

## Sexual Accusations and Rumour as Instruments of Anne Boleyn's Execution in Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*

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### Abstract:

This paper examines how sexual accusation and rumour function as decisive instruments in Anne Boleyn's execution in Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies*. Rather than presenting Anne's fall as the result of proven guilt, the study argues that Mantel depicts it as a socially constructed outcome shaped by circulating suspicion, interpretive exaggeration, and collective storytelling within the Tudor court. Drawing on Rumour Theory alongside feminist-historicist perspectives, the paper analyzes how gossip thrives in conditions of high political stakes and limited reliable information. Mantel portrays the court as an environment of surveillance and fragmented knowledge, where casual remarks and ambiguous gestures gradually acquire the authority of truth. Sexual allegations gain particular force through patriarchal anxieties surrounding women's morality and visibility. The study further shows how Thomas Cromwell institutionalizes these narratives, transforming informal talk into sanctioned judgment. Ultimately, the paper reveals how perception replaces evidence, exposing Mantel's critique of gendered power, reputational politics, and the social construction of truth.

**Keywords:** Gossip, innuendo, gossip, insinuation, cultural anxieties, Tudor court, Courtiers, Sexual accusation, Political Action...

Throughout history, sexual accusation and rumour have served as powerful tools of social and political control, particularly in societies where women's visibility and agency are closely regulated. Gossip, innuendo, and speculation often outweigh formal evidence, shaping reputations and determining individual fates. Anne Boleyn's execution in 1536 stands as a striking historical example of this dynamic. Officially condemned for adultery, incest, and treason, Anne was subjected to a legal process that claimed certainty, yet historians have long questioned the validity of these charges. In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Hilary Mantel revisits this moment not as a story of proven criminality but as one of circulating suspicion and interpretive exaggeration. Mantel's narrative exposes the fragility of truth in a world governed by perception, collective judgment, and the subtle yet lethal power of storytelling.

*Bring Up the Bodies* serves as a second book in Mantel's Thomas Cromwell, which dramatizes the Tudor court as an environment defined by surveillance, suspicion, and shifting loyalties.

Information circulates unevenly, alliances change rapidly, and survival depends on one's ability to interpret ambiguous signs. Rumours function as an invisible engine within this system, shaping characters' understanding of events and influencing political outcomes. Anne Boleyn moves through this court under constant scrutiny: casual gestures, overheard remarks, and unexplained absences are endlessly reinterpreted. Her reputation becomes a contested site of meaning, constructed not through verified facts but through layered speculation. Mantel does not present the accusations against Anne as self-evident truths, rather, she demonstrates how gossip and insinuation, repeated and reframed, gradually consolidate into a narrative that justifies her removal. In doing so, the novel challenges readers to understand history not as a fixed record of facts but as a social product shaped by speech, perception, and collective belief.

Mantel's novels engage with the complexities of historical interpretation, presenting competing perspectives on key events and characters

and exploring their implications. Rather than presenting a single authoritative version of history, Mantel acknowledges the multiplicity of viewpoints and the inherent ambiguity of the past. Characters in her novels often grapple with conflicting accounts of historical events and must navigate the uncertainty and ambiguity that arise from competing interpretations. (Kumud 4)

This study argues that Anne's execution in *Bring Up the Bodies* results primarily from sexual accusation and rumour rather than direct evidence. While political maneuvering and Cromwell's strategic calculations are undeniably important, they operate within a broader communicative ecosystem where speculation carries authority. Mantel portrays the Tudor court as a high-stakes arena marked by uncertainty: information is partial, selective, and malleable. In such a context, gossip becomes a form of power, and sexual allegations are particularly effective because they tap into deep cultural anxieties surrounding women, morality, and authority. Anne's fall is therefore not simply political, it is produced through perception, repetition, and interpretation.

Despite extensive scholarship on Mantel's work, the specific role of rumour remains underexplored. Critical attention has largely focused on her revisionist historiography, her nuanced portrayal of Cromwell, and the psychological depth of her characters. Anne is frequently interpreted as politically inconvenient rather than morally guilty, with her execution framed as the outcome of dynastic necessity and bureaucratic efficiency. While such readings illuminate structural power relations, they often overlook the communicative processes through which suspicion, speculation, and gendered gossip actively construct Anne's downfall. This gap underscores the need to foreground rumour as a decisive instrument of narrative and political authority.

Accordingly, this study pursues four objectives: to analyze how rumours are created, circulated, and legitimized within the Tudor court, to examine sexual accusation as a gendered mechanism of social control, to apply Rumour Theory to literary analysis by demonstrating how Mantel's narrative

mirrors gossip and collective interpretation, and to show how informal speech casual remarks, overheard comments, and speculative readings becomes institutionalized, shaping legal and political outcomes. Guided by these aims, the research addresses several questions: How does rumour operate structurally in *Bring Up the Bodies*? How are sexual allegations socially produced rather than factually grounded? How does Mantel depict gossip transforming into instruments of state power? And what do these processes reveal about women's vulnerability within patriarchal systems?

Methodologically, the study combines qualitative close reading with Rumour Theory, focusing on dialogue, narration, characterization, and ambiguous events to trace the movement and impact of speculative speech. Rumour Theory, articulated by Gordon Allport and Leo Postman and later expanded by Tamotsu Shibutani, provides a framework for understanding the social and psychological conditions under which unverified information gains authority. A feminist-historicist perspective further highlights the gendered dimensions of accusation and the precarious position of women in early modern England.

Mantel's revisionist approach reinforces these themes. Rather than presenting history as a stable record of facts, she foregrounds subjectivity and perspective, immersing readers in a world where meaning is shaped by observation and circumstance. Scholars frequently note that Mantel resists offering a single authoritative account, instead, she portrays history as actively constructed through narrative and interpretation. By reframing Anne Boleyn's downfall in this way, Mantel challenges conventional historical certainty and exposes the interplay between rumour, perception, and power.

Central to this reconstruction is Mantel's sympathetic portrayal of Thomas Cromwell. Traditionally depicted as ruthless and calculating, Cromwell emerges in Mantel's narrative as perceptive, strategic, and emotionally complex. His influence derives less from overt coercion than from his capacity to gather information, interpret ambiguous signs, and anticipate human behavior. Critics emphasize that Cromwell's power is

perceptual and analytical, rooted in his ability to read situations and people. Mantel's narrative style marked by fragmented dialogue, selective focalization, and free indirect discourse places readers inside this world of partial knowledge. Authority, in this environment, is closely tied to perception: those who manage information gain influence, while those misread or misunderstood become vulnerable. Mantel's form thus mirrors the workings of political power, demonstrating that control often depends not on formal authority alone but on shaping knowledge and opinion.

Within this framework, Anne Boleyn appears less as a morally guilty figure than as politically expendable. Her failure to produce a male heir diminishes her usefulness to Henry VIII, rendering her increasingly precarious. Her intelligence, assertiveness, and visibility once assets become liabilities as political priorities shift. Critics emphasize that her execution serves dynastic stability rather than moral justice. Anne's personal innocence or guilt becomes secondary to her positional vulnerability, underscoring how reputations are constructed through rumour rather than evidence.

Yet existing scholarship often concentrates on Cromwell's strategy and Tudor political mechanics, treating rumour as background texture rather than analytical focus. Although gossip permeates the novel, its systematic role in shaping outcomes remains underexamined. Mantel's narrative offers fertile ground for an approach that treats rumour not as incidental detail but as a central mechanism of Anne's downfall. Integrating Rumour Theory with feminist and historicist perspectives allows for a fuller understanding of how social communication produces political consequence.

she does not intrude upon him any inconvenient truth. All he ever wants is the truth little by little and only those parts of it we can use. Anne's protestations of innocence, especially if truthful, would not be useful at all for Cromwell's purposes, or the king's (Maitzen).

Rumour, as a social phenomenon, provides a powerful lens for examining the construction and destruction of reputation. Allport and Postman argue

that rumours flourish when two conditions coincide: the situation is highly important, and reliable information is scarce. Under such circumstances, individuals instinctively fill informational gaps with speculation, and each retelling subtly reshapes the narrative. Over time, what begins as an unverified observation acquires social authority. In *Bring Up the Bodies*, these conditions are pervasive. The Tudor court is a high-stakes environment where survival, property, and royal succession depend on perception, while access to truth is limited. Sexual rumours gain traction not because they are proven, but because they resonate with uncertainty and cultural expectation.

Shibutani extends this model by conceptualizing rumour as collective problem-solving. In ambiguous situations, people attempt to make sense of incomplete events through shared interpretation. Applied to Mantel's court, this framework reveals that Anne's fall emerges not solely from elite orchestration but from a broader network of observation and meaning-making. Courtiers, servants, and onlookers participate in reading Anne's behavior, each contributing to a growing narrative of transgression. Mantel emphasizes Anne's constant visibility and vulnerability to interpretation, illustrating how rumour operates as collaborative sense-making.

Cultural theorists such as Patricia Turner further illuminate rumour's symbolic power, emphasizing that rumours reflect social anxieties and reinforce hierarchies. Sexual rumours, in particular, regulate women's behavior and uphold patriarchal norms. In Mantel's depiction, sexual accusation functions as cultural narrative rather than factual claim. Allegations of Anne's infidelity draw strength from anxieties about female authority and influence. Cromwell does not invent these stories, he organizes and amplifies them, transforming private speculation into institutional judgment. Sexual rumour thus becomes simultaneously cultural discourse, social control mechanism, and pathway to political power.

In sum, applying Rumour Theory to *Bring Up the Bodies* clarifies how Mantel portrays the Tudor court as an ecosystem where perception, communication, and cultural expectation intersect.

Allport and Postman explain why rumours thrive, Shibutani reveals their collective function, and cultural theory highlights their gendered implications. Mantel dramatizes these processes vividly: Anne Boleyn's fall results from stories that circulate, evolve, and gain authority through repetition and interpretation. Rumour operates as both narrative force and social weapon, revealing how sexual accusation shapes perception, enforces gender norms, and ultimately determines life and death within the courtly hierarchy.

By foregrounding rumour as a vehicle of gendered power, this study deepens understanding of Mantel's narrative while illuminating broader cultural mechanisms of reputation, authority, and social control. *Bring Up the Bodies* emerges as a literary space where history is interrogated, reputations are contested, and the destructive force of rumour is rendered powerfully visible.

In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Mantel depicts the Tudor court not merely as a setting for political maneuvering but as a space defined by constant surveillance, observation, and speculation. The court operates as a living network of eyes and ears, where everyone is simultaneously watcher and watched. Courtiers move cautiously, aware that gestures, words, and even silences may be interpreted and misinterpreted. In such an environment, the circulation of rumour is not incidental, it is an inevitable product of uncertainty and social scrutiny. Mantel emphasizes the performative nature of observation: to see and to hear is also to interpret, and interpretation frequently carries consequences far beyond immediate perception. Gossip and suspicion gain authority simply through repetition, gradually shaping reputations and determining political outcomes.

Listening, watching, and whispering become central modes through which information travels. Mantel repeatedly draws attention to casual corridor conversations, overheard remarks during gatherings, and fleeting observations of gestures or glances. Each moment of attention is subject to interpretation, and each interpretation contributes to a collective understanding that may bear little relation to fact. Rumour thus emerges organically from the structural

conditions of court life: high stakes, opaque authority, and constant awareness of danger. Mantel shows that uncertainty does not merely produce anxiety, it actively generates what becomes accepted as knowledge through repetition and mutual reinforcement.

Fragmented information characterizes the environment Mantel portrays. Characters rarely possess complete knowledge, and even those in privileged positions, such as Thomas Cromwell, must assemble narratives from partial observations, whispered reports, and speculative accounts. The court functions as a complex puzzle, with each participant contributing fragments that are interpreted, circulated, and frequently distorted. Minor details concerning Anne Boleyn's behavior her timing at a meeting, her choice of clothing, or a private exchange overheard by a servant acquire disproportionate significance as they pass through multiple channels. Rumour thrives not solely because of malice but because partial knowledge encourages inference, exaggeration, and repetition. As fragments accumulate, perception solidifies into conviction.

And if I were to say, I think there might be guilt in that case, you would say to me, 'Why, Norris! Incest! How can you believe such an abomination? Is it a ploy to lead me away from your own guilt?' (Mantel 328)

Mantel emphasizes that reputation is shaped as much by repeated talk as by concrete action. Suspicion gains authority through circulation: the more frequently an observation is shared and interpreted, the more it contributes to perceived guilt. Courtiers' conversations revolve around insinuation rather than verification. A casual remark about Anne's absence or her interaction with a male courtier becomes material for further speculation. Private observation is transformed into public perception, gradually eroding her standing. Rumour is thus performative, producing consequences that extend into legal and political domains. Mantel reveals how narrative, repeated and amplified, becomes an invisible force shaping historical events.

Thomas Cromwell occupies a central role within this ecosystem. Mantel presents him not as the

inventor of rumours but as their organizer and interpreter. He carefully collects fragments listening to conversations, observing gestures, and weighing reports assembling them into actionable knowledge. His power lies in synthesis. What begins as isolated suspicion becomes persuasive evidence once arranged within a coherent framework. Cromwell recognizes the court's fragmented information environment as a resource to be navigated rather than an obstacle to clarity.

Suspicion often replaces certainty. As rumours circulate, the distinction between verified fact and interpreted behavior blurs. Anne Boleyn becomes the focal point of this process, her actions are continually reframed to support a narrative of transgression. Mantel demonstrates that in a high-stakes environment governed by partial knowledge, rumour is self-reinforcing: speculation transforms uncertainty into conviction, shaping not only perception but also formal political action.

Anne's downfall is presented less as the result of proven crime than of sexual accusation circulating through the court. The charges of adultery and incest emerge not from evidence but from socially constructed narratives shaped by coincidence, misinterpretation, and exaggeration. Mantel shows how ordinary interactions are repeatedly reframed until they appear morally suspect "You may have been surprised to encounter rivalry from that quarter. I hope you were surprised. Though the morals of you gentlemen astonish me." (Mantel 301). A brief meeting in a private chamber, a whispered exchange, or an ambiguous gesture becomes the seed of suspicion. Individually these moments are inconclusive, collectively they form a narrative of guilt.

This process aligns closely with Rumour Theory as articulated by Gordon Allport and Leo Postman, who argue that rumours flourish when stakes are high and reliable information is scarce. Each retelling subtly reshapes the story, and repetition confers authority. Mantel dramatizes this mechanism: Anne's alleged misconduct gains credibility not through proof but through circulation.

Tamotsu Shibutani's conception of rumour as collective problem-solving further clarifies these

dynamics. Courtiers attempt to interpret incomplete information, filling gaps with speculation. Meaning is produced collaboratively. Anne's gestures, words, and movements are collectively interpreted, generating a socially sanctioned story of deviance. Sexual accusation becomes less an expression of individual judgment than a product of shared perception.

The incest charge illustrates the destructive symbolic power of rumour. Mantel presents it as almost entirely detached from factual grounding, yet it carries immense narrative force. It functions not as a legal claim but as an instrument of annihilation, transforming Anne into a figure of moral contamination and legitimizing her removal. The accusation demonstrates how speculation can escalate into authoritative narrative, converting perception into political reality.

Gendered vulnerability intensifies these processes. Mantel emphasizes that sexual accusation disproportionately affects women, whose bodies and behaviors are scrutinized within cultural frameworks equating virtue with obedience and visibility with risk. Anne's interactions are morally coded in ways male behavior is not. While men are evaluated strategically, women are judged sexually. Gendered expectations render Anne uniquely susceptible to rumour, turning ambiguity into evidence. Sexual accusation thus operates as both cultural narrative and structural control.

Cromwell's role is crucial in institutionalizing these socially produced narratives. Mantel portrays him converting informal talk into formal testimony. Observations and gossip are gathered, interpreted, and organized into depositions and indictments. Rumour gains legitimacy through bureaucratic machinery: record-keeping, interrogation, and legal procedure transform speculation into sanctioned evidence. Cromwell becomes the central node through which collective perception is formalized.

This transformation reveals how governance itself amplifies rumour. Power operates not merely through coercion but through legitimizing socially constructed narratives. Cromwell's administrative skill allows speculation to acquire evidentiary

weight. Informal whispers become instruments of the state. Mantel shows that the capacity to manage information is a form of power as decisive as political authority.

Sexual rumour proves especially effective because it intersects with patriarchal assumptions about women and morality. Cromwell does not create these assumptions, he mobilizes them. Gendered anxieties provide the cultural framework through which accusations become persuasive. Anne's reputation becomes a site where social narrative and institutional authority converge.

Mantel ultimately demonstrates that rumour replaces evidence in determining Anne's fate. Proof becomes secondary to perception. Sexual accusation legitimizes political violence by framing Anne as morally transgressive and therefore expendable. Rumour transforms social judgment into sanctioned action, revealing how narrative mediates power.

These dynamics resonate beyond Tudor England. Mantel's court mirrors contemporary cultures of public shaming, where reputations are destroyed through repeated interpretation rather than verified fact. The novel exposes enduring mechanisms through which sexuality-linked rumours enforce hierarchy and justify exclusion.

In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Anne Boleyn's execution emerges as the culmination of collective storytelling rather than incontrovertible evidence. Repeated speculation coalesces into narrative authority. Rumour functions as structural force, shaping perception, legitimizing action, and determining life or death. Mantel exposes the fragility of truth in systems governed by observation and repetition, revealing how gendered rumour operates as an instrument of social and political control.

This study contributes to existing scholarship in several significant ways. While Mantel's work has been widely recognized for its revisionist historiography, nuanced characterization of Thomas Cromwell, and exploration of political power, the role of rumour as a central mechanism has remained underexplored. By applying Rumour Theory to *Bring Up the Bodies*, this research foregrounds the

social processes through which gossip and sexual accusation gain authority. It demonstrates that Anne's downfall is not merely a product of dynastic politics or Cromwell's administrative skill, but of the collective construction of meaning within a high-stakes, perception-driven courtly environment. In doing so, the study highlights the gendered power of accusation: women, particularly those in positions of visibility and influence, are uniquely vulnerable to rumours that exploit cultural anxieties about morality, sexuality, and propriety.

Mantel's novel also invites reflection beyond the historical setting. The mechanisms of rumour, collective interpretation, and reputational vulnerability she depicts resonate with contemporary contexts in which public shaming, social media speculation, and gendered scrutiny continue to shape perception and influence outcomes. By tracing the trajectory from whispered speculation to formalized judgment in the Tudor court, Mantel offers insight into the persistent ways in which information and misinterpretation can be weaponized, socially validated, and institutionally enforced. In this sense, the novel bridges historical and modern concerns, demonstrating the enduring relevance of the dynamics it explores.

Finally, the study opens avenues for future research. Comparative analyses of historical fiction can illuminate how different authors dramatize the social construction of truth and the circulation of rumour. Similarly, examining modern rumor cultures particularly in digital spaces can reveal continuities in the ways gossip and accusation function as instruments of social control. Mantel's work, therefore, serves not only as a literary exploration of Tudor history but also as a framework for understanding broader patterns of collective interpretation, gendered vulnerability, and the power of narrative to shape human lives.

In conclusion, *Bring Up the Bodies* demonstrates that Anne Boleyn is destroyed not by proof but by the accumulation of socially produced narratives. Rumour becomes law, perception becomes authority, and Mantel exposes the fragility of truth within hierarchical, gendered structures of power. By integrating Rumour Theory into the analysis, this

study underscores the enduring significance of narrative, reputation, and gender in both historical and contemporary contexts.

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