# HERSTORY IN HISTORY – WOMEN CHARACTERS IN HILARY MANTEL'S *WOLF HALL* AND *BRING UP THE BODIES*

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**Abstract**

Recovering the lost voices of women in history has been one of the significant endeavors of feminists. Women writers of the present century also venture to recreate the lives of women long gone and historical fiction is one of the most convenient genres for such representation. Hilary Mantel in her Tudor historical fiction Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies charts the rise and fall of Thomas Cromwell, the Chief Minister of Henry VIII. Apart from featuring an unlikely hero, Cromwell, another striking aspect of the novels is Mantel's portrayal of the women characters. Focusing on the lives of the royal women, especially the first three wives of Henry VIII, Mantel highlights the predicament of these women, whose only role was to fulfill their biological duty of producing a male heir, failing which they were not even guaranteed the safety of their lives and much worse, were made victims of history by the discourse of their own bodies.

**Keywords:** *sphere, body, fertility*

Hilary Mantel was born in 1962 in Derbyshire, England. She has penned numerous novels including *A Place of Greater Safety*, *Fludd*, *Vacant Possession*, *Every Day is Mother's Day*, *Giving up the Ghost* etc. Recently she has won two Booker Prizes for the first two installments of her Tudor trilogy, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, historical novels tracing the life of Thomas Cromwell, the Chief Minister of Henry VIII. Being the first woman writer to secure this glory, the third installment of the triptych, *The Mirror and the Light*, that is yet to be published, has raised much speculation. The novels trace the life of Thomas Cromwell, the son of a Putney blacksmith, in the service of Henry VIII and his eventual fall caused by his whimsical master. Mantel's novels very frequently deal with the treatment of women and in the words of John Mullan, a reviewer writing for *The Guardian*, her women characters inhabit a ". . . stifling world where women are deprived of all power to act, even to move. . ." He continues to say that many of them "have no escape from the power exerted over them". Even in her Tudor novels she portrays a similar predicament of the royal women of the Tudor court who were wedged in the quagmire of power.

The Tudor period proffers fascinating perception on the question of sphere, a corollary of power. James Daybell in *Women Letter-Writers in Tudor England* refutes the idea that the concept of sphere- public and the private, was developed during the Victorian period and traces it back to the Tudor times with the help of manuscript newsletters. The letters that women wrote during this period stand testimony to the fact that they established alliance between both the spheres thus blurring the distinction between them. However the women of this period seem to have been restricted in myriad ways. Alison Plowden in *Tudor Women: Queens & Commoners* maps out the life of the Tudor women. In the Introductory chapter she states, ". . . sixteenth century England was still very much a man's world. With no voice in parliament women could play no part in making or changing the law and, indeed, common law barely recognized their existence, except as an appendage of husband or father"(5). This was applicable to the Tudor royal women too who were highly capable and in the words of Plowden, "The royal House of Tudor was to owe a great deal to its womenfolk. Indeed, it owed its very existence to a woman . . ." (7) .The reference is to Lady Margaret Beaufort whose maneuverings led to the accession of her Tudor son Henry VII to the English throne. Also the match that she finalized for him with Elizabeth of York bore its fruits by ensuring the continuance of a peaceful Tudor reign ending the disputes between the Yorks and the Lancastrians for good. Though Margaret initially played

a political role to secure the throne for her son, she immediately relegated herself to the domestic affairs of the royal household. Plowden says:

> She never took any active part in politics and probably never wanted to, but in her own sphere her influence seems to have been entirely benign. To her contemporaries she embodied all the most admired female virtues, being a chaste, fruitful and submissive wife, a loving mother, a dutiful daughter, an affectionate sister and a pious, charitable Christian (14).

Her contemporaries seem to have valued her role in the domestic sphere rather than her political role. Her sense of duty as the woman of the royal household was effectively passed over to her daughter-in-law Elizabeth, who immediately became busy producing children.

A study of the Tudor period would reveal that marital bond is the only means through which women could secure security and status in the society. But it brought along with it the dangers of brutality and unjust treatment in the hands of the husband and most importantly, ". . . martyrdom, which few wives escaped. From her mid-teens to her early forties (if she lived that long), the average woman could expect to face the ordeal of childbirth if not annually, at least upwards of a dozen times. Most women bore between eight and fifteen children and saw perhaps half of them die . . ." (6). The lack of proper reproductive healthcare and medical facilities and poor sanitary conditions spared none including royalty. Elizabeth of York delivered eight children out of which only four survived and she herself died in the childbirth at the age of thirty eight. Though royal births received much attention, such casualties were borne with mettle as it was "a story repeated in countless other families whose domestic tragedies are recorded in brass and stone in parish churches up and down the land" (6). But the lives of royal women were confined in ways as the commoners were not.

The primary role that a Queen was expected to perform was to produce children, particularly sons. This biological duty, as it was called, was massively important to ensure the sustenance of the dynasty. Though no regal laws prohibited a woman from ascending the throne, unstable and difficult times of the past led to the belief that a male-heir would be the ideal option to secure the throne. The Tudor period acutely felt this necessity because "it was a dynasty founded primarily on conquest rather than heritage" (bbc.uk). The competing powers of France and Spain were also posing continuous threats to the English. This was the state of affairs when Henry VIII, the second son to Elizabeth of York ascended the throne in 1509.

A galaxy of literature is available on the Reformation and the Dissolution of Monasteries that Henry masterminded during his period. Receiving commensurate attention is his longing for a male-heir and in his endeavor to have one, his eventual marriage to six women. Though his desire was fulfilled by his third wife, he assayed to marry three more times. *The Six Wives Of Henry VIII*, *Six Wives: The Queens of Henry VIII*, *Henry VIII and his Six Wives*, *The Six Wives and Many Mistresses of Henry VIII: The Women's Stories*, *The six wives of Henry VIII: the king seen through the eyes of each of his ill-fated wives*, *Henry VIII: The King, His Six Wives, and His Court* are the books that talk about his marriage to and treatment of these women. Janet Hardy-Gould, the author of *Henry VIII and his Six Wives* in his introduction to the book states:

> There were six of them – three Katherines, two Annes, and a Jane. One of them was the King's wife for twenty-four years, another for only a year and a half. One died, two were divorced, and two were beheaded. It was a dangerous, uncertain life. After the King's death in 1547, his sixth wife finds a box of old letters – one from each of the first five wives. They are sad, angry, frightened letters. They tell the story of what it was like to be the wife of Henry VIII of England.

It was his first wife, Catherine of Aragon who was cast aside after twenty four years of marriage for not producing a male-heir. The King by then had lusted after Anne Boleyn and married her with the hopes of having a son. Henry was disappointed this time too for their first child was a daughter. Also Anne "miscarried of the boy who might have saved her"(Plowden 5) and the child was also found to have a deformity of some kind and in those days this was attributed to the woman being unfaithful to the husband. The King who had been waiting for a chance to do away with this ranting loose-tongued spouse, sent her to the scaffold on the charges of adultery and conspiracy against him along with five other men with whom she was supposed to have had a liaison, one of them being her own brother George Boleyn. He married Jane Seymour within days after Anne's execution and this woman became his favourite wife because just after seventeen months of marriage she presented him with the long-awaited male-heir, Edward. The King was elated but soon distress followed as Jane passed away just 12 days after the delivery due to post-natal complications. Henry tried to overcome this affliction by marrying once again and this time his bride was Anne of Cleves from Germany. Fascinated by seeing Holbein's portrait of her, he agreed for the union only to find his bride ugly and plain on the night of the wedding. Calling her the 'Flander's Mare', he set out to

annul the marriage immediately. Since the lady was very amicable, the happy Henry put the terms of annulment much in her favor and the two parted on friendly terms and remained so for the rest of their lives. His fifth wife was the gentle 16 year old Catherine Howard whom Henry called his 'rose without a thorn' and the 'very jewel of womanhood'. Soon she was accused of living a dissipated life with Francis Dereham prior to her marriage to the King. Unlike the case of Anne, this time the charges were acquiesced by the lady and she too was beheaded. Catherine Parr, the last of Henry's wives had the good fortune to outlive him thus escaping the fate of the other women.

An exploration of the Tudor age, even after a passage of 500 odd years would shove the reader into copious discussions about Henry's wives, particularly their bodies and fertility .The immense historical content would reveal the shocking extent to which their royal bodies were laid bare for scrutiny then and now. A random page from Antonio Fraser's non-fictional *The Six Wives of Henry VIII* reads thus:

> Naturally he [Henry VIII] was quick to blame the Lady [Anne of Cleves] than himself. Her body, not her beauty, was now the issue. For example he told Sir Anthony Denny, a member of his Privy Chamber, that his wife was not only 'not as she was reported, but had breasts so slack and other parts of body in such sort that [he] somewhat suspected her virginity'. The King's verdict was this; 'he could never in her company be provoked and steered to know her carnally.' " (Chapter 14)

The reference here is to his fourth wife Anne of Cleves whose 'sagging breasts' and 'body odor' seems to have repulsed Henry VIII. He has given more such testimonies against his wife as a reason for his inability to consummate the marriage. Though there are accounts of Henry describing his own virility in detail in the ensuing paragraphs, they are all to his credit- a manly King still capable of producing an heir. The other wives of Henry are more or less recorded in a similar fashion. As for Katherine, it was her virginity that came into question after years of their marriage and the whole of Europe seems to have discussed her maidenhood. Anne's charge of adultery with five men made her body an object of ridicule and derision. Catherine Howard suffered a fate less intense for by the time the King had had a male-heir through Jane and this time he was more worried about a losing a younger wife. However the court contemporaries seem to have recorded how often Henry visited the bed of this beautiful girl.

The life of Henry VIII has been the fertile ground for fiction and non-fiction writers writing about the Tudor era. They have particularly concentrated on the love life of Henry VIII as the sheer indeterminacy of his nature contributed to the sense of perennial terror and danger which his women were forced to battle for survival, failing which they ended up having their heads severed from their bodies. *Times of Malta* mentions Mantel's ironic comment about the choice of Tudor age as a backdrop for her historical novels, "This [The Tudors] is our national soap opera . . . Henry is a monster king – a Bluebeard – with his wives and their various fates. No one else has a king who marries six wives and executes two of them. It is one of our national glories, you know". Her novels focus in detail, the rise and fall of Henry's first two wives and his wandering eyes already eagerly following his next wife-to-be. Though the narrative is not from the perspective of any of the women characters, it still emphasizes the ways in which the bodies of these royal women have been hegemonized.

Mantel is perpetually engrossed with the issue of women's body and its progenitive capacity. This is because the endometriosis that she was affected by at a very early age, and diagnosed with later, never permitted her to bear children. In one of her essays she stated that she had been pregnant just for a day but it was an ectopic conception which bled to an end. Mantel has recorded on many occasions about the traumatic experiences of learning about her disorder and the painful fight that she had to put up against it. In her Foreword to Jill Eckersley's *Coping with Endometriosis*, she states:

> At 19, I began actively seeking a diagnosis. I was 27 when I received it, and by that stage, major surgery was the only answer. Abruptly I lost my fertility and, in some ways, lost myself. Though I was told I was cured, the condition recurred, and drug treatment led to huge weight gain. Thyroid failure followed and the devastating chain of consequences pursues me to this day. Anything I have achieved has been in the teeth of the disease.

The harrowing effect of the ailment has an enduring influence on most of her works. Her first novel *Every Day is Mother's Day* and its sequel *Vacant Possessions* both deal with pregnant women. The resonances are found in other works as well, the culmination of which is *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. By presenting in detail the lives of

Catherine, Anne and Jane, the first three wives of Henry, Mantel explicates the tendency of the Tudor age which constricts the royal women to the sphere of their bodies and only on condition of fulfilling their biological role will they be allowed into a broader sphere that warrants merely the fulfillment of their domestic chores, which was most dutifully carried out by their predecessors Margaret Beaufort or Elizabeth of York.

*Wolf Hall* begins with Henry already being vexed with Catherine of Aragon and is found lusting after Anne Boleyn who is determined to avoid all his advances until they enter a marital relationship. The King not used to such obstinacy from women is willful to consummate his passion and thereby willing to even break off from Rome to secure an annulment of his first marriage. The novel details the capabilities of these two women as they are trying hard to secure the most important thing in their lives - for Catherine, it's her honour and position as Henry's lawful wife and Queen and also the rights that is due to her daughter Mary, and for Anne, to realize her dreams of becoming 'Anna Regina'.

The novel and its sequel show how Henry makes victims of the two most bold and dynamic women of the Tudor age through the discourse of their bodies. In the case of Catherine, it's not just her inability to produce a male-heir, but the claim that she had already consummated her first marriage with Henry's elder brother Arthur thus nullifying her second marriage. This allegation which Henry makes almost after twenty years of their married life was vehemently opposed by Catherine. According to her, the earlier marriage which had lasted only a few weeks because of the untimely death of her first husband did leave her an untainted virgin. Unflinching, the woman makes her stand and validates the legitimacy of her marriage. This part of history forms a major portion of the first part of *Wolf Hall*. Amidst the descriptions of papal court, papal legate and papal dispensations, Mantel takes singular effort to portray how the bodies of the royal women became a matter of engaging discussion among rank and file. In the second half of the novel, Cromwell is found conversing with Lady Rochford, wife of George Boleyn, brother to Anne, "I never knew it was treason to say what passes in a prince's bed. All Europe talked about Katherine, what body part was put where, was she penetrated, and if she was did she know?' " (505).The novel teeming with such statements does not shock the reader anymore with its apparent bluntness but obtains their commiseration for the deplorable condition of these royal women. In another instance, Mantel records that "the cardinal opens a court of inquiry at York Place, to look into the validity of the king's marriage. It's a secret court; the queen is not required to appear, or even be represented; she's not even supposed to know, but all Europe knows" (80). Mantel by trying to capture the attitude of royalty towards its women ingeminates their lamentable position yet again.

Catherine, true to historical records, is depicted putting up a bold front during these misfortunes. "He, Cromwell, admires Katherine: he likes to see her moving about the royal palaces, as wide as she is high, stitched into gowns so bristling with gemstones that they look as if they are designed less for beauty than to withstand blows from a sword"(84). Mantel's narration in the present tense from Cromwell's perspective facilitate the readers to perceive the women characters from behind the rationale of Cromwell, a judicious and balanced individual whose sense of reasoning and analysis is responsible for his rise in the dangerous and glamorous Tudor court. The compliment that Mantel pays to these women through Cromwell is the highest narrative tribute that she could offer them. In one instance, Cromwell praises Katherine for her tenacity in battling the King's obstinacy:

> You can hear what Katherine says. That wreck of a body, held together by lacing and stays, encloses a voice that you can hear as far as Calais: it resounds from here to Paris, from here to Madrid, to Rome. She is standing on her status, she is standing on her rights; the windows are rattled, from here to Constantinople. What a woman she is, Thomas Cromwell remarks in Spanish: to no one in particular. (89)

Rather than making Catherine or Anne Boleyn the focal character, Mantel has created a powerful male protagonist whose brilliant analytical mind and calculative gaze is always at work producing coherent inferences about the women characters through the course of the events. The readers exposed to these convincing speculations are led to see these over familiar women from a fresh perspective.

Mantel however with her extensive research has been faithful to real historical facts in all possible contexts. Plowden's historic account shows Cromwell telling Chapuys that

> . . . Nature had wronged the Queen [Katherine] in not making her a man, as but for her sex, 'she might have surpassed all the heroes of history'. As for Henry, he had long since had to resign himself to the fact that he would never win an argument with his first wife and had therefore wisely confined himself to bullying her through intermediaries. But, like Cromwell, he was in no doubt of her heroic qualities. 'The Lady Catherine', he is reported to have said, 'is a proud, stubborn woman of very high courage. Had she taken it into her head to act, she could easily have mustered an army and waged war against me as fiercely as ever her mother did in Spain.'(38)

Plowden's work which concentrates particularly on the Tudor women finds space for such elaborate recording of facts. Mantel's novels with the prime focus on the exploits of Cromwell still manage to convert these bare facts of history into an interesting narrative:

> The king demands that Katherine give up for his coming child the robes in which the child Mary was christened. When he hears Katherine's answer, he, Thomas Cromwell, laughs. Nature wronged Katherine, he says, in not making her a man; she would have surpassed all the heroes of antiquity. A paper is put before her, in which she is addressed as 'Princess Dowager'; shocked, they show him how her pen has ripped through it, as she scores out the new title. (481)

Mantel's narrative on the one hand portrays the persecution of women's body and at the same time infuses life into those women thus highlighting the brave resistance that they put up in the face of suffering.

Anne Boleyn, the next of Henry's victim also features prominently in the novels. To many historians Anne remains an enigma. Elizabeth Norton in *Anne Boleyn: Henry VIII's Obsession* mentions the contradicting identities given to her in the course of history − wicked murderer, religious reformer, protestant saint and so on. Some others call her a witch and a Great Whore. Lynda Telford in *Tudor Victims of the Reformation* names Anne amongst the foremost victims. The reason for such contrasting portrayal is that the real intentions behind her actions are never known. Her astuteness, political shrewdness and forward manners, were never accepted by anyone, include her own relatives. Those were the days when influential families used the unmarried women of their household, sisters or daughters, to further their position in the society and the personal preferences of these women hardly mattered. Whether Anne was trying to secure herself a fortune through an advantageous marriage or she was a helpless victim, having accidentally caught the eye of the King, and seeing no escape, was trying to retain her virtue by demanding a marital bond in order to escape the fate of some women, her own sister included, who were used by Henry and cast aside later, is not known for sure. But Mantel does not express any doubts over the aspirations of Anne. Her Anne Boleyn "is a calculating being, with a cold slick brain at work behind her hungry black eyes" (350). In *Bring Up the Bodies* Cromwell tells his nephew that, "He has always rated Anne highly as a strategist. He has never believed in her as a passionate, spontaneous woman. Everything she does is calculated, like everything he does. He notes, as he has these many years, the careful deployment of her flashing eyes. He wonders what it would take to make her panic" (113).

Mantel portrays Anne and Cromwell equally powerful, "He has made her queen, she has made him minister; but they are uneasy now, each of them vigilant, watching each other for some slip that will betray real feeling, and so give advantage to the one or the other: as if only dissimulation will make them safe"(29-30). Anne is shown manipulating and maneuvering to attain her heart's desire, and this she did at a time when it was dangerous to be a woman and most of all a Queen. When asked why Anne Boleyn was not her protagonist, Mantel had stated in her interview to the *Daily Beast*:

> The books and plays are not about Anne Boleyn. She is a supporting character. People thought that as a woman writer, I should have written a book about Anne Boleyn. People are very prescriptive about that, but she must be seen as her own character within a 16th-century framework, and strict gender hierarchy. She was not a feminist, she was a very powerful woman.

Mantel has understood the limitations of the sixteenth century women. And the fact that Anne was able to outshine in spite of such restrictions validates the writer's statement. However Anne's denigration continues down the centuries. Geoffrey Moorhouse, a contemporary English journalist and author in *The Last Divine Office: Henry VIII and the Dissolution of the Monasteries* calls her 'coquettish'. Claire Ridgeway, another contemporary British writer and researcher of history has written seven historical works about the Tudors, four focusing particularly on Anne. In her exclusive website for Anne titled *The Anne Boleyn Files*, she lists out the various names given to her by her contemporaries and other writers and historians. The King's Whore and naughty paike (Michael Farquhar), the concubine and the she-devil (Chapuys, the Imperial Ambassador), the Goggle Eyed Whore (Margaret Chanseler), Common stewed [professional] whore (the Abbot of Whitby) and the scandal of Christendom (Catherine of Aragon) are some of them. Needless to mention that each of these names was attributed to her to demean the way in which she had used her body. G.W.Bernard in his *Anne Boleyn: Fatal Attractions* argues radically that the charges of adultery laid against Anne Boleyn may be true after all. But Ridgeway opposes Anne's detractors stating that "to think of Anne Boleyn as some kind of harlot or sexual predator who stole the King's heart from the true queen is to do her a mighty injustice. There is absolutely no evidence at all that Anne was sexually immoral, that she had sexual relationships before her relationship with Henry VIII or that she was unfaithful to him". Plowden states, "Anne's real crime was her failure to produce a son, compounded by the fact that she'd been the cause of the King's making

a lovesick fool of himself before the world" (42). These opposing views have made Anne a favorite choice of many writers.

The ambivalence surrounding Anne's character is left unresolved by Mantel in the novels. Written from the perspective of Cromwell, this ambiguity is natural, for the King seemed to possess no moral scruples and Cromwell, an ardent executor of the King's will was looking for ways and means to indict and not acquit her. In his eyes, Anne would torment anybody "for her own sport while she is arranging her career in the way it suits her" (350). This statement he makes to Thomas Wyatt to affirm Anne's strong will and strategy. The real Anne was also branded as a witch because of a huge rumored mole in her neck. She was also believed to have had a sixth finger in her right hand which was considered a deformity in those days. Added to it the supposed deformity of the child that she lost during the fifteenth week of pregnancy intensified the belief. In the course of the novel a number of characters state her occult connections. In a conversation Cromwell has with George Cavendish, the man says the King ". . . is frightened of her [Anne], you know. She's a witch.' He [Cromwell] says, don't be childish" (63). In *Bring Up the Bodies*, when his son Gregory comes up with a story about Anne being a witch, his "smile becomes pained. 'Do not spread this about the household' " (107), says Cromwell. Though Cromwell never negates such statements, he never affirms them too.

Mantel portrays all England defaming Anne as a whore, "All the same: in village alehouses up and down England, they are blaming the king and Anne Boleyn for the weather: the concubine, the great whore" (22).Also the Spanish Imperial Ambassador Chapuys whose loyalties lie with Katherine of Aragon takes delight in abusing Anne as a whore in his conversations with Cromwell. Cromwell never endorses this opprobrium. Sion Madoc, a boatman on the Thames with his 'blasphemous argon', ". . . calls Anne an eel, he calls her a slippery dipper from the slime, and he [Cromwell] remembers what the cardinal had called her: my serpentine enemy" (295). Later when Cromwell recollects this conversation he thinks it is "very unlike the real Anne" (295). But Henry VIII was most severe in his abuses against Anne always harping on the note of infidelity, "'But you ought to know,' the king insists. 'Her nature. How ill she has behaved to me, when I gave her everything. All men should know and be warned about what women are. Their appetites are unbounded. I believe she has committed adultery with a hundred men'" (181).And when the indictments against Anne come to his hand:

> . . . he [Cromwell] sees at once that, though the script is a clerk's, the king has been at work. He can hear the king's voice in every line: his outrage, jealousy, fear. It is not enough to say that she incited Norris to adultery with her in October 1533, nor Brereton in November the same year; Henry must imagine the 'base conversations and kisses, touchings, gifts'. . . It is not enough to say that she sinned with her own brother: one must imagine the kisses, resents, jewels that passed between them, and how they looked when she was 'alluring him with her tongue in the said George's mouth, and the said George's tongue in hers'. It is more like a conversation with Lady Rochford, or any other scandal-loving woman, than it is like a document one carries into court; but all the same, it has its merits, it makes a story, and it puts into the heads of those who will hear it certain pictures that will not easily be got out again. (198)

Mantel through Cromwell voices Henry's gambit which turns his wives into victims of not only his own eccentricity but also history. Victimized through their own bodies, these women were accused of something false or something they were not responsible for- lacking virginity or virtue or beauty or the ability to produce sons. In what seems to be a very insignificant conversation of court gossip between Lady Rochford and Cromwell, the lady asks:

> "Have you ever observed that when a man gets a son he takes all the credit, and when he gets a daughter he blames his wife? And if they do not breed at all, we say it is because her womb is barren. We do not say it is because his seed is bad.'
> 'It's the same in the gospels. The stony ground gets the blame.'
> The stony places, the thorny unprofitable waste . . . (503-504)

The woman is wife to George Boleyn, Anne's brother. Childless and hence unvalued by her husband, she turns embittered. Being in Anne's train, she was chiefly responsible for the execution of her husband and sister-in-law. In the novel even Cromwell is slightly wary and unsettled in her presence. "'You are too good for me. You see through all my ploys'" (596), he says to her in *Wolf Hall*.

The other women of the court and other noble families too seemingly lead miserable lives. Mary Boleyn, Anne's elder sister whom even Cromwell calls a whore was one of Henry's mistresses. A servant once refers to her as 'every man's hackney' (169). She was cast aside by Henry and Mantel portrays that after Henry's marriage to her sister Anne, Mary was forced to bed down with the King by the pregnant Anne herself, in order to avoid a new

potential rival from other families. She is widowed through her first marriage and the second time she was believed to have married for love, a man much lower in status. Angered by her act the King and Anne banish her from the court and so she settles with her husband in the countryside. Having served her family and sister to the best of her means, she never received any financial help from anyone when she faces a financial crisis later. She doesn't feature onstage in the second novel but a typical court gossip about Mary in the words of Lady Rochford is, "Mary Boleyn down in the country, I hear she blossoms like the month of May. Fair and plump, they say. How is it possible? A jade like Mary, through so many hands you can't find a stable lad who hasn't had her. But put the two side by side, and it is Anne who looks – how would you express it? Well-used'" (72). Victims themselves, these instances expose the cruelty that women inflict on other women.

The Seymour family of Wolf Hall presents another case. Old Sir John Seymour has been having an affair with his eldest daughter- in-law ever since she came into the family. Anne is reporting of the crestfallen son, Edward's Seymour's reaction, "She, Catherine Fillol, she's to be put in a convent. I think he should put her in a cage! He is asking for an annulment. As for dear Sir John, I think we will not see him at court soon'" (297). In *Bring Up the Bodies* it is reported that "The adulteress was locked up in a convent, and soon obliged him by dying; now he (Edward) has a new wife, who cultivates a forbidding manner and keeps a bodkin in her pocket in case her father-in-law gets too close. But it is forgiven, it is forgiven. The flesh is frail. This royal visit seals the old fellow's pardon" (17). The old man's crimes are forgiven to the extent where the King is ready to marry his daughter, Jane Seymour. But the dead woman has justly paid for her sin and the new wife is still under the pressure of guarding herself in her own house.

Henry's third wife Jane Seymour becomes the butt of everyone's insults in the novels as her simplicity, modesty and plainness, very was often vouched for by the historians too, are deemed unfit for survival in the royal house. And the most sensible Cromwell is attracted towards her for the same reason. She is called 'milksop' and 'pasty face' by Anne. However when Jane catches the attention of the King, he ensures that Jane and her family don't sell themselves cheap to the King. And the reason that Henry chooses a woman so plain is no one has ever "known Jane have anything to say for herself" (19). In the words of the King she is a "'A tender, modest, shame-faced maid, such as few be in our day.'"(37). And all that the King wants after a ranting wife is a "silent Jane in his bed, pale and speechless Jane" (33). When Cromwell finalizes her motto as a Queen as "Bound to Obey and Serve" (403), Henry is perfectly contented.

Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII, is another significant character from the novels. She is his only child through Catherine of Aragon that survived to adulthood. But she was suffering from perpetual illness which worsened with her women's problems. Except for her mother nobody seemed to think Mary would amount to anything. According to Henry she is "a frail daughter whom any vagrant wind may destroy" (81). Both the mother and daughter suffered the wrath of the King when they did not agree with the annulment of his first marriage and also his new title as The Supreme Head of the Church. He keeps them both in separate places and never permits them to meet until they budge which never happens. Catherine dies without bidding goodbye to her daughter. In a conversation Cromwell has with the Duke of Norfolk and Suffolk, they argue about Mary's succession to the throne:

> 'Mary?' he [Norfolk] says. 'That talking shrimp?'
> 'She will grow up.'
> 'We are all waiting,' Suffolk says. 'She has now reached fourteen, has she not?'
> 'But her face,' Norfolk says, 'is the size of my thumbnail.' The duke shows off his digit to the company. 'A woman on the English throne, it flies in the face of nature.'
> 'Her grandmother was Queen of Castile.'
> 'She cannot lead an army.'
> 'Isabella did.'(256)

Obviously it is Crowell who argues in favor of Mary. Though there are instances when Mary demonstrates the strong will of her father, she is hardly considered an entity by anybody. As for Cromwell, it is not just his perceptive thinking but also the close connection that he shared with his own daughters that enabled him to acknowledge the potentialities of Mary who is almost the same age as his daughters.

Mantel portrays Cromwell's household to be a model household. Though no records exist about Cromwell's personal life, Mantel chooses to give a positive picture, a fitting contrast to the royal domiciliary. Cromwell was married to Elizabeth Wyckes and they had three children, George, Grace and Anne. The relationship he shares with his wife is of a different order. She is portrayed a business woman, with two apprentices doing "silk-

work, tags for the seals on documents and fine net cauls for ladies at court" (35). He cherishes his son as well as his daughters alike. Except for his son, the rest of them succumb to sweating sickness and die an untimely death. But their memories haunt Cromwell eternally. In fact after his wife's death he gets into a relationship with Johanne, his wife's sister, simply because she looks like her. Earlier when his children were alive, he used to take pride in them, especially his daughter Anne, "you don't have to lead this female child through a conversation with the little shifts and demurs that most women demand. She's not like a flower, a nightingale: she's like … like a merchant adventurer, he thinks . . ." (128). Later in a conversation with Mary Boleyn, he discusses his children:

> 'I have a big boy,' he says, 'he's at Cambridge with a tutor. I have a little girl called Grace; she's pretty and she has fair hair . . . And I have Anne, Anne wants to learn Greek.'
> 'Goodness,' she says. 'For a woman, you know …'
> 'Yes, but she says, "Why should Thomas More's daughter have the pre-eminence?" She has such good words. And she uses them all.'
> 'You like her best.'
> '. . . I could send her into some other household, but then . . . well, her Greek . . .' (138)

In those days it was unnatural for a girl to get educated. The historic exceptions were the daughters of Thomas More, who received classical education. Especially his eldest daughter Margaret set the precedence of excelling in Latin and Greek and this example was emulated by other noble families. Mantel by portraying her Cromwell endeavoring to educate his daughters turns him into a trailblazer in the political as well as the personal front. In another instance, Cranmer pays a visit to Cromwell's house and Cromwell's grown-up nieces are running their dogs up and down the hall making such a racket.

> 'Yes, it is excellent,' Alice says. 'We have the manners of scullery maids and no one will ever want to marry us. If our aunt Mercy had behaved like us when she was a girl, she would have been knocked round the head till she bled from the ears.'
> 'Then we live in happy times,' he [Cromwell] says.
> When she has gone, and the door is closed behind her, Cranmer says, 'The children are not whipped?'
> 'We try to teach them by example, as Erasmus suggests, though we all like to race the dogs up and down and make a noise, so we are not doing very well in that regard.'(250-251)

The above scene, completely out of the author's head aims to offer a striking contrast to the court life. Though it is obvious from Cranmer's questioning that times have not changed in favour of women, it highlights the birth of such possibilities mainly focusing on the fact that the common women were at least free from the constraints that bound the royal women.

Mantel has also made the common folk, especially the women record their subversion. Liz, Cromwell's wife, on hearing that the King is planning to annul his marriage on account of not having a male child, says, ". . . half the people in the world will be against it.' By half the people she means, "'All women everywhere in England. All women who have a daughter but no son. All women who have lost a child. All women who have lost any hope of having a child. All women who are forty'" (38). Cromwell himself admires Catherine when he is in the service of Cardinal Wolsey and soliloquized his subversion in *Wolf Hall* as, "Is a woman bound to wifely obedience, when the result will be to turn her out of the estate of wife?"(84). These are obviously the resonances of Mantel's own views which she never fails to reiterate, time and again, through several other characters.

Mantel through her Tudor historical fiction has endeavored to portray the predicament of the royal women who were restricted in innumerable ways through the discourse of their bodies. Powerless and victimized, they were forced to politically maneuver day after day to secure themselves. Mantel's novels present the bold front that these women put up even at times of extreme difficulties. Her version of history may not be the authentic version, for the likelihood of knowing these royal women of yester years has now become an impossibility. Nevertheless her rendition does offer a glimpse into what it would have taken to be a royal woman in the glamorous, malevolent and power-hungry court of King Henry VIII.

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