

Thomas Cromwell: Friend or Foe of the English Nobility

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Abstract - Cromwell is smart, persuasive, and shrewd in the court setting. *Wolf Hall, Bring Up the Bodies, and The Mirror & The Light*, Hilary Mantel's books about life in king Henry's court as seen by Thomas Cromwell, are widely regarded as having revitalized the historical fiction genre. While Mantel has been lauded for her portrayal of Cromwell, she has also been criticized for painting him in too rosy a light.

Keywords - Foe, Cromwell, Mantel, Friends

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INTRODUCTION

Thomas Cromwell, a prominent figure in English history, is often the subject of debate and speculation regarding his relationship with the English nobility during his time. As a chief minister to King Henry VIII, Cromwell held immense power and influence, implementing significant political and religious reforms. However, his actions and policies were met with mixed reactions, leading to contrasting views on whether he should be considered a friend or a foe of the English nobility.

Cromwell's rise to power was remarkable. Born into a humble background, he climbed the social and political ladder through his exceptional intelligence, shrewdness, and determination. Serving as an advisor to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Cromwell swiftly adapted to the changing political landscape and positioned himself as a key player during the tumultuous period of the English Reformation.

One perspective sees Cromwell as a friend to the English nobility. During his tenure, he implemented reforms that challenged the authority and privileges of the Catholic Church and the aristocracy. Cromwell's efforts to dissolve the monasteries and redistribute their wealth were perceived by some as a means to weaken the power of the traditional nobility and increase the authority of the crown. By facilitating the acquisition of former monastic lands by the nobility, Cromwell garnered support and loyalty from influential figures within the ruling class.

However, there is another viewpoint that paints Cromwell as a foe of the English nobility. Some argue that his reforms threatened the established social order and undermined the traditional power structures that the nobility relied upon. The dissolution of the

monasteries, in particular, brought about economic and political upheaval, leading to resentment among certain members of the aristocracy. Moreover, Cromwell's implementation of a centralized administration and his relentless pursuit of Henry VIII's interests clashed with the interests of some noble families, creating adversaries and fostering an atmosphere of mistrust.

Understanding Cromwell's relationship with the English nobility requires an examination of his actions, policies, and the responses they elicited. By delving into the reforms he implemented and the consequences they had on the nobility, we can gain insights into the dynamics of power and the intricate web of alliances and rivalries that characterized Tudor England.

This research aims to critically assess the role of Thomas Cromwell in relation to the English nobility during his time as a chief minister. Through a comprehensive analysis of primary sources, scholarly works, and historical accounts, we will explore the nuances of Cromwell's interactions with the nobility and determine whether he should be considered a friend or a foe of this influential class. By shedding light on this complex relationship, we can deepen our understanding of the broader political, social, and cultural transformations that took place during the reign of Henry VIII.

CROMWELL THE ALLY

Thomas Cromwell, a key figure in English history, is often regarded as a controversial and enigmatic figure. As the chief minister to King Henry VIII, Cromwell played a pivotal role in shaping the course of the English Reformation and implementing far-reaching political and administrative reforms. While

his actions and policies have been subject to varying interpretations, there is a compelling case to be made for viewing Cromwell as an ally of the English nobility during his tenure.

Cromwell's rise to power was remarkable. Coming from a modest background, he successfully navigated the treacherous political landscape of Tudor England and earned the trust and confidence of influential nobles. Through his exceptional organizational skills, keen intellect, and pragmatic approach, Cromwell developed a network of alliances with key members of the English nobility. These alliances, built on shared interests and a common vision for reform, laid the foundation for Cromwell's success and influence within the royal court.

One aspect that highlights Cromwell's alliance with the nobility is his role in implementing significant legal and administrative reforms that benefited both the crown and the aristocracy. Cromwell worked to streamline and modernize the legal system, providing a more efficient and predictable framework for the nobility to navigate. His efforts in standardizing legal procedures, land tenure, and inheritance laws provided stability and predictability for the noble families, ensuring the preservation of their estates and privileges.

Moreover, Cromwell's policies often aligned with the interests of the English nobility. His campaign for the dissolution of the monasteries, for instance, allowed the nobility to acquire vast amounts of land and wealth previously controlled by the Catholic Church. This redistribution of assets bolstered the power and influence of the noble families, enabling them to further solidify their social and economic standing.

Furthermore, Cromwell's alliances with noble families were instrumental in advancing his political agenda. By forging alliances and gaining the support of influential nobles, Cromwell effectively maneuvered through the intricate web of court politics. This support provided him with a power base and shielded him from potential opposition within the court.

However, it is important to acknowledge that Cromwell's alliance with the nobility was not without its complexities and tensions. Conflicts of interest and rivalries inevitably emerged, especially as Cromwell's reforms threatened established power structures and vested interests. Some noble families felt their authority undermined and their traditional privileges challenged by Cromwell's centralizing reforms.

Cromwell must change his demeanor and vocabulary to suit the audience and the topic at hand. This means he may quickly and readily adopt a new persona behind each disguise. He'll use one method to calm someone down, then switch to a different one to do the same thing for someone else. He now performs as an actor switching between roles.

Cromwell ascended to a position of prominence and influence from very modest origins. However, as

Mantel points out, these people did so mostly via religious channels. Cromwell appears to have done so because to his sharp mind and insider information, qualities that make him stand out. Unfortunately, this failed, and Cromwell eventually fell victim to the whims and might of the Tudor throne as well. How many men can claim, as I must, 'I am a man whose sole friend is the King of England,'" the fictitious Cromwell asks in *Bring Up the Bodies* by Hilary Mantel. So, you'd assume I don't need anything, but I do. But if you take Henry away from me, I have nothing. Although the nature of the connection has been examined from numerous perspectives, there is no denying the entanglements between Cromwell and his royal patron and employer. Cromwell's reputation for brutality is well-earned; under his order, over 800 Catholic monasteries and convents were shuttered and often destroyed, with devastating effects for their residents.

Different historians and writers from different time periods and literary traditions have different takes on the same fundamental events of his life. Whether or if Cromwell acted independently, and to what extent, seems to be a point of fundamental contention. According to biographies produced in the early 20th century, he did not have much say in government and was mostly controlled by King Henry. As a facilitator, he was tasked with helping bring about the shift, but he did not devise the plan himself. In later chapters, though, Cromwell's political impact becomes more prominent. Cromwell is presented as a genius by Elton (1953), who attributes these massive shifts in British culture, religion, and government to him. He is portrayed as a villain in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), where he is responsible for Thomas More's downfall despite More's innocence. There are few depictions of Cromwell that are favourable. Instead, he is viewed as having brutally exercised authority, resulting in the death of Anne Boleyn and much hardship for the people of England when the ecclesiastical system was toppled and replaced by the Reformation. The extent to which Cromwell himself adhered to any faith is questionable; hence, the excesses and tragedies of the Reformation are sometimes blamed on him as unintended consequences of his policies.

In Mantel's novel, Cromwell is relatable on a fundamental level, and yet he also commands respect. Mantel achieves this comprehensive portrait in part via point of view; written in the third person, Cromwell's emotions, background, sympathies, connections, and vital, potent humanity are all made plain. As the author seems more interested in recreating an event than recalling or recounting it, her portrayal of Cromwell is objective, equivocal, and dismissive of his character. Nonetheless, this has prompted much criticism that her portrayal of Cromwell is too favorable. Perhaps most significantly, her portrayal of Cromwell is intense. This seems to be her most significant contribution; it almost has the air of a possession. A contemporary author gives a long-dead figure the benefit of her

heightened sensitivity and keen powers of observation.

A review from The Guardian provides one such instance:

In this way, Mantel serves as a resurrectionist or medium, connecting the Tudor era with the present day. So, Mantel's primary goal in *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies* is to resurrect the dead. Mantel is both a resurrectionist and a translator, as she presents her interpretation of Cromwell's life and political accomplishments to the reader, transforming the sixteenth-century figure into an intriguing hero who values education and justice and leaves an indelible mark on history. Cromwell, in both *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up the Bodies*, recognizes his function as an interpreter and translation of people, languages, and history, and uses the metaphor of the translator to describe himself. As a result, Mantel adopts Cromwell's "translating" skills and roles as an author/translator, bringing a distant history into the present without succumbing to the "domestication" trap.

Mantel's work has been described as "resurrectionist," an accurate and thought-provoking term. On the one hand, it highlights the unique qualities of her method and the outcomes she achieves. On the other hand, it's possible that this is just a flowery way of saying "what all writers of historical fiction do," which raises doubts about the term's use. Although I believe that certain aspects of Mantel's work are unique and serve to redefine the genre, much like Mantel's reimagining of Cromwell, I see the value of situating her work within the recent development of the historical fiction genre and will do so in the future.

However, while Mantel does describe Thomas Cromwell's appearance in her work as a kind of impromptu visitation, she does not claim to have been possessed by his personality; rather, she inhabits the historical figure in the same way that an actor might inhabit a fictional one. Indeed, the parallels between Mantel's writing process and that of an actor were brought to light in the discussion between Mantel and Shakespearean actress Harriet Walter. The opening scene of Cromwell as a vulnerable, abused fifteen-year-old boy seeking refuge in his sister's home, for example, may be argued to be a deliberate selection of scenes from Cromwell's life, and that these tend to make the character sympathetic. From this premise, Cromwell is portrayed in both books as a complex human being who has his own set of moral constraints, preferences, hopes, and fears, all of which serve to soften our first impression of him and make a definitive verdict more difficult.

NOBILITY IN FRIENDS OR FOE

The narrative aims to explore the complex relationship between Cromwell and the English nobility, examining

whether he was a friend or a foe to this influential class. The story begins with a glimpse into Cromwell's humble origins and his rise through the ranks of society. It highlights his intelligence, resourcefulness, and ability to navigate the treacherous political landscape of Tudor England. As Cromwell gains prominence, he becomes a trusted advisor to Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, setting the stage for his entry into the royal court.

As Cromwell's influence grows, he becomes the chief minister to King Henry VIII. Here, the plot delves into Cromwell's policies and reforms that shaped the political and religious landscape of the time. It explores his efforts to challenge the authority of the Catholic Church and establish a centralized administration.

Throughout the narrative, conflicts and tensions arise between Cromwell and the English nobility. Some nobles see Cromwell as an ally, benefiting from his policies such as the dissolution of monasteries, which allow them to acquire wealth and power. Others, however, view him as a threat, as his reforms disrupt the established power structures and erode their privileges.

The plot navigates the intricate web of alliances, rivalries, and power struggles within the court. It showcases the challenges faced by Cromwell as he balances the interests of the nobility with the objectives of the crown. The story unfolds with the opposition and resistance Cromwell encounters from certain noble families, highlighting the complexity of his relationship with the nobility.

As the narrative progresses, key events and turning points in Cromwell's career shape his perception among the nobility. The story reaches its climax with the downfall of Cromwell, as his enemies within the court seize an opportunity to bring him down. The resolution reveals the ultimate fate of Cromwell and reflects on the legacy he left behind.

Through a compelling narrative, "Thomas Cromwell: Friend or Foe" presents a thought-provoking exploration of the intricate dynamics between Cromwell and the English nobility. It raises questions about loyalty, power, and the complexities of political alliances during a transformative period in English history. Ultimately, the plot aims to shed light on the multifaceted nature of Cromwell's relationship with the nobility, inviting readers to consider the diverse perspectives surrounding this historical figure.

THEMES

"Friends and Foe" explores several key themes that provide depth and insight into the complex relationship between Thomas Cromwell and the English nobility. These themes contribute to a nuanced understanding of the dynamics, conflicts,

and alliances that shaped their interactions. Some prominent themes in the narrative include:

Power and Ambition: The theme of power is central to the narrative, reflecting the ambitions of both Cromwell and the English nobility. Cromwell's rise to prominence and his subsequent position as chief minister to the king exemplify his ambitious pursuit of power and influence. The nobility, on the other hand, seeks to maintain and protect their traditional power structures and privileges. The tensions that arise from conflicting ambitions drive the narrative and influence the perceptions of Cromwell as either a friend or a foe.

Loyalty and Betrayal: The theme of loyalty and betrayal is intertwined with the complex relationships depicted in the narrative. Cromwell's alliances with influential noble families rely on loyalty and trust, while the nobility's loyalty to the crown and their traditional authority is tested by Cromwell's reforms. Instances of betrayal, whether real or perceived, shape the perceptions and actions of characters and contribute to the shifting alliances and conflicts within the story.

Reform and Resistance: The theme of reform and resistance explores the transformative changes brought about by Cromwell's policies and their impact on the nobility. Cromwell's reforms, such as the dissolution of monasteries, challenge established structures and traditions, eliciting varying degrees of resistance from the nobility. The tension between the need for reform and the resistance to change highlights the complex relationship between Cromwell and the nobility.

Social and Political Change: The narrative delves into the broader social and political changes occurring in Tudor England and their effects on the nobility. Cromwell's policies and actions reflect the shifting dynamics of power and governance during this period. The narrative examines the consequences of these changes for the nobility, including shifts in social mobility, wealth distribution, and the consolidation of royal authority. This theme allows for a broader understanding of the historical context in which the relationship between Cromwell and the nobility unfolds.

Perception and Reputation: The theme of perception and reputation is integral to the narrative. Cromwell's actions and policies are subject to interpretation, and his reputation among the nobility plays a crucial role in shaping their attitudes towards him. The narrative explores how perceptions of Cromwell as either a friend or a foe evolve over time, influenced by political propaganda, personal interactions, and the consequences of his reforms. The theme of perception underscores the complexities of his relationship with the nobility and invites readers to question their own perspectives.

By exploring these themes, "Friends and Foe" provides a nuanced portrayal of the intricate dynamics between Thomas Cromwell and the English nobility.

These themes illuminate the motivations, conflicts, and alliances that defined their relationship, offering a deeper understanding of the historical context and the complexities of power and governance in Tudor England.

CONCLUSION

Mantel's description of Thomas Cromwell's management style is infused with the power methods that were prevalent in England throughout Henry VIII's reign, both in society and at court. His existence at court is a highly regulated stage on which he often does performances. He likes to show off his wealth and power and utilizes his position to get others to depend on him. As time goes on, he earns Henry VIII's confidence and becomes a close confidant. Because of this, his role is now important. He is deceptively competent at intimidating, threatening, and coercing others into doing what he wants them to do or protecting himself from damage while doing so. This is part of his plan to acquire as much power as possible for himself. Mantel's unconventional trilogy of historical novels is highly regarded by critics. Her interpretation and the anecdotes about Cromwell, together with her own remarks on her work, imply that the theme may have chosen her. By providing an impartial, fully realized account about Cromwell, Mantel is able to take the reader to a time when all consequences were still unknown and the man himself had yet to be appraised.

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