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Review: Lucy Arnold, *Reading Hilary Mantel: Haunted Decades*. (Bloomsbury Academic, 2020). 240 pages. ISBN: 9781350234499, Hbk, £95.00, Pbk £20.29, e-book £18.26.

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A review of 'Reading Hilary Mantel: Haunted Decades' by Lucy Arnold.

On reading the subtitle of this critical monograph shortly after Hilary Mantel passed away in 2022, it is inevitable that springs to mind is her 2013 lecture at the British Museum on the subject of royal women. At the time Mantel was still basking in the afterglow of her second Booker Prize win for the Tudor sequel *Bring up the Bodies* (2012) and must have seemed like a safe pair of hands for such an act of cultural gatekeeping. Likewise, her main argument – that historically, royal women have been expected to look good, to conform, and above all to reproduce – might have appeared relatively uncontroversial. However, from the moment Mantel turned her attention to contemporary royal women, above all Kate Middleton (Princess Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge), her words were interpreted as a vicious personal attack on the Duchess. In no time, tabloids were decrying the author who only days earlier had been treated as a something of a national treasure. The fact that her whole lecture was a sobering warning of how society tends to put unrealistic expectations on royal women and then knock them down when they fail to meet them was soon forgotten. The Prime Minister, David Cameron – another ghost from the past – felt obliged to intervene. Seeking like many a Conservative politician to be all things to all people he announced that Hilary Mantel was a wonderful novelist but was nevertheless wrong to say what she had said about the Duchess of Cambridge. Needless to say, it soon emerged that Cameron himself had neither seen nor heard the lecture. But that was just trivial detail. What mattered was setting the record straight – even where this entailed bending or ignoring the facts of what had actually been said.

In a sense the gap between truth and perception that characterized the brief controversy is an appropriate starting point for a consideration of Mantel's work because she was a writer who had always been interested in the distinction between how things seem and how they are. That distinction in turn is the basis for the hauntedness of the present by the past that Lucy Arnold argues is the primary characteristic of much of Mantel's fiction. Failures or refusals to accept preconceived ideas regarding what we know or think we know open the door for the return of the repressed, where what has been repressed often turns out to be one or more traumatic experiences that reverberate long after their occurrence, with consequences on both an individual and a collective level.

Perhaps befitting a study whose main argument is that ghosts of the past turn up in unexpected places, Arnold eschews the usual academic convention of working chronologically through her subject's career and takes instead a thematic approach that meanders through those works of Mantel where spectrality is foregrounded in order to strengthen the feeling of connection between them. This leads her to adopt a retrospective method whereby her first chapter analyses Mantel's 2003 memoir *Giving*

up the Ghost, the complexities of which Arnold suggests have been overlooked and under-appreciated in previous critical accounts. Through very close attention to textual detail, she argues that Mantel draws attention to the paradoxical nature of life writing: offering itself as the narrative of the coming-into-being of a sovereign self while at the same time demonstrating deep suspicion that there is any such thing. This dichotomy prompts Arnold to find that Mantel at times elides the voice of the speaker of *Giving up the Ghost* with her own, while also at times foregrounding the constructedness of that voice and therefore implicitly drawing apart from it. In turn, this leads Mantel into an interrogation of the autobiographical project as such, which Arnold argues becomes manifest in the form of a 'will-to-presence through writing which is perpetually deferred' (9).

If this does not necessarily sound as though it adds much to existing critical approaches to autobiography (or to life writing in general), what is really distinctive is the way Arnold then positions this reading of the text's critique of the autobiographical imperative in dialogue with Mantel's collection of short stories *Learning to Talk*, published the same year. Given that the narrative voice of *Giving up the Ghost* both is and is not equated with Mantel's own, this dialogue cannot fail to have the outcome that *Learning to Talk* becomes a contested intertext, the author of which is constructed through the play of symbolic difference. In turn, this has the effect that the possibility of a stable, unified self is rejected by both texts. Where classical autobiography organizes material into a harmonious whole, the sense of self that emerges from Mantel's explorations in life writing are therefore fragmentary, partial and highly contingent on circumstance.

One of the ironies of *Reading Hilary Mantel: Haunted Decades* is that having effectively overhauled the notion of a choate authorial self, the study nevertheless proceeds to afford a certain consistency to Mantel's work. For the most part this is done by paying greater attention to continuities between the texts rather than to what is different about them. For this reason nothing at all is said about several works by Mantel such as *A Change of Climate* (1994), *The Giant, O'Brien* (1998) and others. Presumably this is because Arnold does not find the same degree of hauntology in them that she does elsewhere, but a brief mention of what is specific and different about them might have underlined the point Arnold makes about Mantel's diffuse authorial self. Instead she focuses on those texts where instances of spectrality are either more prominent or can be made to appear so. Chapter Two looks at explicit forms of spectrality in the early fiction *Every Day is Mother's Day* (1985) and *Vacant Possession* (1986) to argue that the Thatcherite ideology of the 1980s resulted in the failure of a number of care-giving frameworks, and that from the sites of those collapses emerged a number of ghosts

that haunt the texts. Chapter Three takes a more explicit look at systems of political responsibility through an analysis of *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* (1988), which draws on Mantel's experiences of living in Saudi Arabia. Arnold applies Rancière's notion of *dissensus* to her analysis to argue that conservative religious regimes render certain human subjects spectral by denying them opportunities for political participation. This creates a form of negative capability whereby the very absence of certain marginalized groups from the public sphere can be made to signify an eloquent critique of state power structures on this scale.

If the forms of spectrality Arnold finds in *Eight Months on Ghazzah Street* are culturally specific to the Saudi Arabian context, the kinds of hauntedness that she identifies in Mantel's most explicitly spectral novel, *Beyond Black* (2005), in Chapter Four reveal a different kind of specificity. Drawing attention to the fact that we live in a historical period partly defined by the relationship between culture and technology, the questions she raises here are whether or not this renders conventional ghost figures obsolete and hence what kind of hauntology is possible in the twenty-first century. Drawing attention to the prevalence of various screens, technologies and languages through which ghosts become manifest in the text, she argues that the novel therefore represents an interrogation of the status of the ghost in the contemporary moment, and one which gestures towards an altered set of cultural conditions in which new technological media are necessary for spectres to become present at all. This emphasis on the contemporary feels like an appropriate end-point for the monograph, so it is a little surprising that after this Arnold turns back in time again to discuss the contemporary relationship with history in *Wolf Hall* (2009): by demonstrating that the two historical contexts of most prominence in it are the growth of print culture and the reformation abolition of purgatory, the final chapter argues that the novel dramatizes the connections between textuality and spectrality in a highly self-conscious way.

Part of that self-consciousness presumably stems from a critical awareness of how often we have all seen the Tudors represented already. On this subject, however, the monograph is remarkably silent. In fact, it makes very little reference to other authors who share Mantel's combined interests in the haunting of the present by the past on the one hand; and in the status and conditions of authorship on the other. Shena Mackay and Ali Smith are obvious examples but there are numerous others. Taking advantage of occasional opportunities to signpost out from Mantel towards a number of her contemporaries might have added an extra dimension to what Arnold says both about textuality and spectrality. Nevertheless, this is a thoughtful and illuminating study and one which is likely to be invaluable to anyone interested in either topic.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.