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Private Revenge, Public Spectacle: Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*

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Abstract

The revenge tragedies from Kyd to Webster cover several markedly different social and political periods but what probably fuelled both the fascination of the dramatists as well as the audience was the morality of revenge. Commentators have closely examined Elizabethan and Jacobean attitudes toward revenge, the ethical dilemma in seeking private revenge when denied public justice. In the hands of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights from Kyd to Marston, revenge tragedy becomes the ideal vehicle by which to project their concerns about such provocative issues as a repressive religious tradition, political corruption, and social malaise (Dollimore 4). In Mantel's two books one can see the hall marks of the revenge tragedies like sexual intrigue, sinister characters, a play-within-the-play, torture, and multiple murders.

Keywords

Revenge Tragedy; Hilary Mantel; *Bring Up the Bodies*.

Wolf Hall and *Bring up the Bodies* made history by becoming the only time when two books by the same author written as a sequel, won the Booker Prize in 2009 and 2012 respectively. Though Mantel had initially planned to write only *Wolf Hall*, the characters began to write their own story and Mantel realized that the rise and fall of Cromwell could only be done justice through a trilogy. So what makes these books so great? King Henry VIII and his six wives have captured the imagination of numerous writers. If Helen of Troy had brought about the clash of two major civilizations of her time, Anne Boleyn was the woman who threw entire Christian Europe into uproar, responsible for separating the King of England, once called the Defender of Faith by the Pope, from the Catholic Church and reforming the Church of England. Until the 1950s, historians had downplayed Cromwell's role, but Geoffrey Elton in *The Tudor Revolution in Government*, portrayed Cromwell as the genius who put into place the laws and administrative procedures that marked the English Reformation. It is this man who is the central figure of Hilary Mantel's chilling revenge tragedies *Wolf Hall* and *Bring up the Bodies*. While *Wolf Hall* spans some thirty years, the second book covers just one year. In an interview Mantel was asked if Cromwell was a hero or a villain and she responded "I don't think he has to be either. I just want my reader to ask, "If I were Cromwell, in these circumstances -- and if I had his wit and determination -- what would I do?" (Tetlebaum). She points out that though Cromwell was the son of a blacksmith and brewer, born into a world that was firmly hierarchical, where birth and pedigree was of utmost importance, he had risen rapidly to a position from where he steered the fortunes of England for a crucial ten years (Tetlebaum).

If Cromwell is a genius administrator, Mantel is a genius story teller, who effortlessly captures the reader's sympathy for her protagonist, by beginning her

trilogy with the downfall of Cromwell's patron Cardinal Wolsey. Cromwell is presented to us as a man who loves his patron, who will not abandon his patron after his downfall, and who at great personal risk stands by the Cardinal trying till the end to win back the King's favour for Wolsey. She gains our affection for him by showing his easy relationship with his employees especially Thurston the head cook, his loving relationship with his daughters, his philanthropy, his hard childhood regularly beaten by a violent father, his treatment at the hands of the noble courtiers. What makes the tale riveting is not only the suspense, tightly wrought as it is, but the palpable feel of Tudor England. The reader is immersed in an England simultaneously different and familiar, a bygone cultural milieu but a familiar psychological landscape, filled with tender paint strokes of paternal love, or affection between husband and wife, or pride in one's house, and emotions of jealousy, pain, rage. The large cast of characters who throng the pages are deftly drawn, whether it is the servant Christophe or the nobleman Tom Wyatt or the daughter Anne Cromwell. Both the microcosm with its intimate domestic details like the running of a household, or the painting of a portrait and the macrocosm with its social, political and religious upheavals are intricately woven without the flaws that Cromwell notes in the carpet that More shows him. In the weaving of these tales, she appears to have used the loom of Revenge Tragedies, the two books are like the first two acts of an Elizabethan and Jacobean Revenge Tragedy.

The revenge tragedies from Kyd to Webster cover several markedly different social and political periods but what probably fuelled both the fascination of the dramatists as well as the audience was the morality of revenge. Commentators have closely examined Elizabethan and Jacobean attitudes toward revenge, the ethical dilemma in seeking private revenge when denied public justice. In the hands of Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights from Kyd to Marston, revenge tragedy becomes the ideal vehicle by which to project their concerns about such provocative issues as a repressive religious tradition, political corruption, and

social malaise (Dollimore 4). The revenge tragedy form appeared at a conspicuous time in English history, when people were beginning to question the fundamental relationship between religion and the universe, when the English nation was imperiled by political uncertainty, financial bankruptcy and burgeoning corruption (Ashton 180). In Mantel's two books one can see the hall marks of the revenge tragedies like sexual intrigue, sinister characters, a play-within-the-play, torture, and multiple murders.

Like the revenge tragedies, there is a great deal of complex planning that culminates in revenge, but unlike the protagonists of those tragedies, in Mantel's books there is very little hesitation in the execution of revenge. In *Wolf Hall*, Anne Boleyn is the nemesis. It is not a question of justice denied as in the traditional revenge plays, but Anne Boleyn seems to view it as precisely that. She plots vengeance against all those who stand in her way and ruthlessly brings about the downfall of the Cardinal who had deemed her unworthy to marry an earl and is now faced with the certainty of her marrying the king of England. Wolsey had humiliated her father, and her lover, had mocked her aspirations to marry into nobility. It is only a matter of time before Wolsey is stripped of his office, driven from London, humiliated publicly, and finally arrested. To arrest him, Anne Boleyn sends her lover Harry Percy in what must have seemed to her sweet vengeance. When the report comes to Cromwell of the arrest and death of Wolsey, we hear the first oath of the vengeance that will propel the second act: "When they took him from the house the townspeople were assembled outside. They knelt in the road and wept. They asked God to send vengeance on Harry Percy. God need not trouble, he thinks; I shall take it in hand." The writing is terse, no big words, no histrionics, but the reader pities Harry Percy for he has made an implacable enemy. Then comes the incident of the play in court where a howling, supine scarlet figure is dragged across the floor by actors dressed as devils. There are four masked devils, one for each limb of the dead man. They prick the cardinal with tridents, making him twitch and writhe and beg. Cromwell notes

“Anne sits laughing, pointing, applauding. He has never seen her like this before: lit up, glowing. Henry sits frozen by her side. Sometimes he laughs, but he thinks if you could get close you would see that his eyes are afraid” (266). He follows the actors when the masque is over and watch them take of their masks: “George and Henry Norris are the hand-devils, who seized the cardinal by his forepaws. The two foot-devils are still wrestling each other from their trappings. They are a boy called Francis Weston, and William Brereton, who – like Norris – is old enough to know better” (267). Cromwell says nothing either to the men or to the readers but there is nevertheless an atmosphere of menace as he watches silent, wrapped in a robe of mourning black. At the end of the next book, we see the vengeance being carried out, years later at the opportune moment.

Bring up the Bodies is the second act of a Revenge Tragedy. The cause lies in the First Act, where Wolsey is destroyed. In the sequel, it is time for Cromwell to help God’s wheel of justice grind. Like the Revenge Tragedies, the book is permeated with violence and sexuality. Erotic desire and violent death are a constant, powerful undercurrent (Tettlebaum). The heads of a number of powerful men are staked on pikes, the body count escalates, as this story of private vengeance unfolds. Even as Cromwell helps Anne Boleyn rise to power, he is waiting and watching. “For a long time he has noticed Harry Norris watching the queen; and from some eminence, perched like a falcon over a doorway, he has seen himself watching Harry Norris” (240). There are six people, against whom he has sworn vengeance. The first is Harry Percy, driven by pain, jealousy and anger at not having Anne, has turned to such a life of extravagance and debauchery that he ruins himself. As Cromwell ruminates at one point “I told him I would bring him down for his part in destroying Wolsey. And by God, I have not broken sweat; with his manner of life he has destroyed himself” (136). In the kings growing infatuation for Jane Seymour, who is the complete antithesis of Anne Boleyn, Cromwell gets his chance, to take down not only the queen but the four men whose mockery of Wolsey had earned his enmity: Henry

Norris, George Boleyn, William Brereton, and Francis Weston. As he calmly admits, to make the path of the king free and to secure his own position, he needs guilty men. “So he has found men who are guilty. Though perhaps not guilty as charged” (330).

After the men are placed in the Tower, Cromwell confronts them one by one. Even after this outburst, Norris remains confident, until Cromwell calmly asks his prisoner to recall a certain play, “in which the late cardinal was set upon by demons and carried down to Hell.” Four men, Cromwell thinks, “who for a joke turned the cardinal into a beast; who took away his wit, his kindness and his grace, and made him a howling animal, grovelling on the boards and scrabbling with his paws” (329). Norris’s indignation is replaced by a look of blank terror, as he comprehends that he is but a cog in a drama of private vengeance. Watching Norris’s fear, Cromwell thinks that at least “the fellow has the wit to see what this is about: not one year’s grudge or two, but a fat extract from the book of grief, kept since the cardinal came down” (330). This tense chilling scene which reveals Cromwell’s ruthless nature ends with the terse words—“Henry Norris: left forepaw” (331). And so it continues “William Bereton, left hind paw; George Boleyn, right forepaw; Francis Weston, right hind paw” (333, 337).

There is one more body, that of Mark Smeaton. He was the only one accused of adultery, who actually confessed. Commentators have noted that he is one of the blankest faces among the significant players in Anne Boleyn’s story — virtually nothing concrete is known about him, barring some expense account items, his “confession” of adultery, and the accounts of the last three weeks of his life (Mark Smeaton). He is portrayed usually as a musician patronized by the king and later by Anne and her brother George, all three being generous patrons of the arts. In *Wolf Hall*, he is young and vain. The grounds of his destruction are laid early, when as a chorister in the Cardinal’s household, he is overheard by Cromwell speaking to a compatriot about deserting Wolsey before their

fortunes all sink with his. In *Bring up the Bodies*, his conceit has grown greatly and he is shown constantly hovering around the queen's chambers, dressed in clothes far above the means of a musician. His pride, the desire to shine in the eyes of men of higher birth and greater wealth and power that leads him to boast about favours received from the queen. Meanwhile, Cromwell has neither forgotten nor forgiven. He is the first one picked up probably because Cromwell sees him as the weakest link, the most expendable. Flattered by a dinner invitation from Cromwell, Mark Smeaton is led from boastful statements to terrorized written confession to execution in the Tower.

A Revenge Tragedy inevitably ends with the death or madness of the protagonist never his triumph. The ethical questions and moral dilemma raised by the idea of vengeance however justified, have made the death of the avenger inevitable, as may be seen by the fate of Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, Flamineo in *The White Devil*, Antonio in *Antonio's Revenge*, or Hamlet in *Hamlet*. Cromwell too must come to the same end. History has shown us that he does. *Bring up the Bodies* ends with a triumphant Cromwell, at the zenith of his powers, vengeance achieved. But this is only the second act. The third act is yet to be enacted in the final book of Mantel's trilogy.

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