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Research Article

The Power Of The Unheard: Female Agency Through Silence And Subtext In *Wolf Hall* And *Bring Up The Bodies*

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies* in the manner in which Hilary Mantel has constructed female power in a male-dominated society of the Tudors, where women are mostly silenced and relegated to the periphery. There is no direct reference to politics; rather, Mantel employs silence, gesture, and subtext as the means of resistance instead of portraying women as the victims of the political repression. This paper examines how characters like Katherine Aragon, Anne Boleyn, and Mary Tudor can deal with agency in a world where they are not given a clear political voice, but one which suggests feminist historiography and discourse. It is established in this paper that silence and subtext can be thought of as the vital areas of power and this notion is pursued through a qualitative and interpretive study of the narrative strategies used by Mantel, and feminist theory applied to the context of said text. This strategy confirms the arguments raised around gender and power in historical fiction, as in this case with Mantel to devise a new version of the Tudor history.

Keywords: female agency, silence, Hilary Mantel, Tudor history, feminist historiography

Introduction

Wolf Hall and *Bring Up the Bodies* by Hilary Mantel are a reimagining of the Tudor history with the focus on the emergence of Thomas Cromwell. Although Cromwell is the central character, the women at the court of Henry VIII also get due prominence as Mantel makes an attempt to illuminate them and the means through which they could exercise some power. Traditional historiography has typically depicted women as either obviously ambitious or utterly powerless, with historical memory mostly being built by men, those in official memory. Mantel deconstructs these mainstream stories by focusing on the smaller, less visible acts in which women were involved in and were able to influence the political events.

Female agency in her depictions is often rendered through the silent acts, their actions are often more of a hint than a direct thing again highlighting such subtext. These are not due to the fact that women were inherently non-resistant but boxed in by a social and political situation within the Tudor court that allowed no significant form of defiance to go unpunished. Not that silence was compliant. Instead, it played the role of a coded language whereby women were making resistance, bargaining and making a difference in what was occurring. Mantel thus encourages readers to reconsider what agency is and how power may be projected not just by means of words, but through languid control and non-verbal cues as well.

This paper addresses the issue of silence and subtext as the means of female agency as portrayed by Mantel. It also explores how Katherine of Aragon used a dignified refusal to regain political power (demonstrating symbolic power via the right to resist), how Princess Mary managed to set up networks of domestic and informal influence (even as a child), and how Jane Seymour used her quietness tactically to gain political power. By deploying the theories of feminist discourse and subalternity, it is possible to establish the context of Mantel's narrative in a critical discourse that pays attention to the structural restraint of women's voices, but still recognises their ability in having strategic approaches.

Silence and the Gendered Politics of Speech in Tudor England

To fully realize why the treatment of silence is as powerful in Mantel, it is worth putting the gender standards of the Tudor times in perspective. In early-modern England, women were supposed to be obedient, modest, and restrained in their language. The femininity of the time was not only constantly under the expectation of

remaining chaste but also of being silent. Too much talk in the street or of things beyond the home severely threatened social disapproval, or even worse. In this type of environment, silence proved to be a constraint and an asset.

Starting with this historical fact, Mantel dramatizes it by means of female characters. A woman in the court of Henry VIII is usually under no control over the conditions of her life. The unions are arranged on the basis of dynastic or political alliances, pregnancies are political affairs, and even their mobility is in question by male courtiers. However, Mantel does not present these women as victims but depicts them as subjects who, despite the harsh limitations, find ways to flex agency. They do it indirectly in ways that do not confront the male authority directly.

As an example, Katherine of Aragon, whose annulment Henry is seeking, does not even scream her objections at court in Mantel's novel. In her case, lack of responsiveness is non-verbal and inviolable. She does not accept the annulment or the illegitimacy of her child, and yet this seems at first sight to be an irresolute decision, but with the ramifications of the situation being the impact of the child being considered a whoring princess. Her strong-headedness thwarts synergetic remarriage plans on the part of Henry, summons international goodwill, and draws allegiance to her side. Her silence is not the act of lack of agency but its conveyance made whole.

This reconstitution of agency is similar to the approaches of feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak on the subaltern voice. Spivak states that subjugated individuals very rarely have the right to talk according to the terms of the domination without being subjected to co-optation or retaliation. Instead, they communicate with refusal acts or coded messages. Katherine in Mantel's Wolf Hall, is another example; she has a limited range of action, yet she does make a difference in the policies of the English king and English history.

The Symbolic Power of Princess Mary

Another instance of agency achieved through metonymy rather than voice is provided through the person of Katherine's daughter, Mary Tudor. The narrative provided by Mantel illustrates that Mary is hardly present in the political limelight during the succeeding crisis of Henry, but her presence is suffocated in the crisis. Mary is the daughter of Katherine, the only child who survived, and hence a symbol of dynastic continuity as opposed to the child of Anne Boleyn. Her appeal to conservative forces makes her very presence, even in cases where she is sidelined in politics a symbolic value.

The power of Mary is not asserted through sizzling proclamation but by the fact that Mary represents the continuity of the legitimacy of Katherine and the Catholic religion. That lack of voice adds to Mary's symbolic authority in the portrayal given by Mantel. She escapes at large part into the non-articulation of social argument and thus leaves others to make connotations. Her appearance is used to gather support of those who feel the dissenters Anne Boleyn and the religious reformers. Mantel makes Cromwell a knowledgeable analyst of political subcurrents, and he is aware of this symbolic level. Mary has a certain quiet dignity, even though she has little voice in the story, and this silence is a form of resistance with strong cultural side effects. Mary's role also shows how silence is combined with an expectation that people of her gender behave in a certain way. By openly speaking ill of her father, or of Anne, she would, perhaps, have suffered more severely. Rather, her agency is reduced to the mere ability to survive as a rightful heir in the minds of her constituents, which leaves Henry and his ministers having to recognise her as a political actor even when she remains silent.

Jane Seymour: Quietness as Strategy

Mantel invents a more problematic Jane Seymour in contradiction to the usual traditional historical interpretations of her as either the passive pawn or as the good wife and foil to Anne Boleyn. Rather, she opines that Jane is using a strategy of submission, without feeling, and always smiling, which works in the patriarchal setup. In the novels, Jane's timid demeanour, her coy glances, her bashfulness, and her readiness to allow others to bargain for her win over Henry because of the contrast to Anne, who is more direct.

Jane is silent in two different ways. The first is that it saves her from the same thing that happened to Anne. Jane does not actively state her ambition, as this would have elicited negative attention by influencing resentment and scrutiny, as it was the case with Anne, who was aggressive in her speech. Second, it helps her family to negotiate in politics, but she does not have plausible deniability. Her silence acts as a protective and offensive measure; it serves to reassure Henry that she will be easy to manage and, at the same time, serves to promote her as a regal fit as a possible queen to those looking to get rid of Anne.

Theoretically, one may apply the idea of gender as performance by Judith Butler and compare it with the logic of what Jane does. Jane plays the role of submissive Tudor femininity in order to be powerful. Even her seeming passivity is the act that is customised to satisfy Henry and the court. This is not powerlessness, but an indication of how women operated within structures of oppression in creative ways. Mantel did not portray Jane as a passive victim or a woman of intrigue, as she can take many experiences she had with the limited resources that she has in her possession: silence and modesty in order to guarantee her future.

Domestic Networks and Informal Female Influence

Mantel has shown the influence of regular women in domestic and informal contexts in addition to queens and princesses. The household of Cromwell is full of women relatives and servants and widows whose voices are relayed indirectly but who all form parts of his decision making. Through these women, Cromwell gets to know about information, the way courts function, and can read social dynamics.

Mantel indicates that the Tudor court politics relied on the utilisation of informal channels of communication. Women, excluded on many occasions in formal settings in council chambers, used these informal networks by gossiping, rumour and domestic hospitality. Although gossip is constantly dismissed as insignificant, in the novels by Mantel, it actually has political consequences. The accusations against Anne Boleyn, say, are stoked by the rumours of the ladies-in-waiting. Those testimonies of these women are either forced or voluntary, but they are central to the destruction of Anne.

This manipulation of what women said by powerful men indeed formed a highlight of patriarchal exploitation; however, it also plays a part in the notion that women have indeed had a voice. Their words could move in secret libraries and fell queens, even as they were uttered in whispers in tight-shuttered rooms. Mantel demonstrates, therefore, how both the personal and the political intersected in the Tudor world and how women could use domestic rooms and the language of informal speech to influence events.

The Ambivalence of Silence: Agency and Oppression

Admittedly, it should be noted that silence is not necessarily empowering. However, the novels by Mantel do not idealise the absence of the voice of women in history; they show the ambivalence of it. Silence was potentially a device of agency, as well as a means of forced subjection. This strain is represented in the story of Anne Boleyn and her death. Anne does not mind her words as opposed to Katherine, Mary, or Jane. At the beginning of her relations with Henry, her wit and assertiveness attract him, but later she is turned off by her words when she fails to get a male offspring. Her guts were no longer rejoiced in the patriarchal system. Part of the reason that she is executed has to do with what she says, but also what she represents.
Mantel does not imply with her emphasis on more silent characters that silence is somehow more preferable or emancipating. Instead, it demonstrates that women were made to be in impossible situations because of the constraints put in place. Speak too loudly and you are at risk of ruination; say nothing, and you might remain unscathed, as the other becomes the other, having been erased. Such ambivalence is inherent to the historiography of feminism that Mantel pursues. She asks the readers to reflect on how the gender dynamics have silenced the voice of women who did not lack action, but the systems only granted them some specific forms of power.

Narrative Strategy: Cromwell's Observant Lens

It is essential to Mantel, setting her narrative aside through Cromwell, to give a sense of how silence and the subtext work in the books. Cromwell, on the other hand, is an observer, a man who takes note of gestures and omissions as well as loud words. The readers can be sensitive to the subtleties of female agency due to his view. Cromwell observes Katherine's dignified rejection, Jane's tact of silence, and Mary's political iconography, and the weight thereof is not lost on Cromwell.

This plot construction gives Mantel a chance to investigate subtext in a way that does not directly provide exposition. By giving such attention to what Cromwell can observe that is whispered, what is held back, she instructs the reader to be sensitive to what is not said. A historiographical move, this is a call to question just how much of history originated through formal words, but in reality, through undocumented interactions. With the help of Cromwell drawing an empathetic parallel, Mantel is able to recreate a world where the role of a woman is significant, even though their input is not always verbal. This is a major feminist intervention within historical fiction. Rather than inventing anachronistic heroines, the women who make fun of all gender norms, Mantel restores the entity of female agency as it is likely to have been constrained in the Tudor era.

Feminist Historiography and the Ethics of Representation

The question of how to represent history in relation to female silence articulated by Mantel initiates additional concerns concerning the underlying bracketing process of historical representation. Historiography has tended to voice women by omission; they are seen in records only when the course of their lives dramatically intersects the political interests of their male counterparts. This omission is challenged by Mantel in her novels that explore the inner world of women and more muffled forms of power. This is a nod to feminist historiography, which aims to restore the voices of the disenfranchised and cause disruption to historical narratives that relegated the disenfranchised. Mantel also has her eye on silence and subtext, which suggests an ethics of history, the recognition that much of what women did is not recorded, and that nothingness within the record does not equal nothingness in practice. Mantel reinstates the unhistoric roles such as the silent resistance of Katherine, the symbolic force of Mary, the modesty of Jane, and the gossip of court ladies through her

dramatisation to bring out the bigger picture of the Tudor political culture, even when these women were silent in the historic records.

Silence as Survival, Resistance, and Influence

In the end, the silence as presented by Mantel is multi-faceted. It may mean survival, as with Jane Seymour; it may imply resistance, as with Katherine; it may imply influence, as in the networks of wires that spread information at home. It can also mean oppression, like the forced silence of Anne by being executed. The silence is complex, which captures the complexity of the lives of women under a patriarchal society. Guided by excellent exploitation of silence and subtext, Mantel broadens our conception of political action. Agency does not only lie in a speech at a social gathering or authoritative proclamation, but can be present in a look, denial, or rumour. The weapon of silence could be the strongest in a court where women lost everything by being too outspoken. These novels by Mantel force the reader to acknowledge the strength of the unsaid and pay close attention to the margins of history in which the lives of women were lived.

Conclusion

Wolf Hall and *Bring Up the Bodies* by Hilary Mantel remake the Tudor history concerning the unheard as the background. Mantel uses the quiet speaking voice of Katherine of Aragon, Mary Tudor, Jane Seymour, and many other smaller ladies to show that silence is nothing at all but a political lingo of great intricacy. Her account implies that the voice of women was curtailed by patriarchy, but its power could not silence the women. The suppressing, subversive power of silence still could operate even against systemic oppression.

Mantel therefore extends it through her feminist historiography and prompts the readers to re-construct the history and take account of what is unsaid. It is not about romanticising silence, but it is about realising certain types of agency can be expressed in many ways. Mantel says as much by highlighting the voices of the unheard and unspoken: she restores the presence of women to the historic periphery and makes it clear that we still have much to listen to that history has silenced.

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