# "THIS LITTLE ACTION": THE FEMININE MANNER OF TOUCHING IN ELIZABETH GASKELL'S *WIVES AND DAUGHTERS*

Molly Livingstone
(Georgia State University, Atlanta)

*Abstract*
A close look at 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 best 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 to possess these characteristics. Using Judith Butler's performativity theory, which states that 'gender is the repeated stylization of the body,'[1] I contend here that one powerful vehicle for presenting a woman's femininity, and therefore desirability as a wife, was the deployment of 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 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 female characters in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* clearly exemplifies the ability of touch to function in these ways.

In her final novel, 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.[2]

[1] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 45.
[2] Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters* [1865], ed. by Amy M. King (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005), p. 133. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

Between the physical description the reader receives of Molly's physical passivity, and the narrator's interjection regarding her 'shy modesty', Gaskell appears 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 also seems to expect her readers to make inferences regarding the ideal young Englishwoman. This account of the physical affection shown between two women is not unique in the novel; such scenes abound. There are tender kisses, as when Molly 'went to Mrs. Hamley, and bent over her and kissed her; but she did not speak' (p. 78) or when 'Lady Harriet stopped to kiss Molly on the forehead' (p. 164); lingering smiles, as when 'the smile was still on [Mrs. Kirkpatrick's] pretty rosy lips, and the soft fondling of [Molly's] hand never stopped' (p.132); linked perambulations, when 'the two ladies went arm-in-arm into the ball-room […] until Miss Phoebe and Miss Piper […] came in, also arm-in-arm, but with a certain timid flurry in look and movement'(p. 281); and spontaneous levity, as when Cynthia 'suddenly took Molly round the waist, and began waltzing about the room with her' (p. 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 behaviour?

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 best 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,'[3] I contend here that one powerful vehicle for presenting a woman's femininity, and therefore desirability as a wife, was the deployment of 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 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, as I hope to show through an examination of the female characters in Elizabeth Gaskell's 1866 novel *Wives and Daughters*.

[3] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 45.

According to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophic and scientific theories, woman was not an abstract thinker; rather, she was governed by her body,[4] and her 'social worth [was grounded] in her physical nature'.[5] Women's physicality in the nineteenth century, their use of their bodily senses, should thus bear especial scrutiny since it was considered to constitute them so entirely. Although the intrinsically corporeal senses – sight, hearing, smell, taste, and most centrally here, touch – were read by Victorians as feminine in comparison to the masculine mind, they could be individually gendered as male or female when considered alone. Historian of the senses Constance Classen notes, for example, that 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.'[6] Touch, then, is doubly feminine. It is not a body's shape that is important here, or even the way it is adorned. Rather, the female body's movement – to whom it reaches out, how often, and under what circumstances, is at stake in signifying ideal femininity.

The problem of"the excess woman" led to a difficulty with the oft-touted understanding of women's nature that destined them to be wives and mothers, however. The fact that many women would not marry meant excess "supply" and therefore competition for the available opportunities to become a wife. By virtue of considerable wealth, title, or beauty, some were able to rise above such struggles, but the majority of middle class women could not, and the position of those who failed to find stability through marriage was often bleak.[7] For those who lacked the requisite portion of the above qualities, and even for those who did not, presenting themselves as ideal wives and mothers was vital. It was therefore incumbent on any woman who wished to marry to 'artfully present'[8] herself, just as merchants 'artfully present' their goods. Presenting oneself as anything, however, was a difficult issue for a Victorian woman. As Beth Newman's *Subjects on Display* makes clear, 'feminine display […] was socially devalued.'[9] Indeed, conduct writers of the period like the popular Sarah Stickney Ellis, refer to a woman's 'desire to be an object of attention'

[4] Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 2.
[5] Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laquer, eds, *The Making of the Modern Body*: *Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), p. 46.
[6] Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012), p. 75.
[7] Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 27.
[8] Marjorie Morgan, *Manners, Morals and Class in England, 1774-1858* (New York: St. Martin's P, 1994), p. 111. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[9] Beth Newman, *Subjects on Display: Psychoanalysis, Social Expectation, and Victorian Femininity* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004), p. 5.

as not just ill-advised, but as 'the besetting sin of woman'.[10] In her words, the desire to display was a moral matter of considerable consequence. Because displaying external characteristics such as wealth or beauty was often denigrated, displaying one's interior characteristics was absolutely necessary. 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 by intrinsic qualities that she must now inspire respect.'[11] Newman picks up on this mandate 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.'[12] Displaying internal characteristics rather than exterior wealth works hand-in-hand (so to speak) with this new moral economy.

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. Armstrong contends that the ideal domestic woman 'possessed psychological depth […] [and] excelled in the qualities that differentiated her from the male.'[13] Therefore, characteristics associated with the maternal distinguished a woman, and of first and foremost regard was warm-heartedness. In her conduct manual for young women, Ellis declares that love is woman's 'wealth' and 'her very being'.[14] According to Ellis, a woman without affection is no woman at all. More to the point, one might say that a woman without affection was not woman*ly*. Often linked during this period with the importance of affection is the importance of sincerity. As Ellis and others have made clear, it was necessary for a female to show affection to demonstrate that she was feminine and desirable. The "show" of affections, however, like the show of dress to indicate wealth and status, could be manipulated. To guard against this threat, social commentators encouraged a code of sincere behaviour as a guiding principle. 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.'[15] In making such claims, Morgan draws from a variety of conduct books of the period. Acting naturally is a troubled process,

[10] Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1843), p. 110.
[11] Mrs. John Sandford, *Woman, in her Social and Domestic Character*, in HathiTrust Digital Library <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433067388144;view=1up;seq=7> [accessed 20 Sept. 2013], p. 1.
[12] Newman, p. 21.
[13] Armstrong, p. 20.
[14] Ellis, *Daughters*, pp. 146; 176.
[15] Morgan, p. 72.

for conduct book writers make such behaviours a matter of conscious choice by calling attention to them, while at the same time denigrating any display of behaviour that has an appearance of forethought or intentionality. This helps to explain why spontaneous behaviour would also be desirable, since spontaneity works in tandem with both affection and sincerity. Caroyln Oulton explains that the value of expressed feelings depends on their ability to appear 'unconstrained and spontaneous.'[16] Shows of affection that spring forth spontaneously are characterised by the fountain-like flow that Ellis and her contemporaries so highly regarded. 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 *Women of England*, Ellis rhapsodises, '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.'[17] In this brief passage, Ellis deftly manages to intertwine affection, sincerity, and spontaneity with status and display. 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 it is worth noting that Marianne's displays of sensibility nevertheless 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'.[18] Thus, even those authors who comprehend the dangers of too much sensibility also recognize its appeal to the male sex.

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 perhaps understand more easily Sharon Marcus' claim that 'a woman's susceptibility to another woman defined rather than defied femininity.'[19] 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

[16] Carolyn Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 23.
[17] Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England*: *Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits.* (LaVergne, TN: Dodo Press, 2010), p. 4.
[18] Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (New York: Norton & Company, 2002), pp. 26-27.
[19] Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 83-84. Further references are given after quotations in the text.

to Marcus, women were 'counseled to be passive in relation to men' (56). The ideal settings for such exchanges, then, were female friendships.

A woman must show her inner characteristics, and thereby build and communicate her identity, through actions. Dress cannot fully 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. Moreover, as Morgan asserts, the changes consequent upon urbanization 'fostered a more widespread preoccupation with […] identity [because] 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.'[20] 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 knowledge? Women, I argue, 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 – could 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 Oulton, 'successful women who represented themselves as proper ladies defined their lives in terms of their friendships with women which were thought to help prepare a woman for marriage.'[21] These friendships were believed to foster typically feminine traits of affection and sincerity in youth, as well as practices that would come to be important in marriage like attention to others and self-sacrifice. In addition, the affection shown in female friendships skirted the problem of female 'erotic excitability' since 'the Victorian marriage plot required heroines to be chaste, yet sufficiently ardent and aware of their desires to marry for love.'[22] Victorians' obsession with female modesty meant that a woman was forbidden from exercising and displaying an aptitude for sensuality with a prospective husband, but she could certainly do so with a friend. Finally, female affection provided an excellent vehicle for the establishment 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 familial intimacy was likely to take place most frequently in the home and did not provide the opportunity to demonstrate erotic sensibility, foreclosing opportunities for its public display.

[20] Morgan, p. 104.
[21] Oulton, p. 73.
[22] Marcus, p. 83.

Though Victorians could not have access to Judith 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. Middle class Victorians were familiar with the eighteenth-century physiognomic theories of Johann Caspar Lavater who claimed that 'the body and the face mirror the "true" character and emotional state of a person'.[23] 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 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. […] With regard to people, the most minute details of physical appearance were thought to betray the innermost recesses of the heart and mind.[24]

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 signals certainly seem to fit into the category of 'visible manifestations that were easily perceived.' My point is that both nineteenth-century individuals and novelists could have made use of contemporary theories of signification when attempting to communicate their own or their characters' dispositions through outward signifiers.

Modern readers of Judith Butler, on the other hand, might recognise demonstrations of female amity as one of the 'sustained set of acts that produce the effect' of gender.[25] 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'.[26] The child in any society will realise that 'we

[23] Gesa Stedman, *Stemming the Torrent: Expression and control in the Victorian discourses on emotions, 1830-1872* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1988), p. 52.
[24] Morgan, pp. 69-70.
[25] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. xv-xvi.
[26] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.

regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right'.[27] In the nineteenth century, women who failed 'to do their gender right' faced the possibility that they might end their life stigmatised as old maids, never having achieved that position nearly universally cried out to be best, most worthy, and most "natural".

Butler theorises that gender consists of actions and deeds: 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame.' Such actions include 'bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds' (p. 191). Thus, gender plays out on the exterior of the body. Affectionate touch is a 'bodily gesture' that indicates qualities considered feminine according to the 'regulatory frame' of the time. Butler would disagree entirely that women are 'by nature' anything at all, but she clearly states that such actions 'produce the appearance of substance' (p. 45) even if the substance itself is ultimately nonexistent. Kissing, caressing, shaking hands, and walking arm-in-arm with other women 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.

According to Butler, one's actions must also be endlessly repeated. This is because one never *becomes* 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' (p. 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 internalised […] gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody' (p. 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. Butler's reasoning here proceeds from her belief that there is no inherent core to an individual, a notion the Victorians would have refuted. That identity must be constantly enacted, however, is not in conflict. Victorians certainly believed, for example, that 'minor parts of domestic and social intercourse […] strengthen into habit […] and […] form the basis of moral character.'[28] Thus, character is formed by a repetition of deeds and acts. In addition, the 'fleeting'[29] nature of social interaction meant that identity must be constantly reenacted for new people and scenes. Lastly, to cease enacting one's gender would have itself seemed like a repression of identity and thus an affectation.

Finally, in Butler's view, the action of gender 'is a public action. There are temporal and collective dimensions to these actions, and their public character is not

[27] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 190. Further references are given after quotations in the text.
[28] Ellis, *Women,* Preface.
[29] Morgan, p. 104.

inconsequential.'[30] While a woman can perform actions alone, actions only signify gender to others when those others are able to read the gendered cues. If the deed that signifies a woman's gender is a show of affection to another, then at least one other person 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 such an effective signifier of femininity.

Becoming a wife was the principal measure of female success in Victorian England, and to do so a woman had to show herself to be feminine, a characteristic defined by qualities of affection and sincerity, most easily shown through female-to-female interaction, of which the physical manifestation is intimate touch. Therefore touching between female friends was a near perfect vehicle for the establishment and display of a feminine identity. Touch is a more effective signifier of affection than language – as in, according to Marcus, the 'iterated, cumulative, hyperbolic references to passion, exclusivity, idealization, [and] complicity' exchanged between close friends'[31] – 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. In addition, scenes of physical touch are certainly more immediately and viscerally titillating to the observer than words.

Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* is ideal to examine in relation to female affectionate touch due to the sheer number of such scenes, and also because the narrator makes it clear 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*' (p. 607, emphasis added). 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. Such touch is one of the culturally legible acts that signify gender.

The novel 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 (p.6). Losing her mother very young, she lives for several years

[30] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 191.
[31] Marcus, p. 54.

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' (p. 102). Whilst 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 (pp. 61-147). Following her father's remarriage, Molly lives again at home with her father, stepmother, and her stepmother'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 (p. 597), and Roger realises his mistake in idealizing Cynthia. He turns his affections to Molly (p. 631), but Gaskell's sudden death precluded the consummation of their courtship.

A close look at the three most prominent women in the novel, Hyacinth Kirkpatrick Gibson, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, and Molly Gibson – and their respective deployments of female touch – illustrates the ways in which touch is associated with the feminine, a mark of the ideal woman only when employed spontaneously and sincerely, that is, according to the 'highly rigid regulatory frame'[32] 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 show her ultimate artificiality and shallowness. Her daughter, more forthcoming in her touch, appears to be 'all things to all men,' (p. 217) but the absence of a corresponding deep emotion behind her physical actions belies their sincerity. 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, her touching behaviours reflective of 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.

Wanting a wife to look after his daughter, Gibson's first thoughts regarding Mrs. Kirkpatrick are entirely practical. However, Mrs. Kirkpatrick's 'agreeable and polished manners' (p. 113), 'the harmonious colours of her dress, and her slow and graceful movements,' make him begin to think of her less as a stepmother than 'as a wife for himself' (p. 106). He is perhaps fooled by her blush when he comes in, and her 'hysterical tears' when he proposes (p. 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 both for himself and Molly. But Mr. Gibson is misled. Mrs. Kirkpatrick blushes upon seeing the doctor because she is reminded that Lord and Lady Cumnor have recently discussed her and Gibson (p. 105). Her 'hysterical tears' find vent because 'it was such a wonderful relief to feel

[32] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 45.

that she need not struggle any more for a livelihood' (p. 107). By suggesting her femininity, however, her affected manners and gestures still bring her to the altar and the financial stability she desires.

In addition to her dress and manner, Mrs. Kirkpatrick often deploys shows of physical affection, but the implied warmth of her actions does not spring from a rush of genuine emotion. Rather, she 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, and with her future stepdaughter. The reader has already been informed that Mrs. Kirkpatrick has no great affection for young women because 'all the trials of her life were connected with girls in some way' (p. 126). Nevertheless, 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' (p. 127). The vehicle Mrs. Kirkpatrick utilises for her dissimulation is affectionate touch. Though her 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' (p. 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 her social superior, 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' (p. 133). In such scenes, Mrs. Kirkpatrick seeks to display herself as a loving 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 and others so clearly despise in women. 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 realises that his new wife is not what he had first imagined (p. 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. She exhibits womanliness more readily than the more awkward Molly; she dresses with 'exquisite taste', walks with a 'stately step' and 'was very beautiful', though 'no one with such loveliness

ever appeared so little conscious of it' (p. 217). In sum, Cynthia displays a wonderful combination of those qualities much valued in women – dress, carriage, and beauty – seamlessly merged with humility, another prized trait of womanhood. She "does" her gender almost perfectly. Nevertheless, although Cynthia is described as 'being all things to all men' (p. 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, but lacks depth of affection behind her actions. The ways in which Cynthia differs from Molly in deploying affectionate touch help to demonstrate, before long, how Cynthia's 'grain is different, somehow' (p. 482).

In terms of touch, Cynthia is a figure in-between her mother's shows of emotionality and Molly's sincere behaviour. At their first meeting, 'Cynthia took [Molly] in her arms, and kissed her on both cheeks' (p. 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 whereupon she candidly admits 'I think I shall like you. […] I was afraid I should not' (p. 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.

Later, 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*) (p. 219). However, 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' (p. 327). She herself admits that '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' (p. 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, [and put] out her lips to be kissed' (p. 374). Her physical affection shows her to be sincere, spontaneous, and placidly affectionate, but not deeply loving. 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. Her physicality, accordingly, is pleasant and sincere, but never intense or passionate. 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 lacks a sort of intrinsic taste which Cynthia seems never to be without (p. 217), as when Molly is talked into ordering a hideous silk pattern for a dress (p. 60). 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' (p. 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. In her earnestness, sincerity, and depth of feeling, Molly has more to offer in the form of her internal disposition. Such characteristics can be seen throughout the text in her displays of physical 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. And these demonstrations of identity, like her mother's affectations, do earn her something – after all, she marries well. She differs, nevertheless, from Molly in her depth of feeling. The time Molly takes before initiating such affection on her own is 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' (p. 85) and readily kissing Miss Browning following a disagreement between them (p. 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 (p. 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 sincere affection she feels for her companion. Her 'heart does not go forth' to Mrs. Kirkpatrick, and thus she 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 a genuine inner feeling. 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 behaviour does indeed reflect the inside feeling.

When Molly at length reaches out to Cynthia, several important elements mark her touch as a more authentic gesture. Cynthia lies in her room, privately troubled over 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 (p. 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 deep wealth of maternal feeling is evidently an emotion Cynthia lacks due to her own upbringing. This is not the only scene in which Molly's shows of affection are connected with her value as a mother, that quality which for the Victorians which was the most intrinsic element of woman. 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', murmuring, '"Oh, my darling!" […] "I do so love you, dear, dear Cynthia!" and she stroked her hair, and kissed her eyelids; Cynthia passive all the while' (p. 545) In these scenes, Molly stroking Cynthia's hand and hair, raising Cynthia in her arms, and kissing Cynthia's eyes marks her as the true ideal woman by virtue of her

aptitude for bottomless affection and for mothering – her ability to channel, as it were, her own mother. According to the 'highly rigid regulatory frame'[33] 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, the novel's hero, 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 terms of their dress, manner, and language, close observations of their touching behaviours help to show how the two are lacking in the feminine ideal. As such, touch is one of the most important of the 'acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that […] produce the appearance of' gender,[34] because where other signifiers of the feminine fail to reflect the inner characteristics of the subject, touch provides a more accurate picture.

In Hyacinth Gibson, Cynthia Kirkpatrick, and Molly Gibson, the text of *Wives and Daughters* exemplifies 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 fulfil 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 the "excess" 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 behaviour to society at large, and second, they communicated more fully the personas of their female characters to widespread audiences in different regions of England who nevertheless shared common gender expectations. Too often, however, scenes of female amity are so expected and naturalised in nineteenth century fiction that academics overlook them altogether. Yet analyses of these scenes, as I have shown, can assist scholars in developing deeper understandings of social conventions, and ultimately of gender constructs, in the nineteenth century.

[33] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 45.
[34] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 45.

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