

Themes of the Foucauldian Notion of Resisting Power in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*

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Abstract

The name, Hilary Mantel, is a significant part of the list of the prominent authors of British history. Among her works, *Wolf Hall* (2009), is a remarkable historical fiction that has fascinated readers and critics worldwide since the first days of its publication. Despite the fact that *Wolf Hall* has been studied from various viewpoints such as national identity, legal pragmatism, and ethics, the notion of resisting power has been neglected. Therefore, employing the Foucauldian notion of resisting power, I explore the phenomena of resisting power in Mantel's *Wolf Hall*. I contend that power is resisted by various characters in the novel. The findings suggest that the power of the monarchy in *Wolf Hall* is resisted and restricted by the power of the Roman Church, Bishops, priests, Parliaments, nobles, and common people.

Keywords: "Resisting power", "Resistance", "Wolf Hall", "Hilary Mantel", "Michel Foucault".

Introduction

Hilary Mantel was born on July 6, 1952, into a working-class Roman Catholic family in Derbyshire, England. She is one of England's renowned writers broadly recognized worldwide. She has written over ten novels, two collections of short stories, several articles, and her memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost: A Memoir*. She intends to censure her contemporary society with sharp criticism. In addition, Mantel gives her readers a new view of history by reconstructing different historical periods in her novels. Mantel is also well known for black comedy and historical fiction. Her first novel, *Every Day Is Mother's Day* (1985) and its sequel *Vacant Possession* (1986) are black comedies set in the mid-1970s about a social worker who is involved with an emotionally unbalanced woman and her autistic daughter. Mantel's reputation enhances with the publication of a historical fiction, *Place of Greater Safety* (1992), which is set in the period of the French Revolution from the eyes of its three contributors. A trilogy about the rise and fall of Thomas Cromwell is the other work of Hilary Mantel; the first novel in the trilogy, *Wolf Hall* (2009) depicts the rise of Cromwell to become chief advisor to King Henry VIII of England. A sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012) concentrates on the role of Cromwell in the downfall of Anne Boleyn. *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) is the final novel in this trilogy, which depicts the fall of Cromwell from power and his execution.

Wolf Hall is one of the most important novels among Mantel's works. It won The Man Booker Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 2012. The novel starts in Putney, England where Walter who is a blacksmith, heartlessly beats his son Thomas Cromwell. Cromwell decides to leave home to escape from his abusive father. He becomes a soldier in France and a banker in Florence. Later, when he returns to England to practice Law, Cardinal Wolsey, who is the Cardinal of York and a powerful advisor to King Henry VIII, employs him. Wolsey tries to get the Pope's approval for annulling Henry's marriage to Queen Katherine, who has not given the king a son. After many efforts to annul the marriage, Wolsey fails, and loses his position and even Cromwell cannot bring him back to his former situation. Harry Percy arrests Cardinal Wolsey and when he brings Cardinal back to London, Wolsey dies. Cromwell becomes a true confidant to King Henry and fulfills his orders to separate the king's daughter Mary from her mother, Queen Katherine, and send the queen to a different residence. Meanwhile, King Henry gradually becomes interested in Lady Ann Boleyn. In 1532, Parliament makes Henry head of the church and puts an end to the dependence of the English church on the Pope. Then Henry marries Ann Boleyn in a small ceremony. To Henry's disappointment, the fruit of this marriage is a daughter, Elizabeth. Meanwhile, Cromwell gets the powerful title of Master Secretary and Master of Rolls. At the end of the novel, Cromwell hopes that Ann will give birth to a male heir.

The novel has been named *Wolf Hall* because of the wolf-like features of King Henry VIII's court. Characters strive for power and they also utilize different means to resist power or avoid losing their positions.

Literature Review

Mantel's *Wolf Hall* has been studied from different perspectives. These studies reveal the importance of *Wolf Hall* for critics and readers. In the following, I am going to present an overview of these critical studies on the novel to highlight the significant findings as well as the gap to be filled.

Alaa Alghamdi's "Hilary Mantel: Embodying Thomas Cromwell and Redefining Historical Fiction through 'Women's Writing'" (2018) is an analysis of Mantel's books *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. In this article, Alghamdi attempts to position Mantel's portrayal of Thomas Cromwell in opposition to other portrayals, accentuate her literary approach, and locate her writings within women's writings. Employing Julia Kristeva's point of view, Alghamdi asserts that in spite of the fact that Mantel's narratives are placed within a female-dominated genre, they are related from a masculine viewpoint. Yet, Alghamdi believes that "they still hold a significant subtext suggestive of the 'feminine'" (117). The author concludes that studying Mantel's depiction of Cromwell reveals what historical fiction can and should attain. Alghamdi authentically brings the special individuality of Mantel and her works to light. Similarly, Robinson Murphy in his article, "Elizabeth Barton's Claim: Feminist Defiance in *Wolf Hall*" (2015) analyzes the character of Elizabeth Barton in Mantel's novel, *Wolf Hall*. He traces "the historical Barton's rise to power— from dispossessed orphan to her face-to-face encounters with the king himself— as well as her subsequent imprisonment and eventual execution" (152). Moreover, he continues to examine Barton through Judith Butler's theories about state-defying feminist agency as described in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (2000). Murphy illustrates that Henry is an embodiment of phallogocentric power and Barton obtains phallic power to destroy Henry's power over the Church of England. Murphy concludes that the failure of Barton is an example of Butler's model according to which "the law of Father could never swallow her whole" (164). He believes that Barton's story continues to be related in the contemporary era.

Nora Hämäläinen's study, "*Wolf Hall* and moral personhood" (2019) offers an ethical philosophical reading of Mantel's novels *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. Using Hannah Arendt's viewpoints and comparing Thomas Cromwell with the character of Michael Corleone in Coppola's movie, the author focuses on Mantel's fictional depiction of him as a good person in spite of his growing involvement in the filthy works of Henry VIII. Hämäläinen argues that the narrative resists interpretations of Cromwell as someone demoralized by power. The findings reveal that *Wolf Hall* "invite[s] intensified attention to the complex dynamics of character and circumstance" (197). In fact, the author asserts that Mantel's Cromwell destroys formulations of general morale (206).

Unlike the previous study, David Kenny's investigation, "The Human Pared Away: Hilary Mantel's Thomas Cromwell as an Archetype of Legal Pragmatism" (2020), is a study of the *Wolf Hall* trilogy considering legal pragmatism. In this study, the author intends to assert that Thomas Cromwell, the protagonist of the novel, is a

pragmatic man who utilizes law for his own benefit and rejects any nonconcrete account of law. Kenny argues that “Cromwell’s use of the law in Mantel’s novels are coherent and justifiable, from a certain point of view: the viewpoint of philosophical pragmatism as applied to the law or legal pragmatism” (2). Defining philosophical pragmatism and reconsidering Cromwell’s actions based on this point of view, he concludes that the *Wolf Hall* trilogy achieves a better understanding of law in theory and practice more lucidly than philosophical treatises.

In “Revisiting the Past: A Thematic Study of Man Booker Prize Winning Novel *Wolf Hall* Written by Hilary Mantel” (2020) Meenakshi Joshi presents a thematic investigation of *Wolf Hall*. Joshi asserts that not only does Mantel depict the England of the sixteenth century in *Wolf Hall*, “but she also weaves national myth into with the historical facts into the novel” (545). He declares that in this novel, Mantel utilizes “the story of Brutus, mythological founder of Britain, and the giants of Albion” (546). The author asserts that Mantel deliberately chooses sixteenth century in order to inspect national identity of England when “the nation defining events” (544) of England’s history has happened. The findings illuminate that no story can represent England better than the story of Henry VIII, which Mantel utilizes for writing *Wolf Hall*.

Similarly, Alison LaCroix in “A Man for All Treasons: Crimes by and against the Tudor State in the Novels of Hilary Mantel” explores crimes in Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*. The article argues that “The Tudor novels of Hilary Mantel – *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), with a third installment still to come – depict two species of crime: crimes against the state, and crimes by the state” (1-2). Then the author identifies four kinds of Cromwell: Cromwell the Political Operative, Cromwell the Prosecutor, Cromwell the Bureaucrat, and Cromwell the Evil. After analyzing Cromwell’s actions in the four sections, the finding represents that he is emblematic of crimes that are committed by and against the Tudor state.

The above mentioned studies have researched important aspects of Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* and offered significant findings. Yet, the notion of resisting power by the characters of the novel have not been studied. This study thus offers a Foucauldian reading of the novel focusing on the overlooked aspect.

Theory

One of the important notions that Foucault deals with during his professional life is the concept of resistance. Foucault explains this concept in association with the concept of power. In this part, I demonstrate Foucault’s theories about the notion of resisting power.

The first question that Foucault’s concept of power brings to one’s mind is the extent to which an individual has freedom given that power is present in every social relation. In *Power/Knowledge*, he affirms that “To say that one can never be ‘outside’ power does not mean that one is trapped and condemned to defeat no matter what” (141-2). This problem leads Foucault to conceptualize the notion of resistance. He writes:

Should it be said that one is always “inside” power, there is no “escaping” it, and there is no absolute outside where it is concerned, because one is subject to the law in any case? Or that, history being the ruse of reason, power is the ruse of history, always emerging the winner? This would be to misunderstand the strictly relational character of power relationships. Their existence depends on a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle in power relations. These points of resistance are present everywhere in the power network. (*The History of Sexuality* 95)

Therefore, for Foucault the freedom of an individual depends on the resistance in the field of power relations. Foucault argues that the two concepts of power and resistance are inseparable. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). In some cases, Foucault redefines power in terms of the concept of resistance. In *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, he points out that “in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all” (292). Thus, the existence of power is related to the probability of resistance. He emphasizes that “resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance” (*Ethics* 167). Similarly, he contends “If an individual can remain free, however little his freedom may be, power can subject him to government. There is no power without potential refusal or revolt” (*Power* 324). Thus, he believes that individuals maintain their little freedom by resisting power. In *Michel Foucault*, Sara Mills declares, “we should see that resistance to oppression is much more frequent than one would imagine; in this way he manages to move away from viewing individuals as only passive recipients” (40). In this manner, Foucault avoids accepting individuals as inactive victims of power relations. In the same book, Mills continues, “In order for there to be a relation where power is exercised, there has to be someone who resists. Foucault goes so far as to argue that where there is no resistance it is not, in effect, a power relation. Thus, for him, resistance is ‘written in’ to the exercise of power” (40).

In the same way, for Foucault, resistance is always dependent on the situation with which it is confronted. He declares that “resistance is a part of this strategic relationship of which power consists. Resistance really always relies upon the situation against which it struggles” (*Ethics* 168). Foucault expands the concept of resistance to the ordinary affairs of an individual’s life. As O’Farrell asserts, “There were no pockets of freedom which escaped power relations, but instead resistance existed wherever power was exercised. This resistance was everywhere and at every level, right down, as Foucault says, to the child who picked his nose at the table in order to annoy his parents” (99). Thus, for Foucault even ordinary acts of opposition can be recognized as acts of resistance to power. Moreover, he emphasizes

that the possibility of resistance never disappears. Foucault argues, “aside from torture and execution which preclude any resistance, no matter how terrifying a given system may be, there always remain the possibilities of resistance, disobedience, and oppositional groupings” (*Power* 354). No matter how terrifying a system is, there is always the possibility of resistance.

As mentioned before, the notion of resistance in Foucault’s works is closely entwined with the concept of power. In his article, “Foucault and the Politics of Resistance”, Brent L. Pickett elaborates on Foucault’s viewpoints about the concept of resistance. He writes:

Is resistance simply that which frustrates power; is it “the antimatter of power”? Is it recalcitrance, refusal, and unruliness? There is textual evidence for these views. Foucault sees resistance as the odd element within power relations. Resistance is what eludes power, and power targets resistance as its adversary. Resistance is what threatens power, hence it stands against power as an adversary. Although resistance is also a potential resource for power, the elements or materials that power works upon are never rendered fully docile. (458)

Therefore, resistance, according to Foucault, is a basic element in power relations. Because resistance poses a challenge to power, it is viewed as an opponent by it.

In the following parts of this article, I analyze the passages from *Wolf Hall* in which characters resist the power exercised over them.

1. Thomas Wolsey

After Wolsey is dismissed from his position in the court, it seems that he accepts the judgment of the king about himself. However, the narrator’s account of Wolsey’s attempts to call northern churches for a meeting without informing the king and Archbishop reveals his act of resistance to their power. The narrator states thus:

On 2 October the cardinal reaches his palace at Cawood, ten miles from York. His enthronement is planned for 7 November. News comes that he has called a convocation of the northern church; it is to meet at York the day after his enthronement. It is a signal of his independence; some may think it is a signal of revolt. He has not informed the king, he has not informed old Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury. (Mantel 240)

Calling a convocation of the northern church by Wolsey reveals his control over the churches of England despite his dismissal from the court. He still has his web of followers and powerful close friends. Here, Wolsey’s action is an act of resistance to power. He calls a convocation without informing the King and Archbishop of Canterbury. In *Michel Foucault*, O’Farrell asserts, “There were no pockets of freedom which escaped power relations, but instead resistance existed wherever power was exercised. This resistance was everywhere and at every level, right down, as Foucault says, to the child who picked his nose at the table in order to annoy his parents” (99). Therefore, Wolsey as a free individual resists to power of his enemies including the king by calling a convocation without informing them.

2. Thomas More

More’s arguments for rejecting the act of Supremacy indicate his resistance to the king and Cromwell’s power employing the discourse of the Catholic Church. More declares that “My conscience holds with the majority, which makes me know it does not speak false. ‘Against Henry’s kingdom, I have all the kingdoms of Christendom. Against each one of your bishops, I have a hundred saints. Against your one parliament, I have all the general councils of the church, stretching back for a thousand years’” (Mantel 645). More aims to justify his refusal of swearing an oath on the act of Supremacy. By declaring that “against Henry’s kingdom” he has “all kingdoms of Christendom”, More resists the king’s power. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault maintains, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (95). Here in this passage, where we recognize the king’s exercise of power, we can also recognize More’s resistance to it.

3. Bishop Fisher

Bishop Fisher’s refusal to accept the act of Supremacy shows his resistance to Cromwell and the king’s power. In a conversation between Johane and Cromwell, she says: “‘You can’t,’ she says, aghast. ‘The Commons will not vote it. The Lords will not. Bishop Fisher will not allow it. Archbishop Warham. The Duke of Norfolk. Thomas More’” (Mantel 309). Johane addresses Cromwell and warns him about opposing voices in Parliament. Cromwell aims to convince Parliament to pass the act of Supremacy. He has the support of the King and some of his friends in Parliament but here Johane alerts him that this will not be as easy as Cromwell thinks. In fact, Johane expresses Bishop Fisher’s severe resistance to Cromwell and the King’s power by stating that “Bishop Fisher will not allow it”. In *Foucault Live*, Foucault asserts, “As soon as there is a power relation, there is the possibility of resistance” (224). Also in this passage, Johane points out to the possibility of resistance against Cromwell’s intention to pass the Act of Supremacy.

4. The Commons

In a dialogue between Cromwell and Ann Boleyn, Cromwell’s account of the act of Supremacy reveals the commons’ resistance to the power of the king, Boleyns, Cromwell, and any supporter of the act. The narrator relates:

She turns to him. ‘Your bill is not passed yet. Tell me what is the delay.’

The bill, she means, to forbid appeals to Rome. He begins to explain to her the strength of the opposition, but she raises her eyebrows and says, ‘My father is speaking for you in the Lords, and Norfolk. So who dare oppose us?’

‘I shall have it through by Easter, depend upon it’. (Mantel 440)

Ann asks Cromwell about the Act of Supremacy. Cromwell asserts that there are strong opposition in Parliament. These oppositions are resistance to power in the eyes of Foucault. In *Michel Foucault*, Mills states, “In order for there to be a relation where power is exercised, there has to be someone who resists. Foucault goes so far as to argue that

where there is no resistance it is not, in effect, a power relation. Thus, for him, resistance is ‘written in’ to the exercise of power” (40). If there were no resistance to the act of Supremacy, there would be no need for Cromwell and Ann to exercise power to enforce it.

Similarly, the narrator’s explanation of the actions of Parliament for passing the act of Supremacy represents the commons’ resistance to the power of the church courts in the jurisdiction. The narrator relates that “the Commons drafts a petition against the church courts, so arbitrary in their proceedings, so presumptuous in their claimed jurisdiction; it questions their jurisdiction, their very existence” (Mantel 339). By drafting a petition against the church courts, the commons resist the power of the Church in legal matters. Power relations in the society of Europe make it possible for the Catholic Church to exercise power in legal matters and in this case, the commons petition against them is an act of resistance. Foucault declares, “I think that resistance is a part of this strategic relationship of which power consists. Resistance really always relies upon the situation against which it struggles” (*Ethics* 168). Therefore, because of the form of the power, that the church exercises in legal matters, the commons draft a petition against it instead of using another way of resistance.

5. Queen Katherine

Katherine’s refusal to give the jewels of the Queen of England to Ann indicates her resistance to Ann and Henry’s power. The narrator explains, “At first Katherine had refused to give up the jewels. She had said she could not part with the property of the Queen of England and put it into the hands of the disgrace of Christendom. It had taken a royal command to make her hand over the loot” (Mantel 387). By refusing to give up the Queen’s jewels, Katherine reveals her resistance against the power of those who want to discharge her from her position. Katherine believes that the Boleyns are those who press the King to dispose of her. However, by a royal command she gives up the jewels of the Queen of England. In *Michel Foucault*, Mills declares, “we should see that resistance to oppression is much more frequent than one would imagine; in this way he manages to move away from viewing individuals as only passive recipients” (40). Rather than being a passive recipient, Katherine demonstrates her resistance against those who want to discharge her.

6. the People

King Henry’s statement about the reaction of the people after deposing Katherine from the court demonstrates people’s resistance to his power by supporting her. The narrator states: “Henry looks out, hopeless, at the teeming rain. ‘And when I ride out the people shout at me. They rise up out of ditches, and shout about Katherine, how I should take her back. How would they like it if I told them how to order their houses and wives and children?’” (Mantel 587). Henry discloses his fear of insurrection of the people against him. He is afraid of Katherine’s popularity among people. By expressing, “how I should take her back” king Henry admits that abandoning Katherine and disposing her was not completely his own decision. It seems that it is Lady Ann’s power over Henry that makes Henry to discharge Katherine. Foucault argues that “resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance” (*Ethics* 167). Similarly, in the above passage resistance appears first. It means that it determines the power. King Henry wonders about the way he can exercise power considering such resistances from people.

Moreover, a report about riots in Yorkshire reveals that people resist the authorities’ power there. Cromwell reads from a letter thus: “The authorities in Yorkshire have rounded up their rioters, and divided them into those to be charged with affray and manslaughter, and those to be indicted for murder and rape. Rape? Since when do food riots involve rape? But I forget, this is Yorkshire” (Mantel 648). When Cromwell reads reports, he recognizes a letter from Yorkshire. The letter reveals that there is a riot in Yorkshire. This riot is an example of resistance to power. The authorities exercise power in Yorkshire. They can charge rioters with “affray” and “manslaughter” and “rape”. However, as Foucault asserts in his *Ethics*, “in power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all”. (292) Therefore, the possibility of the people’s rioting enables the authorities to exercise power in Yorkshire. If there were not such a possibility, there would not be such a power relationship.

Conclusions

This study has analyzed Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* deploying Foucauldian concepts of power and resistance in the relationships between the characters of the novel. I have employed Foucault’s theories about resisting power to discuss the ways significant characters of the novel resist power. The findings reveal that characters in Mantel’s novel not only exercise power but also resist it in various forms. The characters resist the power of the Tudor monarchy widely. Therefore, the novel depicts dynamic power relations among the characters in which a seemingly not-so-powerful man can demonstrate a great act of resistance to challenge authorities.

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