

‘The Heart Fails Without Warning’: Precarious Bodies in Hilary Mantel’s Short Fiction

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‘All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours.’
– Virginia Woolf, ‘On Being Ill’

In her essay, ‘On Being Ill’, Virginia Woolf decries literature’s effacement of the corporeal, its understanding of the human body as ‘a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, negligible and non-existent’.¹ Such a criticism could not be levelled at Hilary Mantel’s second collection of short fiction, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher*. By turns anorexic, angelic, vampiric, disabled, disfigured, medicalized, migrainous and monstrous, the bodies in these stories are unpredictable and secretive, broken or uncomfortable, prone to becoming transparent, losing their boundaries or disappearing entirely. The narrator of the story ‘How Shall I Know You?’ recalls that ‘in those days I didn’t know there was something wrong with my heart. I only found it out this year’,² a statement that exemplifies the precariousness of the bodies which populate the collection. Mantel’s characters suspect their bodies of concealing secrets or else, fatally, do not suspect,³ they are physically ill and receiving inadequate, damaging or sadistic medical care.⁴

This wealth of complex embodiment prompts us to question the significance of these bodies, asking what their provocatively various corporeality might communicate. Mantel’s own experience of a body which has been resistant to definition and diagnosis has been well documented,⁵ with her own medical history testifying to the fact that bodies, particularly female ones, not only produce social and cultural effects but are, crucially, produced by them.⁶ Yet a purely biographical understanding of the treatment of the human body on display in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* fails to take into account the critical and theoretical contexts from which the collection emerges. Indeed, the ‘null, negligible and non-existent’ body which Woolf lamented in ‘On Being Ill’ has been superseded in contemporary fiction and theory by an altogether fleshier incarnation as, in the past three decades, the body has become a significant object for study within the humanities.

As Maud Ellman puts it, ‘In criticism, the cult of the body has arisen in defence against poststructuralism, and especially against the fear that “history” and “real life” have been overlooked in favour of a dangerous Gallic fascination with the signifier. In this context the body has come to represent the last bastion of materiality.’⁷ Not only has the physical body been appropriated as a bulwark against mere signification, it has also predominantly been understood, until very recently, in terms of ‘conceptions of the body that construct it as a seamless whole, an unfragmented entity that mirrors and guarantees individual autonomy’.⁸ Time and again, in critical and cultural productions, the body is posited as the guarantee of subjective identity, of recognition *as* a subject in the first place. Yet, simultaneously and paradoxically, ‘experience and culture naturalize the presence of the normative, healthy,

functioning body’ and, as such, ‘the failure to recognize ourselves in and as bodies contributes to a dematerialized ideology that shapes the way we understand, represent, and apprehend both ourselves and those among us – the sick, the aging, the disabled, the dying – through whose visible materiality we tend to name (and delimit) embodiment.’⁹

In this article I argue that the bodies we encounter in Mantel’s recent short fiction problematize the positions outlined above, bringing into conversation two competing trends (or as Mantel, quoting Pascal, might put it, ‘two errors’¹⁰) in body studies: to think the body entirely metaphorically or to think the body entirely materially. They act to make licit how, rather than acting as ‘an incontestable reality’, reliable and comprehensible, or else simply as a figure which is ‘good to think with’,¹¹ the human body is essentially, to use Lennard Davies’ term, ‘biocultural’, coming into being at the intersection of the ‘sum of their biology; the signifying systems in the culture; the historical, social, political surround’.¹² I argue that, in addition to confirming Davies’ tenet of the biocultural, that ‘bodies are always cultural *and* biological’, the bodies represented in *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* crucially undermine prevalent assumptions about the corporeal body as incontrovertible guarantee of subjective identity, an identity which we are increasingly encouraged by both critical and societal discourses to understand as ‘chosen, constructed, and in that sense democratic’.¹³ Through close readings of two stories from the collection, ‘Comma’ and ‘The Heart Fails Without Warning’, I demonstrate how Mantel depicts her characters’ bodies as spaces where metaphor and materiality interact, as essentially biocultural. This biocultural quality, I argue, is ultimately the source of their profound precarity, making these bodies available for degradation and negation by a wealth of social and cultural forces. The various modes of embodiment available to Mantel’s characters foreground a series of interacting class-based and gendered understandings of certain bodies which act to nullify, over-simplify or oppress those who live in them by rendering them non-human.

‘Not a human shape’: Embodying Deprivation in ‘Comma’

‘Comma’ is the **second story** in Mantel’s collection and details the narrator’s girlhood acquaintance with another child, Mary Joplin. The narrative coalesces around the girls’ expedition to a large house on the outskirts of their town, ‘where the rich people live’,¹⁴ and the encounter they have there with a disabled subject, to whom the title of the story refers:

Something nudged out into our sight: it was a long chair on wheels, a lady pushing it. It ran, lightly, over the stone flags, and it was the lady who drew my attention; what lay on the chair seemed just a dark shrouded shape [. . .] Her mouth moved; she was speaking, smiling, to the inert bundle that she pushed. She set the chair down, positioning it carefully, as if on some mark she knew.

[. . .]

It’s shape, beneath the blankets, seemed to ripple; it’s head, shawled, was vast, pendant. It is like a comma, she [Mary] is right: its squiggle of a body, it’s lolling head.

[. . .] at the same time, bending and whispering, she drew back the shawl.

And we saw – nothing; we saw something not yet become; we saw something,

Comment [11]: In the hardback 2014 1st edition cited here this is the second story

not a face but perhaps, I thought, when I thought about it later, perhaps a negotiating position for a face, like God's when he was trying to form us; we saw a blank, we saw a sphere, it was without feature, it was without meaning, and its flesh seemed to run from the bone. ('Comma', p. 53)

This passage describes a complex confrontation between apparent bodily wholeness and an enigmatic and seemingly compromised embodiment. I will return to the story's titular figure below. However, I argue that Mantel's narrative here is not concerned with bodily difference per se but with which bodies are meaningfully recognized and defined as human and which are not. My analysis situates 'Comma' as a story driven by representations of social class in which the disabled body described (or rather evading description) above acts to contrast that of Mary, whose juvenile body is, both physically and imaginatively, profoundly inscribed and prescribed by her classed existence. I argue that Mantel's twinning of these alternately abject and enigmatic bodies clearly articulates how, on the one hand, as Beverley Skeggs puts it, 'class is always encoded through bodily dispositions: the body is the most ubiquitous signifier of class',¹⁵ while, on the other, as the story's titular subject renders explicit, 'the body is an unfinished, unstable entity'.¹⁶

In her book, *Formations of Class and Gender*, Skeggs posits that class actively shapes the body's materiality. While this position has been repeatedly borne out critically it is important to recognize, as Ruth Holliday and John Hansard do, that materiality is not the conclusion to the story of the body, merely one part of it: 'Bodies *do* have material outcomes, though those outcomes cannot be reduced to the body itself. More frequently such material outcomes are associated with *representations* of embodied subjectivities [. . .] the body is both material and representation, and these two domains through which we come to know the body intertwine in complex ways.'¹⁷ This intertwining of the material and the representational is actively demonstrated in 'Comma' with regards to the descriptions of Mary Joplin whose physicality is repeatedly defined as abject and animalistic. The reader is first introduced to her by Kitty, 'crouching with her knees apart, her cotton frock stretched across her thighs', wiping away the results of a perpetual sniffle 'with the back of her hand and inspect[ing] the glistening snail-trail that was left' ('Comma', p. 39). We are confronted with a body which is defined by an uncontrolled openness, a stance which refuses to conform to the received model of social decorousness,¹⁸ an illness which defines Mary's body as always leaking and Mary herself as producing animal-like excretions that are inscribed upon her skin in the form of the 'snail-trails' she inspects. Mary's insides are consistently figured as becoming, or in danger of becoming, her outsides; she is 'scrawny' through lack of food,

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her kneecaps are 'like saucers of bone' (p. 40), the flesh already dispensed with, and her body is bruised, the marks outwardly signifying internal rupture and leakage. This depleted and leaky body also figures in Kitty's imagined view of Mary many years later as 'beaten thin and flat, attenuated, starved away, a shadow of herself' (p. 41), indeed, 'full of shadows, exposed where she should not be' (p. 52).

Mary's body is constructed, both materially and imaginatively, as exposed, undernourished, damaged and leaking. Yet, this is a construction the significance of which is only made licit when understood in the context of Mary's social class as conceptualized by other members of her community, notably Kitty and Kitty's mother and aunt. Kitty and Mary individually understand themselves as 'middle' when it comes to their social standing,¹⁹ with Kitty musing that '[p]overty meant upturned blue eyes and a begging bowl. A charity child. You'd have coloured patches sewn on your clothes. In a fairy tale picture book you live in the forest under dripping gables, your roof is thatch. You have a basket with a patchwork cover with which you venture out to your grandma. Your house is made of cake' (p. 40-1), an assessment which renders poverty a sanitized fiction that neither girl is willing or able to occupy. The reality of Mary's existence, however, is decidedly not 'middle', with a chaotic home life defined by deprivation, squalor, and violence. Kitty's mother attempts to prohibit her daughter from playing with Mary on the basis of the social difference between the girls, backing up her prohibition with a threat to 'skin [her] alive' (p.48), threatening as it were to inscribe this cross-class interaction on her daughter's body. Thus, when questioned about her whereabouts, Kitty lies, and the nature of the lie serves both to exemplify the narrative's recognition of the body's emergence at the intersection of the material and the representational and the wider ramifications of Mary's class-bound embodiment. In denying she was with Mary, Kitty states:

'I'm not up there with Mary. [. . .] Mary's poorly.'
 'What with?'
 I said the first thing that came into my head. 'Ringworm.'
 My aunt snorted with laughter.
 'Scabies. Nits. Lice. Fleas.' There was pleasure in this sweet embroidery. (p. 48)

This 'embroidered' depiction builds from an assertion that Mary's body is compromised by illness. Yet Kitty's choice of illnesses with which to beset the imagined Mary are key. The illnesses are initially conditions exacerbated by, and thus associated with, poor housing and socio-economic deprivation, crowded areas with unsanitary living

conditions, such as scabies²⁰ and ringworm²¹ but move rapidly into those suffered by animals: fleas, fly strike, maggots. Kitty's macabre list appears initially to be merely childish exaggeration performed for the amusement of her adult relatives, yet Mary's status as less than human, indeed as profoundly animal, is confirmed by the adults' assessment of her family. In response to Kitty's fantasized account of Mary's various infections and infestations, Kitty's aunt states, 'None of that would surprise me one bit, [. . .] I tell you, they live like animals. They've no bedding you know?' To which her mother adds, 'At least animals leave home, [. . .] the Joplins never go. There just gets more and more of them living in a heap and scrapping like pigs' (p. 48-9). Skeggs notes that 'the White female working-class body is often represented as out of control, in excess'²² and this exchange provides the mouthpiece for such a representation, attributing the Joplins' living conditions and family structure not to social, cultural, and financial structures but to an inherent animality. The attribution further marginalizes Mary and her family, a marginalization which has material effects upon her body. If Mary's is 'a working class body that is beyond the regulation and discipline required to be part of social and cultural exchanges',²³ it is, at least partly, made so by the way it is imagined and represented by those in her community.

'Reduced to biology'²⁴: Animality and the Anorexic Body

If Mary Joplin's body is rendered merely animal through a classed existence which radically compromises her perceived status as a thinking human subject, Mantel's 'The Heart Fails Without Warning' depicts a protagonist actively refusing corporeality, attempting to live what Laura E. Tanner terms 'the irrational aspiration to transcend the fact of having an animal body' and holding 'contemporary culture [to its] promised erasure of the body's abject or animal qualities.'²⁵ Detailing the decline, over a period of eight months, of Morna, a fifteen-year-old girl with anorexia, Mantel's narrative articulates the crushing weight of symbolic and cultural significances the female body is expected to accommodate, mapping the various ways in which female bodies are medicalized, mythologized, made animal or 'reduced to biology'.

In *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment*, Maud Ellman states of the anorexic, 'Her emaciated form belongs to a collective economy of images, symbolizing not only her own malaise but that of the community at large.'²⁶ In light of this statement, the character of Morna demands to be read both thematically and structurally as one element in this economy of images. Ellman importantly recognizes the referential quality of the starving body, the way it acts as a 'quotation' of other skeletal forms, emphasizing the need to

'recognize these intertextual and even intergastrical allusions, accounting both for the immediate conditions of starvation and also for the ghosts of past and future fasts.'²⁷ Filtered through the eyes of her younger sister, Lola, Morna appears in the narrative not as an individuated subject but as the centre of a matrix of female experiences of compromised or precarious embodiment. A significant proportion of these make reference to Christian symbolism. For example, Morna seeks 'inspiration' from websites which host 'pictures of girls with their arms stretched wide over their heads in a posture of crucifixion' (p. 171), an image which not only invokes the suffering body of Christ but the bodies of medieval saints, starved into hallucination and religious ecstasy in an effort to emulate both the messianic body and the bodies of the poor and destitute.²⁸ In planning for her death Morna requests 'a woodland burial', advising her family, 'You can plant a tree and when it grows you can visit it' (p. 173). This poignant request appears initially to be an aspiration to a vegetal physicality exempt from the overwhelming symbolic weight of human female embodiment. Yet it combines with the advice Morna receives from fellow anorexics online, that one of the foods she can allow herself is 'a green apple' (p. 171),²⁹ to provide a reworking of the biblical Eve's fatal consumption. Rather than having her female physicality painfully and irrevocably confirmed through an act of eating,³⁰ Morna seeks to become the tree itself, in metaphor occupying the space of pure knowledge and disembodied subjectivity.

Morna's invocation of divine female suffering, and the reworking of the myth of the Fall, is compounded by the presence in the narrative of another 'original woman', the skeletal remains of *Ardipethicus*, an early hominid, whose discovery Lola about in the newspaper over breakfast. Drawing her sister's attention to the article Lola reads aloud: 'October: In the paper there was a picture of a skeleton. [. . .] "Look, Mum! They've dug up an original woman. [. . .] Ardi stands four feet high. She's called Ardipethicus. Ardi for short."' (p. 175). This female skeleton, far from being the first to appear in Mantel's work,³¹ is inextricably connected to Morna within the narrative through Lola's deliberately antagonistic comments: "[Ardi's] brain was the size of a chimpanzee's." That's like you Morna.' (p. 175) -- and through the correlations between the date Ardi was first discovered and the time it took to fully unearth her, and Morna's own birth and lifespan: "Fossil hunters first glimpsed this species in 1992." That's just before we first glimpsed Morna. [. . .] "Fifteen years' work involving forty-seven researchers". Looking at Morna, their mother said, "You were fifteen years' work. Nearly. And there was only me to do it" (pp. 176-7). This image of a pre-historic woman, always already disintegrated, whose teeth and meagre diet are specifically

emphasised, mirrors Morna's own disintegration via starvation (Morna herself loses teeth as her illness progresses (p. 186)). Both women, in other words, are entered into an economy of embodiment where flesh and bone, as understood through medical and scientific discourse, threatens to obscure or overwhelm subjective identity.

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If Morna's starving body echoes hungering religious bodies, choked fairy tale corpses, and anatomized archaeological specimens, it is also implicated in a confrontation between biology and subjectivity which powerfully questions the relation of the latter to the former. At the mid-point of the narrative, Lola observes of her sister: 'Morna wiped the back of her hand across her mouth. You could see the bones in it. She was like a piece of science coursework, Lola said thoughtfully. Soon she'd have no personhood left. She'd be reduced to biology' (p. 177). Ten pages later the narrator observes that 'Morna is undoing herself. She is reverting to unbeing' (p. 187). Such assessments position embodiment as a prerequisite for personhood. Yet, the story also proposes a disturbing model of female embodiment wherein an animality particularly associated with female corporeality comes to displace the humanity of the subject. This displacement is most strikingly articulated in the consistent slippage in the narrative between dogs and women. The story opens with Lola complaining about her sister's hair growth resulting from her eating disorder: 'It was only when Morna grew hair – fine down on her face, in the hollow curve of her back – that Lola began to complain. I draw the line at hair, she said. This is a girls' bedroom not a dog kennel' (p. 169). In the process of trying to disavow her physicality, Morna is understood as more not less animal. The psychiatric unit Morna is threatened with is compared with 'a boarding kennel' where the patients are to be kept 'on leads' (p. 187). The most striking instance of this female-canine hybridity occurs at the mid-point of the narrative and is encountered not materially but virtually when Lola follows her sister as she sneaks out of bed, logging into the family computer to cancel her mother's online grocery order:

For a minute they didn't know what it was they were seeing on the screen: human or animal. They saw it was a human, female. She was on all fours, she was naked. Around her neck there was a metal collar. Attached to it was a chain. [. . .] A man was standing out of sight holding the chain. His shadow was on the wall. The woman looked like a whippet, her body was stark white. Her face was blurred and wore no readable human expression. You couldn't recognise her. She might be someone you knew. (p. 182-3)

In this pornographic image the reduction of female embodiment to animal function is rendered starkly literal and its effect on the woman in the photograph is incontestable; she

becomes literally unrecognizable, ceases to communicate her humanity to the viewer -- she '[wears] no readable human expression'. Morna's reaction to this image is one not of fear or disgust but anger: "'Silly bitch!' Morna was angry with the woman or girl who for money or out of fear crouched like an animal waiting to have her body despoiled' (p. 183). The gender and species specific quality of Morna's insult is telling here, reminding the reader how the reduction of women to the level of the animal is not reserved for the space of pornography but is linguistically commonplace. Furthermore, these images are located on the computer which is expressly 'for their father's work use.' (p. 181) As such, a troubling connection is formed between their father as a consumer of these images of female bodies and Morna and Lola as inhabitants of such bodies. This connection combines with the father's function as a mouth piece for domineering and punitive statements regarding Morna's body and medical treatment, to situate even the putative male care-giver within the narrative as an agent of degradation and exploitation which Morna, through her illness, attempts to evade.³² The contact with the dehumanised and sexualised image of woman-as-animal on her father's computer appears to compromise and complicate Lola's relationship with her own gendered body, as well as that of her sister. Lola's encounter with the pornographic imagery coincides with the only sustained physical interaction she has with Morna's anorexic body, an encounter which blurs the boundaries of the corporeal and the psychic: 'She remembered that night in November when they went down to the computer. Standing behind Morna's chair, she had touched her shoulder, and it was like grazing a knife. The blade of the bone seemed to sink deep into her hand, and she had felt it for hours; she was surprised not to see the indent in her palm. When she had woken up the next morning, the shape of it was still there in her mind.' (p. 189)

The animal then, in the form of a dog, is both derided and desired in these depictions, disavowed but stubbornly recurring as the story's ambivalent final image confirms. Formally, Morna achieves her goal within the narrative. The reader is not given any details of her physical death, but it is understood that Morna starves herself until she simply disappears from the text. Morna is absent from the story's closing pages with Lola observing that 'All traces of Morna have gone from the bedroom now' (p. 190). And yet, Lola glimpses a manifestation of her sister from their bedroom window:

She sees the figure of her sister standing and looking up at the house, bathed in a nimbus of frost. The traffic flows long into the night, a hum without ceasing, but around Morna there is a bubble of quiet. Her tall, straight body flickers inside her

nightshirt, her face is blurred as if from tears or drizzle, and she wears no readable human expression. But at her feet a white dog lies, shining like a unicorn, a golden chain about its neck. (p. 190)

The details of this image of a white dog provide a compelling miniaturization of the struggle that is staged in this story to tolerate incarnation for subjects who are repeatedly reduced to their animal materiality while also being expected to harbour an overwhelming weight of cultural symbolism. Morna, in her 'bubble of quiet', stands outside of the associations and symbolisms which adhered to her physical form, wearing, in a doubling of the woman in the pornographic video, 'no readable human expression'. Where previously Morna in her nightshirt had been compared to 'a wraith in a story by Edgar Allan Poe' (p. 180), in this incarnation she requires no literary counterpart, and if Morna is, to an extent, cut free from symbolic associations in this, so too is the dog who accompanies her. Rather than reinforcing the reductive animality associated with female bodies, as is the case in the pornographic image, Morna's dog transforms the previous image of degradation into one imbued with beauty and value, the metal collar of the previous image rendered gold, the 'stark white' of the woman's skin becoming lambent, 'shining' outward rather than a surface for social and cultural projections. The most significant element of this description, which decouples the woman and dog so problematically conflated earlier on, can be found in the dog's comparison to a unicorn. As has been discussed, 'The Heart Fails Without Warning' situates Morna's body in many ways as a 'quotation' of suffering female bodies in Western Christian discourse, from the biblical Eve to anorexic medieval saints. Here, the complex resonances and reworkings of these narratives and images reach their climax. The unicorn in the Christian tradition is a symbol of 'incarnation', the material manifestation of a previously immaterial entity, god or force, specifically as manifested in the figure of Jesus Christ.³³ As such, the image of Morna's alongside this hybrid dog-unicorn figure, which only Lola sees, acts to simultaneously inscribe the fatal consequences of her attempt to circumvent the fact of her own incarnate being while also confirming the inescapability of embodied being: even as Morna stands in dominance over the canine representation of brute animality which threatened to define her selfhood, the secondary image of the unicorn implicitly insists upon the inescapability of the flesh.

Conclusion

Having considered Morna's fatal rejection of her gendered physicality in conversation with Mary's distinctively classed corporeality, in concluding it is necessary to turn to the body

from which the 'Comma' takes its title in order to recognise an alternative model of embodiment proposed by this text, a model which refuses the negating and damaging notion of the body as definable and definitive. When Mary first makes reference to her knowledge of what is being kept in the house 'where the rich people live', her exchange with Kitty reproduces the slippage between human and animal that defines Mary's embodied existence:

"I've seen what they've got in that house."
 I was awake now. "What have they?"
 "Something you couldn't put a name to," Mary Joplin said.
 "What sort of a thing?"
 "Wrapped in a blanket."
 "Is it an animal?"
 Mary jeered. "An animal, she says. An animal what's wrapped in a blanket?"
 "You could wrap a dog in a blanket. If it were poorly."
 I felt the truth of this; I wanted to insist; my face grew hot. "It's not a dog, no, no, no."
 Mary's voice dawdled, keeping her secret from me. "For it's got arms."
 "Then it's human."
 "But it's not a human shape."
 I felt desperate. "What shape is it?"
 Mary thought. "A comma," she said slowly. "A comma, you know, what you see in a book?"

This childish attempt to describe a subject whose bodily presence outstrips normative models acts to make licit the usually implicit process by which bodies are coded into or out of what is 'human'. As Wolf-Meyer and Taussig put it, '[t]he history of the human is always also a history of what is ruled out of being human [. . .]. Our organs and our cells hail other bodies and vice versa, including some and excluding others.'³⁴ The description of the subject's physical shape as 'a comma' is key, however, in that such a description causes the subject to occupy the space of 'a break of continuity, interval, pause'.³⁵ When the girls finally see the 'comma', Kitty is at a loss as to how to describe the subject:

And we saw – nothing; we saw something not yet become; we saw something, not a face but perhaps, I thought, when I thought about it later, perhaps a negotiating position for a face, like God's when he was trying to form us; we saw a blank, we saw a sphere, it was without feature, it was without meaning, and its flesh seemed to run from the bone. (p. 53)

Kitty's description, which moves through negation ('nothing') through potentiality ('something not yet become') to affirmation ('something') confirms how the figure of the 'comma' acts to articulate the impossibility of defining the human subject, of arriving at a model of 'normal'. This is a subject which refuses *any* categorization, whose physical

embodiment ruptures the modes of representation available to Kitty and Mary, who are forced to fall back repeatedly on notions of pausing, waiting, and emergence in order to describe what they see. The indefinite quality of the figure in this scene is reproduced at the end of the story, when Kitty, now an adult, encounters Mary again after a long separation:

Her face, in early middle age, had become indefinite, like wax: waiting for a pinch and twist to make its shape. [. . .] Her skin seemed swagged, loose, and there was nothing much to read in Mary's eyes. (p. 59)

Initially this description closely parallels that of the figure in the garden, the 'wax'-like quality of Mary's adult face twinned with the apparently liquid flesh 'run[ning] from the bone' in the earlier passage. Yet while this refusal of definition allows the figure to resist potentially oppressive and limiting acts of categorization, remaining as a pause in the narrative, Mary's body, formed and bound by class, is permitted no such enigmaticity. Kitty goes on, 'I expected, perhaps, a pause, a hyphen, a space, a space where a question might follow. [. . .] then [Mary] turned back to me, and gave me a bare acknowledgement: a single nod, a full stop' (p. 60). If the possibilities of the body in the garden are infinitely held in the symbol of the comma, affirming that body's status as emergent, 'unfinished and unstable', Mary's body, in the grammar of this text, is circumscribed by an end point which calls a halt to Mary's identity, sharply defining her body and the scope of its meanings.

The uncomfortable, unreliable bodies which populate *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* prompt us to question the taken-for-granted quality of healthy, able, bodies, forcing us to recognize both 'the way that cultural distinctions force bodies into simple binaries' and the fact that 'such binaries not only collapse experiences of embodiment into polarized terms but erect cultural boundaries that enforce the illusion of stability by disrupting our identification with our own bodies as well as the bodies of others.'³⁶ From Mary's classed body, reduced to the level of livestock by friends, family, and neighbours, both imaginatively and materially, to Morna who mourns the loss of her body to a morass of social and cultural projections which render it base, animal and ultimately intolerable to herself, Mantel's precarious bodies demonstrate how flesh, female flesh in particular, is frequently at the mercy of its function within the social and cultural symbolic economy.

NOTES

1. Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill', *The Criterion* 5:1(1926), 32-45 (p. 32).
2. Hilary Mantel, 'How Shall I Know You?', *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), pp. 131-166 (p. 147).

3. The second phenomena forms the basis of 'The Long QT' in which an apparently healthy woman drops dead after discovering her husband is having an affair: 'Long QT syndrome. A disorder of the heart's electrical activity, which leads to arrhythmia, which leads, in certain circumstances, to cardiac arrest. Genetic probably. Underdiagnosed, in the population at large. If we spot it early we can do all sorts of stuff: pacemakers, beta blockers. But there's not much anyone can do, if the first symptom is sudden death. A shock will do it, he said or strong emotion, strong emotion of any sort.' (Hilary Mantel, 'The Long QT', *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), pp. 61-70 (p. 70)).
4. The patients treated at the clinic in which the story, 'Harley Street', is set are depicted as maimed and disfigured by their treatment, their bodies either unresponsive to treatment or, as is the case for one practitioner's patients, radically changed by it: 'They come in drawn and wan, hands trembling, very slightly violent and insane – and a couple of months later they are back again, drunkenly cheerful, rolling and puffing, double chinned, ankles bloated, mad eyes sunk into new flesh.' (Hilary Mantel, 'Harley Street', 'The Long QT', *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), pp. 85-112.
5. Mantel has detailed her experience of endometriosis and the medical mismanagement of her condition in her life-writing, most notably in *Giving up the Ghost* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003) and *Ink in the Blood* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), and has published numerous articles on the frequently misdiagnosed illness.
6. In her article, 'Every Part of my Body Hurt', Mantel states how her disease was only finally named 'on the operating table', going on to describe how 'to make me viable I had to lose part of my bladder and my bowel, my womb and my ovaries' having been repeatedly written off by parents and doctors, first, as 'a fragile 11-year-old confronted by the first shock of womanhood' and, later, diagnosed as a hysteric, a hyperchondriac or, as she puts it in her memoir, as suffering from 'stress, caused by over ambition' (Hilary Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost: A Memoir* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), p. 174). Mantel documents how '[m]yths about the condition had made their way into the textbooks. Endometriosis patients were "anxious perfectionists", white, middle-class career women in their 30s. The truth was it was these well-educated nags who were getting a correct diagnosis. Poor women and black women -- characterised as promiscuous -- were likely to be told they had pelvic inflammatory disease.' (Hilary Mantel, 'Every Part of my Body Hurt', *Guardian*, 7 June 2004 [accessed on 21 July 2017] <<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2004/jun/07/health.genderissues>>.
7. Maud Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1993), p. 3.
8. Laura E. Tanner *Lost Bodies: Inhabiting the Borders of Life and Death* (London: Cornell UP, 2006), p. 64.
9. Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, pp. 8-9.
10. Mantel cites Pascal in the epigraph to her 1985 novel *Every Day is Mother's Day*: 'Two errors; one, to take everything literally; two, to take everything spiritually.' Blaise Pascal, *Penseés* (New York: Dutton, 1958), p. 183.
11. Lynda Birke, 'Bodies and Biology' in Janet Price and Margaret Sheldrik (eds) *Feminist Theory and the Body: A Reader* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1999), pp. 42-9 (p. 43).
12. Lennard J. Davis, *The End of Normal: Identity in a Biocultural Era* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2014), p. 7.
13. Davis, *End of Normal*, pp. 6-7.
14. Hilary Mantel, 'Comma', *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), pp. 39-60, (p. 47).
15. Beverley Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: Sage, 2002), p. 82.
16. Helen Thomas, *The Body and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 17.

17. Ruth Holliday and John Hansard, 'Introduction' in *Contested Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1-18 (p.2).
18. Indeed Kitty, the narrator, rebukes Mary for her posture: 'Put your legs together, Mary,' I said. 'It's rude to sit like that.' ('Comma', p. 45).
19. To Mary's question 'Are you rich?' Kitty replies 'I don't think so. We're about middle' with Mary agreeing 'We're about middle too.' ('Comma', p. 40).
20. For details see World Health Organisation, 'Lymphatic Filariasis (Scabies)', <http://www.who.int/lymphatic_filariasis/epidemiology/scabies/en/>, [accessed 09 October 2017] Centre for Disease Control, 'Scabies: Epidemiology and Risk Factors', <<https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/scabies/epi.html>>, [accessed 09 October 2017].
21. For details see World Health Organisation, 'Water Related Diseases (Ringworm)', <http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/diseases-risks/diseases/ringworm/en/> [accessed 09 October 2017].
22. Skeggs, *Formations*, p. 100.
23. Skeggs, *Formations*, p. 84.
24. Hilary Mantel, 'The Heart Fails Without Warning', *The Assassination to Margaret Thatcher* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), pp. 167-90 (p. 177).
25. Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, p. 4.
26. Ellman, *Hunger Artists*, p. 2.
27. Ellman, *Hunger Artists*, p. 14.
28. For further exploration of these religious practices see Rudolph M. Bell, *Holy Anorexia* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985).
29. In a gesture which is characteristic of a narrative concerned with the unbearably overdetermined symbolic weight attributed to the female body, this advice comes with the caveat that 'the apple must be poison green', directly invoking the fairy tale of Snow White, a further narrative of potentially fatal appetite.
30. Eve is punished for her transgression through the rendering of childbirth painful. Book of Genesis, 3:16.
31. The most notable of these skeletal presences for our purposes is arguably the skeleton owned by medical student Julianne in Mantel's earlier treatment of female starvation, *An Experiment in Love* (1995), of whom Julianne states 'it's female. The skeleton. [. . .] Women's bones are more interesting you know.' Hilary Mantel, *An Experiment in Love* (London: Fourth Estate, 1995), p. 39.
32. Strikingly, after this revelation Lola embarks on a 'last push [. . .], last ditch' attempt to 'save her sister' (p. 188) through reparative acts of feeding which are mirrored by Lola's own loss of appetite: '[emotion] makes you feel full up, a big weight in your chest, and then you don't want your dinner, so she had begun to leave it, or surreptitiously shuffle bits of food – pastry, an extra potato – into a piece of kitchen roll.' (p. 189)
33. For details of the notion of incarnation in Christian theology see Peter Van Inwagen, 'Incarnation and Christology', *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1998) <<https://0-www-rep-routledge-com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/articles/thematic/incarnation-and-christology/v-1.>> [Accessed 09 October 2012] . Furthermore, in medieval Christian thought there was a powerful connection between the figure of the unicorn and the Virgin Mary. This connection further underscores

Morna's impossible relationship to her body, evoking an idealised female form which is simultaneously virginal and maternal.

34. Matthew Wolf-Meyer & Karen-Sue Taussig, 'Extremities: Thresholds of Human Embodiment', *Medical Anthropology*, 29(2010), 113-123 (p. 120-2).

35. "comma, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, June 2017. Web. 24 July 2017.

36. Tanner, *Lost Bodies*, p. 6.

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