


**Please cite the Published Version**

Byrne, Eleanor  (2018) Mantel's Social Work Gothic: Trauma and State care in Every Day is Mother's Day and Vacant Possession. In: Hilary Mantel Contemporary Critical Perspectives. Bloomsbury Academic. ISBN 1474296505

**Publisher:** Bloomsbury Academic

**Version:** Accepted Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/623218/>

**Usage rights:**  In Copyright

**Enquiries:**

If you have questions about this document, contact [openresearch@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@mmu.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

Mantel's Social Work Gothic: Trauma and State Care in *Every Day is Mother's Day* and *Vacant Possession*.

Dr Eleanor Byrne, Manchester Metropolitan University

This chapter offers a reading of the gothic vision of Hilary Mantel's first two published novels, *Every Day is Mother's Day* (1985) and *Vacant Possession* (1986), arguing that they deploy gothic themes of the haunted house and the world of spirits and mediums in order to produce work that offers a critical view of the 'State of the Nation' in British culture and society. It argues that these black comedies which focus on the central characters of a socially isolated mother Evelyn and her daughter Muriel, who has an undisclosed intellectual disability, seek to explore a series of social crises in Britain in the 1980s, brought about by the dismantling of social welfare and care structures, through the prism of one social worker's interaction with a troubled family and their real or imagined ghosts. It explores the ways in which Mantel deploys tropes associated with the experience of trauma, such as hauntings and repression, to reflect on the unburying of past crimes and unspeakable acts of cruelty to children.

In 1974 after graduating, Hilary Mantel began her first job as a social work assistant for the NHS in Stockport on a small wage and with the idea that she would 'learn on the job'. Reflecting on this experience in a 2009 article in the *London Review of Books*, she recalls how she spent her days 'in a ferment of anger and indignation', at the conditions in the geriatric hospital she worked in and recounts her demoralizing attempts to intervene in the lives of abandoned and isolated TB patients by visiting their

extended families to persuade them to visit their relatives. Her community visits led to first hand encounters with devastating experiences of extreme poverty, desperation, mental illness, neglect and a climate of violence. Mantel goes seeking family support for those already in care but ends up on one occasion bringing that family member into care as well. An old lady, Mrs. B, the sister of an inpatient, who answers the door, crying and distressed with a house infested with fleas and rats, can clearly not be expected to offer support to her ill brother. Instead Mantel's superiors arrange for her to be given an emergency psychiatric bed and the next time she meets Mrs. B she is in the dining room of the day hospital, has had a perm and ECT. Mantel's horror at the results of her own intervention is palpable, 'Impossible to say if it was human company or an electric current through the head that had jolted her back into personhood. Depression doesn't usually lift so fast. It was already a liberal axiom that ECT was barbarous. And I proceeded by liberal axioms. Mrs. B's case worried me for years'(2009:2) Mantel is demoralized by how little she achieves, by the unintended violent consequences of her actions, by the scale of social crisis in the post-industrial North.

As Mantel notes, public discourse around social workers in Britain is complex and ugly, representations are riven by contradictions that swing back and forth between busy-body and 'gormless uncaring drain on the public purse' (2009:4). These views are periodically punctuated by tragic and shocking scandals as individual cases of abuse and neglect reach the public via scandalized media framings. In Mantel's day the death of seven-year-old Maria Colwell at the hands of her mother's partner had been fresh in people's minds, for Mantel writing in 2009 it was the case of Baby P.<sup>1</sup> After each case,

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/aug/16/baby-p-family>

Mantel ruefully notes, there is a period of societal examination, a restructuring and altering of procedures, but the phrase ‘it must never happen again’ is ‘an empty piety...like saying “God have mercy on us” and expecting the immediate result’ (2009:5) For Mantel in the 1970s, the social workers she met held what she saw as naïve views of the people they were supposed to help. Although liberal in her views about mental health treatment, as a girl from a Northern working class background she detested what she saw as misguided middle class views in the profession. Notably, she felt that the working class were characterized as culturally different, chaotic, unlike other people, by her colleagues, to the extent that neglect and abuse was tolerated and children were put at risk.

It is with this quickly abandoned career in mind that this chapter proposes to consider Hilary Mantel’s first two published novels, *Every Day is Mother’s Day* set in the mid-1970s and its sequel, *Vacant Possession* set ten years later.<sup>2</sup> It will read both novels through the prism of her social work experiences as they trace the tragicomic relationships that form between a young, newly-qualified social worker, Isabel, and her recalcitrant and threatening clients, Evelyn and her daughter Muriel. In *Every Day is Mother’s Day*, Evelyn, a widow and medium, lives alone in a stifling haunted house with her silent daughter Muriel. Isabel first comes into Evelyn and Muriel’s lives as a bright but naïve young woman making a house call to follow up on Muriel’s absence from her day centre visits. After a short and unsuccessful interview with Muriel and her mother, Isabel leaves the house disturbed and certain that Muriel is heavily pregnant and that her mother is concealing this. Muriel’s pregnancy, achieved despite almost

---

<sup>2</sup> Mantel had already written the manuscript of her first as yet unpublished novel, an historical account of the French revolution, *A Place of Greater Safety*, but this had yet to find a publisher.

never leaving the house, causes a crisis in this enclosed world and subsequently, after a secret home birth, Evelyn convinces Muriel. her baby is a 'changeling child' who must be drowned so that a real baby can be swapped into their care. The narrative works itself up to a crescendo, with the murder of the baby at the close of the novel, and Evelyn falling to her death on the stairs of the house, helped by Muriel's vengeful involvement, as Isabel and social services attempt to intervene in the lives of the two women.

*Vacant Possession* reads as a revenge plot, set in 1984, it picks up the story ten years later after Muriel is released from a secure psychiatric unit as part of the closure of secure asylums under the Conservative government's Mental Health Act of 1983. Living a half-life in rented rooms, as far away from the eyes of social services as she can get, Muriel seeks to take revenge upon all those who were involved in her persecution. To this end, she finds and murders the man who assaulted her sexually and is father of her child. In a convoluted plot twist it transpires he Isabel's disgraced father. Muriel then lures Isabel into another dangerous house where she has been lodging with another ex-asylum resident- a pyromaniac who appears to be burning down churches. Muriel's objective is to seek out a new born baby to replace her lost child, hoping to repeat the earlier drowning and 'baby swap' from the first book in order to retrieve a 'changeling child' to be her companion.

This chapter examines the ways in which domestic spaces are mobilized in Mantel's writing, not as sites of private refuge or retreat, but as dangerously inhabited by the traces of dark family histories and secrets that act as vectors to wider social ills, pervading the environments of her characters' lives like a bad smell coming up the

stairs. In these texts both pregnancy and mothering are traumatic and traumatising, haunted by abuse or paedophilia, and the resulting children, in particular Muriel, unwanted or un-nurtured, bear marks of monstrosity and trauma. Muriel's pregnancy in *Every Day is Mother's Day*, is not a sign of new life but rather a visitation from beyond the grave, it remains inexplicable: whatever actions have made it possible remain unknowable and incommunicable by mother or daughter. Despite the claustrophobic domestic atmosphere of both these novels, a wider set of social observations form the central preoccupations of the world that Mantel creates. Through a depiction of domestic and embodied female sexual trauma Mantel also offers a trenchant critique of British society in the late 1970s and early 1980s, examining the concept of state care in her exploration of social work and health care interventions in the domestic sphere of Muriel's family. *Vacant Possession* as a 'State of the Nation' novel, deploys black humour to satirise the political enactment of 'Care in the Community' legislation and to depict the nation as a haunted house inhabited by aberrant and traumatized maternal presences, ones that witness but cannot coherently speak of abuses of women and children but which must nonetheless be attended to. Read together these two novels - the first bleak and airless, tormented by multiple hauntings, the second suddenly active and vengeful - explore a set of social concerns, and crises that emerge under Thatcherism in 1980s Britain. In particular, the dismantling of aspects of the welfare state as they affect a range of social services: the housing of single mothers, shifting orthodoxies in social work and the slow privatization of State assets. Further, they gesture towards the embedded and repressed knowledge of sexual violence at the heart of British culture, in that they presciently anticipate, if do not fully realize, the unearthing of child abuse and neglect as a key trauma at the heart of the state. Trauma that emerged into the British public realm in

the late 1980s and early 1990s. In such a reading, Muriel, appears as a figure for sexual trauma, whose identity as mentally disabled acts as a metaphor for her inability to speak or represent her abuse in the early novel and the legacy of which propels her need to return to the scene of the crime in the sequel and take her revenge.

The first novel opens with a failed séance as an elderly neighbour visits Muriel's mother Evelyn, who works privately in her front room as a medium, to speak to her dead husband, only to be told he is roasting in Hell. For those readers familiar with Alison, the medium in Mantel's later novel *Beyond Black*, there is a partially recognizable figure here, a medium who practices her art for a paying public, but is far from being a charlatan. Evelyn, having found a route to the 'unseen' now cannot close the open gap between physical and spiritual worlds enabling malevolent spirits to pass freely into her house and take up residence in various rooms.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, a key text in the field of trauma studies, Cathy Caruth suggests that certain traumatic experiences are impossible to experience at the time they occur, and may also defeat easy access in the present, thus trauma is always partially experienced after the event itself. One such index of this 'belated' experience, well used by Mantel, is of course the ghost. It is now a truism for all journalistic articles on Mantel to recount, as the New Yorker does in 2005, that her own childhood was one 'assailed by ghosts', and as she does herself in her memoir *Giving up the Ghost* (2003).<sup>3</sup> Evelyn's opening séance suggests immediately that the concerns of the text are with unsettling the border between what can be spoken or seen and what remains hidden or repressed. As Esther Peeren suggests, the continuing power of the medium is to 'draw

---

attention to the disavowed, un-sensed spheres of reality and the marginalised subjects occupying them' (2013: 204).

After Evelyn's frank admission to her customer that her husband is burning in Hell, her striking claim to a truly 'other' knowledge is as yet unproven. The narrative then segues into a series of letters and reports on Muriel and her mother between members of social services. The letters conjure the pressures of a stretched social service provision, alternating between cheery social worker memos, 'dumping' Muriel's case on yet another colleague, and Home Visit notes, where difficult conversations, and inconclusive observations, mean little concrete action in response to Muriel's neglect appear to have been taken. They reveal a trail of lost opportunities, indicating that Muriel has barely attended school, has had no formal assessment of any condition she may have and has stopped attending her day centre. These mundane scripts of the state appear flimsy in the face of a mother who can speak to the dead and whose house is potentially haunted. Tongue in cheek, they deploy the blackest of comedy as they recount home visits by different social workers where the discourse of social work management clashes with the defensive wall of words Evelyn keeps around her. 'Explained to her that Muriel had been placed on the waiting list for five-day care at the Centre and that in the event of her decease a place would be found for her in a residential institution or hostel. Mrs Axon stated "Do you mean Holloway?" and when queried stated 'She has murderous inclinations' (p.22).

The social workers are unable to apprehend the kinds of cruelty or dimensions of domestic horror that they seek to engage with. Always belated, they come too late to address the present moment, caught in the interminable backlog of a creaking social



services system. The objects of their attention, Muriel and her mother Evelyn, exist in another dimension, barely visible, almost entirely interior to the two women concerned, one that might be the most 'abject' possible, if we use Julia Kristeva's influential use of the term to signify a kind of collapse of the borders between self and other (1982). Muriel and her mother appear as a merged subjectivity, locked onto the secrets and repressions of their complex and suffering relationship, one that appears to have slipped outside of social constraints and norms.

Mantel maintains the Axon's domestic environment as one always teetering on the fantastic, offering a modern-day version of Henry James' masterful exercise in unsettling haunting, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). That text famously walks a tightrope of undecidability where the governess cannot decide if her infant charges are evil or innocent. Mantel replaces the governess role with the social worker, a modern day 'carer' allowed access to the private, domestic sphere of the family armed with liberal guilt and a mundane set of guidelines. The reader too becomes a strangely concerned onlooker, reading intensely for signs of what appears to be taking place in the house, exploring the border between existing and believable events and those without rational explanation, haunting and uncanny. In those passages most deeply interior to Evelyn's role as a medium, talking with ghosts is also a form of talking to herself, monitoring the screams and shouts that have caused her to believe they have moved into her house. She can hear and sense them, sometimes Muriel can too, but they also leave little notes, ghostly versions of more benign domestic messages about running out of milk exchanged between housemates or family members:

On the floor of the hall lay a crumpled piece of paper. Evelyn's gorge rose. Low stinking entities, she said to herself. Once she had been able to smell them, but her

senses were becoming blunter with age. Increasingly they were choosing this method of communication, this, their tricks, the sharp raps on the wall from different rooms of the house.[...] She picked it up and straightened it out. The wavering great letters were familiar by now, fly-track thin: GO NOT TO THE KITCHIN TODAY. (*EDIMD*, p.20)

Some of the incidents that haunt Evelyn are later explained as actions Muriel has taken, but some are not. Other uninvolved witnesses see faces at different windows of the house and Evelyn herself is covered in bruises which she believes come from attacks by the ghosts. After her death they are blamed on Muriel, who it is assumed has terrorized her mother, yet our privileged access to the domestic life they lead at other points in the novel would suggest that the power dynamic is definitely the other way around. Despite Evelyn's attempts to restrict Muriel's movements to the house, Muriel defeats house arrest on a number of occasions and enables Isabel's first visit to the house by answering the door to the social worker's insistent knocking.

It is into this demonic/domestic space that Mantel unleashes her unsuspecting social worker, Isabel Field, setting the tone for the darkly humorous pleasures of the text. Isabel blunders into the Axon house as innocent passers-by do in haunted mansions or murderous hotels, served up as the ideal victim to a landscape of desires that are perverse and murderous, inhabited by characters drenched in gothic perfumes. Following her first short interview with Muriel and Evelyn, after pursuing them for weeks, Isabel flees the house, unsettled by Muriel's silent brooding presence, her suspicions that Muriel may be pregnant and Evelyn's ravings. She later reflects on her own sense of impotence with her lover, a married teacher, Colin: 'I shouldn't talk about it –oh, but I must, I must. Spit it out. Get the foul taste out of my mouth [...] You handled it badly, said the voice inside her. You were brusque and unprofessional; and then you let the situation completely defeat you.' (p.69). Isabel's experience in the

Axon house suggests that the central tenet of social care provision has already become profoundly unsettled: 'We're not supposed to worry. Only to display professional concern. It's different. You mustn't identify with your client or let her life touch yours. It's unprofessional to get involved.' (p.70) Mantel brutally upends this social work maxim, by making Muriel's life touch Isabel's in every possible way. Isabel is already traumatized, as her vague apprehension of Muriel's pregnancy acts as a flickering of unconscious knowledge of sexual abuse, which the text will go on to reveal connects her very personally to Muriel indeed. Even as Isabel attempts to impose order on the demonic chaos of the Axon household, it is her own abusive father who has already gained access to Muriel. Isabel's father is her awful secret, kept at home as far as possible, with a long line of sexual assaults and depraved acts hidden from public view. Isabel's harbouring of her father is mirrored by Evelyn's domestic past, and the latter's veiling of her husband Clifford's crimes. Social worker and client alike both witness but do not fully verbalise or report sexual crimes against women and children.

The slow unravelling of lives at the Axon household is interspersed with sections following the more ordinary helplessness and futility of Colin's domestic life and his short affair with Isabel. This is a different or adjacent kind of domestic hell, mundane, disappointed, powerless, where Colin takes himself out of the house for secret rendezvous with Isabel at a creative writing group. Mantel's cold satire of the fantasies of prisoners of suburban lives seeking self-expression through art is wickedly dismissive of the joys of fiction. The workshop meetings become little more than a veil for the affair Colin conducts with Isabel, and fatally cause her to lose her case notes on Muriel which have been left in the back of a car. The documents fall into the hands of Colin's colleague Frank who, to Colin's abject horror, decides to write them up as a

novel, effecting a darkly funny mise-en-abyme: 'Finders keepers. Its about two dotty women. It's a gift. Grist to the mill.' (p.159) Colin must try to retrieve the files so that Isabel's case notes on Muriel are not turned into an amusing satire by and for the complacent middle class. Mantel's horror of this literary crime is encapsulated in her portrayal of a lavish dinner party scene where Frank outlines his plan, 'You can't imagine the lives some people lead. I might turn it into a sort of allegory, you see, about the state of our society' (p.159). This metafictional gesture queries the politics of the 'state of the nation' novel as a hollow social form, written by and serving a condescending and contemptuous middle class audience.

As Muriel's pregnancy progresses, Evelyn's memories of her own pregnancy begin to resurface, leading her back to reflect on her own early marriage as an orphan at the age of seventeen and to relive the life she led with her now-dead husband. The remains of his life with her have been moved out of the house to the 'lean-to' in the back garden, whose paving stones Muriel fittingly mistakes for gravestones, as indeed all sorts of dead things are buried here. His possessions are unearthed by Muriel as she explores the house, unable to voice her own traumas but acting like a blind seeker, tripping over the relics of the traumatic past, bringing objects back into the house and with them the histories that are attached. The lean-to is a gothic space, full of her father's past, symbolically pressing against the back of the house, where domestic secrets and horrors are hidden. It is a kind of graveyard, not for actual bodies, but for the physical trappings of the man who had terrorized this house and left Evelyn inhabited by ghosts.

Mantel's central motif, one that she will go on to deploy effectively in her later work *Beyond Black*, where it reaches its apotheosis, is to link the hauntings that plague Evelyn with repressed trauma. In Evelyn's case it is her late husband Clifford's use of the garden shed for years of child abuse soon after Muriel was born. Although Evelyn is also his victim, it is something she has tacitly colluded with for fear of her own life and that of her daughter. It is a trauma for which neither resistance nor escape was possible and has overwhelmed Evelyn's own systems of self-defense and she is unhinged and disturbed by it. The text delays revealing this trauma until quite late on in the narrative, as the dead husband enacts a slow ghoulish return to the domestic interior. Muriel, almost mute throughout the novel, digs up the filthy piles of archived papers, magazines, clothes and rotten material until she finds a 'sign', a signifier of all that has been buried here:

She held up the coat and shook it out. It was thick and heavy, its dark wool mildewed but intact. Muriel wrinkled her nose at its ancient and complex smells. At first she wondered whether it had been left there by one of the corpses under the stones outside the door of the lean-to. Then her eye caught some writing. Writing in a coat?[...]Evidently corpses wrote in their clothes; evidently they had a strong sense of private property. She spelled it out for herself. CLIFFORD F. AXON (p.81).

When Muriel brings the coat into the house and hangs it by the front door Evelyn is terrified, 'she raised her eyes to the dark shape that swung gently above Muriel's head. Its folds were dense in the half-light. Clifford had come back and hung his coat on the hallstand' (p.86). The return of her long dead husband is a haunting too far, although the simple explanation is that Muriel has brought the coat in from the lean-to, retrieved it from the filth of the decaying archive of Evelyn's past, it is suffused with a wretched and barely hidden history of paedophilia in which Evelyn has been complicit.

Evelyn approaches this history fearfully, circling her own life story, recalling fragments and partial histories, until late in the novel she recalls a fuller scene:

After Muriel, Clifford had not wanted to risk repetition. He said that he would amuse himself. He would go down to the shed and she must turn a blind eye. A blind eye to whatever he kept in there and whatever comings and goings there were. And that was what she had always done until one day she had seen the child from next door heading down the path (p.174).

Up until this point, marvelously unsympathetic Evelyn has been a troubled or deranged persecutor of her daughter, here she appears for the first time as a more comprehensible monster, a fellow victim produced by a life terrorized by her husband: “‘What are children to you’ Clifford had sneered. His own eyes not blind, but pale and rimless, turning now to all the wastage on the table, the messy spillings of her fear’ (p.174). Her remembering of this era of her life is also of a kind of death of the self, and a burial, that has produced the medium that Mantel portrays, who has crossed the line between living and dead: Years passed like this, the nameable fears giving way to the unnameable, the familiar dread of evening muffled under a pall of fog, of blackness of earth; all the days lived as if underground, and Muriel, she thought, if I could have mourned myself, if I could have drawn breath, I might have pitied you (p.174).

This image of being buried alive tips Evelyn herself into being a quasi-spectral figure, whose full claim to subjecthood has been compromised. This fear of becoming a ghost has already been rehearsed in her depiction of Muriel as ghostlike and her sense of the baby as a phantom pregnancy, not ‘imagined’ by Muriel, but an impregnation somehow done from beyond the grave by her husband: ‘She looked down at the baby and saw Clifford again, sitting behind its eyes; behind the glassy layers the years peeling away’ (p.189). This ghostly fathering seals the baby’s fate; mother and daughter both look at the newborn unable to grasp at a maternal relation to it. As Evelyn begins to weave a story of the child being a changeling, coaxing Muriel to drop it in the river in exchange

for a real child that they could actually love: ‘you have to find some water, a river or something. Float it along. And sometimes they pick it up and give you your own back’ (p.189). Evelyn dispossesses Muriel of her newly born baby even as it lies in a cardboard box next to her crying.

The novel’s conclusion allows Muriel to enact swift retribution for this infanticide through her own role in the matricide that quickly follows it, as she decisively pushes her mother down the stairs. But ultimately there is no justice for Muriel who is taken away to be incarcerated for her own good. Unworthy Colin, split from Isabel, buys the now empty house at a knock down price and sets up home with his wife there. It is unsurprising that Mantel feels compelled to return to this story in her sequel, for she ends with a rather superficial painting over of the walls of this haunted house, and Colin’s impending sense of doom as the demonic presences in the fabric of its bricks and mortar appear to be infiltrating his children. As his unsuspecting wife Sylvia says, ‘the devil’s got into that child since we moved house’ (p.211). In other words, she has created the perfect unhappy ending.

It is perhaps hard to believe after her colossal success with the Cromwell series that Mantel developed a reputation mid-career for being unclassifiable, and writing a different book each time. As Anna Murphy (2017) comments in her introduction to an interview with Mantel, ‘skipping seemingly effortlessly from place to place, era to era, in her books, be it England in the 1970, Botswana in the 1950s or Saudi Arabia in the 1980s’. <sup>4</sup> Cromwell is figured as the stopping point where Mantel found her genre. But *Vacant Possession*, the sequel to *Every Day is Mother’s Day*, uncannily echoes that

---

later pattern as it stays with the same characters and subject matter, compulsively wanting to follow the next part of their lives and is suggestive of Mantel's inability to let the story end. Repetition is key to trauma, whether of the acting out or working through kind, and this sense of repetition is what Mantel will do with her later historical novels. One of the uncanny effects of her sequel *Vacant Possession* is the way it makes the first novel historical by moving forward ten years. It suggests that Mantel's overriding interest in how the past inhabits the present, making it hard to let go of any story, unburying things, repeating, not letting anything lie. As Adam Phillips (2013) notes, 'revenge is nothing if not a riveting way of keeping memories alive. It is conservative in that it seeks to recover a supposed status quo ante. Whereas the first novel trembles with hidden traumas, the second acts as a postmodern revenge tragedy, which explores, just as Renaissance tragedies did, the unstable relation of private revenge to questions of state sanctioned forms of justice. Muriel, a victim of state neglect, maternal torture and sexual assault - and having already murdered her mother - takes matters into her own hands to avenge the murder of her baby and her rape by its father.

Muriel acts as the engine for this revenge plot. She recasts herself as a changeling, following her mother's darkly deceptive storying that caused her baby's death and decides that she is in need of the company of her own kind. Her belief that she can exchange a new human baby for the original changeling, by repeating the act of drowning, propels her back into the lives of the neighbours and social workers from her earlier life. Through wearing multiple disguises she effects a terrifying infiltration of the domestic spaces of those involved who now live literally in what used to be her house. The narrative again propels itself ferociously towards the demise of a second



baby that she abducts, until, by a series of chance events, the remains of the first child are posted to Muriel in a cardboard box. This effects the exchange that she had desired and saves the life of the new child. Mantel's return to Muriel suggests a dissatisfaction with the destiny she had ascribed to the opaque and mute anti-heroine of the first novel. Muriel has been produced as a 'case' for Isabel, a trauma for Evelyn and a victim for an unscrupulous would-be fiction writer. Her release from state care transforms her into an active agent of change and retribution in the sequel.

In *Vacant Possession*, orphaned and still haunted by the loss of her child, with her family home sold from under her and with ten years of time to reflect on her fate, Muriel appears standing outside her old home, scrutinizing the situation, ready to unbury the past one more time. Arguably, Mantel seems to have had a change of heart, where Muriel's previous 'blankness' is now, not a sign of learning difficulties, but the very incarnation of the changeling. She moves between multiple 'socially invisible' identities in the novel, calling herself Lizzie Blank and infiltrating different aspects of the characters' lives as she plays the role of both a cleaner and care-worker, with wigs and voices to fit each character. This invisibility, which appears to be both due to the extremely low social status of her jobs, as much as her wilful disguising of herself, ensures her success. She passes through the minds of her employers with only the briefest amount of interest and no real recognition. Her first victim, Isabel's father, Philip Field, the father of her lost baby, is recovering from a stroke in hospital when she enters his room as an old woman, 'an orderly, a downcast and shrunken personage' (*VP*, P.100). But as he looks at her 'a change seemed to come over her. Her bony shoulders straightened. She grew by an inch of two, and her melancholy manner fell away. The years fell away too; it was 1974, she was a girl alone, on a go in the park,

and a lonely old gentleman was hanging around by the swings' (p.100). Muriel enacts a transformation where the passage of time simply falls away, and the original trauma can be seen again. Nonetheless in the intervening years she has acquired a gutsy vulgarity, and a clear agenda for retribution, 'Muriel grinned at him. "Hello, old cock" she said' (p.100). She enacts revenge for the child she once was, her performance of social marginality enabling her to infiltrate the same state mechanisms that once incarcerated her.

As Mantel's State of the Nation novel, *Vacant Possession* documents the dismantling of residential social care in the early 1980s with the emptying of long term mental health accommodation and the advent of 'care in the community'. It also takes Margaret Thatcher's calculated advocacy of Victorian values for a walk, satirizing the chronic anachronism of a historically backward looking and haunted political present. Colin's daughter, now grown up, is pregnant after a short affair with Isabel's husband, bringing their lives back together after years of separation. Colin goes to plead with him to pay for an abortion: 'This is 1984. Victorian Values. [...] It isn't the scot-free seventies, you can't expect to go littering the countryside with your blow by blows and expect the state to pickup the tab. You've got to feel the guilt Mr. Ryan, you've got to put your hand in your pocket.' (p.164). Thatcherism's neo-liberal attack on the state turns society into individuals, and as individuals everyone must be made to pay. Muriel is the avenging angel, who becomes a vigilante who will ensure that they do.

The phasing out of residential care also affects Colin, whose mother, Mrs. Sidney, is released from state care after she appears to have miraculously recovered from a semiconscious state due to Muriel infiltrating the ward in her geriatric hospital.

Mrs Sidney comes back to consciousness as Princess May of Teck, the young Queen Mary. It is as if the resurgence of Victorian values has managed to open cracks in time allowing historical figures to step through into the present. Her recovery from her previous catatonic state, as a member of royalty, forces the family to take her back from the nursing home and from the rows of ancient ladies who sit propped on the wards. Mantel shows little mercy for the old women, as Colin, his wife and sister walk through the ward: 'their beaky heads swiveled, like a row of birds on a telegraph wire' (p.153). Muriel's act of revenge here is to somehow reignite the spirit of Colin's long gone mother and return her to the house, setting the stage for Muriel to pursue further acts of retribution. Colin's mother is now a revenant, a ghost of past crimes haunting the present. Ultimately she too is unceremoniously seen off by Muriel, forced to take handfuls of her pills.

But taking revenge is also a complex unbalanced equation, as Deborah Willis notes: 'it is not a symmetrical payback but exceeds the original wrong [...] Since revenge requires excess to contain the emotional legacy of trauma it is hardly surprising that it creates the conditions for potentially endless cycles of retaliatory killings. Grief keeps reasserting itself hence the tendency for revenge to become obsessive; when the self has not come to terms with its losses, revenges satisfactions prove temporary' (p.33). Willis proposes an image of the revenger as trying to 'return' the trauma to the perpetrator, translated into an object as one would an unwanted parcel, so that one no longer owns it. This 'return to sender' logic is one that structures Muriel's behaviour, her main preoccupation, disguised as the daily cleaner, is to try to convince Colin's daughter to give up the baby she is carrying; the baby that she can then exchange for her lost child.

Muriel's frenzied acts of revenge are mercifully stopped when she already has the newborn in her arms, when a different 'misdirected' parcel finally arrives for her. She turns to find the box with the baby replaced by a different package. 'And now for little Diddums. She turned from the foot of the stairs and gaped. Sweetie Pie had altered; altered out of all recognition. Displayed on the hall table, neat and sweet and perfectly articulated, was a skeleton; fine and tiny, and set together with a deft and knowing hand (p.236). The skeleton of her lost baby has been retrieved from the riverbank by children and is posted unwittingly by them to her address for safekeeping. With remains to grieve over, Muriel's original loss is translated back into an object, an actual child she can mourn. Mantel appears to take pity on her murderous revenger, and ends the narrative before we can find out what becomes of Muriel. She spares her the fate of most revengers, caught out by the excess of murderous logic in their actions, destroyed by their own desire for revenge. The furious motor of revenge is finally stilled as justice has been done, as far as it can be, by a series of chance events. A group of innocent children, each also neglected in their own way, have hauled the bones from the mud of the river, and have treasured the baby's skeleton, valued its meanings, possibly mixed its bones with that of other creatures, and turned it into a changeling, and created a place of consignment, bringing the feverish revenge of the ghosts to an end. Yet Mantel has also stayed true to Muriel's logic, the occult logic of the changeling, for the live baby has indeed been swapped as the folk tradition would have it.

Whilst Muriel's own personal vendettas have ended, the two novels have traced the outline and partially exposed the many buried histories of abuse that have yet to fully emerge from 1980s Britain. Mantel's bitter satire of state provision in these works

bleakly assesses the state of state care and child protection, and also gestures, perhaps with a prescient eye, to the future unveiling of widespread state-enabled child abuse that would rock multiple institutions in the coming decades. Sexual abuse, its traumas and its repression at the personal and state level, saturate the lives of the characters and the spaces that they occupy. Their partial exposure here, where remains are disinterred in order to be properly named and grieved, indicates the haunting work that will be necessary to overcome private and public denials, burials and institutionalised violences that still resist this traumatic knowing.

#### Works Cited:

Kristeva, Julia, *Powers of Horror, An Essay on Abjection*: New York: Columbia, University Press, 1982.

Mantel, Hilary, *Every Day is Mother's Day*, Fourth Estate, 2013, first published Chatto & Windus, 1985

*Vacant Possession*, Harper Perennial, 2006, first published Chatto & Windus, 1986

*Beyond Black*, Harper Collins, 2005

Mantel, Hilary, *The New Yorker*, 'Devil's Work: Hilary Mantel's Ghosts', July 25<sup>th</sup> 2005.

Mantel, Hilary, 'Diary: On Being a Social Worker', *London Review of Books*, Vol.31, No.11, 11 June, 2009.

Murphy, Anna, 'Hilary Mantel Interview', 1.3.2010, *The Telegraph*.  
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/7345476/Hilary-Mantel-interview.html>,  
accessed 26 February 2017.

Peeren, Esther, 'Other Senses: The Politics of Mediumship', *The Ashgate Research Companion to Paranormal Cultures*, eds. Olu Jenzen, Saly R. Munt, Ashgate, 2014.

Phillips, Adam, A Symposium on Revenge, *The Three Penny Review*, Fall, 2013.

Willis, Deborah, 'Revenge, Trauma, Theory and Titus Andronicus', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol 53, No1, Spring, 2002. pp.21-5