







Research Article

Royal Fabrics: The Politics of Apparel in Tudor England as Reflected in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* Trilogy

Masum Janid¹   & Anjali Daimari²  

¹Research Scholar, Department of English, Gauhati University.

²Professor, Department of English, Gauhati University

Abstract

Costumes played a significant role at the royal courts of King Henry VIII, and courtiers maintained scrupulous cautiousness regarding their presentability and dress. Theatricality is a persistent trope in Mantel's Neo-Tudor novels, often exercised through strategically displayed extravagant fabrics. This study interprets the clothing culture at the courts of King Henry VIII, as represented in the three *Wolf Hall* novels. As social classes became increasingly stratified during the Renaissance, the bourgeoisie distinguished themselves from the commoners and sustained inclusivity into the monarchical elite by enacting strategic theatricality. This paper demonstrates how the theatricality of magnificence was performed through the politics of apparel, ornamentation, and distinguished fashion. Referring to works by John Matusiak, Tracy Borman, Maria Hayward, and Elizabeth Currie, this study argues that fashion was at the core of Royal Tudor governance, and Mantel utilises this trope to camouflage or amplify the magnitude of a political persona. In the context of the Tudor Sumptuary Laws, this paper also analyses how Mantel used dress as a motif of theatricality to demonstrate class segregation during sixteenth-century England. The gendering of clothes and its political ramifications shall be another issue tackled by this paper, focusing on the sartorial choices of the characters of Anne Boleyn, Katherine, and Jane Seymour.

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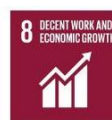
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Introduction

The Renaissance was a period of unprecedented transformation in all sectors of society, and clothing culture was not an exception. Particularly amongst the nobility, clothes determined a person's status and their social aspirations (Currie, 2017, p. 4). Clothes were supplemented by jewellery, accessories, and other material possessions, which were tactically displayed to enhance the attire, thereby asserting the wearer's social identity. Clothing and textiles not only denoted the status quo of the wearer but comprised of national, political, and religious significance (Hayward, 2009, p. 1). With the Reformation of the British Church, England strived to reinforce her neo-national identity in Europe. As a corollary, home-grown textiles and 'English' styles of clothing emerged as a symbol of patriotism (Hayward, 2009, p. 3). During christenings, for instance, it became customary for the godparents to give christening shirts 'with little bands and cuffs wrought with silk or blue thread' (Hayward, 2009, p. 8). Exchanging gifts of clothing and jewellery was customary in upper-class Tudor courtships and marriage. Soon, however, sanctions were imposed on materials, designs, accessories, and even colours of clothes. Apparel developed into a luxury and a form of expressing grandiose and individual ranks. Expensive fabrics such as silk and velvet could only be fashioned by the monarchical and ecclesiastical elites. Violating these rules, particularly by the commoners, often led to harsh and exemplary punishments at the court. Investigating these laws, Leah Kirtio (2011) writes that firstly, the offender had to forfeit their clothes and pay a fine of 'three shillings four pence' each day. Secondly, any man could later sue for the ownership of the offending clothes, with half of the profit going to the King (p. 20). These hierarchical laws administered the quality of clothing materials an individual could wear based on occasion, social status, and gender relations were called Sumptuary laws or Acts of Apparel. This essay endeavours to interpret the significance of clothing culture at the courts of King Henry VIII as demonstrated in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror and the Light*.

Mantel (2020a) has expressed in an article titled "How to Be Tudor" that, 'a flair for display, fine equipage, costly and elaborate clothes, a sense of theatre – these were what made a Tudor grandee' (p. 296). Thus, theatricality was an essential attribute of the Tudor monarchical courts. Mantel aptly resonates with this in her depiction of the diplomacy at King Henry VIII's court by adapting an overarching theatrical metaphor. Rosario Arias (2014) also associates Mantel's appropriation of theatricality with her idea of history and memory (p. 30). 'Beneath every history, another history', writes Mantel (2009), drawing an affliction with the recent critical conceptualization of historiography influenced by Hayden White and Linda Hutcheon, among others (p. 66). According to Arias (2014), contemporary criticism of historical fiction moves beyond 'reductionism' and deploys a more 'nuanced approach to historical recollection' (pp. 21-22). Mantel (2017) also asserts in her introductory BBC Reith Lecture that her concern as a historical fiction writer is with 'memory, personal and collective', highlighting the unintelligible influence of subjectivity in historical discourses (para. 4). Her view that '[o]nce we can no longer speak for ourselves, we are interpreted' aligns with contemporary understanding of historiography beyond sweeping historical narratives (Mantel, 2017, para. 15). Presenting Tudor political drama as an 'act' is appropriate in this sense, as the characters hide behind a mask of theatricality to conceal their true motivations. All the members of the court, including the king and the queen, enacted a distinct role and assumed an identity which ensured their social position(s) and determined their political aspirations. Glorious displays of power through public rallies and ceremonies were also

frequent during the reign of King Henry VIII. An essential feature of this theatrical propaganda was the meticulous utilisation of dresses. This research hereby demonstrates how such theatricalities are performed through the politics of apparel, ornamentation, and distinguished fashion in the Cromwell trilogy. Referring to works by John Matusiak, Tracy Borman, Maria Hayward, and Elizabeth Currie, this study ascertains that fashion was at the core of Royal Tudor society and Mantel utilises this trope to camouflage or amplify the magnitude of a political persona. In the context of the Tudor Sumptuary Laws, this paper also analyses the way Mantel uses dress as a motif of theatricality to demonstrate class segregation during sixteenth century England. The gendering of clothes and its political ramifications shall be another issue this paper will address by focusing on the sartorial choices of Anne Boleyn, Katherine, and Jane Seymour.

The tradition of sumptuary laws did not originate during the Tudor age. Variations of similar legislation against elaborate displays of excess can be traced through ancient Rome and the rise of Christianity in the West. The first of the English acts was passed in 1337 by Edward III and the last act was repealed by James I in 1604 comprising a period of 267 years. The act of 1337 embodied a moral purpose of reducing crime and poverty within the state by limiting ornate expenditure on garments and ornaments (Hayward, 2009, p. 18). In his tenure as the King of England, Henry VIII passed four Acts of Apparel – in 1510, 1514, 1515, and 1533. These laws provide information about social stratification, degrees of urbanisation, and gender relations (Hayward, 2009, p. 17). The first act of 1510 was titled “An Act agaynst wearing of costly Apparrell” which, according to Wilfrid Hooper (1915), had three principal features – it restricted public displays of extravagant clothing by imposing fines, it enabled individuals to sue if rules are not abided, and it authorized the King to grant exceptions (p. 433). Interestingly, however, all women were exempted without distinction from this law, irrespective of their social class. The act prohibited anyone under the rank of a lord from wearing gold or silver, sables, or even wool produced outside of England, Wales, Calais, or Ireland. Velvet in crimson or blue was outlawed for anyone under the rank of a knight and the lowest classes (servants, shepherds, and labourers) were forbidden from wearing clothes which surpassed two shillings if their income was less than ten pounds (Hooper, 1915, p. 433). According to experts, the act was primarily contrived in the interest of the domestic English textile and wool market, as most of the expensive materials were imported from Italy or France. Multiple subsequent amendments and proclamations were put forth between the first Henrician law of 1510 and the last in 1533, mostly granting relaxations to lords and knights regarding the use of silk in their outfits and enforcing these laws upon women along with men. The final act by Henry VIII passed in 1533 titled “An Act for Reformacyon of Excesse in Apparayle” intensified the severity with which the rules were instituted, particularly regarding the use of silk in accordance to rank or earnings of the wearer (Hooper, 1915, p. 435). With this act, Henry reserved the colour purple and sable fur for himself and his family (Richardson, 2017, p. 118). Hayward (2009) suggests that these acts of apparel ‘provide a framework of the clothing types, colours and fabrics which contemporaries linked to rank’ (p. 28). Clothes, thus, were associated with national identity and social rank, and were an intrinsic feature of the glorious occasions of public appearance. Following this line of research, the next section primarily scrutinises the sartorial choices of Thomas Wolsey, King Henry VIII, and Thomas Cromwell, as represented by Mantel in her three *Wolf Hall* novels to demonstrate the importance of strategic clothing, jewellery, and material possessions in Tudor politics.

Political Implications of The Royal Wardrobe

The significance of dress in depicting social class, cultural norms, and gender politics, has long been a fascinating subject for literary scholars. Since the publication of Terry Castle's *Masquerade and Civilization* (1986) which suggests that clothing, particularly during a masquerade, reveals the 'inner workings' of a period, scholars such as Laura Brown, Joseph Roach, Felicity Nussbaum, and Kristina Straub have incorporated the study of clothing into their discussions of 'gender, race, and class' (Smith, 2006, p. 967). One method of demonstrating class sensibilities in literary works is through the representation of dress and high fashion culture. Ian Watt (1957) in his seminal work *The Rise of the Novel* associates the meteoric rise of the novel as the predominant literary form in the eighteenth century with the ever expanding middle-class (p. 48). As a form primarily interested in 'realism' and the intricacies of human experience, the novel resonated with the newly emergent industrial and mercantile class who became its largest reading audience (Watt, 1957, p. 11). The novels of Richardson, Defoe, and Fielding, for instance, fortified the middle-class outlook that their social superiors were morally inferior in comparison (Watt, 1957, p. 166). According to Rosy Aindow (2016), the emergence of the modern fashion industry towards the later half of the nineteenth century democratised the British fashion market, which threatened the established social hierarchy between the bourgeoisie and the lower class. The novel, therefore, as an 'expression of predominantly bourgeois sensibilities', was critical in the 'articulation of these sartorial anxieties' (p. 1). In historical fiction particularly, dress and costumes attain a new level of significance, as they portray the dominant socio-cultural practices of the period where the novel is set. Accurate clothing and costumes also appropriates historical fiction as 'period pieces' distancing themselves from the contemporary reader. The history of costumes and its representation in literature provides not only a peek into the customs, mannerisms, and social hierarchies of a particular era, it adds detail and authenticity into the narrative (Proskurnin, 2016, p. 87). Judith Wilt's (1985) seminal study of the works of Walter Scott, *Secret Leaves: The Novels of Walter Scott* considers the fascinating life of the novelist along with his works. Quoting the historian Thomas Carlyle who comments on Scott's adaptation of costumes in his novels, Wilt writes that Scott worked by 'contrasts of costume' only, 'dazzling his audience, by the multiplex tailoring of the ages' (p. 9). In similar vein, Mantel's intricate description of clothing and possessions of the characters of Wolsey, Henry, and Cromwell clearly exhibits the strict class demarcations prevalent within the Tudor monarchical society.

Mantel's 2009 Booker Prize winning historical novel *Wolf Hall*, its 2012 Booker Prize winning sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies* and the final installment of the trilogy, *The Mirror and the Light* (2020) documents the tremendous rise of Thomas Cromwell, a blacksmith's son, to unprecedented political power, and his precipitous fall. Cromwell swore revenge on everyone who celebrated the downfall and death of his beloved mentor, Thomas Wolsey, the most notorious Lord Chancellor, and cardinal of King Henry VIII's government. Wolsey was a controversial figure who amassed political influence and wealth second only to the King of England. His influence was so astronomical that he held the highest secular rank in the state and the highest position in the English Church. While Wolsey was hated by the nobility for his 'low origins' and feared by the masses for his exemplary punishments and severe forms of justice, he also gained popularity by establishing the Court of Requests. According to Peter Gwyn (2002), Wolsey felt the need to establish such 'under courts' to hear 'poor men's causes' as 'there were too many cases to be dealt

with by the existing machinery' (p. 123). Although Wolsey's political methods simultaneously attracted admirers and misanthropes, his extravagant demeanour and grand displays of sovereignty were loathed collectively by everyone. John Matusiak (2014) in *Wolsey* opines that in his extensive career as the Lord Chancellor, Wolsey was guided by two principal philosophies – he believed that the act of governing is to dominate the governed, and rank based social stratification must be effectively reinforced through 'continual displays of pomp and splendour' (p. 169). Putting on an imposing spectacle, thus, was a considerable part of Wolsey's political identity.

In *Wolf Hall*, Mantel presents a subverted depiction of the characters of Wolsey and Cromwell. While they are widely portrayed as Machiavellian figures in historical narratives and artistic reinterpretations, Mantel humanises the two by reveling into their personal and intimate lives which is overshadowed by their often-stereotyped political personas. She reimagines the internal conflict of her characters which is beyond the scope or relevance for historical discourses. The liaison between their actions and intention is ambiguous and always concealed, as reflected by this statement of Mary Boleyn, 'They have no virtues, it's all show' (Mantel, 2009, p. 139). As such, dress emerges as an essential recurrent motif for deceit and ambiguity. Often within the narrative, clothes are used to deceive and conceal the true motivations of a person; a quality resonated particularly by the protagonist Cromwell. Costumes also amplify the magnitude of an imperial occasion and add to its theatricality and pretentiousness. Susannah Butter's (2015) *Evening Standard* article about costumes in the BBC adaptation of *Wolf Hall* expressed how Mantel acknowledged that our fascination regarding the Tudors emerges from our ability to identify ourselves in them, which includes the 'appeal of getting trussed up in velvet hats and corsets' (para. 4). In the novels, dress is utilised strategically by paramount figures to impose their status and positions of authority. This is particularly witnessed in the cases of cardinal Wolsey and king Henry. While known for his magnificent attire and public displays of extravagance, we encounter a vulnerable Wolsey in *Wolf Hall* who is at the twilight of his political career. The first depiction of Wolsey is him characteristically writing legal drafts. He is described as looking as handsome as in his prime, 'dressed not in his everyday scarlet, but in blackish purple and fine white lace: like a humble bishop' (Mantel, 2009, p. 19). His uncharacteristic appearance is Mantel foreshadowing Wolsey's imminent public downfall, although, for the moment, he still flashes the 'papal tiara' on his head, signifying his clerical authority. King Henry believed that his marriage to queen Katherine, former wife of his deceased brother Arthur, was illegitimate, alleging consummation of their earlier marriage. He sought annulment of their nuptial which would allow him to marry the young Anne Boleyn, with the foremost intention of securing a male heir for the British throne. This was naturally cardinal Wolsey's responsibility who, being a devout Catholic, failed to supersede the Pope. This aggravated the king who imposed charges of treason and a political house arrest upon the cardinal, which caused his eventual demise due to heartbreak. While Mantel's sympathetic depiction of Wolsey as a loyal and calculated man has influenced contemporary perceptions regarding the character¹, she explicates his widely acknowledged opulent lifestyle and orchestrated spectacles to emphasise his sartorial vanity. Following the orders of Henry, the Duke of Norfolk and Suffolk arrives at York Place to strip Wolsey of his stately power and send him to Esher. Mantel's description of his attire in this scene exemplifies the symbolic relevance of dress in Tudor politics:

In public, the cardinal wears red, just red, but in various weights, various weaves, various degrees of pigment and dye, but all of them the best of their kind, the best reds to be got for money. There have been days when, swaggering out, he would say, 'Right, Master Cromwell, price me by the yard!' (Mantel, 2009, p. 50)

This indicates Wolsey's particularity regarding the choice of colours and quality of materials for his attire. At Henry's court, red clothes and furnishings denoted royal authority and power (Hayward, 2007, p. 135). Red and scarlet were also prominent in early modern court peasantry and coronations within the royal household. While red is often invoked as an imagery of blood, passion, and aggression, suggests Hayward (2007), 'evaluating red against concepts such as status, cost, social definition and also, on occasion, social uniformity and celebration, both secular and ecclesiastical, has equal or greater significance in the first half of the sixteenth century' (p. 136). Wolsey understood the semantic significance of the colour, and strategically distinguished himself from his persecutors by establishing a designatory hierarchy based on his appearance. Scarlet robes were also central in religious symbolism as they denoted ecclesiastical rank. In Carol Richardson's (2020) views, red is not the colour of a cardinal, but the Pope. The significance of the colour is precisely because it 'binds the pope and his cardinals, as head and members of the papal body' (p. 535). The inference here is that Wolsey seemingly asserts his spiritual authority and ministerial status which is beyond Henry's terrestrial power. By separating the church and the state, this is a clear indication of establishing religious and moral superiority over the monarchical order. Wolsey also believed in continual displays of the grandiose through affluent possessions to establish his class. With Cromwell as his mighty diplomatic orchestrator, Wolsey materialised his political belief of dominating the citizens with illustrious displays of sartorial and artifactic grandeur. For Wolsey, the mere possession of power was not enough, but he endeavoured towards constant displays of his vast political and ecclesiastical power which was rendered more evident by his immense wealth. An evidence of his spectacles of power is his journey in the year 1520 from Calais to meet the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V. Glenn Richardson (2020) describes the journey as follows, 'Escorted by an impressive guard of more than 100 men, the cardinal, dressed in scarlet silk and velvet robes, rode a mule richly caparisoned in gold and crimson' (p. 79). Mantel provide vivid descriptions of corporeal assets possessed by Wolsey which denote his lavish stature within the monarchical institution. For instance, among Wolsey's seized belongings were his gold plate, jewels, silver, precious stones, parcel-gilt, and magnificent tapestries of King Solomon and Sheba (Mantel, 2009, p. 49). Another piece of evidence is during the trial between Katherine and Henry contesting the validity of their marriage. Wolsey asserts the power of the church over the king and queen of England by being 'in his corporeal pomp, his finest scarlet' (Mantel, 2009, p. 144). Later post his house arrest, when Cromwell enquires the number of servants Wolsey is taking with him to Esher, Cavendish replies, 'Only a hundred and sixty' (Mantel, 2009, p. 212). Wolsey even acquired a huge debt 'for richest cloth of gold at thirty shillings a yard' (Mantel, 2020b, p. 289). As such, Mantel establishes Wolsey as a protean figure whose intentions were overshadowed by his political methods and sartorial choices.

While it is clear that Wolsey reveled in compelling displays of opulence, it was a feature definitely not exclusive to him. Henry VIII was one of the most fashionable monarchs of Tudor England who dressed to influence and maintain hierarchies of status at his courts and rallies. While the sumptuary laws ensured strict social demarcations based on designation, promoted English

textiles, and prevented extravagance in clothing, the royal family, unsurprisingly, were exempted from them and King Henry VIII utilised it to the fullest (Hayward, 1996, p. 38). In full display of his self-imposed magnificence, Henry VIII is reported to have held over 40 gowns, 13 Spanish cloaks and 8 other cloaks, 26 doublets and 25 pairs of hose at the time of his death (Hayward, 1996, p. 38). King Henry's magnificent presence is often denoted through his imposing physical proportions and his costumes. In contrast to Wolsey who necessitated dress as a form of political subjugation, Henry's apparel created an aura of exuberance around him. For instance, when he goes to his wife Katherine's private chambers to persuade her for a divorce, he is described as, 'well barbered and curled, tall and still trim from certain angles, and wearing white silk . . . He moves in a perfumed cloud made of the essence of roses: as if he owns all the roses, owns all the summer nights' (Mantel, 2009, pp. 88-9). The narrator describes the king embodying his royal status through his sartorial eloquence multiple times across the trilogy. When Cromwell and the duke of Norfolk goes to visit the king to discuss matters pertaining to the recently accused cardinal, Norfolk is conspicuously annoyed by the monarch's profligate presence, 'The gilded ebullience makes him shrink inside his clothes' (Mantel, 2009, p. 210) refers to both Henry's ornamental attire and his overtly cheerful theatrical mannerisms. At a routine meeting of the king's council, Henry makes an appearance wearing 'pale silks. Rubies cluster[ed] on his knuckles like bubbles of blood' (Mantel, 2009, p. 380). He preferred green velvets, starred with diamonds (Mantel, 2020b, p. 29), white and gold gowns (Mantel, 2020b, p. 150), and doublets of crimson satin sewn all over with gold and pearls (Mantel, 2020b, p. 354), which complimented his royal presence. Throughout the day, 'he is so bejewelled that it hurts to look at him; he is the sun' (Mantel, 2020b, p. 370). Even during his private visit at Austin Friars to see a sick Cromwell, Henry appears garmented in characteristic embellishments:

The ladies of the house, Mercy and his sister-in-law Johane, are decked out like Walsingham madonnas on a feast day. They curtsy low, and Henry sways above them, informally attired, jacket of silver brocade, vast gold chain across his chest, his fists flashing with Indian emeralds. (Mantel, 2009, p. 617)

Henry's utilisation of fashion as a political tool is mostly evident during his dealings with foreign ambassadors. He seems to take great pleasure in astonishing the French and Spanish ambassadors at his court through elaborate costumes, tapestries, and portraits chiefly painted by Hans Holbein, which function as a tactic of power imposition. At his wedding with Anna of Cleves, which was attended by Charles de Marillac, the French ambassador, Henry embellishes 'purple and cloth of gold . . . so studded and slung with belts of gemstones that he seems to be wearing a suit of armour forged and welded for Zeus' (Mantel, 2020b, p. 730).

The protagonist Cromwell, however, is in complete contrast to his political mentor Wolsey in terms of his appearance, which is ironic considering their tantamount political brilliance. Akin to his enigmatic vigilante-esque persona within the discourse, Cromwell mostly wears shades of crimson or purple so deep it almost appears black:

At court and in the offices of Westminster he dresses not a whit above his gentleman's station, in loose jackets of Lemster wool so fine they flow like water, in purples and indigos so near black that it looks as if the night has bled into them; his cap of black velvet sits on his black hair, so that the only points of light are his darting eyes and the gestures of his

solid, fleshy hands; those, and flashes of fire from Wolsey's turquoise ring. (Mantel, 2009, p. 343)

Being a lawyer, his choice of darker shades in clothing resonated with his deceptive and observant persona. He had impeccable taste in rich fabrics and wore finest of the materials. His admiration for exquisite linen is reflected as he inspects an expensive gown worn by the Bishop of Lavaur at a feast thrown by Henry to celebrate his marriage with Anne, 'He takes in everything too: stitching and padding, studding and dyeing; he admires the deep mulberry of the bishop's brocade' (Mantel, 2009, p. 471). While being made of high-quality materials, writes Borman (2016), 'Cromwell's cap and gown are hardly the attire of a fashionable courtier. Both are in sombre black, with a brown fur collar' (p. 11). Mantel strikingly illustrates the formative years of Cromwell, his abusive childhood, and his hardships of climbing the social ladder. He is presented as an elusive figure with arguable motivations and questionable loyalty. In *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell's presence is primarily at the backdrop of incidents avoiding attention. For instance, when Wolsey is confronting Thomas Bolyen about his daughter Anne, Boleyn ominously interjects, 'Who's that? . . . In the corner there?', to which Wolsey replies, 'Just one of my legal people', wavering him away with a gesture of his hand (Mantel, 2009, pp. 67-8). The narrator further adds that half of the world is called Thomas and he will most likely have inconspicuous memory of Cromwell. According to Borman (2016), Cromwell's dark attires might have reflected his aversion towards pretension or a practical choice given his mysterious presence, but 'he was still a man of lowly birth . . . so he was denied the privilege of wearing the rich colours and fabrics' which were preserved exclusively for the royal family (p. 11). Therefore, Cromwell's preference of darker shades for his outfits represent not only his persona as a pragmatic diplomat but his lower social class. And learning from the mistakes of his mentor, Cromwell refrained from ostentatious fashion at the courts to detract unwanted attention, thereby avoiding sartorial adornments above his benign social origin.

Although Cromwell did not dress in flashy colours as the late cardinal or the king, he still imposed himself as a paramount legal and political mastermind through expensive fabrics and rare ornaments. The narrator describes that 'the colours of his working wardrobe are those sombre and expensive shades the Italians call *berettino*' (Mantel, 2020b, p. 28). Cromwell wears 'linen shirts so fine you can read the laws of England through them' (Mantel, 2020b, p. 63). After the death of his beloved mentor, Cromwell takes out a package given to him by Wolsey. The package held the late cardinal's turquoise ring which fits his finger 'as if it had been made for him' (Mantel, 2009, p. 265). He later settles the ring into its place, suggesting a shift in power dynamics. The ring becomes a metaphor of both the past and the future in the sense that it constantly reminds him of Wolsey and foreshadows his tremendous rise to power. Along with the cardinal's ring, Cromwell also adorns Francis Bryan's ruby which the king slid off from his own finger and gave to him at New Year. The narrator describes the ring in a similarly dramatic way suggesting his colossal rise to power. Nicholas Carew, one of Henry's confidant, remarks, 'His Majesty's ring fits you without adjustment' (Mantel, 2009, p. 426). However, he routinely wore dark velvet gloves made of kidskin and scented with amber, hiding the rings in plain sight (Mantel, 2009, p. 280). This is clear indication that while Cromwell had intricate knowledge and taste for rich fabrics, he was tactically the least gaudy at Henry's courts, echoing his low social status. Cromwell's sense of dressing at the court resonated enforcement and concealment rather than a conscious choice. For instance, when speaking with his (invented) daughter Jenneke, he says:

'When you work for Henry Tudor you have no choice in how you appear. You must be a courtier, you cannot look like a clerk. And the common people, outside the gate, you must show them you have the king's favour. They only understand what they see plain. If you put on no show, they take you for nothing.'

He wants her to know, I was happy in my lawyer's black. But is that true? He thinks, I used it for concealment. That does not mean I was content. Did I not have a doublet of purple satin, long before the cardinal came down? (Mantel, 2020b, p. 405)

This is clear evidence of Cromwell utilising the intricacies of clothing as a theatrical tactic to establish his political dominance. While his garments were always understated in contrast to his patron, he ultimately got in trouble during his private trial for owning and wearing 'a doublet of purple satin' during Wolsey's day as the cardinal (Mantel, 2020b, p. 818), which reaffirms the classism prevalent during the Tudor period.

Cromwell's low birth denied him access to certain colours and clothing materials, but as it is apparent, he was not a man of simple disposition. In fact, his growing political oeuvre also led to his increasing vanity in terms of property and materialistic possessions. Within the narrative, Cromwell asserts his new-found status through elaborate displays of wealth. At Austin Frairs, his family manor, Cromwell's excessive spectacle of grandiose via tapestries, paintings, and books is striking. The narrator clearly establishes Cromwell as a covetous figure who enjoys showcasing his wealth and influence, which progressively emerge as a power strategy. In this context, his wall painting is relevant as an allusion towards his growing influence:

The space where the arms of Wolsey used to be is being repainted with his own newly granted arms: *azure, on a fess between three lions rampant or, a rose gules, barbed vert, between two Cornish choughs proper.* (Mantel, 2009, pp. 420-421)

Here, Cromwell's growing political significance is denoted through his painted arms, replacing Wolsey as the most important personality at Henry's court. Amongst other decorations, imposing self portraits were also common within the Tudor elites and while painting his portrait, Hans Holbein says, 'Thomas, I've got your hands done but I haven't paid much attention to your face' (Mantel, 2009, p. 482). The lack of attention to Cromwell's face indicates his habitually unnoticed facial identity which augments the mystifying nature of the character, while his hands accentuate his renowned work ethic and accumulation of pecuniary status. Even Johane, his deceased wife's sister, criticises him for his growing superficiality:

'All these things,' she says, 'these things we have now. The clock. That new chest you had Stephen send you from Flanders, the one with the carving of the birds and flowers, I heard with my own ears you say to Thomas Avery, oh tell Stephen I want it, I don't care what it costs. All these painted pictures of people we don't know, all these, I don't know what, lutes and books of music, we never used to have them, when I was a girl I never used to look at myself in the mirror, but now I look at myself every day.' (Mantel, 2009, p. 311)

This increasing materialistic obsession, however, emerges out of Cromwell's anxiety regarding his low social status. Being restricted of adorning colours like purple and fine materials like sable fur, he made continual efforts to reinstate his neo social identity through accumulation and grand displays of wealth. Cromwell's utilisation of his extensive knowledge of authentic and rare fabrics

as a patronising tactic against his political rivals is evoked a few times by the narrator. As he rose in administrative rank, Cromwell had to create a façade of magnanimity to compete with his nemeses. This becomes apparent during his visit to Thomas More's house, who indulged in an opulent lifestyle that befitted his rank as the lord chancellor. More urges him to inspect his new turkey carpet made of soft mountain sheep wool, which Cromwell is not too impressed with. 'It's beautiful, he says, not wanting to spoil his pleasure. But next time, he thinks, take me with you'. When asked by More whether the carpet should be hanged or walked upon, Cromwell suggests the latter and More facetiously responds, 'Thomas, your luxurious tastes!' (Mantel, 2009, p. 228). The protagonist, therefore, was required to conform to the established theatricality within the elite Tudor households to maintain his social identity.

Acquiring the position of the Master of Rolls from Henry was suitable for Cromwell as it reinforced his growing status within the Tudor kingdom. His new residence at Chancery Lane was three hundred years old and lacked in comfort equivalent to Austin Friars, but it was nearby Westminster which allowed the king to entrust him with any treasure in the form of gold plates and rare gems. He was now personally responsible to hold and safeguard royal assets, which cemented his status as a major player within the monarchical hierarchy:

The jewels are swaddled in silk and packed into chests with new and shiny locks: and he has the keys. There are great pearls which gleam wet from the ocean, sapphires hot as India. There are jewels like the fruit you pick on a country afternoon: garnets like sloes, pink diamonds like rosehips. (Mantel, 2009, pp. 582-583)

Cromwell was consequently able to detach himself from his past and achieve unparalleled rise in social rank by maintaining his appearance and possessions. Along with rank, property in the narrative is also linked with memory – as a way for Cromwell to reminisce the late cardinal – as 'he buys the cardinal's property when he can, wherever he sees it, hangings and plate and books from his library' (Mantel, 2020b, p. 392).

Fashion, Gendered Politics, and *Wolf Hall*

In *Designing Women*, Tita Chico (2005) argued that the dressing room becomes a powerful metaphor in literature which emerged during the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, changing from 'a site of lasciviousness and secrecy for aristocratic women to an emblem for good and virtuous mothers' (p. 9). Following a similar analytical trajectory, Jennie Batchelor (2005) investigates the literary inferences of the growing emphasis on 'sentiment' and 'sensitivity' during the eighteenth century. She explains in *Dress, Distress and Desire* that dress and fashion became crucial tropes for both critics and supporters of the growing trade and commercial sectors during the eighteenth century (p. 7). Particularly for women, a balanced sartorial act was 'tricky' as 'the language of clothes is often arbitrary, its meanings vulnerable to manipulation and misinterpretation', as reflected in Richardson's *Pamela* and Maria Edgeworth's *Belinda* (Batchelor, 2005, p. 9). Christine Bayles Kortsch (2009) suggests that during the nineteenth century, sewing and interpreting textiles served as one of the 'multiple literacies' and Victorian women of all classes were expected to harvest literacy in 'dress culture' (p. 4), which is reflected in works like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. Examining Margaret Atwood's

depiction of sartorial trends and their functions in her literature, Cynthia Kuhn (2005) also addressed that an examination of dress contributes to a further understanding of circumstantial elements in her fiction, particularly borders, boundaries, masks, and mirrors, which received much critical attention (p. 1). Since dress is closely related to the body, it is often associated with the erotic, 'particularly the sin of the body' (Kuhn, 2005, p. 2). Hence, whether classified as artistic visualisation or as a semiotic system, 'dress clearly locates a site of performance' (Kuhn, 2005, p. 4), alluding to its contingent social meanings and frequent usage as a literary device for disguise.

In *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, dress is associated with integrity, sexuality, and chastity of the female characters. The author adapts dress as a potent motif through which the unique identities, class, and motivations of figures such as Katherine, Anne Boleyn, and Jane Seymour are distinguished. As Henry sought annulment of his marriage with queen Katherine, Cromwell admired her for displaying strength and rectitude of belonging from a royal Spanish bloodline, even if her resilience clashed with his political aspirations. Katherine's strength and resilience of character is represented through her dress, which is 'stitched into gowns so bristling with gemstones that they look as if they are designed less for beauty than to withstand blows from a sword' (Mantel, 2009, p. 84). Cromwell's comparison of her clothes and jewellery to a kind of armour suggests that during her public appearances, she continues to embellish herself to impose that she is still the queen and prove her irrefutable love for her husband (Schacht, 2020, p. 42). This is again invoked when the king ordered to confiscate her jewels to gift the prospective queen, she refused to give them up claiming that 'she could not part with the property of the Queen of England' (Mantel, 2009, p. 387). In this sense, clothes and ornaments emerge as a site of strength and resistance against monarchical tyranny.

While donning strategic costumes and jewels as a form of feminine strength is invoked in *Wolf Hall*, the most significant function of female clothing and colours in the narrative is its association with virginity and (dis)obedience. The controversial new queen of England, Anne Boleyn, is an often stereotyped and misconstrued character. Since her arrival at the court of king Henry, the illustration of her fashion and physical demeanour hinted towards her alleged promiscuity. During the Tudor era, a gentlewoman's virginity was regarded as her most coveted jewel. Anne's lack of virginity and integrity of character has been a subject of debate and rumour throughout the texts, which is frequently symbolised by the colours of her garments. When she first appeared at court at the Christmas of 1521, she was wearing a 'yellow dress', dancing gracefully (Mantel, 2009, p. 66). She is described as 'sumptuous in her nightgown of dark silk. Her hair is down, her delicate feet bare inside kidskin slippers' (Mantel, 2009, p. 236). She has also adorned 'dark red gown of figured damask' (Mantel, 2009, p. 366) and 'red velvet and ermine' (Mantel, 2009, p. 387). The descriptions of her dress and colours in *Wolf Hall* are symbolically akin to her ostensibly seductive and vociferous presence. Later, in *Bring Up the Bodies*, when she fell from grace and was accused of adultery, her sartorial choices are vehemently compared to a prostitute. For instance, Anne is described as wearing yellow again on 8 January 1536, like she did when she first appeared at the court. But this time, '[the colour] had slid down the scale abroad; in the domains of the Emperor, you'd see a woman in a brothel hoisting her fat dugs and tight-lacing her yellow bodice' (Mantel, 2012, p. 172). Her physical adornments are described in a progressively grotesque manner, alluding to her alleged amorality. Like when Cromwell visits the new queen, she wore 'rose pink and dove grey. The colours should have had a fresh maidenly charm; but all he could think of were

stretched innards, umbles and tripes', 'the pearls around her neck looked to him like little beads of fat', and her 'nails flashing like tiny knives' (Mantel, 2012, p. 45). The narrator's shift from sensuality to tawdriness while depicting Anne's clothing and jewellery clearly symbolise her fall from being an enigmatic French maiden to an adulteress in the eyes of king Henry. At her court trial, she wears 'scarlet and black' (Mantel, 2012, p. 441), exhibiting her mournful state and resistance against the imperial lords, as black is the colour of mourning and death. At her public execution, Anne wears 'a gown of dark damask and a short cape of ermine' which belonged to Katherine, urging Cromwell to reflect that 'these furs, then, are Anne's final spoils' (Mantel, 2012, p. 469), suggesting that it might be a way for Anne to enrage the former queen. It may also be read as a metaphor of finally showing solidarity with Katherine who suffered a similar fate as her.

In contrast to Anne Bolyen, the new love interest of Henry, Jane Seymour, is presented as a plain, maidenly virgin (Mantel, 2012, p. 272). Jane is meek, soft spoken, and shy, who wears a 'silvery pallot', 'pearls, and white brocade embroidered with stiff little sprigs of carnations' (Mantel, 2012, p. 13). Jane's colour choices mostly consists of white gowns with halcyon sleeves and seed pearl necklaces giving her an abstinent, heavenly appearance. It is interesting to notice the difference in Jane's clothing in comparision to Anne, who mostly draped red, scarlet, crimson, and yellow. Even Henry appreciates Jane's humble demeanour, as the narrator claims, 'All the riches of the New World would not sate her [Anne]; while Jane is grateful for a smile' (Mantel, 2012, p. 249). Fom the above instances, it is clear that the colours of a woman's dress in the *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* is symbolic of her presumed virginity or sexual promiscuity. It also function as a trope of resistance and strength, as reflected by the cases of persecuted characters like Katherine and Anne Boleyn.

Conclusion

Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, *Bring Up the Bodies*, and *The Mirror and the Light* are captivating narratives that examine the intricacies of political and interpersonal power during the Tudor era. One of the ways the author proficiently represents diplomacy of political authority is through the trope of dress and costumes. This research demonstrated how costumes and colours at Tudor courts possessed semantic, monarchical, and ecclesiastical meanings, as reflected in Mantel's trilogy. By focusing on the characters of Thomas Wolsey, Thomas Cromwell, and Henry VIII, this research illustrated the rampant class discrimination prevalent in Tudor society and how such classist ideals are proliferated through imposing restrictions on fabrics, colours, ornaments, and clothing items. Finally, this study explored gendered implications of dress and the way costumes functioned as a political statement for women in Tudor England. Scrutinising the characters of Anne Boleyn, Katherine, and Jane Seymour, this study concludes that costumes for women in Mantel's narrative functions as a metaphor for strength, resilience, (dis)obedience, and virginity.

Notes

ⁱ The *Wolf Hall* trilogy has been adapted on stage by multiple production houses, most notably by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2014, and by *BBC* as a television series with the same title in 2015. The production of its second season is underway and will be released in 2024.

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Masum Janid is a PhD Research Scholar in the Department of English, Gauhati University, Guwahati, Assam, India. He completed his Post Graduation from Gauhati University in 2018. He specializes in Gender Studies and Historical Fiction. He is also keenly interested in Postcolonial literature, Ecocriticism, Fiction, and Film Studies.

Dr Anjali Daimari is a Professor in the Department of English, Gauhati University. She did her Post Graduation and M,Phil from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and her PhD from NEHU, Shillong. She has contributed articles in various journals of repute, book chapters, and translated multiple Boro literature into English, including two Bodo short stories in Aruni Kashyap edited *How to Tell the Story of An Insurgency*, HarperCollins India, 2020. Her interest areas are Fiction, African Writing in English, Contemporary South Asian Literature, Life writing, Translation Studies, Writings from India's Northeast and Bodo Life and Literature.
