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Touching Scenes: The Politics of Female Touch in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

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TOUCHING SCENES: THE POLITICS OF FEMALE TOUCH IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE

by

MOLLY LIVINGSTON

Under the Direction of Michael Galchinsky, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Victorian literature is crowded with scenes of women reaching out and touching one another. Women regularly show their affection through physical manifestations such as hugging, kissing, walking arm-in-arm, and with hands clasped warmly around one another’s waists. Physical manifestations of female affection recur in the great majority of Victorian fiction, from the early to the late period, in a variety of genres, in literature by both male and female authors, and often recur in chapter after chapter.

My study recognizes that in any society, the tacit rules of who touches whom, when, why, where, and how, are complex and deeply-engrained social issues, and close analysis thereof may thus yield much information about a society’s most deeply held values. In addition,
nineteenth-century England, with its popular reputation for extreme prudery and restraint, is an enticing place to find such myriad description of physical touch. Why, then, are they there, and why so prevalent? What functions do they serve in the texts? How were these women, and their bodies, read by onlookers? And what meaning and values were ascribed to such depictions by Victorian readers? This work begins to answer these questions, codify the implicit politics of social touching between women in Victorian England, provide a justification for the analysis of such scenes in literature, and develop an initial framework for these analyses. My research has determined that touching behaviors function as markers of various identity constructs including gender, (chapter one of this work), and nationality and social standing (chapter two). In addition, some women were able to manipulate expectations surrounding their physical behavior to accomplish their own ends (chapter three), while the physicality of others results in significant or lasting consequences for the individuals who are touched (chapter four).

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to all those who supported me in this process, including my grandparents, John and Annette Livingston, whose loving encouragement was invaluable;

My father, Colin Martin, whose love of literature and education inspired my own;

Peter Koop, without whose endless support this work would not have been completed;

All the women who taught me what it means to be a friend;

And especially my first friend, my best friend, my mother: Peggy Livingston Martin.
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1 Introduction: The Phenomenon of Female Affectionate Touch

1.1 The Research Question

Writing of a trip he made to England in the fifteenth century, the intellectual and philosopher Desiderius Erasmus wrote:

there is a fashion [here] which cannot be commended enough. Wherever you go, you are received on all hands with kisses; when you take leave, you are dismissed with kisses. If you go back, your salutes are returned to you. When a visit is paid, the first act of hospitality is a kiss, and when guests depart, the same entertainment is repeated; wherever a meeting takes place there is kissing in abundance; in fact whatever way you turn, you are never without it. Oh Faustus, if you had once tasted how sweet and fragrant those kisses are, you would indeed wish to be a traveler, not for ten years, like Solon, but for your whole life, in England. (Erasmus 1962:203)

Whatever Erasmus’ experiences may have been in the Middle Ages, English manners would become more “physically uneffusive” by the nineteenth-century (Classen 4). Indeed, in the popular imagination mention of the Victorian period calls to mind images of prudish, straight-laced, and highly constrained individuals. But to believe that the English were always self-restrained is to overlook the habits of certain populations. Victorian literature, in particular, is crowded with images of women reaching out – in markedly unconstrained fashion – and touching one another. Women regularly show their affection through physical manifestations such as hugging, kissing, walking arm-in-arm, and with hands clasped warmly around one another’s waists. Despite the fact that physical manifestations of female affection recur in the great majority of Victorian fiction, from the early to the late period, in a variety of genres, in
literature by both male and female authors, and often recur in chapter after chapter, no scholar has as yet made these depictions the subject of particular study. Given the sheer number of such scenes, this is a serious omission, but not a surprising one. According to historian of the senses Constance Classen, “the decision to omit tactile data is probably not a choice contemporary historians have made as individuals. The decision would seem to have already been made for them by a general, unspoken consensus among academics,” probably because, as Classen goes on to note, “‘high’ culture requires the suppression of the ‘lower’ senses. . . . Touch was typed by scholars of the [nineteenth century] as a crude and uncivilized mode of perception” (xii). Scholars of literature are indeed some of the most likely to succumb to this mode of thought since our work is primarily cerebral and rational both in process (we spend hours a day almost solely in our heads) and in product (abstract theory, criticism, and philosophies constructed solely of the printed word).

But in the last few decades, literary scholars have rediscovered the body and the importance of the senses in sense-making. Perhaps this is because the “senses are socially constructed… [and] most social scientists agree that . . . their topic of interest [be it sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell] is subject to social construction, negotiation, regulation, and control (Vannini et al. 6), and therefore worthy of closer analysis and study. Just as “the senses are skills that we actively employ in interpreting and evaluating the world” (Vannini et al.), literary scholars are discovering the importance of the senses our attempts to make sense of our world, our primary first objective. My study recognizes that in any society, the tacit rules of who touches whom, when, why, where, and how, are complex and deeply-engrained social issues, and close analysis thereof may thus yield much information about a society’s most deeply held values. In addition, nineteenth-century England, with its popular reputation for extreme prudery
and restraint, is an enticing place to find such myriad descriptions of physical touch. Why, then, are they there, and why so prevalent? What functions do they serve in the texts? How were these women, and their bodies, read by onlookers? And what meanings and values were ascribed to such depictions by Victorian readers? This work begins to answer these questions, codify the implicit politics of social touching between women in Victorian England, provide a justification for the analysis of such scenes in literature, and develop an initial framework for these analyses. In sum, my research has determined that touching behaviors function as markers of various identity constructs including gender (chapter one of this work), and nationality and social standing (chapter two). In addition, some women were able to manipulate expectations surrounding their physical behavior to accomplish their own ends (chapter three), while the physicality of others results in significant or lasting consequences for the individuals who are touched (chapter four).

1.2 Literature Review

In 1975, Caroll Smith-Rosenberg wrote that “The female friendship of the nineteenth century, the long-lived, intimate, loving friendship between two women, is an excellent example of the type of historical phenomena which most historians know something about, which few have thought about, and which virtually no one has written about” (1). What was true more than a quarter of a century ago, however, is true no longer. Many well-known scholars, including Lillian Faderman, Tess Coslett, Martha Vicinus, Carolyn Oulton, and Sharon Marcus, have studied and written about female relationships between both fictional and historical Victorian women of all ages and classes. These scholars and others studying women’s friendships have increased modern understanding of Victorian conceptions of gender, sexuality, kinship, and
identity: profound foundational elements that influence every other conceivable area of study of the Victorian world. Despite the considerable critical work published, the field contains ample room for additional study, as even these scholars disagree with one another about some of the most basic elements of nineteenth-century female friendship. While Faderman, for example, maintains that female friendships could exist in a kind of Edenic paradise before the time of Freud and the sexologists, a time when “romantic love and sexual impulse were often considered unrelated” (19), Oulton counters that Victorian writers were not only aware of the dangers erotic possibilities posed towards the social patriarchal order, but that such friendships in fact existed and developed on the basis of “a deliberate rejection of erotic elements, not an ignorance or even unthinking denial of erotic potential” (3). She also contends that a preoccupation with the tangible or intangible, real or imagined degrees of eroticism between friends obscures other questions about the ways in which friendships were regulated by society (Oulton 5).

I agree with Oulton that other important questions about the nature of female friendships are shrouded by preoccupations with the presence or absence of eroticism, and find that one significant element of these relationships, the physical manifestations of affection between friends, is too often ignored, skimmed over, or assumed without exploration in contemporary scholarship on Victorian romantic friendship. Many scholars mention the importance of female friendships to literary plots,¹ but only speak in passing of the frequent physicality exhibited by friends. Smith-Rosenberg herself wrote that “Girls routinely slept together, kissed and hugged

¹ See such critics as Tess Coslett, who maintains that “the coming together of two women is often essential to the resolution of the plot” (3), Sharon Marcus who writes that “Victorian marriage plots depended on friendship between women” (12), and Deborah Gorham, who asserts that “Friendships between girls . . . were meant to foster femininity” (115).
each other” (22) but does not comment further on what these activities signify beyond, perhaps, “An undeniably romantic and even sensual note” (24). Lillian Faderman, too, writes that romantic friends “might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together” (16), and explains that “because there was seemingly no possibility that women would want to make love together, they were permitted a latitude of affectionate expression and demonstration” (152). Sharon Marcus claims that “female friendship allowed middle-class women to enjoy . . . the opportunity to display affection and experience pleasurable physical contact outside marriage without any loss of respectability. Women who were friends, not lovers, wrote openly of exchanging kisses and caresses. . . . Women regularly kissed each other on the lips. . . .” (57-8). Barickman, MacDonald, and Stark argue that “Victorian women in general enjoyed considerable freedom to feel and display love for each other, even allowing for literary heightening and idealization” (81). And Carolyn Oulton states that “Feeling between friends might be mediated through the carefully chosen terms of letters or diaries, but it was also expressed through physical gesture” (23). Thus, while the physicality shared by women friends is frequently noted, it is a phenomenon not explored in depth by critics.

This is not to say that all physicality is overlooked by literary critics. Various scholars note the importance of descriptions of physicality, like Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, who note that, “behind the apparently most trivial differences of gesture and comportment there lie fundamental differences of social relationship and attitude. To interpret and account for a gesture is to unlock the whole social and cultural system of which it is a part” (11). These critics argue that “gesture formed an indispensable element in the social interaction of the past. [And] . . . it can offer a key to some of the fundamental values and assumptions underlying a particular society; as the French historians would say, it illuminates mentalité” (5). They do not,
however, explore the Victorian period, or physicality between women, particularly. There is also the work of Constance Classen. She recognizes that “touch lies at the heart of our experience of ourselves and the world yet it often remains unspoken and, even more so, unhistoricized” (Deepest xi). This omission she works to correct in her studies of the history of touch.

Touching behaviors should be read as signifiers because:

“Our hands and bodies learn to ‘speak’ a certain language of touch, a language shaped by culture and inflected by individuals. We learn what to touch, how to touch, and what significance to give different kinds of touch. Laden with meaning and bound by rules, touch has what could be called a vocabulary and a grammar. . . . Caresses and blows express profoundly and instantly what language labors over at length. A kiss is worth a thousand words. Touch precedes, informs and overwhelms language. (Book of Touch 13)

Classen’s work seeks to justify the study of the sense of touch by academics, and explore the values ascribed to the sense of touch beginning with Biblical accounts and moving through various ages, but like Bremmer and Roodenburg, her work explores touch in a grand, historical sweep, mentioning the nineteenth century only briefly. In addition, her work studies all aspects of the haptic – that is, the ways in which individuals touch inanimate materials and use sensory information to understand the world around them. Though she comments on reciprocal touch, she is less interested in individuals touching one another than in individuals’ conception of one of their five senses. Robert Jütte, in his A History of the Senses, takes a similar broad and historical view of the sense of touch dating back to the Classical period, and notes that “the transformation of the sense of touch in the industrial age is still uncharted territory” (216). My work addresses this period as these studies do not.
One scholar who does focus his attention on the Victorian period as he examines significations of the body is William A. Cohen. In his *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*, Cohen “analyzes the means by which the effect of . . . immaterial, psychological depth is produced: surprisingly, through the depiction of physical substances, interaction, and incorporation” (xi-xii). In other words, Cohen seeks to understand how the soul or spirit of an individual was depicted by Victorian authors, and he concludes that it was communicated through physical descriptions. He does not address women or their physical behaviors towards one another, but like all the critics listed here, his work demonstrates the interest scholars are developing at the intersection of studies of literature, the body, and the senses.

The subject of female touch in the Victorian period has been specifically addressed by Ann Marie Carmela Gagné in her 2011 dissertation, “Touching Bodies/Bodies Touching: The Ethics of Touch in Victorian Literature (1860-1900).” Her work is preoccupied with female touch (that is, in females touching other people, or in other people touching females, not necessarily in females touching one another) in relation to the Contagious Disease Act (CDA) of 1864. She is primarily concerned with the ways in which displays of touch in Victorian literature work through anxieties regarding disease and containment evidenced by the CDA. Therefore, although she focuses specifically on female touch in the Victorian period, this area yet contains considerable room for further study.

1.3 *Methodology: Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu*

As I explore the phenomenon of female reciprocal touch in this study, the work of two prominent scholars of the body will be vital: Judith Butler and Pierre Bourdieu. Butler’s theories of performativity are essential because they account for ways in which the stylization of
the female body denotes a particular gender to onlookers. In other words, her work, like Bourdieu’s, explains why the physical body signifies immaterial and abstract concepts. Bourdieu’s concepts of *habitus* and *bodily hexis*, similarly, describe how the body comes to denote abstract concepts of class, nationality, and level of breeding. Because both theories will have implications for my project, I will delineate them at some length here.

Though Victorians could not have access to Butler’s theories concerning the ways in which a person’s exterior, manners, and actions signify gender, they would certainly concur that certain outer points could be read as signifying femininity. According to Gesa Stedman, even middle class Victorians were familiar with the eighteenth-century physiological theories of Johann Caspar Lavater who claimed that “the body and the face mirror the “true” character and emotional state of a person” (Stedman 52). According to his theories, characteristics of a person’s inherent disposition could be read in his or her face. It is not a far stretch for persons to believe, then, that such characteristics can also be read in a person’s actions. Indeed, according to Marjorie Morgan,

> In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, people [believed] . . . all forms of invisible reality including character, emotions and truth had . . . corresponding visible manifestations that were easily perceived. In fact, they invested the whole material world with a chain of significant hidden, spiritual implications. With regard to people, the most minute details of physical appearance were thought to betray the innermost recesses of the heart and mind. (Morgan 69-70)

Morgan does not make explicit reference to gestures or physical actions, mentioning instead the cut of a person’s clothing as an example of the sort of “minute details” which were thought to
have “significant . . . implications,” but an individual’s physical gestures certainly seem to fit into the category of “visible manifestations that were easily perceived.” The belief that an individual possesses an inherent character is echoed by Mrs. Sandford in her etiquette manual, *Woman in her Social and Domestic Character*, when she writes that

however contrary to the theory of some, it is very evident that there is an innate moral and intellectual bias, which contributes greatly to the formation of individual character. It is in the mind as in the body; there is a peculiarity in each which no training can take away, which is observable, not only in those pre–eminently distinguished, but in all. For all have their peculiar aspect, as well as their general resemblance; and we need not be indebted to physiognomical or phrenological science for a truth which experience and observation sufficiently discover. (130–1)

My point here, is that both nineteenth-century individuals and novelists, totally unaware of what Judith Butler would theorize in the twentieth century with regard to gender, could still have made use of contemporary theories of signification when attempting to communicate their own or their characters’ dispositions through outward signifiers.

While Victorian women may have carried out their gender norms unawares, many modern readers of Judith Butler might recognize demonstrations of female amity as one of the “sustained set of acts” that produce the “effect” of gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xv-xvi). In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler writes that “‘Sex’ is . . . not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the forms by which the ‘one’ becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility” (*Bodies* 2). Gender is the process by which an “it,” a pronoun which references an object, comes to be a “he”
or a “she,” the pronoun which refers to a subject. In relation to this study, an individual must become and enact “she” in order to have a place in nineteenth-century English society, and the more feminine a woman she shows herself to be, the greater the cultural capital she will possess. Butler claims that “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection” (Bodies 3). The child will realize, likely quite early on, that “we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right” (Gender 190). In the nineteenth century, those who failed “to do their gender right” faced the possibility that they might end their life stigmatized as old maids, never having achieved that position society around them nearly universally cried out to be best, most worthy, and most natural.

Butler outlines her theory of performativity most cogently when she states, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Gender 45). Four implications of this theory will be significant to this study. First, Butler believes that there is no gendered core at the heart of any human being; the idea of the gendered core is an illusion, “the appearance of substance.” Butler develops this idea from Simone de Beauvoir’s famous statement that “One is not born a woman, but rather, becomes one” (Butler, Gender 11) and also from Nietzsche’s claim that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed - the deed is everything” (Butler, Gender 34). As such, Butler’s theory conflicts with the Victorian notion that individuals possess a “true character” (Stedman 53) or that something inherent exists in the “innermost recesses of the heart and mind” (Morgan 69-70). Despite this apparent conflict, both Butler and the Victorians agree that outward actions signify; they only disagree about what is signified through the use of signs. The Victorians believed actions signified an inner core; Butler believes actions signify the
illusion of a core. According to either theory, however, such actions are signs: interpretable social factors that others will use to define and categorize the individual enacting them.

A second implication of Butler’s theory is that gender consists of actions and deeds, or, as Butler phrases it, “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.” Such actions include “bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds” (Gender 191). Thus, gender plays out on the exterior of the body. It is my contention here that the Victorians understood female affectionate touch to signify femininity, as well as nationality, class, and level of breeding. This is because affectionate touch is a “bodily gesture” that indicates qualities considered feminine according to the “regulatory frame” of the time. The frame in question here is not just the culture of Victorian England, but the gender expectations of that time period which insisted that “real” women were by nature domestic and nurturing. The display of female affection in the bounds of a female friendship is therefore extremely functional. Kissing, caressing, shaking hands, and walking arm-in-arm are all examples of “bodily gestures [and] movements” that relay gender expectations. Because these deeds signify affection, which is the primary characteristic of femininity for the Victorians, such actions appear to manifest a woman’s particularly feminine nature.

Third, one’s actions must be endlessly repeated. For Butler, this is because one never finishes becoming one’s gender. In Butler’s words, “gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker” (Gender 152). Because a stable gender is never reached, one must forever be insisting and showing that one is one’s gender. Gender is “a norm that can never be fully internalized . . . gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody” (Gender 192). Because an individual can never embody her gender norms, can never be feminine, she must
perpetually act feminine in order to maintain the gendered illusion. Similarly, many Victorians certainly believed, as the conduct book writer Sarah Stickney Ellis claims, that “minor parts of domestic and social intercourse . . . strengthen into habit . . . and . . . form the basis of moral character” (Ellis, *Women* Preface). Thus, character can only be formed by a repetition of deeds and acts. In addition, the “fleeting” nature of society (Morgan 104) meant that identity must be constantly reenacted for new people and scenes. Finally, to cease enacting one’s gender through signification would have seemed like a repression of identity and thus an affectation. For both Butler and the Victorians, then, repeated acts and deeds are necessary in the process of signification. This implication has important ramifications for female friendship because friendships are available to every woman regardless of age, rank, education, or breeding. Long before a woman can signify her femininity through her position as a wife, and years after she is no longer a wife or daughter due to the death of a spouse or parents, the vehicle of friendship remains. In addition, one may have only two parents, and only one spouse, but several female friends. As such, one may interact with a variety of female friends at various times and places when other relations are far away. In essence, there is rarely an occasion, public or private, in which a woman cannot signify various identity constructs through affection shown to her female friends.

Fourth and finally, the action of gender “is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not inconsequential” (*Gender* 191). While a woman can perform actions alone, actions only signify gender to others when those others are somehow present to read the gendered cues. If the deed that signifies a

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2 Thomas Gisborne concurs, as when he writes that “‘Man,’ it has been well observed, ‘is a bundle of habits’” (204).
woman’s gender is a show of affection to another, then at least one other person (the friend) must be present every time the deed is performed. Even when no additional onlookers are present, as in a private meeting between two individuals, the recipient of a woman’s affection is ever present to mark the demonstration of a woman’s warm, affectionate, feminine nature. Dress, for example, does not necessitate the presence of another individual in the way a show of physical affection does. This is yet another reason that touch is an effective signifier of femininity.

Thus, Butler’s performativity theory helps to explain how physical touch between women functions in regard to gender identity. Because individuals, including the Victorians, “persistently disavow” the abjection of sex, women consciously and unconsciously enact the norms of their gender according to the prescriptions of their time and culture. In the nineteenth century, they did this, in part, by repeatedly, physically, and publically deploying physical touch as a sign of sincerity, spontaneity, and affection.

In addition to signifying femininity, touching behaviors can also signify identity constructs like nationality, class, and level of breeding. In any society, the rules of who touches whom, and when, where, why, and how, are not set down in manuals or even taught explicitly by parents to their children. Yet the rules are of vital import. To touch another person inappropriately (according to any society’s standards) is a faux pas which can make the toucher appear socially inept at best, or ignorant or dangerous at worst. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus and bodily hexis help to explain this phenomenon.

To begin, we must understand Bourdieu’s terminology. He speaks regularly of his concept of habitus but often in fairly roundabout and somewhat ambiguous terms. The habitus is comprised of “systems of durable, transposable dispositions” (emphasis in original, 72) and it
is “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations” (78). But this is what the *habitus* does – it regulates behavior – and not what it *is*. He later explains that it is “a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class and constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception” (86). Bourdieu’s language here, as in almost all his writing, is complex and perhaps even convoluted. Sociologist Kate Cregan helps to clarify in more straightforward terms Bourdieu’s useful concept. She writes that *habitus* is:

the social, cultural and physical environment that we as social beings inhabit, through which we know ourselves and others identify us. The factors . . . include, but are not limited to, the level of education one had reached, the kind of work one does, the sort of entertainments one enjoys, the places one goes, the cultural pursuits one takes part in or values, the class one identifies with, and so on. (66)

According to these definitions, *habitus* is that which defines for individuals what is ideal or acceptable behavior, attitudes, beliefs, and actions. It develops largely as the result of the geography in which an individual lives, both nationally and locally; partly as a product of one’s culture, in terms of the family, class, and societies to which one belongs; and somewhat as the consequence of one’s education, both formal and informal. As such, the *habitus* of the Frenchman will differ markedly from the Englishman’s, the country dweller from the city, the upper from the lower classes, and the educated from the uneducated. It develops for persons individually in terms of their different experiences in life, but completely unrelated persons with very similar experiences of geography, class, and education will develop markedly similar *habitus*, and as such will exhibit markedly similar physical behaviors, as in their use of touch.
Bodily expression is particularly important to Bourdieu’s sociological theories, and the embodiment of the *habitus* – the ways in which a person’s perceptions are outwardly physically manifested – is termed bodily *hexis*. In Bourdieu’s words, “bodily *hexis* is political mythology realized, *em-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of *feeling* and *thinking*” (emphasis in original, 93-4). For example, the undeveloped musculature of a woman of leisure, her sedate pace, her propensity to tire easily, or to be sensitive to powerful smells or noises, are all part of bodily *hexis*. Such a bodily *hexis* is both the natural consequence *and* the learned product of *habitus*. In other words, such a woman, not forced to work for her subsistence, simply does not develop physical strength as a dairy maid or maid-of-all-work would be forced to do; she walks slowly because she is not forced to accomplish as much as possible in a given period of time, and sheltered from the world at large, she is not accustomed to the barrage of sensory input other women of her age and country are subjected to. She also perceives early that a woman of her station *should not* walk hurriedly, or appear unperturbed by the sounds and smells abounding, for example, in a London slum or city port. Because these behaviors are learned at a young age and become inscribed into the body through, for example, muscle memory, and greater or lesser strength and flexibility of sinews, tendons, and tissues through early physical development, bodily deportment and gestures are difficult to alter in later adulthood. Thus bodily deportment and gestures become more valuable markers of identify because they seem to reveal a more essential truth, or history, of a person as a result of the fact that they are difficult to consciously manipulate for effect. This is not to say that individuals did not attempt to manipulate bodily signifiers. The common theme in conduct manuals warning against the affectation of manners is evidence that they regularly did. The affectation of fainting or frequent illness to suggest high sensibility or delicacy is one common
example. And in chapter three of this work I will discuss additional ways women utilized the expectations surrounding touch to further their own agendas. The key is that these physical markers seemed to be more accurate signifiers because consciously manipulating them is challenging.

These bodily manners develop in childhood though they can be altered or refined, to a limited extent, in adulthood. Bourdieu explains that “children are particularly attentive to the gestures and postures which, in their eyes, express everything that goes to make an accomplished adult – a way of walking, a tilt of the head, facial expressions, ways of sitting and of using implements, always associated with . . . a certain subjective experience” (87-8). It is because cultural concepts of acceptable bodily behavior are developed, mostly unconsciously, in youth, that the bodily hexas of an individual, including their touching behaviors, is of such import with regard to identity constructs. That which is unconsciously learned and long practiced is most difficult to alter and is thus seen to be a truer mark of an individual’s identity than signifiers that can be more easily changed like dress and even, to some extent, language. And so, in Hardy’s The Mayor of Casterbridge, Lucetta La Sueur can change her name to Lucetta Templeton, move to a rural English town, speak the English language, and assert volubly “I am English!” (183),

3 Bourdieu is not the first to notice the mimicry of children and the importance of this process in the development of a child’s behavior. In 1892 Lady Violet Greville, in her The Gentlewoman in Society, notes that “One cannot begin to study Society's mysterious laws too early; and the conscientious parent (in Society) trains her child almost from infancy. Soon, very soon, the little thing learns to take care of its clothes; to behave ‘prettily,’ as it is called; to resist its little greedy instincts, and to copy its mother's manners and it's visitor's ways as accurately as possible. Children are essentially mimics. . . .” (2-3).
but it is obvious to others nonetheless that she is “of unmistakably French extraction” (156) which is shown in her body. In front of a young woman she hardly knows, Lucetta displays a “reckless skip” (156) and lies on a sofa in a “flexuous position . . . throwing her arm above her brow – somewhat in the pose of a well-known conception of Titian” (156), motions which lack the reserved dignity an Englishwoman would like to be seen to possess, and which seem part and parcel with Lucetta’s “native lightness of heart” (184). Similarly, in Dickens’ Bleak House, Lady Dedlock can dress in her maid’s clothes and walk alone through London believing that she is disguised, but even the poorest crossing-sweep recognizes at once that she is a lady, not a servant, because “between [her] plain dress, and her refined manner, there is something exceedingly inconsistent. She should be an upper servant by her attire, yet, in her air and step, though both are hurried and assumed . . . she is a lady” (emphasis added, 200). Lucetta and Lady Dedlock can seek to alter the ways they are perceived but their bodily movements, part of their bodily hexis, learned as a result of the habitus they each inhabited as children, belie their altered names, homes, language, and clothes. After all, as Bourdieu writes, the principles em-bodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, made body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy. (94) Lucetta and Lady Dedlock developed their respective bodily hexis in childhood as a result of their environments, their habitus. Lucetta, raised in Jersey, developed modes of behavior
common to the French amongst whom she lived. Lady Dedlock absorbed the movements appropriate to a woman of her high class. Neither realizes the extent to which her bodily movements signify and give her away when she seeks to be recognized as something other.

Bourdieu also explains why one movement signifies (like Lucetta’s deportment and Lady Dedlock’s walk) even when other marks (like the former’s language and geography and the latter’s dress) are altered. He asserts: “the logic of scheme transfer which makes each technique of the body a sort of *pars totalis*, predisposed to function in accordance with the fallacy *pars pro toto*, and hence to evoke the whole system of which it is a part, gives a very general scope to the seemingly most circumscribed and circumstantial observances” (emphasis in original, *Outline* 94). In other words, each action, each behavior, each gesture, each part of a whole (*pars totalis*) leads an observer to (mis)recognize the part as the whole. The process of logic at work here may indeed, as Bourdieu notes, lead to a fallacy. One part cannot always stand for the whole (the fallacy *pars pro toto*); an observer may be misled. Nonetheless, such a process is very commonly practiced and, fallacy though it may sometimes lead to, the observers of Lucetta and Lady Dedlock show that the logical process does not always fail. Indeed, Lucetta is part ethnically French and was raised in a French-speaking land. Lady Dedlock is by class indubitably a lady. Had observers of Lucetta and Lady Dedlock mistaken a different part for the whole, judging Lucetta to be English because she speaks it, or Lady Dedlock to be a lady’s maid because she is dressed as one, however, such observers would have been wrong. But this very reasoning underscores Bourdieu’s point that “nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, *made body*” (*Outline* 94). Body language – not vocal language, dress, or wealth – is the
signifier of identity *par excellence*. Affectionate touch between women can thus be understood as a prime signifier of identity, specifically of Englishness and of level of breeding in society.

The *habitus* is thus the source of an individual’s *dispositions*, that is, the likelihood or tendency of individuals to favor certain actions and strategies in the social world over others. The social world is made up of various fields of practice within which individuals have a certain degree of maneuverability. In is in maneuverability, in the ability of individuals to make choices to better their circumstances in a particular field, that agency lies.

While Bourdieu continually recurs to the vast power of the *habitus* to structure our daily lives, he does not completely deny the power of an individual to reflect on a situation and consciously alter her behavior purposefully. Simple observation shows that individuals reflect and make conscious decisions to a greater or lesser degree according to their natural inclination and degree of education. Bourdieu recognizes this fact, and assures us that “times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted, constitute a class of circumstances when indeed ‘rational choice’ may take over” (*Invitation* 131). My research confirms that individuals certainly make conscious decisions regarding their behavior and gestures in order to adjust to specific situations, and so Bourdieu’s caveat is important. I do, however, understand “times of crises” in a very broad sense as including moments of extreme duress, as well as any sort of turning-point, especially any time in which an individual attempts to adjust her behavior to the demands of a new and different *habitus*. This occurs, for example, when the eponymous heroine of *Miss Marjoribanks* must adjust her behavior patterns, formally predicated on her reading of novels, to the actual society of her hometown of Carlingford, or when Becky Sharp on *Vanity Fair* finds herself amongst a higher class of people than previously.
Bourdieu again and again assures his readers that the “habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experienced, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure. It is durable but not eternal!” (Invitation 133). While the habitus may give exceptional weight to early experiences, it also evolves with changing circumstances. Like the young Catherine Moreland in Austen’s Northanger Abbey whose habitus expands first when she leaves her family and small rural town to live for some time in Bath, and then again when she resides for a time with the higher-class Tilney family at Northanger Abbey, individuals who encounter and live amongst those with a different habitus will find their own habitus, and thus dispositions, expanded in consequence. Naturally, this expansion and growth of the habitus, and the embodiment (or bodily hexis) of those dispositions, is dependent upon complete immersion in an alternative social group for some time. Bourdieu even notes that “adjustments . . . are constantly required by the necessities of adaptation to new and unforeseen situations” and that such “Adjustments . . . bring about durable transformation of the habitus” (Sociology 87). Bourdieu’s theories therefore provide for opportunities for individuals to take make purposeful changes in their own lives in order to better their own circumstances, regardless of how “durable” the habitus, developed early and unconsciously, may be. The theories surrounding performativity, habitus, and bodily hexis will undergird my claims throughout this study regarding the ability of touching behaviors to serve as signifiers of identity and tools of empowerment.
1.4 Chapter Descriptions

The four chapters of this study are designed to move from touch’s capacity to serve as a signifier of one of the most elemental identity concepts (gender) in chapter one, to broader concepts of nationality, class, and level of breeding in chapter two; from there, I examine the ways expectations surrounding touching behaviors are manipulated to achieve women’s personal desires in chapter three, and finally analyze the profound and lasting consequences these actions can have on individual characters, and literary plots, in chapter four. Thus, while all chapters in this work are concerned with determining what functions touching scenes serve in the literature, the first two chapters are concerned with touch as signifier – that is, with how touching behaviors serve to indicate the identity of the toucher – while the second two chapters are concerned with touch as expressive act – that is, with how these behaviors function in relation to others. In making claims about the capacity of touching behaviors in the Victorian period, I examine non-fiction conduct material written throughout the nineteenth-century, including texts written and published from 1763 to 1893, and analyze a variety of fiction to show that the same social expectations surrounding physical touch can be found in novels, novellas, and verse, as well as in parodies, gothic horror stories, and realist fiction. This fiction includes work by both male and female authors, canonical writers and non, and ranges from an Austen text written in the 1790s to an 1896 novel by Mary Augusta Ward. The texts examined in this work are chosen to emphasize the deeply-rooted and pervasive nature of expectations surrounding female touch in England in the nineteenth century. Fictions, and particularly novels, are explored to such an extent for various reasons. Firstly, according to Nancy Armstrong, “the rise of the novel hinged upon a struggle to say what made a woman desirable” (Armstrong 4-5). In other words, the popularity of novels was predicated on changing societal expectations and individuals’ desire to navigate
new societal norms. Secondly, or perhaps, as a result, “texts can function as intentional or unintentional conduct books, a purpose of which Victorian writers and readers were well aware” (Stedman 2). If novels function in some ways as conduct manuals, then they will exemplify ideal systems of behavior. As Pauline Nestor writes, the:

inclination to privilege the insights offered by literature is particularly marked in regard to the nineteenth century when the popularity of fiction made it perhaps the most potent form of social commentary. [Many factors] suggest its capacity not merely to reflect, but to amplify and deepen contemporary debate. . . . The essayist may write for his hundreds, the preacher preach for his thousands; but the novelist counts his audience by millions. His power is three-fold - over heart, reason, and fancy. (2-3)

Novels have the ability both to reflect and to suggest social norms and values. The genre therefore reacts to society, and influences it, and it does this on a colossal level since the readership of many popular novelists numbered, as Nestor notes, in the millions.

In Chapter One of this work I examine some of the most highly-valued characteristics of the feminine woman in Victorian society – characteristics that center on a woman’s presumed capacity for affection, warmth, and ability to nurture – and determine that these traits are particularly suited to communication via the vehicle of female affectionate touch. Authors like Charles Dickens in his 1852 novel, *Bleak House*, and Elizabeth Gaskell in her 1866 novel, *Wives and Daughters* utilize implicit social conceptions of female touch to signify the femininity, and thus, desirability, of their characters. This chapter also begins to codify the politics of female touch; specifically, in order for touching behaviors to signify the feminine, touch between friends
must be spontaneous, sincere, and affectionate in nature. Characters whose physical behaviors lack sincerity and spontaneity, then, or whose actions are not propelled by a deep well of warmth and regard, are marked instead as lacking in the feminine ideal.

While chapter one suggests that female affectionate touch is a highly respected process for its ability to signify female desirability, chapter two will show that touch was subject to additional tacit regulation. Unless she conforms to these further rules, a very tactile woman might be considered to the Victorians highly feminine, but rather girlish, and not necessarily well-bred. This is due to the high value the English placed on self-restraint. It was therefore incumbent on women who wished to appear refined to carefully walk the line between display of affection (to portray themselves as feminine) and restraint (to portray themselves as well-bred Englishwomen). In Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (which was written in the 1790s), Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), and Sheridan La Fanu’s 1872 *Carmilla* (1872), male and female authors of parodies, realist fiction, verse, and gothic vampire stories reaffirm the following wide-spread cultural dictates surrounding female affectionate touch: that is, that scenes of affection should take place in private, be gentle, and always be initiated by the woman of higher social standing. Female touch that does not abide by these rules marked the toucher as Other – in terms of their nationality, class status or level of breeding.

Chapter three moves from examining female affectionate touch as a marker of identity, to a vehicle for the achievement of personal goals, and begins to examine how such bodily behaviors impact those touched. Touch functions in this way because it allows the toucher to draw the gaze of others, to manipulate the way she is viewed by others, and to alter the behavior of others. Physical behaviors have such power because while calling attention to the self was
generally disparaged, demonstrations of affection were socially accepted, encouraged, and well-regarded by onlookers. As such, William Thackeray in *Vanity Fair* (1847) and Margaret Oliphant in *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866) create heroines highly gifted at influencing and even manipulating their social surroundings through the employment of physical affection with other women. Touch is a tool, and sometimes a weapon, with which women could influence their social standing and personal opportunities.

In keeping with the way chapter three examines touch as an instrument of influence, chapter four shows that physical behaviors can have great significance for the touched as well as the toucher. This is because touch is a powerful demonstrator of sympathy, and so even between women who are not friends, who may in fact dislike one another, the deployment of physical behavior can have a powerful emotional effect, especially when one of the women is experiencing extreme distress. In George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* of 1871 and Mary Augusta Ward’s *Sir George Tressady* of 1896, displays of physical affection between disparate women are shown to break down distance between the characters, and to affect a conversion of mental feeling in the individual who is touched. While the conversion of the individual may be long-lasting or transient, in both cases the scenes have serious ramifications for the plot of the texts, suggesting the enormous capacity Victorian authors attributed to the phenomenon of female affectionate touch.
2 “This little action”: The Feminine Manner of Touch

In her final novel, *Wives and Daughters*, Elizabeth Gaskell presents a seemingly simple scene of female amity between the novel’s heroine, Molly Gibson, and her soon-to-be stepmother, Hyacinth Kirkpatrick. Gaskell writes:

Molly and her future stepmother wandered about in the gardens with their arms round each other’s waists, or hand in hand, like two babes in the wood; Mrs. Kirkpatrick active in such endearments, Molly passive, and feeling within herself very shy and strange; for she had that particular kind of shy modesty which makes any one uncomfortable at receiving caresses from a person towards whom the heart does not go forth with an impulsive welcome. (133)

Between the physical description the reader receives of Molly’s physical passivity, and the narrator’s interjection regarding her “shy modesty,” Gaskell seems to have something particular to say about affection and physical touch. Given that Molly is the novel’s heroine and the superficial Mrs. Kirkpatrick a foil to her sincerity and simplicity of heart, Gaskell perhaps also expects her readers to make inferences regarding the ideal nature of a young Englishwoman. This account of the physical affection shown between two women is not unique in the novel. Such scenes abound, as when the narrator writes that Molly “went to Mrs. Hamley, and bent over her and kissed her; but she did not speak” (78), “the smile was still on [Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s] pretty rosy lips, and the soft fondling of [Molly’s] hand never stopped” (132), “Lady Harriet stopped to kiss Molly on the forehead” (164), “the two ladies went arm-in-arm into the ballroom. . . . until Miss Phoebe and Miss Piper . . . came in, also arm-in-arm, but with a certain timid flurry in look and movement” (281), and that Cynthia “suddenly took Molly round the waist, and began waltzing about the room with her” (424). Many other depictions of physical
touch, between virtually all the women in the text, litter the pages of *Wives and Daughters*. What is Gaskell saying about female affection, physical touch, and ideal (or not-so-ideal) feminine behavior? Perhaps, in fact, Gaskell is exemplifying critic Sharon Marcus’s claim that, “a woman's susceptibility to another woman defined rather than defied femininity” (83-4). In other words, these women demonstrate their femininity by displaying the effect that their affections have on one another.

A closer look at such scenes of physical intimacy between women in nineteenth-century novels reveals much about larger Victorian concerns with affection and sensibility, femininity, and identity. Given that nineteenth century English society propagated the belief that a woman’s nature suited her most imminently for wife- and motherhood, and that certain “feminine” traits of affection and simplicity of heart were considered essential in the domestic woman, it was necessary that women who desired to marry show themselves as possessing these characteristics. Using Judith Butler’s performativity theory which states that “gender is the repeated stylization of the body” (*Gender Trouble* 45), I contend here that one powerful vehicle for presenting a woman’s femininity and therefore, desirability, was the deployment of affectionate female touch. More specifically, I argue that certain kinds of touch between close friends – specifically spontaneous, sincere and affectionate touch – signified for the Victorians a distinctly feminine identity, indicating in the participants the aptitude for sensuality and a loving, ‘womanly’ heart. Conversely, touch between women that did not meet such standards could be read as suspicious or problematic. An examination of the heroines in Charles Dickens’ 1852 novel, *Bleak House*, and Elizabeth Gaskell’s 1866 novel, *Wives and Daughters*, exemplifies the ability of touch to function in this way.
2.1 Displaying the Inner Self

The belief that a woman’s place was in the home developed primarily in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the body versus mind distinctions that underwrite this assumption appeared much earlier. Cartesian Dualism dates to the sixteen hundreds when René Descartes proposed that the mind is separate from the body, and that the mind is simply a “ghost” that inhabits a body that is more-or-less a “machine.” This duality of human existence allowed other thinkers to map gender beliefs thereto: the mind, associated with truth and rational thought, was considered male, and the body, the seat of the senses and associated therefore with the passions, female. In this way, women were understood not just to live in their physical bodies, but to exist entirely as physical, sensing beings (Cregan 9, 49). Later, concurrent with the pseudo-scientific theories of the eighteenth century, the work of French social thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau helped to give life to the doctrine of the separation of spheres (Gallagher 67). Because women are not, according to Rousseau and these theories, abstract thinkers, since they are animal-like, natural bodies taking concrete action, their physicality is especially important given that it constitutes them almost entirely. Pseudo-scientific medical studies of the eighteenth century modeling male and female as opposite and complimentary (Gallagher viii, 2, 43) (rather than similar but hierarchically understood) beings strengthened such theories.4 By the Victorian

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4 Indeed, Ruskin, in his Letters and Advice to Young Girls and Young Ladies, claims that “we are foolish, and without excuse foolish, in speaking of the ‘superiority’ of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not: each completes the other, is completed by the other: that are in nothing alike” (33). And in 1858 Dinah Mulock Craik, in speaking of the sexes, claims “equality of the sexes is not in the nature of things. Man and woman were made for, and not like one another” (6).
era, it therefore appeared entirely sensible that the logical male should rule the political and commercial realms, while the emotional female, because of her inherent nature, should remain in the home, where the physical, concrete body would order the home, birth and nurture the children, and enact and perform those intimate connections with other individuals that produce the web of social life.\(^5\) The ideal of the domestic woman was born.\(^6\)

The daily life of the physically bound, emotional female would therefore include regular and frequent use of the bodily senses. It is important also to note that although the senses—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and most centrally here, touch—in being intrinsically linked with the corporeal, are read by Victorians as feminine in comparison to the masculine mind, they could be individually gendered as male or female when considered alone. According to Constance Classen, while the “higher” senses of sight and sound were connected with the male, “touch, taste and smell were generally held to be the lower senses and thus were readily linked to the lower sex—women” (Deepest 75). Historian of the senses Robert Jütte reaffirms this conviction, \(^5\)

\(^5\) These theories are echoed in the period by writers who claimed, like Sarah Stickney Ellis, the author of conduct books for women, that woman is “inferior in mental power” (Daughters 6) and “more quick to feel than to understand” (Daughters 10); above all, Ellis asserts, “to love, is woman’s nature” (Daughters 11). Reading Ellis and many other contemporary authors writing about women, modern critics declare that “Throughout much of the nineteenth century….Men tried to claim exclusively for themselves the capacity of action and thought, and relegated women to the realm of sensibility alone” (Faderman 157).

\(^6\) Various authors propound this theory, such as John Sandford in his 1833 book, Woman in her Social and Domestic Character, who claims “Domestic life is the chief sphere of her influence; and domestic comfort is the greatest benefit she confers upon society” (2).
stating that “The five senses are commonly ranked in descending order of merit, beginning with
the highest, which is almost always sight, and ending with the lowest, which is usually
sensation” (63). To touch, then, is doubly feminine, and should thus bear close scrutiny in
studies of Victorian age texts. It is no surprise that Victorian women’s work was mostly physical
in nature and often the work of the hand, such as sewing to clothe the children, embroidering to
embellish the home, or preserving food to nourish the family. It should also come as no surprise
that women’s relationships with others in the nineteenth century would be often constituted
through physical touch.

That woman belonged in the home, enacting those handiworks necessary to physical life
in the form of food and shelter and the bearing and caretaking of children, was clearly accepted
by the English in the nineteenth century.7 A difficulty with the prescription that women’s nature
destined them to be wives and mothers arose, however, due to the problem of “the excess
woman.”8 The corollary to the fact that many women would not marry is that, considering the
excess “supply,” competition for the available positions of “wife” would soar. By virtue of
considerable wealth, title, or beauty, some women could afford the luxury of rising above such
struggles, but the greater majority of middle class women could not. Even those who, due to the
above claims, were fairly secure in their prospects of marriage would face the ever-present

7 Indeed, according to Dinah Mulock Craik writing in 1858, “the first, highest, and in earlier
times almost universal lot” of women is “’in sorrow to bring forth’ – and bring up – ‘children’”
(6–7). She also states that, “respect for Grandfather Adam and Grandmother Eve must compel
us to admit [that the single state in women] is an unnatural condition of being” (2).

8 The Census of 1851 revealed that there existed in England nearly a half million more
marriageable women than men (Nestor 3).
struggle for the choicest husbands. For example, in *The Way We Live Now*, Georgiana Longstaffe, daughter of a petit-aristocrat family, expects a husband in the Upper House of Parliament. As she ages, “she moved her castle in the air from the Upper to the Lower House” but is thankful that she “had not as yet come down among the rural Whitstables” (Trollope 264). Therefore, for those whose portion of the above qualities was negligible, and even for those who were more assured, presenting themselves as ideal wives and mothers would be vital. In her book, *Manners, Morals and Class in England*, Marjorie Morgan speaks of the “puffing” that was often done to draw consumer’s attention to products. She writes,

> Artful presentation that concealed the faults and heightened the appeal of “stuffs or trinkets” was, in a highly commercial society, not only a matter of fashion, but an economic necessity as well. As the market became more intensely competitive in the early industrial period, material goods had to be rendered increasingly conspicuous and seductive in order to attract people’s attention and pocket-books.

(Morgan 111)

Though she is speaking of “stuffs or trinkets,” Morgan might just as successfully, I contend, have substituted “marriageable women.” After all, the ratios involved in the marriage market in England in the nineteenth century resulted in the same increasing competition for women that existed for goods.

Given, then, that the Victorian social order overwhelmingly agreed that a woman’s success lay in marriage, it was incumbent on any woman who wished to marry to “artfully present” herself, just as merchants “artfully presented” their goods. Presenting themselves as anything, however, would be a difficult issue for Victorian women. As Beth Newman’s *Subjects on Display* makes clear, “feminine display . . . was socially devalued” (5) and Nancy Armstrong
asserts that the ideal Victorian woman “is not a woman who attracts the gaze as she did in an earlier culture” (80). Indeed, conduct writers of the period like the popular Ellis refer to a woman’s “desire to be an object of attention” as not just ill-advised, but as “the besetting sin of woman” (Daughters of England 110). In her words, the desire to display is not just an ethical matter, but a moral one of considerable consequence.

There is little question that displaying wealth or beauty, i.e., external characteristics, was denigrated; however, displaying one’s interior characteristics rather than outer acquirement would be absolutely expected.9 Victorian conduct book writer Mrs. John Sandford, for example, writes that “the romantic passion, which once almost deified [woman], is on the decline: and it is

9 Joining the censure of external characteristics is Thomas Gisborne, who, in 1806, wrote “it was unquestionably the design of both [biblical authorities quoted], . . . to censure those who, instead of resting their claim to approbation solely on the tempers of the soul, in any degree should ambitiously seek to be noticed and praised for exterior embellishments. . . . These observations may . . . be extended from the subject of dress to solicitude respecting equipage, and all other circumstances in domestic oeconomy, with which the idea of shewy appearance may be connected. They may be extended also to a thirst for fashionable talents and dispositions . . . and for modish accomplishments, gestures, phrases, reading, and employments” (141). Regarding the importance of attending to interior versus exterior, Etiquette: Social Ethics and the Courtesies of Society, claims that “In the present day, when . . . ladies have laid aside that distinctiveness of dress in which courtly fames of old times especially delighted, it is all important that every gentlewoman should scrupulously attend to manners and general conduct” (27).
by intrinsic qualities that she must now inspire respect” (1). Contemporary critic Beth Newman picks up on this mandate in *Subjects on Display* and echoes, “It is necessary . . . to consider [women] within a moral economy that exhorted women to abjure their propensities for display” but also to keep in mind that “social ranking . . . depended on some kinds of feminine display in order to signal status” (Newman 21). Displaying internal characteristics rather than exterior wealth works hand-in-hand (so to speak) with this new “moral economy.”

### 2.2 Displaying a Feminine Manner: Affection, Sincerity, and Spontaneity

What interior characteristics should a woman desirous of marriage, or of presenting herself as womanly, display? For the Victorians, a woman’s femininity consisted, to a large degree, in an affectionate heart and sincerity and spontaneity of manner. In *Desire and the Domestic Ideal*, Nancy Armstrong outlines the rise of the ideal of the domestic woman in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and claims that she “possessed psychological depth . . . [and] excelled in the qualities that differentiated her from the male” (20). One quality that differentiates women from men would be physicality, as discussed above. In addition, characteristics associated with the maternal would distinguish a woman, and of first and foremost regard would be warm-heartedness.  

10 Dinah Mulock Craik concurs that “Perhaps at no age since Eve's were women rated so exclusively at their own personal worth . . . at no time in the world's history judged so entirely by their individual merits” (38) than in the present.

11 In 1806, Thomas Gisborne concurs about the worth of female warm–heartedness when he writes, “To estimate [the native worth of the female character] fairly, the view must be extended from the compass and shades of intellect, *to the dispositions and feelings of the heart*. Were we
that “affection . . . is a subject in which the interests of woman are deeply involved, because affection in a peculiar manner constitutes her wealth. . . . Let no man choose for the wife of his bosom, a woman whose affections are not warm, and cordial, and ever flowing forth” (Daughters 146). Here, Ellis implicitly ties together the first and most important characteristic of the ideal young woman (affection) with a woman’s prospects of marriage. “Ever flowing” affections are their “wealth,” the attribute men will seek. Later Ellis will go on to claim that love is not only woman’s “wealth” but also “her very being” (Daughters 176). It seems, according to Ellis, that a woman without affection is no woman at all. More to the point, one might say, at least, that a woman without affection was not considered womanly.12

Often linked during this period with the importance of affection is the importance of sincerity. As Ellis and others have made clear, it is necessary for a female to show affection to demonstrate that she is feminine and desirable. The “show” of affections, however, like the show of dress to indicate wealth and status, can be manipulated. To guard against this threat, social commentators also encouraged a code of sincere behavior as a guiding principle.13 The sincere behavior code meant, above all, behaving simply. Morgan explains that “behaving simply required actions to be both consistent with one's heart and mind and free from all artifice, affectation and embellishment” (Morgan 72). In making such claims, Morgan draws from a

12 This theme of women’s affection runs throughout Ellis’s Women of England s (see pages 4, 11, 13, 20, 22, 28, 34, 52, 65 & 106) and Daughters of England (see pages 6, 10, 11, 13, 91, 135, 146, 150, 156, 175, 176 & 194).

13 For more on the sincere behavior code, see Marjorie Morgan’s chapter, “Conduct Books” in Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774–1858.
variety of conduct books of the period, including those by Sarah Stickney Ellis.\textsuperscript{14} Chiefly, according to Ellis, a woman must avoid an affectation or artificiality in manner, which “consists chiefly in assuming a particular expression of countenance, or mode of behaviour, which is not supported by a corresponding state of feeling” (\textit{Daughters} 194). Ellis appears to make greater allowances for artificialities of language and appearance than for manner. This suggests the degree of import attached to the display of interior characteristics in outward forms. In other words, it is more acceptable for Ellis for women to dress above their station, for example, than to affect feelings they do not possess.

Spontaneity works in tandem with both affection and sincerity, and is thus also considered desirable, particularly in young women. According to critic Caroyln Oulton, the value of expressed feelings depends on their ability to appear “unconstrained and spontaneous” (23). Shows of affection that spring forth spontaneously are characterized by the fountain-like flow that Ellis so highly regards. Sincerity, too, profits from spontaneity, as that which is not premeditated seems to leap more naturally, more straight-forwardly, more earnestly, from the heart. In the beginning pages of her \textit{Women of England}, Ellis rhapsodizes, “so great is the charm of personal attentions arising spontaneously from the heart, that women of the highest rank in society . . . are frequently observed to adopt habits of personal kindness towards others” (\textit{Women} 14)

\textsuperscript{14} Ever willing to help define what is most attractive in the female sex, Ellis wrote “Simplicity of heart is unquestionably a great charm in woman” (\textit{Daughters} 197). One can show her sincerity, as Morgan points out, through “conduct, appearance and language” (Morgan 71). Also, according to \textit{The Young Lady’s Book} of 1829, “Sincerity has been hailed by the poet as the ‘first of virtues;’ and it has the benefit of being, like modesty, a pretty general one to . . . young and artless [women]” (29).
4). In this brief passage, Ellis deftly manages to intertwine affection (in the form of personal attentions), sincerity, and spontaneity (these “arise spontaneously”) with status (“women of the highest rank”) and display (since they “are frequently observed”). Ellis is clearly aware of the challenges women face and, in the guise of detailing the “minutia” that make up women’s lives, and “establishing benevolence and habits of industry,” she is in fact helping to establish ideal codes of femininity.15

Considering that a young woman wishing to appear feminine must show herself to have an affectionate heart and sincerity and spontaneity of manner, one can see perhaps more easily why Sharon Marcus’ claim that “a woman’s susceptibility to another woman defined rather than defied femininity” (Marcus 83-4). After all, if the first rule of womanliness is affection, then the most womanly woman will be eager to both give and receive affection, and she will be most likely to exchange that feeling with another who feels the same – another of her sex. If that affection is expected to be sincere and spontaneous, then two women will often be seen engaging in the “natural flow” of their feelings, and because women were conceived of as predominantly physical beings, the exchange of feelings will often appear through physicality. Besides, with whom else could women display affection and sensuality? According to Marcus, women were

15 Some authors, of course, explore the dangers of an excess of sensibility in women. Jane Austen’s Marianne Dashwood in Sense and Sensibility comes to mind; yet even so Marianne’s displays of sensibility engage the masculine interest of two suitors, and establish her immediately in the kindly Sir John’s ‘good opinion; for to be unaffected was all that a pretty girl could want to make her mind as captivating as her person.’ Thus, even those authors who comprehend the dangers of too much sensibility also recognize its appeal to the male sex.
“counseled to be passive in relation to men” (56). The ideal backdrops for such exchanges, then, were female friendships.

2.3 The Value of Female Friendship

A woman must show her inner characteristics, and thereby build and communicate her identity, through actions. Dress cannot signify a woman’s emotional capacity, nor can the rank of her connections, or the possession of accomplishments like the ability to draw, paint, or speak French. Establishing identity would become a major issue in Victorian times as English society developed from an agrarian into an industrialized nation. Marjorie Morgan writes that the changes consequent upon such a shift “fostered a more widespread preoccupation with . . . identity. . . . For in these worlds of strangers where interactions typically were fleeting and superficial, people lacked the personal knowledge necessary for evaluating others according to their intrinsic merits” (Morgan 104). How would social relations be established in the new order when one could not possibly know everyone, and when a person’s blood, connections, wealth, and even less, persona, were not a matter of long-standing, universal community

16 Also, according to Lillian Faderman, “Women understood that they must not be open with men. They must not show heterosexual feeling even to a beloved fiancé before marriage, and once married they must be very restrained or they risked grave disease. They knew too, in an era when birth control was not effective and when the risks of childbirth were high, that heterosexual intercourse might mean they were taking their lives into their hands” (159).

17 For more on the changing nature of English society in the early nineteenth century, see “The Triumph of Etiquette” in Marjorie Morgan’s Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774–1858.
knowledge? When, even in the country towns, greater social mobility and the rise of professions meant the influx of previously unknown individuals? Women could display an affectionate heart and sincerity and spontaneity of manner with their female friends through the deployment of affectionate touch. Touch – kissing, caressing, walking arm-in-arm - can be read by observers as a sign of a warm heart and thus, for the Victorians, a feminine nature.

Female friendships helped define femininity through mutual shows of affection, but they were encouraged during the period for other reasons as well. According to Marcus, “successful women who represented themselves as proper ladies defined their lives in terms of their friendships with women as well as their devotion to family and church” (42). Perhaps this is because, firstly, it was believed that young friendships helped prepare a woman for marriage. Oulton contends that “such friendships were most highly valued as a preparation, and secondarily as a substitute for marriage” (73).18 Friendships were considered preparation for marriage because it was believed they fostered typically feminine traits of affection and sincerity, and also practices that would come to be important in marriage like attention to others and self-sacrifice.

Secondly, the affection shown in female friendships skirted the problem of female “erotic excitability.” According to Marcus, “the Victorian marriage plot required heroines to be chaste, yet sufficiently ardent and aware of their desires to marry for love” (83). Female affection would be key in solving this paradox. Victorians’ obsession with female modesty meant that a woman was forbidden from exercising and displaying an aptitude for sensuality with a prospective

18 Reading Dinah Craik Mulock and Eliza Lynn Linton, Pauline Nestor agrees that “friendships, in Mulock's terms, were ‘... a kind of foreshadowing of love’, or, according to Linton, ‘unconsciously rehearsing for the real drama to come by and by’” (16).
husband, but she could certainly do so with a friend. Marcus goes on to say that “the ploy of female amity circumvents the paralyzing effect that this paradoxical demand might have on the marriage plot by using the female friendships as a vehicle for depicting a heroine’s erotic excitability while skirting . . . the strictures on female heterosexual assertion” (83). Clearly, although Victorian women were generally considered sexless, a level of sensuality is generally a necessary element when considering the prospect of a happy marriage, and so female affectionate touch allowed women to show their enjoyment of sensual behavior without compromising their chastity or reserved dignity with men.

Finally, female affection provided an excellent vehicle for the establishing and display of identity because friendship was a relationship available to everyone at all times. Of course, a woman might show her affectionate nature to her family, but, firstly, familial intimacy was likely to take place almost entirely behind closed doors, foreclosing opportunities for the display of sensibility, and secondly, demonstrating the “erotic excitability” that Marcus mentions would be taboo amongst relations.

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19 Other scholars have noted the use of female friendship in this capacity as well. Oulton, for example, states that “Intense friendship stood to offer . . . a useful means of displaying a susceptible and responsive nature to potential suitors, without the danger of compromising restrictive feminine codes of behaviour” (9) and “references to the unrestrained contact between women suggest the usefulness of female friendship as a means of conveying passion to male onlookers without sacrificing the demands of propriety” (74). Critic Tess Coslett, meanwhile, in Woman to Woman, argues that a friendship between a more sexually innocent woman and a more sexually aware woman can help the former realize her desire for a man, as Cynthia will help Molly to do in Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters (75–6).
“Intimate . . . caresses” may be “the currency of friendship” (Marcus 105-6), but they are also a prime signifier of gender. It is my contention here that female affectionate touch is one of the actions that signifies the feminine for British society in the nineteenth century. As I have shown above, the feminine woman was characterized by her loving nature. This internal characteristic must be manifested through physical actions that connote affection, such as the kiss or caress. Recalling from the introduction Judith Butler’s performativity theory which states, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, a natural sort of being” (Gender 45), one can see that when women acted affectionately toward one another, their physical intimacies “create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” (Gender 186) that stood for the feminine. Given the following prerequisites – that to become a wife was the principle measure of female success in Victorian England, that to become a wife a woman must show herself to be feminine, that the feminine was defined by qualities of affection and sincerity, that affection is easily shown through female-to-female affection, that the physical manifestation of that feeling is intimate touch – touch between female friends is a near perfect vehicle for the establishment and display of a feminine identity. Touch is a more effective signifier of affection than language – even the “iterated, cumulative, hyperbolic references to passion, exclusivity, idealization, [and] complicity” exchanged between close friends (Marcus 54) – firstly because visual cues have the ability to reach a larger audience that aural ones, and secondly because body language, or “manner,” is considered a more authentic signifier than words because it is seems less open to manipulation. Finally, scenes of physical touch are certainly more immediately and viscerally titillating to the observer than words. In the Victorian period, then, spontaneous,
affectionate touch signified a distinctly feminine identity, indicating in the participants the aptitude for sensuality and a loving, “womanly” heart.

2.4 “Hovering about my darling”: Femininity in Bleak House

To more clearly see the significance of female affectionate touch, one need only look to any of the innumerable Victorian-age novels which describe female amity. The greater number of such novels include at least one scene of affectionate female touch. Because of the vast number of texts available which depict touching scenes between women, I have chosen for this analysis those novels which possess the widest array of scenes for examination. Charles Dickens’ 1852 novel, *Bleak House*, for example, contains no less than thirty scenes of women grasping, embracing, kissing, or caressing other women. This text was also chosen because the heroine, Esther Summerson, enjoys the privilege of being one of the most iconic figures of English womanhood in Victorian literature. According to various critics, Esther, “with her tenderness and motherly nature [is] one of Dickens' ideal women in spite of her disgraced background” (Yildirim 122). She “mimic[s] . . . feminine identity” (Salotto 333); represents the ideal “middle” middle-class position” (Stuchebrukhov 147), “is the feminine virtue incarnate” (Murugan 74), and is “a sign of the feminine” (Danahay 416). These authors have differing

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20 (Dickens 615)

21 For example, in the not–at–all–touchy *Middlemarch*, recall the meeting between Dorothea and Rosamond, when Dorothea believes Will is in love with Rosamond, and Rosamond believes Dorothea has come to chastise her. But in that meeting, Rosamond “involuntarily . . . put her lips to Dorothea’s forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck” (*Middlemarch* 759).
reasons, however, for defining Esther as the ideal Victorian woman. For Yildirim, for example, it is “her eagerness to serve others and modest manners” which comprise her ideal nature. Stuchebruhov, alternatively, believes Esther to be ideal due to her “ability to overcome vanity, egotism, and passion through reason” (147). Danahay, quite differently, believes that Esther gains social capital and becomes the pinnacle of womanliness through her work as a housekeeper (421). The novel is thus an ideal source with which to examine Victorian conceptions of femininity, and while I agree that Esther gains social resources and becomes a model figure as a result of all of these things, I will locate an additional source of Esther’s perfect femininity in her physical behaviors with female friends.

In the course of the text, the orphaned heroine, Esther Summerson, often physically interacts with several other female characters, including Ada Clare, the young orphan woman to whom Esther becomes a companion; Caddy Jellyby, the neglected daughter of a middle class philanthropist with whom Esther becomes friends; and Lady Dedlock, a baronet’s wife, and (as it is eventually discovered) the mother of Esther. Of these four women, at least three possess shortcomings: Caddy is uneducated and awkward, Esther is an illegitimate child, and Lady Dedlock initially appears cold and shallow. The deployment of sincere, spontaneous, and affectionate touch between these women, however, is part of the “repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame” (Gender 45) that helps to redeem each so that Caddy and Esther both become marriageable young women, and Lady Dedlock earns the sympathy of the reader despite her youthful indiscretions and her otherwise unprepossessing coldness.

Of the four women, only Ada Clare begins the novel with sanguine prospects for marriage. Though Ada is an orphan, she is firmly middle class, neat, clean, educated, and lovely,
and, as a ward in the enormous chancery case Jarndyce v. Jarndyce, possesses some financial support (30). She shows her femininity through touch in her very first meeting, for as Esther relates, “she came to meet me with a smile of welcome and her hand extended, but seemed to change her mind in a moment, and kissed me” (30). Her welcoming smile, and the way in which she first advances to shake hands, but then spontaneously and warmly kisses her new companion, confirm the “natural, captivating, winning manner” (30) that assures her social success. In so doing, Ada publicizes her femininity for the other characters and the reader. The warmth of a kiss over a handshake, and the spontaneity displayed in her sudden change of greeting, suggest that her emotions are easily touched, and thus that she will be ideal in the domestic sphere which she will soon inhabit. Ada “does” her gender well, though doing so may be less vital for her than for the other female characters in the novel who must play the part of the ideal feminine domestic woman especially well in order to ameliorate the drawbacks of their other disadvantages.

As Bleak House belongs to the genre of the domestic novel, it is no surprise that all three young, unmarried women – Ada, Esther, and Caddy – will marry in the course of the novel. But Caddy and Esther possess disadvantages that Ada does not. Caddy Jellby, for example, is the only one of the three who is not an orphan, but she might as well be for all the care that her philanthropist mother, her attention overwhelmingly focused on Africa, takes of her and her siblings (36-57). She has been raised in a household with no order or comfort. In Esther’s and

22 Butler writes that “‘Sex’ is, thus, not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is” (Bodies that Matter 2) and “gender is always doing” (Gender Trouble 34). Glossing Judith Butler, Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson write that, according to Butler, “gender is what one does, not who one is” (204).
Ada’s first impressions of the Jellyby residence, they notice untended children, one of whom has his head stuck between railings (36) and another who tumbles down the stairs (37); unkempt rooms, “not only untidy, but very dirty” (37); and general disorder so that “they couldn’t find the kettle, and the boiler was out of order” (39), a “dish of potatoes [was] mislaid in the coal scuttle” (40) and “four envelopes” were seen “in the gravy” (41). Under such circumstances, who would not fear that Caddy, like her mother, would develop “eyes . . . [that] see nothing nearer than Africa”? (37) In addition, Caddy herself is not in much better shape than the house in which she lives. She is disordered in apparel and covered in ink (38), “jaded” and “sulky” in demeanor (37, 38), and, when she first speaks to her newly-met guests, insults them, suggesting to their faces that they are ill-natured and prideful (44). What man of good sense would choose a wife of such a temper, or from such a household, to manage his own domestic comforts? Despite all of these drawbacks, however, other signs exist that Caddy has the aptitude to become a more ideal Victorian woman, and that, having improved, will marry just like Ada and Esther.

The warm physical affection Caddy shares with Esther shows the observant reader almost immediately Caddy’s aptitude to be an ideally feminine woman who will make her husband an excellent wife. On the evening of Esther and Ada’s visit to the Jellyby residence, Caddy comes to the girls’ room to say goodnight. She is first rude and then, as Esther notes, suddenly “stooped down . . . and kissed Ada” (44), and then “knelt on the ground at my side, hid her face in my dress, passionately begged my pardon, and wept” (44). Esther goes on to writes that “I could not persuade her to sit by me, or to do anything but move a ragged stool to where she was kneeling, and take that, and still hold my dress in the same manner. By degrees, the poor tired girl fell asleep” (45). In this scene, Caddy’s physicality is powerful. Imagine if she had simply wept in front of Esther and begged her pardon for being rude. Such behavior would be affecting,
but could not have the same force of emotion that is conveyed by physically humbling herself to Esther, dropping to Esther’s feet, embracing the folds of her dress, and trustfully falling asleep on Esther’s lap. The physicality of the scene conveys a real depth of emotion in Caddy, and as such bodes well for her womanly prospects. If the girl possesses that first characteristic of Victorian womanliness, a warm heart, then all might yet be well for her. And the scene detailed above is not just the effect of exhaustion and overwork, for Esther writes that the following day Caddy holds and squeezes her arm for comfort when the two go for a walk (47, 56), and when she and Ada leave, records that “Caddy left her desk to see us depart, kissed me in the passage, and stood biting her pen, and sobbing on the steps” (57). These behaviors, in spite of her “sulky manner” (46) which continues off and on for a while, suggest a warmth and kindliness in Caddy that might yet suffice to make her into the affectionate, sincere, and spontaneous young woman who will make a loving wife and mother. That such is the case is born out when, on the next meeting of the three girls, Caddy appears “unaccountably improved in her appearance” (165) and assures Esther that she is practicing her housekeeping skills – learning to make coffee and puddings, sew, purchase household comestibles, and tidy the rooms – with Miss Flite (177). She is soon married to a dancing master, Prince Turveydrop, and develops, as Esther says, “a natural, wholesome, loving course of industry and perseverance” (474). She has become a model of the supportive and nurturing domestic figure, and her aptitude for such a life was early shown, in her first appearance in the novel, through the warm and spontaneous physical affection she shares with Esther at her home in Thavies Inn. Returning briefly to Butler, we are reminded that certain public, repeated acts or gestures in any culture, or “regulatory frame,” produce the appearance of the feminine gender identity. Though her early physicality with Esther, Caddy has signified that
she can “do” her gender well even though other more superficial signs – her dress, attitude, and environment, may appear to be cause for concern.

Esther, like Caddy, possesses serious disadvantages as well. Though educated (26-7) and “quiet, dear, [and] good” (42), she is illegitimate (19), and, until most of the novel has passed, ignorant of her parentage. Even after she learns that her mother, at least, was high born, she must keep it secret to avoid casting aspersions on her mother or her mother’s husband (450-3). In an era in which birth and blood possessed such power and influence, particularly with the mother of Esther’s would-be-suitor, Alan Woodcourt (365-6), Esther’s deficit in this respect must be surmounted, both with Mrs. Woodcourt, as well as the Victorian reader. Once again, scenes of spontaneous, sincere affectionate touch function to convince the reader that despite Esther’s birth, she is nonetheless an appropriate bride for a good English man because she is feminine in possessing a sincere and affectionate heart.

In *Bleak House*, the character of Mrs. Woodcourt personifies society’s changing perceptions of the worth of an individual. Historically in England, an individual’s pedigree often acted as the measurement of his or her value, particularly with regard to courtship and marriage (Armstrong 4). Cherishing such a belief, Mrs. Woodcourt claims loudly that “neither charms nor wealth would suffice [in a bride] for the descendents from such a line [as the Woodcourt’s], without birth: which must ever be the first consideration” (215). But, according to Armstrong, the domestic fiction of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries suggested, conversely, that “neither birth nor the accouterments of title and status accurately represented the individual; only the more subtle nuances of behavior indicated what one was really worth” (4). And female affectionate touch is, I contend, one of the “subtle nuances of behavior that indicated what one was worth.” Mrs. Woodcourt’s evolving notions in the course of the novel represent in one
person the shift in perception taking place throughout the nation as the domestic woman became idealized, and also allows the reader to vicariously experience a similar evolution in thought, or to reaffirm her beliefs if she already appreciates the domestic ideal. Thus, through observing Esther minutely, Mrs. Woodcourt learns to appreciate Esther’s generous heart over the fact that she is “so peculiarly situated altogether” (367) (because Esther is an orphan and illegitimate).

Examples of the heroine’s generous heart are certainly abundant in *Bleak House*, and often displayed through physical touch. One can hardly find a more “touching” character in Victorian literature than Esther Summerson. She is one of the participants in every touching scene in the novel, barring only two exceptions. She touches, or is touched by, Mrs. Rachel (23); Ada (various\(^{23}\)); Caddy (various\(^{24}\)); Lady Dedlock’s French maid, Hortense (286); Lady Dedlock (449-52); the Snagsby’s servant-girl, Guster (711); Miss Flite (719), and even a random stranger in an inn during her quest to locate her mother who has disappeared (688). The great majority of her exchanges, however, take place with Ada Clare, Esther’s “darling.” As such, these scenes exemplify the way that touch can function as a prime signifier of gender since “gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity” (Butler, *Gender* 152). That is, since signifiers of gender must be endlessly repeated,\(^{25}\) Esther’s regular touching scenes with Ada are central to signifying the former’s (and indeed, the latter’s) feminine nature.

While it is Ada who first initiates intimacy with Esther, kissing her warmly in their very first meeting, Esther is not slow to reciprocate. The two hold hands (623), rest upon one another’s shoulder (103, 606), kiss one another’s hair and cheeks (30, 62, 211, 615), and

\(^{23}\) (Dickens 30, 62, 103, 159, 211, 456, 601, 606, 613–5, 723–4, & 761)

\(^{24}\) (Dickens 43–57, 177, 601–2, 757)

\(^{25}\) According to Butler and the Victorians; see pages 15–6 of this chapter.
frequently embrace (159, 456, 601, 613, 614, 724, 761). Esther patently takes pleasure in the physical connection she shares with her friend, suggesting sincere warmth of heart because she does not stand upon her pride and encourage distance and formality. She records that “to see Ada lift up her flushed face in joyful surprise, and hold me round the neck . . . was so pleasant!” (159). Later, when the two are reunited after Esther’s illness, she recalls lyrically, “O how happy I was, down upon the floor, with my sweet beautiful girl down upon the floor too, holding my scarred face to her lovely cheek, bathing it with tears and kisses, rocking me to and fro like a child, calling me every tender name that she could think of, and pressing me to her faithful heart” (456). Her union with Ada causes Esther to wax almost poetically over the power of the moment, which is constituted no less in the touching scene that is drawn for the reader than in Esther’s language. Whatever Esther’s blood, pedigree, or upbringing, in those repeated acts and gestures which constitute gender for the Victorians Esther takes great pleasure, and therefore meets the domestic feminine ideal propagated by her society.

While touching for a woman’s own pleasure may suggest a pleasant wealth of emotion, touching to console another is especially womanly because it is a manner of nurturing, and to be a nurturer – of husband and child – was the primary role designated to Victorian women. This is a quality Esther displays in abundance. For example, when the distressed and exhausted Caddy falls asleep as Esther’s feet, Esther “contrived to raise [Caddy’s] head so that it should rest on [her] lap” (43) so the girl will be more comfortable. When Ada is upset over keeping a secret from Esther, the latter supports her physically and emotionally, stating, “I made my sweet girl lean upon my shoulder . . . and put my arm around her, and took her up-stairs” (606), and later, when Ada cries to leave her friend and live with her husband, Esther attempts to cheer with a kiss and embrace, recording that “I folded her lovely face between my hands, and gave it one last
kiss, and laughed, and ran away” (615). Esther can also console those she hardly knows. With the Snagsby’s troubled servant-girl, Guster, Esther states “I kneed on the ground beside her, and put her poor head on my shoulder; whereupon she drew her arm round my neck, and burst into tears,” and thereafter Esther lays her face against Guster’s forehead (711). Esther has only met Guster moments before, and, as a servant, Guster is also of a distinctively lower class. Yet Esther does not hesitate to spontaneously and warmly reach out to the young woman in need. In observing such scenes as these, the reader, and one might imagine, Mrs. Woodcourt, learn to appreciate Esther’s virtues. Birth and blood she has not, but an ever-flowing heart, always eager to rejoice or console those around her, she has in abundance. Such qualities give her, as John Jarndyce says, “true legitimacy,” and at last make Mrs. Woodcourt’s heart “beat . . . no less warmly, no less admiringly, no less lovingly” towards Esther than does John Jarndyce’s. Through her warmth of heart, so often displayed in her physical touch, Esther has displayed her ideal femininity to reader and Mrs. Woodcourt alike.

Though already successfully married, Lady Honoria Dedlock possesses her own disadvantages, at least so far as the reader is concerned. Wealthy through her marriage to Sir Leicester Dedlock, Baronet, the head of an old and respected family, she is on top of the fashionable world and has all the material goods one could wish for. Also, she is “surrounded by worshippers” (150), and treated with the most intense deference by her husband, acquaintances, and extensive staff (11-12). Nevertheless, Lady Dedlock “having conquered her world, fell . . . into the freezing mood. An exhausted composure, a worn-out placidity, an equanimity of fatigue not to be ruffled by interest or satisfaction, are the trophies of her victory” (emphasis in original, 13). One can hardly help becoming exasperated with Lady Dedlock, when, surrounded as she is by so many privileges, she is perpetually “bored to death” (11, 139, 141, 150) and “indifferent”
Who can sympathize with this fine woman, her manner always “fatigued . . . and insolent” (150), her face the picture of “loftiness and haughtiness” (225)? Even Mrs. Rouncewell, the loyal housekeeper at Chesney Wold, who prays “Heaven forbid that she should say a syllable in dispraise of any member of that excellent family [the Dedlocks]” (142), admits that Lady Dedlock is “cold and distant” (142). What sincere, spontaneous affection does she show, to break through her chilly dignity, and invite the reader in? When, in chapter twenty-nine, Lady Dedlock learns from Guppy that the child she bore out of wedlock as a young woman did not die as she had thought, that that child was “sternly nurtured” by her “cruel sister,” the reader may finally be inclined by her shocking circumstances and passionate cry, “O my child, O my child!” to feel something of tenderness for Lady Dedlock (364). And later, when she at last encounters Esther face-to-face, and humbles herself so penitently and passionately to her, what reader could help but be moved and at last sympathetic? But as with Caddy Jellyby, Lady Dedlock’s own deployment of female affectionate touch signifies otherwise unsuspected emotion and femininity even in this haughty, highly-placed woman of fashion long before Lady Dedlock learns that her daughter lives.

Though Lady Dedlock is perpetually bored, when she first encounters the young village girl, Rosa, in her household at Chesney Wold, she immediately “beckons her, with even an appearance of interest.” It is thus with another woman that Lady Dedlock first expresses warmth. She even condescends to “touch . . . [Rosa’s] shoulder with her two forefingers” (141). Slight though such a gesture may appear, according to Rosa it is “such a thrilling touch, that [she] can feel it yet!” (142) The lady’s maid, Hortense, underscores the power of the moment, complaining loudly and often that she has “been in my Lady’s service since five years, and always kept at a distance, and this doll, this puppet, caressed – absolutely caressed – by my Lady
on the moment of her arriving at the house!” (sic, 143). This is not the only such moment between the two. Later the narrator will wonder, “is this Lady Dedlock standing beside the village beauty, smoothing her dark hair with that motherly touch, and watching her with eyes so full of musing interest?” (355), and when “Rosa . . . kneels at her feet and kisses her hand. . . . My Lady takes the hand with which she has caught it, and, standing with her eyes fixed on the fire, puts it about and about between her own two hands” (356). In such scenes the narrator permits glimpses of a more traditionally feminine woman: the hands-on, caressing, domestic, even maternal woman. Such moments of spontaneous affection and physical closeness with another human being allow the observant reader see something more in Lady Dedlock full three hundred pages before the affecting scenes between her and Esther.

It is, of course, just this scene with her daughter that truly redeems Lady Dedlock with the reader. At first she only gives Esther her hand, typical in “its deadly coldness” (449), but, the reader soon learns that even Lady Dedlock can be overwhelmed with emotion. When she tells Esther, “‘O my child, my child, I am your wicked and unhappy mother! O try to forgive me!,’” this grand, “perfectly well-bred” woman (13), this woman who, “if she could be translated to Heaven to-morrow . . . might be expected to ascend without any rapture” (13), actually, as Esther writes, “caught me to her breast, kissed me, wept over me, compassionated me . . . fell down on her knees and cried to me . . . at my feet on the bare earth” (449). In language, yes, but also through physical touch, Lady Dedlock’s great coldness and distance, her seemingly impregnable loftiness, is at last broken down and through. In the coming together of Esther and Lady Dedlock, the reader may at last feel close to that lady, too. Her movements literally close the physical and metaphoric distance she has always maintained with others; they actually lower her to the common sphere just as she, and perhaps because she, kneels upon the ground, embracing
this child of her flesh. She becomes woman at last, not “My Lady,” as she bodily embraces the product of her physicality. She in fact calls this “the only natural moments of her life” (450). It is natural in that for once Lady Dedlock is not repressing all emotion to maintain a dignified hauteur, but also because she is finally engaging in that relationship which society has deemed most “natural” for women: motherhood. Lady Dedlock can finally be read as truly woman at this moment of spontaneous and sincere feeling. In embracing this “naturalness,” she both redeems herself with readers, and also comes into being as her sex, according to Butler, by at last stylizing her body “within [the] highly rigid regulatory frame” of her culture (Gender 45) which demands that women exhibit sincere and spontaneous affection in order to be read as feminine.

The touching behaviors of Ada, Caddy, Esther, and Lady Dedlock show each, whatever her ostensible disadvantages, to nevertheless be capable of conforming to the ideal of the feminine woman – that domestic goddess: nurturing, sincere, spontaneous and warm. Despite their disadvantages, Caddy and Esther both marry happily and become mothers in the course of the text. Lady Dedlock earns the reader’s sympathy and regret when she dies before the end. Through their physical touch, each signified her claim to the feminine as the Victorians conceived of it. Elizabeth Gaskell’s novel, Wives and Daughters, shows a similar attention to the significance of female physical amity, and through the narrator’s voice, repeatedly calls the reader’s attention to touch, femininity, and identity.

2.5 Signifying Touch in Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters

Even though Elizabeth Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters is unfinished, it contains quite as many scenes of female affectionate as Dickens’ Bleak House. This novel is ideal to examine in relation to female affectionate touch not only due to the sheer number of such scenes, but also
because the text so clearly focuses its thoughtful attention on female touch. The narrator makes it clear in *Wives and Daughters* that touch speaks volumes. For example, when Cynthia prepares to marry and leave the house for good, we are told that “Lady Harriet saw, too, that in a very quiet way, [Cynthia] had taken Molly’s hand, and was holding it all the time, as if loth to think of their approaching separation - *somehow, she and Lady Harriet were brought nearer together by this little action than they had ever been before*” (emphasis added, 607). This “little action” that brings Cynthia and Lady Harriet nearer together is a signifier of the love and affection that Cynthia is able to bear for Molly, and as such it raises Cynthia’s value in Lady Harriet’s eyes. This touch is one of the culturally legible acts that signify gender. In addition to such scenes, as the title suggests, the work is particularly concerned with women’s lives, so the novel is an excellent one in which to study the power of physicality and female interaction. The many scenes of female physical affection support Coslett’s view that, “Mrs Gaskell is . . . accepting of the female social world. . . . The standards of female behaviour are not oppressive to her [as they are to some other female authors of the period]” (89), and therefore Gaskell is happy to celebrate the bonds between women.

This novel is also of interest due to its focus on processes of categorization. Critics like Karen Boiko and Susan E. Colón have noted this; the former, indeed, argues that “the trope of classification is central to [the novel’s] meaning” (85). However, while social class in the novel is seen to be “important not only to members of the middle class who wished to assert their social and political equality with all gentlemen of whatever rank; [but also] to all who would understand their own place and that of their neighbors” (Boiko 99-100), it is not the case that “social class figures more prominently than gender” (86). If Gaskell is less concerned with the differences between men and women than between distinctions of rank and class, she is
nevertheless deeply concerned with differences between types of women, as my analysis will show. Colón’s argument, that “Molly eventually comes to be valued for her human capital of intellect and virtue rather than according to her financial status or ornamental attractions” (8) is more of a piece with my own claims, though I will focus on Molly’s emotional “human capital” rather than her intellect.

Wives and Daughters details the life of young Molly Gibson as she grows to womanhood in Hollingford, a fictional “country town” in England in the early part of the nineteenth century (Gaskell 6). Orphaned of her mother young, she lives for several years only with her father until he decides to marry so that Molly can enjoy “the kind of tender supervision which . . . all girls of that age require” (102). While Mr. Gibson courts the former governess of the local county lord, Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick, Molly lives with Squire and Mrs. Hamley, to both of whom she becomes closely attached, as well as to their sons, Osborne and Roger (61-147). Following her father’s re-marriage, Molly lives again at home with her father, step-mother, and her step-mother’s daughter, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, with whom she develops an intimate friendship. Cynthia, Molly, Osborne, and Roger move through a series of romantic entanglements until Cynthia marries a well-to-do young man in London (597), and Roger realizes his mistake in idealizing Cynthia. He turns his affections to Molly (631), but before their courtship can play out, the book stops short due to Gaskell’s sudden death.

A close look at the three most prominent women in the novel, Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick Gibson, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, and Molly Gibson, and their respective deployments of female touch, will illustrate the ways in which touch is associated with the feminine, but a mark of the ideal woman only when employed spontaneously and sincerely, and out of a deep well of emotion, that is, according to the “highly rigid regulatory frame” (Gender 45) of the time. Mrs.
Gibson makes use of touch intentionally in order to display herself as an affectionate woman and to manipulate those around her when it suits her purpose. Such affectations of manner reinforce her ultimate artificiality and shallowness. Her daughter, Cynthia, appears at first to be an ideal young woman, and she is more sincere in her touch, but while she appears to be “all things to all men” (217), the absence of a corresponding deep emotion behind her physical actions belies this view. The novel’s heroine, Molly Gibson, on the other hand, may be inexperienced and lacking in the more obvious feminine charms, but she is always shown to be sincere and spontaneous and, through her touching behaviors, accurately reflects the deep wealth of feeling in her heart. As such, Molly exemplifies the ideal young Englishwoman, and in consequence is rewarded with the love of the intelligent and kind-hearted Roger Hamley.

Mrs. Hyacinth Clare Kirkpatrick appears at first to be the answer to Mr. Gibson’s prayers: “a sensible agreeable woman of thirty or so” (102). Wanting a wife to look after his daughter, Gibson’s first thoughts regarding Mrs. Kirkpatrick are entirely practical. “She had very little, if any, property,” he realizes, but “she’s a very suitable age. . . . has been accustomed to housekeeping – economical housekeeping, too . . . and . . . she has a daughter” (113). However, Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s “agreeable and polished manners” (113), her “voice . . . so soft, her accent so pleasant. . . . the harmonious colours of her dress, and her slow and graceful movements,” make him begin to think less of her as “a possible stepmother for Molly” than “of her . . . as a wife for himself” (106). He is perhaps fooled by her blush when he comes in (105) and her “hysterical tears” when he proposes (107). Such displays of emotion, combined with an outward appearance so pleasant and agreeable, certainly make Mr. Gibson believe the marriage will be an advantage to himself as well as to Molly. But he is misled. Mrs. Kirkpatrick blushes upon seeing the doctor because she is reminded that Lord and Lady Cumnor have recently
discussed her and Gibson (105). Her “hysterical tears” find vent because “it was such a wonderful relief to feel that she need not struggle any more for a livelihood” (107). Her affected manners and gestures, however, which suggest her femininity, at least have brought her to the altar and the financial stability she desires.

That Mrs. Kirkpatrick realizes the usefulness of outward signs is certain. She wears “half-mourning” for her dead husband “in reality because it was both lady-like and economical.” She is sorry that she “could no longer blush” but is proud that “her movements were as soft and sinuous as ever” (97). In addition, she recognizes the power of emotion particularly to reflect well on women. When Gibson tells Mrs. Kirkpatrick that “the intelligence of my engagement has rather startled” Molly, we are told that, “‘Cynthia will feel it deeply, too,’ said Mrs. Kirkpatrick, unwilling to let her daughter be behind Mr. Gibson’s in sensibility and affection” (125). This communication about Cynthia’s emotions is intended to reflect more upon the mother than her offspring. For herself, she often deploys shows of affection, but, as in the above incident in which Mrs. Kirkpatrick is more concerned with herself than with her daughter, such warmth does not spring from a rush of genuine emotion. For example, while talking with Gibson and wondering if he will propose (106), she speaks of Molly to her father as “‘Dear child! How well I remember her sweet little face as she lay sleeping on my bed. . . . How I should like to see her!’” (107). In reality, on the day that Mrs. Kirkpatrick refers to she found Molly “tiresome” (17) and “quite forgot” her (20). But Gibson does not know this, and it is immediately upon Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s loving reference to his daughter that Gibson proposes. Wishing for the proposal, Mrs. Kirkpatrick has made very effective use of her shows of affection, since Gibson is influenced enough to propose marriage before he had even fully thought the issue through (107).
Mrs. Kirkpatrick enacts the expected gender norms of femininity only until she attains her objective – to marry. Accordingly, she mostly demonstrates affection when and with whom it will be most effective for her: that is to say, before her marriage, with her future stepdaughter. The reader has already been informed that “it is a question whether Mrs. Kirkpatrick or Molly wished the most for the day to be over which they were to spend together.” The stepmother-to-be has no great affection for young women because “all the trials of her life were connected with girls in some way.” Nevertheless, despite her disinclination, “she intended to be good to [Gibson’s] daughter, though she felt as if it would have been easier for her to have been good to his son” (126). It is easy to imagine how a governess, without the aptitude or aspiration to educate, could become disaffected with her students, and so it is laudable that Mrs. Kirkpatrick intends to do her best despite her inclinations. What is less praiseworthy, however, is that she affects a vastly different attitude than she possesses. In their first meeting when both are aware of their impending new relations to one another, “Mrs. Kirkpatrick was as caressing as could be. She held Molly’s hand in hers as they sat together in the library, after the first salutations were over. She kept stroking it from time to time, and purring out inarticulate sounds of loving satisfaction, as she gazed in the blushing face.” The vehicle Mrs. Kirkpatrick utilizes for her dissimulation is affectionate touch, “stroking” Molly’s hand and only “purring . . . loving satisfaction,” and for a time Molly accepts her caresses. But when her future stepmother opens her mouth to tell Molly, “he is so fond of you, dear,” and, “I’m almost jealous sometimes,” “Molly took her hand away,” for her stepmother’s verbal communications are less satisfactory (127). As soon, however, as Molly “put her hand into her future stepmother’s with the prettiest and most trustful action,” however, “Mrs. Kirckpatrick fondled the hand” again, continuing throughout their conversation.
Though such caresses, Mrs. Kirkpatrick clearly intends to ingratiate herself with the girl who is the primary reason she is being released from “the struggle of earning her own livelihood” (126). But she also attempts to use that affectionate touch as a manner of control. When Molly shows herself to be willing to speak up to Lady Cumnor, “Mrs. Kirkpatrick fondled [Molly’s] hand more perseveringly than ever, hoping thus to express a sufficient amount of sympathy to prevent her from saying anything injudicious (133). In such scenes, Mrs. Kirkpatrick seeks to display herself as an affectionate woman through the use of physical touch even though her inner emotions do not correspond with her outer gestures. As such, her gestures are a prime example of the sort of “affectation of manner” that Ellis so clearly despises in women. Her artificiality marks a clear difference between herself and Molly, whom the narrator, in the scene I referenced in the beginning of this chapter, describes as having “that particular kind of shy modesty which makes any one uncomfortable at receiving caresses from a person towards whom the heart does not go forth with an impulsive welcome” (emphasis added, 133). In direct contrast to Molly, Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s affectations of manner reinforce her ultimate artificiality and self-centeredness. In addition, the cessation of her physical affection to Molly after her marriage suggests that Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s aura of ideal femininity will not be maintained because she does not, as Butler says she must, endlessly reenact her gender – in this case, through the deployment of affectionate female touch. It is not long indeed until Mr. Gibson himself realizes that his new wife is not what he had first imagined (274).

Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s daughter, Cynthia, appears for a time to be an ideal young woman. Because they are nearly the same age and both unmarried young women, it is Cynthia who provides the strongest contrast with Molly. Superficially she exhibits womanliness more readily than the more awkward Molly; she dresses with “exquisite taste” and walks with a “stately step.”
In addition, she “was very beautiful,” though “no one with such loveliness ever appeared so little conscious of it” (217). In sum, Cynthia displays a perfect combination of qualities much valued in women – dress, carriage, and beauty – perfectly merged with humility, another prized trait of womanhood. She “does” her gender almost perfectly. Put simply, Cynthia has the power to fascinate. “Some people have this power,” writes the narrator, and “a woman will have this charm, not only over men but over her own sex” (216). Nevertheless, although Cynthia is described as “being all things to all men” (217), it is quite clear by the end of the novel that Cynthia will yet leave something to be desired as a wife and, quite likely, as a mother. Why so?

Cynthia is sincere and spontaneous, as we shall see, but the depth of affection behind her actions is lacking. The ways in which Cynthia differs from Molly in deploying affectionate touch help to demonstrate, before long, how Cynthia’s “grain is different, somehow” (482).

In terms of touch, Cynthia is a figure in between her mother’s shows of emotionality and Molly’s sincere behavior. Upon their first meeting, “Cynthia took [Molly] in her arms, and kissed her on both cheeks” (214). Her greeting to her new relation, unlike her mother’s, is not manipulative. She tells Molly straight out to “stop a minute” and takes Molly’s hands and looks her in the face. She candidly admits to Molly “I think I shall like you. . . . I was afraid I should not” (215). Immediately the reader and Molly learn that Cynthia is sincere and, if not especially warm-hearted, at least amiable, for, in the French fashion in which she has been trained, she makes a simple and open-hearted gesture of kissing Molly on both cheeks, and then looks at her frankly and openly. She is also capable of real sympathy. Just a few days after Molly and Cynthia have met, when word is brought that Mrs. Hamley has died, “Cynthia came softly in, and taking Molly’s listless hand . . . sat at her feet on the rug, chafing her chilly fingers without speaking” (218). Cynthia’s kindness is seen here in her actions. She does not come because she
is sent for or because it is expected that she do so; she comes in “softly,” and of her own accord. She makes no fuss, no bustle. She attends simply to Molly’s needs in her time of trouble, “chafing her chilly fingers.” Her actions, spontaneous and gentle, are exactly what Molly needs, for Cynthia’s “tender action thawed the tears that had been gathering heavily at Molly’s heart” (218).

Such affections are appropriate to the time and place, and sincere if not founded on deep emotion. Cynthia openly tells her new sister that, “I do believe I love you, little Molly, whom I have only known for ten days, better than any one” (sic) (219). That Cynthia can grow to love someone better than anyone else in ten days is not a testament to the strength of her emotions, but rather a consequence of the fact that she has “been tossed about so” (327). She herself admits that “I can respect, and I fancy I can admire, and I can like, but I never feel carried off my feet by love for any one, not even for you, little Molly, and I am sure I love you” (375). This is Cynthia’s failing, the reason why, for all her charms and graces and fascinating ways, it is Molly, and not Cynthia, who is Gaskell’s heroine. Cynthia, merrily and amiably enough, will come “up behind [Molly], and putting her two hands round Molly’s waist, [peep] over her shoulder, [put] out her lips to be kissed” (374). She is sincere, spontaneous, and placidly affectionate, but, as Coslett remarks, she “lacks this capacity for passionate feeling” (80). One must never take Cynthia, as she says, au grand sérieux” (376). Molly herself recognizes this when she says to Mr. Preston that “I only know that Cynthia . . . does as nearly hate you as anybody like her ever does hate” and upon Mr Preston responding “like her?” she replies, “I mean, I should hate worse” (478). Cynthia, unlike Molly, cannot be consumed by her emotions, and so it is unlikely she will be consumed by love of her husband or her children. Gaskell grants her a suitably
wealthy and handsome young husband in London, but she cannot deserve the heart of the novel’s hero.

That position rests with the novel’s heroine and ideal young woman, Molly Gibson. In contrast with her brilliant stepsister, she does not at first appear to be the greatest prize of womanhood. She lacks a sort of intrinsic taste which Cynthia seems never to be without (217), as when Molly is talked into ordering a hideous silk pattern for a dress (60). Too, she is often disordered where Cynthia is neat. Just after Molly learns that Roger has proposed to Cynthia and then gone away for years without bidding her goodbye, Molly sees herself and Cynthia reflected in a mirror. She sees herself “red-eyed, pale, with lips dyed with blackberry juice, her curls tangled, her bonnet pulled awry, her gown torn – and contrasted it with Cynthia’s brightness and bloom, and the trim elegance of her dress. “‘Oh! It is no wonder!’ thought poor Molly” (374). No wonder that Roger has proposed to Cynthia? No wonder that he left without saying goodbye? Fortunately for Molly, she places too much emphasis here on the merits of dress. But she is also shy where Cynthia is self-possessed, as when the two first meet and “a sudden rush of shyness had come over [Molly] just at the instant,” and Cynthia is left to direct the course of the meeting (214). Nevertheless, Molly has more to offer. In her earnestness and sincerity, she is, as even Mr. Preston will recognize, like a “pure angel of heaven” (479). Her purity and sincerity can be seen, throughout the text, in her affection.

In her self-assurance, Cynthia regularly clasps Molly affectionately long before Molly begins to reciprocate. It is surely no coincidence that in a novel as preoccupied with physical contact as Wives and Daughters, Cynthia kisses, clasps, and caresses Molly in a half dozen scenes, in the span of over one hundred pages, before Molly is first shown voluntarily taking Cynthia’s hand. These repeated demonstrations on Cynthia’s part are important to her feminine
identity since, as Butler reminds us, gendered expression must be endlessly repeated. But the
time Molly takes before initiating such affection on her own is also significant. This absence of
touch initially is not an indicator of Molly’s general attitude toward the display of physical
affection, since she is seen early in the novel “kneeling at Mrs. Hamley’s feet, holding the poor
lady’s hands, kissing them, murmuring soft words” (85) and readily kissing Miss Browning
following a disagreement between them (151). To discover the worth of Molly, we must return
to the scene that opens this chapter:

Molly and her future stepmother wandered about in the gardens with their arms
round each other’s waists, or hand in hand, like two babes in the wood; Mrs.
Kirkpatrick active in such endearments, Molly passive, and feeling within herself
very shy and strange; for she had that particular kind of shy modesty which makes
any one uncomfortable at receiving caresses from a person towards whom the
heart does not go forth with an impulsive welcome. (133)

Molly reciprocates the touch that is offered to her, as by holding hands with Mrs. Kirkpatrick, or
wrapping her arm around her soon-to-be stepmother’s waist, but she does not initiate it, and is, as
the narrator writes, “passive” in her participation. Her “modesty,” that necessary component of
womanliness for the Victorians, is not made uncomfortable by touching another woman, but
rather by the lack of affection she feels for her companion. Her “heart does not go forth” to Mrs.
Kirkpatrick, and thus, Molly feels uncomfortable when her physical body does indeed “go forth”
alone. For the Victorians, physical touch is appropriate and commended only when it is the
outward sign of the inner feeling. For how can acts signify gender if they do not indicate the
characteristics understood as naturally feminine? Also significant here is the narrator’s addition
of the adjective “impulsive” which acts as a foil to Mrs. Kirkpatrick’s more deliberate conduct.
The scene acts as a guarantee of Molly’s authenticity. The reader can be sure that, in the many later scenes in the book in which Molly initiates touch herself or participates more wholeheartedly, the outside behavior does indeed reflect the inside feeling.

And so, when Molly at length reaches out to Cynthia, several important elements mark her touch as the more authentic and valued gesture. Cynthia lies in her room troubled over, unbeknownst to Molly, Mr. Preston’s move to town. When Cynthia remarks plaintively that she intends to go out as a governess, Molly responds:

“You’re over tired,” continued she, sitting down on the bed, and taking Cynthia’s passive hand, and stroking it softly – a mode of caressing that had come down to her from her mother – whether as an hereditary instinct, or as a lingering remembrance of the tender ways of the dead woman, Mr. Gibson often wondered within himself when he observed it. (327)

Here, Molly’s gesture appears in sympathetic and affectionate response to another and is associated by the narrator with Molly’s long-deceased mother. The correlation noted here between touch and the mother is not arbitrary; Molly imitates a mother’s gesture as if through “hereditary instinct.” Her touch springs from something apparently intrinsic within her; according to Gaskell, it outwardly reflects the inner core. This is not the only scene in which Molly’s shows of affection are connected with her value as a mother, or a nurturer. Later, when Cynthia weeps bitterly for Mr. Gibson’s rebukes, Molly “took Cynthia into her arms with gentle power, and laid her head against her own breast, as if the one had been a mother, and the other a child.” Thereafter the narrator continues, “Oh, my darling!” [Molly] murmured. ‘I do so love you, dear, dear Cynthia!’ and she stroked her hair, and kissed her eyelids; Cynthia passive all the while” (545). In these scenes, Molly’s touch – stroking Cynthia’s hand and hair, raising Cynthia
in her arms, kissing Cynthia’s eyes - marks her as the true ideal woman by virtue of her aptitude for affection and for mothering, shown in her ability to channel, as it were, her own mother. According to the “highly rigid regulatory frame” (Gender 45) of gender expectations in Victorian England, Molly exemplifies the ideal young Englishwoman, and in consequence is rewarded with the love of the intelligent and kind-hearted Roger Hamley, while Cynthia’s lesser depths of affection only earn her a pleasant but unknown husband in London.

It can thus be seen that though Mrs. Kirkpatrick and Cynthia show many signs on the feminine – in dress, manner, and language – close observations of their touching behaviors help to show how the two are lacking in the feminine ideal. In addition, while Molly is often contrasted with Mrs. Kirkpatrick and Cynthia in her dress, manner, and language, her touching behaviors help to display her as the truly ideal domestic woman. As such, touch is one of the most important of the “acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that . . . produce the appearance of” gender (Gender 45), because where other signifiers of the feminine fail to reflect the inner characteristics of the subject, touch provides a more accurate picture.

2.6 Touch and Femininity: Concluding Remarks

In Ada Clare, Caddy Jellyby, Esther Summerson, and Molly Gibson, the texts of Bleak House and Wives and Daughters exemplify gender expectations of women, especially of young, unmarried women, in Victorian society. Ideologically conditioned to accept marriage and domesticity as their primary objective and role in life, huge numbers of young Victorian women wished, or were at least expected, to marry and nurture families in the sphere of the home. In order to marry well, and to best fulfill the role of nurturer, a woman needed to be affectionate, warm-hearted, spontaneous, and sincere, especially after the Census of 1851 revealed that many
women would never have the occasion to marry due to “excess” number of women in the population. Opportunities to demonstrate such a nature to others were afforded through the vehicle of female affectionate touch, which is displayed in dozens of novels throughout the period. In describing touching scenes between women, novelists accomplished two things. First, they prescribed codes of ideal gendered behavior to society at large, and second, they communicated more fully the personas of their female characters to wide-spread audiences in different regions of England who nevertheless shared common gender expectations. Too often, however, scenes of female amity are so expected and naturalized in nineteenth century fiction that academics overlook them altogether. Given these considerations, scholars need to develop an increased awareness of descriptions of female physical affection in Victorian texts.

In addition to signifying a feminine identity and a woman’s perceived aptitude for wife- and motherhood, particular instances of female touch can also signify individuals’ degrees of nationality and breeding. Like gender, these other foundational identity categories were of momentous interest to those individuals participating in a new “fleeting” society in the nineteenth century, and the study of societies’ perceptions of these categories continues to appeal to scholars today. Whereas we have seen in this chapter that manifestations of spontaneous and sincere affection signified femininity for Victorians, the next chapter will analyze the ways in which such shows were required to be controlled and reserved in order to characterize participants as well-bred, middle-class Englishwomen.
3 “Calm and unruffled behaviour”: Touch and Englishness in Victorian Fiction

Whatever Erasmus’ experiences may have been in the late fifteenth century, by the late eighteenth century, it is clear that emotional excessiveness is no longer a mark of the English. In one of a series of lectures given at the University of Glasgow between 1762 and 1763, the political and moral philosopher Adam Smith noted of the English:

Foreigners observe that there is no nation in the world which use so little gesticulation in their conversation as the English. A Frenchman, in telling a story that was not of the least consequence to him or to anyone else, will use a thousand gestures and contortions of his face, whereas a well-bred Englishman will tell you one in which his life and fortune are concerned, without altering a muscle in his face. (191-2)

He continues,

Politeness . . . in England, consists in composure, calm and unruffled behaviour. . . we see that, when the [most polite persons] go out of frolic to a bear-garden or such like ungentlemanly entertainment, they preserve the same composure as . . . at the Opera, while the rabble about express all the various passions by their gesture and behaviour. (192, sic)

Comparing Erasmus’ observations of the English (that “wherever a meeting takes place there is kissing in abundance; in fact whatever way you turn, you are never without it” (203)) with Smith’s, one wonders what happened to English physical affection in the three centuries separating these two intellectuals. Erasmus makes clear than in his visit to England, the physical, bodily expression of warmth and welcome is everywhere he turns. But by Smith’s time, those
who “express all the various passions by their gesture and behavior” are understood as “rabble,” while the most polite persons are those who “preserve [their] composure.”

It seems that somewhere in the nearly three centuries between these two observers, the physical expression of emotion died out to a considerable extent in England, but in fact, as this chapter will show, the expression of warmth and physical affection did not disappear. Rather, the Victorian period’s novels reveal a major conflict between the mandate to display and to restrain oneself. On the one hand, cultural ideals of Englishness and breeding demanded that an individual *show restraint* as a mark of a civilized being. On the other hand, the repression of all emotional displays is inhuman and unnatural, and makes interpreting the desires – and status – of another person incredibly difficult. One way this conflict could be managed was by shifting the expression of emotion onto the domestic sphere, and especially onto women who, by virtue of their presumed closeness to nature, were seen as more fit to express emotion in general, and to express themselves through the use of the body in particular. Even in women in the domestic sphere, however, society encouraged women to show some restraint of physical expression.

Those women who best walked the fine line between display and restraint, as dictated by the more privileged classes, were considered well-bred and enjoyed the most social success and approval. Using the theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, I contend here that, through most of the Victorian period, affectionate touch between women which followed specific cultural dictates characterized the participants as well-bred middle-class Englishwomen. These cultural dictates include the following: 1.) all ardent scenes of affection must take place in private only; 2.) between acquaintances of short standing, touch must be gentle and infrequent, consisting, for example, of a grasp of the hands or walking arm-in-arm; and 3.) between bosom friends or friends of longer standing, touch could be more intimate and frequent. Finally, 4.) regardless of
the length or intimacy of the friendship, the woman of higher status must initiate physical intimacy. These rules could be abrogated only in extraordinary circumstances such as illness or accident. Conversely, touching that occurs outside of these tacit social rules identifies the toucher as other, either in terms of being guided by a different set of principles (as a person of a different nationality or race), or in terms of having imperfectly learned the English code of conduct (as in a person of lower class status). Either way, in their difference and unpredictability, such individuals were often marked as vulgar, ill-bred, suspicious, or dangerous.

The same implicit rules regarding female affectionate touch applied over most of the course of the long nineteenth century. Analyses of scenes from a variety of literary texts over the course of the period, including Jane Austen’s 1817 *Northanger Abbey* (which was written in the 1790s), Charlotte Brontë’s 1853 *Villette*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s 1856 *Aurora Leigh*, and Sheridan La Fanu’s 1872 *Carmilla*, exemplify the ability of touch to function in this way. These texts represent a wide variety – in terms of chronology, gender of the authors, and genre of the texts\(^{26}\) – which shows that touching behaviors are deeply ingrained and largely inflexible. These qualities make physical gestures all the more powerful markers of identity because they are difficult to manipulate intentionally. The rules I describe here can thus be expected to hold true in literature throughout the greater part of the period.

\(^{26}\) They include a parodic novel, a realist novel, a künstlerroman in verse, and a gothic horror story.
3.1 Display and Restraint for Middle-Class English Women

Modern scholars recognize the paradox Victorian women faced between restraint and display. Beth Newman, for example, makes this contradiction the central subject of her book, *Subjects on Display*. She writes that “the meaning of display itself was unstable throughout the nineteenth century, and . . . the burdens of this instability fell disproportionately on women who had either achieved or aspired to the status of gentility” (15). Newman examines this conundrum from a psychoanalytic standpoint, seeking to understand the conflict through an analysis of the ego and super-ego at work in the individual. I find that Newman’s insight that women were subject to, and essential in, this clash of social mandates, might also be fruitfully examined through a social-historical lens. Gesa Stedman, too, in *Stemming the Torrent*, claims that “being too open-hearted and willing to express one's emotions without any restraint whatsoever was not in keeping with this cult [of privacy]. But . . . the absence of all emotional expression . . . implied the unhealthy absence of all feeling, [and] . . . rendered it impossible to judge what kind of class an individual belonged to” (55). Stedman here summarizes the difficulty well. Refusing to express any emotion might signify any number of undesirable ideas: perhaps that the individual was without feeling at all, cold and calculating. If the individual is not totally unfeeling, repressing the expression of emotion might injure a person’s health, as it would seem happens to Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* when she has no place to expend her passionate nature (Eliot 289-354), or to Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* when she is forced to repress her feelings for her cousin, Robert Moore (Brontë 392-411). In addition, a lack of expression means an individual cannot be read or understood by others. How can people work together in large numbers if they cannot interpret one another’s desires and wishes? And yet restraint did not become important to the Victorians only due to a fashion, a “cult of privacy.”
Several other factors combined and compounded to produce a powerful ideology of restraint and self-control.

According to sociologist Norbert Elias, with the word ‘civilization,’ “Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of its technology, the nature of its manners, the developments of its scientific knowledge or view of the world” (emphasis in original, 5). The Victorians’ sense of their progress and place in the world was very much founded on national manners. Maurice Quilian asserts that “Englishmen prided themselves upon . . . their moral excellence” and also that “the conviction that the English were a chosen people, elected to enjoy the fruits of virtue at home and to rule over palm and pine abroad, was peculiar to the Victorians” (253). As Quinlan notes, Victorians understood their right to rule and colonize and to have a high standing in the order of nations as “a chosen people” to be a consequence of their “moral superiority.” Nineteenth-century conduct book writer and social commentator Sarah Stickney Ellis acknowledges this when she wrote, “every country has . . . its moral characteristics, upon which is founded its true title to a station, either high or low, in the scale of nations” (Women 1). In fact, Ellis justifies the writing and publication of her conduct manuals for women on the basis that English women are of “importance . . . in upholding the moral worth of [England]” (Women Preface). Ellis’ text gives evidence of the Victorian conviction that morality is intimately interlinked with an individual’s manners and habits, by which I mean, what individuals do, not just what they believe. After all, according to Jan Bremmer and Herman Roodenburg, for the Victorians “there was also an aesthetic-cum-moral
conviction that external bodily behaviour manifested the inner life of the soul” (8). Understood by the Victorians to be a demonstration of a moral code, the manners of English men and women were therefore believed to be of utmost importance in forming and maintaining England’s claim to a privileged place in the world. Since educated, middle-class Victorians manifestly took such pride in their moral superiority and understood morality to be linked with behavior, it is important that one look to the outward behavior of these Victorians when seeking a more complete understanding of their contemporary conception of ‘Englishness.’

It is also true that the behavior of English women should be examined particularly, since in the Victorian ideology of separation of spheres, women were understood to inhabit and rule the domestic realm in which morality was believed to most properly reside. According to Marjorie Morgan, “the moral underpinnings of etiquette . . . were virtues more easily cultivated and displayed in the private drawing-rooms of leisured ladies than in the competitive, ruthless public world of self-seeking, career-minded gentlemen” (30). In the commercial, public sphere, capitalism demanded that “the world of commerce should be pervaded by a spirit of competition and recognition that only the fittest should survive” (Gorham 4). “Competition” and “survival of the fittest” are naturally opposed to a religiously based morality that calls for generosity of spirit. The home would then be the seat of “the moral values of Christianity” (Gorham 4). Kathryn Gleadle concurs that “it was such behaviour as . . . the niceties of household duty and the ____________________________

27 This sentiment is reflected in the 1854 anonymous text, Etiquette: Social Ethics, and the Courtesies of Society, which claims, “The outer form conceals an immortal spirit; but the tendencies of that spirit are often made known by acts, apparently immaterial, yet nevertheless important” (24-5). Readers are also exhorted to “remember that mental qualities are often judged by the exterior; and certainly with justice” (25).
maintenance of social proprieties which enabled the construction of a self-conscious belief among the middle and ruling classes that they were the highest exemplars of civilised behaviour” (84). These realms – the home and the social – were the primary responsibility of England’s women. An examination of Englishness and English society in the Victorian era should therefore not fail to concern itself with the behavior of English women.

The highly civilized manners upon which the Victorians prided themselves were founded first and foremost on a highly refined sense of self-control, that is, on the restraint of individuals’ emotions and behavior. This behavior Victorians understood as ‘reserve’ (Curtin 128). According to Carolyn Oulton, “in general, the more highly civilized and polished the society, the greater the tendency to avoid demonstrative feeling in public; and this is true of all countries, but more especially true of England” (303). In addition, high culture, Constance Classen claims, “requires the suppression of the ‘lower’ senses” (Deepest xii). But why? According to Elias, increasingly populated and commercial societies must learn to regulate their behavior to a high degree. This is his thesis of civilization. He writes,

> From the earliest period of the history of the Occident to the present, social functions have become more and more differentiated under the pressure of

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28 Similarly, critic Paul Langford maintains that “A horror of emotional display was not thought of as a particularly English phenomenon between the mid-seventeenth and late eighteenth century, though the subject figured in the literature of gentility to which the English made a notable contribution. But by the early nineteenth century, not only had the English model of the gentleman come to reveal an almost overwhelming preoccupation with composure, impassivity, and self-control, but the national character itself was taken to embody it” (250).
competition. The more differentiated they become, the larger grows the number of functions and thus of people on whom the individual constantly depends in all his actions, from the simplest and most commonplace to the more complex and uncommon. As more and more people must attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfill its social function. Individuals are compelled to regulate their conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner. (367)

In other words, as the world industrializes and progresses, individuals become increasingly interdependent. Because their livelihoods depend upon one another, individuals must place more and more trust in one another, and so individuals become less erratic and idiosyncratic in manner so that others can trust them. Elias’ thesis therefore helps to explain why those who do not follow expected norms of behavior are denigrated or feared. When interdependent livelihoods are at stake, unpredictability is suspicious at best, dangerous at worst.

Restraint was not only a necessary component of large numbers of interdependent people, however. All Western civilizations at the time would fall under this umbrella. The English, rather, developed a special appreciation for self-control over and above that of neighboring, similarly-developed countries. This interest Stedman claims to result from two major historical movements that fostered an emphasis on restraint. First, she notes “an anxious reaction against romanticism” due to concerns about the excess of passions and the expression of sentiment encouraged by that genre. The texts of the period, according to Stedman, often emphasize “the fear of losing control and the dangers to physical and mental health that the emotions are alleged to present” (41). Second, she notes “an interest in controlling the passions of crowds following
the French revolution,” since the English were particularly concerned that such revolutions not appear in Britain to embroil the home population (24). After all, “unrepressed feeling, the abandonment of all emotional control, can also result in social danger: that of the violent ‘mob’, attacking at random and upsetting social peace” (107). Finally, societies often tend to define themselves against their neighbors, and so the English might have upheld reticence as distinguishing themselves from the (popularly conceived) more light-hearted French. Between understanding restraint as a mark of a civilized society, reactions against the earlier Romantic period, the desire to control society to avoid war and bloodshed, and a desire to differentiate themselves from their neighbors, the English developed an appreciation and encouragement of restraint far and above what can be seen in contemporary continental societies.

This emphasis on restraint is particularly important when considering accepted physical behaviors in middle-class Victorian England. Restraining one’s expression in language was vital, but restraining one’s body and hands in particular is a visual, and thus, highly demonstrable method of showing oneself to be civilized. English and other Western societies had, by the nineteenth century, been learning to keep their hands to themselves for centuries. As Western cultures colonized the world, they explained their own codes of behavior by virtue of differences with other ‘less civilized’ cultures. “Touch was typed by scholars of the day as a crude and uncivilized mode of perception,” asserts Classen, and “societies that touched much . . . did not think much and did not bear thinking much about” (Deepest xii). Western societies had learned to ‘look with your eyes, not with your hands,’ as mothers today still tell their children. Cultures that did look with their hands, “so-called primitive races – namely indigenous peoples . . . were assumed to remain mired in an irrational tactile world” (Deepest 182). Naturally, intellectuals
attempted to define this categorization of the higher and lower senses, and higher and lower people, in scientific terms. According to Classen,

Nineteenth-century evolutionary theory would declare that attending to sights over tactile or olfactory sensations was a defining trait of the human species, which at some point in its long transition from animality has learned to take its hands and nose away from the ground and stand up and look around. Aping the evolutionists, social theorists claimed that the most evolved peoples – namely Europeans – manifested a similar interest in sight as the most evolved and rational sense. (Deepest 182)

Classen is not the only critic to notice Western culture’s privileging of sight over touch. Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk also note that “the sensory acuity of non-white ethnic groups’ experiences of touch, taste, and smell were particularly denigrated for their properties of overwhelming emotionality; ‘brute’ corporeality, and the need for copresence, in contrast to the cognitive and abstract power afforded by the ‘distant’ senses of sight and hearing” (13). However, it would be impossible for any society to eradicate all touching. In order to harmonize the necessity for human touch with the societal imperative to restrain oneself, a society must tacitly regulate who it is acceptable to touch, when, and under what circumstances. The touch of women, especially amongst themselves, would be more accepted since, as demonstrated in chapter one, women were already considered more body-bound and natural beings in contrast with intellectual and mind-guided men.

In her conduct manual for young women, published in 1843, Ellis writes, “there is a popular notion prevailing amongst [young women], that it is exceedingly becoming to act from
the impulse of the moment, to be, what they call, ‘the creatures of feeling.’” This popular notion Ellis clearly does not share. Such young women, she writes, say that “it is a cold philosophy . . . to calculate before you feel,” but Ellis cautions such believers that “it is . . . appalling to contemplate the extent of ruin and of wretchedness to which woman may be carried by the force of her own impetuous and unregulated feelings” (Daughters 13). Thus, even young English women – more permitted than their countrymen and elders to express their emotions – were yet also encouraged to develop the restraint famous to their country.29 It should be noted that Ellis

29 Questions regarding the expression of emotion in women are much deliberated by conduct book writers of the period. Celebrating expression – to an extent at least – is Mrs. John Sandford who, in her 1833 book, Woman in her Social and Domestic Character, describes some of the difficulties with expressing versus repressing emotion. She writes, “[Some] persons . . . repress in themselves every thing that savors of [sensibility]. . . . They must not feel, or, at least, they must not allow that they feel: for feeling has led so many persons wrong, that decorum can be preserved, they think, only by indifference. And they end in becoming really as callous as they wish to appear . . . [if emotional] excess be foolish, it is surely a mistake to attempt to suppress it altogether; for such attempt will either produce a dangerous revulsion, or, if successful, will spoil the character” (101-2). While celebrating the expression of emotion, she also remarks, somewhat contradictorily, that “breeding . . . is always self-possessed and at ease” (25), suggesting that although emotion should be expressed, that expression should also be controlled in order to reflect ‘breeding.’ Thomas Gisborne in his 1806 An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex, notes that “The gay vivacity and the quickness of imagination, so conspicuous among the qualities in which the superiority of women is acknowledged, have a tendency to lead to unsteadiness of mind. . . . These contribute likewise to endanger the composure and mildness
likely feels called to encourage women to regulate the expression of their emotion because in reality they do so rather infrequently. This emotional command and self-possession was understood positively as tact. Tact, Morgan writes, “called for the constraint of feelings in the of the temper, and to render the dispositions fickle through caprice, and uncertain through irritability. . . . [Sensibility] . . . sometimes degenerates into weakness and pusillanimity, and prides itself in the feebleness of character which it has occasioned” (33-5). Similar cautions on the expression of emotion appear in anonymous Etiquette: Social Ethics and the Courtesies of Society, which claims “Feeling . . . is ridiculous when affected; and even when real, should not be too openly manifested” (27).

It is worth noting that the word ‘tact’ shares an etymological root with ‘tactile.’ According to the Oxford English Dictionary, both words spring from the Latin tactus meaning ‘touch,’ from the stem tangĕre, meaning ‘to touch.’ ‘Tact,’ in French, has referred to the sense of touch since the fourteenth century, but likening the sense of touch to “a keen faculty of perception or discrimination,” and to a “sense of what is fitting and proper in dealing with others, so as to avoid giving offence,” dates only to the turn of the eighteenth century, with the first uses of the word in the latter senses appearing in 1797 and 1801 respectively (“Tact”). This history suggests that the sense of touch is very important in human interaction. Perhaps this is no surprise. In The French Revolution, Thomas Carlyle refers to “a most delicate task, requiring tact” (Carlyle II. i. iv. 390). Thus delicate situations – important, yet uncertain – require, not the careful use of sight, smell, sound, or taste, but of touch, of tact. Similarly, when in a precarious position, one is recommended to ‘feel one’s way’ carefully – not look, smell, hear, or taste his way. The use of the sensory word in connection with the concept of appealing to others’ feelings also suggests that we can offend most easily through touch. To show something offensive, speak something
interest of not offending others” (97). According to Ellis it is a “quickness of perception in minute and delicate points” (Daughters 82) and seems to be what the French commentator Alfred d’Orsay meant when he wrote in his etiquette book that “the essential part of good breeding is more in the avoidance of whatever may be disagreeable to others, than even an accurate observance of the customs of good society” (51).

In recommending tactful behavior, social commentators did not absolutely forbid the expression of emotion even to young women, but even when writers like Ellis appear to permit the expression of emotion, they do so with some ambivalence. For example, while “the rules of ‘Society’ demanded that men and women display . . . tact” and repress the display of their emotions (Morgan 97), Ellis declares that: “there are home societies, and little chosen circles of tried and trusted friends . . . and here it is that the genuine feelings of unsophisticated nature may safely be poured forth . . . because all around it is the atmosphere of love, and the clear bright radiance of the sunshine of truth” (Daughters 135-6). Ellis’ counsel reflects the pervasive feeling among the English that the expression of emotion could be dangerous, though some specific places are ‘safe,’ or at least safer. In public, and with mere acquaintances, apparently, ‘the sunshine of truth’ does not always gleam forth. This sentiment reflects D’Orsay’s claim that “Etiquette is the barrier which society draws around itself as a protection . . . it is a shield . . . a guard” (3). Society is clearly conceived here as a dangerous place. Morgan argues that this concept likely developed as a result of the “impersonal nature of the more urban, market-regulated society” (97). The home, in contrast, should be a place of safety. But even when that offensive, or produce an offensive odor or taste, are not so distasteful as to touch someone offensively, likely because touch invades the physical space of another more intimately, and is thus more potentially dangerous than any other sensory stimuli.
emotion is “unrestrained” in a “safe” and “truthful” place, such “genuine expression” is nevertheless the product of “unsophisticated nature.” It can be seen here, then, that even when some emotion is safely admitted, its expression is nevertheless not regarded with absolute equanimity, since the term “unsophisticated nature,” while not unreservedly negative, is neither unconditionally complimentary.

How does one walk this line? How show that one is warm-hearted and feeling, as it is clearly necessary particularly for women to do, when the restraint of emotion is the very mark of one’s people and, as Adam Smith notes, the mark of one’s country’s “most polite persons” at that? Ellis encounters this conundrum herself, and locates the line between expression and restraint in one’s behavior and manners. She claims:

> It is seldom regarded as consistent with that delicacy which forms so great a charm in their nature, that [women] should act out to their full extent all the deep feelings of which they are capable. Thus there is no other channel for their perpetual overflow, than that of their manners; and thus a sensitive and ingenious woman can exhibit much of her own character . . . simply by the instrumentality of her manners. (Women 52).

Women, according to Ellis, are constituted by their deep emotions, but it is not appropriate (or “delicate”) for them to “act out” such feelings “to their full extent.” Instead, they can still display their emotions in their manners, by which term Ellis means not just a woman’s display of etiquette and propriety, but also her bodily deportment. It is probably for this reason that “Victorian texts linger on the surface attributes of the individuals they describe. They dwell on skin and flesh, and on the blood and bones encased within the body, only to establish, time and again, a picture of that individual's inner ‘self’ or identity” (Purchase 14).
3.2 Bodily Behaviors

Considering, then, that the middle-class English believed that their superiority over other nations was a result of their moral code and manners which required individuals to restrain their emotional displays, that English women were of primary “importance . . . in upholding the moral worth of [England]” (Ellis, Women Preface), and that middle-class women, while allowed greater freedom in their emotional displays than men, were nevertheless encouraged to control their emotional displays as well, one begins to see how female affectionate touch could assist the Victorians in the conflict they faced in terms of display and restraint. Women touching other women created a much-needed place for affectionate displays in English society; these displays allowed women to show status and identity through their behavior and to expend emotional energy acceptably. They would also defend the English people as a whole from charges of coldness and lack of feeling. In keeping with the national belief in restraint, however, such displays must have boundaries.

Of course, in extraordinary circumstances, as in illness or accident, general expectations were abrogated by necessity. In such situations, mere acquaintances might touch more intimately than otherwise. For example, in Brontë’s Villette, when Lucy Snowe reencounters Paulina Mary at the theatre where the latter has been injured, Lucy undresses Paulina Mary, whom she does not at the time recognize as an old acquaintance (305). In general, however, as Adam Smith in the lines above, and this chapter have made clear, the implicit rules of middle class, well-bred English women demands that female acquaintances must be reserved in their deployment of touch – that is, such touches must be infrequent and gentle - in order to differentiate the women from more “touchy” and impetuous persons like the French or (as Smith puts it) “the rabble” (192).
In addition, the person of higher status must also be the first to initiate physicality. This practice surely extends from the English fixation with class status. While, ideally, according to critic Sharon Marcus, “friendship was defined by altruism, generosity, mutual indebtedness, and a perfect balance of power” (emphasis added, 4), in practice, individuals were made aware of the importance of status in every aspect of life from the time of birth, and expectations regarding the precedence permitted those of higher status were built into every social act (for example, in the order in which individuals went down to dinner at any social gathering). An individual of lower status must always be introduced to an individual of higher status, and the privilege of continuing, or discontinuing, a relationship after an introduction belonged to the latter as well. This distinction is important. A person of higher status encouraging intimacy with someone lower indicated for the Victorians a polite condescension; it was seen as a warm and generous gesture. For a person of lower status to encourage greater closeness with a person of higher status, however, appeared to be an impertinence, a sort of social ineptitude at best, or an attempt at social climbing at worst. To physically touch a person of higher status without invitation (verbally, as when a woman might say “you may kiss me,” or by gesture, when the higher classed individual touches first), was considered the same sort of impertinence, denoting a marked lack of good breeding, and tact.

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31 Routledge’s Manual of Etiquette, in 1860, for instance, orders individuals to “always introduce the gentleman to the lady - never the lady to the gentleman. The chivalry of etiquette assumes that the lady is invariably the superior in right of her sex.” Between two persons of the same sex, however, the person of lower rank must be presented to the person of higher (1).
Close friends of long-standing (that is, when the friendship has a standing of some weeks or, better yet, months) were permitted more laxity in their interactions. Initially, “one was distant upon first introduction (the bow rather than the more forthcoming handshake was the requisite gesture), friendly though still impersonal at calls (one shook hands at calls), and so on” (Curtin 146). Thus, beginning with such distance and formality between individuals, it is easy to see how it would take some time of increasing closeness to build to a relationship of intimacy at an emotional and physical level. In addition, by the time two women have developed a close friendship, it was expected that they would carry out the most intimate behaviors of that close friendship in private – whether that privacy be gained by virtue of geography (located inside the private sphere – the home) or of population (when two women were alone together, even though it be in a public place, like a park).

To return briefly to Bourdieu’s theories delineated in the introduction, the physical affectionate behaviors in which women engaged marked them as English and well-bred (or not) because “nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and, therefore, more precious, than the values given body, made body” (Outline 94). The value the English placed on tact and restraint becomes apparent in the bodily hexis of individuals. The English habitus taught its middle-class inhabitants to idealize restrained behavior, especially in men,

32 According to Morgan, “relations between intimate friends fell outside the domain of ‘Society’ and the jurisdiction of etiquette and thus received scant, if any, attention in etiquette books” (Morgan 23). For example, Etiquette: Social Ethics, and the Courtesies of Society, in 1854 states “in visiting your intimate friends, ceremony may generally be dispensed with” (21).

33 For more on Pierre Bourdieu’s conception of the habitus and bodily hexis, see the introduction to this work.
but also to an extent in women. Indeed, because women were so intimately connected with manners and morals by virtue of their ostensible supremacy over the domestic sphere in which such principles were largely enacted, it was imperative that women exhibit controlled and restrained emotional behavior in their bodily *hexis*. In public or with acquaintances, then, touch must be rare and, when deployed, gentle and unobtrusive. In addition, the individual of higher status must initiate physical contact. In private amongst bosom friends greater intimacy was permitted. In so doing, women showed themselves to be (as chapter one makes clear) feminine and desirable, but also well-bred English women of the higher classes. Scenes of physical touch in Victorian fiction therefore have the ability to signify characters not only as ideally feminine, but also as English or other, well-bred or ‘rabble.’

Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* and Brontë’s *Villette* confirm how the above qualities also mark an English woman as well-bred throughout the nineteenth century, and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*, Brontë’s *Villette*, and Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, demonstrate the infrequent, restrained, and gentle touch expected of English women (as opposed to the Italian, central European, and French women portrayed in the above tales). Like the novels explored in chapter one of this work, the texts analyzed here were chosen for their many scenes of female affectionate touch, and thus the attention the authors show to physical behavior. In addition to this consideration, I have also sought to select texts as disparate as possible (in time and genre specifically) in order to show how the deeply-seated expectations regarding touch are less subject than other markers of identity – like dress, language, accomplishments, and wealth – to the whims of fashion, the processes of education, or the accession to higher status through marriage or inheritance.

Touching behaviors show, not *what social category one may aspire to* (as might a lady’s dress, carriage, house, or friends), but suggest instead *who one is inside*, (as in feminine at heart: the
subject of chapter one), and where one comes from, (as in where and how one was raised: the subject of this chapter).

3.3 “Half a dozen turns in the pump-room”: Touch in Northanger Abbey

I begin my analysis with Northanger Abbey, sold for publication in 1803 but not published until 1817, for the sake of chronology, to show that the same expectations regarding social touch that were true in Austen’s time at the turn of the century will remain true up to the late-Victorian period with the advent of the New Woman. In addition, as critic Nancy Armstrong notes in Desire and Domestic Fiction, Austen’s mature work is representative of the new form the novel was beginning to take in the late eighteenth century: previously, Armstrong writes, “the novel had a reputation for displaying not only the seamy undersides of English political life, but also sexual behavior of a semi-pornographic nature” (96). Such “lady novelists” as Austen, however, “rescu[ed]” the novel and the domestic scenes which they depicted, creating “a non-aristocratic kind of writing that was both polite and particularly suitable for a female readership. It also had the virtue of dramatizing the same principles sketched out in the conduct books” (97). Austen’s work is particularly interesting to this study, therefore, since it exemplifies the beginning stages of the “polite” fiction that characterizes other, later works considered in this study, and because such works, as Armstrong clearly notes, depict preferred and recommended behavior according to Victorian ideals. The novella is also interesting to this study because of the way various critics, including Joanne Cordón and Linda Gill, analyze Austen’s social beliefs. Cordón, for example, concludes that “Isabella’s language and affection are bankrupt of meaning” (48), and Gill claims that “Austen’s ultimate measure of morality and the morality of her characters is language and the way in which characters use or
abuse language” (42). While this is true, I would like to here to extend Gill’s thesis to include body language as an additional language which characters can use or abuse.

The novel’s heroine, Catherine Morland, begins her introduction to society and courtship by traveling with some family friends, Mr. and Mrs. Allen, to Bath (Austen 7). There she is introduced to the young clergyman, Henry Tilney (14), and shortly thereafter to Isabella Thorpe, with whom she becomes fast friends (21-2). Henry Tilney and his sister Eleanor, with whom Catherine also develops a friendship, eventually invite Catherine to visit them at their home Northanger Abbey (113). While Isabella proves herself a false friend, Catherine becomes closer to Eleanor and especially to Henry, whom she has begun to think of romantically (187-8). When Eleanor marries a young man with a title, Henry’s father eventually assents to Henry and Catherine’s union (211). It is Catherine’s relationships with her female friends, Isabella and Eleanor, however, which will be most significant here. With regard to those friendships, critic Lillian Faderman suggests that “Jane Austen was one of the few women writers who seemed to scoff at the excesses of romantic friendship” (427n), but I would suggest that Faderman’s language is too strong. Austen does indeed call attention to the conventional “excesses of female friendship,” which makes her work particularly interesting here, but the humor inherent in the work suggests that the behaviors of Catherine and Isabella, for instance, should be smiled at, not harshly derided.

And so, in the course of the novel, the young heroine, Catherine Moreland, expands her *habitus* and alters her bodily *hexis* correspondingly, which is easily seen in her behavior to her female friends. Living in a rural environment, her knowledge of the world has heretofore been limited mostly to the sentimental gothic novels she reads. Accordingly, when she meets Isabella Thorpe, she easily falls into a highly demonstrative romantic friendship based on displaying
excesses of emotion common to the genre. The effusions Catherine shares with Isabella, however, are not gentle, restrained, and appropriate according to a well-bred code of English behavior. This Catherine learns when Isabella’s effusive affections prove false, and the dignified reserve of Eleanor Tilney instead encourages Catherine to remold her own behavior into that of the proper English young woman deserving of the novel’s hero, Henry Tilney.

The unrestrained bodily *hexis* of Isabella Thorpe, which Catherine initially unthinkingly reciprocates, early indicates Isabella’s lack of breeding, and therefore dangerous influence on Catherine’s development and happiness. The first day the two meet in the Pump Room in Bath, the two young women strike up a friendship and inaugurate it with taking a turn about the room, arm-in-arm (21). Because the two have only just met, such intimacy could be surprising, but some allowances might be made for the young age of the two women, and also because the two meet in the popular resort town of Bath, where social rules are somewhat more relaxed than in major city-centers. Their immediate intimacy might seem just the innocent and beautiful effusion of loving hearts. But the narrator adds that, “their increasing attachment was not to be satisfied with half a dozen turns in the Pump-room, but required . . . that Miss Thorpe should accompany Miss Morland to the very door of Mr. Allen’s house; and that they should there part with a most affectionate and lengthened shake of hands” (21). Thus, should the reader not immediately pick up on the suddenness of Isabella’s and Catherine’s affections, the narrator exaggerates to the point of comedy the excessiveness of their impulsive closeness. A turn around the room and a shake of the hands may meet the gentle and reserved code of behavior expected of new acquaintances, but a half a dozen turns, and a “lengthened shake of hands” does not. While Austen’s tone here is humorous, and not hostile or highly critical, her consideration of Catherine and Isabella’s physical behaviors nonetheless implies the common nature of such
behavior in British society since it is implicitly assumed by the text that readers will recognize the sort of behavior to which Austen is calling attention. Thus, the bodily signs described here can be read early on in the novel to indicate to the reader than the friendship is at least immature, if not actually suspect and dangerous.

If the reader is nevertheless slow on the uptake, the narrator continues to comically describe the excessive intimacy between the young women, again frequently described in terms of their physicality with one another. The narrator writes that Isabella and Catherine:

> passed so rapidly through every gradation of increasing tenderness, that there was shortly no fresh proof of it to be given to their friends or themselves. They called each other by their Christian name, were always arm in arm when they walked, pinned up each other's train for the dance, and were not to be divided in the set; and if a rainy morning deprived them of other enjoyments, they were still resolute in meeting in defiance of wet and dirt, and shut themselves up, to read novels together. (24)

Only one of these five markers of affection is constituted verbally, as in calling each other by their Christian names, a practice usually not undertaken for some weeks or months or an acquaintance and denoting deep intimacy (Mitchell 149-50). The other four behaviors all refer to proximity or physical touch in describing the impetuousness of the friends. Their behavior in itself is not the subject of Austen’s amused condescension; it is perfectly acceptable to call each another by first names, walk arm-in-arm, pin up a friend’s train, and dance and read together.

Rather, the speed and excessiveness of the behaviors are noted (for they passed “so rapidly through every gradation of increasing tenderness”) because they are at odds with expected codes of well-bred English behavior. Even had the two women’s friendship been of longer-standing,
the public display of their attachment is inappropriate and thus an excellent subject for Austen’s parodic pen. Isabella’s primary fault is that she is not sincere in her affection for Catherine, and as chapter one showed, sincerity is a must in physical touch between women. The reader finds that, when Catherine’s brother James appears in Bath, suddenly “James and Isabella were so much engaged in conversing together, that the latter had no leisure to bestow more on her friend than one smile, one squeeze, and one ‘dearest Catherine’” (46). But Catherine has some maturing to do as well; she too quickly reciprocates Isabella’s advances. One should be distant at first and work up to intimacy as one becomes more assured of the other’s worth and sincerity. Isabella’s quick and eager advances might have forewarned Catherine that Isabella lacks the manners appropriate to a well-bred young woman of the middle class; distance and reserve, the qualities of the well-bred Englishwoman, would have protected Catherine from her false friend who eventually hurts her considerably, and might have given her the opportunity to warn her brother of Isabella’s insincere nature as well.

Conversely, Eleanor Tilney, of higher class and considerably better breeding than Isabella, comports herself with restrained pleasantness with Catherine, and the still-young Catherine, child-like in adapting easily to varying habitus, once again responds in kind. Indeed, Eleanor and Catherine, though they enjoy one another’s company very much, never touch at all until an occasion arises to merit the intimacy. Catherine met Eleanor some weeks before coming to Northanger, stays there with Eleanor a month, and is engaged to stay for another, when Eleanor enters Catherine’s room one night much upset. In response, “Catherine . . . could only express her concern by silent attention; obliging [Eleanor] to be seated, rubbed her temples with lavender-water, and hung over her with affectionate solicitude” (186-7). Thus, with Eleanor, Catherine has learned to walk the line between restraint and display. Unlike with Isabella, the
two do not walk incessantly arm-in-arm or with hands around one another’s waists, kissing and embracing in public before an intimacy has scarce had a chance to form. Catherine has learned to show her friend attentions in private, and when the occasion merits it rather than indiscriminately. Bourdieu’s theories explain that Eleanor’s higher status in society means that she has greater access to codes of power, to cultural capital, and that Catherine’s intimacy with Eleanor has expanded the *habitus* to which Catherine has access. Before Eleanor, Catherine only knew how to treat young women friends as she saw in her romance novels, where sentimentality reigns, and she falls into such a pattern easily with Isabella. But access to the upper-class Eleanor and her cultural capital allows Catherine to remodel her own bodily *hexis* into one that signifies better breeding and higher status as well, an alteration necessary for the young and provincial Catherine to enter Eleanor’s world on a more permanent basis through her marriage with Eleanor’s brother, Henry Tilney.

### 3.4 Touch as an indicator of nationality and breeding in *Villette*

Jumping ahead over half a century, the expectations regarding physical touch that Catherine Moreland must learn continue to hold true in Charlotte Brontë’s 1853 novel, *Villette*. The novel is particularly interesting because, as critic Graeme Tytler notes, “the novel is much concerned with the vexed question of human identity” (42-3), and signifiers of identity are the focus on this chapter. Various scholars, indeed, have written about Bronte’s views on English versus French identity, including Alain Lescart who claims that “the *grisette* serves to underline cultural differences between the English and the French. To the English writer, the French *grisette* is the immoral mistress, opposed to the well-behaved English woman” (109); Anne Longmuir who argues that “a conflict between British and Continental, especially French, values
dominates Bronte’s fiction” (165) and “French is coded as an inherently corrupt language, while English is associated with honesty, discipline, self-control” (181); and Richard A. Kaye, who asserts that for Bronte, “British fictional character was formed in marked opposition to French culture. Thus a reprimand of French conceptions of femininity provided the basis of Bronte's Villette” (53). Clearly, Bronte is profoundly interested in issues of identity and in delineating British character as opposed to French, but her delineations of difference, as the following reading will show, are born out through physical touch as well as through other signifiers.

In the novel, the background of the novel’s heroine, Lucy Snow, is drawn early for the reader. As a youth, she stays for a while with her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, and that lady’s son, John Graham Bretton (3-36), referred to alternately as Graham or Dr. John. Thereafter troubles come on her soon, and she is orphaned of all close relations (37-38). She begins her adult career as a companion to an elderly lady in her town, Miss Marchmont, but upon that woman’s death (38-45), seeks out a fresh life for herself on the continent (54). Arriving in the town of Villette (the fictionalized version of Brussels, Belgium,) she becomes an English teacher in a girls’ boarding school under the employ of Madame Beck (91). There, she is befriended by Ginevra Fanshawe, a student at the school whom she first meets on her passage to the continent (58). She also later reencounters her godmother, Mrs. Bretton, and that lady’s son, living as expatriates in Labasscouer (200) and Paulina Mary Home, now, de Bassompierre (305), whom she first met at her godmother’s house many years before (6). The touching behaviors of Lucy, Ginevra, and Paulina Mary exemplify the ways in which restrained affectionate female touch mark each character as better or lesser-bred Englishwoman.

Critic Tess Coslett identifies Lucy Snowe as an unconventional woman, and her friends Ginevra and Paulina as foils, both of whom represent (quite different versions of) the
conventional woman, though only one is ideal (38-9). Lucy’s unconventionality, I contend, is partially revealed by the extreme to which she takes her English reserve. In less than one third of nearly three dozen scenes in the novel of female affectionate touch does Lucy initiate contact with another female, and in half of these she interacts with a female youth or child. Of the remainder, Lucy once undresses a young woman who has become ill and needs assistance (305); once mentions greeting her German teacher with a quiet kiss (351), once imagines grasping her employer, M. Beck by the hand, in order to detain her (511); and twice shakes or otherwise physically reprimands Ginevra Fanshawe (170, 171). In only one instance (with her German teacher) does the heroine initiate affectionate touch with another female. Lucy, then, does not walk the fine line between display and restraint necessary to well-bred, socially successful Englishwomen, for she errs too far on one side of the equation. Perhaps Lucy’s aversion to reaching out physically is a consequence of that time “of cold, of danger, of contention” (37) that she experienced before she was finally orphaned. Her habitus during her formative years included a time of neglect, perhaps, or even abuse, which is therefore reflected in her bodily hexis, even though internally she often feels quite passionately.

These passions the reader learns of in many ways. For example, when she lives as a companion with the elderly and temperamental Miss Marchmont, she describes their relationship as “my little morsel of human affection, which I prized as if it were a solid pearl” (40-1). Her emotions are here shown to be strong and of high value to herself. Her passions are most deeply shown when she and Dr. John attend the theater and Lucy deeply connects with the expressed emotions of an actress she calls Vashti (299-302). While Lucy recognizes and connects with Vashti’s passion, however, Lucy will not display such feelings as the actress does. Rather than walking the line between reason and emotion, restraint and display, Lucy makes the former
always her guide. Contemplating Graham Bretton’s promise to write to her, she personifies and argues with reason. She writes, “Reason still whispered me, laying on my shoulder a withered hand, and frostily touching my ear with the blue chill lips of eld” (265). Here, the personified Reason addresses Lucy intimately, stroking her shoulder and face like an old friend. Lucy is so close to Reason, it seems, that she cannot reach out to anyone else. The familiarity evidenced in this ‘touching scene’ bespeaks a long acquaintance between the two, and Lucy argues vehemently with Reason, crying, “But if I feel, may I never express?” to which Reason replies “Never!” (265). “Chill[y]” Reason makes Lucy cold and distant, at least in appearance, and so it is no surprise that Lucy fails to so much as register on Dr. John’s radar, and she “attracts (and finds attractive) an austere, frequently irascible, idiosyncratic little man whose foreignness and adherence to Catholicism make him no judge of an English ideal of femininity” (Newman 45).

Even this possibility for marital happiness is denied her, however, when M. Paul drowns at the end of the novel. Throughout the text, Lucy’s reserved use of female touch marks her as lacking as an ideal, well-bred middle class Englishwoman because she does not display restraint and emotional warmth through the deployment of affectionate female touch.

Ginevra Fanshawe, conversely, is in some ways the opposite of Lucy, and therefore she, too, is lacking as an ideal, well-bred Englishwoman because, though warmly affectionate, she does not also display restraint. As Bourdieu would remind us, this sort of bodily hexis is the result of Ginevra’s particular habitus. The habitus is partly that of her family’s station which she reveals when she states that “they are poor enough at home. . . . Papa . . . is an officer on half-pay” (61) and partly the result of education, for she has been at a “number of foreign schools” (59). Lucy claims that Ginevra has caught the customs of the French, that she speaks the language, and Ginevra even admits that “I have quite forgotten my religion” and cannot tell the
difference between Protestantism and Catholicism (60). Her bodily *hexis*, then, will be the result of this conglomeration of a lower-middle-class family and a continental education – which is to say, quite different from that of a well-bred, middle-class Englishwoman.

Indeed, could Dr. John have seen all of Ginevra’s frequent and excessive physical effusions he might have been forewarned that she was not the ideal young woman he imagined. At various points Lucy writes that Ginevra “threw herself on the bench beside me, and . . . cast her arms round my neck” (165), “made no scruple of . . . catching me as I was crossing the carre, whirling me round in a compulsory waltz” (273), “always leaned upon me her whole weight [when she took my arm]” (357), and “would . . . have her elbow in my side. . . . [and] be gummed to me, ‘keeping herself warm,’ as she said, on the winter evenings” (382). Ginevra displays her status as ill-bred or foreign in two ways. First, as Lucy says, “that bright young creature was not gentle at all” (417-8), and gentleness bespeaks restraint and tact and so is a requirement except in exigent situations. Secondly, Ginevra regularly displays her affections in public – in the carre or refectory of the school, and in the streets of the city. Such a public display of her emotions precludes the reserve and modestly essential to English notions of womanhood.

While Lucy carries her English reserve too far, and Ginevra her effusive physicality, Paulina Mary, the novel’s young, well-bred Englishwoman who marries the novel’s English hero, walks the line between restraint and display, warm affections and emotional reserve, most successfully. Initially, having known Lucy as a child and only recently having been reintroduced as adults, Paulina Mary builds intimacy slowly, primarily by verbally reminding Lucy of their former relationship. It is significant, however, that though she builds intimacy through language, she describes scenes of their physical familiarity. She says to Lucy:
You have forgotten then that I have sat on your knee, been lifted in your arms, even shared your pillow? You no longer remember the night when I came crying, like a naughty little child as I was, to your bedside, and you took me in? You have no memory for the comfort and protection by which you soothed an acute distress? Go back to Bretton. (319)

Paulina implicitly connects intimate scenes of physical female amity – when she “sat on your knee. . . . [was] lifted in your arms, even shared your pillow” - with “comfort and protection,” and recalls these memories to Lucy in unembarrassed manner for she is “quite pleased and glad.” Paulina is the ideal model of well-bred, English womanhood. That she is unembarrassed speaks to her ease in social situations, a result of her good breeding. She neither rushes impetuously toward a long-absent friend, nor coldly distances herself and refuses to acknowledge their former relations. She builds intimacy slowly, and as the social superior, she initiates such intimacy.

Later, at Paulina’s home, Lucy recaps the difference between deep and shallow emotion, according to English notions, by noting that “my regard for [Paulina] lay deep. An admiration more superficial might have been more demonstrative; mine, however, was quiet” (431). Extrapolating from Lucy’s conceit, one might therefore argue that Ginevra’s affections, because so “demonstrative,” are ultimately “superficial.” As such they may be girlish and pleasant, but shallow emotion does not bespeak English dignity. Paulina’s affections, to Lucy’s esteem, are quiet. For example, Lucy writes that “She held my hand between hers, and at each favourable word gave it a little caressing stroke,” (431) and later, “Still holding my hand, she played with the fingers unconsciously, dressed them now in her own rings, and now circled them with a twine of her beautiful hair; she patted the palm against her hot cheek” (432). This behavior perfectly fits Ellis’ assertion that “there is no other channel for [the] perpetual overflow [of a
woman’s feelings], than that of their manners; and thus a sensitive and ingenious woman can exhibit much of her own character” (Women 52). Paulina feels passionately about Dr. John, which is exhibited in her “hot cheek,” but she acts out such feelings only by warmly physically approving – by patting and playing with her hands - Lucy’s kind remarks about Dr. John. This behavior is both gentle and affectionate. It takes place in the private sphere of Paulina’s home where the two are alone, and is initiated by the wealthy and well-connected Paulina Mary. She thus walks the line between the two extremes, reserve and display, represented in the characters of Lucy and Ginevra. And her happy marriage to the highly-eligible Dr. John confirms her successful enactment of the codes of well-bred English womanhood.

### 3.5 Touch, Breeding, and Nationality in Aurora Leigh

Around the same time as Villette, but in very different form, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s künstlerroman in verse, Aurora Leigh, published in 1856, demonstrates the same expectations with regard to physical touch as do the much earlier parody, Northanger Abbey, and the Realist novel Villette. Like the latter, Aurora Leigh does not take place entirely in England, which is of particular interest. It tells in first person the story of the eponymous heroine who travels from her birthplace in Italy, to England, and then back to Italy via France. The tale deals with a limited number of characters, and among the most important are the protagonist and poetess herself, Aurora; Lady Waldemar, a high-ranking lady who loves Aurora’s cousin Romney Leigh, and who seeks to separate him from a low-class seamstress; and the seamstress herself, Marian Erle. Scenes of physical intimacy in Aurora Leigh, between Aurora, Aunt Leigh, Lady Waldemar, and Marian Erle, demonstrate the ways in which a nation’s tacit rules regarding
female affectionate touch characterizes Aurora as only partially English, and Lady Waldemar as unscrupulous and dangerous due to her lack of restraint. 34

Like many of the primary texts analyzed in this study, *Aurora Leigh* was chosen for the author’s special attention to instances of female touch. Indeed, Barrett Browning exemplifies in the work a sort of sacredness due to the sense of touch. The instances I examine here therefore bear all the more scrutiny. In several instances Barrett Browning indicates the significance of physical touch, as when Aurora writes of her mother that “If her kiss / Had left a longer weight upon my lips / It might have steadied the uneasy breath” (I: 35). The touch of the mother reflects the power of a mother to “steady” a child. Of Marian, Aurora writes that she might “touch her hand if worthy, and hold her hand / If feeble,” which physical and intimate action would “justify” the engagement of the lower class Marian and the upper class Romney (III: 671-2). Near the end of the text, Aurora tells Marian “Here's my hand / To clasp your hand, my Marian, owned as pure!” (IX: 268-9). In this case the gesture of the clasp of hands signifies Marian’s innocence despite the fact that she has born a child out of wedlock. And Aurora is not the only one who recognizes the steadying, justifying, or purifying quality of touch. Marian writes that when Aurora kisses her “mouth to mouth: I felt her soul / Dip through her serious lips in holy fire” (IV: 940-1). Intimate touch becomes the way to sense the soul, the very center, of another. 34 Many critics today applaud the text for its feminism. The poem might, therefore, seem an odd choice to analyze in a work that examines typical nineteenth century gender roles. However, I agree with critics Deirdre David, Christine Sutphin, and Lynda Chouiten that *Aurora Leigh* is neither radically feminist nor entirely conservative, and that in their body language, Aurora, Lady Waldemar, and Marian Erle participate in gendered behavior that would be clearly readable to Victorian reader more often than not.
And touch can warn of danger, too, for Marian says of the lady’s maid who brought her to France, drugged her and left her to be raped, that, long before she knew of the woman’s evil designs, “It made me tremble if she touched my hand” (VI: 1152). The reciprocal value that Aurora and Marian experience from their intimacies reflects critic Sharon Marcus’ claim that “the feminist buldingsroman deploys amity to help female protagonists acquire the autonomy that makes them equal to their husbands” (91). Female affectionate touch can thus be seen as one of the elements of friendship that strengthens both partners, and contributes to their “mutual fortification” (92).

The text is also of primary interest in this chapter because Aurora is of mixed heritage. Born of an English father and an Italian mother, and raised entirely in Italy until age thirteen, upon the death of both of her parents she is sent to England to live with her father’s sister. Prejudiced against the Italian wife who kept her brother away from his home in England until his death (I: 337-48), Aurora’s aunt seeks to remold her brother’s daughter’s hexis into that of a proper Englishwoman. The rules regarding affectionate female touch will be the very first of Aurora’s lessons in Englishness, and demonstrate powerfully the nineteenth century English predilection for the controlled expression of emotion, particularly between less intimately familiar women, and in the public sphere.

Aurora’s meeting with her aunt is significant, and I quote it here at length:

She stood upon the steps to welcome me,
Calm, in black garb. I clung about her neck—
Young babes, who catch at every shred of wool
To draw the new light closer, catch and cling
Less blindly. In my ears, my father's word
Hummed ignorantly, as the sea in shells,
‘Love, love, my child.’ She, black there with my grief,
Might feel my love—she was his sister once,
I clung to her. A moment she seemed moved,
Kissed me with cold lips, suffered me to cling,
And drew me feebly through the hall into
The room she sat in. (I: 313-24)

Aurora, a girl blossoming into womanhood, has lost her father and been torn from the only home
she has ever known. She has been shipped to a foreign one and consigned to a woman she has
never met, albeit her aunt. It is no surprise that this young girl, not long since a child (Aurora
claims her childhood ended when her father died (I: 215)), should cling so closely, passionately
and immediately to the woman who bears her father’s blood, who mourns for him also, the more
especially because her father’s recent death and last words have impressed on her the directive to
“Love, love, my child.” But such a greeting is also symbolic of Aurora’s Italian roots; it
indicates a passionate nature that has not been taught to restrain itself. The lack of reserve she
shows was not seen as negative when in Italy; that habitus did not demand it. Indeed, when she
was separated from her Italian nurse, when her father’s agents “commanded, caught me up /
From old Assunta’s neck . . . with a shriek, / She let me go” (I: 225-7), there is no indication that
such an emotional scene between women was viewed pejoratively. Even after, “poor Assunta . . .
. stood and moaned!” (I: 231). In Italy emotion is unembarrassed and openly displayed.

But Aurora’s aunt is English, and belongs therefore to a different habitus; the bodily
hexis of a well-bred Englishwoman is different. In response to Aurora’s ardent embrace, her
aunt perhaps for “A moment . . . seemed moved” and “Kissed [Aurora] with cold lips, suffered
[her] to cling” but immediately afterward draws Aurora inside. Aurora has failed English expectations of conduct in two ways. First she has been too immediate, zealous, and clinging with a woman she does not know intimately. Second, she has enacted her passions out of doors, “upon the steps” where anyone might see. Thus, the aunt begins her training of the niece immediately by drawing Aurora indoors to a more private space, and then “wrung loose [Aurora’s] hands / Imperiously, and held [her] at arm’s length” (I: 325-6). Distance helps to create the reserve Aurora’s aunt requires, as does the use of vision over touch. Unlike Aurora, Aunt Leigh looks with her eyes, and not with her hands. She “searched through my face-ay, stabbed it through and through, / . . . as if to find / A wicked murderer in my innocent face” (I: 328-30). She looks for signs of Aurora’s mother, that Italian woman (and perhaps that Italian nature?) who have stolen so much from her. She is determined to:

prick [Aurora] to a pattern with her pin

Fibre from fibre, delicate leaf from leaf,

And dry out from [her] drowned anatomy

The last sea-salt left in [her]. (I: 381-4).

The “pattern” Aurora must be “pricked to” is that of a well-bred Englishwoman. She must inhabit a new habitus henceforward in England, and the aunt will attempt to mold Aurora’s bodily hexis as well, as she has begun to do in this scene. The rugged, wild ‘sea-salt,’ the Mediterranean in Aurora’s nature, must go; she must be separated from nature, from the sea, and civilized. For, according to Aunt Leigh, "English women, she thanked God and sighed / . . . / Were models to the universe” (I: 444-6). She strives to make Aurora Leigh into a woman like Lady Waldemar, that “English dame” (I: 345) who is “out of nature” (III: 358), the sort of woman who appears that she “would not touch you with their foot / To push you to your place”
(III: 353-4); in other words, a woman who recognizes the power of distance and restraint. *Aurora Leigh* clearly thus demonstrates the English sense of superiority, founded in women’s behavior, and the value placed on distance and reserve over unrestrained expressions of emotion.

To an extent, Aunt Leigh succeeds with Aurora. With such women as Lady Waldemar, (who seeks Aurora out to enlist her help in separating Aurora’s cousin, Romney, from the woman to whom he has become engaged, Marian Erle), Aurora willingly keeps her distance. It is Lady Waldemar, not Aurora, who appears suspicious when, upon their first meeting, she “took [Aurora’s] hands” (III: 528). To be sure, having a title, Lady Waldemar is higher in status than Aurora and can afford to make intimate gestures sooner than the heroine, but in a first meeting, and especially when Aurora has not been forth-coming throughout (indeed, just before Lady Waldemar takes the poetess’s hands, Aurora has been nearly rude, insisting that her guest will not get to the point) Lady Waldemar’s touch is distinctly out of place. She restrains her remarks no more than her hands, admitting to Aurora she loves Romney Leigh (III: 421), a confession that certainly ought not to be made to a stranger. Aurora cautions restraint, responding, “If here’s no Muse, still less is any saint; / Nor even a friend, that Lady Waldemar / Should make confessions” (III: 421-4). These early signs of Lady Waldemar’s nature bear out in the text when the reader learns that she has gone so far as to visit the much-lower-class Marian personally and convince her to break her engagement with Romney.

When Lady Waldemar visits Marian she continues her inappropriate use of touch, demonstrating her dangerousness. Though Lady Waldemar is upper class and Marian lower, the former regularly visits the latter as if a friend. When Marian humbly beseeches her advice, Lady Waldemar “wrapped [Marian] in her generous arms at once, / And let [her] dream a moment how it feels / To have a real mother” (VI: 1001-3). If this scene had not succeeded the scene I have
quoted above, one might be tempted to see beautiful condescension in Lady Waldemar’s willingness to wholeheartedly embrace a woman of the working class. But the reader has already learned that she seeks only to separate Marian from Romney. Her touches cannot be trusted, the more so because embracing another so wholeheartedly is so powerful a gesture. Gentle her touch may be, but it is not at all restrained. No exigent circumstances are present. Marian is not ill. No series of gentle intimate touches have built to this one. If no other indications of Lady Waldemar’s ill will exist, this scene would nevertheless raise a red flag because of its impropriety according to the English social code. Lady Waldemar’s touch signifies danger because it is outside of expectations.

Aurora, while properly reserved with Lady Waldemar, is, like Lady Waldemar, less circumspect with Marian. Aunt Leigh was unable to prick Aurora perfectly to her pattern of an Englishwoman. At their first meeting, Aurora writes that she “looked [Marian] in the eyes, and held her hands” (III: 802), though, unlike Aurora’s relation to Lady Waldemar, or Lady Waldemar’s relation to Marian, there is a little more reason for Aurora to be intimate with Marian since, when Romney and Marian marry, Marian will be Aurora’s cousin, too (III: 804). But there seems to be more to it than an anticipatory kinship relation, for Aurora writes that Marian “touched me with her face and with her voice, / This daughter of the people” (III: 805-6). Aurora’s warm feelings for Marian thus seem paramount, not the unspoken rules of who touches whom. She touches Marian because she is metaphorically touched by her. Aurora justifies this behavior because, as she claims, she is a poet. And “a poet’s heart,” Aurora claims, “Can swell to a pair of nationalities” (VI: 50-2). But Bourdieu’s theories would suggest that in fact, Aurora’s bodily hexis can swell “to a pair of nationalities” not because she is a poet, but because she experienced and therefore learned the expectations of two very different habitus, that of Italy
and of England, when she was still in her formative years. Thus, her bodily *hexis* can be both reserved with an Englishwoman she does not like, and burst forth tenderly and in less-restrained fashion with someone who “touched [her].” Through her use of touch she thus shows herself to be only partially English; she is both a woman aware of the reserve expected of well-bred Englishwomen, as well as partly Mediterranean and passionate in her ability to exceed tacit English social codes when she finds herself “touched.”

3.6 *Otherness, and “the power of the hand” in “Carmilla”*

Sheridan Le Fanu’s vampire story, “Carmilla,” published in 1872, was written almost a century after the earliest text considered here, and was also, unlike the other three texts, produced by a male author. In addition, the genre, part horror, part romance, and entirely gothic, is dissimilar to the parody, realist novel, and künstlerroman explored heretofore. Nevertheless, the expectations regarding physical touch do not differ. It was also chosen because the novella includes more touching scenes between women than most. Indeed, critic Ellen Stockstill, in “Vampires and Panic in ‘Carmilla,’” writes that Carmilla and Laura “touch each other a lot - more than is usually appropriate in the heteronormative marriage plots that many Victorian love stories follow” (Stockstill 51). Stockstill is correct. In the short story, nearly two dozen such scenes occur, and those scenes are also marked by their aggressive physicality. To be sure, as a ghost story, it is no surprise that physicality should be marked and that everyday elements should become extraordinary in order to heighten the readers’ reactions. The genre, like sensationalist fiction, demands it. The many scenes of touch are all the more complex, however, because, as Faderman notes, “in 1872 . . . it was still conceivable that, aside from Carmilla's most extravagant utterances about hating, her behavior might be considered appropriate within the
framework of romantic friendship” (288-9); thus, the many scenes of excessive affection seem to have a basis, and yet are uncomfortably strong nevertheless. But Laura’s ambivalent response to Carmilla’s aggressive emotional expression (noted by critic Arthur H. Nethercot as far back as 1949) helps to delineate both acceptable and unacceptable physical expression in Victorian culture.

Set in a border town in Austria, the teenage Laura is born of an English father and Styrian mother. Helping to raise her are Madame Perrodon, “a native of Berne” who speaks “French and broken English” (Le Fanu 6) and Mademoiselle De Lefontaine, a “finishing governess” who “spoke French and German” (6). The end result is a conglomerate, a “Babel” (6), a border-land of cultures and identities, which is compounded by the fact that the home of Laura and her father is located on the border of Austria and Hungary. Nonetheless, with her mother long since deceased, Laura and her father share a number of English customs. As Stockstill notes, “Laura and her father intentionally speak English, read Shakespeare, and have tea in the English way, refusing to adopt the language and culture of their neighbors” (49). Thus, though only half English by blood, Laura becomes the representative figure of young English womanhood in the story, and the mysterious Carmilla a representative of the Other, the non-English. Indeed, Laura emphasizes this fact when she writes that “I gathered from . . . chance hints that her native country was much more remote than I had at first fancied” (Le Fanu 31). Carmilla’s habitus is making itself felt to Laura as that which is remote, distant, strange, and different.

In the story, when Carmilla arrives under strange circumstances following a carriage accident, Laura and her father welcome the newcomer into their home at Carmilla’s mother’s request. But Laura has met Carmilla before, in a “dream,” when Laura was only a child. Their intimate physicality first appears in this “dream,” when Laura sees a,
very pretty face looking at me from the side of the bed. . . . She caressed me with her hands, and lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly. (7)

From the very beginning of the tale, then, the reader learns that Carmilla’s touch is both soothing and dangerous, welcomed and rejected. The same will be true when Carmilla and Laura meet again, when Laura is a teenager, and she recognizes in her strange houseguest that “very pretty face” from her dream. Why is Carmilla’s touch so ambiguous? At the literal level, Carmilla is a predator who soothes her victims into complacency before feasting upon them. But symbolically, Carmilla is also transgressing English expectations regarding physical touch, which makes her physicality— a pleasant gesture of intimacy when appropriately deployed, according to English standards— into something suspicious and fear-provoking. Critics Willian Veeder and Arthur H. Nethercot claim respectively, for example, that “even the freedom allowed to, say, female cousins would not condone the intense physicality of Carmilla’s advances” (210), and “there is something basically sinister in the sweetness and friendliness of . . . Carmilla. [She is] so desirous of establishing physical contact . . . that suspicion is immediately aroused” (35). According to English standards, as chapter one of this work showed, Laura must show herself to be loving and warm-hearted to merit the distinction of the ideal feminine young woman, and this is easily done through the deployment of touch. At the same time, when that affection does not attend to the tacit rules of touch— because it is not gentle, restrained, or infrequent— Laura must reject it or risk losing her status as a proper middle-class English woman. This is exactly the
dynamic which ensues in the course of the text, and helps to explain the ambivalence surrounding Carmilla’s affectionate physicality.

Initially, Laura shows her warm-heartedness by initiating affectionate touch with Carmilla. Coming into Carmilla’s room just after her accident, Laura writes, “I took her hand as I spoke. . . . She pressed my hand, she laid hers upon it, and her eyes glowed, as, looking hastily into mine, she smiled again, and blushed” (23-4). The two girls appear to be about the same age. Reading status otherwise is difficult since Carmilla is under strict orders from her mother not to communicate anything regarding her family or background, but the fact that Carmilla and her mother were traveling in a carriage suggest that Carmilla is certainly not of the lower classes (15-8). Camilla has just been in a traumatic accident when her carriage overturned, however, so Laura’s warm greeting to her new houseguest, taking her hands because, as she writes, “the situation made me eloquent, and even bold” (23), is appropriate. But Carmilla quickly heightens the intensity of the moment, when “She held [Laura] close in her pretty arms for a moment and whispered in [her] ear, ‘Good night, darling, it is very hard to part with you, but good night’” (25). The two young women have only been introduced within hours, so while exigent circumstances might allow Laura to grasp the hand of a prospective new friend, Carmilla’s response – embracing Laura, and whispering passionate endearments in her ear – is suspiciously intense.

Still, their touches in some ways seem to follow a course common to romantic friends. Laura loves to take down Carmilla’s “wonderful” and “magnificent” hair, “fold and braid it, and spread it out and play with it” (27). Carmilla, in turn, “used to place her pretty arms about [Laura’s] neck . . . laying her cheek to [Laura’s] (29). Such gestures have a pretty innocence and warmth: the hair, the cheeks, and the arms are not distinctively erogenous zones, and so these
touches between friends are constituted by the requisite distance and restraint expected of friends.

But Laura quickly recognizes that something is not right. She states that Carmilla would “press me more closely in her trembling embrace, and her lips in soft kisses gently glow upon my cheek” and that “from these foolish embraces . . . I used to wish to extricate myself” (29). In other words, while Laura maintains a gentle touch and a respectful distance of sorts in her affectionate touch – grasping a hand, braiding the hair – Carmilla reciprocates not in kind, but by decreasing the distance between the two as when she presses Laura “more closely in her trembling embrace,” and introducing lips and glowing kisses, by no means as innocuous as hands and hair. Her touches are distinctively unrestrained. The otherness of Carmilla, in literal terms her vampirism, but also her different cultural upbringing, are playing out in her bodily hexis, and Laura, raised according to a different code, is disturbed by the unfamiliarity, the unpredictability. She thinks of her friend as “strange” (29) and “strove in vain to form any satisfactory theory” of Carmilla’s “extraordinary manifestations” (30). Laura seeks to mitigate her agitation at the differences her friend exhibits by explaining and justifying Carmilla’s unusual behavior which, she says, “embarrassed, and even frightened me” (42).

Baron Vordenburg, who eventually destroys Carmilla, tells Laura and her father that “one sign of the vampire is the power of the hand” (96). He states that their hands are extremely powerful, and leave a numbness where they have grasped a human. But Carmilla’s hands also have the power to signify her otherness more symbolically. Her grasping, trembling embraces show her to be unpredictable, and ultimately dangerous, long before Laura learns that Carmilla is
a vampire. In this way, the text of “Carmilla” presents the unrestrained hand as dangerous to social order and to the well-bred and civilized classes.35

3.7 Conclusion

In England in the nineteenth century, the habitus of the well-bred and ruling classes demanded that all persons, including women, demonstrate restraint in terms of their emotions, language, and behavior. For women, the ability to walk the line between two opposing dictates – to be loving and to be reserved – oftentimes dictated social success. Affectionate touch between women, as has been shown, can thus serve as a powerful signifier of identify Victorian texts because its deep-rooted nature in bodily hexis makes it less open to manipulation than other markers. As a tacit system, imbedded in the body from a young age, touching behaviors are slow to alter and remain constant from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth centuries. Warm, sincere, and spontaneous touch signifies an individual as the ideally feminine woman, undeniably marriage material; the absence of these behaviors is detrimental to Lucy Snowe, for

35 According to critic Elizabeth Signorotti, “Le Fanu’s ‘Carmilla’ . . . marks the growing concern about the power of female homosocial relationships in the nineteenth century” (610). Carol Senf claims that the “power” of homosocial relationships became apparent due to the “growing awareness of women’s power and influence . . . [as] feminists began to petition for additional rights for women” (154). As I have shown, however, women’s unrestraint of emotion was in fact seen as a danger to the British sense of moral superiority over other nations throughout much of the nineteenth century, and while the advent of the sexologists and other pseudo-scientific claims would certainly change the nature of the danger female emotion presented at the end of the century, the necessity of containing it was present as early as the 1790s when Austen wrote Northanger Abbey.
example. But such behaviors only mark a woman as belonging to the English well-bred *habitus* when combined with a gentle restraint that is guided by the societal expectations that it will be initiated by the person of higher standing, and that intimacy will develop over the course of time, and take place in private. Other forms of touching between women – impetuous or public – conversely mark the participants as either lower class or foreign, and thus as suspicious or dangerous. Isabella Thorpe, Ginevra Fanshawe, Lady Waldemar, and Carmilla show this clearly. From touch as a signifier of identity constructs, this study will now turn its attention to touch as an expressive act which functions to increase a woman’s possibilities for agency and self-definition in her world.
4 “A perfect performer”: Touch and Agency

In chapters one and two of this work, we have seen that female touch functioned in the Victorian period as a signifier of identity in terms of a woman’s level of femininity, Englishness, and breeding. Touch is a valuable marker in terms of identity constructs because bodily deportment and behavior are difficult to intentionally manipulate, unlike other signifiers such as dress, a smattering of accomplishments, or careful adhesion to formal rules of etiquette, all of which can be altered or quickly learned upon a sudden accession to wealth. As we have seen, the theories of Pierre Bourdieu explain how bodily habits become deeply engrained and difficult to change because such habits are learned 1.) at an early age, and 2.) generally unthinkingly, that is, outside the conscious process. These theories suggest that intentionally manipulating one’s identity is difficult, and so opportunities for exploiting social expectations surrounding identity to affect one’s place in the world, or the social world itself, are limited. Yet the sheer volume of advice dedicated to acting naturally and avoiding affected behavior in Victorian conduct material suggests that many women indeed attempted to realize and display a particular version of themselves to others through carefully crafted performances. Did Victorian women utilize touching behaviors in their quests for agency in their lives? And if so, how effective were such strategies?

Becky Sharp, William Thackeray’s consummate little actress, and the protagonist of the 1848 novel *Vanity Fair*, is a wonderful example of a woman born in adverse circumstances determined to rise in the world through her own initiative, and the novel is of particular interest since Becky does not rely on her marriage to the younger son of an aristocratic family for her future stability, comfort, and happiness. Only weeks after her nuptials, the young adventuress is
seen playing a part nimbly, seeking to raise her and her husband’s fortunes through particularly feminine methods. The narrator declares:

> When Rebecca entered her [Amelia’s] box, she flew to her friend with an affectionate rapture which showed itself, in spite of the publicity of the place; for she embraced her dearest friend in the presence of the whole house, at least in full view of the general’s glass, now brought to bear upon the Osborne party. Mrs. Rawdon saluted Jos, too, with the kindliest greeting: she admired Mrs. O'Dowd's large Cairngorm brooch and superb Irish diamonds, and wouldn't believe that they were not from Golconda direct. She bustled, she chattered, she turned and twisted, and smiled upon one, and smirked on another, all in full view of the jealous opera-glass opposite. And when the time for the ballet came (in which there was no dancer that went through her grimaces or performed her comedy of action better), she skipped back to her own box. . . . (Thackeray 276)

Becky’s behavior “in the presence of the whole house,” and the response to her behavior (for George Osborne calls her “the nicest little woman in England” (277), while her husband’s superior, General Tufto, seethes with jealousy) suggest that bodily behaviors and touch indeed function as tools of agency in Victorian texts. As this passage illustrates, and this chapter will argue, agency can be gained through touch in three distinct ways. First, touch calls the attention of onlookers to the toucher, drawing the gaze and providing a socially licit form of self-display, as seen here when the general turns his opera-glass to follow Becky’s performance. Second, touching behaviors allow the toucher to enact a particular version of the self, to manipulate identity, the way one is seen or viewed by others; in this scene, Becky enacts “affectionate rapture” which would seem to denote a loving heart and thus a particularly feminine nature.
Third, touch has the power to affect the behavior and actions of others, actually altering the social landscape around the toucher. Through her behavior here, for example, Becky cows her former social superior and patroness, Amelia, who “was overpowered by the flash and dazzle . . . of her worldly rival” and actually silences the formidable Mrs. O’Dowd, who was “subdued after Becky’s brilliant apparition.” Much of Becky’s triumph may seem to be won through “flash and dazzle” and the way, as honest Old Dobbin remarks, she “writhes and twists about like a snake” (277), but I would suggest that the way Becky “embraced her dearest friend” is the linchpin of the entire performance. Dobbin may realize that “all the time she was here . . . she was acting,” and Amelia and Mrs. O’Dowd may be intimidated, but what negative response can be shown in the face of such an outright display of affection as an ardent embrace? As this brief reading demonstrates, the socially licit nature of touch makes it a powerful instrument for gaining what I will call ‘advanced agency’ in Victorian England. Shows of physical affection may be wielded as tools, and also as weapons, to advance a woman’s prospects in the world. Such physical behaviors will be utilized by the protagonists of William Makepeace Thackeray’s 1847 novel, *Vanity Fair*, and Margaret Oliphant’s 1866 novel, *Miss Marjoribanks*.

### 4.1 Advanced Agency

In order to understand how female physical affection functions as agency, we must first understand what is meant by the term. Some critics, like Carrie Noland, see agency as “the power to alter acquired behaviors and beliefs for purposes that may be . . . resistant . . . or . . . innovative” (9). While I agree that innovation of, and resistance to, accepted norms certainly constitute a type of agency, I understand the word according to a broader definition as suggested by the *OED*, as “action or intervention producing a particular effect” (“Agency”), and as a
process which “implies rationality and free will” (Campbell, Meynell, & Sherwin 2). Of course, according to these definitions, all persons, even slaves, possess agency to some extent. In this chapter, however, I suggest that some women made use of socially permissible behaviors, particularly the expectations surrounding female friendship and affectionate touch, to gain social power or standing. These actions I will denominate as ‘Advanced Agency’ to distinguish this particular kind of “action or intervention producing a particular effect” (“Agency”) from other kinds of intentional actions that subjects take.

In this sense then, an individual gains advanced agency when she draws the gaze of onlookers because drawing the attention of others is a necessary precondition for influencing others’ perception of the self, and their future actions. It is also a personal empowerment, an “I can” in the face of various authorities – be they family members, friends, or social commentators – who would mandate that the ideal Victorian woman must “disappear into the woodwork” (Armstrong 80). Touch between women appeals to the notice of others both because it is a physical action constituted in space and time: a scene to be observed, perceived, and noticed, and because the physical action implies intimacy, an inherently titillating object for the attention.

In addition, a woman gains advanced agency when she crafts a specific version of herself for display because in so doing she takes conscious control of her own image. Like Diana Meyers, I find that “Self-determination . . . is best understood as an ongoing process of exercising a repertoire of agentic skills – skills that enable individuals to construct their own self-portraits and self-narratives and that thereby enable them to take charge of their lives” (5). The will and ability to construct the self, and how that self is viewed by others, is at the heart of agency. It entails self-reflection and a degree of objective consideration of the social world, and is a necessary prerequisite to influencing the beliefs and behaviors of others. As chapters one
and two of this work have demonstrated, the utilization of touching behaviors is central to perceptions of identity in Victorian society, and as such, the purposeful construction of one’s identity constitutes intentional intervention in one’s fortunes.

Finally, a woman gains advanced agency when she acts to influence the beliefs and actions of others in the social world around her, and social touching behaviors, as shown by Becky Sharpe in the introduction, can certainly be used to manipulate others. Bourdieu would say this occurs because one’s perceptions of another’s identity, and thus, of her standing in society and ability to act on that society, alters the *habitus*’ “estimation of chances” (*Logic* 53) and subsequent actions as it “[adjusts] to the future” (*Logic* 51). Like most actions of the *habitus*, our perception of others is formed mostly unconsciously (especially, I might interject, when it comes to perceptions influenced by body language, signs that are more subtle and often less explicitly critiqued than other signifiers of identity, like dress), and those beliefs which are formed without reflection are often the most lasting, deeply-entrenched, and therefore most influential. For example, the townspeople of Carlingsford think very highly of Lucilla Marjoribanks, and that view, I will show below, is predicated partially on her enactment of physical displays of affection to other females in the town, yet no character ever remarks upon such physicality. It seems to go (at least consciously) unnoticed by her friends, yet one character after another is touched by Lucilla (metaphorically as well as physically), and one after another, each falls under her sway as the reigning social monarch of the town.

### 4.2 Obstacles to Agency

Opportunities to self-empowerment were limited for Victorian women outside of the social world. Pseudo-scientific theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries regarding
women’s supposedly physical and purely reproductive (rather than intellectual) nature “constructed the woman as essentially different from man and, because of the quasi-pathological nature of this difference, as a creature who needed constant and expert superintendence by . . . men” (Poovey, Uneven 37). Such theories supported explicit as well as implicit regulations that limited a woman legally, financially, and socially. For example, legally, a woman was subordinated to her father before marriage, and to her husband, through the process of coverture, afterwards. In becoming a wife then, a woman “became ‘nonexistent’ in the eyes of the law” (Poovey, Uneven 52), resulting in limited recourse to independent legal action. In addition, the Victorian woman enjoyed no opportunity to vote to change such laws, since women did not earn full suffrage in England until 1928, and Queen Victoria herself referred to the desire for emancipation in women as “this mad folly” (Paterson 25). Financially, middle-class women’s opportunities were also extremely limited. Michael Paterson notes that “there were many possibilities for earning a living in small and insecure ways,” such as by selling small items, taking in washing, or watching or educating children (40), but more stable paths to financial independence were few and far between, and less likely to be utilized by middle-class woman anxious to preserve the dignity of their station. Careers for middle-class women in formal nursing, for example, did not begin to appear until the later part of the century (Paterson 242). In addition, for much of the period the laws of the nation determined that a woman’s husband had the right to any remuneration she might earn, and oftentimes any inheritance that came to her as well.

In addition to explicit laws regarding women’s legal and financial opportunities, cultural mandates about women’s place in the world also limited them. Kathryn Gleadle writes that “women were portrayed as financially, intellectually and emotionally dependent upon their male
kin. They were encouraged to perceive themselves as ‘relative creatures’, whose path in life was to nurture the family and to provide unstinting support for the head of the household” (51), a point which Deborah Gorham corroborates (4-5). Gleadle’s and Gorham’s point is exemplified by Sarah Stickney Ellis, who, in 1839 and 1843 respectively, claims that, “as women, then, the first thing of importance is to be content to be inferior to men – inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength” (Daughters 6). They are responsible instead for “making their own personal exertions conducive to the great end of promoting the happiness of those around them” (Women 7). Nearly thirty years later, Sarah Tytler, a Victorian author of conduct literature for women, reiterates the same claims in 1870, exhorting young women to “remember . . . that the ‘woman’s head is the man.’ Let them not forget that the great apostle would not suffer women to usurp authority; that at fathers’, and brothers’, and husbands’ feet they should sit . . . loyally and willingly, resting their heads on their knees, taking them as their masters” (8-9). Thus, a woman was overtly and explicitly ordered to form her life around the lives of men, and not in relation to her own ambitions or personal desires. Her role was always to support others, and not to make a path for herself.

Finally, in addition to legal systems that denied women rights, and explicit cultural directives regarding women’s ostensibly natural dependent status, the qualities for which women were celebrated in Victorian England were antithetical to self-advancement. While critics offer a variety of terms to describe the most appreciated qualities in women, four main themes emerge in a close examination of such descriptors, including innocence,\(^{36}\) emotional responsiveness,\(^ {37}\)

\(^{36}\) Also commonly referred to as purity or sweetness.

\(^{37}\) Also commonly referred to as ‘naturally’ all heart, sensitivity, tenderness, softness, and vulnerability.
self-sacrifice,\textsuperscript{38} and submission to male authority (Marcus 107, Langford 159, Purchase 74, Mitchell 266). These traits, and the very qualities discussed as characteristic of feminine and well-bred Englishwomen in chapters one and two of this work – affection, simplicity of heart, gentleness, and reserve – counteract to a considerable extent a woman’s opportunities to direct her own life. One of the most significant obstacles, however, is the implicit and explicit prohibition against female self-display during the period.

Several nineteenth century critics have recognized the Victorian ideal of the “invisible woman.” Mary Poovey, for example, claims that the “ideal woman . . . cannot be seen at all” \textit{(Proper Lady 22)}. She could not be more right. Again and again, the conduct literature exhorts women to avoid personal display. Mrs. John Sandford, for example, claimed in 1833 that “it is not to shine, but to please, that a woman should desire” (14-5). Later, in both \textit{Women of England} and \textit{Daughters of England}, 1839 and ’43 respectively, Sarah Stickney Ellis devotes many pages to the “folly and of suffering” that attends the desire to be admired (\textit{Women} 146), and the “enemies” of women, “vanity . . . and . . . love of admiration” (\textit{Daughters} 96).\textsuperscript{39} Even at the end of the century, in 1893, Lady Gertrude Elizabeth Campbell warns that “a true lady . . . will shrink from all affectation and avoid all pretention, and never try, by any means, to appear other than she really is” (18-9). Lady Gertrude applies her assertion only to “true lad[ies],” but such an appellation is one that any middle-class woman would covet. Therefore, her claim is as much prescriptive as descriptive.

\textsuperscript{38} Also commonly referred to as altruism and self-effacement.

It is small wonder, however, that Victorian women should seek and enjoy the attention of others however they might be exhorted to behave. For one thing, the desire to attract the gaze is a common human inclination. As Beth Newman notes, “Exhibitionism . . . is a normal expression of what Sigmund Freud calls Schaulust, the drive in the visual register of seeing and being seen, and it is inherent in all subjectivity” (emphasis in original, 7). In addition to a desire for self-display stemming from the inherent desire to attract the gaze that Newman notes, the social sphere implicitly encouraged such displays even while contemporary commentators explicitly denigrated them. In her study of Victorian conduct material, Marjorie Morgan claims that the barometer of success in society lay in observers’ opinions of the individual; such opinions were based on individuals “striking the right pose and making an agreeable impression on their fashionable audience.” She goes on to explain that the correct fashionable dress, manners, and conversation of an individual could raise one to the status of society icon regardless of the individual’s wealth or birth (102). It is this conundrum – the implicit encouragement of display versus the explicit prohibition of it – that Newman refers to when she argues that “the meaning of display itself was unstable throughout the nineteenth century, and . . . the burdens of this instability fell disproportionately on women who had either achieved or aspired to the status of gentility” (15). Ultimately, she determines that “the triumph of an ideal femininity defined against spectacle needs to be reimagined and replayed because it was never fully embraced, neither by the men who were supposed to desire this kind of femininity in women nor by the women were supposed to desire to embody it” (25-6). In fact, she contends, although many women might consciously adopt society’s dictum that they should, as Nancy Armstrong writes, “disappear . . . into the woodwork,” (80), they could simultaneously experience competing desires to attract and enjoy the gaze of those around them (Newman 13-4).
No simple resolution to this dilemma exists, but I would agree with Newman that some women found socially licit opportunities for satisfying their “scopophilic impulses” (Newman 14). Some licit opportunities were found in the exercise of female friendship. While women of the highest breeding, as delineated in chapter two, might be expected to embrace only in private, Carolyn Oulton asserts that, in general, “women in general enjoyed considerable freedom to feel and display love for each other” (emphasis added, 18), and Sharon Marcus, that, “Friends . . . could openly exchange material tokens of their affection and exhibit themselves giving and receiving the caresses and kisses of friendship” (emphasis added, 57-8). When physical touch – “the caresses and kisses of friendship,” along with other forms of physical affection like walking arm-in-arm – are the subject of display, women may justify their exhibitionism with the excuse that they are simply giving vent to the overflow of their own natural feelings, or that they are offering a kindness to another woman, either of which excuse is justified by the Victorian conception of women as naturally highly-emotional beings, and as instinctive nurturers and caretakers of others. Greater allowances for public physicality, as I have noted previously, were also granted to young women (as is the case with both Becky Sharp and Lucilla Marjoribanks, discussed here), and to women who were close friends. In addition, although privacy during physical encounters signified the highest level of breeding, as discussed in chapter two, a lack of privacy during such encounters was not automatically derided, simply less privileged. Touch between women, the physical and visible enactment of affection, thus provides a solution to the paradoxes I have been delineating here – that is, Victorian women’s limited opportunities for gaining agency versus the natural human desire to achieve mastery over their own world, and the myriad prohibitions against feminine self-display in nineteenth-century society versus the necessity of self-display if one is to advance in society. Through the socially acceptable vehicle
of touch, that manifestation of warm-heartedness and nurturing that women ostensibly naturally possess, Victorian women could draw the gaze of observers without censure, and in doing so, present an intentionally-crafted version of themselves to the world, and also influence the actions of others around them.

Chapter two of this work explained how, according to Bourdieu, every individual develops a *habitus*, a “a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks” (*Outline* 82-3), which develops from “the level of education one had reached, the kind of work one does, the sort of entertainments one enjoys, the places one goes, the cultural pursuits one takes part in or values, the class one identifies with, and so on” (Cregan 66). As delineated in the introduction, however, Bourdieu does understand the *habitus* and individuals’ resulting actions to be malleable to some extent. This is possible for two reasons. First, individuals have the ability to consider situations individually and make conscious choices that will improve their standing and social capital. This occurs in “times of crises, in which the routine adjustment of subjective and objective structures is brutally disrupted.” During such a time, ‘rational choice’ may take over” (*Invitation* 131). In addition, because the *habitus* is an “*open system of dispositions*,” it is “constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structure.” (emphasis in original, *Invitation* 133). While giving exceptional weight to early experiences, the *habitus* is also constantly evolving. Bourdieu’s theories therefore provide for opportunities for individuals to make changes in their own lives in order to better their own circumstances, regardless of how “durable” the *habitus*, developed unconsciously, may be. William Makepeace Thackeray’s Becky Sharp, protagonist of *Vanity Fair*, and Margaret Oliphant’s Miss Marjoribanks, eponymous heroine, demonstrate the various ways in which
women, (even women of small origins, like Becky Sharp, or very young women new to society, like Lucilla Marjoribanks), can in fact effectively utilize touching behaviors in their pursuit of advanced agency.

4.3 “She redoubled her caresses”: Agency in the hands of Becky Sharp

In choosing to analyze *Vanity Fair*, I am not the first scholar to observe that Becky exploits the codes of feminine conduct for her own purposes. Lisa Jadwin, for example, claims that “ambitious women . . . mimic the discourse of the ‘paragon of virtue,’ deliberately enlisting . . . acquiescent, self-minimalizing discourse . . . to achieve power denied them” (664). While Jadwin’s article focuses on “double-discourse,” and concentrates much on her analyses on the verbal behaviors of women, she also briefly mentions that women’s “double-discourse” can be, and often is, “sub-linguistic,” that is, it “often takes the form of a series of standard, theatricalized gestures or poses calculated to generate a certain response” (665). Critic Peter Capuano delves further into the explorations of the body in *Vanity Fair*, but turns his attention particularly to Becky’s use of her hands. He determines that “the indeterminacy of Becky's manual gesture allows her to perform subordinate social actions while still asserting individual agency” (167). In their attention to body language and female advancement in *Vanity Fair*, Jadwin’s and Capuano’s arguments bear some semblance to my own, though neither have recognized the extent to which Becky utilizes the expectations surrounding female friendship, or women touching one another, to make her way in the world.

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray presents his reader with the adventuress Becky Sharp, the penniless and orphaned daughter of a painter. Thereafter an articled boarder at Miss Pinkerton’s
school for girls where she teaches French and minds the younger pupils in trade for her board and education, Becky is an intelligent and ambitious girl determined to rise in the world (12-4). She begins her ascent through a friendship with a fellow pupil, Amelia Sedley, and when her attempts to marry Amelia’s wealthy brother fail, becomes a governess to an aristocratic family (19-60). Marrying the younger brother in the family who has hopes of a large inheritance, Becky is cast again on her own resources when her husband’s expectations fail because of his elopement with her (160). Undaunted, she works to raise herself and her husband by means of her own resources: particularly her strong ability to accommodate herself to the expectations of the fashionable world.

Critic Nancy Armstrong asserts that “no matter how closely Becky may resemble the people of polite society, that resemblance is at best superficial . . . Her sexual behavior reveals her origins in another class” (180). I would expand Armstrong’s claim. First, Becky has origins in the lower classes since her father was an unsuccessful painter and her mother an opera girl (13), but she was also brought up in a very masculine world since her mother died when she was young and thereafter “she sat commonly with her father . . . and heard the talk of many of his wild companions – often but ill-suited for a girl to hear.” The narrator makes clear that, growing up, she “had never mingled in the society of women” (14). Becky’s habitus is thus formed not only as a result of her early experiences with poverty and the lower classes, but also as a result of socializing predominantly with men. Second, it is not only her sexual behavior with men that reveal these origins, but also her manners with women. Becky is a “consummate actress” who exploits certain behaviors and expectations, including, at least in her early days, those belonging to the realm of female friendship. Her early displays of affection allow her to call attention to herself, to present a specially-crafted version of herself (that is almost entirely unfounded on
corresponding emotion), and to affect the behavior of those around her. She accomplishes this through conscious, strategic intervention, and also by rapidly accommodating herself to the habitus of high society. In the end, however, Bourdieu’s cautions regarding the durability of the early habitus are borne out; Becky’s lack of appreciation for other women, especially, which she successfully dissimulated for a time, contributes heavily to her downfall. Bourdieu is correct that “One cannot really live the belief associated with profoundly different conditions of existence” (Logic 68). Eventually Becky’s early training shows through, but for a time, her meteoric rise – from penniless painter’s daughter, to her presentation at court before the Prince Regent – demonstrate that, to some extent at least, women in the nineteenth century were able to utilize the bodily behaviors associated with female friendship to achieve advanced agency in their lives.

Becky Sharp is wonderfully conscious of the ability of performance to make a difference in life. This may be due to the fact that “her mother had been on the stage” (89), but the narrator informs the reader early on that Becky “has not been much of a dissembler, until now her loneliness taught her to feign” (when she has become an orphan and gone to live at Miss Pinkerton’s school at age seventeen) (13-4). Her first lesson in learning to play the part of an innocent young lady is to learn to befriend women, for not only had Becky “never mingled in the society of women” before coming to Miss Pinkerton’s, but once she arrived, “the pompous vanity of the old schoolmistress, the foolish good humour of her sister, the silly chat and scandal of the elder girls, and the frigid correctness of the governesses equally annoyed her” (14-5). It is this limitation, Becky’s lack of familiarity with women, and lack of appreciation for their power, which eventually contributes to her downfall. This is similar to critic Sharon Marcus’ claim that “Vanity Fair describes Becky Sharp as a monster and attributes her deformation to” her lack of
familiarity with women (50). Becky can make rational, conscious interventions to change her behavior towards women, and to some extent as her habitus expands she recognizes their value, but not having been raised in a middle-class environment, or in the company of other women, she falls back on “yesterday’s [wo]man” (Bourdieu Outline 79). Yesterday’s woman, for Becky, includes one who refuses to conciliate women, and so she effectively forecloses her own opportunities.

It is not that Becky never recognizes the power of women in the world she undertakes to conquer. In the beginning Becky sets about consciously improving her own reputation through enactments of female physical affection. Upon discovering that Amelia, with whom she is staying for a week before taking up her new governess position, possesses a wealthy brother, Jos, Becky “redoubled her caresses to Amelia; she kissed the white cornelian necklace [that Amelia gave her] as she put it on. . . . When the dinner-bell rang she went downstairs with her arm round her friend’s waist” (18). Such enthusiasms are intended partly for Amelia, with whom it is judicious for Becky to ingratiate herself, partly for Jos, whom Becky wishes to ensnare, and partly for the Sedley family as a whole. By enacting the rituals of female friendship – by caressing Amelia and making impetuous protestations – Becky wishes to suggest a certain persona to the family; that is, she intends to persuade them that she is innocent, affectionate, and feminine, in short, an ideal wife for the single and eligible (because rich) Jos. While she is not successful with Jos, Becky continues to enact the part that brought her so close to her goal, petting, kissing, and caressing Amelia at every opportunity, a practice that the narrator makes clear is entirely an act. When the time comes for Becky to leave to become a governess, for example, the narrator explains that “after a scene in which one person was . . . a perfect performer – after the tenderest caresses . . . Rebecca and Amelia parted” (60). Months later,
when “the eternal friendship . . . had suffered considerable diminution,” upon reuniting the two girls “flew into each other's arms with that impetuosity which distinguishes the behaviour of young ladies towards each other, [and] Rebecca performed her part of the embrace with the most perfect briskness and energy.” To be sure, Amelia readily participates in the embrace, but she differs from Amelia who, in all sincerity, feared “she had been guilty of something very like coldness” to her friend (135-6). Becky’s utilization of female affectionate touch with Amelia is intended to reflect positively on herself; it is purposeful and a performance, and not, as with Amelia, a natural ebullition of a warm and overflowing heart. But for a time, at any rate, as long as she takes the trouble to conciliate women, none of her audience is the wiser. To provide a further example, her performance of a loving heart is initially very successful with her sister-in-law, Lady Jane. Becky warmly returns that lady’s welcoming embrace; the two look “very kindly at each other,” and walk to the children’s nursery “hand-in-hand” (407-9). Becky’s act is so effective that “her ladyship informed Sir Pitt that she thought her new sister-in-law was a kind, frank, unaffected, and affectionate young woman” (409).

All of Becky’s acts of affection might be said to function as performance, to convince the recipient of her caresses, or any onlookers, of her innocent and loving nature, but most of the time Becky acts with an immediate and specific purpose in mind; she wants to tangibly affect the behavior of those around her. In her position as governess, for example, “she wisely determined to render her position with the Queen's Crawley family comfortable and secure, and to this end resolved to make friends of every one around her who could at all interfere with her comfort” (86-7). Her efforts do not stop with the immediate family living on the property, for Becky soon encounters the wealthy and elderly Miss Crawley, sister to the Baronet, who is visiting. As aunt to Rawdon, Becky’s future spouse, it is necessary for Miss Crawley to approve of Becky, or the
finicky aunt might change her will and leave the pair nothing. Becky therefore plays the part of loving young woman to perfection, hoping to entice that woman to approve. She “laid her head upon Miss Crawley’s shoulder and wept there so naturally that the old lady, surprised into sympathy, embraced her with an almost maternal kindness, uttered many soothing protests of regard and affection for her, vowed that she loved her as a daughter, and would do everything in her power to serve her” (149). While Becky has long been a favorite of Miss Crawley’s for her wit, it is with her innocent and helpless tears, shed (quite intentionally) on Miss Crawley’s shoulders, that Becky intends to cement her advantage, and is very nearly successful, for, in response, the old lady “left her little protégé, blessing and admiring her as a dear, artless, tender-hearted, affectionate, incomprehensible creature” (149). Declarations of love and loyalty the rich old lady hears from every quarter, but Becky is the only one to carry her avowals so far as embraces and tears. These actions have weight above that of verbal protestations because they appear to signify greater sincerity. But then, Becky is a “perfect performer” (60).

Alas, if, instead of leaving a note full of loving and humble language (157-8), Becky had her tears and caresses present when Miss Crawley learns that her favorite is already wedded to her darling nephew, Rawdon, then “the pair might have gone down on their knees before the old spinster, avowed all, and been forgiven in a twinkling” (155-6). Unfortunately for Becky, however, Miss Crawley’s feelings for Becky, formed when Becky was physically present with her, cannot withstand the double impairment of Rawdon having married the daughter of an opera-dancer, and that woman simultaneously absconding from Miss Crawley’s immediate physical presence, leaving only words behind. This underscores the importance of Becky’s use of physicality. Had she been physically present with Miss Crawley when her marriage to
Rawdon was revealed, had she been able to go “down on [her] knees before the old spinster,” Becky might have gained the fortune she so desires.

When Becky is barred from Miss Crawley’s door, she brilliantly attempts to regain access to her would-be patroness through shows of friendship to another woman: Miss Crawley’s companion, Briggs. In solidarity with the rage of her benefactor, Briggs intends to avoid meeting the new Mrs. Rawdon Crawley as well, but Becky follows Briggs and “was holding out her pretty white hand as Briggs emerged from the box. What could Briggs do but accept the salutation?” Not one to stop while ahead, Becky “seized her hand, pressed it to her heart, and with a sudden impulse, flinging her arms round Briggs, kissed her affectionately.” Becky knows her woman, for the narrator declares that “Miss Briggs of course at once began to melt” (242). Here Becky utilizes the expectations surrounding female friendship as effectively with the lady’s companion as with the lady, persuading her to shake hands and engaging her attention and conversation even against Briggs’ will. Indeed, “what could Briggs do” in the face of so warm and affectionate a greeting? It would be a much sterner woman that the lady’s companion who could forbear it. And this is the very power of affectionate touch: it is so very difficult to resist. When Becky leaves Briggs “after an hour’s chat,” with “the most tender demonstrations of her regard” (244), she can be sure that, were all in the hands of Briggs, the situation would be speedily resolved. Unluckily for Becky, her kinswoman-by-marriage Mrs. Bute Crawley is impervious to Becky’s charms where Miss Crawley’s fortune, and thus Mrs. Bute’s future, is concerned. Yet the power of female affection, compounded by the influence of a seemingly loving touch, very nearly brought Becky the fortune she so desires.

Some of Becky’s maneuvers are clearly consciously done, as when, in trying to snare Jos Sedley, her reflections convince her that “I must be very quiet . . . and very much interested
about India” (23). Such deliberations reveal a calculating and rational mind intentionally intervening in circumstances to gain Becky her personal desires. Such reflection is also shown when “she wisely determined to render her position . . . comfortable and secure, and to this end resolved to make friends of every one around her” (86). These conscious decisions make her “quite a different person from the haughty, shy, dissatisfied girl whom we have known previously,” but the narrator is careful to qualify Becky’s growth by adding:

> Whether it was the heart which dictated this new system of complaisance and humility adopted by our Rebecca, is to be proved by her after-history. A system of hypocrisy, which lasts through whole years, is one seldom satisfactorily practised by a person of one-and-twenty; however, . . . we have written to no purpose if [our readers] have not discovered that she was a very clever woman.

(90)

Clearly, Becky’s “new system” is not “dictated by the heart”; it is dictated by her mind which reasons that such behavior will be profitable to her. Nineteenth-century English society values young women who are loving and outwardly affection, so why should “a very clever woman” not notice and make use of such values for her own purposes? In befriending Amelia, Lady Jane, Miss Crawley, and Briggs, Becky gets herself invited into higher society and enjoys more luxurious surroundings. In her kisses and caresses Becky takes advantage of the association of such behaviors with deeply ingrained notions of womanliness. Thackeray, to be sure, is too wise to believe that all such bodily behaviors spring from the feelings of the heart, but the book would not be a successful satire if all his characters, and all women in the real world, were as clear-sighted as he. Such consciously-determined actions are perfectly practicable, Bourdieu would
say, but only occasionally, and only by people capable of detached reflection. Most of the time, actions are guided instead by the workings of the *habitus*.

Fortunately for Becky, she is capable of acclimating to the demands of foreign *habitus* more quickly than most. In the prologue to the novel the narrator encapsulates Becky’s social dexterity when he tells the reader that “the famous little Becky Puppet has been pronounced to be uncommonly flexible in the joints” (xxxvii). This verdict is borne out on many occasions, as when, in Brussels, “Mrs. Rawdon Crawley's début was . . . very brilliant” and “after three dinners in general society, this young woman had got up the genteel jargon so well, that a native could not speak it better” (279-80). Certainly, Becky has spent more than a year with the Crawley family as governess, but that family was so isolated and remote as to provide her very little glimpse of what might be termed society. Later, Becky lives for a time with Miss Crawley in London, but as a maiden, elderly lady, Miss Crawley does not attend the sort of dinners and balls, filled with aristocrats and military personages, that Becky does with the army in Brussels. Becky’s time in Brussels perhaps helps to prepare her somewhat for Paris, where the army proceeds thereafter, and may contribute to her success when she “was the gayest and most admired of Englishwomen” and “accommodated herself to polite life as if her ancestors had been people of fashion for centuries past - and who from her wit, talent, and energy, indeed merited a place of honour in Vanity Fair” (340-1). Her “wit, cleverness, and flippancy” even go far to establish her when she returns to London, at least, “among a certain class” (364), but Becky’s mistakes begin to catch up to her then, for “it must be confessed that the ladies held aloof from her, and that their doors were shut to our little adventurer” (364).

This is Becky’s failure, the point at which her original *habitus*, which taught her early that women were of no account, at least amongst her father’s bohemian circle as a child, does not
expand enough to support her. In the beginning, Becky seems to realize that she must conciliate women, as she does with Amelia, Lady Jane, Miss Crawley, and Briggs early on, but her “wild, roving nature, inherited from father and mother, who were both Bohemians” (644) shows through. There is a point beyond which Becky cannot carry her “system of hypocrisy” (90); “yesterday’s man” (Bourideu, *Outline* 79) wins out.

Becky’s failure is brought about ultimately by her failure to continually propitiate the female sex with signs of affection. Even early on, with her first patron, Amelia, Becky oversteps by becoming too friendly with Amelia’s husband, George Osborne (240), which leads to a coldness between the two women. Fortunately for Becky, Amelia has little influence in the world, and cannot do much to harm her, but the same will not be true of other women whom Becky offends. In Paris where she achieves much success, Becky “had all the men on her side. She fought the women with indomitable courage” (340). Later, in London, Becky continues to believe that “the women will ask me when they find the men want to see me” (367), but obviously she is wrong. In Paris she should have shown the other women the same warmth she early on showed Amelia, Lady Jane, Miss Crawley, and Briggs, and then English women’s doors might have been open to her when she returned home.

Most importantly, she ought to have redoubled her efforts with Lady Jane when their initial friendship cools as a result of Becky’s misfire with her son. On that occasion, recognizing that “tenderness was the fashion” (443) Becky calls her son to her to kiss in the presence of Lady Jane, but her move backfires when the startled boy responds “You never kiss me at home, mamma” (444). Over time, Becky simply cannot keep up her act of loving friend and mother incessantly; her true colors show through. “Lady Jane's sweetness and kindness,” the narrator states, “had inspired Rebecca with such a contempt for her ladyship” that “it was impossible for
her at times not to show, or to let the other divine, her scorn” (446). Lady Jane is not unaware of this, and she “could not but revolt at her sister's callous behaviour” (512). If only Becky could have kept up the “behaviour” she began with! Instead, the gentle and loving Lady Jane, who once welcomed Becky so warmly into her arms, denounces her sister-in-law to her husband, Sir Pitt, crying out, “She has deceived her husband, as she has deceived everybody; her soul is black with vanity, worldliness, and all sorts of crime. I tremble when I touch her” (emphasis added, 540). Becky’s caresses once won her entrance into Lady Jane’s heart and home. But when her original bodily hexis reasserted itself, the hand that first smoothed her way becomes a polluting element. Then, Becky’s ability to sway men in no longer a help to her, for Lady Jane blocks Becky’s access both to her own husband, Sir Pitt, whose influence might have done much, and from Becky’s husband, Rawdon, who has left her. Not content to have the little performer out of London, it is ladies – those whom Becky scorned – who haunt her as she flees across Europe, for each time she finds a home in which to settle, she is “always found out some day or other, and pecked out of the cage” because the “English ladies would not sit down with her” (633).

It can thus be seen that so long as Becky practiced the conduct associated with warm and affectionate femininity, as long as she befriended other women and caressed and cajoled them, Becky’s star rose. But, after ascending to such heights she becomes overconfident and falls back on her former manner towards other women, misguidedly thinking that so long as she is a favorite with men, her place is assured. English society does not value the women who focus their arts only on men; femininity, as was shown in chapter one of this work, is too deeply associated with women’s demonstration of love and affection towards other women, and this is a value Becky did not grow up with, so she can only adopt it to an extent later in life. Society was kind to Becky when she caressed Amelia, Lady Jane, Miss Crawley, and Briggs; she attracted the
gaze of observers positively, creating a Becky Sharp who is “a kind, frank, unaffected, and affectionate young woman” (409), and even persuading Briggs to her camp, and nearly Miss Crawley, which would have changed her life completely, securing her a wealthy future. That Becky does not finally succeed is only additional evidence of the importance of female friendship in Victorian women’s lives, for it is only when she angers and alienates the women in her life that Becky is effectually barred from the life she truly desires.

4.4 “Under the guidance of her genius”: Agency and Miss Marjoribanks

As with Vanity Fair, literary scholars have also recognized that Lucilla Marjoribank takes advantage of Victorian feminine codes of behavior to achieve mastery over her world. That she acts within conventional codes of conduct is obvious since, as scholar Joseph O’Mealy notes, Lucilla is considered to “personif[y] conventionality itself” (2). According to Melissa Schaub, “The ability to assess a situation for its conventional dramatic potential is the source of Lucilla's power, because other people will always fall in with her planned narrative if she can establish it convincingly and conventionally enough” (205). For instance, as Amy J. Robinson noes, "By characterizing her aim as being a ‘comfort to [her] dear papa’ rather than gaining influence, Lucilla silences her critics and quickly seizes control not only of her father's household but of the social world of Carlingford” (68). Andrea Kaston Tange, too, recognizes that “Oliphant's novel, like her heroine, operates within the ‘prejudices of society’ while simultaneously offering a means to exploit those prejudices” (Tange 163) because she does not “[reject] [the role of the Angel in the House] altogether” but instead makes use of the prerogatives of that position for her own advantage (Tange 165). Like all of these scholars I argue also that Lucilla makes use of

41 (Oliphant 19)
accepted notions of female behavior for her own advantage, but expand on the recognized ways Lucilla is able to control her world by also analyzing her ability to make use of affectionate physicality.

The reader is introduced to Lucilla when she is only fifteen and returns from school upon the death of her mother, contentedly rehearsing in the railcar on the way home the behavior she will exhibit upon arriving: behavior which imitates that of heroines in novels and which is also intended to comfort her “dear papa” (3-5). When her pragmatic and unsentimental father fails to appreciate Lucilla’s best intentions (5), she returns to school for another three years, and then spends a fourth year touring Europe (6-9), before returning to take up her place as mistress of her father’s house and reigning queen of society in Carlingford. Her introduction to the reader on the train, when she “revolved the situation in her mind. . . .” (3) and “meant to fall into her father’s arms ” (4), makes her consciousness of the importance of a woman’s performance exceptionally apparent. In her awareness of behavior as a performance, she is markedly similar to Becky Sharp.

Unlike Becky, Lucilla does not experience the same ‘crises’ in attempting to rise in society that that other consummate actress does because Lucilla is born into the highest social class in her town, so her intentions are not to rise into a higher class. She does experience obstacles, however, in her goal to fashion her world as she sees fit and become the reigning social queen of Carlingford, and in this attempt, female affectionate touch is a tool Lucilla happily wields. Thus, Lucilla understands the necessity of drawing the public gaze to herself, and she draws their attention to a specific version of herself which is carefully crafted. Her touching behaviors conciliate and persuade her intended subjects, ultimately granting her all the power, by the end of her first year home, which she first desired at fifteen. As with Becky,
physical shows of affection to her friends function for Lucilla as a means to achieving the advanced agency she desires and ultimately wins.

Though as the town’s leading doctor’s daughter Lucilla is born into the upper class of Carlingford society, she possesses other characteristics that detract from the feminine charm she wishes to utilize to her own advantage. She is “a large girl” whose “gloves were half a number larger, and her shoes a hairbreadth broader than those of any of her companions.” She has “a mass of hair which . . . did not . . . do any of the graceful things which curls ought to do” (3) and walks with an “unhesitating step” (12). Unhesitating she certainly is, forging straight ahead with an indomitable will and no-nonsense attitude that might be more generally characteristic of the ideal Victorian man than to a still-teenage person of the weaker sex. Indeed, though Lucilla regularly dresses in a maidenly “white frock, high in the neck” (21), expresses orthodox religious views (22), and insists that she must have a chaperone (20), (all appropriate characteristics of the Victorian young woman), Lucilla is more cut out to act and protect that to be protected. When Mr. Bury, the minister, proposes that Lucilla is in need of a full-time companion for protection because she is “left alone, so young, and without a mother, and exposed to – temptations” (25), Lucilla takes the situation in hand immediately, first making the proposed companion so uncomfortable that she nearly faints with embarrassment (25-6), and then taking physical control of the woman as she “took the poor woman by the shoulders and all but lifted her to the sofa” (26). Possessing such large features and a will more masculine than feminine in force, Lucilla has need of every tool available to keep from being considered mannish, and thus unnatural, to her neighbors. One such tool she utilizes is female affectionate touch. Such touches, because they take place in space and time, and because they are considered natural to women, legitimately draw the attention of others to her own person, and in the process construct a
specially crafted version of Lucilla for others: Lucilla not as no-nonsense, won’t-take-no-for-an-answer will personified, but as loving and emotional young lady.

In her interactions with others, therefore, Lucilla never misses an opportunity to play the affectionate, feminine woman through the use of her caresses, be the recipient of her warmth servant, friend, or kin; and casual acquaintance or bosom friend. With one of her closest friends, the elderly Mrs. Chiley, for example, it is no surprise to see Lucilla “[pressing] . . . her old friend’s hand” (37), “[arranging] the ribbons on the old lady’s cap . . . in a caressing way” (58), “[giving] her old friend a close embrace” (109), or “[kissing] the soft old withered cheek” (134). As Mrs. Chiley has known Lucilla since the latter was born, she surely has a right to such intimacies. The same is true with our heroine’s Aunt Jemima, whom Lucilla gladly kisses (129, 150, 175). But others would seem to have less expectation of such intimacy with Lucilla, for example, the Marjoribanks’ servants, or mere acquaintances of lower status. Yet Lucilla embraces them all. At fifteen, when her mother dies, she “[reposes] her sorrow in the arms” of Ellis, her mother’s maid (4), and much later in the novel, upon the death of her father, finds an opportunity to hug the other female servant in the house, the surly and highly-particular cook, Nancy (175). Other women of low status whom Lucilla notices include Rose Lake, the drawing master’s second daughter who “was entirely out of Miss Marjoribank’s way” and certainly of “inferior position” (8), but whom Lucilla still troubles to kiss and caress (55, 59, 62). There is also Mrs. Mortimer, Mrs. Bury’s proposed companion for Lucilla, a dependent, widowed woman who does not even enter into society (which is Lucilla’s great purpose in life), but whom Lucilla patronizes, assists, and caresses as well (26, 109, 117). Though neither Rose Lake nor Mrs. Mortimer has any degree of influence that can benefit our heroine, Lucilla is a woman who “instinctively understood and appreciated the instruments that came to her hand” (8), and insofar
as she makes use of everyone around her in her grand plan to form “society” in Carlingford, she must also conciliate and propitiate those individuals who might otherwise by offended by her all-subsuming triumphal progress through the world. She therefore also caresses her equals in status, just as she propitiates the lower. After Miss Bury, the rector’s sister and a maiden lady, has her sentiments offended by a young man at Lucilla’s luncheon, Lucilla “[takes] both Miss Bury’s hands,” and in return the offended woman felt “her heart melting over the ingenuous young creature,” Lucilla (23). She is just as willing to “[kiss Mrs. Woodburn] in the most neighbourly and affectionate manner” (86), though Mrs. Woodburn is the neighborhood comedienne, with no especial good will for Lucilla, and quite fond of “taking her off” (40).

Though Lucilla generally does not embrace these women in public and thus under the gaze of others, she enacts a version of herself – a loving, feminine version of herself – to every woman she takes in her arms.

That Lucilla understands the value of a crafted performance in constructing herself is not in doubt, though (especially when we first meet her at fifteen) she does not always nail her character. When she first returns from school upon the death of her mother, for example, her father suspects from her behavior that she is growing into a woman very like her mother, some of whose characteristics he did not appreciate. But the narrator assures the reader that, “Lucilla was . . . as different from her mother as summer from winter; but Dr. Marjoribanks had no means of knowing that his daughter was only doing her duty by him . . . according to a programme of filial devotion resolved upon, in accordance with the best models, some days before” (5). Lucilla’s actions are carefully planned; not the result of some natural swell of feeling. Four years later, at nineteen, Lucilla’s performances have advanced, and when the clergymen comes one day to impose a full-time (and undesired) companion on her, she gathers her resources to oppose him,
and “kept up the air of amazement and consternation . . . and had her eyes fixed on him, leaning forward with all the eager anxiety natural to the circumstances” until “the unfortunate clergymen reddened from the edge of his white cravat to the roots of his grey hair” (25). “[Keeping] up the air of amazement” (though Lucilla is only affecting here to misapprehend a situation and to be shocked by it) certainly succeeds in discombobulating the good rector, who is summarily vanquished by Lucilla’s powers.

One of Lucilla’s most effective triumphs occurs, however, as she deploys a show of physical affection to a girl who should be her enemy. The highly desirable Mr. Cavendish has been “paying attention” to Lucilla, but one evening at an entertainment in her own home, Mr. Cavendish begins to “[flirt] in an inexcusable manner with Miss [Barbara] Lake” (38), Rose’s sister, and the drawing master’s eldest daughter, a beauty and wonderful singer who is nevertheless generally disliked for her unpleasant personality. When Barbara threatens to continue singing indefinitely and spoil Lucilla’s party, our heroine intervenes: “My dear Barbara,” she said, putting her hands on the singer’s shoulders as she flushed her strain, “that is enough for to-night. Mr. Cavendish will take you down-stairs and get you a cup of tea” (38). Lucilla’s coup is masterful. In the same stroke, she convinces Barbara to willingly desist and even leave the room for a time, shames her erstwhile suitor, and, most importantly, “demonstrated the superiority of her genius to her female audience” (38). In sending off the singer (on the arm of her own suitor) for the sake of the comfort of the party, Lucilla demonstrates astonishing magnanimity; she is every bit as generous and self-sacrificing here as Victorian social commentators could desire. At the same time, everyone has witnessed her actions and knows that she did not send Barbara and Mr. Cavendish off in a fit of pique, for she calls the singer “My dear Barbara” and reaches out to touch her in a classic gesture of friendship.
That gesture, that touch of Barbara’s shoulder, is key. Even for those not near enough to hear Lucilla address her rival as “dear Barbara,” our heroine physically demonstrates herself as high-minded, noble, and considerate to the entire party, such that “even Mrs. Centum and Mrs. Woodburn and the Miss Browns, who were, in a manner, Lucilla’s natural rivals, could not but be impressed” (38). Thus, without dressing gaudily or expensively; without displaying her accomplishments brazenly (as by singing to her guests or displaying her drawings or needlework), without talking loudly or flirtatiously, Lucilla draws all eyes to herself and, in a splendid moment performs the part of ideal Victorian woman: innocent and loving, self-sacrificing and humble. When her guests retire for the evening, they leave Lucilla, the narrator writes, “an acknowledged sovereign” (39).

In all of these moments of physicality Lucilla draws attention to herself in a way perfectly permitted by society, be the eyes those of the individuals she touches, or of a wider audience of onlookers. In all of these moments, too, Lucilla presents herself in the enactment of these caresses as feminine and affectionate, even though the caresses themselves are generally performed not as a result of an overabundance of emotion on her part, but in service to Lucilla’s greater goal of forming “society” in Carlingford. In addition to propitiating the female population so as to utilize them as instruments in her great plan, however, Lucilla also utilizes physical touch with more immediate and concrete objectives in mind. She does this most effectively with Barbara Lake, “a young woman without any . . . instincts of politeness,” full of “temper,” “who has not the least intention of being civil” (14), but who eventually falls to the heroine’s superior genius nonetheless. In her first meeting with Barbara, for instance, Lucilla is walking on the street when she hears a voice singing from inside a house that she calculates will agree well with her own in her evening entertainments. She recognizes the house, applies to the
maid for admittance, and, seeing Barbara, “[goes] forward with the most eager cordiality, . . . holding out both her hands” (14). In utilizing the normative behavior associated with friendship here, Lucilla makes it difficult for Barbara to protest her visitor’s imposition in her house. Though Barbara does an excellent job making her displeasure known nonetheless, she does not actually ask Lucilla to leave; no doubt Barbara is as confused by Lucilla’s overtures of friendship as she is by Lucilla’s sudden and unexpected appearance in her home. Undaunted by Barbara’s apparent hostility to her visit, Lucilla sails ahead with her plans, insisting on practicing a duet with Barbara, and then commanding Barbara’s presence (and voice) at her first entertainment. In taking her leave, Lucilla reasserts herself by “[holding] out her hand to her captive graciously” (15).

Lucilla is utilizing the normative behavior surrounding female friendships as a weapon which she wields against Barbara rather than as a loving instrument of intimacy. (To be sure, Lucilla would probably consider her behavior as a ‘tool’ which she wields in Barbara’s best interests, albeit against Barbara’s inclinations.) The normative rules surrounding social contact insist that it is the prerogative of the superior in social status to initiate physical intimacy (as discussed in chapter two of this work), but the recipient of that intimacy may interpret physical touch as an amiable politeness and an invitation to greater closeness (as Nancy the cook and the dependent and helpless Mrs. Mortimer do), or as a degrading arrogance, a tacit display of the toucher’s right to make physical contact by virtue of her own superiority. That Barbara takes Lucilla’s behavior as an example of the latter is evident in her thoughts, for the narrator writes that “at the bottom [Barbara] could not but feel that any one who was kind to her was taking an unwarrantable liberty. What right had Lucilla Marjoribanks to be kind to her? As if she was not as good as Lucilla any day!” (31-2). Here, Barbara recognizes the tacit social policies in play
(that it is the prerogative of the superior in status to initiate greater intimacy through physical touch), but denies the aptness of the policies to her situation, insisting that Lucilla has no right to initiate intimacy because she perceives herself as Lucilla’s equal. Certainly, Lucilla does not intend to insult Barbara, but as Lucilla’s grand objective is the reorganization of Carlingford society, she necessarily takes less account of Barbara’s feelings than of her own plans and personal interests. This is illustrated when, following her visit, Lucilla returns to her own house and recaps the incident for her father and cousin Tom, emphasizing particularly how Barbara’s voice was “just the very thing to go with [mine].” The narrator goes on to expound that, “If Miss Marjoribanks did not go into raptures over the contralto on its own merits, it was . . . simply because its adaptation to her own seemed to her by far its most interesting quality, and indeed almost the sole claim it had to consideration from the world” (emphasis in original, 18). As Lucilla is apparently only concerned with Barbara so far as Miss Lake’s voice will go with her own, and contribute to the luster of her future entertainments, Barbara’s feelings and resulting negative behavior may be an overreaction, but not entirely unreasonable. However Lucilla intends her actions, though, there is no doubting their results. Lucilla gains her ends, and alters the world around her through demonstrations of regard that Barbara cannot combat.

Barbara ultimately consents to Lucilla’s plans, partly because “she was ambitious” and so “there was something . . . which was not disagreeable when she came to think it over” (15); in other words, because it serves Barbara’s own purposes to appear in society. But I would contend that Barbara also concedes because, even unwillingly, she is subsumed by the constraints of the relationship Lucilla enacts. Lucilla “knew by instinct what sort of clay the people were made of by whom she had to work,” and, “[taking] it so much as a matter of course,” is easily able to overwhelm Barbara who is “lost in . . . bewilderment and perplexity” (15). Her acquiesce to
Lucilla’s performance can be seen, not just when she does in fact appear at Lucilla’s evening entertainment, (as she may do so entirely for her own purposes), but when, as Lucilla leaves, and offers her hand to Barbara once again, Barbara shakes it, this time failing to “draw her hands away from the stranger” as she did when she first encountered Lucilla (15).

This ability of Lucilla’s to employ physical touch as a signifier and enactment of friendship, and thus as a tool with which she may exert control, can be seen again later in the novel, when Lucilla will once again offer Barbara her hand in friendship, and then carries off Mr. Cavendish herself, a scenario which is not in Barbara’s best interest, but which she fails to prevent as a result of Lucilla’s mastery. Here, while Lucilla sits in the Lake’s drawing room, taking tea with Rose, Barbara purposefully parades with Mr. Cavendish, (who has been secretly visiting Barbara, and knows nothing of Lucilla’s presence in the house), up and down the street before her home. While Lucilla watches, the narrator informs us, she “was looking to the joints of her harness, and feeling the edge of her weapons,” for she intends to “denounce the faithless knight to his face, and take him out of the hands of the enchantress, and show him his true dangers, and at the same time vindicate his honour.” In this instance Lucilla does pay more attention to Barbara’s feelings, for “the breadth of human sympathy was such that she waited till the very latest moment, and let the deluded young woman have the full enjoyment of her imagined victory” (99) before stepping outside to meet the pair, much to Barbara’s amazement, and Mr. Cavendish’s shame. One of the “weapons” that Lucilla uses to accomplish such a mission and foil Barbara’s efforts is none other than her own relationship with Barbara. Facing the two on the street as she leaves the Lake’s house, I quote the scene at length:

“I am very sorry to separate you from Barbara . . . but she is at home, you know, and I want so much to talk to you. Barbara, good night; I want Mr. Cavendish to
walk home with me.” . . . When she had done this, she put out her hand to Barbara, and passed her, sweeping her white garments through the narrow gateway. . . . “Be sure to practise for Thursday, Barbara, and bid you papa good-night for me.” This was how she carried off Mr. Cavendish finally out of Barbara’s very fingers, and under her very eyes. (99)

Lucilla’s gesture is a slight one, to be sure; she only shakes hands with Barbara briefly in the whole of this scene, and yet that handshake is essential. It represents Barbara’s complicity in Lucilla’s triumph, as much, or more, than the negative evidence that Barbara has nothing to say, no rejoinder to make to Lucilla’s assault. Once again, Barbara has been overwhelmed and outmaneuvered by Lucilla’s performance of friendship, by her casual talk (“Barbara, good night” and “be sure to practise for Thursday”) and demeanor. In accepting Lucilla’s hand when it is offered, Barbara accedes to Lucilla’s dominance. With Barbara, as with the other women in the novel, Lucilla utilizes touching behaviors to enact a friendship which she employs sometimes as tool, and other times as weapon, in her never ending quest to “[have] her own way” (42).

4.5 Final Remarks on Female Affectionate Touch and Agency

In chapter two of this work, we saw that bodily behaviors like touch appear to be powerful signifiers of identity because they appear to be deeply ingrained in an individual. Those women who are able to perceive this power, like Becky Sharp and Lucilla Marjoribanks, are therefore able to utilize these behaviors to their advantage as they seek control over their own destinies and the world around them. By consciously constructing their actions in times of crises and unconsciously expanding their habitus, they can use touch in multiple ways. First, in the process of caressing another woman, they can attract the attention of observers without fear that
their behavior will be judged as ostentatious or ill-bred. Indeed, the performance of such intimacies will instead reflect positively upon them, inspiring observers to consider them to be the sort of ideal feminine women – i.e., warm-hearted and emotional – that their society values. Finally, they can often rely on physical demonstrations of their regard to stimulate, sway, influence, and even manipulate those around them into responses and action favorable to the toucher. In the next chapter of this work, we will see how such physical actions can create a relationship between two women where none before existed, and serve as a conduit for the transmission of positive moral influence.
5 “If words had been all . . .”: The Power of Touch in Scenes of Duress

In most of the texts analyzed heretofore I have examined women friends, often of similar social status, who enjoy relationships of some degree of intimacy with one another, and I have uncovered the normative function of touch in the course of such relationships. The power and potential of touch to function as a transformative agent can also be seen in transactions between women who are not otherwise close – who may, indeed, have little reason for intimacy or attraction to one another – but who come together in times of duress. Chapters one and two of this work focus on the function of touch in terms of identity constructs for middle-class Victorian women, and chapter three explores the way touching scenes could empower a woman by enticing the gaze of others in a socially licit manner and allowing her to exert authority and persuade others in conventional situations. This chapter will now turn its focus to the agency touch allowed women to exert in extremis.

At such times, the vital element bringing the women together is sympathy, an emotion of considerable significance for Victorian intellectuals. Various well-known philosophers and scientists of the period, including Adam Smith, Alexander Bain, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer, posited sympathy’s aptitude to bring about positive social change. Novelists George Eliot and Mary Augusta Ward, both extremely learned and widely-read women interested in promoting social reform through their respective literary projects, echo these men’s theories of sympathy in their novels. My research shows that, in moments of extreme emotion, touch between women functions as an integral part of a sympathetic exchange which promotes positive influence. Touch is effective in these moments of emergency because of its very difference from the normative tacit rules of conduct. In these scenes, an individual’s sympathetic imagining – placing herself in another’s shoes – prepares the ground for physical interactions that will affect
a transformation in at least one party. During the moment of sympathetic exchange, touching behaviors break down barriers between women otherwise distant from one another in physical space, social status, mental feeling, emotional experience, and moral aptitude. They also embody the sympathy women feel, and constitute an affectionate relationship between two disparate women where none before existed. In so doing, physical displays of sympathy and affection open a conduit for the transmission of positive influence between individuals in the manner presumed most suitable to women, which is to say, through the heart rather than the head. In fact, in being physically touched, the women depicted in these scenes also appear to be morally or mentally touched; a conversion is taking place.

Between some pairs of women the conversion of mental attitude is transient and slight, and exists only while the two women are co-present, as will be seen between Dorothea Brook and Rosamond Lydgate in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* of 1871. This is conversion in the sense of a “Turning in position, [or] direction” (*OED* “Conversion”), a revolution that mostly devolves again as soon as the two women separate. But for others the effect is more long-lasting, as will be seen a quarter of a century later between Lady Marcella Maxwell and Letty Tressady in Mary Augusta Ward’s 1896 novel *Sir George Tressady*. This is conversion in the sense of “The bringing of any one over to a specified religious faith, profession, or party, esp. to one regarded as true” (*OED* “Conversion”), and, true to the religious sense of the word, involves a transformation at the root or in the spirit of the individual. In either sense, however, touching behaviors have a powerful function, because even when the influence on the woman is transitory – when a woman reverts to her old behaviors or mental attitude after the scene – the influence on the narrative plot is significant, and what passed during the scene between the two women has implications for the remaining course of the novel. Because touching scenes are shown to help
affect such conversions in the course of a sympathetic exchange, they should be understood as powerful vehicles of agency for Victorian women in terms of their ability to affect change for their own ends (as shown in chapter three), as well as for the profound effect they allow women to have on others (as delineated in this chapter).

5.1 Victorian and Eliotian Conceptions of the Power of Sympathy

The value of sympathy to the Victorians can hardly be overstated. They theorized about it, argued about it, and praised it as the highest emotion of which humans were capable. It was understood to be of primary importance in the elevation of national character and the progress of society. Critic Rachel Ablow states that “Victorian commentators themselves were fascinated by the historical status of the emotions. . . . [a subject] to which the Victorians returned repeatedly” (376), and critic Susan Lanzoni claims that, “In debates about the nature of emotion, the higher emotions – particularly that of sympathy – played a crucial role. . . . sympathy was tethered to a variety of moral and epistemological ends – as a cornerstone in evolutionary ethics . . and even as a source for knowledge of other minds” (266). Indeed, “For Victorian intellectuals, sympathy stood as the signpost of civilization, of progress, and of heightened moral sensibility” (Lanzoni 286). But why are the emotions, and especially sympathy, believed to hold such power for social progress in a post-Enlightenment age when the power of the mind supposedly reigns supreme, and science and technology are assumed to be the keys to the future? Because, according to Alexander Bain, “all the systematic provisions and precautions of human life grow out of feelings that spur us to action, both when they are present in reality, and while existing only as ideas” (20). The power of feelings to impel action is echoed throughout the century, as when James Fitzjames Stephen, in an essay called “Sentimentalism” published in 1864 in Cornhill
Magazine, argued that emotions “exercise so powerful an influence over our conduct, that they may almost be said to determine it. They are the active element in the greater part of our conduct . . . A man, totally destitute of feeling of every kind, could no more act than a mill could go without wind (qtd. in Ablow 377). As the perceived root of all action – and thus, of all change, transformation, and progress – the emotions, and sympathy especially, could not be too closely scrutinized by Victorian men and women.

The fiction of George Eliot particularly was written according to the explicitly stated goal of enlarging the sympathies of readers, a process that was intended to promote social reform. Various Eliot critics note this endeavor, and scholar Anna Kornbluh brings together several of Eliot’s “oft-quoted maxims, like ‘if art does not enlarge men's sympathies, it does nothing morally,’ . . . ‘the greatest benefit we owe the artist is the extension of our sympathies;’ . . . [and] ‘art . . . is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot,’” all of which underscore Eliot’s commitment to producing texts which inspire a transformation in the reader. According to Kornbluh, in attempting to broaden people’s sense of compassion, “Eliot venerated sympathy as the raison d'être of her aesthetic” (942). In Middlemarch, she famously expresses the difficulty humans have in recognizing the pathos in everyday life when she claims:

That element of tragedy which lies in the very fact of frequency, has not yet wrought itself into the coarse emotion of mankind; and perhaps our frames could hardly bear much of it. If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we
should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the
quickest of us walk about well wadded with stupidity. (185)

In her fiction, Eliot seeks to “[amplify her readers’] experience” in order to remove a bit of that
“wadding” which prevents individuals from sympathizing with the common experiences of
common people. That such is necessary she explains in Amos Barton, when she writes:

It is so very large a majority of your fellow-countrymen that are of this
insignificant stamp. At least eighty out of a hundred of your adult male fellow-
Britons returned in the last census are neither extraordinarily silly, nor
extraordinarily wicked, nor extraordinarily wise. . . . Yet these commonplace
people – many of them – bear a conscience, and have felt the sublime prompting
to do the painful right; they have their unspoken sorrows, and their sacred joys;
their hearts have perhaps gone out towards their first-born, and they have
mourned over the irreclaimable dead. Nay, is there not pathos in their very
insignificance – in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the
glorious possibilities of that human nature which they share?

Depend upon it, you would gain unspeakably if you would learn with me
to see some of the poetry and the pathos, the tragedy and the comedy, lying in the
experience of a human soul that looks out through dull grey eyes, and that speaks
in a voice of quite ordinary tones. (68-70)

If most of those who surround us in life are insignificant, we are missing most of life when we
see right past such people, refusing to recognize the sadness – the tragedy even – of their
otherwise invisible suffering. And in Adam Bede she continues the theme, claiming,
The existence of insignificant people has very important consequences in the world. It can be shown to affect the price of bread and the rate of wages, to call forth many evil tempers from the selfish and many heroisms from the sympathetic, and, in other ways, to play no small part in the tragedy of life. (128-9)

Readers themselves, then, “would gain unspeakably” from looking more closely and more compassionately at ordinary human existence, as would the world at large. Sympathy with common life and common sorrow is important because so much of the world is made up of it, because there is “pathos in [common individuals’] very insignificance – in our comparison of their dim and narrow existence with the glorious possibilities of that human nature” (Barton 69), and because the experiences of these common people affects the world at large. Authors like Eliot and Ward saw the enlarging and promoting of sympathies as a crucial step in the process of promoting positive social change, because they believed it impelled sympathizers to broaden their own perspectives as well as to take positive action in the world around them.

The intellectual foundations of Eliot’s beliefs regarding sympathy undergird her depictions of sympathetic scenes between women in times of emotional turmoil and duress. Critic Rae Greiner, who writes explicitly about Eliot and sympathy, contends that Eliot’s conception of the process of sympathy is developed from Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. It is not Eliot’s aim, Greiner persuasively argues, that her readers should learn to be more sympathetic by learning about other people and seeing into their minds and motivations. Rather, Eliot wants to “produce the mental condition… [that] inspires [readers’] souls and sends a strong will into their muscles” (Writings 310). To produce this proper “mental condition,” the spectator of suffering must engage herself in an active process of speculation, placing herself
mentally in the situation of the other, an activity that is understood to produce an emotional feeling in the spectator herself. Greiner argues Eliot is following Smith’s suggestion that “by the imagination we place ourselves in ‘another man’s] situation, we conceive ourselves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and then form some idea of his sensations” (9). The emphasis, Greiner claims, should therefore be on the imagining the spectator does, not on the performative aspect of the so-called “spectator,” or on the spectator getting to know the sufferer first hand. In other words, “Speculation, not spectatorship, best describes the labor sympathy requires” (296). In my analysis of Middlemarch, the necessity of an active imagination in the spectator to produce effective sympathy will be shown to be assisted and compounded by the physical affection which occurs between sufferer and sympathizer.

Smith’s ideas concerning sympathy would have been important to Eliot because, as Fonna Forman-Barzilai notes,

Smith's central purpose in the Moral Sentiments was to identify an ordinary sociological process capable of ordering and unifying modern people without resting on strong, divisive theological foundations and without requiring archaic modes of coercion which would stifle modern (commercial) freedom and human progress. . . . Smith described a lighter, freer, self-regulating method of social coordination that worked endogenously - proof for critics of progress and modernity that free men could live sociably without consensus on the meaning of God's will, and without being coerced. (14)

Such a project would have appealed to Eliot who, following her break with evangelicalism in 1841 (Wolff 56-7), sought similar aims and hoped to forward them with her fiction. As Moira
Gatens notes, “For [Eliot], the question had become: how can we ground these values within nature and revere them in the absence of god? When she turned to writing novels, she sought to show that the values posited by religion as transcendent could be understood in naturalistic terms” (73).

While Eliot’s theories of sympathy do owe much to Adam Smith, Eliotian ideas of sympathy are also informed by other intellectuals of the period. In her study of popular late-century conceptions of sympathy, for example, Lanzoni notes the influence of various thinkers Eliot is known to have read, admired, and even personally befriended, including Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Alexander Bain. According to Lanzoni, who also acknowledges Victorian’s debt to Adam Smith in terms of sympathy, “In the late Victorian period, theories of sympathy drew on [the] lineage [of Smith] and increasingly became tinged with evolutionary and developmental features” (266).

Like Smith’s foundational ideas of sympathy that Greiner identifies in Eliot’s work, the “evolutionary and developmental features” that Lanzoni notes in later Victorian concepts of

42 Not only did Eliot and Lewes both read Origin of the Species avidly, but one critic claims that “Middlemarch itself, among its many other meanings, is a painstaking analysis of the humanistic implications of Darwin’s new ways of looking at nature and history” (Lustig 110).

43 Indeed, Herbert Spencer was a close personal friend of both George Henry Lewes and Marian Evans (Kornbluh 946).

44 According to Mary Beth Tegan, “[Eliot] and Lewes greatly admired the work of Alexander Bain” (172). Lewes himself remarks, in his Physiology of Common Life, “I have received more light from his work than from that of any of other psychologist” (II. 180). Scholar Kathleen McCormack even notes that Bain was a long-time visitor at the house of Lewes and Eliot (539).
sympathy can also be found in Eliot’s depictions of women aiding one another in times of duress. Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of the Species* in 1859, and if at first skeptical of Darwin’s claims, Eliot is known nonetheless to have frequently considered and wrestled with his ideas for the better part of the following decade, during the latter part of which she was composing *Middlemarch* (Lustig 110). Lanzoni notes that Darwin saw evidence of sympathy in the animal world, and believed that “social instincts led an animal to feel sympathy for others in his group, which in turn led to the performing of good deeds. When coupled with language, and the ability to remember and image past actions, the social instincts could form the basis of a moral guide to action” (269-70). It is important to note here Darwin’s belief that “the ability to remember and image past actions” (i.e., the ability to reflect on situations) inspires sympathetic feelings which compel an individual to action, a belief perpetuated again and again by various thinkers, and one which resonates in Eliot’s own claim regarding her responsibility as an artist and educator. She “[aimed] … at producing that mental condition which . . . sends a strong will into [men’s] muscles” (Eliot, *Writings* 310). The feeling of sympathy compels a sympathizer to take action, such as comforting and influencing the sufferer, or attempting to ameliorate the wrongs that produced the suffering in the first place.

Herbert Spencer, close friend of Eliot and Lewes, was well known for applying Darwin’s evolutionary ideas to the social world, and so became the “archetypal social Darwinist” (“Herbert Spencer”). Like Darwin, Spencer believed sympathy to be instinctual, and he hearkened back to Smith’s notions of the active element of sympathy, while also drawing out Darwin’s point about the importance of human’s ability “to remember and image,” by arguing that real sympathy (as opposed to simple and reflexive impulsivity) in more evolved races and natures required “imaginations of consequence” (Spencer 12), which is to say, the ability to think
through situations before acting. In the writings of Smith, Darwin, and Spencer, then, Eliot would have been confronted with the idea that, in order to produce an effect, sympathy must include intellectual energy – imagination, consideration, and rumination – on the part of the sympathizer. Spencer also claimed, according to Lanzoni, “that as social evolution advanced, sympathy would increase due to the greater capacity to express feeling, and an increased susceptibility to expression by observers” (270-1). Eliot thus may have found support in Spencer for the idea that “enlarging men’s sympathies,” as she tried to do in her work, would have a positive influence not just on the world at present, but also on the future evolution of society.

In his *Emotions and the Will*, published like Darwin’s seminal text in 1859, Alexander Bain posited that sympathy occurs in two stages. First, one physically mimics the bodily stance or movement of the suffering individual. This imitative process results in the second stage, in which the mental state of the sympathizer assumes a corresponding mental state with the sufferer (Bain 174-7). If the ideas of Smith, Darwin, and Spencer are significant to Eliot for positing that the experience of sympathy compels a resulting response or action by the sympathizer on behalf of the sufferer, and that an increase in sympathy will aid in the social evolution of the race, then Bain’s concepts are vital because he introduces the body into what otherwise is conceived of as an entirely mental and intangible process. But Bain goes farther in his theories, especially noting the consequences of tender emotions (like sympathy) on women’s bodies. He posits that “with regard to Movement and Touch, there is a peculiar local region of the body that is immediately related to tenderness. The breast, neck, mouth, and the hand are more especially devoted to this emotion, in conjunction with the movements of the upper members” (71). Not only are these parts of the body most fundamental to the experience of tenderness, but “The physical side of Tender emotion is characteristic. . . . The full and outspoken manifestation of the feeling, the
goal that it always tends to, is the loving embrace” (73). Bain goes on to theorize about why
tenderness generally results in an embrace, particularly in women. He believed that

The Lacteal secretion in women no doubt co-operates with the lackrymal, as a
physical basis of tender feeling. Even without the stimulus of maternity, the
mammary glands may be supposed to be in a state of fluctuating activity; and any
rise in the degree is likely to be accompanied with a genial feeling, entering into
the aggregate of tenderness, and consummated by finally squeezing some living
object to the breast. If this be so in the ordinary state, we can imagine the
increased development given to it in the mother giving suck to the child. (74)

Thus, when a woman sees another woman in distress, she will tend to mimic the body language
of the sufferer. This impels a feeling of commiseration is the spectator’s own body, and results
in an outpouring of sympathy and tenderness. She will feel the reaction physically, according to
Bain, in her chest, and, to soothe herself, and perhaps the sufferer as well, she will tend to
“[squeeze] some living object to [her] breast.”

In more than one of her novels, Eliot creates emotional scenes between women which
culminate in a full-body embrace, suggesting that she took Bain’s pseudo-scientific theories to
heart. Consider, for example, the scene between Maggie Tulliver and her cousin Lucy in The
Mill on the Floss after Maggie returns to St. Oggs following her elopement with Lucy’s suitor,
Stephen Guest. Maggie is alone in an agony of remorse when Lucy quietly steals in and places
“a light hand on her shoulder,” and then “threw her arms round Maggie’s neck and leaned her
pale cheek against the burning brow” (45) in order to show Maggie she does not hate her, and to
comfort her. Both have been thinking much of the other. Maggie’s “thoughts tended continually
towards her uncle Deane’s house” and she “was has haunted by a face cruel in its very
gentleness. . . . And as the days passed on, that pale image became more and more distinct” (544). Lucy, on the other hand, tells Maggie during their interview that “you have more to bear than I have – and you gave him up, when . . . you did what it must have been very hard to do” (546), suggesting that she has imagined herself in Maggie’s shoes. They do not talk much, for Lucy does not have much time, and “each felt that there would be something scorching in the words that would recall the irretrievable wrong” (545). As the two sit silently together, holding hands, emotion builds in Maggie until “every distinct thought began to be overflowed by a wave of loving penitence” (545). Lucy “hop[es] to soothe Maggie with [her] gentle caress” (545), and before she leaves, the two “clasped each other again in a last embrace” (546). This embrace marks the apotheosis of their mutual love and forgiveness. The moment portrays a contrast between “the world’s wife’s” view of Maggie’s conduct (525-6), and the sympathy and compassion shown by a loving heart like Lucy’s, and the tenderness of the moment clearly suggests Eliot’s preference for the latter.

One might also consider the prison scene between Dinah Morris and Hetty Sorrel in Eliot’s *Adam Bede*. Dinah, a cousin-by-marriage of Hetty, has earlier in the novel spent much time reflecting on her cousin’s mental and moral well-being. When the two are together in their Aunt Poysner’s home, Dinah’s “thoughts became concentrated on Hetty” and “by the time Dinah had undressed and put on her night-gown . . . her imagination had created a thorny thicket of sin and sorrow, in which she saw the poor thing struggling torn and bleeding, looking with tears for rescue and finding none. It was in this way that Dinah’s imagination and sympathy acted and
reacted habitually, each heightening the other” (220-1). She goes to Hetty and tries to incline Hetty’s mind to her spiritual welfare then, but Hetty resists her; she has not yet come to the despair and distress which will later allow her to open her mind and heart to Dinah, or to God.

But when Hetty is arrested for killing her new-born child, she becomes much more susceptible to Dinah’s sympathy and influence. Stepping into the cell and calling Hetty’s name, Dinah “unconsciously opened her arms and stretched them out” to Hetty. At first Hetty only “kept her eyes fixed on Dinah’s face – at first like an animal that gazes, and gazes, and keeps aloof,” but Dinah’s sympathy, both verbally expressed, as when she says “I’m come to be with you, Hetty . . . to be your sister to the last” (490), and physically displayed, with the opening of her arms for an embrace, impel Hetty to step into Dinah’s arms. As Dinah stands there holding Hetty, “it was borne in upon her . . . that she must not hurry God’s work: we are overhasty to speak – as if God did not manifest himself by our silent feeling, and make his love felt through ours” (emphasis added, 491). Dinah recognizes the ability of embodied emotion to affect conversion in a religious sense. Her arms cradling Hetty are representative of God’s arms, and her love of God’s love. The entire time the two are together the cousins embrace, hold hands, or rest cheek against cheek, and Dinah continually references her arms and God’s arms, her sympathy and God’s, as when she tells Hetty, “on Monday, when I can’t follow you – when my arms can’t reach you – when death has parted us – He who is with us now, and knows all, will be with you then” (491) and “You believe in my love and pity for you, Hetty, but if you had not let me come near you . . . you’d have shut me out from helping you. I couldn’t have made you feel

No doubt this is the process Eliot hopes to promote through her work: imagination and sympathy mutually encouraging and reinforcing one another in her readers’ minds to promote a fuller and more compassionate world view.
my love. . . . Don’t shut God’s love out in that way” (492). Eventually, Hetty’s heart is touched and converted; she confesses to Dinah and aloud to God how she bore a child and left it to die in the woods. Throughout the scene, “They still [hold] each other’s hands” (494), Hetty “throw[s] her arms round Dinah’s neck” (493-4), and “Hetty cl[ings] round Dinah” (496).

The emotional connection the two women feel does not end in that scene; rather, two days later as Hetty (with Dinah beside her) is carted to her execution, “[Hetty] was clinging close to Dinah; her cheek was against Dinah’s. It seemed as if her last faint strength and hope lay in that contact” (emphasis added, 501), and when they finally arrive at the spot, the two “clasped each other in mutual horror” (503). But Hetty’s conversion means that she can deserve the “release from death” which Arthur Donnithorne obtains for her (503). Dinah’s physical affection and sympathy (compelled initially by her imagination of Hetty’s situation), here depicted as a physical manifestation of God’s affection and sympathy, break down the barriers Hetty has erected and embody feeling allowing for a conversion of mental and spiritual position. Hetty and Dinah become true friends at last, just as Dinah hopes Hetty has become in that time a friend to God. The reader cannot know whether the conversion is in any way lasting for Hetty, for she is transported, and dies years later before she completes her sentence and returns, but surely the feelings and later lives of Dinah, Adam Bede, Arthur Donnithorne, and the whole Poysner family are better for Hetty not being hanged in the public eye. The way that touch functions in moments of sympathetic exchange in The Mill on the Floss and Adam Bede – the imagining of another’s position, the breaking down of barriers, the embodiment of feeling, and a final conversion – appear again in Eliot’s striking scene between disparate women in Middlemarch, with Rosamond Lydgate and Dorothea Casaubon.
Of course, Eliot’s are not the only novels which depict the importance of physicality on influence between disparate women experiencing duress. Consider also Frances Trollope’s 1840 *The Widow Barnaby*, in which the young Agnes Willoughby “timidly [holds] out her hand” to her distrustful great aunt, and the two clasp one another in a full embrace, a scene which would have convinced the aunt to take in her orphaned niece and make the girl her heir had not the moment been just then interrupted (89). Because they are interrupted, though, Agnes is left to the care of her shallow and low-bred aunt, the eponymous Widow Barnaby, and is left to experience various miseries thereby.

Think also of Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend* of 1864, when the lower-middle class Bella Wilfer meets the working-class Lizzie Hexam, and, observing Lizzie’s distress, Bella “seiz[es] the moment to touch [Lizzie’s] hand” (II. 81). Throughout the scene Bella shows her sympathy and interest in Lizzie physically, as by “clasp[ing] a girdle of her arms around Lizzie’s waist” (II. 82) and “kiss[ing] her on the cheek” (II. 84), and Lizzie is persuaded to tell Bella her story which she “had no touch of every parting with a single word” of “a moment before [Bella] came in” (II. 84). Listening to Lizzie’s story, Bella, on the other hand, “sat enchained by the deep unselfish passion of this girl or women of her own age courageously revealing itself in the confidence of her sympathetic perception of its truth” (II. 84). Thus while Bella’s physical expression of sympathy convinces Lizzie to tell her story, Lizzie’s story is verified for Bella by her “sympathetic perception,” echoing Adam Bede’s words that “feeling’s a sort o’knowledge” (470). As a result, Lizzie has a part in Bella’s eventual conversion from money-loving girl to tender-hearted wife, and the significance of their encounter to Bella is expressed in her own words when she says, “Can you believe . . . that I feel as if whole years had passed since I went into Lizzie’s Hexam’s cottage?” (II. 85).
There is also Thomas Hardy’s 1887 *The Woodlanders* in which Grace Fitzpiers, née Melbury, encounters Felice Charmond in the wood, a woman whom Grace believes to be having an emotional affair with her husband. Lost and cold, the two women are brought together physically by a need for warmth, and they “crept up to one another, and . . . did what neither had dreamed of doing beforehand, clasped each other closely” (291-2). The physical nature of the situation compels “uncontrollable feelings” to “germinate” in Mrs. Charmond (292), and she confesses “what all but a fool would have kept silent as the grave” (294) to Grace: that her affair with Grace’s husband is physical as well as emotional, indeed, that she, Mrs. Charmond, is pregnant by Grace’s husband (293). Such knowledge disburdens Grace of any residual feelings of responsibility to her husband outside of what is demanded by social propriety. Mrs. Charmond, meanwhile, wishes afterwards to “[keep] faith with Grace,” which implies a sort of conversion of emotion, but feels that “all things conspired against” it and ultimately is unable to do so (319).

Finally, think of Mary Cholmondeley’s novel of 1893, *Diana Tempest*, in which the eponymous heroine visits her ‘friend’ Madeleine Thesinger who is engaged to marry the “prawn-like” but wealthy and titled Sir Henry Verelst (50). Although Madeleine has asked Diana to be a bridesmaid, the two are not close, for the narrator says that Madeleine “had never been [Diana’s] friend” (76) and that Madeleine “has nothing in common” with Diana (75). Still, the thoughtful and emotionally superior Diana tries to encourage Madeleine to rethink her marriage, and her question “Do you really care for him?” causes the more shallow Madeleine to “burst into uncontrollable weeping” (57). As a result, Diana “knelt down by the little sobbing figure and put her arms round her” (58) and speaks to her sympathetically. She encourages Madeleine to “Break it off – break it off!” and, as “Madeleine clung closer to the girl kneeling beside her,” “It
almost seemed as if the urgent eager voice were not speaking in vain” (61). As in The Widow Barnaby, however, at the very moment of possible conversion a third party enters the room, interrupting the process, and Madeleine marries Verlest after all. Still, such near misses as occur in Trollope’s and Cholmondeley’s novels show the power physical displays of sympathy might have had were they allowed to run their full course.

These scenes do not contain all of the elements of sympathy I discussed above which will be found in the texts of Eliot and Ward. For example, most of these scenes lack a character’s explicit imagination of the other’s pain that Bain, Spencer, and Darwin posit as essential to sympathy. Furthermore, in The Widow Barnaby, the conversion necessary is not one of shallowness or vanity to kindness or compassion for others, but rather a movement from ignorance of another’s personality to awareness. In Our Mutual Friend, Bella’s conversion from money-loving to loving young woman has already begun before the scene between her and Lizzie, so the passage only compounds what is already occurring. And in The Woodlanders the two women are not brought together by the sympathy of either, but by the necessity of warmth while they are out in the cold. Nonetheless, all of these novels depict women who either do not know or do not generally trust one another coming together in a moment of emotional intensity, and their physical behaviors during the scenes either begin or compound a process of mental conversion in one of the characters. Also, each of these scenes is shown to have significant effects either on the women involved or on the plot for the remainder of the novel. These myriad scenes therefore support my contention that women’s touching behaviors exert considerable influence.
5.2 Abrogated Rules: Extreme Situations and the Body

When two women generally unknown to one another, or who even have reason to dislike one another, come together, each will likely ‘stand on her dignity,’ remaining as formal and distant as possible. But in order for sympathy to do its work – to impel the sympathizer to take action and the sufferer to be positively influenced by the sympathizer – the physical and mental reserve must be broken down. In order to affect a meeting of the minds, Eliot and Ward depict a meeting of bodies. As shown in chapter two of this work, part of the motivation for the restraint and reserve of English women was predicated on a sense of national identity which placed high value on such behavior. Social rules demanded that “the well-mannered individual . . . did not intrude on others; he did not ask personal questions; he did not thrust information about himself onto others; he kept his knowledge of others to himself; he did not talk to strangers” and, especially relevant here, “he did not stand closely to his interlocutor, talk loudly, or gesticulate wildly” (Curtin 127). An avoidance of familiarity should thus be mental and emotional, sidestepping all “personal questions” and “information,” as well as physical, in terms of bodily proximity and gesture. This is the bodily hexis (to recall a term of Pierre Bourdieu’s from earlier in this work) valued by English nineteenth-century society. Reserve entailed “the careful maintenance of public and private boundaries” (Curtin 128), and for women, the maintenance of physical boundaries was exceptionally important. In discussing the bodies of seventeenth-century English women, critic Laura Gowing explains that “in a cultural context which understood women's bodies to be easily invaded and hard to defend, the dynamics of touch helped define women's place in the social and domestic world. Defending personal space was one way of marking out status and social role . . .” (53). I would suggest that this insight was no
less true for middle-class Victorian women than their foremothers; indeed, it is probably no less true for women today.

The women discussed in this chapter who come to one another’s aid in times of duress are known to one another only nominally. Social custom thus dictates that the two should keep their distance from one another mentally as well as physically. And yet, in times of heavy strain the women in the novels of Eliot and Ward (and, as in the novels of Trollope, Dickens, Hardy, and Cholmondeley mentioned above) do not. During such moments, the breaking down of reserve is permissible because of the unusual nature of the situation: exceptional situations call for exceptional behavior. And in the very breakdown of the rules of accepted behaviors, opportunities arise. Carolyn Oulton, for instance, recognizes that in Victorian literature, “serious illness” (which is clearly an extraordinary circumstance) “is posited as a site of both intimacy and the trial of affection or moral worth” (77). Scenes of heightened emotion can function in the same way, that is, as a “trial of . . . moral worth” (the worth of the sympathizer). Another critic to recognize the special significance of scenes of distress and dismay, as well as to recognize the role of the body in such scenes, is Gesa Stedman. She argues: “In fictional texts, the body comes in where language seems to fail. . . . The character’s verbal language . . . is replaced by non-verbal forms of communication. These scenes often coincide with crucial moments in the narrative.” This non-verbal communication, Stedman adds, “also heightens the intensity of critical moments because the description of physical symptoms gives rise to images which may have had a greater effects on readers than mere dialogue” (70).

In her otherwise persuasive argument about the body and emotional scenes, Stedman also claims that “It is important to distinguish the moments and reasons for the body being foregrounded. It is used for the illustration of excessive passion and the danger that this presents
to physical, and consequently to mental, well-being” (emphasis added, 70). While the body is brought to the front to depict scenes of remarkable emotion, such emotion is not represented, at least in the scenes I will analyze of Eliot’s and Ward’s, as “excessive” or dangerous. In fact, the body’s place in such scenes is essential to the expressions of sympathy Eliot and Ward depict, and the ability of that sympathy to impel positive change or a conversion of the other. Stedman herself posits a reason that the representation of the body at times is only “potentially dangerous, boundless and unpredictable” (emphasis added, 72). For, she claims, the body:

is not allowed to play this part unchecked. Firstly, gender relations are rarely subverted in these visual representations. . . . For women to faint or to cry is not a transgression at all, but rather expected behaviour which draws on the idea of their ‘excessive sensibility’ allegedly making them more disposed to experience violent emotions. Secondly, these tableau-style images are derived from a genre (melodrama) which, although it evokes scenes of sex and crime, places them firmly in a moral framework which distinguishes clearly between right and wrong, pleasure and pain, gain and punishment. . . . Finally, conventional gestures made these images predictable and less shocking in their effect. Overall, then, one is inclined to read this type of apparent bodily excess as a very controlled, conventionalised physicality which was probably more pleasing than actually threatening. (72-3)

If, therefore, conventional rules dictating social touch are broken during scenes of emotional duress, the imposition of the body in the scene “heightens the intensity of critical moments” (Stedman 71), probably because “even though the quality of touching may be monitored and intentionally modified to create a particular impression, it most likely will be trusted more by the
person touched as a genuine reflection of feelings *than all other forms of human communication*” (emphasis added, Thayer 264).

I would add to Stedman’s list that even women who were not close friends with one another would recognize the behaviors they engage in at such times as “conventionalised physicality” because such behavior – caressing, hugging, embracing – is recognizable during the period as belonging to the domain of close female friendship. Thus, though the context is changed because they are engaging in such behavior with near strangers instead of friends, the behavior is nevertheless entirely familiar. Familiar behaviors applied voluntarily to unfamiliar contexts – like the intimacy expected between bosom friends shared between near strangers – *brings into being*, if only for a temporary time, the relationship that the behavior implies. In placing themselves in the role of close friends, the two women are more likely to practice or admit other behaviors associated with such a relationship, like “altruism, generosity, [and] mutual indebtedness” (Marcus 4), and to open themselves to the influence of the other.

### 5.3 Conversion

When two women are placed in the position of friendship toward one another, they will necessarily, to some extent, be affected by one another’s beliefs and ideas. As the women examined in this chapter were not friends before the moment they come together in an emotionally heightened scene, they are often quite dissimilar in nature. The effect they have on one another is therefore extremely interesting, especially for the ability of the woman of a higher moral nature to influence the lower. This is the process of conversion mentioned briefly in the introduction to this chapter, which is, according to the *OED*, a “change in character, nature, form, or function” or “The action of converting or fact of being converted, to some opinion,
belief, party, etc.” However, conversion has multiple meanings, many of which carry religious significance, such as “The bringing of any one over to a specified religious faith, profession, or party, esp. to one regarded as true, from what is regarded as falsehood or error” (“Conversion”). The idea of conversion can thus be appropriated by authors familiar with the process, and while the religious overtones are traded for the secular, the idea of an individual moving from a lower plane to a higher can be retained. Just so, the influence of one individual’s persona on another becomes the natural (rather than divine) process by which a conversion is affected from a baser to a more ethical line of thinking or behavior.

Before proceeding to *Middlemarch* and *Sir George Tressady*, a final point must be made regarding women’s path to influence. During the Victorian period, women’s nature was perceived as highly emotional (and less intellectual), but it is important to note here that by virtue of their emotionality women were also believed to be prime influencers of others. Woman is thought to be, after all, “A sensitive and intelligent being, more quick to feel than to understand” (Ellis, *Daughters* 10), but she is offered some consolation for her lack of intellect in her apparently corollary ability to influence. She wields this privilege not through her use of reason, of course, which she is deemed to lack, but through the power of the feelings that make up her emotional nature, for “to interest the feelings is to her much easier than to convince the judgment; and the heart is more accessible to her influence than the head” (Sandford 22). This influence is supposedly quite powerful. According to conduct book writer Mrs. John Sandford, “Nothing is more persuasive than feeling: it has a natural charm to which art can never attain” (26). Of course, that feeling must never be expressed violently and shockingly. “Gentleness,” she claims, “prepossesses at first sight: it insinuates itself into the vantage ground, and gains the best position by surprise. . . . gentleness at once disarms the opposition, and wins the day before
it is contested” (22). We will see the disarming power of gentleness at work in both

*Middlemarch* and *Sir George Tressady*.

Woman’s power of influence is also constructed as pervasive and wide spread. Another conduct book writer of the period, Thomas Gisborne, waxes poetic, stating that the influence of the female character “is not like the periodical inundation of a river, which overspreads once in a year a desert with its transient plenty. It is like the dew of heaven which descends at all seasons, returns after short intervals, and permanently nourishes every herb of the field” (11-2). Thus, when Eliot and Ward produced their scenes of feeling and influence between women, they wrote in a context which understood women to be affected more strongly by their own feelings and the feelings of others rather than through their reason, and to be most likely to turn their influence outward on others through the expression of feeling. It is very sensible, therefore, that Dorothea and Marcella are impelled to take action by virtue of their strong feelings, and that they influence Rosamond and Letty, respectively, though the expression of warm, sincere, and fervid sympathy.

Given, then, the high value the Victorians placed on sympathy for its supposed ability to improve human society, and that George Eliot and Mary Augusta Ward wrote with the aim of promoting human sympathy with an eye towards human progress and reform, a common element in their most dramatic and affective scenes – female affectionate touch – cannot be ignored. Touching behaviors enjoy special power in these scenes because the extreme nature of the situations sanctions unusual behavior, and unusual behavior is experienced all the more strongly by participants already affected by extreme emotion. Touch is also empowered by the Victorian conception that women were most likely to be influenced, and to influence others, through the use of their emotions, and bodily behaviors are often understood to sincerely reflect a woman’s interior emotional state. Indeed, Bain claimed that “The expressive gestures . . . are our means of
judging of what is passing in the interior of the mind” (29). It is through this process that authors like George Eliot and Mary Augusta Ward show touch to possess an important place in their all-important goal of “enlarging men’s sympathies” and promoting positive social change.

5.4 Touch, Sympathy, and Influence in Middlemarch

George Eliot’s Middlemarch, written in the late 1860s and published in its entirety in 1871, is a formidable text comprising many interrelated plots and a vast array of characters. The characters of primary interest here, however, are Dorothea Casaubon, née Brooke, and Rosamond Lydgate, née Vincy. The former is an “open, ardent” young woman (Middlemarch 6) of the gentry who possesses a “hereditary strain of Puritan energy” (5) as well as “an active conscience and a great mental need” (24). In her quest to “see how it was possible to lead a grand life here – now – in England” (25), Dorothea marries the much older Edward Casaubon, believing that he will be “a guide who would take her along the grandest path” (25). She soon develops an awareness, however, that her husband’s mind is in fact filled with “anti-rooms and winding passages which seemed to lead nowhither” (186). Dorothea understands her husband no more than he understands her (190), and their married life is an unhappy one. Even so, “in Dorothea’s mind there was a current into which all thought and feeling were apt sooner or later to flow – the reaching forward of the whole consciousness towards the fullest truth, the least partial good” (193), which makes her yearn to do good for others despite her personal disappointments. Not too many months after their marriage, Casaubon dies of a heart ailment (459).

Contrasting Dorothea is Rosamond Lydgate, who “was always that combination of correct sentiments, music, dancing, drawing, elegant note-writing, private album for extracted
verse, and perfect blond loveliness, which made the irresistible woman” (255). Nevertheless, she is intensely selfish and self-absorbed. Thoughtless of others to the point of cruelty, she begins imagining “how delightful” it would be “to make captives from the throne of marriage with a husband as crown-prince by your side – himself in fact a subject – while the captives look up for ever hopeless, losing their rest probably, and if their appetite too, so much the better!” (414-5), even when she is first married. She and her husband understand each other no better than Dorothea and Edward Casaubon (558), and they soon become as unhappy when pressed upon by debt (616-20, 626-9, 632-5). Unlike Dorothea who “would have thought it very sinful in her to keep up an inward wail because she was not completely happy” (736), Rosamond withdraws from her husband and counteracts his efforts to improve their situation.

Both young and beautiful gentlewomen, both living near or within the country town of Middlemarch, both new but rather unhappy brides, the two women could nevertheless not be more different – the first generous and yearning for the good of the world, the second concerned only with her own pleasure. Nor are they alike in station, for Dorothea possesses her own fortune in addition to her husband’s (728), and belongs to the gentry, while Rosamond has nothing of her own, and is married to a physician who must work for his living. Rosamond of course knows of Dorothea as “one of those country divinities” (410), and Dorothea comes to know of Rosamond as the wife of Lydgate, who attends Casaubon in his illness before his death, but in their different temperaments and stations in life, nothing is likely to draw them together. In fact, they have active reason to dislike and distrust one another, for following her husband’s death, his cousin, Will Ladislaw, all but professes his love to Dorothea, a revelation in which she feels great joy (604). At the same time, however, Will has spent a good deal of time entertaining himself at Lydgate’s house with Rosamond, and that young lady has come to imagine that she
has made him one of her “captives” of love, and depends not a little upon her fantasies of Will for her happiness (440-1, 717). Rosamond suspects and dislikes Will’s attachment to Dorothea (572), and Dorothea in her turn cannot help but uncomfortably associate Will with Rosamond, for she has seen them entertaining themselves together in Lydgate’s absence (734). When Lydgate opens his heart to Dorothea and explains some of his troubles to her – financial as well as marital – Dorothea generously plans to seek out Rosamond and offer comfort (725-9). When she arrives, however, she finds Rosamond engaged in an intimate scene with Will, the two talking alone and fervently, with clasped hands, and so Dorothea rushes out of the house believing Will’s former professions of attachment to her to be “a detected illusion” (749).

I summarize at such length because it is important to recall Dorothea and Rosamond’s state of mind leading up to their final eventful interview, which is also their first together of any consequence. When Dorothea resolves the next day to again “attempt to see and save Rosamond” (752), she does so despite the fact that seeing the woman she so intimately connects with her false lover (as she believes him to be) must be intensely painful. Indeed, the narrator comments that “the resolve was not easy” (752). Rosamond, for her part, believes that Dorothea, “must have come now with the sense of having the advantage, and with animosity prompting her to use it” (755). Both women are experiencing severe emotional turmoil, and their respective differences and situations make their coming together at such a time all the more surprising. In the dramatic scene between Dorothea and Rosamond which then unfolds, the women’s touch becomes an integral part of a sympathetic exchange – an exchange clearly based on the sympathetic theories of Smith, Darwin, Spencer, and Bain. The exchange promotes the transmission of positive influence from Dorothea to Rosamond, and leaves both women better off than before. The effectiveness of physical affection in this scene rests partly on its variance
from accepted norms of behavior; it helps to break down the intense distance between the two and compounds the expression of feeling exchanged between them. In consequence of their coming together, Dorothea learns that Will was never false to her, while Rosamond is comforted in a time of intense trouble, and moved to turn her attention and affection again to the husband she has so lately ignored and despised. While the positive influence Dorothea exerts on Rosamond is not permanent or even long-lasting, Dorothea has clearly shed some of that light she radiates on the Lydges, and Eliot celebrates this influence, transient and “diffuse” though it may be.

The influence of thinkers like Smith, Darwin, and Spencer, all of whom posit the importance of the imagination on the effective transmission of sympathy, can be seen even before the scene begins. When Dorothea rushes from Rosamond’s house the first day, she goes home to a night of misery and suffering (749-50). When morning comes, however, the narrator writes that “It was not in Dorothea’s nature . . . to sit in . . . the besotted misery of a consciousness that only sees another’s lot as an accident of its own” (750). In order to see Rosamond’s lot more clearly, “[Dorothea] began now to live through that yesterday morning deliberately again, forcing herself to dwell on every detail and its possible meaning. Was she alone in that scene? Was it her event only? She forced herself to think of it as bound up with another woman’s life” (750). Her ruminations about Rosamond’s situation are supported by Dorothea’s past experience “representing to herself the trials of Lydgate’s lot” (751). The reflecting Dorothea does here is not incidental. It is a part of her influence, indeed, her power, for the narrator claims “all this vivid sympathetic experience returned to her now as a power: it asserted itself as acquired knowledge asserts itself and will not let us see as we saw in the day of our ignorance” (751). The words of Adam Smith are easily recalled here, who argues that for
sympathy to be effective, “the spectator must, first of all, endeavour, as much as he can, to put himself in the situation of the other, and to bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer. He must adopt the whole case of his companion with all its minutest incidents” (23). It is only by vividly imagining Rosamond’s circumstances that Dorothea is able, first, to incite herself to try to see Rosamond again the next day, and second, when she arrives, to reach an individual who, when she hears of Dorothea’s arrival, is already “wrapping her soul in cold reserve” before even greeting her guest (754).

With the experience of the day before in both of their minds and no previous relationship with one another to provide happier memories, the two women stand in the same room separated by what would seem an impassable distance. They are of two different worlds, different temperaments, and different ambitions. Further, they are divided by embarrassment, resentment and suspicion on Rosamond’s part, and terrible grief fighting to restrain itself, as well as “the need to express pitying fellowship rather than rebuke” (759) on Dorothea’s. Both characters feel it. Rosamond “prepared herself to meet every word with polite impassability” and so “paused at three yards’ distance from her visitor and bowed.” In fact, “Rosamond’s notion when she first bowed is that she should stay a long way off from Mrs. Casaubon” (755). But Dorothea breaks partway through Rosamond’s reserve almost instantly with her use of her body. She “had taken off her gloves, from an impulse which she could never resist when she wanted a sense of freedom, came forward, and . . . and put out her hand. Rosamond could not avoid . . . putting her small hand into Dorothea’s, which clasped it with gentle motherliness.” For Rosamond, “immediately a doubt of her own prepossessions began to stir within her,” for she “was quick for faces; she saw that Mrs. Casaubon’s face looked . . . gentle, and like the firm softness of her hand” (emphasis added, 755). In the first place, social etiquette required that acquaintances
making calls would not make themselves so comfortable during the visit; ladies would not remove their hats, shawls, or gloves, and gentlemen would hold onto their hats rather than leaving them in the hall or with a servant, all to avoid implying familiarity and the suggestion that the call would be of extended duration. Dorothea does so because “she wanted a sense of freedom,” and yet her actions also mean that she and Rosamond will grasp one another’s hand flesh to flesh, making an actual connection during which Rosamond is able to experience the “gentle” and “firm softness” of Dorothea’s hand. The “firm soft” feel of Dorothea’s hand can be seen to physically manifest the firmness of Dorothea’s moral character which nonetheless is communicated with gentle, motherly, “soft” kindness. In the second place, as only nominal acquaintances, Dorothea might have only bowed to Rosamond as Rosamond does to her, but Dorothea understands the importance of breaking through the distance between them – including mental and emotional distance which the physical distance between them reflects – and that Rosamond immediately becomes unsure of herself, and allows herself to be seated right beside Dorothea (755), is evidence that both moves of the heroine are highly effective. Touch has the power to be so effective here because it is different from the normative rules of behavior. No doubt Dorothea’s behavior surprises Rosamond, which is the first strike against Rosamond’s impenetrability and heightened self-imposed reserve.

46 This action of Dorothea’s is not without precedent in other Eliot novels. In Adam Bede, for instance, when Dinah Morris goes to visit Hetty Sorrel in prison, she “mechanically took off her bonnet and shawl as soon as they were within the prison court, from the habit she had of throwing them off when she preached or prayed, or visited the sick” (489). Eliot clearly registers the necessity of bodies coming together less impeded by physical obstacles when one individual seeks to have an effect on another.
Of course touch does not achieve all. The narrator states that, “The cordial, pleading tones which seemed to flow with generous heedlessness above all the facts which had filled Rosamond’s mind as grounds of obstruction and hatred between her and this woman, came as soothingly as a warm stream” (756), but it does achieve the first closing of distance between the two. And when Rosamond begins to respond positively, Dorothea “unconsciously laid her hand again on the little hand that she had pressed before” and it is immediately after this gesture that “Rosamond, with an overmastering pang, as if a wound within her had been probed, burst into hysterical crying” (emphasis added, 757). Dorothea’s hands which reach out in firm but gentle sympathy touch Rosamond physically as well as emotionally. The walls between the two are breaking down, and more, Rosamond is beginning to experience the positive influence that the thinkers described earlier posit that sympathy can provide, for Rosamond was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others; and this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling in a woman whom she had approached with a shrinking aversion and dread, as one who must necessarily have a jealous hatred towards her, made her soul totter all the more with a sense that she had been walking in an unknown world which had just broken upon her. (758)

This “shatter[ing]” of Rosamond’s “dream-world” is necessary to a conversion to a different world-view which is promoted through compassionate emotion. For all that Dorothea tries to break through Rosamond’s reserve with words as well as with touch, by assuring her that “You will like to know that your husband has warm friends, who have not left off believing in his high character?” (756), even Dorothea’s verbal communications are guided by emotion and feeling rather than reason. She may attempt to reason Rosamond into believing that her husband is
innocent and that her life will improve, but her reasoning is based on feeling and emotion which her bodily behavior quoted above heightens and compounds. It is “this strange unexpected manifestation of feeling” in Dorothea – exemplified as much in her touch as in her words – that punctures Rosamond’s vain and shallow self-assurance. Dorothea has broken through and conversion has become possible. Rosamond wonders to herself “What was the use of thinking about behaviour after this crying?” Once again, the difference from normative rules of behavior between the two women here heightens the effect of the scene. The narrator continues, “And Dorothea looked almost as childish, with the neglected trace of a silent tear. Pride was broken down between these two” (758).

This breaking down of pride is essential. These two women who could not be more different and who began their meeting on this day far apart are now experiencing all the great power of sympathy, which, as Smith says, “pleases us” (14) and “enlivens joy and alleviates grief” (11). According to Bain, “The situation of receiving benefits is one of pleasure, and calls forth warm emotion towards the giver, in proportion to the greatness of the pleasure” (84-5). Dorothea’s reaching out to Rosamond, Bain would add, is “a stroke of signal and unexpected generosity.” This is significant because “When an enemy, or an injured party, renders good offices, even the indifferent spectator is touched and melted. The mind being totally unprepared, the stimulation would appear to operate as shock” (85). The same word is co-opted by Eliot when she writes that Rosamond “was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world” (758). Considering the scene of the day before which suggested that Rosamond, a married woman, was illicitly engaged with Dorothea’s lover, Will, Dorothea is twice the offended party, because she is also Rosamond and Lydgate’s financial benefactor (732). Eliot thus shows Dorothea’s kindness to Rosamond here to be doubly effective.
It is clear that Rosamond, at least for the time, is deeply touched. As Dorothea struggles on, speaking brokenly, abstractly, and confusedly of Rosamond’s danger with reference to falling into an emotional dependence on Will, “she pressed her hands helplessly on the hands that lay under them.” Her words, and apparently her touch, cause Rosamond to be “taken hold of by an emotion stronger than her own – hurried along in a new movement which gave all things some new, awful, undefined aspect” and because she, by this time, “could find no words” herself, she “involuntarily . . . put her lips to Dorothea’s forehead which was very near her, and then for a minute the two women clasped each other as if they had been in a shipwreck” (emphasis added, 759). This moment in which the two women embrace one another fervidly and whole-heartedly, (no doubt, soothing their respective lacteal glands!), is both the embodiment and the apotheosis of the two women’s sympathy. They have reached an ideally sympathetic exchange.

And just as Herbert Spencer predicts, “the altruistic sentiments resulting from sympathy” which include “Pity . . . Generosity . . . [and] Justice” (19), begin to do their work. It was building up her sympathy over the course of her long night that impelled Dorothea, pityingly and generously, to seek out Rosamond again the following day. And Rosamond, “while she was still feeling Dorothea’s arms round her” (759), in her converted state, begins to “[deliver] her soul under impulses which she had not known before” (760). It is only now that she confesses to Dorothea that “you are thinking what is not true” (759) and explains that when she and Will were together the day before, Will “Was telling me how he loved another woman, that I might know he could never love me” (760). This gesture on Rosamond’s part is surprising, for while she does incur some benefit to herself for confessing the truth, the gratification of feeling she has done right cannot be equal to the mortification a vain and shallow woman would feel at
confessing the man she thought was her own captive to have professed himself the ardent lover of another.

But because she does, Dorothea can “[care] for Rosamond without struggle now,” which causes her, “With her usual tendency to over-estimate the good in others, [to feel] a great outgoing of her heart towards Rosamond for the generous effort which had redeemed her from suffering.” Dorothea does not realize that “the effort was a reflex of her own energy” or that in telling her the truth, Rosamond was “repelling Will’s reproaches, which were still like a knife-wound within her” (760). Here Eliot reflects Smith’s claims that when an individual feels sympathy, she can only imagine of the other what she would feel in the other’s position; she can never have access to the other’s mind in truth. Dorothea counts Rosamond’s “confession” as a “generous effort” and does not really know Rosamond’s full mind. But we must be careful to remember that even Rosamond’s desire to defend herself from “Will’s reproaches” did not inspire her with the desire to confess the truth at the beginning of this meeting. And Dorothea

47 It is fascinating here that Eliot, as Ward will do also a quarter of a century later, is working out in her fiction how sympathy achieves its highest results. Sympathy is indubitably a positive feeling for an individual to have, and it generally has a positive effect on others. But why? How does it affect others? Does Dorothea’s sympathy appeal to Rosamond’s lower nature, presenting her with a safe environment in which to clear herself of “Will’s reproaches,” in essence, simply defending herself and caring nothing for justice or truth? While the narrator makes it clear that Rosamond does have this self-interested goal in mind, the narrator’s further claims that Rosamond “was under the first great shock that had shattered her dream-world in which she had been easily confident of herself and critical of others” (758) suggests that Dorothea’s sympathy is affecting Rosamond on a higher level as well.
could not have learned the truth any other way, for in the situation Will could not have explained himself, a fact he himself notes when he exclaims, “Explain! How can a man explain at the expense of a woman!” (741).

When Lydgate returns shortly after their scene together, Dorothea and Rosamond “said an earnest, quiet good-bye without kiss or other show of effusion,” because “there had been between them too much serious emotion for them to use the signs of it superficially” (761). This absence of physicality now helps to restore propriety and the accepted implicit rules of social behavior are now again in command. The two women have indeed experienced very real and very deep emotion, and throughout their experience is first made possible, and then deepened and compounded, by the expressions of positive physical affection. As a result of the sympathetic exchange the two women experience together, Dorothea learns that Will has always been true to her, and eventually marries him. This could not have happened without Rosamond’s confession, and few women are less likely to have confessed such a thing as Rosamond, which suggests all the more the immense importance of the two women’s sympathetic exchange, since it makes possible the book’s dénouement. Rosamond, on the other hand, thinks when Dorothea leaves that Mrs. Causabon had made her feel “less discontented” with her husband, Lydgate, which is surely a considerable benefit in an era before any possibility of divorce (762). In addition, she “never committed a second compromising indiscretion,” and “she never uttered a word in depreciation of Dorothea, keeping in religious remembrance the generosity which had come to her aid in the sharpest crisis of her life” (796). This second fact shows that the friendship which was constituted in their highly emotional scene is still present for Rosamond. It also alludes to the religious meaning of the word conversion, since here Rosamond has learned to “reliously” value a secular character trait, that is, Dorothea’s generosity.
Some might argue that Dorothea did not have much positive impact on Rosamond, since, for the rest of her life, Rosamond “simply continued to be mild in her temper, inflexible in her judgment, disposed to admonish her husband, and able to frustrate him by stratagem” so that Lydgate calls her “his basil plant” because it “flourished wonderfully on a murdered man’s brains” (796). Indeed, in a recent discussion on the Victoria Listserv regarding Eliot’s views on positive influence as shown in *Middlemarch*, John Plotz argued that “While Eliot explores possible moral actions that might be undertaken in the hope of altering others morals and mores, I think she is also very skeptical about direct alteration of other’s habits” (Plotz), and Ellen Moody suggests that “if we look carefully we find that while a character like Dorothea seems to hold a momentary sway over other characters, within a short time the other character is back to behaving just as he or she would have without that influence” (Moody). To be sure, commentator Julie Melnyk is right to point out that “Eliot certainly doesn't believe in any Scrooge-style total conversions” (Melnyk). Nonetheless, Dorothea has enough influence to encourage a confession of truth out of Rosamond, and I would posit that the fact that Dorothea’s influence is difficult to directly quantify is part of Eliot’s point. After all, in the final pages (and some of the most memorable language) of the novel, the narrator asserts that

Her finely-touched spirit had still its fine issues, *though they were not widely visible*. Her full nature . . . spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth. But *the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive*: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs. (emphasis added, 799)
Eliot’s project in her writing is to “enlarge men’s sympathies,” but she does not lay out a scientific and measurable account of how sympathy works, or what it is sure to achieve. She believes that sympathy’s capacity to inspire personal and social change exists, but that is “diffuses” itself through the world just like Dorothea’s “effect . . . on those around her.” One might liken the effect that Dorothea has on those around her with the effect Eliot believes her fiction will have on those that read it, that is to say, a diffusely positive effect, impossible to measure, and yet undoubtedly valuable. For if such acts as Dorothea’s are responsible for “the growing good of the world,” then so, perhaps, are Eliot’s works. Her depiction of the exchange that Dorothea and Rosamond experience, then, for all that it does not influence Rosamond to become a totally different person, is nonetheless a powerful example of the kind of positive effect she believes sympathy can accomplish. And throughout, female affectionate touch was necessary to the production and experience of that so immensely valued emotion.

5.5 Touch, Sympathy and Influence in Sir George Tressady

This chapter will address scenes of women in extremis in a novel of Mary Augusta Ward as well as Eliot. Ward bears a special relationship to Eliot. The similarity of her writing to Eliot’s was noted at least as far back as 1892, though the author of that editorial admitted only a “superficial likeness” in that “both have a far-reaching interest in life and the problems of human conduct” (Copeland 503). More recently, the two authors have been compared by a number of critics who note, for example, similarities in the authors’ lives, for “Both Eliot and Ward were considered women of intimidating intelligence and penetrating thought, who participated in the

48 Somewhat humorously, the same author also sees a resemblance between the two women in that “Both women are learned to the verge of pedantry” (Copeland 503).
intellectual discourse of the country (Hale 242), and “Both began their professional lives in essay-writing and reviewing, both undertook a major theological-philosophical work for translation early on, and both, having started out within the bounds of Evangelical orthodoxy, had had to adjust personal faith to a highly sophisticated intellectual position” (Collister 296). The two women even met in person when Mary (then Arnold49) was a teenager living in Oxford, where the fifty year old Eliot was visiting with Lewes (Collister 296). More importantly, marked similarities exist also in the women’s authorial and intellectual projects, for “Both Eliot and Ward were considered women . . . [whose] work advocates for the novel as a key medium of serious, intelligent and valuable thought” (Hale 242) and both exhibit interest in “heroic decisions made in a prosaic medium” (Collister 300). Ward, like Eliot, was “a serious novelist who engaged her readers in imaginative experiments on important social and moral questions” (Argyle 940), and as such, in the later Victorian period, “She was considered George Eliot’s successor” (Argyle 941).

Ward is not a traditionally canonical writer, though some critics are rediscovering interest in her work. Most of that interest, however, centers on Ward’s position with the Anti-Suffrage

49 Though little known today, Mary Augusta Ward came from an industriously intellectual family. She “was a granddaughter of the reforming headmaster, Thomas Arnold of Rugby, and a niece of the poet, Matthew Anold. Jane Arnold, her aunt, married W. E. Forster, who was responsible for the Education Act of 1870. Her husband Thomas Humphry Ward was a tutor of Brasenoe College, Oxford and her daughter Janet married the historian G.M. Trevelyan. Ward was the aunt of the writers Julian and Aldous Huxley and the main breadwinner in a family which she supported financially through her earnings as a professional writer” (Joannou 564).
movement, or with Ward’s theological beliefs as expressed in her early novels. However, critic Peter Collister in his 1983 article, “Portraits of ‘Audacious Youth,’” carefully delineates the debt Ward owed to Eliot in the construction of the scene in *Sir George Tressady* between Lady Marcella Maxwell and Letty Tressady which will be the subject of my analysis here, and which is undoubtedly a powerful depiction of sympathy between individuals. Collister notes that “*Middlemarch* . . . exercised a decisive influence upon the development of Mary Ward’s work when she turned from the portrayal of young men . . . to the more challengingly accessible mind of the young woman” (297). After all, during the writing of *Sir George Tressady* Ward had been requested to produce a book on Eliot. While she never completed the project,

From the early summer of 1896, and very likely earlier than that, Mary Ward had been re-reading George Eliot with a view to this critical work. During these

50 For Ward and the anti-suffrage movement, see, for example, Nicola Ward Thompson’s “Lost Horizons: Reclaiming Victorian Women Writers,” Maroula Jouannou’s “Mary Augusta Ward . . . and the Opposition to Women’s Suffrage,” Gisela Argyle’s “Mrs. Humphry Ward’s Fictional Experiments in the Woman Question,” Ann Heilmann and Valerie Sanders’ “The rebel, the lady and the ‘anti.’” For Ward and Theology, see Elizabeth Hale’s “Sickly Scholars and Healthy Novels,” Laura Fasick’s “The Ambivalence of Influence,” and David B. Howell’s “The Novelist as Interpreter of Theology and Biblical Criticism.”

51 Coincidentally this article also fruitfully compares the two scenes between unlike women which will be the subject on analysis in this chapter (Dorothea’s meeting with Rosamond, and Marcella’s meeting with Letty), though Collister’s analysis intends to show the debt Ward owes to Eliot, while my analysis will focus on the similar touching behaviors in the two scenes and the different effects of those meetings on the individuals involved.
months too, she was engaged upon the final stages and revisions of *Sir George Tressady*. We must not be surprised, then . . . to find that two of the most powerful scenes at the end of the novel have been modelled upon incidents of comparable emotional significance in George Eliot. (Collister 311)

Collister determines that George Eliot and Mary Augusta Ward both produce novels that “are constructed upon events which vindicate the supreme worth of intuitive feeling and mature discrimination” (308), and also that “Both scenes evince a belief in the strength of good-will. . . Both, too, are constructed upon an unquestioning faith in the power of woman, as a sensitive helper for others weaker” (314). Therefore, Eliot and Ward exhibit similar ideas concerning sympathy, “the supreme worth of . . . feeling,” “the strength of good-will,” and the sensitivity of women. The results of the two scenes, though, are markedly different, as however alike in their opinions regarding the expression of sympathy might be, the two authors’ beliefs regarding the lasting quality of the resulting influence between individuals varies to some extent, since Ward’s text suggests a more lasting and essential change of attitude and behavior is possible in the converted individual.

Published a quarter of a century after *Middlemarch*, *Sir George Tressady* by Mary Augusta Ward (Mrs. Humphry Ward) is a sequel to her popular *Marcella*. The character Marcella, Lady Marcella Maxwell, *née* Boyd, has much in common with Dorothea. Just as Dorothea experiences “the mixed result of young and noble impulses struggling amidst the conditions of an imperfect social state” (*Middlemarch* 798), so Marcella, in her ardent ambitions, often makes mistakes, one of which will become significant to her encounter with the title character’s wife, Letty. When Marcella marries Aldous Raeburn, Lord Maxwell, she enters into
his political life intent on reforming the working life of the London poor. It is this endeavor which makes up most of *Sir George Tressady*.

Opposing Lord Maxwell’s bill to limit the working hours of the poor is Sir George Tressady, an intelligent young man who has just entered Parliament. Tressady considers himself well-traveled and his conservative beliefs and opinions well-grounded and well-ingrained (*Sir George Tressady* I. 53), though they will suffer considerable evolution in the novel as a result of his friendship with Marcella because he is “full of a sensitive ability and perception” (II. 148). Before coming to know Marcella, however, even though “he was not passionately in love – not at all” (I.63), he marries Letty Sewell simply because “he had never been depressed in her company” (I.41), because he doesn’t wish to “make a common household with his mother,” and because “He wanted the right to carry off the little music box [as he thinks of Letty], with all its tunes, and set it playing in his own house, to keep him gay. Why not?” (I. 63).

Like Rosamond, Letty Tressady is shallow and self-absorbed, callous to the pains of others and eager to judge (I. 21), while still possessing “small proportions and movements light as air . . . with an inventive refinement in dress and personal adornment that never failed” (I. 22).

52 Interestingly, Sir George imagines that Letty “must be sweet-tempered, or that pretty child Evelyn Watton would not be so fond of her.” Evelyn is not quite a child; she is a teenager, and in fact knows Letty is “vain [and] selfish,” but she talks sweetly to George about Letty simply because Evelyn’s “heart . . . leap[t] forward to the time when a man would look at her so” (I. 64). George is misled, but it is worth noting that part of his assessment of Letty Sewell comes from his conception of Letty’s supposed friendship with another woman, This is another example of touching behaviors as an indicator of femininity and a woman’s supposed aptitude for lovingness and motherliness as discussed in chapter one of this work.
Like Rosamond and Lydgate, Letty and Tressady soon fall into debt, and like Rosamond, Letty counteracts her husband’s attempts to save money and improve their position (II. 97, 110-3). When Letty and George find themselves mutual guests at a house party at Castle Luton along with Marcella and her husband, whom they had little known before, Marcella tries to be friendly with Letty, but quickly finds that she is “not exactly enchanted with Lady Tressady,” for “she jarred” and Marcella “pined to get away” (I. 253). In fact, Marcella considers Letty “a vulgar, common little being” (II. 153). What should the ardent and loving Marcella find of interest in this “audacious gossip” who “ask[ed] a number of intimate or impertinent questions . . . so anxious was she to show off her own information and make her own comments” (I. 251)? On the other hand, Marcella is “determined to make a friend of” George for whom she “felt a strange compassion” because “it was plain to her woman’s instinct that he was at heart lonely and uncompanioned” (I. 267), and also because “to talk to him stirred all one’s energies; it was a perpetual battle” (II. 153). The two discuss politics and gradually, their friendship deepens, until George comes almost to worship Marcella, and, in fact, to fall in love with her (II. 140-4). Letty is aware of this fact (II. 110), though Marcella has thought throughout her friendship with George only of trying to help her husband’s work in Parliament, and, happy in her own marriage, she never intended to seduce George Tressady romantically in any way. Although Letty “had never imagined herself in love with [George] when she married him,” as he drifts away, she begins “thinking constantly of George, determined to impress him with her social success, to force him to admire her and think much of her” (II. 111). Worse for Letty, George’s attachment to Marcella becomes a matter of wide-spread public knowledge when he switches sides in Parliament, throws over his party, makes an impassioned speech in favor of Maxwell’s bill, and wins the day for the Maxwell party (II. 122-6).
This, then, is the state of things when Marcella—anguished that she has drawn such affection from the husband unintentionally, and finally aware (through a letter of Letty’s to Lord Maxwell) of the pain she has caused the wife—goes to visit Letty. As in Middlemarch, in the scene which unfolds between Letty and Marcella, the women’s use of affectionate touch is an essential element of their sympathetic experience. Touch proves to be necessary to the breaking down of distance between the two women, and to the compounding of Marcella’s generosity, both of which are necessary precursors to Letty’s conversion in feeling, understanding, and eventually (to some degree) even her personality. Their encounter promotes the transmission of a positive influence which proves to be more permanent and transformational for Letty than that which occurs for Rosamond. As a result of their scene, Marcella has the opportunity to expiate her guilt about George, and Letty begins to enter into a new and higher understanding before unknown to her. Like Eliot before her, and the scholars of sympathy Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and Alexander Bain, Ward celebrates the uplifting and transformative power of sympathy, while making use of the immense power of the body to perform that which words alone cannot.

Just as Dorothea places herself in Rosamond’s shoes, reflecting on what Rosamond must feel even before she goes to Rosamond for their final scene, Marcella begins to imagine Letty’s pain at her husband’s defection. While sitting with George, she says to him, “may I tell you what I am thinking of? Not of you, nor of me—of another person altogether!” (II. 145). She thinks of the “self-complacent being” she met at Castle Luton whom she so disliked, but imagines how she would feel if another woman had “taught ideal truths to [her own husband,] Maxwell!” (II. 145). She realizes “I seem to have done [George] a wrong— and his wife” (II. 148). When she reads the letter Letty wrote to Maxwell, that “effusion of gall and bitterness,”
Marcella feels “stab[bed],” and determines immediately, “I shall go to her . . . I must see her!” (II. 154-5). Sympathy begins even before the women see each other, when one, just as Smith recommends, tries to “bring home to himself every little circumstance of distress which can possibly occur to the sufferer” (23).

When Letty realizes Marcella is coming to her, she feels all the resentment that Rosamond, too, felt, but in Letty’s case she believes she is the wounded party, and is “excited . . . by the thought of the rebuff she was about to administer to the great lady who had affronted her.” She erroneously believes that “Lady Maxwell, of course, was coming to try and appease her, to hush it up. . . . Tears, humiliation, reproaches, she meted them all out in plenty to the woman she hated” (II. 182). Letty plans at first to humiliate Marcella by turning her away at the door, refusing even to see her (II. 181), but in a fit of rage decides to see her face to face (II. 185).

When Marcella is shown in, Letty offers her several “small discourtesies,” asking, “in her sharpest, thinnest voice, ‘to what [do] I owe the honour of this visit’” and telling Marcella “perhaps you will sit down,” after which she seats herself, but does not offer Marcella a chair (II. 185). The distance between the two women is substantial. Physically, Letty sits where she pleases and leaves Marcella to find her way herself. Emotionally, Letty is enraged, while Marcella is full of compassion and pity; she comes to soothe and compassionate, not to hush up.

Mentally, Letty believes Marcella had seduced her husband. Marcella, meanwhile, more justly realizes her mistake in making such a close friend of Sir George, but knows she never sought to draw husband away from wife. Morally, Letty is full of spite and venom, eager to hurt her supposed rival, while the generous and eager Marcella seeks only to console and soothe Letty’s “distortion[s]” and “jealous[ies]” (II. 154). Both women are suffering extreme emotional distress, and never having liked, or had much of anything to do with, one another in the first
place, the idea that they could come into sympathy with one another, or that they should soothe one another, is extraordinary. But they will. And the bodily behaviors of each will help them achieve this.

The first tactic Marcella tries is not successful. She attempts to talk to Letty, to reason with her. She tries to explain that Letty’s letter did not “[seem] to either of us [Marcella or her husband] a true or just account of what had happened . . . but it made me realize . . . that in my friendship with your husband I had been forgetting” his ties to Letty. She admits that she “had no right to offer [friendship] to Sir George alone,” and although “The frank, sudden passion of her lifted eyes sent a thrill even through Letty,” the younger woman is still furious and untouched (II. 186). Letty indeed feels “triumph in the evident nervousness with which her visitor approached her” (II. 185) as well as the “thrill” from Marcella’s eyes (that is, through Marcella’s body language), but the older woman’s words move her not at all. Marcella must pause and rethink, she wonders “What could suggest to her how to say the right word, touch the right chord?” (emphasis added, II. 187). The fact is, Marcella’s words, or at least, her words alone, cannot break down the space between the two women. Marcella pauses, then “came nearer” and, speaking compassionately and sympathetically, at last begins to “touch the right chord.” She says, “—if only . . . I could make you realise how truly – how bitterly – I had felt for any pain you might have suffered,” confusedly trying to explain her friendship with Letty’s husband. The narrator continues:

The nobleness of the speaker, the futility of the speech, were about equally balanced! . . . the story, so told, was not only unconvincing, it was hardly intelligible even, to Letty. For the two personalities moved in different worlds, and what had seemed to the woman who was all delicate impulse and romance the
right course, merely excited in Letty, and not without reason, fresh suspicion and offense. *If words had been all, Marcella has gained nothing.* (emphasis added, II. 189-90)

These two women, as the narrator notes, are so different that they can hardly understand one another through the medium of verbal expression and reason, through explanations and avowals. Speech alone is futile. The narrator even implies that it does more harm than good, for “it merely excited in Letty . . . fresh suspicion and offense.”

But words are not all. It is growing signs of emotion, only, that move Letty, and bring the two together, signs of emotion that are expressed through the body, and that are wildly at variance with the expected norms of social behavior. When Letty jabs at Marcella by telling her that she has found another man to amuse her (a libertine named Lord Cathedine), and claims that “It’s your doing and George’s, you see” (II. 191), Marcella is horror-struck, sinks into a chair, and covers her eyes with grief and revulsion. *This* touches Letty, to see her enemy “thus silenced, thus subdued” (II. 191). As Marcella loses some of the reserve expected of her in a social situation with an acquaintance, Letty is moved. This reaction of Marcella’s, and her entreaty that Letty allow someone to advise her, “for the first time, and against its owner’s will, [makes Letty’s] hard tone [waver]” (II. 192). Letty can only be moved when she sees her enemy in the grasp of deep emotion. Marcella is horrified because she *imagines* to herself “the wife as such, slighted and set aside,” for “she knew nothing of the real Letty Tressady.” It is her imagination of Letty’s situation that makes her “h[o]ld out her hands, looking down upon the venomous creature who had been pouring these insults upon her” (II. 188). And these sights and signs – Marcela’s eyes, her “evident nervousness,” holding out her hands to Letty, overwhelmed with emotion that Letty might be entering into an extramarital affair – raise “a strange tumult in
Letty’s breast. There was something in this mingling of self-abasement with an extraordinary moral richness and dignity, in these eyes, *these hands that would have so gladly caught and clasped her own*, which began almost to intimidate her” (II. 190). Marcella’s sympathy is fueled in imagining Letty’s situation (though she gives Letty much more credit in her imagination than the younger woman deserves), and as a result she shows her impassioned feeling to Letty, who in her turn begins to be affected as well. Like Rosamond before her, in the face of another’s sympathy and strong emotion, expressed in her bodily behavior, Letty is losing her own prepossessions; conversion is occurring.

And so Letty begins to talk. She confesses that “if you want to know . . . I *am* just about the most miserable wretch going!” She admits that “there was plenty of reason for his [George’s] getting tired of me. I’m not the sort of person to let anyone get the whip-hand of me, and I *would* spend his money as I liked, and I *would* ask the persons I chose to the house; and, above all, I wasn’t going to be pestered with looking after and giving up to his *dreadful* mother,” and Letty goes on and on, ranting and raving until she “sank gasping on a sofa, still putting out her hand as though to protect herself” (emphasis in original, II. 193-4). Finally,

Marcella knelt beside her, the tears running down her cheeks. She put her arms – arms formed for tenderness, for motherliness – round the girl’s slight frame.

“Don’t – don’t repulse me,” she said, with trembling lips, and suddenly Letty yielded. She found herself sobbing in Lady Maxwell’s embrace, while all the healing, all the remorse, all the comfort that self-abandonment and pity can pour out on such a plight as hers, *descended upon her from Marcella’s clinging touch*. . . (emphasis added, II. 195)
Here, Marcella’s arms which are “formed for tenderness, for motherliness” recall Alexander Bain’s claims that women’s biology impels them to desire to press a living being to their breasts. It is the wonders of reflecting on another’s suffering that Adam Smith, Charles Darwin, and Herbert Spencer so encourage, along with the lack of knowledge of the other’s true state (which Smith has made clear is an element of sympathy) that helps to win the day. The narrator explains that,

> The quality of [Marcella’s] own nature, perhaps, made her bear Letty’s violences and frenzies more patiently than would have been possible to a woman of another type; generous remorse and regret, combined with her ignorance of Letty’s history and the details of Letty’s life, led her even to look upon these violences as the effects of love perverted, the anguish of a jealous heart. Imagination, keen and loving, drew the situation for her in rapid strokes, draped Letty in the subtleties and powers of her own heart, and made forbearance easy. (II. 195-6)

Through the power of imagination, the two are brought to a mutual display of extreme emotion, a display markedly altered from the rules of behavior the critics of manners enjoin, and that emotion and display breaks down distance. The two finally come together physically, and that physicality “pours comfort” on Letty through “Marcella’s clinging touch.” Letty is touched as “her whole being surrendered itself to a mere ebb and flow of sensations” (II. 196).

This yielding to feeling – both physical and emotional – brings the women together, making possible the conversion of mind that Letty will soon begin to exhibit. As Marcella speaks passionately into Letty’s ear of her own life and marriage, and caresses and soothes her with all the generous compassion in her character, Letty is ecstatic to have overcome Marcella’s inbred dignity and reserve,
But there was more than this, and better than this. Strange up-wellings of feelings long trampled on and suppressed – momentary awakenings of conscience, of repentance, of regret – sharp realisations of an envy that was no longer ignoble but moral, softer thoughts of George, the suffocating, unwilling recognition of what love meant in another woman’s life – these messengers and forerunners of diviner things passed and repassed through the spaces of Letty’s soul . . . Marcella was still sitting beside her, holding her hands, and talking in the same low voice, when suddenly the loud sound of a bell clanged. . . . (II. 196)

Because of this breakdown of dignity and reserve – on Letty’s part, a reserve built of offended pride and outrage, and on Marcella’s pride, an inherent dignity of station and self-worth – transformation begins. The results for Marcella are not all positive; “she had taken upon herself the burden of Letty’s character and fate, vowing herself to a moral mission, to a long patience” (II. 195). She is able to “satisfy her own conscience” (II. 187) by explaining “[George’s conduct and mine – in its true light” (II. 189), but she does not receive nearly the same benefit from Letty’s confessions as Dorothea does from Rosamond’s. On the other hand, while Rosamond in *Middlemarch* is not hugely altered by her experience with Dorothea, Letty’s “Strange up-wellings of feelings . . . [and] momentary awakenings of conscience” will not end here. Ward is clearly more optimistic about the concrete and measurable effects of conversion than her predecessor.

Rosamond comes to think that Mrs. Casaubon “certainly was different from other women” (*Middlemarch* 761), but Letty feels “a new and clinging need has arisen in herself. The very neighbourhood of the personality beside her had begun to thrill and subjugate her” (II. 200).
In an intriguing rumination on what exactly in the exchange between the two women affected Letty so dramatically, the narrator questions:

No ordinary preacher, no middle-class eloquence perhaps would have sufficed [to bring about this change] – nothing less dramatic and distinguished than the scene which had actually passed, than a Marcella at her feet. Well! there are many modes and grades of conversion. Whether by what was worst in her, or what was best; whether the same weaknesses of character that had originally inflamed her had now helped to subdue her or no, what matter? So much stood – that one short hour had been enough to draw this vain, selfish nature within a moral grasp she was never again to shake off. (II. 200)

The narrator makes it clear that it was Marcella’s bodily behavior which really began to affect Letty’s conversion. Though “a Marcella at her feet” refers as much, metaphorically, to a Marcella subdued in dignity as it does to the literal woman on the floor next to Letty’s couch, soothing and caressing her, there is no doubt that the way in which Marcella lowers herself – to the ground, and to bring herself closer to Letty – physically embodies the relations between the two women Letty so desires. Does that reaching out between the two women, that apotheosis of sympathy – as one lies distraught on a couch and the other, on the floor next to her, embraces and caresses her – affect change by appealing to Letty’s baser nature, allowing her to glory in a supposed triumph, or by appealing to her higher nature, calling her to imitate Marcella’s loving and generous nature? Ward seems to see both processes at work. In either case, however, whether sympathy appeals to the best or the worst in us, it clearly produces positive results. Ward, no more than Eliot, believes in “Scrooge-style total conversions,” as Julie Melnyk so succinctly put it. But even by the next morning, Letty felt “that she had grown older, and life has
passed into another stage” though as yet she has no conception of what that stage might consist of. But when the two remain in contact, the influence that began as the two women embrace in Letty Tressady’s London drawing-room continues and grows.

Letty’s transformation, her conversion, the narrator makes clear, is not only due to her delight in Marcella’s sympathy which first brought the two women together, and which made the first impression on Letty. Letty continues to grow in the last chapters of the novel because she wonders

what is might be to be admitted to the intimate friendship of such a nature [as Marcella’s], to feel those long, slender arms pressed around her one more, nor in pity or remonstrance, as of one trying to exorcise an evil spirit, but in mere love, as of one asking as well as giving. The tender and adoring friendship of women for women . . . had passed Letty by. . . . Now . . . she seemed to be trembling within reach of its emotion; divining it, desiring it, yet forced onward to the question, “What is there in me that may claim it?” (II. 211)

And so it is that Letty’s desire “to be admitted to the intimate friendship” of Marcella is what continues her transformation after the two women’s first emotional scene. This is not a “Scrooge-style conversion.” It is, rather, the natural extension of what sympathy can achieve when it is practiced over a length of time. For after their scene in London, Letty goes to visit Marcella’s county estate, where the hostess “[saw] to every comfort” (II. 210) and Letty “was made constantly aware that her hostess remembered her” (II. 219). There, though “Marcella had not kissed her since the day of their great scene; they had been ‘Lady Maxwell’ and ‘Lady Tressady’ to each other all the time” (II. 211), she continues to feel “Strange waves of emotion” pass through her when Marcella so much as touches her shoulder (II. 219). Even Marcella’s
husband notices the effect, saying to Marcella, “And for the wife. . . . I saw her look at you tonight – once as you touched her shoulder. Dear! – what spells have you been using?” (II. 240). Weeks later, Letty’s husband will notice the differences beginning to grow in her, as “He thought of her visits to the village . . . then of her speech about . . . his mother. They seemed to him signs of some influence at work” (II. 252), and Letty even becomes “more patient under his mother’s idiosyncrasies than [George] was” (II. 254). This is after Marcella’s visit has ended and she and George have returned to their own county home, but the two women continue to correspond by letter, which allow Letty “to express herself to one who cared to listen, who poured upon her in return a sympathy which braced while it healed” (II. 263).

For Ward, female friendship, sympathy, affectionate touch, and positive influence are all inextricably bound up together. Marcella’s generous friendship has “thrilled and broken up the hardnesses of [Letty’s] own nature. . . . [Letty] found herself, as it were, groping in a strange world, clinging to Marcella’s hand, trying to expressing feelings that had never visited her before . . . and through it all catching dimly the light of new ideals” (II. 267). Even when Marcella and Letty are not co-present, the image of “clinging to Marcella’s hand” remains, echoing the importance of “Marcella’s clinging touch” during their dramatic scene together (II. 195). In Letty’s transformation, Ward celebrates the fantastic power sympathy was understood to possess during the Victorian period. That sympathy between very different women in times of emotional duress could not have come about, however, without the power of female affectionate touch to break down distances and reserve, and to express kindness, interest, and generosity in ways that words cannot, since, as the narrator clarifies, “if words had been all, Marcella had gained nothing” (II. 190).
George Eliot and Mary Augusta Ward clearly had different ideas about the possible effects of sympathy. To the former, the effects are diffuse and unquantifiable, while to the latter, sympathy can apparently sometimes effect radical and long-lasting positive change. Both, however, recognize the aptitude of this powerful emotion to somehow contribute to “the growing good of the world” (*Middlemarch* 799), and that belief was based in scholarly and scientific thought which posited the emotions as the foundation of all action, and sympathy as one of the highest of the human emotions. Deeply embedded in the work of both novelists is the power of female affectionate touch to break down barriers, physically embody sympathy, constitute a relationship between two diverse women, and affect a conversion of mindset, whether it be transient or lasting.
6 Conclusion: Final Thoughts

For too long scholars have overlooked the phenomenon of female touch in Victorian Literature. Throughout the period, in every genre, women appear again and again reaching out to one another, caressing one another, embracing one another. I began this study to determine why descriptions of touch between women were so prevalent in Victorian fiction, with the assumption that the very frequency of these scenes suggested they served a function over and above their ability to act as window-dressings to verbal communication. I questioned how women’s bodies and gestures were read as texts by nineteenth-century readers, and what values and meanings were ascribed by those readers as a result of these scenes. I have determined that scenes of affectionate female physicality function as signifiers of identity constructs including gender, nationality, class, and level of breeding. They function also as actions with desirable consequences, and as such they repeatedly advance the plots of texts both canonical and non.

More specifically, this study has found that Victorian authors like Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell often implied the feminine nature of their characters, and their suitability to domestic ideals, by creating scenes of female physical affection between their characters. Such scenes have this power because affectionate touch was read as a signifier of the warm and loving nature necessary to the woman who would be a wife and mother. Such scenes could also be read to indicate the reverse, however, that a woman would not be an ideal family woman, when the character employs touch without spontaneity, sincerity, and a corresponding depth of feeling. Women who did not touch, or who used touch inappropriately, should be eyed suspiciously.

By inappropriate, I mean of course women who were not sincere in their shows of affection, but also women whose use of touch did not obey additional tacit rules that indicated Englishness and good breeding. As such, touching behaviors serve not only as a marker of
femininity, but also of social standing. The friendly acquaintance who touched gently and infrequently, the ardent friend who embraced passionately but only in private, the woman who always waited for the individual of higher standing to initiate contact: these women showed themselves to be guided by the highest rules of English decorum, and thus to be thoroughly English, of higher class, and well-bred. Women who did not obey such policies, on the other hand, appeared to act under a different set of cultural principles, as would a Frenchwoman or an Italian, or seemed to have learned the English code of conduct imperfectly, due to their origins in a lower class. I would have readers of this study take away the understanding that touching behaviors are an identity marker *par excellence* because of their deeply engrained nature. Though not impossible to manipulate, because they are learned in youth and mostly unconsciously, they are difficult to alter, and appear therefore to reveal a more essential truth about an individual than other markers like dress, material possessions, or even female accomplishments.

However difficult, some women learned to manipulate this implicit system of manners, consciously or otherwise, for their own advantage, and so touch becomes not just a signifier of identity, but an action incurring desirable results. Thackeray’s Becky Sharp and Oliphant’s Lucilla Marjoribanks wielded shows of friendly affection as tools, and sometimes as weapons, to advance their own aims. This was possible because the wealth of emotion and affection supposed to compel touch justified the display women made of themselves when they physically caressed or embraced another. Through such shows of affection, women gained what I term advanced agency in three ways: they called attention to themselves without censure, they presented themselves as loving and feminine women, and ultimately they influenced the behavior and beliefs of those around them. As such, nineteenth-century women could utilize
touch to resolve a difficult paradox in their daily lives: the social interdiction against self-display, and the generally inherent desire to call attention to oneself, especially in order to exercise a degree of control over the surrounding world.

While affectionate touch has the power to gain the toucher her own ends, in some cases, especially when women are in extremis, the benefit is mostly on the side of the woman influenced: the woman touched – physically and metaphorically – by another. This is because touch is a manifestation not only of affection for another, but also of sympathy for another, and sympathy is most welcome when an individual is distressed. Authors of the period like George Eliot and Mary Augusta Ward conceived of touch as having the power to break down various barriers between unlike women: barriers of space, social status, life experience, and moral capacity. In so doing, touch constituted a relationship between the women where none existed before, and opens a conduit for the transmission of the sort of positive influence some women may never before have experienced. As such, touching behaviors are powerful tools in society’s progress towards a more humane, ethical, and positive state.

This work may be of interest to scholars of Victorian studies concerned with social relationships and regulation, because my research delineates implicit societal rules for the use of the body. These rules may also be of interest to scholars of the body interested in the senses, gesture, and performativity. Critics exploring women’s issues in the Victorian period should also take interest in the way touch works to form and secure social bonds, as well as its ability to be wielded as a tool, and to function as a signifier of sympathy. Of course, there is ample room for further study in this area. The politics of touch between men in the Victorian era remains to be examined, as do the cultural rules guiding physical behaviors between the sexes. In addition,
a close study of the politics of touching behaviors is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to understanding the role of bodies in Victorian literature. A study of women’s gestures, wherein no physical contact occurs – as in the sweeping back of one’s skirts, the movement of hands, the expression on a face, the description of one’s walk, even the way one sits down at a pianoforte – might be just as productive.

In revising this study to form a book I would make many changes. The immense number of quotations of literary critics would be abbreviated by paraphrasing those who make similar points rather than quoting and explicating each scholar at length. In addition, I would alter the organization of the chapters. Rather than beginning with context, delineating an argument, and then moving on to a separate section of close readings, I would prefer to integrate the readings throughout the chapter as I make the points of my argument. This way support will immediately follow each point, and the sections will appear less separated. In addition, shorter readings placed throughout the chapter will make the analyses easier to follow, and the entire chapter more of a pleasure to read. An integration like I’ve described will create a smoother narrative flow.

In addition, in the writing of chapter four, though I only analyzed two texts in depth, I provided shorter readings of some half dozen or more additional works where touching scenes of similar nature to those I analyze in depth occur. Though I strove throughout the writing of this dissertation to show that the functions of touch I delineate applied to various genres and eras, and believe I generally succeeded, I imagine the tactic I utilized in chapter four would make the point much more clearly in each individual chapter, because it would allow me to bring in (prospectively) another dozen or so examples from disparate literature.
In short, this study only begins what could be a much larger examination of the implicit social expectations surrounding the human body as depicted in Victorian literature, and this study itself could benefit from various revisions in its progress towards a published scholarly work. Nevertheless, it does, I believe, successfully call attention to a significant phenomenon of nineteenth-century literature, a phenomenon that, when closely examined, reveals closely-held Victorian mores. Analyses of physical behaviors help to uncover ways in which the Victorians made sense of one another, and can thus provide an additional window into their world to allow us, ultimately, to make more sense of them.

The End
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