

BBC2 drama *Wolf Hall* is a work of fiction

Bishop of Shrewsbury criticises depiction of St Thomas More in BBC2 drama *Wolf Hall*



The Bishop of Shrewsbury has criticised *Wolf Hall* for its unfair depiction of St Thomas More.

The Lord Chancellor of England, played by Anton Lesser in the BBC2 Tudor history drama, is depicted as a cruel, cold and creepy misogynist.

Thomas Cromwell, who as King Henry VIII's Chief Minister helped to send St Thomas to his death, is in contrast projected as a deeply human, enlightened and modern man who cuddles kittens.

Although the series opened to rave reviews a number of historians and other commentators have already voiced concerns about the narrative, based on the novels by the award-winning writer Hilary Mantel, who grew up in Romiley, Cheshire, and attended Harrytown Convent, the local Catholic secondary school.

But two bishops have now expressed their own reservations about the drama because of its "dark" depiction of St Thomas, a martyr canonised in 1935 and made patron of politicians by Pope St John

Paul II in 2000.

The Rt Rev. Mark Davies, Bishop of Shrewsbury, said: “We should remember Wolf Hall is a work of fiction.

“It is an extraordinary and perverse achievement of Hilary Mantel and BBC Drama to make of Thomas Cromwell a flawed hero and of St Thomas More, one of the greatest Englishmen, a scheming villain.

“It is not necessary to share Thomas More’s faith to recognise his heroism – a man of his own time who remains an example of integrity for all times.

“It would be sad if Thomas Cromwell, who is surely one of the most unscrupulous figures in England’s history, was to be held-up as a role model for future generations.”

Speaking to the Daily Mail, the Rt Rev. Mark O’Toole, the Bishop of Plymouth, said that he thought there was a “strong anti-Catholic thread” in the series, which stars Shakespearean actor Mark Rylance as Cromwell and Damien Lewis as Henry VIII.

He said that the drama appeared to connect St Thomas and his Catholic faith to religious fundamentalism in the 21st century.



Abbot with cardinal and bishop resized “Those modern parallels need to be cautiously drawn,” said Bishop O’Toole (pictured). “Hilary Mantel does have this view that being a Catholic is destructive to your humanity,’ he continued.

“It is not historically accurate and it is not accurate in what the Catholic faith has to contribute to society and to the common good as a whole.

“There is an anti-Catholic thread there, there is no doubt about it. Wolf Hall is not neutral.”

Bishop O’Toole said: “The picture of More is dark. More was a man of his time and heresy was the big sin, really, it was the big wrong on both sides. It is hard for us in our modern mentality to see it as wrong. They looked on heretics as we look upon drug traffickers. But it is inaccurate to say that he (St

Thomas) condemned people to death.

“The other side which I think is dark, which it doesn’t give, are the things Erasmus describes – his enlightened family life, the fact that he did educate his daughters.”

Margaret, St Thomas’s eldest daughter, he said, learned Latin and Greek in the home “which was very uncommon”.

In Wolf Hall, however, it is Cromwell who is seen educating his daughters while St Thomas is depicted as humourless, severe and unloving.

“The idea that you get in Hilary Mantel that he (St Thomas) is a dour anti-feminist is pushing it a bit too far,” said Bishop O’Toole.

He said the series also failed to offer a positive view of the monasteries and their centrality to the lives of many communities, suggesting only that they were corrupt.

Bishop O’Toole added: “Did More make mistakes? Yes. Does it mean he is not a saint? No. Mainstream histories seem to recognise that. Wolf Hall is not presenting Thomas Cromwell through a neutral perspective. There is an anti-Catholic element.

“If we compare the characters and the manner of their deaths it is very interesting. Thomas More approached his death with serenity and even a degree of humour ... whereas Thomas Cromwell was shouting out loud all night in the Tower and begging for mercy. He saw his death as a deep failure whereas More transcended his.

“One is rightly held up as a saint and one is held up as a villain in history. One is worthy of devotion and the other is worthy of learning from but not in emulating because of his ruthlessness and pursuit of power – it is hard for me to say that he (Cromwell) was driven by principles instead of by darker motives.”

Bishop O’Toole, the former private secretary to Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor and head of the bishops’ Department of Evangelisation, has had a life-long devotion to St Thomas, attending St Thomas More Catholic High School in North London, and studying at and then serving as rector of Allen Hall, the seminary built on part of the site of St Thomas’s Chelsea home.

One of his first acts when he was ordained Bishop of Plymouth last year was to visit Buckfast Abbey, Devon, and pray before the saint’s hair shirt, which is kept by the Benedictine monks there.

Much of the historic criticism of St Thomas focuses on his alleged involvement in the pursuit and prosecution of heretics during the reign of Henry VIII.

English law at the time dictated that those who refused to abjure their heresy were burned at the stake.

St Thomas’s defenders argue that, although he approved of the laws, he sent no heretics to their deaths and that he would often use his power to persuade authorities to imprison rather than to execute them.

He resigned his office when Henry took the English Church into schism from Rome, annulled his marriage to Katherine of Aragon and wedded his mistress, Ann Boleyn, whom he hoped would bear him a son.

Cromwell summoned St Thomas to Lambeth Palace to take the oath attached to the Act of Succession, which recognised the progeny of the King and his new Queen to be legitimate heirs to the throne.

St Thomas refused on grounds of conscience to take the oath and was committed to the Tower of London.

He was beheaded on Tower Hill on 6 July 1535 after he was convicted of treason in a trial at Westminster Hall, London, in which he denounced the schism and said he was condemned to death simply because he refused to condone the King's marriage.

In the following five years Cromwell drove through the Protestant reforms to the Church, including the dissolution of the monasteries and the seizure by the Crown of their wealth, most of which was used by Henry to fund military expeditions into France.

Cromwell was suddenly arrested at the Privy Council table on 10 June 1540 and charged with heresy and treason.

His downfall came at the hands of his enemies, the Dukes of Norfolk and Suffolk, whom he had kept from court since his appointment as Lord Chancellor.

According to Professor Jack Scarisbrick's seminal biography of Henry VIII, they had won the ear of the King thanks to his romantic interest in Catherine Howard, a member of the Norfolk family.

Henry married Catherine, his fifth wife, on July 28 that year – the same morning as Cromwell was beheaded.

Diocese of Shrewsbury Online