



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

## Cromwell As A Precursor To Modern Meritocracy

Anjelin Mathew<sup>1</sup>

Research Scholar, MATS University, Raipur

Dr. Sajal Thakur<sup>2</sup>

Assistant Professor, MATS University, Raipur

Email-id: [anjelinmathew94@gmail.com](mailto:anjelinmathew94@gmail.com)

### Abstract

The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy (*Wolf Hall*, *Bring up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror and the Light*) by Hilary Mantel provides a drastic rearrangement of the power structure of the Tudor period by turning Thomas Cromwell into a professional and bureaucratic figure. In this paper, I will argue that Mantel's Cromwell is a prelude to contemporary meritocracy, and represents a transition between aristocratic privilege and government by expertise, flexibility, and administrative rationality. The work is based on New Historicism, Weberian theories of bureaucracy and the ideas by Bourdieu of cultural and symbolic capital in order to discuss the manner in which the rise of Cromwell disrupts feudal hierarchies, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, enables the application of lawful violence and institutional surveillance. Although Mantel foregrounds a progressive force that allows social mobility, in the trilogy, the ethical ambiguities of meritocratic power are also revealed, as meritocratic power turns out to be coercive and exclusionary. The ultimate demise of Cromwell highlights the vulnerability of meritocracy in a society that was still heavily obsessed with lineage. The trilogy is therefore a place where early modern England can be seen as a place of political modernity, which provokes a critical reevaluation of the origins and contradictions of meritocracy.

**Keywords:** Meritocracy, Bureaucracy, Social Mobility, Tudor Politics, Hilary Mantel, Power

### Introduction

The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy by Hilary Mantel has a central place in the world of the twenty-first century British literature, both in terms of literary innovation and in terms of audacious historiographical revisionism. Through the inner mind of Thomas Cromwell, Mantel is able to break the old historical accounts that have established Cromwell as a cold-blooded manipulator and the creator of oppression. Rather, the trilogy is a very subtle portrayal of a man who ascends to the top of political power by being smart, working hard, and making changes.

The re-conceptualization has notable consequences to the interpretation of power, class, and governance in early modern England. Cromwell according to Mantel, is neither a feudal overlord nor a god-made king, but a professional administrator whose power resides in utility and skills. In this way, Cromwell looks forward to modern meritocracy, in which promotion is



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

in theory dependent on talent, not on lineage. However, Mantel does not glorify meritocracy in her story. Rather, it unveils its own moral contradictions, and the way that the rule by expertise can justify violence, and establish new bases of domination.

The present paper posits that Cromwell by Mantel can be regarded as a forerunner of modern meritocracy and will encompass its potential prospects as well as its moral hazards. By means of a profound textual analysis and working with the political and cultural theory, the paper considers the rise of Cromwell, the tensions he creates among classes and the bureaucratic processes to maintain it, and the precariousness that finally causes his downfall. Thus, the paper proposes the trilogy of Mantel as the critical reflection on the political modernity itself.

## **Revising Tudor Historiography: Cromwell Reimagined**

Historiographical traditions in the traditional Tudor historiography have continued to construct Thomas Cromwell as a debaucher and a man who shows no political mercy, a figure whose historical portrayal has been influenced by ideology as much as it has been influenced by history. Catholic historians of the early period depicted Cromwell as an agent of destruction who was a heretic and caused the dissolution of the monasteries and the vanishing of religious tradition. Though at times Protestant historians conceded his administrative ability they diminished him to being a necessary but morally compromised agent of reform. This image was also cemented in literary portrayals, particularly in Henry VIII by Shakespeare and Fletcher, Cromwell is shown as a dispensable political player whose up and down enhance the unalterability of the monarchical supremacy.

The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy by Mantel steps in with a decisive action in this historiographical tradition in that the moral binaries in which Tudor power was construed. Mantel does not place Cromwell in the context of the structural changes of the early modern England as an exception or a warning figure. Her Cromwell is not a distortion of Tudor society but a by-product of that society--a type that was formed by new systems of administration, law and governance that were slowly replacing feudal forms of authority.

It reflects a general change in historical scholarship which is oriented away from moralized biography in favor of structural and material analysis. The key to the administrative revolution in Tudor England has been already stressed by revisionist orchestras like G. R. Elton, whom it is not so much that Cromwell was ambitious himself, but that he made institutions innovative. Mantel goes further with this academic re-evaluation, by recreating the historical argument as a narrative, so that the reader is able to experience the thinking and feeling world of the bureaucratic modernizer, instead of just being spectators of his doings.

Most importantly, there is no idealization in the revision by Mantel. Rather, she reformulates the ambiguity of morality in Cromwell as historically understandable. Violence, coercion, and manipulation are not personal vices that Cromwell had but part of the structural needs in a volatile political system undergoing feudalism to capitalism. Mantel gets this by



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

placing the actions of Cromwell within the scope of law, reform of parliament, and necessity in administration, the question of historiography becomes not Is Cromwell good or evil? but What kinds of power did Tudor England make possible- and at what cost?

The new historiographical change is a key aspect of the narrative perspective by Mantel. The narration of the three trilogy counts on the close third-person narration that reduces the gap between the reader and subject and forces the reader to empathize with the rationale of Cromwell. This method defies the authority distance that has traditionally been linked with historical writing and is consistent with the argument that rhetorical and ethical decisions inform historical narrative as opposed to objectivity, as presented by Hayden White. Among the interpretive work that history carries out itself, Mantel puts into view the manner in which previous accounts of Cromwell depended upon selective accentuation and ideological infraction.

In addition, the Cromwell of Mantel disrupts the historiographical privilege of aristocracy. The conventional Tudor histories tend to focus on the rulers, nobility, and ecclesiastical elites, and ignore those whose activities are in the administrative and professional spheres of life. In contrast, Mantel prefigures clerks, lawyers, merchants and secretaries, people whose work keeps the machine of power functioning but does not seize the figurative power. This change is indicative of New Historicist worries about the agency of the subaltern and the movement of power via ordinary practices.

The fact that Cromwell was low in birth is of special interest in this regard. Mantel does not use class as a background to the interpretation of historiography but rather as a structuring element. The fact that Cromwell was not a noble by any means justifies, in part, the fact why historical accounts have been very unkind on him. His ascendancy poses a danger to the principles of ideology of hereditary rule, and is therefore an uncomfortable presence to those historians who are interested consciously or unconsciously in the survival of aristocracies. In the trilogy, Mantel reveals the role of historiography in reproduction of classes giving more importance to a lineage rather than to the work.

The concept of historical progress is also difficult to grasp in the trilogy. Although the reforms in Cromwell administration look forward to the modern model of governance, Mantel is opposed to projecting this shift as one that is absolutely beneficial. Bureaucracy emerges and creates efficiency as well as impersonality; legality substituting arbitrary violence does not remove cruelty. Mantel, in this regard, concurs with postmodern historiography that does not subscribe to the improvement stories of progress. The world which Cromwell is leading is not gravitating towards justice but towards systematization.

By redefining Cromwell as a historically-contextual figure as opposed to a moral anomaly, Mantel makes the reader question the mechanism of historical villains' creation. According to the trilogy, the fame of Cromwell is driven not so much by his deeds as by the pain that he causes: he is neither a noble nor a divine but neither a tyrant with charisma nor a



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

romantic rebel. He is a symbol of power without spectacle, authority without descent--something that shakes the usual historiographical norms.

Finally, Mantel does not just do justice to Tudor historiography, but a diagnosis. She brings out the anxiety regarding class mobility, professional authority and institutional power encoded in historical narrations. The rehabilitation of Cromwell is not, in any event, an act of exoneration, but of being invited to reconsider the systems of morality within which history deals with blame and virtue. In bringing complexity back to the character of Cromwell, Mantel reveals the constraints of moralized history, and creates a platform on which the structural conditions that constitute political agency can be explored.

Thus, by doing that, The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy makes the historical fiction a valid form of historiographical investigation. Mantel does not say she substitutes academic history; she supplements it, by delving into other aspects of power, psychological, emotional, experience, which archival documentation could scarcely capture. Her Cromwell is both historical and modern at the same time, neither the villain redeemed, but rather the reflection of the troubled roots of modern government.

## **The Self-Made Political Subject: Cromwell and the Logic of Merit**

The reconfiguration of Thomas Cromwell offered by Hilary Mantel is based on her long-term creation of him as a self-made political subject, a personality whose power becomes a result of work, flexibility, and experience instead of hereditary position. The ascendancy of Cromwell is a massive challenge of political legitimacy in a society that was organized in terms of lineage and feudal obligation. Mantel does not view self-making as a triumph of individualism, but rather as an elaborate process of discipline, discipline that is painful, and disciplined, and molded by systemic constraints, and thus suggests that Cromwell shares much in common with early versions of meritocratic subjectivity.

The key to this construction is the paternal violence, economic precarity, and continental exile that Cromwell had to deal with since his early years. Cromwell, unlike the aristocratic characters, who will be vested to power as a continuation of their birthright, is taught to learn power as something that is contingent and negotiable. It is his ability to read environments accurately, anticipate danger, and change behaviour that keeps him alive. Mantel repeats this idea that Cromwell acquires the knowledge of power before he can practice it. This practical base is what makes him stand out of the nobles who depend on symbolic power as opposed to a practical skill.

A concept of self-fashioning as developed by Stephen Greenblatt can be especially helpful in interpreting the subjectivity of Cromwell. Greenblatt explains that the early modern identity is not a natural phenomenon but it is created in the course of performance and strategic bargaining with the dominant structures. An example of this process is Cromwell: his words, body, and non-verbals are highly context-specific. He is genuinely expressive, and is not cynically artificial; on the contrary, his selfhood is instrumental, the result of political necessity.



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

The close third person narrative point of view used by Mantel gives the reader an opportunity to see the relentless effort it takes to keep such a self-alive.

The important elements of self-making by Cromwell are the language and silence. He has little to say, much to hear, and his memory is like a dog. Restraint in the case of Mantel is a kind of intelligence. Where nobles claim their dominance by showing off and being violent, Cromwell gathers power by watching and counting. This focus on cognitive work as a foreground of merit is a role of discipline and not charisma.

Cromwell is also identified by professional competence. The legal, financial, diplomatic, and administrative expertise he possesses makes him an indispensable element in a speedily centralizing state. For Mantel, Cromwell was always able to master systems compared to the nobility who depended on tradition. He realizes that power is becoming less and less concentrated in individual loyalty but it is in institutions, courts, councils, parliaments, and archives. This institutional literacy makes Cromwell a present-day political subject who acted in the context of emergent bureaucracies.

Nevertheless, Mantel makes the process of self-making more complex by revealing the emotional and moral price of it. The self-control exhibited by Cromwell requires the repression of sorrow, sensitivity, and ethical indecisiveness. He has to sacrifice personal loss especially death of his wife and daughters to political survival because of his professional identity. In this respect, self-making is a self-erasure. The meritocratic subject has to constantly be useful and has little time to waste his emotional indulgence or moral dissent.

Class is an ongoing hindrance to self-fashioning on the part of Cromwell. His competence is constantly made to remind him of his low birth. The use of class insults by aristocratic characters as one of the ways to destabilize his legitimacy exposes the boundaries of merit in a society that is still based on the principles of hereditary hierarchy. The self-made position makes Cromwell very strong and weak at the same time: he is praised as an efficient man, he is despised due to his background, and he is never completely safe.

The theory of capital formulated by Pierre Bourdieu can be used to explain this tension. Cromwell fills in the deficiency of inherited symbolic capital with the accrual of cultural and institutional capital- knowledge, expertise, and procedural power. But these kinds of capital must be renewed. Merit should be constantly demonstrated unlike lineage, which does not require performance. Mantel therefore brings out meritocracy as a tiresome system, which requires constant proving of worth.

The climax of this relationship is in *The Mirror and the Light* where the self-constructed identity of Cromwell starts to break. His merit decreases in value as the political situation changes. The same qualities, efficiency, discretion, and loyalty, which made his rise possible, are now turned against him in a court which is growing more and more suspicious and spectacular. The demise of Cromwell reveals the extreme weakness of the self-created political subject in the monarchical system of power.





# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

The image of Cromwell that Mantel creates thus challenges the heroic history of the self-made man that dominated liberal modernity. She instead introduces self-making as a historically particular reaction to structural change, a response to the new forms of bureaucratic governance, and not a victory of will power. The life of Cromwell shows that meritocracy does not destroy hierarchy, it reforms it.

Mantel is also asking her readers to reevaluate the moral consequences of merit-based power by making Cromwell a self-made political subject. One needs not just proficiency but obedience and not just intellect but self-denial to self-making. In this regard, Cromwell will be an exemplar of contemporary professional topics whose power lies in utility in systems they lack control over. His narrative, therefore, speaks far beyond Tudor England, as the genealogy of meritocratic identity is critically genealogical, with its contradictions that persist.

## **Bureaucracy and Rational-Legal Authority: Cromwell and the Architecture of Modern Power**

The ability to focus on bureaucracy as a narrative texture and a political power is one of the most remarkable characteristics of Hilary Mantel in Thomas Cromwell Trilogy. Mantel describes Thomas Cromwell as not merely a bureaucrat in the court, but a designer of rational-legal power, who envisions the modern types of governance, based on documentation and procedure and continuity of institutions. Through this, the trilogy prefigures the history of bureaucracy as a historically transformative form of power that supersedes feudal devotion and charismatic authority with administrative ability.

The theory of rational-legal authority by Max Weber is an important theory that can be used to comprehend the political relevance of Cromwell. Weber describes bureaucracy as the ideal organizational structure of the modern states, which is marked by administration that is rule-based, functions are specialized, there are written documents, and accountability is hierarchical. These principles are long preceded in Cromwell by Mantel. His power does not derive out of aristocratic rank or the approval of God but rather out of his skill in systems, law, finance, diplomacy, and record-keeping, which govern the political life.

Paperwork as used throughout the trilogy serves as a symbol and as a material of power. Memoranda, letters, contracts, indictments, parliamentary acts fly through the hands of Cromwell. Mantel intentionally makes these materials visible and makes what could be a dull administrative description become narrative driving forces. The power of writing and documentation, of documentation and not spectacle is the exercise of power in the world of Cromwell. This change is an indicator of a larger change in the nature of authority as such.

The bureaucratic rationality of Cromwell is in deep opposition to the performative politics of the nobility. Power based on ritual, display and lineage is an aristocratic power; predictability and procedure are the basis of power based on Cromwell. He realizes that systems exist longer than people and that written records have a permanence which personal loyalty does not. Mantel repeatedly stresses the fact that continuity is invested by Cromwell, in making



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

sure that there are traceable, defensible, and reproducible decisions. In this regard, Cromwell represents a proto-modern civil servant as opposed to a medieval courtier.

The affective implications of the bureaucratic governance are also revealed in the trilogy. Mantel portrays bureaucracy as something that demands emotional control and professional indifference. Cromwell has the ability to administer justice or injustice and this requires him to be able to make a distinction between personal feeling and the institutional responsibility. It is an emotional discipline, not natural, but developed, which shows the psychological requirements of rational-legal authority. Weber himself remarks how impersonal bureaucratic power is; Mantel brings the impersonality to the fore in the internal deliberations of Cromwell between memory, grief, and duty.

The best example of bureaucratic violence is the trial and execution of Anne Boleyn in *Bring Up the Bodies*. Cromwell neither directly accuses nor condemns Anne, but rather arranges a machine where the evidence, testimony, and legal precedent all agree on a certain course of action. Violence is spread into institutions and personal responsibility becomes obscure. The story told by Mantel shows the possibility of rational-legal authority to legitimize the coercion by inculcating it in the procedure. What seems to be justice is in reality the good administration of political necessity.

This modernization of violence is a great change of feudal systems of power where punishment was usually arbitrary and dramatic. In the England of Cromwell, violence is made legal and documented and justified. Mantel therefore foresees the views of Michel Foucault concerning the present-day disciplinary power, where control is exercised through normalization as opposed to force. The power of Cromwell is not based on the dread of the scaffold but the necessity of the process.

The other important element of bureaucratic power of Cromwell is surveillance. Mantel introduces information-gathering as a routine and not an ad hoc approach. Cromwell has networks of spies, watches letters and keeps a careful check on political opinion. Knowledge is an administrative resource which confirms Foucault that power and knowledge are constitutive. The intelligence of Cromwell is not simply a personal matter but it is an institutionalized one.

But Mantel does not want to depict bureaucracy as ethically neutral or even historically progressive. Although rational-legal authority brings in sanity and effectiveness, it also creates novel alienation and defenselessness. People are turned into cases, names into files and decisions are given an air of inevitability. Even Cromwell is aware of the threat of the systems he creates. In *The Mirror and the Light*, he realizes more of the fact that once bureaucracy is set up, it does not care about its makers. State power can be misused against anyone, even its most proficient administrator.

The downfall of Cromwell highlights the paradox of bureaucratic power, which is that its power is based on its impersonality, but this fact makes its representatives dispensable.



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

Bureaucrats gain authority based on position unlike feudal lords whose authority is based on lineage. The cessation of function to be useful means the disappearance of authority. Mantel, therefore, reveals the precarity of governance that is driven by merit and systems.

Mantel provides a critical genealogy of the contemporary state power by making bureaucracy the core of her story. Cromwell comes out not just as a historical figure but also as a prototype of the contemporary administrator: efficient, intelligent, irreplaceable, and disposable. According to the trilogy, the roots of modern bureaucratic rationality cannot be separated in terms of moral compromise and institutional violence.

Mantel dissents to the celebratory stories of political modernization by portraying bureaucracy as empowering and destructive at the same time. The trilogy suggests that rational-legal authority does not annul injustice; it merely restructures it. The tale of Cromwell therefore is a cautionary reflection on the moral boundaries of expertise-based rule and permanent human costs of governmental authority.

## **Class Anxiety and the Crisis of Aristocratic Legitimacy**

Easily one of the longest running points of tension in the Thomas Cromwell Trilogy by Hilary Mantel is the fear created by the ascendancy of Cromwell in a hereditary-based social hierarchy. Mantel introduces the reader to Tudor England as a society that is formally devoted to ancestry, but is becoming more and more reliant on professionalism. The rise of Cromwell, the son of a blacksmith to the position of the chief minister of the king brings to light a great crisis of aristocratic legitimacy which shows that the inherited authority was no longer a self-evident and unchallenged one.

The antagonism of the nobility towards Cromwell is not a personal one. The Duke of Norfolk, Stephen Gardiner, and other members of the court elite stress the low birth of Cromwell as a tool of delegitimization several times. These attacks are defensive gestures, which are geared towards maintaining a social order that is being threatened. Mantel puts such antagonism in the context of class anxiety: the fear that power can be acquired instead of inherited upsets the ideological base of aristocratic government.

This anxiety can be explained quite well using the concept of symbolic capital introduced by Pierre Bourdieu. The aristocratic power is based on the collective acknowledgement of lineage as a source of power. Cromwell upsets this system by amassing other types of capital, education, knowledge of law, bureaucratic power, which has nothing to do with aristocratic blood. His appearance reveals the aristocratic legitimacy to be conditional and not natural and supported by ritual and agreement but not by natural superiority.

Mantel plays this crisis by dramatizing it in terms of recurrent social friction. Cromwell is condoned, even depended on, but never entirely accepted. He can even dine with the nobles, he can negotiate marriages and he can even formulate the national policy but his roots are always cited to remind him of his inferiority. Class is a weapon here and it is used to reinforce





# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

boundaries in case institutional power is not enough to do it. The continued use of such insults shows how shaky the aristocratic belief in a political environment in flux is.

Notably, Mantel does not make aristocratic resistance irrational. The nobility is right in believing that Cromwell is a new form of power that will destroy their supremacy. His power lies not in individual loyalty or feudal attachment but in structures of law, bureaucracy and administration which circumvent the old structures of hierarchy. Not just Cromwell but a whole social order is being undermined by the crisis.

Another theme that can be identified in the trilogy is the influence of class anxiety on political behavior. Aristocratic characters tend to indulge in carefree demonstrations of domination arrogance, violence, and melodramatic rebellion as a way of reusing their fading structural strength. Conversely, the tact and coldness of Cromwell show that he was cognizant of the fact that aggression is met with resistance. Mantel, therefore, compares two forms of power: one that is based on a show of symbols, the other on institutional power.

Gender also adds to this crisis of legitimacy. Aristocratic masculinity of the trilogy is often performative and fragile and is based on aggression and culture of honor. The masculinity of Cromwell, on the other hand, is practical and self-contained, but directed to perseverance and not domination. This contradiction makes the classes more strained because the self-restraint of Cromwell reveals the instability of the noble manhood and destroys its right to the natural power.

Another way that Mantel brings up that the concept of class anxiety intersects with memory and historiography. This claim of the nobility about lineage is an effort to correct history, to stabilize the identity by means of ancestry. Cromwell, on the other hand, is a symbol of historical contingency and mobility. His ascendancy proves that history can be rewritten not hereditary account but through deed. This is a possibility that is very disturbing to the individuals who rely on continuity to get their power.

The killing of Anne Boleyn in *Bring Up the Bodies* is an example of the intersection of the anxiety of the class and the violence of politics. The fall of Anne is not purely the issue of royal discontent but a chance of the aristocratic parties to restore their power over the administrative authority of Cromwell. As Cromwell manipulates the legal procedure, the larger picture shows that there is an overall attempt to stem out the power of a commoner who has crossed the reasonable boundaries.

The partial recovery of aristocratic legitimacy comes in the eventual downfall of Cromwell in *The Mirror and the Light*. But Mantel introduces this restoration as something shaky and unfinished. The execution of Cromwell is not going to undo the administrative changes he put in place. The institutions that he contributed to the creation of still stand, and it is possible to infer that people can be ousted, but not structural change. The victory of aristocrats is therefore nominal as opposed to real.



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

The view of the Mantel on the topic of class anxiety eventually dispels idealistic imaginations of the Tudor order. The trilogy shows aristocracy as not a natural order but a pretense, which is maintained by exclusion and intimidation. The ascension of Cromwell reveals how hard one has to work to perpetuate inherited advantage and how much bloodshed one has to engage in to protect it.

Through foregrounding class anxiety, Mantel redefines the politics of Tudor as being a battle over the validity itself. The struggle of Cromwell and the nobility is not merely the battle of power but the clash of the opposing models of power based on birth and merit. The trilogy also locates class as a pivotal point of change in politics and demonstrates how the rise of meritocracy disrupts not just social structures, but also the psychological premises of power.

## **Meritocracy and Moral Ambiguity**

While Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell Trilogy foregrounds merit as a transformative force competent of destabilizing patrimonial privilege, it simultaneously interrogates the mental uncertainties intrinsically in meritocratic power. Mantel resists presenting meritocracy as a virtuously obvious alternative to noble rule. Instead, the trilogy exposes how authority grounded in expertise and efficiency often demands mental compromise, emotive suppression, and complicity in institutional violence. Cromwell's rise, therefore, illuminates meritocracy as a system marked by intimate mental ambivalence.

Cromwell's authority rests on competence, adaptability, and usefulness qualities that are ostensibly neutral but politically consequential. His value to the Crown lies not in mental vision but in effectiveness. Mantel repeatedly emphasizes that Cromwell survives by solving problems, not by questioning the justice of the tasks assigned to him. This realistic orientation aligns merit with utility than virtue, suggesting that meritocracy prioritizes outcomes over moral deliberation. Cromwell's intelligence becomes indivisible from his willingness to act without hesitation.

This moral flexibility is most open in Cromwell's relationship to law. As an administrator, he does not only apply legal principles; he interprets, reshapes, and mobilizes them to serve political ends. In *Bring Up the Bodies*, the prosecution of Anne Boleyn demonstrates how legal expertise can transform suspicion into certainty. The accumulation of evidence, the management of testimony, and the orchestration of trials produce an appearance of justice that conceals political calculation. Mantel thusly reveals law as a virtuously pliant instrument within meritocratic governance.

Michel Foucault's concept of power/knowledge helps illuminate this dynamic. Cromwell's authority derives from his control over information what is recorded, what is omitted, and what becomes official truth. Meritocratic power, in this sense, operates not through raw brutality but through epistemological dominance. By determining the terms of legality and legitimacy, Cromwell participates in a system where moral responsibility is diffused across institutions, rendering private culpability obscure.



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

Mantel too emphasizes the emotional costs of meritocratic efficiency. Cromwell's pro identity requires him to suppress private grief, empathy, and moral doubt. The deaths of his wife and daughters haunt him throughout the trilogy, yet he must continue to function as a trenchant administrator. This emotional discipline mirrors the impersonality of bureaucratic systems, where sentiment is perceived as a liability. Meritocracy thusly demands not merely competence but emotional self-regulation, reshaping the subject's interior life.

Importantly, Mantel does not depict Cromwell as virtuously indifferent. His intrinsic monologues reveal awareness of the human consequences of his actions. However, awareness does not translate into resistance. Cromwell's insight becomes another form of burden, reinforcing the paradox of meritocratic ethics: knowledge increases responsibility but does not needfully enable refusal. To survive, Cromwell must continue to perform effectiveness, even when it conflicts with his moral instincts.

The moral ambiguity of meritocracy is further underscored by its invisibility. Unlike feudalistic tyranny, which is raw and personalized, meritocratic domination is procedural and dispersed. Violence appears as necessity rather than choice. Mantel's narrative frequently emphasizes inevitability decisions seem compelled by circumstance rather than agency. This framing reveals how meritocratic systems can absolve individuals by embedding catastrophic outcomes within mental processes. Cromwell's downfall in *The Mirror & the Light* finally exposes the moral instability of meritocratic authority. His service, intelligence, and loyalty offer no moral immunity. The system he serves neither protects him nor recognizes moral investment. Mantel thusly suggests that meritocracy, remote from rewarding virtue, often rewards adaptability to power heedless of moral cost.

By foregrounding moral ambiguity, Mantel challenges celebratory narratives of merit-based governance. The trilogy suggests that replacing transmissible privilege with expertise does not resolve the problem of injustice; it transforms its mechanisms. Meritocracy reorganizes power rather than humanizing it. Ultimately, *The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy* presents meritocracy as a system that simultaneously enables progress and perpetuates domination. Cromwell's success illustrates the promise of interpersonal mobility, while his compromises reveal the moral price of effectiveness. Mantel's exploration of moral ambiguity invites readers to scrutinize the values embedded within meritocratic systems, both past and present. The trilogy thusly offers not a condemnation or endorsement of meritocracy, but an uninterrupted moral inquiry into the costs of governance grounded in merit alone.

## Surveillance, Law, and State Violence

Meritocratic governance in the trilogy is nearly tied to surveillance. Cromwell maintains networks of informants, monitors correspondence, and anticipates dissent. These practices anticipate modern forms of state control, where power operates invisibly and continuously. Law functions as a key instrument in this system. Cromwell does not invent



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

violence; he organizes it. Executions are framed as legal necessities rather than acts of cruelty. This transformation of violence into procedure is one of Mantel's most unsettling insights. It suggests that merit-based systems can make oppression more efficient and less visible. The trial and execution of Anne Boleyn exemplify this process. Cromwell's skill ensures that the outcome appears inevitable, even just. Mantel thereby exposes the dark underside of mental governance, where legality becomes identical from injustice.

## **Precarity and the Limits of Merit**

Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell Trilogy culminates in an uninterrupted meditation on the fragility of merit-based authority. While Cromwell's rise appears to validate competence, intelligence, and administrative mastery as practicable foundations of power, his eventual downfall exposes the morphological limits of meritocracy within a political system still anchored in transmissible and noble supremacy. Mantel presents merit not as a lasting source of legitimacy but as a contingent and rescindable condition, subject to the loose demands of autonomous power.

Cromwell's authority exists merely insofar as it remains useful to the Crown. Unlike aristocrats, whose status is buffered by lineage and tradition, Cromwell's position requires ceaseless justification. Meritocracy, as Mantel portrays it, demands perpetual performance. Cromwell must remain indispensable anticipating crises, neutralizing threats, and managing contradictions without the security of inherited legitimacy. This dependence on usefulness renders his authority inherently precarious.

The trilogy repeatedly underscores this vulnerability through Cromwell's awareness of contingency. He recognizes that loyalty does not guarantee protection and that service does not generate immunity. In *The Mirror & the Light*, Cromwell reflects on the instability of favor, understanding that the same qualities that elevated him efficiency, discretion, and proximity to power also expose him to suspicion. His competence becomes identical from threat, specially as the court shifts toward spectacle, suspicion, and affectional politics.

Mantel contrasts Cromwell's precarity with blue blooded resilience. Nobles may fall temporarily from favor, but their lineage affords them pathways to restoration. Cromwell lacks such morphological cushioning. His fall is last because merit, unlike blood, does not endure beyond utility. This asymmetry exposes an important contradiction within meritocratic systems operating alongside transmissible hierarchies: while merit enables access, it does not ensure survival.

The bureaucratic systems Cromwell helps to construct intensify this precarity. Rational legal authority, as Weber observes, is impersonal and function based. Once Cromwell ceases to serve the system effectively or becomes politically inconvenient the machinery of governance operates without regard for personal history or contribution. Mantel emphasizes the irony that Cromwell is undone by the very procedures he perfected. Documentation,



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

accusation, and legal process are mobilized against him with the same efficiency he once commanded.

Cromwell's downfall too reveals the affectional isolation of the meritocratic subject. His professional identity has required emotional restraint and strategical silence, limiting the formation of custodial alliances based on loyalty or kinship. When he is arrested, few are ready or capable to defend him. Meritocracy, Mantel suggests, produces subjects who are functionally focal but socially expendable. Their value lies in performance, not in belonging.

The trilogy further complicates the limits of merit by exposing the incompatibility between bureaucratic rationality and noble caprice. Cromwell operates within a system that aspires to procedural stability, yet ultimate authority remains concentrated in the sovereign. Henry VIII's favor is unpredictable, governed by desire, resentment, and fatigue rather than mental evaluation. Merit cannot shield Cromwell from a system where decision making remains personal at its core. Mantel frames Cromwell's execution not as a moral reckoning but as a morphological inevitability. His fall restores a sense of emblematical order by reasserting blue blooded dominance, yet it does not dismantle the administrative transformations he initiated. The system survives the individual. This outcome underscores the paradox of meritocracy: it enables general continuity while offering stingy protection to those who sustain it.

By foregrounding precarity, Mantel challenges the loose fantasy of merit as a guarantor of justice or stability. Cromwell's life demonstrates that merit-based power is conditional, reversible, and often isolating. Advancement is possible, but security is not promised. In this sense, Cromwell anticipates the modern pro subject valued for productivity, vulnerable to disposability, and subject to institutional indifference. Ultimately, The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy presents the limits of merit not as real anomaly but as morphological condition. Cromwell's precarity exposes the unsettled tensions within systems that claim to reward competence while preserving entrenched hierarchies. Mantel's portrayal thusly invites a decisive re-evaluation of meritocracy, revealing it not as a solution to inequality but as a reconfiguration of vulnerability and power.

## **Cromwell and Political Modernity**

Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell Trilogy situates Thomas Cromwell at a conclusive real threshold, presenting him as a figure through whom political modernity begins to take placeable form. Mantel's Cromwell does not merely participate in Tudor governance; he actively reshapes its mechanisms, epistemologies, and modes of authority. Through his rise, the trilogy charts a transition from medieval, personality-based rule toward systems characterized by bureaucratic rationality, documentary governance, and institutional continuity. Cromwell thusly emerges as a new modern architect of political modernity.

Political modernity in Mantel's narrative is defined by a shift in how power is exercised and legitimized. Authority progressively resides not in spectacle, divine sanction, or lineage





# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

alone, but in administrative competence, legal codification, and informational control. Cromwell's effectiveness derives from his ability to translate royal will into perdurable structures statutes, courts, and offices that outlast individual intentions. Mantel repeatedly emphasizes Cromwell's preoccupation with records, inventories, and written orders, highlighting how governance becomes text based rather than performative. Power is no longer enacted exclusively through open rituals but embedded within paperwork and procedure.

This transformation aligns nearly with Max Weber's account of rational legal authority, in which governance depends upon rule bound administration sooner than personal allegiance. Cromwell's work professionalizes the state, converting political loyalty into contractual obligation and habitual practice into enforceable law. In *Wolf Hall*, his restructuring of legal processes and ecclesiastic authority demonstrates how political modernity involves the absorption of devout power into laic administration. The break with Rome is not merely theological; it is bureaucratic, enabling the crown to claim jurisdiction over bodies, property, and belief.

Mantel foregrounds Cromwell's role in redefining sovereignty. While Henry VIII remains the emblematical center of power, Cromwell functions as its functional core. He anticipates crises, manages dissent, and regulates the flow of information to the king. This division between emblematical authority and administrative execution marks a modern political configuration in which rulers depend upon good intermediaries. Cromwell's proximity to power reflects the emergence of the professional political advisor an indispensable yet vulnerable figure within modern governance.

At the same time, Mantel complicates narratives of progress by revealing the violence embedded within political modernity. Cromwell's administrative innovations facilitate surveillance, coercion, and state sanctioned punishment. Michel Foucault's concept of disciplinary power is specially related here: Cromwell's governance does not rely mainly on prominent punishment but on normalized regulation, legal classification, and institutional monitoring. Individuals become subjects of the state through documentation and procedure; their identities fixed within administrative categories.

Mantel's narrative technique reinforces this modernity. By privileging Cromwell's interiority and temporary consciousness, the trilogy emphasizes forward planning, risk assessment, and strategical calculation. Cromwell thinks in terms of futures, probabilities, and contingencies rather than inherited certainties. This temporary orientation reflects a modern political mindset, where governance involves managing uncertainty rather than preserving tradition. Yet Mantel resists presenting Cromwell as a triumphant modernizer. His execution exposes the broken nature of Tudor political modernity. Despite institutional advances, power remains insecure to private whim and blue-blooded resentment. Cromwell's fall reveals the unsettled tension between bureaucratic rationality and noble absolutism. Political modernity, Mantel suggests, emerges unevenly, marked by contradiction rather than coherence.



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

Cromwell's legacy within the trilogy is therefore paradoxical. He helps create systems that survive him, yet he himself is disposable within those systems. Political modernity appears less as a moral advancement than as a reorganization of authority and vulnerability. Mantel invites readers to recognize that modern governance, while further efficient and rational, does not eliminate injustice it systematizes it. Ultimately, The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy positions Cromwell as both agent and casualty of political modernity. Through his rise and fall, Mantel dramatizes the origins of modern state power while exposing its moral and human costs. Cromwell's story becomes a meditation on how modern political systems are built: not through idealism alone, but through compromise, coercion, and the disposability of those who make them function.

## CONCLUSION

Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell Trilogy offers an important reimagining of new modern power by situating Thomas Cromwell at the intersection of meritocracy, bureaucracy, and political modernity. Through Cromwell's rise and fall, Mantel challenges linear narratives of progress that equate the emergence of merit-based authority with ethical or social advancement. Instead, the trilogy reveals meritocracy as a historically contingent system one that reorganizes power without resolving its fundamental inequalities.

Cromwell's ascent exemplifies the promise of merit: intelligence, legal expertise, and administrative competence enable a man of vague origins to penetrate the maximum echelons of Tudor governance. Yet this promise is persistently undermined by morphological instability. Unlike blue blooded power, buffered by lineage and tradition, meritocratic authority demands constant performance and justification. Cromwell's position remains constantly provisional, exposing the intrinsically precarity of expertise driven governance. His fall demonstrates that merit grants access but not security.

The trilogy further exposes how bureaucratic rationality transforms governance into a system of documentation, surveillance, and legal abstraction. Cromwell's mastery of rational legal authority marks a decisive shift toward political modernity, yet this shift intensifies rather than mitigates violence. Law becomes an instrument of efficiency rather than justice, sanctionative coercion under the guise of procedural legitimacy. Mantel thus reveals the moral ambiguity at the heart of meritocratic systems: competence and effectiveness frequently replace moral accountability.

Class anxiety and blue-blooded resistance underscore the limits of interpersonal mobility within hybrid political systems. Cromwell's success destabilizes inherited privilege, yet his outsider status finally renders him expendable. The aristocracy survives his reforms even as it sacrifices him to restore emblematical order. In this sense, Cromwell becomes both architect and casualty of modern governance. Mantel's trilogy finally resists bold or inculpative readings of Cromwell. Instead, it presents him as a profoundly modern political subject strategic, adaptable, ethically burdened, and structurally vulnerable. By dramatizing the



# Kavya Setu

A Multidisciplinary Open Access, Peer-Reviewed Refereed Journal

Impact Factor: 6.4

ISSN No: 3049-4176

emergence of meritocracy alongside its contradictions, Mantel invites a decisive reassessment of modern political values. The trilogy suggests that replacing birth with merit does not eliminate domination; it redistributes it, often in less open but further systematic forms.

In tracing the origins of modern political authority through Cromwell's life, Mantel compels readers to confront the imperishable tensions between efficiency and justice, expertise and ethics, advancement, and disposability. The Thomas Cromwell Trilogy thusly stands not merely as a real reimagining but as an uninterrupted meditation on the costs of political modernity itself.

## WORKS CITED

### Primary Sources:

Mantel, Hilary. *Wolf Hall*. Fourth Estate, 2009.

Mantel, Hilary. *Bring Up the Bodies*. Fourth Estate, 2012.

Mantel, Hilary. *The Mirror & the Light*. Fourth Estate, 2020.

### Secondary Sources:

Bourdieu, Pierre. *The Forms of Capital*. Translated by Richard Nice, Greenwood Press, 1986.

Držaić K. The Question of the Narrative in Historiography: Between the Annales School and Hayden White [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations]. *Open Res Europe* 2025, 5:259 (<https://doi.org/10.12688/openreseurope.20777.1>)

Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan, Vintage Books, 1995.

Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, Pantheon Books, 1980.

Weber, Max. *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, University of California Press, 1978.

Skinner, Quentin. *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. Vol. 1, Cambridge University Press, 1978.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*. University of Chicago Press, 1980.