anne, George and the other four men as well as the rumour that Anne was a witch has been played upon heavily. There is also the possibility of the existence of several different theories on a historical 'fact' from which the author must choose one. While Gregory's characters seem to be fairly accurate in the way they are portrayed based on what we know of the 'real' people Gregory is writing about, there are some things about them that do not match the 'facts'. Both Mary and Anne are portrayed as being much younger than evidence would suggest leading to some questionable age differences between Mary and Henry VIII. Gregory has made Anne the older sister when it seems more likely that it was Mary who was the oldest, based on her being married first and claims made by her son. Mary's young age does influence the plot by making her more innocent than the 'real' Mary is generally thought to have been in 1521. Despite this, it is unclear whether this was a conscious choice by Gregory, the result of her using outdated sources or not supporting newer studies and the conclusions drawn from them. The same can be said of the paternity of Mary's two children.

Gregory had several people she could have chosen as narrator. However most of them are either too well documented or would have changed the tone of the novel. Mary is in fact the perfect narrator for a romantic novel because the fact that we know so little about her opens a world of possibilities for an author. The little we do know about Mary says plenty about who she might have been and only seems to confirm that Gregory made a good choice of narrator.

The novel features some potential misrepresentations of history concerning the era's attitude towards homosexuals. It is depicted as being very close minded, yet, if we consider how common gender fluidity and homosexual elements are in the works of Shakespeare, the attitude in the novel seems too categorical. Although none of Gregory's characters can really be considered as feminist, the novel itself can be considered such due to some feminist elements which surface when Mary is treated unfairly or is reflecting on her life. The purpose of the novel appears to be to entertain at the same time as it educates the reader on the historical events in the novel's plot. The notion of using historical novels for education is

not as strange as it sounds. Educating people through the use of historical fiction, including novels, as a complimentary tool to normal history books appears to be something that might inspire people who otherwise struggle with history to study more of it.

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