Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2582-7472

ShodhKosh: Journal of Visual and Performing Arts
May 2024 5(5), 1127–1134

STATE VIOLENCE AND FAILED LEADERSHIP IN HILARY MANTEL'S WOLF HALL

Anjelin Mathew [1], Dr. Sajal Thakur [2]

[1] Research Scholar, MATS University, Raipur, India
[2] Assistant Professor, MATS University, Raipur, India

Corresponding Author
Anjelin Mathew, anjelin282@gmail.com

DOI
10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.5131

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to critically analyse the relationship between leadership, violence, and court politics in Mantel's Wolf Hall, paying particular attention to King Henry VIII's inability to govern effectively and its ramifications. At its core is Thomas Cromwell, an agent who plots his way through the dangerous world of the Tudor court, teaching viewers the rules of New World interactions. Through exploring issues of manipulation, division, and self-interest as the major concerns of the secondary analysis, this paper reveals that Mantel provided a critique of leadership and its turbulent influence on stability. The study helps fill the gap in research on Mantel's depiction of leadership as a fragile and selfish enterprise and extends the scholarship on power within history and literature.

Keywords: Tudor Governance, Henry VIII, Thomas Cromwell, Political Violence, Wolf Hall

1. INTRODUCTION

The Tudor dynasty, inaugurated by Henry VII in 1485 after his victory at the Battle of Bosworth, ushered in a period of centralised royal power, political turbulence, and sweeping religious reform. Among the most iconic figures of this era is Henry VIII, a monarch whose reign redefined the English monarchy and laid the groundwork for a modern bureaucratic state. Yet beneath the surface of Tudor grandeur was a court rife with intrigue, coercion, and moral ambiguity. These strains made up the core of Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall (2009), which mentions the rise of Thomas Cromwell, the king's chief minister, and the architect of many reformations of Tudor England. Mantel's narrative departs from traditional historical fiction by placing Cromwell—often vilified in popular memory—at the centre of political and moral discourse. Her portrayal is intimate, ironic, and nuanced, presenting Cromwell as both a master strategist and a man navigating a world dominated by impulsive kings, fragile institutions, and institutionalised violence. Through Cromwell's eyes, Wolf Hall reconfigures Tudor politics as a theatre of competing ideologies and survival strategies, offering a compelling study in early modern statecraft. Scholarly discourse on Foucault, Weber, Arendt, Connell, and others provides a conceptual framework, while Mantel's artistry in voice and symbolism reveals the ethical ambivalence of Tudor power.

This paper examines the interlocking themes of poor leadership, political and legal violence, and Cromwell's strategic moral positioning in Wolf Hall. It asks: How does Mantel represent the failures of traditional leadership, the role of legalised coercion, and Cromwell's emergence as a political realist within the Tudor court? In answering this, the paper applies a thematic approach to six key narrative segments, corresponding roughly to Mantel's chapter divisions. The analysis identifies recurring patterns of royal indecision, parliamentary manipulation, legal expropriation, ritualised executions, and covert surveillance—elements that reflect the broader structures of early modern governance.

These themes are organised into three analytical sections. The first explores the turbulent leadership of Henry VIII, and the collapse of the credibility of the ecclesiastical and parliamentary institutions. The second explores how violence, both visible and hidden, was systematised through legal instruments and public spectacle. The third examines Cromwell's rise not simply as a response to chaos, but as a calculated project rooted in administrative efficiency, intelligence centralisation, and flexible morality. Together, these threads illuminate what this study calls Tudor "realpolitik"—a political mode driven by pragmatism, strategic coercion, and moral fluidity.

In situating Mantel's fiction within academic discourse, the paper draws on scholarship from both literary and historical fields. Key works include G. R. Elton's theory of a "Tudor Revolution in Government" (1970), Diarmaid MacCulloch's biographical study of Cromwell (2018), and interdisciplinary research on early modern violence, surveillance, and state formation. The paper also engages with critical responses to Mantel's narrative form, such as her use of free indirect discourse and her subversion of hagiographic or villainous character tropes.

Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to analyse how Wolf Hall dramatises the emergence of the modern state through literary fiction. Mantel's Cromwell is not just a character within a historical re-enactment; he is a lens through which readers can examine how states evolve—not by ideals alone, but through strategic improvisation within flawed, violent systems. As contemporary political systems confront their crises of authority, legality, and morality, Wolf Hall offers a fictional yet profoundly instructive case study in governance under pressure.

2. NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC REVISIONISM

Mantel's novel is often categorised as "historical fiction," but it deliberately breaks from straightforward chronology. The narrative is filtered through Cromwell's consciousness, blurring fact and invention. Critics note that Mantel treats Cromwell's point of view as both a strength and a strategy. Andrew Johnston observes that Wolf Hall and Bring Up the Bodies use "modernist narrative strategies" to make Cromwell appear a "perfect specimen" of the Renaissance statesman, only to undercut that grand image by highlighting how easily readers collude in "grand récits" of Western greatness. Mantel herself admits the novel's subjectivity, warning, "Look to my book for accuracy where I can contrive it, but don't look to it for impartiality." This partiality signals Wolf Hall's ethical stance: history is a human story of motives and emotions, not an impersonal chronicle. The plotting and imagery – such as Wolsey's chess-game analogies or the recurring motif of eyes and mirrors – constantly remind readers that the past is narrated, not handed down. As one commentator puts it, Mantel's imaginative fiction "is the novel's greatest achievement and a handy rationale for playing very loose with the facts." In other words, Mantel's revisionism re-empowers characters like Cromwell, More, and Henry with interiority, yet she also underlines that power itself is mediated through narrative. By engaging with this narrative artifice, the novel pushes readers to see Tudor violence from new angles: not as remote historical data, but as personal, visceral experience.

Mantel's syntactic choices reinforce this modern sensibility. She writes in the present tense and often with sparse, matter-of-fact descriptions – e.g. heads rolling, bodies bleeding – which creates immediacy. At the same time, Wolf Hall uses repetition and leitmotifs (birds, snakes, genealogies) that echo medieval storytelling. The effect is a layered temporality: characters live in the 16th century, but the narrator speaks to us as if events are unfolding "now," and with a twenty-first-century sensibility about politics and psychology. Thus, Mantel turns Tudor leadership into a mirror for our concerns. Critics note, for instance, that Mantel's Cromwell "is agent and doer, an author of change," so that readers constantly hear him in the narrative ("He, Thomas Cromwell, is speaking"). By aligning us so closely with Cromwell – a figure often maligned in traditional histories – Mantel unsettles fixed moral judgments. We see Henry not as a distant sovereign but as Cromwell's sometimes-befuddled king; More not as a saint but as Cromwell's former friend grown fearful; and Cromwell not as a Machiavellian villain but as a thoughtful survivor. In short, the narrative voice itself becomes a critique of Tudor authority: the story of leadership is shown to be a story of how power is felt and interpreted, not just decreed.

3. HENRY VIII: MASCULINE SOVEREIGNTY AND BRUTAL WILL

The quintessential Tudor leader is Henry VIII, who was gregarious, impetuous, and aggressive. In Wolf Hall, Mantel portrays him through Cromwell's eyes as a man driven by masculine anxiety and sovereign absolutism. His courtly image is one of dazzling vigour, as contemporary ambassadors noted (Henry was "handsomer than any other sovereign in Christendom"), but Mantel constantly undercuts the king's swagger with scenes of cruelty or insecurity. From the outset, Henry's twin obsessions – martial glory and a male heir – are shown as two sides of his hegemonic masculinity. According to Glenn Richardson, Henry's international diplomacy was primarily concerned with improving "his reputation as a man," and his complaints—particularly the absence of a son—undercut the "respect which he believed it was due." This internal conflict overflows into violence in Mantel's story.

One emblematic episode is a council meeting recounted by Cromwell: Wolsey's old strategy of "the King will do such-and-such" has already morphed into "We will do such-and-such" – but now Henry has seized the stage entirely, and Wolsey admits "Now he says, 'This is what I will do'". The simplicity of that line is terrifying in context: Henry is reclaiming divine prerogative. After centuries of medieval checks (law, Papal dispensation, adverbs of "if"), he now issues commands like a de facto dictator. The ensuing conversation, "What will happen to the Queen?" "Convents can be very comfortable" – drips with menace. Henry's abandonment of Katherine of Aragon is here enacted as the king discarding the queen. Mantel's use of bathos ("'Convents can be very comfortable.' 'Perhaps she will go home to Spain.'") exposes Henry's casual cruelty as shameful banality.

Henry's domestic and political violence coalesce in such moments. He imprisons and breaks allies (e.g. Buckingham, although outside Mantel's timeline, is a spectre of his ruthlessness), and he casually threatens even Catholic loyalists. Henry, through Cromwell's plans, will have More punished as a traitor when Thomas More refuses the royal Supremacy. Symbolic aspects of Henry's authority also carry violent resonance. The king's status as "Defender of the Faith" is grotesquely ironic: in Wolf Hall, this title grants him the mandate to persecute dissenters. Henry's performative piety (mass, processions, prayer books) becomes a mask for the deadly politics underneath. In Mantel's hands, the king is a kind of "sovereign exception" (to invoke Schmitt): he treats himself as above canonical law, even rewriting oaths (Cromwell secretly swears the archbishop to Rome but keeps it hidden). His decisions – marrying Anne, sending Katherine away, ordering More's death – echo Carl Schmitt's dictum that "sovereign is he who decides on the exception." For the benefit of the dynasty, Henry grants a "exemption" from traditional morals and assigns Cromwell and others to complete the task.

This absolutism is framed as a failed form of leadership. In Weberian terms, Henry claims the Weberian "monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force" within his realm, but Wolf Hall shows the costs. His tyranny generates fear rather than loyalty, leading to courtly scheming and alienation. Even those close to him see his violence as self-defeating: Cromwell recognises that Henry's drive to secure the dynasty – to live up to a hypermasculine ideal of a warrior-king – is born of desperation, not strength. As Arendt might note, Henry's resorting to violence at every turn means his actual power (political legitimacy) is precarious. Mantel's portrayal suggests that the Tudor king's endless brutality – beheadings and annulments – ultimately undermines the very greatness he seeks. His leadership is a façade propped up by violence, destined to "end in power's disappearance."

4. THOMAS MORE: MORAL CERTAINTY AND VIOLENT ORTHODOXY

Thomas More embodies another facet of Tudor leadership: the morally righteous but hypocritical statesman. Mantel's More is outwardly saintly – unshaken by worldly temptations – but privately ruthless. In the early chapters, Cromwell observes More at work approving heresy trials. One notorious image is More "walking his fish" (heretics) into a crypt, as if animal training, sounding at him to pray, and ignoring his pleas. This domesticity of torture – behind closed doors at his manor – illustrates More's ironic dual role as gentle family man and merciless inquisitor. "Thomas More tortures heretics in his basement," Mantel wryly notes, unsettling traditional views of the man. Thus, Mantel uses More to critique the pious elites: zeal for orthodoxy easily slips into state violence.

More's confrontation with Cromwell later in the novel crystallises this hypocrisy. During a council meeting, More lectures Cromwell on papal oath-breaking, casting Cromwell as a traitor to Christ. But Cromwell retorts that More himself broke his conscience to burn people alive. The tension is captured when More snorts that Cromwell will be "laughed out of court" for his claims – and Cromwell retorts that More will be "laughing on the scaffold" if Cromwell's king holds sway.

In a private scene (more fully dramatized in Bring Up the Bodies), More lashes out at Cromwell: "It is a mirror that flatters Thomas More, but I have another mirror… It shows a killer, for you will drag down with you… those who will have only the suffering, and not your martyr's glory". Though this excerpt comes from a later part of the trilogy, it echoes Wolf Hall's pattern: More's language is flooded with Biblical righteousness ("all the saints" behind him), and yet he is the one reigning violence on conscience.

For Mantel, More's leadership fails because of this disjunction. While he claims to serve a "united Church," his actions betray a Victorian tyranny by another name. Mantel hints that More's sense of duty is sincere but blind to injustice: when he sends Cromwell to the Tower for heresy, More piously believes he has saved souls, but in doing so, he has weaponised law against peaceful people. The narrative voice does not vilify More outright; we see him as witty, affable, and sincerely devoted. But Mantel makes us complicit in seeing through him. Mantel's portrayal demonstrates that such assassination is moral vanity, despite the fact that his executing of Martin Luther is renowned for being his "highest public service". The novel thus uses More to question whether "correct" ideology justifies cruelty. Like Henry, More embodies Weber's "state monopoly of violence," but he wields it in God's name. Arendt would observe that when More burns dissidents, power becomes mere violence. In effect, Mantel suggests that More's moral certainty collapses into tyranny, making his leadership both zealous and disastrously uncompromising.

5. THOMAS CROMWELL: PRAGMATIC POWER AND ITS ETHICS

Thomas Cromwell, the novel's protagonist, embodies a pragmatic centre of Tudor power – the cold-blooded agent of the state. His backstory (schooled in Italy, former soldier, orphan) and inner life are rendered with psychological nuance. Yet Cromwell is never innocent: he is "deeply identified with violence" from childhood. Mantel imagines Cromwell's father as "savage" and drunken, implying Cromwell learned brutality as normal. Even in adulthood, Cromwell's dealings are laced with coercion: he negotiates settlements, arranges arrests, and if needed, he carries out executions. Unlike Henry's hot temper or More's sanctimonious anger, Cromwell's violence is corporate and calculated. He plans secret operations (the Trap, disposing of Wolsey's legacy) with bureaucratic efficiency.

Cromwell's ascent reveals the ethical complexity of statecraft. He forges alliances and then betrays them (as with his early clients). He marries "for money" (Liz Wykys) in a businesslike manner, a decision Mantel treats as an affectless contract. His grief (his wife's death, his lost daughters) is often kept internal – the narrative mentions only a brief lapse when Cromwell remembers his family, then he "puts it down again" (phobia of sentiment). This emotional constraint underscores his professional detachment. Mantel uses subtle close-reading to show how Cromwell juggles roles: he is sincere in some beliefs (he loves Anne Boleyn's intellectuality; he is proud of championing a vernacular Bible) but ruthless in others. For instance, Cromwell grows to admire Anne's strength, yet he ultimately engineers her downfall when royal favour shifts. The novel never lets him rationalise away this disloyalty; Cromwell simply "accepts" the new order as part of survival.

The narrative's ethical positioning of Cromwell is famously ambivalent. Mantel's Cromwell is neither hero nor villain in the traditional sense, but the novel does interrogate his moral standing. Foucault's insight that "power is a complex set of interlocking, constantly shifting relationships" is dramatised in Cromwell's dealings. In conversation, he often emphasises facts and law, masking violence behind procedure. At the same time, he wields the king's monopoly on force: he signs death warrants as if signing paperwork, his pen as sharp as any sword. When More calls him "killer," Cromwell does not deny it; he merely implies that killing has become the essence of politics. In one scene, he muses that if an assassination were done with the king's consent, it would not be murder. This detachment echoes Foucault's notion of "routinization" of state violence, as Justine or biopolitical hygiene.

Mantel also emphasizes Cromwell's power's gendered aspect. Unlike Henry's performative masculinity or More's patriarchal authoritarianism, Cromwell's masculinity is subordinate yet practised. Growing up poor, he was an outsider ("dishonourable estate" he admits), which he parlayed into worldly cunning. He understands honour differently: as a form of negotiation, not automatic entitlement. The novel shows how other courtiers (like Norfolk) try to manhandle Cromwell or test his strength, but he responds with wit and strategy, not brawn. Connell's idea of hegemonic masculinity – culturally exalted male ideals that subordinate others – is implicitly at play. Henry and More represent aspects of hegemonic masculinity (valour, piety, legacy), while Cromwell must construct his masculinity within their shadow. Some critics note that Cromwell "cows people" not by violence but by subverting their expectations of a man of his low birth. In this sense, Cromwell's narrative highlights how masculinity intersects with class and power: he is effective not through

swords or sermons, but through cleverness and influence. However, he is not immune to Foucault's docile bodies: he has wielded power over others, but he is always under suspicion (tilting in Punishment's terms).

Crucially, Cromwell is also Mantel's vehicle for empathy and doubt. The novel forces us to feel with him – we see him cringe when More's devout spouse prays over him, or reflect when he sees women's fear. Yet Mantel never excuses him. The climactic scenes (such as setting Henry's final marriage in motion) often end on Cromwell's face in shadow or mid-thought, leaving interpretation up to the reader. In all, Cromwell's leadership is shown as practical but morally fraught: he may be the Tudor state's glue, but that glue is made of compromises, and compromises cost lives. Mantel thus uses Cromwell to show that the workings of power are not clean or benign; even the "good" operator is tainted by the necessary violence of rule.

6. DEPICTIONS OF VIOLENCE: DOMESTIC, LEGAL, POLITICAL, SYMBOLIC

Wolf Hall effectively illustrates the various degrees of brutality that underlie Mantel's criticism of Tudor authority. These forms often overlap in the characters' experiences:

Domestic violence and patriarchy: While Henry's brutality towards wives (Anne Boleyn's beheading, Katherine's exile) is a well-known theme, Mantel also foregrounds subtler forms. Secondary literature notes that Mantel portrays wives as "tools of fertility" – Cromwell even imagines his mother might have died of "domestic violence" under his violent father. Katherine and Anne are similarly objectified: when they fail to produce a son, Henry abandons them with only "some true or false excuses." Domestic scenes – Wolsey dismissing Cromwell's wife's concerns, More's wife praying desperately for mercy, Anne consoling Henry after miscarriages – underscore that violence permeates personal life as well. These episodes align with feminist critiques of patriarchy: As one scholar points out, Mantel's women "were not entitled to inherit... because of her gender and femininity," making daughters and wives into "family properties". Thus, the novel implicates Tudor "leadership" in enforcing a violent gender order, where even emotion and childbirth become life-and-death politics.

Legal and bureaucratic violence: The Tudor state's legal machinery is itself a weapon. Mantel shows how arrests, trials, and punishments are routine. Under Cromwell's direction, charges of treason or heresy can be engineered at will: men like Arundel or Fisher are hunted by writs; dissidents live in fear of the Star Chamber. Mantel's narrative voice dwells on minute details – the skulls on spikes, the placement of execution carts – as Cromwell anticipates each move. These scenes resonate with Foucault's description of discipline: the English court is a panoptic machine where the threat of torture and execution underlies every negotiation. Symbolic indictments matter too: clothing remnants (a torn page of Mass) become evidence of treason. In a famous scene, Anne Boleyn's portrait (a headless queen on a playing card, "Anne sans tête") is used to terrorise her, a token of legal condemnation transformed into popular culture. Even land confiscation (like Wolsey's losses) is shown as a form of coercion. For Mantel, Tudor legality is inseparable from violence: the veneer of process conceals that justice is often just another tool of the powerful.

Political and military violence: War and conflict loom in the background of Wolf Hall. Henry's wars with France and Scotland, while not detailed on the page, cast long shadows on policy. Wolf Hall often reminds us of England's precarious position: Cromwell notes foreign emissaries, hears rumours of rebellion (the Lincolnshire Rising, afoot though not detailed). Henry's generals – even Cromwell himself, once a soldier – see violence as part of statecraft. One key scene has Cromwell contemplating Thomas More's adage that "blood begets blood," a sentiment Mantel dramatises when she shows Catholic plots and punishments provoked by Henry's break with Rome. The conversos leave the court, and More's workshop burns the heretical books he confiscates. Mantel hints that Henry's sovereign might leads to warlike posturing: he craves glory in tournaments and favours alliances (with France vs. the Emperor) that he thinks bolster his "reputation as a man". Thus, political ambition is inseparable from looming violence; leadership in Mantel's world means always being ready to wield armies or sanction slaughter.

Symbolic violence and ideology: Mantel also attends to the symbolic dimensions of Tudor power. Royal pageantry, courtly ritual, and religious iconography all carry coercive weight. The novel repeatedly draws attention to images of kingship and its brokenness. For example, Cromwell sees a tapestry of the Lyre (Anne's badge) slashed in the palace, a portent of downfall. The language of sacrifice and martyrdom pervades speeches (Henry sees himself as modern Joshua, More as a martyr "for truth"). Catholic liturgy is frequently on the tongues of characters, sometimes twisted, as when Cromwell quips that King Arthur's ghost wrote Henry's annulment books. Bourdieu's insight – that modern states claim a monopoly on symbolic violence as well as physical force – is visible here. The Tudors invest violent meaning in words

and rituals: More's burning pyre is justified by scripture; Henry's new Bible is used to justify schism. Even mundane acts (Henry's constant changing of ministers, Katherine dressing up as a queenly martyr) have broader signal value. In one scene, Cromwell orders that More's trial be held in the open, banking on the public performance of authority to silence dissent. Mantel thus suggests that Tudor leadership enforces its will not only through bloody means but through controlling symbols – the creed, the crown, the courtroom – that dominate thought. (Wikipedia contributors, 2025)

By enumerating violence in these categories, Mantel shows that Tudor leadership is inherently coercive: there is no sphere (domestic, judicial, political, cultural) free from force. As Hannah Arendt observed, "where power is in jeopardy, violence appears." In Wolf Hall, the kings of England never wield pure power of consent; every act of authority is backed by the threat of violence, and this intertwining of power and violence ultimately signals a leadership crisis.

7. THEORETICAL LENS: POWER, MASCULINITY, AND IDEOLOGY

Mantel's novel resonates with modern theories of power. Michel Foucault's ideas in particular illuminate its world. Foucault wrote that power is not a thing but a network of relations, which is exactly how Cromwell experiences authority: it shifts with alliances and documents rather than residing in one person. The Tudor state in Wolf Hall exercises what Foucault might call discipline and biopower simultaneously – disciplining subjects through law and managing the populace (collecting papal dispensations, commanding monasteries). Cromwell himself is like a Foucauldian bureaucrat, carrying out the king's will in myriad small decrees. Yet Mantel also nods to the modernist critique of power: Tony Karon notes that Mantel infuses "life and emotional and moral complexity" into Cromwell, which in Foucault's terms means seeing how power is internalised by individuals. Cromwell's inner reflections – fear of falling, empathy for innocents – show how power shapes subjectivity.

Hannah Arendt's distinction between power and violence is equally relevant. Arendt famously said that "violence appears where power is in jeopardy." Wolf Hall dramatises this: when Henry's legitimacy falters (no heir, foreign pressure), he resorts to extreme violence (annulment, executions). Similarly, More's power in his church-state is revealed only when he uses violence to defend it (burnings). In each case, violence betrays a lack of genuine authority. Mantel's narrative voice often suggests Arendtian scepticism: law and sanctity alone do not command loyalty, so Tudor rulers resort to intimidation. The grim outcome is that leadership depends on terror.

Max Weber's theory of the state's monopoly on violence also frames Mantel's critique. According to Weber, modern states claim exclusive right to "the legitimate use of physical force." In the novel, Henry's regime certainly claims this. But Mantel unsettles Weber by showing how that legitimacy is constantly under siege. Tudors enforce compliance through force (prisons, hangings), but Arundel and others whisper that Henry has broken his word. Crucially, Mantel foregrounds that Weber's "legitimacy" is socially constructed. A king's right to kill hinges on belief in divine right and national unity – things Mantel's Henry must forcefully reaffirm (by declaring himself head of Church, for instance).

Finally, R.W. Connell's work on masculinity undergirds the novel's gendered politics. Connell posits that hegemonic masculinity – culturally exalted male ideals – underpins the subordination of others. Henry VIII in Wolf Hall is portrayed as embodying the Tudor ideal of manhood: athletic, feudal-lordly, desperate for an heir. Cromwell's conscious obsession with the heir (the "fragment of waste paper" at court symbolism) speaks to what Richardson calls Henry's struggle for masculine honour. Yet Mantel also depicts how this masculinity is inherently fragile: Henry's tantrums and paranoia expose an insecure man compensating for a broken covenant with providence. Thomas More's masculinity is pious and intellectual – he is the moral exemplar – but it too collapses into violence when challenged. Cromwell's masculinity is more ambiguous: he occupies a subordinate position but seeks mastery through competence. Wolf Hall thereby shows multiple masculinities colliding in Tudor politics, and critiques the very notion that a stable, "legitimate" masculine order exists in such turmoil.

Throughout the novel's moral universe is shaped by these theoretical tensions. Mantel neither wholly condones nor condemns her characters, but her narrative position is clear: power untethered from empathy leads to cruelty. She suggests that the ethics of leadership must confront violence rather than merely justify it. In key episodes, Mantel often lingers on the sufferers (for example, Anne's stoic face before execution, or More's wife left widowed) to elicit affect from the reader, aligning with modern theories of empathy and emotion in literature. While she rarely indulges sensationalism, Wolf Hall prompts its audience to feel the weight of Tudor violence – a strategy akin to affect theory's claim that literature can convey the lived experience of power.

8. CONCLUSION

Wolf Hall's sweeping narrative portrays Tudor leadership as inseparable from various forms of violence – domestic, legal, political, symbolic – and uses this portrayal to critique the ethics of power. Through Henry VIII's increasing tyranny, Thomas More's hypocritical zeal, and Thomas Cromwell's pragmatic cruelty, Mantel argues that Tudor governance was ultimately "failed" in moral and practical terms. Each character's story reveals the costs of maintaining authority by force. Mantel's historiographic revisionism deepens this critique: by giving voice to those who suffered under violence (e.g. the wives, the heretics, the downtrodden courtiers), the novel refuses to let official histories gloss over brutality. Instead, it exposes how such violence was normalised and even hidden beneath religious or patriotic rhetoric.

In sum, Mantel's ethical position is quietly subversive. She does not depict violence for spectacle; she depicts it as a consequence of men who believe themselves rightful rulers. Her narrative invites us to question whether even the most cunning leader can truly justify such force. As scholars of power and gender have noted, the Tudor state claimed to be modernising and rationalising Britain – yet in Wolf Hall, its statecraft is shown as profoundly irrational when judged by human cost. By foregrounding these tensions, Mantel's work resonates with feminist and critical theory: it suggests that the Tudor era's legacy is as much one of trauma and oppression as of renaissance and reform.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Mantel, Hilary. Wolf Hall. Henry Holt, 2009.

Arendt, Hannah. On Violence. Harvest/HBJ, 1970.

Connell, R. W., and James W. Messerschmidt. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." Gender & Society, vol. 19, no. 6, Dec. 2005, pp. 829–59.

Foucault, Michel. Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Pantheon, 1977.

Karon, Tony. "A Man for Changing Seasons: What Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell Teaches About Power." TIME, 19 Oct. 2012, world.time.com/2012/10/19/a-man-for-changing-seasons-what-hillary-mantels-thomas-cromwell-teaches-about-power/.

Kim, Margaret. "' Make or Mar': History and Fiction in Wolf Hall." The Wenshan Review of Literature and Culture, vol. 12, no. 1, Dec. 2018, pp. 17–29.

Richardson, Glenn. "The 'Diplomatic Masculinity' of Henry VIII." The International History Review, 2022, DOI: 10.1080/07075332.2022.2046130.

Schmitt, Carl. Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty. Translated by George Schwab, MIT P, 1985.

Weber, Max. "Politics as a Vocation." From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology, translated by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, Oxford UP, 1946, pp. 77–128.

Wenshan Review. "Make or Mar: History and Fiction in Wolf Hall." 2018. (cited excerpts).

Bilyeau, N. (2019, September 15). Was Henry VIII a psychopath? - Nancy Bilyeau - medium. Medium. https://tudorscribe.medium.com/was-henry-viii-a-psychopath-9cc0cab7dfd8

Mullan, J. (2022, September 23). How Hilary Mantel's Wolf Hall trilogy turned Thomas Cromwell from villain to hero. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2022/sep/23/how-hilary-mantels-wolf-hall-trilogy-turned-thomas-cromwell-from-villain-to-hero

Krause, P. (2022, May 10). Carl Schmitt and the concept of sovereignty. Discourses on Minerva. https://minervawisdom.com/2020/03/26/carl-schmitt-and-the-concept-of-sovereignty/

Understanding power for social change, powercube.net, IDS at Sussex University. (2010, March 8). Foucault: power is everywhere | Understanding power for social change | powercube.net | IDS at Sussex University. Understanding

Power for Social Change | powercube.net | IDS at Sussex University | Understanding Power for Social Change. https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/foucault-power-is-everywhere/

Wolf Hall. (n.d.). http://www.historicalnovels.info/Wolf-Hall.html

Wikipedia contributors. (2025, March 12). Symbolic violence. Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symbolic_violence