

LAURA TORRES ZÚÑIGA

“A CROPPED SILHOUETTE, NEITHER MAMMAL NOR AVIAN”:
LIMINALITY AND BECOMING IN SARAH HALL’S “M”*

INTRODUCTION

Borders are ever-present in Sarah Hall’s fiction. Most evidently, many of her novels are located in the English county of Cumbria, the borderlands along the Scottish frontier. This Anglo-Scottish frontier, known as “The Borders,” is configured in Hall’s work “as both a place of belonging and as locus of trauma”¹ that impacts the lives and dealings of its inhabitants. The characters’ engagement with the landscape and its wildlife and the questions of land ownership and ecological vigilance are the thematic nuclei of works such as Hall’s debut novel *Haweswater* (2003), the dystopic *The Carhullan Army* (2008), and *The Wolf Border* (2016).²

Yet the other main thematic focus of Hall’s works, “issues of gender and subjectivity,”³ especially the female one, also engages with borders. It is in Hall’s exploration of female lives and subjectivities where borders acquire

LAURA TORRES ZÚÑIGA, PhD, Associate Professor, Autonomous University of Madrid, Faculty of Education and Teacher Training, Department of Philology and Didactics; e-mail: laura.torres@uam.es; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8434-2021>.

* Research for this article was part of the Research Project “*Tales from the Border*”: *Global Change and Identity in Contemporary British Short Fiction* (Plan Nacional, PID2021-122433NB-I00, Proyectos de investigación no orientada 2021-PN168; 01/09/2022-31/08/2025), financed by the Spanish AEI – Agencia Estatal de Investigación.

¹ Christiane Hansen, “Indifferent Borders: Confined and Liminal Spaces in Sarah Hall’s ‘Bees,’” in *Borders and Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story*, ed. Barbara Korte and Laura M. Lojo-Rodríguez (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 174.

² Sue Vice, “Sarah Hall: A New Kind of Storytelling,” in *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000*, ed. James Acheson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

³ Iain Robinson, “‘You just know when the world is about to break apart’: Utopia, Dystopia and New Global Uncertainties in Sarah Hall’s *The Carhullan Army*,” in *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, ed. Siân Adishesiah and Rupert Hildyard (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 200.

a more ontological and symbolic relevance: for example, in short stories that depict experiences of metamorphosis that defy the border between human and animal, such as “Bees” from *The Beautiful Indifference* (2011) and “Mrs. Fox” from *Madame Zero* (2017). However, it is the contention of this paper that, just like “‘Bees’ can be read as the forerunner to the more radical transformation in ‘Mrs Fox’,”⁴ the foremost example of liminal subjectivity and the transgression of borders is the story “M,” from Hall’s last collection, *Sudden Traveller* (2019).

After a brief revision of the earlier stories, our analysis will clarify how Hall’s “M” takes the trope of the human-animal metamorphosis a step beyond by making use of the short story’s potential as a format to portrait in-betweenness and liminality, as well as of magic realism as the perfect mode to narrate the transgression of boundaries. Thus, “M” shows a more radical approximation to the blurring of animal, corporeal and symbolic borders by turning what was metaphorical or unknowable in the previous stories into a materialized and narratively accessible border experience that, in addition, situates the reader in a similarly liminal position. In so doing, this story problematizes the construction of female subjectivity and the crossing of animal-human boundaries that had looked *tamer* in the previous stories of “Bees” and “Mrs. Fox,” which work to illuminate the reading of “M” as if part of a thematic trilogy.

HALL’S ANIMAL STORIES: “BEES” AND “MRS. FOX”

The short story has been recognized as the liminal genre par excellence, for it “privilege[s] the depiction of processes of transition, threshold situations, and fleeting moments of crisis or decision.”⁵ Hall’s stories make use of this liminal character to portray the epistemological crises of characters who “find themselves in moments in which their concepts, beliefs, and cognitive securities are contested by the unforeseen and in which the world

⁴ Emilie Walezak, “The Borderline in Sarah Hall’s ‘Bees’,” Colloque *Crisis in Contemporary Writing*, British Association for Contemporary Literary Studies, Virtual Conference, 26 June 2020, 2, https://www.bacls.org/documents/449/The_Borderline_in_Sarah_Hall.pdf.

⁵ Jochen Achilles, “Modes of Liminality in American Short Fiction. Condensations of Multiple Identities,” in *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*, ed. Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann (New York: Routledge, 2015), 41.

has somehow become strange to them.”⁶ In “Bees,” the protagonist is an abused woman that flees a violent husband and takes refuge in a friend’s house in London, especially within its garden, a secluded, self-contained piece of nature in the middle of the city. The story explores her experience of dislocation by means of the opposition of rural and urban spaces, domestication and wilderness,⁷ symbolized by the eponymous bees and the fox that, as an in-between, half-feral and half-domesticated species, breaks the garden’s limits. This nameless woman’s arrival in the city is marked by a symbolic breaching of her bodily limits, as she feels that “some lurid internal part of you has unzipped your flesh and stepped outside. A red, essential thing ... tugged itself through the walls of muscle, slid to the floor and moved off into the crowd.”⁸ The ensuing emotional disintegration and emptiness that turns her into “a loose pink sack of human being,” like the carcasses of the dead bees she finds in the garden, seems to be the prize to pay “to forget, to move on ... to let go, to forget entirely” her painful past.⁹

While the imagery of that physical dissection brings up reminiscences of moments of birth or abortion, that “red thermal mass” expelled in “Bees” remains a metaphor for “[a]ll the anger and desperation and love that was furled up inside” the now unemotional protagonist—as she herself wonders at one point: “it might have been your heart that left you as you reached the capital.”¹⁰ Estranged from her, this metaphorical life force only seems to eventually materialize in the shape of the red fox that enters the garden at the end of the story, as Hall herself has explained in an interview: “When the fox arrives, the spirit of the wild, she recaptures it [her verve] and you know she’s going to be fine again.”¹¹ This epiphanic encounter between the protagonist and the animal, described like her lost red mass as “flaming red, agile and vividly alive,”¹² “quer[ies] the boundaries between human and animal, feral and domesticated, and thus the essence of being human,”¹³ yet only on a symbolic level.

⁶ Michael Basseler, “Cognitive Liminality: On the Epistemology of the Short Story,” in *Liminality and the Short Story*, 83.

⁷ Hansen, “Indifferent Borders,” 172.

⁸ Sarah Hall, *The Beautiful Indifference* (London: Faber & Faber, 2011), “Bees”, Kindle.

⁹ Hall, “Bees.”

¹⁰ Hall, “Bees.”

¹¹ Anne Garvey, “The Sensual World of Sarah Hall,” *Civilian Global*, October 14, 2013, <https://civilianglobal.com/arts/sarah-hall-author-lake-district-bbc-national-short-story-award2013>.

¹² Hall, “Bees.”

¹³ Hansen, “Indifferent Borders,” 182.

That liminal figure of the fox returns again in the story “Mrs. Fox,” winner of the BBC National Short Story Award in 2013, in which a woman named Sophia Garnett does not just metaphorically expel a part of herself, but she is completely “purg[ed] of the disease of being human” by turning into a “bright mass” of a fox,¹⁴ a threshold creature able to “challenge binaries between symbolic and experience-based interpretation, between wild and tame, and between living and dead.”¹⁵ Observed and recounted from her husband’s point of view, Sophia’s feelings and thoughts remain mostly opaque during the narration of her vomiting in the mornings, the discovery of a “coppery gleam under her skin,”¹⁶ and the paragraph-long description of her sudden metamorphosis when she becomes a vixen during a stroll through the woods with her husband.

Whereas the references to morning sickness hint again at pregnancy, her bodily transformation proves to be more radical: she becomes and remains an animal for the rest of the story, escaping to the forest and bearing little cubs. Her process is so seemingly natural that, as Ditter suggests, Sophia’s usual “subterranean dreams, of forests, dark corridors and burrows, roots and earth”¹⁷ (the only omniscient remark of the narrative) and the purple ball she had always kept in her purse as a human may have been memories of a previous animal life that she is retrieving now, a “suggestion of continuous transformations [that] increases the sense that the epistemological border between humans and animals is a fluid one.”¹⁸ Also, although she has not suffered abuse like the woman in “Bees,” Sophia’s dreams of wild freedom and her objectivized position in the husband-dominated narration insinuate marital oppression that the subjective narrative perspective keeps veiled: the apparent equality that the husband’s remarks describe, as both “He, or she, cooks; this is the modern world, both of them are capable,” is undermined by the domestic reality after his wife loses her human form: “There is no milk. He drinks black tea. He eats cold soup, a stump of staling bread.”¹⁹

¹⁴ Sarah Hall, *Madame Zero* (London: Faber & Faber, 2017), “Mrs. Fox,” Kindle, 12, 14.

¹⁵ Timothy C. Baker, *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 77.

¹⁶ Hall, “Mrs. Fox,” 4.

¹⁷ Hall, 3.

¹⁸ Julia Ditter, “Human into Animal: Post-anthropomorphic Transformations in Sarah Hall’s ‘Mrs Fox’,” in *Borders and Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story*, ed. Barbara Korte and Laura M. Lojo-Rodríguez (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 192.

¹⁹ Hall, “Mrs. Fox,” 2, 14.

IN BETWEEN "BEES" AND "MRS. FOX": "M"

"Bees" and "Mrs. Fox" are thus stories about women's strategies to cope with trauma and domination at the expense of the loss of some integral part of themselves. In "M," Hall takes these previous explorations of the wounds of abuse, the breaching of bodily boundaries, and the fluidity of the human-animal border a step further and breaks the limits altogether in order to represent a woman that straddles categories without being susceptible to being pinpointed. This liminal nature of the story's eponymous protagonist is detectable already in her name: she is not nameless like the woman in "Bees" but just that initial *M* does not fully identify her like the name and surname of the wife in "Mrs. Fox." Like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for whom "the absence of a name is the mark of a blurred identity" as well as of her fluctuations between life and death,²⁰ *M* has always walked a carefully balanced tightrope between life and death, thanks to what she calls "a life's contract of survival and compensation" that endows her with a quasi-mythical character. Her repeated near-death experiences have branded her body with scars that remind of Christ-like stigmata: the "surgical cleft" on the side after "her body flooded with poison" from appendicitis, "the faint red holes along her brow" when she returns from hospital, "un-killed, risen" after a motorcycle accident—more evocatively, a hiking accident left her unconscious until "after three days" she ascended into the sky, "airlifted" by rescuers. Indefinite by name, traversing life and death, *M* shows signs of liminality right from the beginning of the story.²¹

This long list of "events to chart pain's signature" on her body sets the tone for the preeminence of *M*'s embodied experiences throughout the story. Of all those events, however, there is one that left the deepest but most invisible scar: "the night she was forced" and "the morning she was forced again" as a child by a neighbor. Rape is a "moment of violence ... of human rights violation," and as such it "can be described as a border crossing, as an attack on the body and soul."²² Moreover, as "a crime against our humanity,"

²⁰ Lidia Curti, *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 122.

²¹ Hall, *Sudden Traveller* (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), "M," 2.

²² Wolfgang Müller-Funk, "Phenomenology of the Liminal," in *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings*, ed. Johan Schimanski & Jopi Nyman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 25.

rape “alienates the body from its own lived being.”²³ M shows signs of such detachment not only in her minute account of her body’s mutilations but also in the dispassionate, fragmentary description—through the omniscient voice of the narrator—of the intimate relations with her lover: “they make love ... an angle of great pleasure and intimacy.... The blood is loaded in the right place; her nerves are ready. This time, release.”²⁴ After this aseptic intercourse, her reaction is precisely to *brand* her lover’s body: “She cries into his shoulder, leaves a mark.”²⁵

Although the woman in “Bees” also suffered sexual violence from her husband, for M, the suppressed memory of that traumatic trespassing of her bodily limits has a more powerful and lasting effect, as it breaks the narration at several points: “She watches people.... Echoes of the past. *Quiet, girl. Your mammy’s gone. I’ll fuck you till you come apart.*”²⁶ Memory itself is “a border-crossing between a present and a past, the actual temporal border being that of forgetting.”²⁷ M is perpetually at this border, as the descriptions of this memory surface throughout the story not as flashbacks, but narrated in the same present tense in which the whole story is told. This reinforces the immediacy with which the traumatic experience is recalled: “If what happened had not happened. It is so far away, deep in the vein, behind the lens, an animal’s memory. She is alone in the village. She has passed through the door of her neighbor’s house.”²⁸ After suffering the rape, M “has always left room for worse,” but what may follow can only be in M’s words “unimaginable,” beyond the limits of reason—as her subsequent metamorphosis will be.²⁹

The haunting words of her rapist, “*I’ll fuck you till you come apart,*” and the “animal’s memory” that keeps them alive seem to be the underlying driving forces that cause our protagonist to undergo a process of transformation that, this time literally, *breaks her apart*. Her physical transformation is much more vividly described than the almost instantaneous change in “Mrs. Fox”: one night, M feels she is coming apart at the seams, as if that

²³ Debra B. Bergoffen, “From Genocide to Justice: Women’s Bodies as a Legal Writing Pad,” *Feminist Studies* 32, no. 1 (2006), 29.

²⁴ Hall, “M,” 3–4.

²⁵ Hall, 4.

²⁶ Hall, 10.

²⁷ Johan Schimanski and Stephen F. Wolfe, “Intersections: A Conclusion in the Form of a Glossary,” in *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections*, ed. Johan Schimanski & Stephen F. Wolfe (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 163.

²⁸ Hall, “M,” 18.

²⁹ Hall, 2–3.

unhealed wound of her rape was opening up again, “unzipping... sutures are being unstrung.”³⁰ Suggestions of expectant contractions while “[s]he breathes out. In. Out,”³¹ imagery of connecting cords, and an instinctive passage in a womb-like room “alive... made of soft moving skin” all recreate the birth of the new creature M is turning into.³² Night after night, we witness how M advances in this process of mutilation and mutation, her crises becoming a routine repeated cycle: “Violent alteration, acceptance, discarding. Crawling. Reaching the window, pulling herself up on to the sill.”³³

This sill or window threshold, which for her “has been the draw” for her mutant advances,³⁴ is one of the typical figurations of an aesthetics of the border,³⁵ a liminal place neither outside nor inside where she will complete her transformation. Again, straddling between life and death, she overrides “the survival mechanism,”³⁶ climbs onto that sill and jumps into the void; but she overrides death too by extending a pair of wings and turning into a “cropped silhouette, neither mammal nor avian.”³⁷ She becomes an indefinite *border being* in Schimanski and Wolfe’s terms:³⁸ monstrous, with an incomplete body, in border-crossing locations, a creature that reminds us of that animal part of the self that was described in “Bees” as “that urgeful *hybrid* creation carrying *flames along its back* as it moves.”³⁹ Yet here this creation is not a separate, metaphorical part that escapes from the protagonist: she herself has turned into it.

While, as some critics have explored,⁴⁰ the encounters with non-human animals of the woman in “Bees” and the husband in “Mrs. Fox” represent the hopeful recognition of interspecies shared existence and mutual influence

³⁰ Hall, “M,” 3.

³¹ “She tenses, resists, but then allows it, expects it, as one might surrender to contractions”; Hall, 3, 8.

³² “When she looks back,... her legs are far away severed, joined by a dark stem of meat”; Hall, 9.

³³ Hall, 11.

³⁴ Hall, 10.

³⁵ Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman, “Introduction: Images and Narratives on the Border,” in *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings*, ed. Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021), 1.

³⁶ Hall, “M,” 12.

³⁷ Hall, 14.

³⁸ Schimanski and Wolfe, “Glossary”, 153.

³⁹ Hall, “Bees”; emphasis added.

⁴⁰ E.g., Walezak, “The Borderline in Sarah Hall’s ‘Bees.’”

emphasized by animal studies theorists such as Donna Haraway (2003),⁴¹ M's unfettering of the animal in herself is life-changing too, but not that felicitous. "M" becomes a monstrous border being, neither human nor animal, an indeterminate creature with an "incomplete bod[y] which can be situated in border-crossing locations ... both inside and outside borders."⁴² Unlike the sudden and irreversible transformation in "Mrs. Fox," which does not leave room for doubt in the reader and which, however fantastic, must be taken for granted, the narration of M's metamorphosis "hesitates on the threshold between two realities" as the magic realist mode does.⁴³ The process of transmogrification unfolds throughout several nocturnal scenes of intermittent vigil that keep the reader's disbelief doubtfully suspended before the possibility of everything being just a dream on M's part, a "delirium."⁴⁴ In addition, in contrast to the initial detailed geography of pain's signature on M's human body, only a couple of references help to roughly sketch M's metamorphosed figure. Whereas her "lips ... hard as a beak, her mouth full of gristle"⁴⁵ and her unfolding wings first bring to mind the image of a harpy, half-woman half-bird,⁴⁶ her "viscous" wings and her "tongue's long catheter"⁴⁷ place her closer to a Kafkian butterfly-like insect. Nonetheless, the exact appearance of M as a hybrid monster remains undefined throughout the story, frustrating the reader's voyeuristic desire to delineate and chart her grotesque, half-animal half-human body during its fleeting existence, as M always returns to her human shape and life during the day. "M" is Hall's story that most clearly partakes of magic realism's "genre-specific form of liminality,"⁴⁸ by blending "essentially realist discourse" with "the seeming appearance of phenomena that we know cannot exist"⁴⁹ with the effect of

⁴¹ Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

⁴² Schimanski and Wolfe, "Glossary," 155, 157.

⁴³ Rachel Falconer, "Crossover literature," in *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, ed. Peter Hunt (New York: Routledge), 563.

⁴⁴ Hall, "M," 5.

⁴⁵ Hall, 8.

⁴⁶ Walezak, "The Borderline in Sarah Hall's 'Bees'," 4.

⁴⁷ Hall, "M," 11–12.

⁴⁸ Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann, "'Betwixt and Between' Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Short Fiction," in *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*, ed. Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann (New York: Routledge, 2015), 18.

⁴⁹ Adam Zolkover, "King Rat to Coraline: Faerie and Fairy Tale in British Urban Fantasy," in *Postmodern Reinterpretations of Fairy Tales: How Applying New Methods Generates New Meanings*, ed. Anna Kérchy (Lewiston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 70–71.

producing a feeling of uncanniness and ontological doubt in the reader that holds them in a liminal position themselves.

M does not only traverse the biological border between animal and human: just like "border beings in these in-between spaces live unconditionally both inside and outside the law,"⁵⁰ she is able to inhabit both positions simultaneously. She begins the story clearly within the law, as is obvious from her occupation as a lawyer trying to prevent the Haven, a refuge for abused women, from being dismantled. Her efforts prove futile to protect either the women, whose hideaway is revealed during the process so that men manage to breach its entrance, or the shelter itself, which is eventually closed down. Thus, her days working as a lawyer become "emptying of meaning" because she can't stop the demolition of the Haven, compared to "a motherless antelope" in a ruthless city jungle full of predatory men.⁵¹

The emptiness of her *lawful* life contrasts with her nightly escapades, in which she herself becomes the "predator" and contemplates the city as "a new landscape, a map of the hunt."⁵² Her first prey, although with benevolent intentions, will be the abused women she visits in their sleep, unknowing poor sheep that "bleat" of discomfort when she enters their bodies to amend what she calls "the issue of a crime," i.e. the unwanted pregnancies caused by their violations. Through careful penetration, her operations thus "reset, if not restore" the women's bodies by removing the still embryonic fruit of their wombs.⁵³ In the legal terms she still employs for this operation, she offers these women "reprieve,"⁵⁴ a commutation of punishment for a crime not their own. Subsequently, her animalistic heightened senses and instincts lead her to her other prey, and she begins to track and kill the male perpetrators of the abuses. Hers is a frenzy that does not allow for rational scrutiny: "she would like to examine inside [the men] and know why. But it is too exciting, or instinctive" as she acts "not [by] pure calculation" but simply as "the honing of skill" when she briskly evacuates the men's hearts and discards their bodies.⁵⁵ The last of her victims will be her own rapist, in a closing scene that endows the story with a seemingly circular structure that reinforces the idea of the rape as the seminal cause of M's ordeal: "So the first dream ends or never started. She stands waiting at his door again,

⁵⁰ Schimanski and Wolfe, "Glossary", 161.

⁵¹ Hall, "M," 11.

⁵² Hall, 14, 12.

⁵³ Hall, 12, 13.

⁵⁴ Hall, 12.

⁵⁵ Hall, 14–15.

a creature unwhole, a creature so evolved and lethal it might free the earth's hold on the moon. Everything is near and hers."⁵⁶

Powerless to act from within the *law*, M breaks apart the *Law* with capital L in the Lacanian sense of "the 'symbolic' order of intersubjective relations including language, sexual identity and law,"⁵⁷ or in Hall's own words, "the male framework of the world."⁵⁸ She transmogrifies into a hybrid, human/animal border being that tries to dynamite the dichotomic, categorical structures that sustain that symbolic, patriarchal social order—she reverses the victim/perpetrator dynamic and does indeed literally *kill the fathers/Name of the Father*. Her newly-gained empowerment within that order positions her now on a par with Olayan, the city kingpin who is going to raze the Haven: "the most powerful man in existence" who is a "spider in the globe's rich web" and remains "untouchable," "*beyond any legal reach*."⁵⁹ In her new shape, which has changed her "for advance, for primacy: a leveling," she is able to reach him after breaching all the protecting walls and security measures of his palace-fortress, yet she spares his life because her incursion was not to actually kill him but merely "to know what she can do, who is within her grasp."⁶⁰ She tests her own limits to prove that now "she has it all, the greater part of time, the oceanic dark above the world, superiority."⁶¹ The protagonist of "M" has then become what Müller-Funk denominates "the most Utopian crosser of borders: the 'hybrid', the man or woman who seems to ignore frontiers," not only geographically but "especially metaphorically."⁶²

With its emphasis on liminal states and indeterminacy, the story "M" both expands and problematizes the use of metamorphosis as a metaphor for feminine emancipation that critics have praised in Hall's previous works⁶³ as attempts to "liberate and empower the female characters to escape the

⁵⁶ Hall, 22.

⁵⁷ Jeanne L. Schroeder, "Strange Bedfellows: Lacan and the Law," *Teoria E Critica Della Regolazione Sociale / Theory and Criticism of Social Regulation* 2 (13): 57, <https://mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/tcrs/article/view/121>.

⁵⁸ Garvey, "Sarah Hall."

⁵⁹ Hall, "M," 16–18; emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Hall, 19–20.

⁶¹ Hall, 20.

⁶² Müller-Funk, "Phenomenology," 28.

⁶³ E.g., Ann-Sofie Lönngren, "Reading Transformations: from David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* (1922) to Sarah Hall's "Mrs Fox" (2013)," *European Journal of English Studies* 27 (3): 484ff, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2023.2287096>.

constraints of patriarchal societies.”⁶⁴ Baker’s analysis of “Mrs. Fox,” for example, connects the story’s destabilization of the species boundaries and hierarchies with Rosi Braidotti’s concept of metamorphosis as posthuman *becoming*, “not a process of moving between one stable state and another, but of challenging the stability of given identities,” opening space for “an explicit rejection of categorical determinations” and “new forms of empowerment.”⁶⁵ M’s metamorphosis, however, comes closer to Braidotti’s *becoming* than that in “Mrs. Fox” in some important aspects. As Baker himself acknowledges, for Braidotti, “metamorphosis is fundamentally rooted in desire,”⁶⁶ which in Braidotti’s feminism of sexual difference takes precedence over *will* for its “political importance” and “role in the constitution of the subject”: “Not just libidinal desire, but rather ontological desire, the desire to be, the tendency of the subject to be, the predisposition of the subject towards being.”⁶⁷ It is in this distinction that “M” differs more clearly from “Mrs. Fox”: whereas Sophia’s change is repeatedly described as “an act of will” on her part,⁶⁸ M is moved by an internal force greater than her, she is a passive object to a process that occupies the subject position of the narration: “the pain returns, around the same time, folding her double.... Like a knife, the pain splits her... An extraordinary, medieval agony is halving her body.”⁶⁹ Although she first “tenses, resists,” she realizes that she cannot but surrender to it, to that *desire to be*: “No, she thinks, no. *I am this. There’s no choice.*”⁷⁰

For Braidotti, the distinction between will and desire becomes fundamental because “[f]eminists cannot hope therefore merely to cast off their sexed identity like an old garment ... women who yearn for change cannot shed their old skins like snakes” just by an act of will;⁷¹ surprisingly enough, this is precisely what M’s metamorphosis allows her to do. While the character in “Bees” had felt her skin unzipped to let a just figurative life-sustaining thing escape from her, M can only transmute herself by casting off, specifically, her life-bearing, sexed organs: “the heap of flesh left

⁶⁴ Ditter, “Human into Animal,” 192.

⁶⁵ Baker, *Writing animals*, 80, 91.

⁶⁶ Baker, 91.

⁶⁷ Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming* (Cambridge: Polity, 2002): 26, 22.

⁶⁸ Hall, “Mrs. Fox,” 16, 20.

⁶⁹ Hall, “M,” 5, 8.

⁷⁰ Hall “M,” 3, 9; emphasis added.

⁷¹ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 26.

behind *disgusts* her,... *defecation* of an old self. The *hole*, with all its laws and allure, simply a fistula in meat.”⁷² The repulsive imagery of the scene signifies M’s abjection, in Kristevan terms, of that lower part of her body that was the locus of the traumatic patriarchal violence, “a useless section of herself.”⁷³ In so doing, she becomes an abject herself, as becoming-insect is described by Braidotti: “an insect is non-human, but also somewhat non-animal.... It is rather a border-line being, in between the animal and the mineral.... They are also, by definition, objects of disgust and rejection,” i.e. abjects.⁷⁴ As Schimanski and Wolfe state, “[t]hat which is in a state of becoming can promise transcendence, or can appear as monstrous and cause fear;”⁷⁵ M, as a proper liminal subject, does both at the same time.

Braidotti warns, nevertheless, that “sexual difference meant as the dissymmetry between the sexes” affects “the quest for points of exit from identities based on phallogocentric premises,” that is, the quest for in-depth change through the casting off of sexed identity. Such quest “needs to be timed carefully in order to become sustainable, that is to say in order to avoid lethal shortcuts through the complexities of one’s embodied self.”⁷⁶ In M’s context, the extreme dissymmetry between the sexes—evidenced throughout her engagement with other abused women from the Haven—may have indeed conditioned her *quest for exit* and led her to one of those *lethal shortcuts*. As her newly embodied self surges after her “confrontation with the maternal as an abject but unavoidable site of female identity,”⁷⁷ her attempt to level out that dissymmetry between the sexes is not limited to violent retaliation against men but it configures as an act of solidarity the restoration of other women’s bodies (or, as she puts it, their *resetting, if not restoring*), liberating them from the physical brand of their abuse by also expelling or abjecting the maternal from them. However, M’s procedure is self-contradictory. On one hand, it may represent an effort towards the undoing of patriarchal violence and the erasure of rape culture; yet, for such restoration of the women’s bodies to their pre-violated state, she has to again perform a penetration or violation through “the mouth, belly, the hole.”⁷⁸ In

⁷² Hall, “M,” 10; emphasis added.

⁷³ Hall, 8.

⁷⁴ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 161.

⁷⁵ Schimanski and Wolfe, “Glossary,” 162.

⁷⁶ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 168, 26.

⁷⁷ Braidotti, 163.

⁷⁸ Hall, “M,” 12.

order not to be the hunt, she seems to necessarily become the hunter, and the raper, herself.

In conclusion, this analysis has shown how the story "M" deals with the "contradictoriness of an abjected force"⁷⁹ and "the varieties of female and bodily experience,"⁸⁰ like Hall's previous works, yet it expands on themes of metamorphosis and liminality more radically, illustrating the author's ongoing critique of gender-based violence but also an awareness of the complexities of resistance. Like Kafka's metamorphosis, M's transformation "of a human into an abject insect is a trip to the limit of one's ability to endure."⁸¹ However, whereas in the other animal-transformation stories of "Bees" and "Mrs. Fox" "collapsing the borderline between subjects and objects, human and non-human, nature and culture makes way for the 'new images of thought'" in the Braidottian sense,⁸² "M" offers a counterpoint to those optimistic views. With its emphasis on the prevalence of (sexual) violence and female victimization, its circular structure, and its use of magical realism to undermine the factuality of metamorphosis, "M" throws into question the possibilities and limits of women's becoming when the structural social inequalities are still not overcome. Its protagonist, situated in between the symbolic mutilation in "Bees" and the complete transformation in "Mrs. Fox," does not completely attain the kind of "affirmative mode of becoming" that Braidotti wishes for.⁸³ Instead, shedding her sexed identity leads her to a rather destructive shortcut. "M" aligns itself thus with Hall's novel *The Electric Michelangelo*, whose tattooed protagonist uses her corporeal battleground against patriarchal sexual victimization and strikes back when she is attacked.⁸⁴ Both texts focus on "the importance of contesting gender-based discrimination" but, even if they are fifteen years apart, "Hall's pessimism toward current strategies of resistance" still resonates in "M."⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Daniel Lea, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Contemporary British Voices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 163.

⁸⁰ Vice, "Sarah Hall," 75.

⁸¹ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 132.

⁸² Walezak, "The Borderline in Sarah Hall's 'Bees,'" 4.

⁸³ Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 99.

⁸⁴ Ashley Orr, "Inked In: The Feminist Politics of Tattooing in Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo*," *Neo-Victorian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 114, <https://neovictorianstudies.com/article/view/86>.

⁸⁵ Orr, 121.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Achilles, Jochen. "Modes of Liminality in American Short Fiction. Condensations of Multiple Identities." In Achilles and Bergmann, Achilles and Bergmann, *Liminality and the Short Story*, 35–49.
- Achilles, Jochen, and Ina Bergmann. "'Betwixt and Between' Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Short Fiction." In Achilles and Bergmann, *Liminality and the Short Story*, 3–31.
- Achilles, Jochen, and Ina Bergmann, eds. *Liminality and the Short Story: Boundary Crossings in American, Canadian, and British Writing*. New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Baker, Timothy C. *Writing Animals: Language, Suffering, and Animality in Twenty-First-Century Fiction*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Basseler, Michael. "Cognitive Liminality: On the Epistemology of the Short Story." In *Liminality and the Short Story*, 77–91.
- Braidotti, Rosi. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge: Polity, 2002.
- Bergoffen, Debra B. "From Genocide to Justice: Women's Bodies as a Legal Writing Pad." *Feminist Studies* 32, no. 1 (2006): 11–37.
- Curti, Lidia. *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.
- Ditter, Julia. "Human into Animal: Post-anthropomorphic Transformations in Sarah Hall's 'Mrs Fox'." In *Borders and Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story*, edited by Barbara Korte and Laura M. Lojo-Rodríguez, 187–204. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Falconer, Rachel. "Crossover Literature." In *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, edited by Peter Hunt, 556–75. New York: Routledge.
- Garvey, Anne. "The Sensual World of Sarah Hall." *Civilian Global*, October 14, 2013. <https://civiangulobal.com/arts/sarah-hall-author-lake-district-bbc-national-short-story-award>.
- Hall, Sarah. *Haweswater*. London: Faber & Faber, 2003.
- Hall, Sarah. *The Electric Michelangelo*. London: Faber & Faber, 2005.
- Hall, Sarah. *The Carhullan Army*. London: Faber & Faber, 2008.
- Hall, Sarah. *The Beautiful Indifference*. London: Faber & Faber, 2011. Kindle.
- Hall, Sarah. *The Wolf Border*. London: Faber & Faber, 2016.
- Hall, Sarah. *Madame Zero*. London: Faber & Faber, 2017. Kindle.
- Hall, Sarah. *Sudden Traveller*. London: Faber & Faber, 2019. Kindle.
- Hansen, Christiane. "Indifferent Borders: Confined and Liminal Spaces in Sarah Hall's 'Bees'." In *Borders and Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story*, edited by Barbara Korte and Laura M. Lojo-Rodríguez, 171–86. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.
- Haraway, Donna. *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003.
- Lea, Daniel. *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: Contemporary British Voices*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017.

- Lönngren, Ann-Sofie. "Reading Transformations: From David Garnett's *Lady into Fox* (1922) to Sarah Hall's "Mrs Fox" (2013)." *European Journal of English Studies* 27, no. 3 (2023): 483–96. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2023.2287096>.
- Müller-Funk, Wolfgang. "Phenomenology of the liminal." In *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings*, edited by Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman, 43–22. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.
- Orr, Ashley. "Inked In: The Feminist Politics of Tattooing in Sarah Hall's *The Electric Michelangelo*." *Neo-Victorian Studies* 9, no. 2 (2017): 97–125. <https://neovictorianstudies.com/article/view/86>.
- Robinson, Iain. "'You just know when the world is about to break apart': Utopia, Dystopia and New Global Uncertainties in Sarah Hall's *The Carhullan Army*." In *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, edited by Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard, 197–211. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Schimanski, Johan, and Stephen F. Wolfe. "Intersections: A Conclusion in the Form of a Glossary." In *Border Aesthetics: Concepts and Intersections*, edited by Johan Schimanski and Stephen F. Wolfe, 147–69. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017.
- Schimanski, Johan, and Jopi Nyman. "Introduction: Images and Narratives on the Border." In *Border Images, Border Narratives: The Political Aesthetics of Boundaries and Crossings*, edited by Johan Schimanski and Jopi Nyman, 1–20. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021.
- Schroeder, Jeanne L. "Strange Bedfellows: Lacan and the Law." *Teoria E Critica Della Regolazione Sociale / Theory and Criticism of Social Regulation* 2, no. 13 (2020): 57–68. <https://mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/tcrs/article/view/121>.
- Vice, Sue. "Sarah Hall: A New Kind of Storytelling." In *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000*, edited by James Acheson, 70–78. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- Walezak, Emilie. "The Borderline in Sarah Hall's 'Bees'." Colloque *Crisis in Contemporary Writing*, British Association for Contemporary Literary Studies, Virtual Conference, 26 June 2020. https://www.bacls.org/documents/449/The_Borderline_in_Sarah_Hall.pdf.
- Zolkover, Adam. "*King Rat* to *Coraline*: Faerie and Fairy Tale in British Urban Fantasy." In *Postmodern Reinterpretations of Fairy Tales: How Applying New Methods Generates New Meanings*, edited by Anna Kérchy, 67–82. Lewiston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2011.

"A CROPPED SILHOUETTE, NEITHER MAMMAL NOR AVIAN":
LIMINALITY AND BECOMING IN SARAH HALL'S "M"

Summary

Although the English writer Sarah Hall is mostly known for her novels about the Cumbrian borderlands between England and Scotland, from *Haweswater* (2003) to *The Wolf Border* (2016), this paper employs a wider understanding of borders and boundaries not just as spatial issues, but as constructs related to embodied and identitarian processes in which borderlines are erected, breached, or destroyed. The story "M," from Hall's last short story collection, *Sudden Traveller* (2019), will be taken as a case in point to illustrate how characteristics of Hall's fiction, such as the representation of an abjected force at the core of human behavior and of the multiplicity of female and bodily experience, are reflected by the articulation of liminal states and the blurring or

breaching of different borders: geographical, corporeal and symbolic. "M" joins thus Hall's previous stories "Bees" and "Mrs. Fox" as the final episode in a trilogy that problematizes the construction of female subjectivity and the crossing of animal-human boundaries.

Keywords: Sarah Hall; short story; liminality; becoming; abjection; embodied identity

„PRZYCIĘTA SYLWETKA, ANI SSAK ANI PTAK”:
LIMINALNOŚĆ I STAWANIE SIĘ W OPOWIADANIU „M” SARAH HALL

Streszczenie

Choć angielska pisarka Sarah Hall znana jest głównie ze swoich powieści o kumbryjskim pograniczu Anglii i Szkocji, artykuł bada poruszaną przez nią kwestię granic nie tylko w kontekście przestrzennym, ale i w kontekście procesów zachodzących podczas kształtowania się tożsamości, w których granice są wznoszone, naruszane lub niszczone. Opowiadanie „M” z ostatniego zbioru opowiadań Hall zatytułowanego *Sudden Traveller* (2019) ukazuje w jaki sposób cechy fikcji pisarki, takie jak reprezentowanie „wewnętrznej sprzeczności budzącej wstręt siły” tkwiącej u podstaw ludzkiego zachowania oraz „różnorodności kobiecego i cielesnego doświadczenia”, znajdują odzwierciedlenie w artykulacji stanów granicznych oraz zacieraniu lub naruszaniu granic geograficznych, cielesnych i symbolicznych. „M”, podobnie jak wcześniejsze opowiadania Hall zatytułowane „Bees” i „Mr. Fox”, problematyzuje konstrukcję kobiecej podmiotowości i przekraczania granic między tym co ludzkie a zwierzęce.

Słowa kluczowe: Sara Hall; opowiadanie; liminalność; stawanie się; tożsamość ucieleśniona; abiekcja