



British Women of the Past: A Study of Traditional Prejudice in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*



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Abstract

The main purpose of the research paper is to analyze the English novel *Wolf Hall* written by Hilary Mantel that shows how the author deals with the feminine topic and how she moves forward with the historical accuracy in her novel. The main subject of the analysis is a life of a married woman. In the subsequent such aspects as the essential education of a woman that preceded marriage, courting, marriage, and the circumstances of giving birth form the core of the narrative. This paper also slightly covers the topic of the rights and obligations of woman in her marriage. The novel gives proper justice to the cultural and historical analysis of the Tudor England and throws light upon the life of women in England in the sixteenth century. It describes the contemporary life of women at that period in England and takes us back to the old days.

Keywords: homo humini lupus, historical novel, aristocracy, chronicler, humanism

Research Paper

The subject of the analysis is a historical novel *Wolf Hall* written by Hilary Mantel, a British novelist. *Wolf Hall* was awarded the Man Booker Prize for fiction in 2009. The novel is set in England during the reign of King Henry VIII. The main character of the book and also the narrator is the king's advisor Thomas Cromwell. The plot of the book focuses on the "king's great matter", the divorce with Catherine of Aragon, the new marriage to Anne Boleyn and also on the king's desire to have a male heir. The end of the novel reveals the fact that the king feels the end of his marriage to Anne Boleyn is near and it is necessary to look for another woman. That is the time the mind of Thomas Cromwell is concentrated to Wolf Hall, a seat of the Seymour family, where the future wife of the king, Jane Seymour, lives. The Wolf Hall manor is only mentioned in the novel several times, but no event takes place there. To explain the title of the book, it comes from the name of the Wolf Hall manor and also from a Latin proverb "homo homini lupus" that means "man is wolf to man". (Mantel, 2009, p. 572) In the novel, this quote was uttered by Thomas Cromwell and refers to the bad deeds humans are capable of.

The historical facts in this research paper concern primarily with the lives of the women of higher status, such as the wives or widows of richer townsmen, because the historical sources that could provide factual information about lower class women at that period are limited. Nevertheless, the pieces of knowledge from their lives are essential to get a vision of the everyday life of ordinary women. But just because of their ordinariness, such women were not probably attractive enough for contemporary chroniclers to record any events of their lives. Poor women were also rarely literate and so they could not leave any records of their lives, such as diaries or letters.

Before the sixteenth century, learning and teaching was considered to be very practical and sensible for women. The education focused more on religion and was accessible to both poor and rich women. The beginning of the sixteenth century and the arrival of Humanism and Reformation in England affected the education of women in a way that it became more liberal than the preceding religious scholasticism. At the beginning of the century, education was not widespread, but later in Tudor period, especially during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, access to education became easier than in recent years. Nevertheless, the educational disadvantages for the poor people still existed. (Cressy, 1976, p. 302) Cressy further explains that the illiteracy of

people was measured by the ability or inability to sign one's name and also that this was correlated with social and occupational status.

The women's education differed from the education of men quite significantly. Boys were attending schools, but girls were not allowed to. This was related to the fact that a man was a lord for a woman. She, as a completely subordinate person, was considered to be somewhere else than at purely men's place. The upper class girls were usually educated at home by their private tutors. If a woman did not come from a wealthy family, she did not have many opportunities to become an educated person. In fact, she did not even need that. All that she needed was to be taught enough to run her household in the future or to be prepared to serve in somebody else's house. The education consisted of learning practical and necessary skills, such as sewing and cooking, which served as a preparation for her married life. As for the aristocracy, it was not unusual that a woman was literate. The education was adjusted to the needs of an aristocratic woman. Girls were educated at home by their private tutors. The education of such a girl was aimed at different subjects from learning to dance, play some kind of a musical instrument, learning to read, write, sew, embroider and also learn languages, usually Latin, Greek, Spanish or French.

In *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel does not deal with the subject of women's education in detail. She mentions only marginally the examples of women who wanted to be or had to be educated and also of those who did not get the opportunity to it at all. In some cases, they managed to achieve at least a little, for example they learned to read and write. However, this was perfectly sufficient then. One of those women who did not have an opportunity to have access to education was Kat Morgan, the sister of Thomas Cromwell. For a daughter of a blacksmith and brewer, there was no reason for being literate, because all her duties she had to do were taking care of their household and raising children. Kat's father, who was cruel and beat his children, was, among other things, the reason she remained uneducated. She could not count and probably even write. The only thing she was able to do was to sign her name because of her brother. Kat comments the allusions of other people on her not being literate with the words: "...how much time do you think I had for learning figures, with a father like that? If I can write my name, it's because Tom [Thomas Cromwell] here taught me". (Mantel, 2009, p. 25)

Entering into marriage was an important change in the life of a woman. The issue of marriage is very broad. Therefore, the aspects examined in this research paper had been chosen according to

the appearance of these elements in the novel *Wolf Hall*. The attention paid to these aspects is limited by the extent into which they are being dealt in this novel. As it was previously mentioned, the sources of life of the lower-class women are rather limited. For that reason, the aspects concerning the topic of marriage are based on the examples from the lives of aristocratic women, especially those who were probably the most famous in their period.

Naturally, there is a notable contrast between getting married at present and in the past. Generally, wedding is a legally approved act between woman and man, during which the fiancées pledge they will follow the rights and duties of matrimony. It is a form of contract in which the married couple promises to each other to meet the obligations connected to the institution of marriage. The unity of marriage is seen differently within various societies and cultures in the world. In today's England, as well as probably in the whole Western world in the twenty-first century, marriage is perceived as a voluntary joining of two separate lives of two people into one unity. If compared entering into marriage in the sixteenth and twenty-first century, it would be exactly the word "voluntarily" that would be very important in this comparison. Nowadays, people have the right and the opportunity to decide for themselves freely about their future partner. Lawrence Stone notes that a present-day couple is being "united primarily on the basis of romantic and sexual attraction, and a harmony of tastes and interests". (Stone, 1961, p. 182)

To begin with, the marriage was preceded with a period of courting. In the Medieval times courtly love was connected with gallantry and chivalry which was valued most. To gain love of a lady was a principal purpose of courting. The brave deeds were the means of gaining a favor of a lady to whom a man later devoted his life. According to Einstein, since the medieval period these values have changed. The Tudor men rather abandoned chivalrous behaviour and courting became a pleasant pastime without serious intentions. (Einstein, 1921, p. 250) But, at the king's court, a tradition of medieval courtly love was still present. For instance, as a love of a knight for a lady who was married? He was sure he could never have her love. As Weirová notes, in medieval period, it was a chaste relationship, but at the Tudor court it also worked as a pretext to conceal adultery. (Weirová, 1999, p. 17) Although a premarital intercourse was forbidden, it was often committed. The morals of the aristocracy were more loosened. The men were allowed to enjoy the presence of many women, but the women were not allowed to do the same. Although marriage was a common thing, there were still women who either decided for themselves or were

forced by circumstances not to marry. If that happened, a woman had to choose what to do. Life of an unmarried woman in the sixteenth century was different from the life of a never-married man. As it had already been mentioned above, such way of life was not attractive and it was not easy either.

Apparently, there is no evidence that could tell us something about the exact motives that were important for Tudor women when contemplating about their future life or even their opinions about it. Barbara J. Harris comments that she [Harris] “has not yet found a single piece of evidence in which a Yorkist or early Tudor aristocratic woman expressed her views about the choice between marriage and chastity or the more specific alternative of marrying or entering a convent”. (Harris, 1993, p. 111) An aristocratic woman was not obliged to marry and she could “remain single and be sexually active, either inside or outside of convents” (Harris, 1993, p. 111), but this situation was not considered to be legitimate and also that choice was “neither socially nor morally acceptable”. (Harris, 1993, p. 111) A woman living in some unusual way was often considered to be strange.

Although the divorce was not seen in the same way as it is nowadays, it is undoubtedly an interesting topic. The way the elements are grasped in this research paper responds to their importance and appearance in the novel *Wolf Hall*. As the example of the marriage that ended with a divorce, the case of Catherine of Aragon is presented.

Firstly, it is necessary to define a concept of divorce or rather what its perception and reasons for it in the sixteenth century were like. Not all the couples were happy in their relationships. If a marriage did not work, a married couple did not have many opportunities to solve that situation. They could have been dissolved, but they had to prove the right reasons for such a move. A divorce, as it is known nowadays, was not typical for that period. It occurred only in exceptional cases. Instead of “a divorce” the marriage was simply “cancelled” or “annulled” which means that it has been declared invalid. According to Weirová, the other reasons for cancelling a marriage could be for example discovering the close kinship between the couple, insanity of one of the partners, or that the marriage was not fulfilled. (Weirová, 1999, p. 17) The greatest example of a divorce of that period was the case of the king Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon.

The details of their divorce as well as what preceded it are well known to the historians. According to André Maurois, after Henry VIII accessed to the throne in 1509, he married

Catherine of Aragon, his brother's widow. Catherine was the daughter of the Spanish king and arrived in England when she was sixteen years old. She was a devoted Catholic, a very scrupulously faithful and religious woman. She clung to the Spanish habits and customs. Henry had not chosen Catherine for himself and it is said he did not love her although he claimed to marry her from love. Henry was eighteen when he married her and she was six years older than him. It is said that she "must have been a tiresome wife to a spirited young man, but the evidence is that she did her best to attune her life to her husband's way". (Mackie, 1972, p. 325) On the other hand it should not be denied that Henry behaved well to her. According to Maurois, their marriage was a marriage of convenience, the reasons were purely political. The connection of the Spanish and English thrones was an honour for England and also an assurance for the future. (Maurois, 1993, p.185)

In the sixteenth century, it was not easy to live a long and healthy life. In the past, England was hit by plague several times. For example the Black Death and sweating sickness arrived and these caused a reduction in population. With the sixteenth century a growth of the population occurred. According to Derry, the causes for that were the earlier marriages, a more nutritious diet and also better supplies of grain in the times of a hunger. (Derry, 1973, p. 6) On the other hand, death was still on a daily basis. Medicine was developed very poorly and hygiene was rather unusual. Mervyn states that on an average, the Tudors washed themselves only three times a year, but presumably the members of royalty washed themselves more regularly. (Mervyn, 2008).

A man always desired to have someone who would inherit his property, or at least, would be the successor of his family name. Therefore, to bear a male descendant to provide an heir for a dynasty was the main task for a woman, either aristocratic or less significant one. Charlotte Otten stresses the importance of the women's task:

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English society, the bearing of children was considered a woman's primary calling and children as her primary contribution to the family, the church, and the state. (Otten, 1993)

King Henry was the man whose desire for a male heir was apparently the greatest one. As an example from the novel *Wolf Hall*, the king of France has three sons. Henry is envious and thinks "... how God must love him... ". (Mantel, 2009, p. 390) It is obvious that having a son was perceived to be the blessing of God. The sixteenth century was full of superstitions, assumptions

and half-truths. In *Wolf Hall*, the belief in certain rumors is also depicted. King Henry tells his wife Anne Boleyn who is expecting a baby: “The Italians say for a boy you have to keep warm.... Heat up your wine to heat up your blood. No cold fruit, no fish”. (Mantel, 2009, p. 440) However, there is no evidence whether this advice actually worked. Another wrong assumption was concerning the sex of a child and fertility. If what a man wanted did not happen, the woman was almost always guilty. If it was vice versa, a man deserved admiration. In *Wolf Hall*, one of the women comments the contemporary views on having a child. Her opinion probably describes a vision of the whole situation by men:

Have you ever observed that when a man gets a son he takes all the credit, and when he gets a daughter he blames his wife? And if they do not breed at all, we say it is because her womb is barren. We do not say it is because his seed is bad. (Mantel, 2009, pp. 503-504)

These judgments could probably originate in the belief that bearing children is primarily a task of a woman and therefore she is responsible for the whole situation and mainly its result.

To conclude, the position of a woman in the Tudor period can be expressed by her obligation and her role. The obligation of a woman was obedience and her role was bearing a child. The sixteenth century was the time when men ruled the families. But women were also significant, although they were often considered being useful just for one thing and that was- bearing a child. In Tudor England, women were taught that they were inferior to men. This was similar a little bit to the medieval thinking when a woman was considered to be even a tool of the devil to seduce a man and lead him astray from his way to religious life.

In Tudor England, the subordination of children to their parents and the subordination of women to men was a common thing. A woman was completely dependent on a man. She was living within his household. A man had a great legal and also the economic power over his wife, but it was not the same for a woman. If a woman was not satisfied with the life she lived, she had no opportunity to solve it, while the man could simply leave his wife and start a new affair, which was tolerated in a way. The role of the queen was probably the most difficult task that a woman could have. There was a lot of pressure and expectations. She was expected to be a support for her husband. However, the main task of the queen was, like any other woman, and that was to ensure a successor, preferably a male, for her dynasty.

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