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THE FEMALE IMAGES IN HILARY MANTEL'S *WOLF HALL*

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ABSTRACT

The novel *Wolf Hall* vividly represents the fierce battle between the British monarchy and the church power in Henry VIII's period. In the novel, female characters such as Queen Catherine of Aragon, Mary Boleyn, Anne Boleyn and Cromwell's sister Kat are all faced with various criticism and difficulties hard to break through. This paper analyzes the four characters from the feminist point of view. Through the analysis of their social positioning, social difficulties, and the different attitudes they choose towards their difficulties, it discusses the oppression of women's rights and women's aphasia dilemma in Tudor times.

Keywords: Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall*, female images, aphasia dilemma

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Introduction

Hilary Mantel's historical novel *Wolf Hall* has depicted the glittering and bloody life of Tudor England in the time of Henry VIII from Cromwell's perspective and life experience. In her novel, Mantel "acts as a mediator between the Tudor past and the present, while providing a close encounter with the exotic other" (Arias 1). As an excellent work of great value in literary research, it has attracted reader's attention and interpretation from different perspectives since it won the Man Booker Prize in 2009. Previous researchers mainly interpreted it from the perspective of new historicism, religion, family construction, as well as subversion and suppression of rights. This paper mainly focuses on the major female characters in the novel. They play an important part in the hero Cromwell's family life and political career, but none of them are able to control their own destiny. This paper analyzes four female roles: Queen Catherine of Aragon, Mary Boleyn, Anne Boleyn and Cromwell's sister Kat from the feminist point of view. Through the interpretation of their social positioning, the difficulties they face, and the different attitudes they take to deal with the dilemma, to discuss the oppression of women's rights in the patriarchal society and their aphasia dilemma.

Simon Beauvoir, a feminist theorist, once said that "women are not born to be women, but are shaped"(Beauvoir 8). Men have been in the dominant position for a long time by virtue of their physical and power advantages, and have formulated a series of unwritten rules to strengthen their dominant position, emphasizing the virtues like docility, obedience, diligence, quietness, introversion and loyalty of women. Women, especially in the ancient times, were virtually imprisoned and internalized by these standards, unconsciously regulating and weakening their social existence in accordance with these requirements. They had to act like a "perfect angel", striving to meet all kinds of social expectations. All the severe demands, at the same time, make women's life situation become very difficult: They were easily to be accused of being "unqualified".

In the face of such accusations, some women choose to refute and resist against it, but finally fail. Other women choose to be "evil women", who satisfy men's needs for flattery and beauty in order to gain their own interests. And the third type of women tend to be totally "soft and submissive", who carefully play the role of "angel in the house" and completely obey the patriarchal society without a thought of resistance. All the main female characters in *Wolf Hall* can be classified into these three types mentioned above. They all have their own misfortunes, while they all showed their powerlessness to the harsh "women's dilemma" of Tudor era.

Catherine of Aragon, Mary Boleyn---"Struggling Women"

In the novel *Wolf Hall*, Queen Catherine of Aragon is a good example of women's initial awakening to fight against the patriarchal society and defend her reasonable rights and dignity. In the second part of the novel (*An Occult History of Britain*), Catherine of Aragon refuses to admit that her marriage with Henry VIII was invalid, bravely arguing with her husband Henry when he came to lobby her to abdicate:

You can hear what Catherine says. That wreck of a body, held together by lacing and stays, encloses a voice that you can hear as far as Calais: it resounds from here to Paris, from here to Madrid, to Rome. She is standing on her statues, she is standing on her rights; the windows are ratted, from here to Constantinople. (Mantel 89)

There is no doubt she is very passionate in her defense, and all her words sound quite reasonable. She certainly wants to do her best to prevail in a reasonable and moral way. However, her words cannot touch the king at all, neither can they have much political power. At least those words are not strong enough to refute Henry VIII's unreasonable will. He still insists on all his accusations against Catherine and demands for a divorce.

The reason why Henry VIII insists on a divorce is simple and clear: although they have been married for nearly 20 years, his wife did not give birth to a healthy Prince for him. And since Queen Catherine is over forty, she has no hope of giving birth. If their marriage continues, the royal family of England will be in crisis due to the lack of a legal male heir. The idea of 'male heir' here is very important. According to the social expectation of Henry VIII, one of the most important tasks for women is to give birth to male offspring for the family. Or, in other words, give birth to a male heir.

Catherine of Aragon's childbearing history has been variously reported by historians. They credit her with "several miscarriages, three infants who were either stillborn or died immediately after birth (two of them males), two infants who died within a few weeks of birth (one of them a boy) and one girl, Princess Mary"; this means she must have had a total of at least nine times of pregnancies (Dewhurst 49). Such a large number of times is unimaginable for many women of the present day, but for Tudor women, they had to do it again and again until they had a healthy boy. And due to the underdeveloped medical level and poor health conditions at that time, the neonatal mortality rate was extremely high. Therefore it is generally believed that the more boys a wife can give birth to for her family, the better. Only in this way can a family ensure that they have high quality male heir grow up to his manhood and take his family responsibility.

Against this major background, Women's reproductive value in marriage is greater than their other advantages. In some extreme cases, even their own lives have to sacrifice for the newborns. Newborns are considered to be the much more worthy to survive in dystocia. "We shouldn't mourn, if our wife or daughter dies in childbirth—she is only doing what God made her for" (Mantel 124). These very words proposed by the Martin sect is a good example of that point of view mentioned above. Based on this social demand, women who fail to give birth to boys are often under threat. No matter how noble they are, they all may be deprived of social status. Due to this social view, all of Catherine's previous self-defences are vulnerable.

Thus in the end, she can only hope the Holy See could give her some help. Only the power of speech from the Holy See to suppress King Henry could help to save her marriage. In order to contend with Henry, she has to gain the papal's support behind her. To gain the recognition of mainstream forces, she has to rely on claims that "marriage is both a shared life status reached in accordance with will of both spouses, and a sacred system established between a man and a woman who are baptized at a Christian church, the foremost purpose being breeding and cultivating offspring. Christian advocates monogamy and loyalty to marriage and objects to

divorce. " (Yan 2) That is to say, if she only relies on her own right from the "queen's crown", she is surely powerless to compete with the king. To solve this crisis, the essential of this divorce case has to change into the struggle between Catholic power and British monarchy. "Queen Catherine" can only act as the symbol of Catholic power in this case. This means if she holds on to the position of queen, it is in essence that the power of religion overthrows that of king. And if she has to divorce, it shows that King Henry VIII has more authorities in England than the Catholic Church. "Queen" is just a pretext on the surface among the secret fighting of these two forces. Both sides need to ensure their supremacy in Britain through her case.

Therefore, her struggle has many limitations, which leads to failure. Queen Catherine was not able to keep her place in the end. It also shows that the control power of male dominated society is very strong, and women for a while are not powerful enough to resist it successfully.

Ironically, the Queen's loss of discursive power did not start from the time she was old and childless. As early as many years ago, when she arrived England as the Spanish Princess and the fiancée of Prince Arthur, her wishes were already obviously insignificant in the court of patriarchy. At that time Henry VII, the old king, refused to follow her Spanish wishes: to wear a veil before marriage. Instead, when little Catherine got to bed, he strode through the rooms, looking as if he had in mind to tear back the bedclothes in order to see her face. "In case his son Arthur would marry to a monster"(29). It can be said that Catherine's wishes and voice have almost never been adopted in the British court. She plays the role of a "chess piece" all her life: first as a symbol of the political marriage between Britain and Spain, then the "excuse" for the contest between the British monarchy and Holy See power. As an individual woman, her struggle and resistance is weak and ineffective under the power discipline. In the end, she can only become a member of the silent female group.

Another woman who tries to fight against the patriarchal society but also fail in the end is Mary Boleyn. In the beginning of the novel, she is already a fallen mistress of King Henry. Due to this awkward status, she has been treated with contempt and ridicule, and cannot obtain her son's custody. She has to follow Henry VIII and her sister Anne's order to leave away from her son. Poor Mary tries to seek for help and get her son back. However at that time all her families, especially her father and uncle, are unlikely to support her. All of them are busy pleasing the king's new lover Anne, for now Anne is the Boleyn family's future hope.

Mary once complains to Cromwell "because now she (Anne) is everything, and I am to be swept out after supper like the old rushes...they can say anything they like to me. My father says I'm a mouth to feed and my uncle Norfolk says I'm a whore" (137). Now that Mary has lost her future development value to the family, no one will care about her feeling and demand any more. Her anger and protest is unimportant to the Boleyn family. At the same time, without the family's attention and support, she cannot have an independent personality, rights or even property. Since her resistance fails, in order to survive in the society and be respected in her family, Mary decides "I need a new husband. To stop them calling me names--One who will take care of my children. One who can stand up to my family"(138). She has to comply with the rules of the patriarchal society and makes herself be attached to a man for protection. Although she already feels that what she suffered is very unfair, she could do nothing with that. The only way to survive is to cater carefully, to let herself meet the social criteria. As an "awakened woman" who intends to speak for her own rights and interests, Mary finally finds out that her wills are in fact impossible to achieve in that social background.

Anne Boleyn---"Evil Woman"

Anne Boleyn plays the role of an "evil woman" who would be criticized under the traditional moral standards. She is ambitious without following the "loyalty" and "Lady morality", whose bold moves make her the "rebel" of the times. And her way of speaking is always not gentle, which is totally against the "ladies rules". In Cromwell's view, "Lady Anne" even speaks "imperiously and partially in French, mockingly accenting his name as 'Cremwuel'" (Pilhuji 116). And that makes him regard her very unruly. Besides, unlike other docile women, Anne uses all her wit and beauty to gain step by step a higher position in the British court. She is more like an ambitious and adventurous woman, using every of her twinkle and smile to achieve more political power. She tries to free herself from the "cage" of patriarchy and live a better life in her own way.

In addition, she is also a very utilitarian person. In her opinion, body and beauty are the chips in exchange for benefits with men. It is worthwhile to calculate her capital carefully and play it to the right degree to get higher titles of nobility. She also makes full use of her family members, wiping out her political enemies in the court with the power of her father, brother and uncle. She squeezes out her sister's position and becomes the king's new mistress, regardless of whether her sister will fall into an embarrassing marginalization situation after this change or not. And for the Boleyns, the one they want to support and protect is "the Boleyn girl who married the king". As for whether she is Mary Boleyn, Henry VIII's old mistress, or Anne Boleyn, the king's new lover, is not the most important question. Now that Anne is already the queen and most likely to bring glory for the Boleyns, of course all of them must do their best to eliminate the enemy and pave the road for Anne. They flatter her and please her, making her become the center of the family. They pay great attention to all the details she reports back about sleeping with the king, to make sure that her behavior can make King Henry happy. They transfer their best resources from Mary to Anne, making her the new "face" of the Boleyn family. In the face of great interests, family emotions and moralities all become less important.

Anne's action seems to make her the most successful person in the court, but in fact, such "success" is also very unstable. That is, she still ignores the most essential problem: all her rights come from the "giving" of the powerful male. Since it can be "given", then on the contrary, it may also be "taken back" quickly. In this way, her success or failure actually comes from men's preferences and willings. Once she is no longer liked by the king, she would soon be "taken off the crown" just like the last queen. "Like chess queens, women are moved about the game board but are sacrificed first to protect the king—especially if their wombs prove infertile or if they become too power hungry" (Waldherr 7). The essential cause of Anne's failure is totally the same as the last queen: couldn't give birth to a boy. In Henry VIII's time, the identity of "a boy's mother" is the foundation of women's social status. And those who fail to have a boy would severely be criticized for their "fault". As we can see, finally Anne exhausted Henry's patience because she also failed to give birth to the successor of Tudor Dynasty, which gives Cromwell and a group of nobles a chance to bring her down.

Anne Boleyn's ambition and adventurous behavior cannot help her totally escape from the tragedy of the times. She ultimately becomes a victim of patriarchal society as well. As a woman, Anne's self situation is still quite passive in Britain court. All her strength and support are based on the interests of her family. Once she loses the position of a "chess piece", her family members would prefer to betray and abandon her as a useless girl. They in the end choose to let her emerge and perish all by herself, to be pushed to the guillotine. Anne's miserable fate is decided by the patriarchal society, no matter how witty and cunning she is, she can't escape from the social rules by herself. The most rebel and utilitarian speculative woman of Henry VIII still have no choice but to accept her fate and admit her "guilt" under the judgment of the monarch.

Kat---"Angle in the House"

Kat is an image of "angel in the house" which is in line with men's traditional aesthetics. She is gentle and virtuous, gets used to keeping the house and does the chores for her family since she was a child. The first time she appears in the novel, she is "coming from the kitchen with a rack of hot pies in her hands"(4), which indicates her as a proficient housewife. As a common girl, Kat can always take good care of her father and brother's daily life, cooking and sewing for them. And after getting married, she also perfectly fulfilled the duties of a good wife, as diligent and kind as an angel, completely conforming to the standard of "ideal wife" in men's mind at that period of time.

She is timid and obedient as well, always letting her husband Williams hold the power of decision-making in the house, and never arguing anything with Williams. When Cromwell was beaten by his father, he ran to Kat for healing and comfort. Although Kat cried for him and strongly hoped he could stay in her house, she could not make the decision on her own. She had to beg Williams to let her brother stay. "Morgan Williams, what do you say? He'll be good to do the heavy work, when he's healed up. He can do the figures for you, he can add and... "(7). And when Williams refused her, all she could do was "smiling a pained smile" to her brother. Apparently, she dare not contradict her husband. Contradictions are not in line with the social rules for women under the Tudors; women at that time had to submit to their husbands rather than take their own way.

Besides, after years of obedience, Kat has already been used to having no discourse power. She takes it for granted that she is in the secondary and marginal position of her family. She seems to be married to Morgan only to manage household chores and raise children, and no one expects her to give any opinions or participate in family decision-making.

In the patriarchal society, the deprivation of women's discourse means the loss of women's rights. Many ordinary women are not qualified to make any important decisions at home. They are not awoken at all. Instead, they are imprisoned by deeply rooted traditional ideas, and are forced to keep silence. They play the role of "good girl" at home, obeying men's decisions. In their opinions, it is abnormal to resist or talk back against the male. Living in such a strong patriarchal society, they already get used to be discriminated, devalued, oppressed and conquered, and they have never been awakened by female consciousness. Kat is the most common and typical one of them. Lots of girls like Kat are shaped into a kind of submissive, acquiescent and conformist image by the male-centered society, and can only accept the fate's control in their whole life.

Conclusion

In *Wolf Hall*, all the main female characters mentioned above are in some kind of dilemma: Struggling women like Catherine of Aragon and Mary Boleyn till the end still cannot get the discourse power to decide their own destiny. The former has to play the role as a "chess piece" of the Holy See in order to keep her queen crown, while the latter is not respected by her family, and has to separate with her son; "evil woman" Anne Boleyn tries to use all her wit and beauty step by step to rise to the higher position in the British court; however, she only achieves a very unstable success and finally died on the guillotine. Cromwell's angelic sister Kat completely has no sense of striving for her own discourse power from the beginning to the end. She has been obedient to her father and husband, never participating in family decision-making. They are all victims of Tudor patriarchal society. No matter what attitude they choose toward their life, they are more or less faced with the feeling of powerlessness. Their words and deeds are often defined and judged by men's aesthetic standards. Once they do not meet the requirements and standards set by men, their social respect and status will be in danger. It can be seen that under the oppression of feudal patriarchal society, it is difficult for women to obtain their own happiness. The labels of "meekness", "obedience", "gentleness" and "modesty" imprison women in an invisible way, which makes them weaken their social existence and lose their uniqueness and discourse power.

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