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Inhabiting the Minds of the Dead: An Overview of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*

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Abstract:

This article seeks to explore the hidden aspects of Hilary Mantel's writing about Tudor history. Her novel *Wolf Hall* wins Man Booker Prize in 2009 and its sequel *Bring up the Bodies* won Man Booker Prize in 2012. She is not only the first female novelist to win the prize twice, but also the first writer to win with a sequel. The current study endeavors to present the prominent historical background prevailing discourses in her novels. She uses Thomas Cromwell as a central character in her novels as opposed to other popular royal body such as Henry VIII or Anne Boleyn, while re-establishing the image of Cromwell in the prejudiced minds of the reviewers.

Keywords: English Reformation, Tudors, Historical fiction, Protestants, Catholics.

Hilary Mantel was born on July 6, 1952, in Glossop Derbyshire. She was the eldest of the three children and reared in the mill village of Hadfield. Her first novel *Every Day Is Mother's Day* published, in 1985, marked the beginning of her literary journey that has continued. Except her two universally acclaimed historical novels she has written *The Vacant Possession* (1986), *Eight months on Ghazzah Street* (1988), *Fludd* (1989), *A Place of Greater Safety* (1992), *A Change of Climate* (1994), *An Experiment in Love* (1995), *The Giant O'Brien* (1998), and *Beyond Black* (2005). Her works are rich in themes and content, but the most important her texts are historical novels written in sequel form such as *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. These books are the part of a planned trilogy whose third book entitled *The Mirror and the Light* is pending publication.

Tudor history has remained one of the most talked of and written about topic of the writers. This period attracts the present century writers as well. Hilary Mantel is not the first novelist to write about Tudor history. Many novelists have chosen Tudor age as the background of their bestselling novels before Hilary Mantel's novels about Tudor era published. A few amongst them are Alison Weir, Philippa Gregory C. J. Sansom, Karen Harper, David Starkey, Jean Plaidy etc. Hilary Mantel's fictional work stands apart from the others due to its precision of events, style of writing, and deft handling of a subject already known to public. There is nothing new in the story of the Tudors which Hilary tells, readers are already aware of the forthcoming events. We all know the fate of Thomas Cromwell, Anne Boleyn, and Thomas

More, but the way Hilary places her dialogues in the mouths of the characters dead years back and reinvents the probable situations establishes her at the top of living legends.

Unlike other writers Hilary chose Thomas Cromwell as a central character in her prize winning novels. Thomas Cromwell has been criticized by the people and critics of his nation from centuries. According to many historians he was the leading figure who influenced Henry VIII to break from Roman Catholic Church and encouraged him to establish the Church of England. Cromwell was Henry's chief minister from 1532 to 1540. Many historians consider him the person who turned British politics upside down. He was the chief engineer behind the plan of Henry's annulment with Catherine of Aragon and Henry's remarriage to Anne Boleyn. Thus, he was behind England's separation from Roman Catholic Church and the establishment of the Church of England and English Reformation. For centuries, Cromwell's image was not positive in people's minds. His skills as a political leader were underrated, but Geoffrey Elton brought him to the center of a Tudor Revolution in his work *Tudor Revolution in Government* (1953). Hilary Mantel also brings his positive image in her novels. She talks to Sarah O'Reilly about Thomas Cromwell's handling by historians and tells:

I think Cromwell's been given a very hard time by writers. In fiction and drama he's been caricatured as an evil figure in a black cloak, lurking in the wings with dishonourable intentions. In the biography his essential self is missing, because his private life is almost entirely off the record. (Quoted in *Wolf Hall* 4)

Thomas Cromwell is a secondary figure in Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII*, in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for all Seasons* Cromwell is an antagonist. He does not find a place in Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl* either. When Mantel treats him a central character in her novels, critics opine of Hilary's being at Cromwell's side but she totally rejects such charges. She says in an article published in *The Guardian*:

It wasn't that I wanted to rehabilitate him. I do not run a Priory clinic for the dead. Rather, I was driven by powerful curiosity. If a villain, an interesting villain, yes? My first explorations challenged my easy prejudices. Some readers think I've been too easy on Cromwell. In fact it's possible to write a version of his career in which he is, at worst, the loyal servant of a bad master.

Thomas Cromwell's journey from a blacksmith's son to the chief minister of the King fascinated Hilary Mantel. She began probing the facts about his journey. She researched for many years about the historical facts of Cromwell's journey. She emphasized an author's responsibility to provide authentic information to their readers.

Wolf Hall, the first book in her planned trilogy explores the rise of Thomas Cromwell and Anne Boleyn, the fall of Cardinal Wolsey, as well as that of Thomas More. It comprises of the events leading to England's break from Roman Catholic Church and Henry's coronation as the supreme head of the Church and England. It narrates the story of Henry's annulment from

Catherine of Aragon and marriage to Anne Boleyn. It explores Thomas Cromwell's personal life and political expertise. His rise from Cardinal Wolsey's right hand man to King's right hand man.

The second book, *Bring Up the Bodies* describes one of the most discussed moments in history the imprisonment and execution of Anne Boleyn. She is the woman responsible for Henry VIII rewriting history, for whose love he divorced his first wife Catherine of Aragon, and for whom he broke from the Church of Rome and became the supreme head of his country, was finally taken to Tower and executed mercilessly.

The novel *Wolf Hall* is divided into six parts consisting three chapters each. The first part tells about Thomas Cromwell's early life, in 1500, and instantly shifts to 1527 the year Cardinal Wolsey fell from his distinguished post as Lord Chancellor which indicated Cromwell that his bad fortune was also near. Hilary becomes the first novelist to peep into Cromwell's personal life. Much is not known about his early life except a universally known fact that he was the son of a blacksmith. An amazing journey from such low birth to the right hand man of the King of the nation is captured fantastically by Hilary Mantel in her both the novels. Glimpses of his early hard life are seen in the very first chapter of the novel when it starts with the scene when Cromwell is lying wounded on ground, bleeding and fearing his father's advances:

'So now get up!' Walter is roaring down at him, working out where to kick him next. He lifts his head an inch or two, and moves forward, on his belly, trying to do it without exposing his hands, on which Walter enjoys stamping. 'What are you, an eel?' his parent asks. He trots backwards, gathers pace, and aims another kick. (Wolf Hall 3)

Cromwell's personal life, achievements, and losses are simultaneously discussed in contrast with his political achievements. Hilary Mantel deftly portrays his love for his wife Liz, their daughters Anne and Grace, each of whom died due to sweating sickness. According to Derek Gatherer sweating sickness appeared around the time of Cromwell's birth or with the invading army of the first Tudor king Henry VII in 1485. Talking about sweating sickness mentioned in *Wolf Hall* Derek Gatherer, a lecturer at Lancaster University, writes in an article in *Independent*, "Thomas Cromwell returned home to find his wife and two daughters had all died during the night, victims of a pestilence – the "sweating sickness" – that was scything through the Tudor world. "Unlike other fictions based on Cromwell, Mantel treats him as not only a shrewd, intelligent, foresighted man, but also as an honest, beloved, compassionate, and loyal person. One who can see corruption in religion and the clergy as well as beggars and needy on London's streets. He wanted to change the nation for the good of the people. When he reached the pinnacle of his position he fed many beggars and the needy every day. He desired to reform present condition of England and to do something for the orphans, beggars and poverty stricken, "At Austin Friars he has beer and bread sent out to the men who stand at the gate" (321). At one place talking to his cook Thurston he says, "It is a shame there should be beggars" (445). We find such examples of

generosity in many places in both novels. At one place in *Bring Up the Bodies*, Mantel mentions, "After supper tonight there will be the usual dole to the poor. Thurston, his chief cook, says they are feeding two hundred Londoners, twice a day" (47).

In Mantel's version, Cromwell is a compassionate reformist and a most loyal servant to his masters whether it is Cardinal Wolsey or King Henry VIII. His fondness for the Cardinal appears in many places. When at the time of Cardinal's fall he is sent to Esher, place of his exile, Cromwell goes with him and settles him there. He sends letters to Cardinal regularly even after returning from there. He keeps meeting the king to ask him to give Cardinal his place back even knowing King's reluctance in this matter. He wept secretly when he learned about the forty-four charges against the Cardinal. He felt there was no chance for his master now. He loved his master even after his death. He goes behind a nun to enquire about the dead Cardinal, because she claimed that she could reach the dead. Even Henry was impressed with Cromwell's loyalty. Henry spoke to Cromwell about disloyal people and praised his loyalty. The King said:

'I hate ingratitude. I hate disloyalty. That is why I value a man like you. You were good to your old master in his trouble. Nothing could commend you more to me, than that.' He speaks as if he, personally, hadn't caused the trouble; as if Wolsey's fall were caused by a thunderbolt. 'Another who has disappointed me is Thomas More.' (Wolf Hall 541)

Cromwell's skills as financial and legal adviser were unquestionable. Because of his unsurpassable intelligence he first entered into Cardinal Wolsey's service, then in Parliament and finally in the service of the supreme head of the nation King Henry himself. He was declared the chief minister of the King officially in 1534. Henry wanted to divorce Catherine because she failed to produce a male heir to rule the country and he was deeply in love with Anne Boleyn. In *Wolf Hall* Cardinal tells Cromwell, "...the king – after they have spent some twenty years together – would like to marry another lady. Any lady. Any well-connected princess whom he thinks might give him a son" (23). Nevertheless, the Pope rejected his annulment request. He disapproved this idea. At such point Cromwell and Henry thought of a plan and made parliament endorse Henry's claim to be the supreme head of the Church. After he became the head of the Church, Henry could take the decisions without anyone's consent and got power to annul his marriage himself.

The act of annulling Henry's marriage to Catherine created a great historical and political event in the history of England. Thomas More was against of this annulment. He was a staunch follower of Roman Catholic Church and Cromwell was a loyal servant to Henry. For him Henry's desire and order were supreme. In Mantel's version Cromwell is not a villain but a protagonist denying all the charges of a torturer by the historians.

The act of disapproving Henry's desire to get divorced to Catherine by Pope evoked Henry to proclaim himself the religious and political despot of the nation. This started in 1529 when Henry announced his separation from Catherine of Aragon, but when he married to Anne

Boleyn in 1533, the Pope disapproved of this marriage and the child born of their union, the future Queen Elizabeth I, was considered a bastard. Henry took solid steps and created Reformation Parliament (1529-1536). A scholar Jessica Lynn Hoeschen writes in her thesis,

To establish the new boundaries of his rule, Henry VIII created the Reformation Parliament (1529 -1536). This Parliament contained several prominent acts, including the Pardoning of the Clergy (1531), the Act in Restraint of Appeals (1532), the Act of Supremacy (1534), and the Succession Act (1534).The Pardoning of the Clergy exemplified Henry VIII's predilection for moderate reform by increasing power over Church government...the Act in Restraint of Appeals elevated power by forbidding appeals in ecclesiastical law to Rome...These laws concluded the initial phase of the English Reformation, but Tudor dynastic stability remained a concern.(5)

Thus, this time was the time of fundamental political changes in the nation. *Bring Up the Bodies* furthers the story after Henry and Anne's marriage. Their first issue was a girl child and then Anne miscarried twice and Henry became increasingly upset by Anne's dominating nature. She had not fulfilled her promise of begetting a male heir too. Henry was desperately needed a male heir and at this time Jane Seymour entered in the service of the Queen. She was comparatively a silent woman. The King was now feeling a strong attraction towards Jane Seymour, the daughter of old Sir John Seymour, the owner of Seymour family residence called 'Wolf Hall' in Wiltshire. Cromwell immediately sensed Henry's desires for Jane. Cromwell thinks about this matter in the following way:

He, Cromwell, had seen at Wolf Hall what Rafe could not see: silent Jane in his bed, pale and speechless Jane, that is what Henry dreams of now. You cannot account for a man's fantasies, and Henry is no lecher, he has not taken many mistresses. No harm if he, Cromwell, helps ease the king's way towards her. (Bring Up the Bodies 40)

Meanwhile Cromwell sensed Anne's disloyalty to her husband. Henry also got some news about Anne's infidelity. Now shrewd Cromwell could easily sweep Anne away from King's way to get married to Jane. Cromwell enquired in this matter and found Anne guilty. Charged with treason and infidelity, she was arrested, imprisoned, and tried for her alleged crimes. Anne was found guilty and executed in 1536. Hilary Mantel portrays Anne as an intelligent, clever, and a woman with a charismatic personality, but her hunger for power made her forget her limits. She was the daughter of Earl of Wiltshire, however, she was ambitious. She dreamt of being the Queen of England and she succeeded, but her passion for power was such that finally she was found involved in adulterous relationships with Henry's close friends and courtiers, and even with her own brother to save her position as a Queen. Mantel does full justice with historical facts and she gives the truth to the readers. Anne had affairs with many men including her own brother but Mantel's version says that whatever she did was for the sake of the title of the Queen. After her

marriage, she was unable to produce a male child and the King was desperate to have one. Therefore, his interest in Anne decreased gradually, and Anne for whom he changed the nation's history was not his beloved Anne anymore. Anne's dominating nature and her ways to keep an eye on official works made it even worse. Henry started thinking that when he married Anne, he was under some spell. Henry tells Cranmer, "It seems to me I was seduced," Henry says, "that is to say, I was practised upon, perhaps by charms, perhaps by spells. Women do use such things. And if that were so, then the marriage would be null, would it not" (184)? Anne wanted a male heir to secure her position as a Queen. This desire of hers resulted in adultery. While talking to Lady Rochford, Anne's brother George's wife, Cromwell came across the truth of Anne's incest. Lady Rochford tells him that she has seen George (Anne Boleyn's brother) and Anne Boleyn kiss each other. When Cromwell tells a brother can kiss his sister, she denies and says, "He may not, not in that way" (267). When Cromwell asks her why Anne would do this, why she would go against the law of nature and perform such a crime? Lady Rochford answers,

The better to rule. Surely you see it? She is lucky with Elizabeth, the child is like her. But suppose she gets a boy and it has Weston's long face? Or it looks like Will Brereton, what might the king say to that? But they cannot call it a bastard if it looks like a Boleyn. (276)

Lady Rochford tells Cromwell to talk to Mark Smeaton, a musician, in this matter. When Cromwell enquires Mark about his relationship with the Queen he confessed his adulterous relationship with her and named Henry Norris, the King's friend and chief of King's privy chamber, Francis Weston, William Brereton. Cromwell informs the King. He orders the Queen's arrest. In addition Norris, Weston, Smeaton and Brereton were tried and executed first, then, George Boleyn, Anne's brother, and finally Anne was tried and was sentenced to be dead. Norfolk read the sentence loud, "...thy judgement is this: Thou shalt be burned here, within the Tower, or else to have thy head smitten off, as the king's pleasure shall be further known --" (374). Thus the woman who was so important for the King met her end. Anne was crowned the Queen in 1533 and was executed in 1536, but the change she brought in the nation was the biggest historical event in the nation's history. In the author's note at the end of *Bring Up the Bodies* Hilary mentions, "A mercurial woman, elusive in her lifetime, Anne is still changing centuries after her death, carrying the projections of those who read and write about her" (409).

In all respects Mantel establishes herself as a living legend in writing fiction. She inhabits the minds of the dead so perfectly that some historians expressed fear that readers believe her stories as Historical facts. Mark Brown writes in an article in *The Guardian*, "One of Britain's most respected Tudor historians has expressed concern that prospective students imagine Hilary Mantel's novels are fact. John Guy told the Hay literary festival in Wales that Mantel's Thomas Cromwell novels needed to be enjoyed for what they were: fiction."

Mantel's historical novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* not only won Booker Prize but also the hearts of a million readers. Whether intentionally or not she succeeded in

establishing positive image of Thomas Cromwell. She did not choose any royal figure as the central character of her novels other than Thomas Cromwell. In the words of Hilary in the author's note in *Bring Up the Bodies*, "This book is of course not about Anne Boleyn or about Henry VIII but about the career of Thomas Cromwell, who is still in need of attention from biographers" (410). It is not an exaggeration to say that Cromwell becomes 'entirely beloved Cromwell'.

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