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Thomas Cromwell: Villain, Victim and Visionary in the Tudor Power Politics

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Abstract

The Tudor era, particularly the Henrician reign, is known for momentous changes in religion, monarchy, governance and national identity in British history. At the centre of these transformations stands Thomas Cromwell, whose historical image remains profoundly contested. Since the sixteenth century, historians, chroniclers, diplomats, playwrights and novelists have offered sharply contrasting interpretations of his life and career. Catholic writers have portrayed him as a ruthless destroyer of the traditional Church and a principal architect of England's break with Rome, whereas Protestant chroniclers praised his loyalty to the Crown and his support for religious reform. Literary representations have also been divided. Shakespeare's *Henry VIII(2006)* and *Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons*(1960) have contributed to a negative image of Cromwell, while Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy re-examines his life and presents him as a complex, humane and politically intelligent figure shaped by survival, ambition, loyalty and grief. This article examines Cromwell as villain, victim and visionary through Mantel's trilogy in relation to Tracy Borman's *Thomas Cromwell: Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant*(2014) and G. R. Elton's *England Under the Tudors(2019)*. By employing New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning and Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, the article argues that Cromwell cannot be confined to a single historical identity. He emerges as a contested figure whose representation reflects the intersections of power, religion, politics, social mobility and historical memory in Henrician England.

Keywords: Thomas Cromwell, Tudor Politics, New Historicism, Self-Fashioning, Historiographic Metafiction

Introduction

The Tudor Epoch ,as described in the publisher's note," *England Under the Tudors"(2019*), is "a historical period that witnessed monumental changes in religion, monarchy, and government and one that continued to shape British History long after". (Elton 2019) The Tudor monarchy has gradually centralized state power by weakening papal authority over English religious life. Consequently, the English Reformation has emerged not merely as a theological movement but as a political revolution shaped by dynastic anxiety, royal authority and succession politics. Thomas Cromwell is the fountain head of this transformation. Statesman, lawyer, administrator, reformer, royal servant and political strategist, he occupied a crucial position during one of the most turbulent periods in English history.

Very few figures in Henrician England have generated as much historical debate and literary reinterpretation as Cromwell. His rise from the son of a Putney "blacksmith" (*Wolf Hall 359*, Borman Ch.1) to the Blacksmith's boy to Earl of Essex (Mantel, *How I Came to write Cromwell*), the apex position in Henry VIII's government, have coincided with the break with Rome, the dissolution of the monasteries, the emergence of parliamentary sovereignty and the consolidation of royal authority. Yet, his prominence has not produced a stable reputation. From the sixteenth century onwards, Cromwell's identity has been shaped by competing political, religious and ideological perspectives. Catholic writers such as Cardinal Reginald Pole, Nicholas Sander and Robert Persons represented him as the destroyer of the traditional Church and the corrupt adviser who led Henry VIII away from Rome. Protestant chroniclers, however, treated him as a loyal servant of the Crown and a supporter of religious reform.

Literary portrayals have also contributed to Cromwell's contested image. Shakespeare's Henry VIII (2006) largely presents the Tudor court from a traditional royal perspective, while Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons (1966) depicts "Cromwell as a ruthless villain" whose loyalty to the state places him in direct

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opposition to Sir Thomas More's conscience (Ory 1). In contrast, Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy, comprising *Wolf Hall* (Wolf 2009), *Bring Up the Bodies* (*Bring Up* 2012) and *The Mirror and the Light (Mirror* 2020), revisits these established perceptions and reconstructs Cromwell as a complex historical subject. Mantel neither canonises nor demonises him. Instead, she presents him as a man shaped by intelligence, memory, grief, political necessity and survival.

The significance of Mantel's triptych lies in its reimagining of Tudor history through Cromwell's consciousness. Traditional historical narratives have often placed kings, queens and nobles at the centre of historical action. Mantel shifts the focus to a minister whose social origins placed him outside the traditional aristocratic order. Through Cromwell's lens, readers witness the political, religious, and cultural transformations of the Henrician England from the position of an outsider indispensable to power. The trilogy, therefore, is not only a historical reconstruction but also a reconsideration of how history itself is written, remembered and interpreted.

The present study examines Thomas Cromwell as villain, victim and visionary through Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy, Tracy Borman's *Thomas Cromwell: Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant* and G. R. Elton's *England Under the Tudors.* By bringing together the literary and historical texts, the article analyses how Cromwell's identity has been constructed, contested and revised across different historical periods and textual traditions.

Review of Literature

The figure of Thomas Cromwell has attracted considerable attention from historians, biographers, playwrights and novelists. Yet the interpretations offered by these writers differ significantly, reflecting the political, religious, and ideological concerns of their respective periods. Dermaid MacCulloch, in his foreword to the Routledge Classics Edition of Elton's *England Under the Tudors(2019*) remarks that Elton discovered in Cromwell" a cool'secular-minded figure who out of conviction shaped reality by enacting by enacting and observing laws"(MacCulloch). Further, according to Tracy Borman's Epilogue, one of the earliest and most influential representations of Cromwell has emerged from Catholic historiography. Cardinal Reginald Pole condemned Cromwell as an "agent of Satan

sent by the devil to lure King Henry to damnation." Similarly, Nicholas Sander and Robert Persons portrayed him as a destroyer of monasteries and a chief enemy of the traditional Church. These accounts were shaped by Catholic opposition to the English Reformation and royal supremacy. Their portrayal of Cromwell mirrors both an assessment of his character and resistance to the religious changes associated with Henry VIII's reign.

At the same time, positive portrayals emerged within Protestant historiography. John Foxe's Acts and Monuments delineates Cromwell as a supporter of reform and a defender of evangelical causes. Borman notes that Raphael Holinshed praised Cromwell's "worthy and industrious demeanor," while John Strype described him as "very zealous and very honest in doing the King his master's work." Such portrayals demonstrate that positive interpretations of Cromwell did not begin with modern historians but were already present within early Protestant traditions. Cromwell's reputation therefore developed as a battlefield of confessional memory.(Borman Epilogue)

Modern historiography continued this debate. Among twentieth-century historians, G. R. Elton occupies a significant position. Elton's representation of Cromwell as the architect of the "Tudor Revolution in Government" transformed scholarly understanding of the minister's role in English history. Rather than presenting Cromwell merely as Henry VIII's servant, Elton argued that he was responsible for creating a more centralized and bureaucratic form of government. Parliamentary legislation, administrative reform and financial reorganization became evidence of Cromwell's political vision. Elton thus elevated Cromwell from a secondary political figure to one of the principal architects of the Tudor state. (Elton)

Tracy Borman's *Thomas Cromwell: Henry VIII's Most Faithful Servant* offers a balanced reassessment of Cromwell. Borman acknowledges his ruthlessness and political pragmatism alongside his administrative brilliance, loyalty and remarkable rise from humble origins. Her biography demonstrates how Cromwell's reputation has been constantly reshaped by competing historical narratives. More importantly, Borman rejects simplistic classifications of Cromwell as either hero or

villain and instead presents him as a figure whose life is characterised by achievement and controversy.

Literary studies have also examined the reconstruction of Tudor history in Mantel's trilogy. Raginee Mahanta's article "His-Stories: Uncovering the Stronghold of the Shadows in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall" argues that Mantel employs historiographic metafiction to recover the "little narratives" marginalised within traditional historical accounts(Mahanta 46). By focusing on Cromwell and other peripheral figures, Mantel challenges dominant historical narratives and creates alternative perspectives on Tudor history. Mahanta's study is important because it explains how the trilogy draws attention to the intersection of history and fiction.

Salomé Ory's *Inside the Mind of Thomas Cromwell: The Fashioning of the Self and of Tudor Politics in Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies* is relevant to the present study. Ory examines Cromwell's interiority and the political construction of selfhood in Mantel's fiction. Her study is useful because it connects Cromwell's psychological formation with the larger machinery of Tudor politics. Cromwell's rise is not treated as a simple career progression but as a process of self-fashioning shaped by language, memory, service and political danger. This perspective supports the present article's use of Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning(Ory 2018).

Marta Poloni's thesis, *Henry VIII in History and Fiction, from Shakespeare to Mantel*, examines the changing representation of Tudor history across literary traditions. By comparing Shakespeare's Henry VIII with Mantel's trilogy, Poloni demonstrates how historical fiction continually reinterprets Tudor figures according to the concerns of different periods. Her work is valuable because it shows Mantel's departure from royal-centred narratives and her decision to place Cromwell at the centre of historical action. This shift allows Cromwell to emerge not merely as a minister serving royal interests but as the central consciousness through which Tudor politics is interpreted.(Poloni 2016)

Despite this considerable scholarship, a gap remains. Many studies examine Cromwell either as a historical figure or as a literary character. Comparatively, fewer

studies bring together historical texts, biographical narratives and literary representations within a single analytical framework. Furthermore, while several scholars discuss Cromwell's administrative achievements or Mantel's narrative technique, relatively less attention has been paid to the simultaneous construction of Cromwell as villain, victim and visionary. The present study addresses this gap by employing New Historicism, self-fashioning and historiographic metafiction to examine how competing textual traditions construct and reconstruct Cromwell's identity.

Theoretical Framework

The present study employs New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning and Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction as its principal theoretical frameworks. These approaches are suitable because the article examines Cromwell not only as a historical figure but also as a textual construct shaped by competing historical and literary narratives.

Peter Barry defines New Historicism as "a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period" (Barry 175). Unlike traditional historical criticism, New Historicism does not privilege either literary or historical texts. Instead, both are treated as cultural products that illuminate one another. Barry further notes that New Historicism refuses to maintain a hierarchy between foreground and background, literature and history, text and context (Barry 175). Louis Montrose encapsulates this principle through his formulation of a combined interest in "the textuality of history, the historicity of texts" (Montrose, as qtd. in Barry 175). This suggests that history reaches modern readers only through textual representations, while literary texts are themselves products of specific historical circumstances.

Pramod K. Nayar similarly argues that New Historicism studies literature as part of broader networks of social, political, religious and cultural power. Literary texts are not isolated aesthetic objects but sites where ideological conflicts and cultural negotiations become visible. Such a framework is useful for analysing Mantel's trilogy because the novels depict the interactions among monarchy, religion, diplomacy, class mobility, administration, and personal ambition.

Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning provides another important framework for understanding Cromwell's rise. Greenblatt argues that Renaissance identity is not fixed but constructed through interaction with structures of authority and power. Individuals fashion themselves according to the demands of their social and political environments.(Greenblatt *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*) Cromwell's rise from humble origins to the highest levels of government offers a striking example of this process. Finally, Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction explains Mantel's narrative strategy. Historiographic metafiction reconstructs historical events while questioning the authority of historical narratives. Mantel's trilogy exemplifies this approach by remaining faithful to major historical events while exploring emotional and psychological dimensions that conventional historiography often leaves unexplored. Also,Mantel brings Thomas Cromwell, a figure often portrayed as a minor or villainous character in traditional history, to the centre of the narrative. Instead of presenting history through kings and queens, Mantel narrates major Henrician events through Cromwell's lens. In this way, she gives importance to a historical figure who is often pushed to the margins of history and offers a fresh interpretation of the Tudor past (Hutcheon 114).

Thomas Cromwell as Villain

Among the many representations of Cromwell, the image of Cromwell as a villain is the most debatable. Catholic historians, foreign ambassadors, conservative nobles and later literary writers frequently portray him as a ruthless political operator whose ambition accelerated England's religious and political upheavals. Borman, in her Introduction of *Thomas Cromwell: The most faithful Servant,* notes that Cromwell was "reviled by many as a Machiavellian schemer who destroyed England's monasteries, ousted one queen and had another executed, and stopped at nothing in his quest for power" while recent historians have attempted to rehabilitate him as "an enlightened, pious and dedicated royal servant" (Borman). This duality becomes central to Cromwell's identity in both historical biography and Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* trilogy.

Further, Mantel complicates this perception by revealing how villainy itself is constructed through ideology, factional politics and historical memory. Through New Historicist analysis, Cromwell's villainous image cannot be understood as a

reflection of his actions. Rather, they are a product of competing political and religious discourses in Tudor England.

One of the strongest sources of Cromwell's negative reputation has emerged from Catholic opposition to the English Reformation. Borman notes that Reginald Pole condemned Cromwell as an "agent of Satan sent by the devil to lure King Henry to damnation." Similar accusations are found in the writings of Nicholas Sander and Robert Persons, who viewed Cromwell as the principal architect of the destruction of traditional religion. These representations were shaped by resistance to royal supremacy and the dissolution of monasteries. Consequently, Cromwell's villainy was closely associated with broader fears concerning religious change.

Mantel incorporates such hostile perceptions into her narrative. In The Mirror and the Light, rumours circulating among the people portray Cromwell as a demonic figure. Rebels and traditionalists describe him as "the devil in the guise of a knave" and insist that he hides "horns" beneath his cap (*Mirror* 298). Others claim that he intends "to pull down all the parish churches" and "melt the crucifixes for cannon" (*Mirror* 297). These accusations reveal how deeply Cromwell had become associated with the destruction of traditional religious practices. Significantly, Mantel does not present these rumours as objective truth. She demonstrates how political anxiety and religious uncertainty generate monstrous images of those who represent change.

The Lollard episode in Wolf Hall further illuminates Cromwell's complex relationship with religion. As a child, he witnesses the execution of a woman condemned for heresy. The woman insists before her death that "the God on the altar is a piece of bread" (*Wolf* 353). Young Cromwell is deeply affected by the spectacle and repeatedly asks, "What if she changes her mind now, will they let her go?" (*Wolf* 354) Mantel connects Cromwell's later religious policies with personal memory rather than ideological fanaticism. The episode reveals the violence that emerges when institutional religion suppresses dissenting voices. Through New Historicism, this minor episode becomes historically significant because it links individual experience with larger religious transformation.

Cromwell's religious views contribute further to his controversial image. While visiting the dying Katherine of Aragon in Bring Up the Bodies, she asks him, "In what language do you confess?" Cromwell replies, "God knows our heart, madam. There is no need for an idle formula, or for an intermediary" (*Bring Up* 109). The narration adds, "God is beyond translation"(*Bring Up*109). Such remarks reveal Cromwell's suspicion of ritual mediation and institutional authority. To conservative Catholics, these views would appear dangerously close to heresy. Yet Cromwell fashions his religious identity carefully. When Chapuys suggests that Anne Boleyn is his "co-religionist," Cromwell responds: "Like my master the king, faithful son of the holy Catholic Church, only just now we are not in communion with the pope" (*Bring Up* 240). Through Greenblatt's theory, Cromwell emerges as a figure who negotiates public identity according to political necessity.

The downfall of Anne Boleyn remains one of the strongest sources of Cromwell's villainous reputation. Chapuys warns him: "Anne is desperate and dangerous. Strike first, before she strikes you. Remember how she brought down Wolsey" (*Bring Up* 241). The warning captures the atmosphere of pre-emptive aggression that governs Tudor politics. Mantel does not deny Cromwell's role in Anne's destruction. Reflecting upon the charges against Anne and her alleged lovers, Cromwell admits: "I married them to crimes they had barely imagined" (*Mirror* 287). This confession reveals his awareness that political necessity can demand the fabrication or shaping of legal narratives. Through historiographic metafiction, Mantel exposes the instability of official truth and asks readers to examine the relationship between legal guilt, political survival and historical memory.

Cromwell's role in the prosecution of Sir Thomas More also contributed to his negative image. In Wolf Hall, More remarks sarcastically: "Master Cromwell, I should not mock you, should I? You have shown yourself my most especial and tender friend" (*Wolf* 567). Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons later reinforces More as a heroic martyr and Cromwell as a servant of state power. Mantel complicates this opposition by portraying More as intellectually arrogant and socially contemptuous, yet Cromwell nevertheless becomes associated with the legal machinery that transforms dissent into treason. The oath of succession provides another example. Cromwell "has written this oath, a test of loyalty to Henry, and he means to swear

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the men of every burgh and village" (*Wolf* 574). From one perspective, the oath represents visionary state formation; from another, it appears as ideological coercion. Mantel herself acknowledges the controversial nature of Cromwell's historical reputation. In her article *"How I Came to Write Cromwell"* (2012), she remarks that if Cromwell is "a villain", he is "an interesting villain" and describes him as "an arch plotter, smarter than Henry though not meaner." (Mantel). This observation captures the complexity of Cromwell's character. Mantel does not deny his involvement in political conspiracies, legal manipulations, and the destruction of opponents. Instead, she presents him as a man who understood power better than those around him and used intelligence, strategy, and administrative skill to achieve political goals. Further, Mantel also explores Cromwell's capacity for aggression. During his conflict with Norfolk, he imagines: "Tell him to go north, or I will come where he is and tear him with my teeth" (*Wolf* 572). The phrase "homo homini lupus", man is wolf to man, enters his mind (*Wolf* 572). The image becomes a metaphor for Tudor political culture itself. Violence, rivalry and survival govern relationships between individuals. Cromwell's aggression is therefore not exceptional but historically produced by the world in which he operates. Thus, his villainy appears as a contested identity shaped by religion, faction, rumour and power.

Thomas Cromwell as Victim

While Cromwell is often remembered as a powerful minister, Mantel repeatedly reveals the vulnerability beneath his public authority. One of her most important revisions of traditional Tudor narratives is the presentation of Cromwell as a victim of violence, class prejudice, political insecurity, personal grief and royal instability. Through Cromwell's memories and reflections, Mantel demonstrates that power does not eliminate vulnerability; it often intensifies it.

Mantel establishes Cromwell's victimhood from the opening scene of *Wolf Hall*. The novel begins not with political triumph but with physical violence. The young Cromwell lies on the ground after being beaten by his father Walter: "Felled, dazed, silent, he has fallen; knocked full length on the cobbles of the yard" (*Wolf* 3). Many years later, he remembers the conditions of childhood discipline. In Bring Up the Bodies, he reflects: "My father had a savage temper. I learned as a child to be still. If he noticed me, he hit me" (*Wolf* 137). Mantel links Cromwell's political discipline, caution and emotional restraint to childhood trauma. Through

Greenblatt's theory, identity emerges not as inheritance but as response to external pressure. Cromwell fashions himself through survival.

The memory of his father, Walter Cromwell, remains central to Cromwell's self-understanding. Although he rises to become chief minister, he never entirely escapes class prejudice. Chapuys tells him that "not prayer nor Bible verse, nor scholarship nor wit, nor grant under seal nor statute law can alter the fact of villain blood" (*Mirror* 309). Norfolk similarly mocks his origins, insisting that "your father was a pauper" (*Mirror* 310). Cromwell replies calmly: "Not a pauper, my lord. A roisterer. I concede. It was not money we lacked, so much as peace of mind" (*Mirror* 310). The response demonstrates dignity and pain. Tudor England remains structured by hierarchy and hereditary privilege. Cromwell's rise threatens aristocratic assumptions about authority because it proves that intelligence, education and administration could challenge birth.

Cromwell's vulnerability is also evident in his relationship with Henry VIII. Although he occupies one of the highest positions in government, his authority depends on royal favour. Henry reminds him that "what you are, I make you" (*Wolf* 360). The statement reveals the precarious nature of political power in the Henrician court. The tournament accident in Bring Up the Bodies further illustrates this danger. When Henry falls unconscious during the joust, Cromwell thinks that without Henry, his structures and his own future could collapse. Reflecting on the king's apparent death, Cromwell confesses to Richard Cromwell:
"*It was a bad moment for me. How many men can say, as I must, 'I am a man whose only friend is the King of England'? I have everything, you would think. And yet take Henry away and I have nothing" (Bring Up 210).*
This is one of the most revealing statements in the entire trilogy. Despite his immense power, Cromwell recognises that his position depends entirely upon Henry VIII's favour. The statement exposes the fragility beneath his public authority. He appears powerful, yet his security rests on a single relationship.

Through Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning, this moment reveals the limitations of Cromwell's constructed identity. He has fashioned himself into England's most effective minister through intelligence, education, and political skill.

Yet the structures of the Tudor monarchy prevent complete independence. His identity remains tied to the king who created his authority. Thus, even at the height of power, Cromwell remains vulnerable.

Further, Cromwell describes Henry as his *"only friend"* (*Bring Up 210*). This description suggests that his rise has alienated him from both the aristocracy and traditional political networks. Unlike Norfolk or the Boleyns, Cromwell lacks the protection of an ancient family dynasty. Consequently, he becomes a victim of the very political system he helps sustain.

Cromwell's conversation with Fitzwilliam further reinforces this vulnerability. When Fitzwilliam suggests that Cromwell has supporters, Cromwell responds sceptically: *"Forgive me, but in what way does this support manifest?" (Bring Up* 210). The question reveals his awareness that court loyalty is temporary and unreliable. Unlike that of hereditary nobles, Cromwell's position depends on performance rather than birth. Mantel therefore presents him as a man who understands the precarious nature of power better than anyone else.

Perhaps, the most profound aspect of Cromwell's victimhood lies in his awareness of instability. He understands that Tudor politics is governed by uncertainty. His observation that one should not "expect consistency" from Henry VIII (*Bring Up* 248) reveals his knowledge of royal unpredictability. Yet awareness cannot save him. From a New Historicist perspective, his victimhood reflects larger structures within Tudor society: violence, hierarchy, patronage, factional rivalry and royal absolutism. Cromwell may navigate these structures better than most, but he cannot escape them.

Tracy Borman's account of Cromwell's arrest and imprisonment presents him as a tragic victim of the very political system he helped create. After more than a decade of loyal service to Henry VIII, Cromwell was suddenly arrested for treason and heresy and protested that this was "the reward of his services" (qtd. in Borman, ch. 18). His downfall reveals the instability of Henrician monarchy, where royal favour could disappear without warning. Borman also shows that Cromwell's enemies never forgave his humble origins as "the blacksmith's son from Putney" (Borman ch. 18). The public stripping of his honours mirrors the aristocracy's determination to reclaim power from a commoner whose intelligence and

administrative ability had elevated him above the nobility. Thus, Cromwell becomes a victim not only of political rivalry but also of deep-seated social prejudice and class hostility.

Cromwell's prison letters further expose the human tragedy of his fall. He insisted that he had never knowingly acted against the king, declaring, "I neuer in all my lyffe thought willinglye to doo that thing that myght or Sholde displease your Magestye" (qtd. in Borman, ch. 18). His emotional dependence on Henry is evident when he describes the king as "more lyke a dere Father" (qtd. in Borman, ch. 18), revealing the unequal nature of their relationship. His plea for the protection of Gregory and his grandchildren humanizes him as a frightened father rather than a powerful minister. The repeated cry of "Mercye mercye mercye" in his final letter symbolizes the complete collapse of the once-confident statesman (qtd. in Borman, ch. 18). Through Cromwell's destruction, Borman demonstrates that Tudor power was ultimately founded on fear, instability, and the absolute will of the monarch, making Cromwell one of the most significant victims of the system he had faithfully served.

Similarly,Hilary Mantel's portrayal of Cromwell's final days in *The Mirror & the Light* presents him as one of the most tragic victims of Tudor power politics. The man who spent his career strengthening Henry VIII's authority ultimately becomes a victim of the same royal supremacy he helped construct. Even on the morning of his execution, Cromwell remains concerned with administration and trade, wondering about William Hawkins's voyage and remarking, "I would have liked to know how that works out" (*Mirror* 869). Yet this practical intelligence cannot save him from political destruction. His fate reveals the instability of Henrician monarchy, where service, loyalty, and competence offer no protection once royal favour is withdrawn. Cromwell's tragedy lies in the fact that he is destroyed not by foreign enemies or personal failure, but by the king he served with unwavering devotion. The scaffold therefore exposes the darker reality of Tudor governance, where power operates through fear, uncertainty, and absolute dependence upon the monarch's will.

Mantel further humanizes Cromwell through his spiritual uncertainty, bodily suffering, and emotional isolation. Rejecting religious images, he declares, "I do not need an image, because I shall see God's face," yet he still asks others to "pray for me too, while I am dying" (*Mirror* 870). These statements reveal a man caught between traditional faith and reformist belief, reflecting the broader uncertainties of the English Reformation. His final moments strip away the powerful ministerial identity he had carefully fashioned throughout his life. The executioner's blow brings "a raw stinging, a ripping, a throb," while Cromwell realizes that "no one has told his heart" that he is dead (*Mirror* 875). Through this intensely personal depiction, Mantel transforms a familiar historical execution into a profound meditation on vulnerability, mortality, and political betrayal. Cromwell emerges not as a triumphant architect of reform but as a victim of the very system he helped create, demonstrating the tragic human cost of Tudor state formation.

Thomas Cromwell as Visionary

If villainy represents one dimension of Cromwell's reputation and victimhood reveals the vulnerability beneath his authority, vision constitutes the third and perhaps most significant aspect of his political identity. Mantel, Borman and Elton emphasize Cromwell's administrative intelligence, political foresight and capacity to understand structural change. While Catholic writers remembered him as destroyer of the old order, Elton's historiography and Mantel's fiction demonstrate that Cromwell was also one of the principal architects of a new political order. Borman complicates this severe image by introducing testimonies from Eustace Chapuys and John Foxe, the sixteenth-century historian. Chapuys observes that Cromwell's seemingly dull and awkward appearance transformed dramatically during conversation. His face would "light up" and display expressions ranging from "intelligent and amused to cunning and thoughtful" (Borman). Foxe similarly praises his "dexteritie of wytt as England shal skarsly have agayne" (quoted in Borman, Introduction). These observations humanise Cromwell and present him as socially adaptive, witty and intellectually dynamic

Elton's interpretation remains central to any discussion of Cromwell's vision. Elton argues that Cromwell transformed Tudor administration through parliamentary legislation, bureaucratic organization, financial reform and centralized government. The so-called "Tudor Revolution in Government" was not a series of isolated reforms

but a restructuring of the relationship between Crown and state. Cromwell's genius lay in recognizing that royal authority could be strengthened through institutions rather than through personal influence alone.

Mantel dramatizes this administrative brilliance through the responses of those around Cromwell. Richard Riche observes that if "all the records of government" were destroyed, Cromwell "would carry them in his head" (*Mirror* 291). The statement suggests that Cromwell becomes the embodiment of governmental memory. Unlike nobles who derive authority from birth, he derives authority from knowledge. Languages, law, finance, diplomacy and administration become the instruments through which he constructs his identity. His success reflects broader changes in Tudor society, where bureaucratic expertise increasingly competes with aristocratic lineage.

The parliamentary reforms associated with Cromwell provide clear examples of visionary statecraft. Mantel mentions the legislation that established English as the language of law courts, dissolved smaller monasteries and created the Court of Augmentations (*Bring Up* 243). Such measures demonstrate Cromwell's understanding that power operates through institutions, records and procedures. The Court of Augmentations is especially significant because the dissolution of monasteries generated enormous property and revenue. Rather than leaving these resources to informal management, Cromwell helped create specialized institutions capable of administering them. According to Borman, Cromwell believes that the politician's role is "to see through the disguise that sovereigns tend to throw over their true desires" and to satisfy those desires "without upsetting morality or religion" (Borman, Introduction).

Religion also forms an important aspect of Cromwell's vision. Unlike many contemporaries, he recognizes that religious reform cannot be separated from political authority. His admiration for William Tyndale provides one example. Reflecting upon Tyndale's work, Cromwell observes that he "knew God's word and carried a light to guide us through the marsh of interpretation" (*Mirror 280*). The metaphor of light links scriptural understanding with intellectual clarity. Cromwell's support for vernacular religion reflects a broader vision of reform grounded in

education, literacy and access to knowledge. Yet Mantel avoids presenting him as a simple Protestant reformer. His religious position remains adaptive because survival requires flexibility.

Cromwell's political insight extends beyond England. Throughout the trilogy, he understands alliances, diplomatic negotiations and military threats. The Pilgrimage of Grace provides another example of his foresight. While many nobles dismiss the rebellion as disorder, Cromwell insists: "Poor men do not rise without leaders. Let no man tell me they do" (*Mirror* 301). This observation reveals his understanding of political causation. Rebellions emerge from networks of influence, ideology and organization rather than from spontaneous emotion alone. Cromwell therefore appears as an analyst of power capable of identifying structures invisible to others.

From a New Historicist perspective, Cromwell's vision reflects broader transformations within sixteenth-century England: the growth of bureaucracy, expansion of literacy, centralization of administration and increasing importance of Parliament. Cromwell does not create these changes alone, but he understands and accelerates them. Mantel's achievement is to humanize this vision without reducing it to heroism. Cromwell remains capable of manipulation, coercion and political violence. Yet these qualities coexist with intelligence, loyalty and administrative innovation. The same man who creates new governmental structures also participates in the destruction of opponents.

The tournament accident in *Bring Up the Bodies* reveals Thomas Cromwell as both a visionary statesman and a victim of Tudor political structures. When Henry VIII appears to be dead, Cromwell immediately recognises the constitutional crisis facing England. Unlike the panicking courtiers, his first concern is the succession, and he declares, *"The Princess Mary ... I must have her. Or the realm is done for"* (*Bring Up* 204). He further predicts the consequences of political factionalism, observing, *"Let Mary remain in the hands of the Boleyns, and she is dead. Let her fall into the hands of the papists, they will set her up as queen ... There will be civil war"* (204). These reflections demonstrate Cromwell's extraordinary political foresight and his ability to understand the relationship between succession, religion,

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and national stability. Yet the same episode also exposes his vulnerability. Reflecting upon Henry's apparent death, Cromwell admits, *"I am a man whose only friend is the King of England ... take Henry away and I have nothing"* (210). This confession reveals the fragility beneath his authority. Through Greenblatt's theory of self-fashioning, Mantel's Cromwell is a man who has risen through intelligence and administrative skill, yet whose identity remains dependent upon royal favour. Mantel therefore presents Cromwell as simultaneously visionary and victim: a statesman capable of imagining England's political future, yet a servant whose own future rests entirely upon the life of one king.

Cromwell's visionary quality is also visible in his understanding of language. He knows well that power is not exercised only through force but through oaths, statutes, warrants, confessions, translations and rumours. His sympathy for Tyndale's scriptural project and his suspicion of ritual mediation show that language is central to his religious imagination. At the same time, his role in framing legal charges against opponents reveals that language can be used coercively. Mantel, therefore, refuses to separate liberation from domination. The same culture that opens scripture to lay readers also creates written tests of obedience. The same administrator who values clarity can also produce documents that destroy lives. This ambiguity is central to Cromwell's historical significance and to the article's argument that he must be understood simultaneously as villain, victim and visionary.

The triangular structure of villain, victim and visionary is therefore not an artificial classification imposed upon Cromwell from outside. It grows out of the texts themselves. Borman's biography shows why contemporaries and later historians could not agree on him. Elton's institutional history explains why his reforms mattered to the making of the Tudor state. Mantel's fiction supplies the interiority that historical documents cannot fully recover. Together, these texts make Cromwell a suitable subject for New Historicist study because his identity is produced through the interaction of documents, rumours, laws, memories and literary imagination. His life also demonstrates Greenblatt's idea that Renaissance selves are fashioned in relation to authority and danger (Greenblatt Introduction). Cromwell submits to Wolsey, serves Henry, negotiates with nobles, confronts

churchmen and survives among enemies. Yet, every act of self-fashioning contains risk, because the power that raises him can also destroy him.

Furthermore, this complexity is the reason Mantel's triptych becomes central to the modern revaluation of Cromwell. The novels do not replace history with fiction; instead, they expose the imaginative and ideological processes through which history is made meaningful. Mantel accepts the broad facts of Cromwell's career, but she reorders attention by giving significance to memory, household life, childhood injury, grief and private conversation. In doing so, she changes the scale of Tudor history. Political events are not reduced, but they are connected to the human experiences that produced them. Cromwell's public role in religious reform and state formation is therefore read alongside his private losses and social humiliations. This method provides a holistic view of how one man can be perceived by different observers as a monster, a sufferer, and the maker of modern government.

The present study, therefore, treats Cromwell's reputation as a historical problem rather than a settled judgment. The image of Cromwell as a villain lies in his association with coercive reform, legal manipulation, and the deaths of political opponents. The image of Cromwell as a victim lies in the violence of his childhood, the prejudice of aristocratic society, the loss of his family, and the insecurity of service under Henry VIII. The image of Cromwell as a visionary lies in his administrative imagination, his use of Parliament, his management of information, and his ability to recognise that monarchy could be strengthened through institutions. These three identities overlap throughout the trilogy. Mantel's Cromwell is frightening because he is effective, moving because he is wounded, and historically significant because he understands the machinery of power.

Conclusion

Thomas Cromwell remains one of the most complex figures in the Tudor history. He evolves as a villain, a victim, and a visionary simultaneously through the works of Hilary Mantel, Tracy Borman, and G.R. Elton. More importantly, Borman's chapter *Many Lamented but more Rejoiced* serves as a powerful reflection of the divided responses to Cromwell during his lifetime and after his death. He appears villainous in his use of law, political manipulation, and administrative power to achieve royal objectives. He is a victim because he ultimately falls prey to the

same political machinery he has created and to the unpredictable favour of Henry VIII. Yet, he is also a visionary whose administrative reforms have transformed English governance. From both the Literary and Non-literary portrayals of Cromwell, it is evident that he is the Vanguard of socio-economic, political, and religious reforms of the Henrician period, and his life mirrors the opportunities, contradictions, and treacherous waters of power in the Tudor England.

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