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The Sacred Touch of Hallowed Hands: Tracing the Holy through the Haptic in George Eliot’s Early Work

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The Sacred Touch of Hallowed Hands:
Tracing the Holy through the Haptic in George Eliot's Early Work

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from
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by

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Accepted for Honors

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Introduction

George Eliot paid remarkable attention to the hands of her characters, as she penned her early works from 1857 to 1860. From the outstretched hand in “Janet’s Repentance,” through the hands “that have long ago mingled with the soil” in Adam Bede, to the clasped “little hands in love” in The Mill on the Floss, these three works are saturated by haptic imagery and interaction (Eliot, Adam Bede 518 and Eliot, The Mill on the Floss 483). Yet, why take the time to describe the shape of a wrist, the pressure of a hand, or the offer of an arm? Why are these details important and how would Eliot’s mid-nineteenth century audience have interpreted them?

The hand has always held significance for people. As the ancient means of ratifying a covenant and the site where one could be cleansed from sin, the hand has long carried a myriad of social and sacred implications. Indeed, the Bible is rich in haptic language, from the rescuing arm of God to the persecuting hands of King David’s enemies. However, the Victorians were particularly fascinated by this appendage. From phrenological tracts claiming that larger palms indicated unreserved sensuality, to etiquette manuals governing the movements of a lady’s fingers in the drawing room, hands were the subject of study and scrutiny (The Hand Phrenologically Considered 62 and Etiquette for the Ladies 43). “Who touched whom, and how, counted in nineteenth-century society” (Tilly 1). This cultural preoccupation permeates nineteenth-century English literature. In fact, the hand is the most described body part in the nineteenth-century novel (Capuano 1, 12).

Why did hands hold such a prominent place in the Victorian consciousness? As Peter Capuano, author of Changing Hands: Industry, Evolution and the Reconfiguration of the Victorian Body, argues, “major changes unique to the nineteenth century made hands newly relevant” (Capuano 1). The nineteenth century functioned as a key moment when the conception
of the human hand was shifting: “The Victorians were highly cognizant of the physicality of their hands precisely because unprecedented developments in mechanized industry and advancements in evolutionary theory made them the first people to experience a radical disruption of this supposedly distinguishing mark of their humanity” (Capuano 2). As the power and purpose of the human hand was called into question, science sought to offer under-the-skin explanations of how this limb operates and senses. As Heather Tilly explains, “In the discursive field of nineteenth-century psychological and physiological treatises on the senses, touch was increasingly promoted as a complex, compound sense, central to the ways in which humans gathered and conceptualized information about their world” (Tilly 6). The hand, an essential instrument of the “complex, compound sense” of touch, became a site of anatomic and psychological examination. Scientists and pseudoscientists alike, linked the hand’s sensory capacity to erotic stimulation and the formation of memory, for example.

Writing in this century of developing, multi-faceted ideas on hands and sensation, with a profound knowledge of their ancient, enduring religious significance, Eliot arguably uses both cultural and scriptural haptic conceptions in her fiction. What her characters hands look like, who, what, when and how they touch counts, speaking into their desires, allegiances, histories, and transformations. By tracing the haptic through Eliot’s early works, against the context of her time period and her personal history, we are permitted an enriched reading of her works – one that ultimately gives insight into where Eliot imbues sanctity in her writing.

My thesis will explore the role of arms, hands and touch in three of Eliot’s early works. In Part I, I will analyze the religious hand in her novella, “Janet’s Repentance,” published in 1857, against the context of Eliot’s personal faith. I will then examine the rural working hand in Adam Bede, published in 1859, against the backdrop of English urbanization and
industrialization. In Part III, I will explore the hand of passion and memory in *The Mill on the Floss*, published in 1860, in conjunction with nineteenth-century tactile etiquette and scientific thinking on sensation. As I concentrate on the female hand in my longer analyses on “Janet’s Repentance” and *The Mill on the Floss*, I will also touch on how the haptic counters gender constructions for a nineteenth-century audience. Finally, throughout all three of these works, I will trace the reshaping of the sacred hand, proposing that sanctity is written upon the hands of Eliot’s redeemed alcoholic in “Janet’s Repentance,” her rural laborers in *Adam Bede* and her tragic heroine in *The Mill on the Floss*.

Alongside treating the representation and interaction of hands in these works, I will simultaneously consider relationships and experiences that guided Eliot’s own hand as she wrote. How does the haptic encourage a deeper understanding of Eliot as a writer? How does the sacred hand shed light on what Eliot considered sacred, for herself, for others and for England as a nation? By exploring hands through these diverse lenses, I hope to provide an original and unique reading of three of Eliot’s most significant early fictions— one that perhaps provides an element of first-hand insight into Eliot herself.
Possibly “the first detailed portrait of a middle-class, female alcoholic” in nineteenth-century fiction, George Eliot’s “Janet’s Repentance” arguably depicts a groundbreaking female restoration (Shaw 177). Serialized anonymously in *Blackwood’s Magazine* between January and November of 1857, and later published as part of *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1858, the novella tells the story of Janet Dempster, an alcoholic abused by her husband, who finds redemption through her relationship with the Reverend Tryan (Henry 103). “Janet’s Repentance” is also a novella that abounds in haptic imagery and interaction, a subject untouched by scholars. One way, I argue, Eliot illustrates Janet’s individual redemption, and the larger feminine triumph over masculine abuse by the end of the novella, is through haptic representation, transformation and exchange. In this chapter, I will primarily consider moments of touch from a biblical perspective, by chronologically tracing the development of the religious hand, from the persecuting hand of Robert Dempster, through the Christ-like hand of the Reverend Tryan, to the erased, redeemed and reinscribed female hand. I will examine this topic against the context of Eliot’s faith, while considering her artistic interests at the time of her writing. Ultimately, I argue that Janet’s hands become the very hands of Christ’s, underscoring her countercultural restoration as an abused female alcoholic. Finally, in light of Janet’s religious repentance, I will pose the question, why does Eliot create a character who experiences redemption first-hand, when she herself renounced her evangelical faith?

Firstly, focusing on the hand of Robert Dempster, Eliot begins her novella by constructing hands as appendages of abuse. As “Janet’s Repentance” opens, the reader learns

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1 Eliot, “Janet’s Repentance” 260.
that Robert Dempster, who has been married to Janet for fifteen years, has taken to “drunken
fits” (Eliot 190). Instead of showing affection to his wife through his touch, he abuses her.
Indeed, the first touch between Janet and her alcoholic husband described in Eliot’s novella is
one of brutality. After an evening of leading demonstrations against the new evangelical
minister, the Reverend Tryan, Robert Dempster returns home from the Red Lion angry and
intoxicated. He immediately turns on Janet as he walks through the door: “‘I’ll teach you to keep
me waiting in the dark, you pale staring fool!’ advancing with his slow drunken step. ‘What,
you’ve been drinking again, have you? I’ll beat you into your senses’” (Eliot 199). “Standing
silent before her husband,” Janet becomes the victim of Dempster’s violence, rooted in his brutal
touch. Robert lays “his hand with a firm grip on her shoulder” and pushes her “through the
dining-room door which stood open on their left hand” (Eliot 199). The narrator then imagines
the reaction of Janet’s mother, whose portrait hangs in the dining room and overlooks this attack:
“It would be better if she trembled – standing stupidly unmoved in her great beauty, while the
heavy arm is lifted to strike her. The blow falls – another – and another. Surely the mother hears
that cry – ‘O Robert! pity! pity!’” (Eliot 199). Interestingly here, Eliot centers the action of the
abuse in the location of Dempster’s hands, as Janet falls victim to Robert’s “firm grip,” and “the
heavy arm” moves to strike her again and again (Eliot 199). The reader follows the movement of
Mr. Dempster’s hand, clearly one of strength, domination and repeated cruelty. This abusive
tactile relationship may also explain why Janet and Robert Dempster have no children. Indeed,
the lack of erotic touch between the couple speaks to their barren marriage bed.

   It is also important to note the filial and maternal hands that are unrepresented and
implied in this scene. As I will later address, the female hand has pronounced strength by the end
of the novella. With this development in mind, the erased hands in this scene beg analysis.
Despite the minute attention to Dempster’s hand, Janet’s hand goes undescribed, particularly poignant given the other details we learn about Janet’s body before the scene of abuse. Just before Dempster lays his hand upon her, the narrator notes Janet’s “light dress which sits loosely about her figure,” her “mass of straight jet-black hair,” her “grandly cut features,” her “wide open black eyes” and even her “delicately-curved nostril” (Eliot 199). However, there is no direct mention of her hand or arm, when one would naturally imagine the victim using her hands to protect herself.

In addition to Janet’s erased hand, there is also a lack of representation of Janet’s mother’s hand. In this scene, it seems as if Mrs. Raynor, from her painted position on the mantelpiece, actually witnesses her daughter’s abuse. Yet, while she sees her daughter suffer and hears Janet’s cries from her position on the mantelpiece, she cannot act. By placing her in portrait form – a fixed medium – Eliot underlines the mother’s inability to intervene in the face of her daughter’s oppression. Perhaps to undergird this point, there is no mention of Mrs. Raynor’s hands in this portrait. In the following description of her lying sleepless on her bed, praying and weeping for Janet as she dreads it “may be a cruel night for her child,” we can only imagine Mrs. Raynor’s hands begging in supplication for her daughter’s deliverance (Eliot 199). Thus, this appendage of potential maternal and filial action – one that could be used to prevent Robert Dempster’s blows, if strong enough – is impliedly helpless, or excluded altogether. As Katherine Rowe discusses in Dead Hands: Fictions of Agency, Renaissance to Modern, “Across Western philosophical writings, particularly in the Aristotelian tradition, the hand is the preeminent bodily metaphor for human action” (Rowe x). If we consider this tradition of the hand as the site of agency, as Rowe does in her analysis, the erased female hand in this scene indicates the power imbalance between the male abuser and the female victims. Eliot strips her
preeminent female characters of “the body part most often associated with intentional, effective action,” suggesting that they are defenseless in the face of such severe masculine abuse (Rowe 3).

Robert Dempster’s hand is not only seen in light of his abusive treatment of his wife, but also in relation to his protests against Mr. Tryan. When Mr. Jerome, an elderly congregant, and Mr. Tyran are discussing Dempster leading the demonstrations against the new Reverend's evangelical teachings, Mr. Tryan states: “‘He is evidently the brain and the hand of the persecution’” (Eliot 217). From a biblical perspective, “the hand of the persecution” mirrors the language of the Psalms. In Psalm 31:15, for example, David calls on the Lord to rescue him from the hand of his enemies: “My times are in thy hand: deliver me from the hand of mine enemies, and from them that persecute me” (King James Version, Ps. 31:15). Thus, Robert Dempster’s hands, like those of David’s foes, are hands that stand in hostile opposition to the Lord’s servant. They are appendages of both physical and religious oppression.

It is also worthy to note the use of “the heavy arm” and “the hand” in these passages (Eliot 199, 217, emphasis added). This article removes personality, individuality and possession from Dempster’s arm, as his body seems to move independently of himself. When the narrator is discussing the Dempsters in Chapter XIII, we again hear of “the mighty hand” – but in this instance to describe the ambiguous and powerful “Nemesis” (Eliot 240, emphasis added). As the narrator describes Janet’s mother’s observations of Mr. Dempster’s deteriorating alcoholism – “...he was beginning to lose the physical power of supporting excess...” – and Janet’s increasing misery, Eliot rather unexpectedly invokes the ancient Greek goddess of retribution (Eliot 240). The following passage stands alone as its own paragraph, curiously embedded in the overarching narration of the Dempster’s domestic situation:
Nemesis is lame, but she is of colossal stature, like the gods; and sometimes, while her sword is not yet unsheathed, she stretches out her huge left arm and grasps her victim. The mighty hand is invisible, but the victim totters under the dire clutch. (Eliot 240)

Here, the similarities between Robert Dempster’s hostile hand and this greater hand of vengeance are striking. The use of “the mighty hand” parallels how Eliot describes Dempster’s abusive touch. Just as Nemesis “grasps her victim,” so too does Dempster seize his wife with his “firm grip.” In Ancient Grecian culture, Nemesis was a goddess known for punishing individuals who fell prey to hubris (“Nemesis”). Just before this passage, the narrator notes Janet’s “proud, angry resistance” against her husband’s abuse: “She would bear it all proudly to the world, but proudly towards him too” (Eliot 240). Thus, Eliot aligns Dempster with this greater pagan figure of physical punishment through a shared hand of retribution, targeted against those considered proud and fated to receive injury.

However, despite the god-like vengeance of Dempster’s hand, Eliot also points to its lowly savagery. Later on, in Chapter XIV of the novel, the narrator describes Janet’s mother’s perception of her daughter’s tragic beauty, when she comes to visit her from Orchard Street: Sorrow and neglect leave their traces on such beauty, but it thrills us to the last, like a glorious Greek temple, which, for all the loss it has suffered from time and barbarous hands, has gained a solemn history…” (Eliot 243). By comparing Janet to a “glorious Greek temple” with a “solemn history,” Eliot elevates and ennobles her protagonist, characterizing her as strong, enduring and distinguished even in the midst of her suffering. Janet’s husband’s “barbarous hands,” by contrast, appear particularly primitive, uncivilized and small. He can leave “traces on such beauty,” or physically bruise her tender flesh, but he cannot efface her divine glory. Thus, while Dempster’s hands carry a destructive power, Eliot highlights the limits of their vicious authority; they cannot rob Janet of her beauty or value. Notably, it is also Janet’s mother, who witnesses the
effects of abuse on her daughter’s body both physically and metaphorically from her position in the portrait, who equates Janet to this Greek temple. Through this female vision of masculine hands and the impact of their touch, Eliot suggests the shared female acknowledgement and understanding of womanly strength in the face of masculine abuse. Janet’s enduring resilience to the hands that break her body behind closed doors, is silently recognized.

It is at the cruel, savage hands of her husband, that Janet longs for a compassionate touch. In the scene of perhaps the greatest abuse in Eliot’s novella, Robert Dempster violently turns his wife out from their home, throwing her into the frozen, blustering March night: “He pushed her on the entrance, and held her firmly in his grasp…He opened the door a little way, and thrust her out” (Eliot 245). Here, Dempster’s hands become ones of brutal rejection and abandonment, as he profanely breaks his marital vow, “to have and to hold.” As Janet wanders the streets, “crushed with anguish and despair,” she craves relief from her wretched plight and severely doubts her faith (Eliot 246). If there was only some ray of hope, she bitterly reflects, she might believe in a heavenly Father who cares for his children (Eliot 247). The narrator describes her thoughts: “And if there was Divine Pity she could not feel it; it kept aloof from her, it poured no balm into her wounds, it stretched out no hand to bear up her weak resolve, to fortify her fainting courage” (Eliot 247). The language of this passage is remarkably biblical. Janet feels “no balm” poured on her wounds, echoing the lament of Jeremiah over his people’s sinful ruin: “Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there? why then is not the health of the daughter of my people recovered? (Jer. 8:22). Here, Janet evidently longs for a healing touch, one that will ease the pain of her emotional and physical wounds. Similarly, the language of an outstretched hand speaks to the hand imagery woven throughout the Book of Exodus and the Book of Deuteronomy, when the Lord uses his “mighty hand and outstretched arm” to save the Israelites
from the Egyptians. This outstretched hand also recalls the Psalms, when David is persecuted by Saul. He implores the Lord to, “Send thine hand from above; rid me, and deliver me out of great water from the hand of strange children” (Ps. 144:7). Like these biblical heroes of the Old Testament, Janet clearly yearns for the divine comfort, healing and rescue of a godly hand, as she confronts her husband’s profane hand of persecution.

Indeed, it is within Mr. Tryan’s hand that Janet encounters this godly touch. Before meeting Mr. Tryan at the bedside of Sally Martin, Janet, like her husband, condemns and criticizes the Reverend. She tells her neighbor Mrs. Pettifer, “...he talks about faith and grace, and all that, making people believe they are better than others...I know he has put a great deal of that into Sally Martin’s head, and it has done her no good at all” (Eliot 236). Janet states that she will never disobey her husband and hear Mr. Tyran preach. However, her perception of the Reverend begins to shift when she encounters him at Sally Martin’s bedside, humbly asking the invalid to pray for him. The Reverend asks Sally to pray for strength to endure his future suffering, as he anticipates his approaching death on account of his illness. This “simple appeal to help, a confession of weakness” strikes Janet’s heart, as she recognizes her comparable affliction in his plea: “Mr Tryan too, like herself, knew what it was to tremble at a foreseen trial – to shudder at an impending burden, heavier than he felt able to bear?” (Eliot 236). As the pair pass each other in the doorway, they exchange a powerful “direct glance” and from this point, Janet begins to think of Mr. Tryan with sympathy.

Indeed, when Janet is thrown out of her home and takes refuge with Mrs. Pettifer, it is the Reverend who she asks to see. Recollecting how he comforted Sally Martin on her deathbed, she

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2 While I use a period with a title before a name (ex. Mr. Tryan), Eliot does not (ex. Mr Tryan).
longs to “pour out her heart to him” and find some sense of strength and hope (Eliot 252). In the course of their conversation, Janet confesses that her husband’s beatings have turned her to drink, and Mr. Tryan, deeply moved, shares the story of his own indulgent youth and shameful past life. He only found real hope and change, he tells Janet, when a friend pointed him to the arms of God:

‘At last, as I told you, I found a friend to whom I opened all my feelings—to whom I confessed everything. He was a man who had gone through very deep experience, and could understand the different wants of different minds. He made it clear to me that the only preparation for coming to Christ and partaking of his salvation, was that very sense of guilt and helplessness which was weighing me down. He said, You are weary and heavy-laden; well, it is you Christ invites to come to him and find rest. He asks you to cling to him, to lean on him; he does not command you to walk alone without stumbling. He does not tell you, as your fellow-men do, that you must first merit his love; he neither condemns nor reproaches you for the past, he only bids you come to him that you may have life: he bids you stretch out your hands, and take of the fullness of His love. You have only to rest on him as a child rests on its mother’s arms, and you will be upborne by his divine strength. That is what is meant by faith.’ (Eliot 260)

Notably, this description of returning to Christ is richly corporeal. “Cling,” “lean” and “rest” all suggest a physical dependence on the Father. “He bids you stretch out your hands” may allude to the passage in Matthew when Jesus heals a man’s withered hand on the Sabbath: “Then saith he to the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it forth; and it was restored whole, like as the other” (Matt. 12:13). The image of Mr. Tryan resting in Christ, just like a child in its mother’s arms, is also profoundly intimate. This passage portrays the arms of God as ones of maternal love, strength, and deep tenderness, restoring a childlike innocence and security. And it is the hope and comfort of this divine embrace that Janet yearns for. When Mr. Tryan finishes speaking she says, “‘That is what I want’” (Eliot 260).

Significantly, as the story of Janet’s repentance progresses, it is Mr. Tryan’s touch that comes to embody these divine qualities, as Janet experiences authentic love and finds her courage, strength and release in his hands. For Janet, Mr. Tryan’s hand is the redemptive hand of
God. Notably, as their meeting at Mrs. Pettifer’s continues, Janet experiences a powerful moment of repentance and a renewal of her faith. In the course of their conversation, Mr. Tryan calls Janet to “‘cast away the pride that makes us shrink from acknowledging our weakness to our friends’” (Eliot 262). Janet then humbly confesses her sin: “‘I know I have always been too proud…I have been proud towards my mother’” (Eliot 262). Mr. Tryan replies by encouraging Janet to “‘see what work there is to be done in life, both in our own souls and for others’” and to “‘keep the great end of life before you’” (Eliot 262). He then holds out his hand: “Mr Tryan rose and held out his hand. Janet took it and said, “God has been very good to me in sending you to me. I will trust in Him. I will try to do everything you tell me’” (Eliot 263). By holding out his hand, Mr. Tryan perhaps emulates the outstretched arm of God in this moment – the hand that Janet so longs for in her desperation when she is thrust out of her home by her husband, and a hand that reaches down to her even in the midst of sin. Indeed, it appears that Janet also conflates Mr. Tryan and the Lord himself here, as to trust in God is to concurrently obey the Reverend. The two go hand in hand; to submit to one is to submit to the other.

This image of Mr. Tryan’s divine outstretched hand perhaps further evokes Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam*. In this fresco, based on the Book of Genesis, God reaches out to impart life into Adam’s human flesh through a near meeting of fingers. Indeed, Eliot was highly knowledgeable on the subject of art and would most likely have been familiar with this High Renaissance fresco. Her artistic interests are often thought of in context of her three-month tour of Italy in 1860 with her partner George Henry Lewes, where she “could not contain the ultimate joy she found particularly in Roman and Italian art and architecture” (Henry 121). However, Eliot’s interest in art was also expressed much earlier, evidenced through her expansive reading list. In 1856 alone, one year before the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*

Interestingly in 1856, Eliot also reviewed Nicholas Michell’s *The Poetry of Creation* (Fleischman 25). Based on the Book of Genesis, it describes the hand of God designing, sculpting and caring for his creation at least twenty times. For example, in Part II of the poem, Michell describes the hand of God, ready to impart life into the limbs of Adam: “The hour the Creator’s hand / would summon up before their sight / A thing with greater wonder rife / Than aught yet dower’d with burning life…” (Michell 46). Later in Part IV, Michell then describes “a hand divine” designing the human body (Michell 136). Considering Eliot’s art studies and her interest in *The Poetry of Creation*, this haptic exchange in “Janet’s Repentance” takes on even more significance. Much like Adam, the recipient of the divine, creative touch of God in both Michelangelo’s fresco and Michell’s poem, Janet similarly becomes a new creation. As she confesses her pride and promises to trust in God and follow Mr. Tryan, she is made anew by the outstretched hand of the Reverend.

Directly after this haptic exchange, the narrator paints Mr. Tryan as a Christ-like figure, who embodies divine love through his fleshly fingers. While the language of the following

3 *The Lives and Works of Michael Angelo and Raphael*, by Richard Duppa and A.C. Quatremère de Quincy, notes the significance of the arm in this fresco: “…the fourth is the creation of Adam, in which the omnipotent power is surrounded by angels, extending his right arm as if imparting the vital principle to the created form” (Duppa and de Quincy 43).
passage is universalized, it most likely describes Janet and Mr. Tryan given the context of the scene. Here, the narrator reflects on the idea of love taking human form:

Blessed influence of one true loving human soul on another! Not calculable by algebra, not deducible by logic, but mysterious, effectual, mighty as the hidden process by which the tiny seed is quickened, and bursts forth into tall stem and broad leaf, and glowing tasseled flower. Ideas are often poor ghosts; our sun-filled eyes cannot discern them; they pass athwart us in thin vapour, and cannot make themselves felt. But sometimes they are made flesh; they breathe upon us with warm breath, they touch us with soft responsive hands, they look at us with sad sincere eyes, and speak to us in appealing tones; they are clothed in a living human soul, with all its conflicts, its faith, and its love. Then their presence is a power, then they shake us like a passion, and we are drawn after them with gentle compulsion, as flame is drawn to flame. (Eliot 263)

Here, the narrator proposes that the idea of love can be but “thin vapour”– a concept unfelt and unexperienced. For Janet, who has suffered under the abusive hands of her husband, these ideas of genuine affection “cannot make themselves felt.” Yet, as the narrator goes on, sometimes this idea of love is made flesh. The phrase “made flesh” most likely alludes to the Gospel of John’s description of Christ, who takes on human form– “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us” (1 John 1:14). This allusion divinizes this concept of love, which is then felt in the warm breath of a human body, seen in the look of “sad sincere eyes,” heard in “appealing tones,” and most notably for this analysis, felt in the touch of “soft responsive hands.” Given the fact that the Reverend has just extended his hand to Janet, one can imagine that it is his “soft responsive hands” that the narrator refers to here. Thus, by reading the couple’s handshake through the lens of this proceeding passage, I argue that Janet feels genuine, godly love through Mr. Tryan’s touch in this moment. For her, his hands become the incarnate love of God.

Thus, by considering Mr. Tryan as a Christ-like figure, the phrase “held out his hand” could further refer to Christ’s healing touch. In the New Testament, Jesus frequently stretches out his hand to heal the sick and dying. In Matthew, for example, Jesus heals a leper by touching him with his hand: “And Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean.
And immediately his leprosy was cleansed” (Matt. 8:3). Consequently, by holding out his hand to Janet, Mr. Tryan’s hand evokes both the creative hand of God and the healing hand of Christ’s. By returning his touch with the words, “I will trust in Him” Janet, in a sense, accepts this implicit corporeal offer of restoration.

Interestingly, this moment of touch between the couple’s hand may also function as a kind of covenant seal in the novel, affirming this moment of creative, healing restoration. Handclasps have long been used to indicate an agreement between two parties. As Katherine Rowe discusses, “…handclasps indicate consent in the marriage ceremony of the Church of England, confirm feudal obedience, signify formal reconciliation after conflict, or ratify a compact or treaty…” (Rowe 24). While Rowe is speaking of manual rituals in the early modern era in this excerpt, the use of handclasps to affirm a promise certainly continued through the nineteenth century to today. Indeed, this manual promise-making ritual may have sacred implications, when considering its role in the Old Testament. As biblical scholar Gordon Paul Hugenberger points out, in the Bible, “The giving of a hand may function as an oath-sign by solemnly depicting the covenant commitment. The gesture of giving one’s hand in a handshake…appears with plausible covenant making implication in 2 Kgs 10:15; Jer. 50:15, Ezec. 17:18; Lam. 5:6; Ezra 10:19; 1 Chron. 29:24; and 2 Chron. 30:8.1” (Hugenberger 211). As Hugenberger discusses, the giving of hands functions as a gesture of promise between people, or as a hallowed bond between man and God. Thus, by giving Janet his hand, Mr. Tryan seems to make a sacred promise of his loving hand of help. By taking his hand in return, Janet swears her trust and obedience. Thus, there exists a sanctified covenant between the two, embodied by their haptic relationship.
Notably, Eliot must have been aware of the biblical significance of hands, owing to her devoted study of scripture growing up. While Eliot renounced her faith at the age of twenty-two, her youth was characterized by her devout evangelicalism (Henry 48). Eliot was deeply influenced by the evangelical Maria Lewis, who mentored the bright young pupil at Mrs. Wallington’s Boarding School in Nuneaton. Under Miss Lewis’ guidance and following her example, Eliot diligently studied the scriptures and “by the time she was fifteen, Mary Ann Evans was an acutely religious young woman with a profound reverence for and ‘thorough familiarity with the King James version’” (Jones 15). Eliot knew the Bible so well that, as scholar Jessie C. Jones points out, citing Eliot’s biographer Gordon Haight, “Of the seventy letters written from May 1838 through December 1841, Haight footnotes a total of ninety-six separate biblical references” (Jones 18). Biblical allusions and imagery seeped into Eliot’s words, as they occupied her thoughts and imagination. Additionally, as Jones discusses, Eliot’s later translations of David Strauss’s Das Leben Jesu, The Life of Jesus: Critically Examined in 1846 and Ludwig Feuerbach’s Das Wesen des Christentums, published in 1854 as The Essence of Christianity, “so broadened and deepened her knowledge of the Scriptures that she was thoroughly steeped in the Bible by the time she began to compose her fiction” (Jones 4).

Not only was Eliot deeply knowledgeable about biblical scripture in general, but as Peter Capuano discusses in his seminal work Changing Hands, Eliot was “aware of the myriad positive biblical representations of Jewish hands” (Capuano 158). In Chapter Six of Changing Hands, entitled “Racial Science and the Kabbalah in Eliot’s Daniel Deronda,” Capuano traces Eliot’s study of the Kabbalah in the 1870s to argue that Eliot locates Daniel’s Jewishness on his hands. In the course of his argument, Capuano notes that Eliot was well aware that, for Jews, “‘the hand of God’ was not merely a scriptural allusion to divine power in the Hebrew Bible; it
was the body part through which God worked most directly: Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt by stretching his hands over the Red Sea (Exod. 14:21) and later leading Joshua’s army to victory by raising and lowering his hands in the battle against Amalek (Exod. 17: 10-13)” (Capuano 163). Reading Capuano’s argument with Eliot’s scriptural formation in mind, the author’s attention to the hand of God in “Janet’s Repentance” suggests a much earlier interest in biblical hands.

This interest in biblical hands continues through Eliot’s characterization of her protagonist’s hand. In “Janet’s Repentance,” Janet’s hand itself, touched by the godly, healing hand of Mr. Tryan, becomes sanctified by this metaphorical covenant. Indeed, her very repentance and renewal is expressed through her own hands. Her redemption, exhibited through haptic exchange, is particularly visible in the moments straight after her conversation with Mr. Tryan when Janet calls for her mother. As soon as Mrs Raynor enters the parlor, Janet clings to her: “‘Mother, dear mother,’ Janet cried, clasping her closely. I have not been a good tender child to you, but I will be – I will not grieve you anymore’” (Eliot 263). Her confession of her proud behavior towards her mother, and her willingness to change, is accompanied by a powerful physical embrace. The phrase “clasping her closely” suggests that Janet uses her hands to draw mother and daughter together, a physical act underscoring her desire to bring restoration and unity to their relationship.

Janet’s renewal is also expressed through her hand of forgiveness, outstretched to her dying husband. When Dempster rides home intoxicated, he is thrown out of his gig, breaks his right leg and falls into a violent delirium. As two nurses hold him in bed, he envisions the following horrifying scene:

‘Let me go, let me go,’ he said in a loud, hoarse whisper; 'she's coming…. she's cold…. she's dead…. she'll strangle me with her black hair. Ah!' he shrieked aloud, 'her
hair is all serpents .... they're black serpents .... they hiss.... they hiss.... let me go .... let me go.... she wants to drag me with her cold arms .... her arms are serpents… they are great white serpents …. they'll twine round me…. she wants to drag me into the cold water…. her bosom is cold….it is black….it is all serpents….

‘No, Robert,’ Janet cried, in tones of yearning pity, rushing to the side of the bed, and stretching out her arms towards him, 'no, here is Janet. She is not dead—she forgives you.' (Eliot 276)

While Robert Dempster does not explicitly tie this Medusa-like figure to Janet, the fact that Janet is present in the room while Robert describes this figure with her same black hair, implies that it is her. Indeed, after Janet draws near to him, his vision continues, as if he “received some new impression from her appearance” signifying a link between Janet and Dempster’s imagined Gorgon (Eliot 276). This vision of Janet as a Medusa, with head, bosom and arms of snakes, underscores Dempster’s anticipation of her vengeance. He imagines that her serpent hands will “twine around” him, wanting to drag him “into the cold water.” This morbid image suggests that Dempster expects his wife’s hands will emulate his own arm of abuse. However, despite her profound suffering at her husband’s hand, Janet instead stretches “out her arm to him,” and says “here is Janet…she forgives you.” This outstretched arm beautifully mirrors both the arm of God and the hand of Mr. Tryan in this moment, embodying Janet’s divine internal transformation – one that allows her to touch the very man who beat her senseless with love and mercy, instead of cruelty and anger.

As Janet’s husband is on his deathbed, it is equally important to consider his languid hands. As Robert slips into unconsciousness, the narrator describes his “wasted hands stretched motionless on the bedclothes” (Eliot 281). These motionless, sickly hands may be a nod to the idea of divine judgement upon Dempster’s abuse. Biblically, wasted hands are usually associated with the Lord’s destruction; in the Book of Isaiah, the prophet foresees the destruction of Babylon with attention to the hands of the people: “Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is at hand; it
shall come as a destruction from the Almighty. Therefore shall all hands be faint, and every man's heart shall melt” (Is. 13:6-7). “Faint” here most likely denotes both an emotional lack of courage and a physical feebleness; “wasted” suggests a similar deterioration in health or strength (“Faint” and “Wasted”). The fact that these powerful appendages of abuse now become weak, may indicate the inevitable destruction of the unrepentant Dempster, who never expressly asks for forgiveness.⁴ Indeed, Dempster’s hands, once paralleling the hand of Nemesis and embodying the power of a god-like vengeance, now become the potential victim of divine punishment.

Dempster’s “wasted hands” also speak to his diminished agency as an abuser. In *Dead Hands* Rowe argues that while the living hand is usually a site of action, a dead or severed hand often signifies a loss of this agency. Hands that are “wandering or ghostly…symbolize the loss, theft or withering of an individual’s capacity to act with real political or personal effect” (Rowe 4). Thus, regarding Dempster’s hands with Rowe’s argument in mind, his “wasted hands” may also signify a “withering” of his personal capacity to act, as they occupy a liminal space between life and death. Awaiting potential divine judgement, his hands are stripped of their abusive authority and their power to act.

Interestingly, by suggesting a coming punishment through his feeble hands, Eliot also counters popular opinion towards domestic abuse in the nineteenth century. Eliot’s readers may have been less sympathetic towards Janet’s abuse by her husband, since during the Victorian era, female alcoholics were considered to be “the most degraded of women…morally, socially and physiologically” (Warsh 71). As Julia Skelly asserts, nineteenth-century British society had little

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⁴ See Chapter XXIV of “Janet’s Repentance:” “He kept his eyes fixed on her, and there was a faintly perceptible motion of the lips, as if he wanted to speak. But the moment of speech was for ever gone – the moment for asking pardon of her, if he wanted to ask it” (Eliot 282).
sympathy for these individuals, believing women’s “maternal instincts and sensibilities” would deter them from this vice (Skelly 3). While male alcoholics, like Dempster, “…were regarded as nuisances at best and potential criminals at worst, female alcoholics held a special place in the popular imagination as a particularly villainous type of fallen woman…” (Skelly 5). Indeed, if a woman fell prey to excessive drinking, it was believed her sin justified her husband’s abuse (Skelly 3). Furthermore, by suggesting Dempster’s possible punishment through his hands, and stripping them of their abusive agency, Eliot condemns Dempster’s brutality, regardless of Janet’s struggle with drink. Here, Eliot counters the nineteenth-century cultural tendency to place blame on the alcoholic woman for her husband’s behavior.

In fact, Janet’s haptic behavior is a further testament to her noble character. Indeed, in the midst of Dempster’s decline, Janet waits on him with tenderness. She experiences a dawn of new hope for their relationship and genuinely believes he will get better (Eliot 279). Imagining returning to her husband after his illness passes, Janet takes comfort in her newfound help that will keep her from falling back into “the cold damp vault of sin and despair,” presumably her alcoholism, pride and depression: “The Divine Love that had already shone upon her would be with her; she would lift up her soul continually for help: Mr Tryan, she knew, would pray for her. If she felt herself failing, she would confess it to him at once; if her feet began to slip, there was that stay for her to cling to” (Eliot 279). Notably here, Janet returns to the image of clinging to Mr. Tryan, just as Mr. Tryan spoke of clinging to God in Mrs. Pettifer’s parlor. It is with this image in mind, that Janet touches Dempster with gentle affection in his final hours, placing “her left hand on the cold unanswering right hand that lay beside her on the bed-clothes” (Eliot 281). Notably, this hand over hand may represent Janet’s renewed duty to her marital vow—“to have and to hold, in sickness and in health”—despite her husband’s mistreatment. Janet’s hand is one
that embodies unity, longing to draw husband and wife together again. What’s more, Eliot seems to establish a chain of hands here; Janet, touched by the divine love embodied by Mr. Tryan and resting in the image of his secure hold, extends the same generous warmth through her fingertips to her dying husband. Since Janet is a recipient of godly touch, she is able to extend the same merciful, outstretched hand to the undeserving.

Thus, analyzing this scene through a broader biblical lens, Eliot suggests both the possibility of Old Testament judgement and New Testament mercy for Robert Dempster, through haptic representation and interaction. As a potential victim of divine punishment, Dempster’s “wasted hands” may illustrate the biblical law of retaliation, presented in Exodus and echoed in Leviticus and Deuteronomy.\(^5\) Specifically referring to the consequences of harming a woman with child, but more broadly demonstrating the law itself, Exodus 21:23-25 states, “If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.” With this passage in mind, Dempster’s hands typify this ancient law of the punishment equaling the injury. In a sense, hand is given for hand; Dempster’s hand, which rendered Janet’s hand defenseless, now becomes powerless. Yet Janet, by extending her merciful, outstretched hand to Dempster, exemplifies the overturning of this law. As Christ laid out on his Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” (New International Version, Matt. 5: 38-39). By refusing to follow

the code of “eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand,” Janet epitomizes Christ’s teaching, embodying the New Testament concept of undeserved grace.

In fact, it is not long after Dempster dies when Janet’s hand also comes to Mr. Tryan’s aid when the Reverend’s health deteriorates. Becoming progressively weaker, Mr. Tryan resettles at Mrs. Pettifer’s home at Holly Mount and gives over his duties to the new curate, Mr Walsh. As “autumn rolls gently by in its ‘calm decay,’” Janet tends to Mr. Tryan with particular care, moving into Holly Mount as his “constant attendant” as if she was performing “a sacred office” (Eliot 298). The narrator describes this scene in his sick room:

There were many visitors to the sick room, led thither by venerating affection; and there could hardly be one who did not retain in after years a vivid remembrance of the scene there – of the pale wasted form in the easy chair (for he sat up to the last), of the grey eyes so full even yet of inquiring kindness, as the thin, almost transparent hand was held out to give the pressure of welcome; and of the sweet woman, too, whose dark watchful eyes detected every want, and who supplied the want with a ready hand. (Eliot 299)

While Mr. Tryan’s hands have become “thin, almost transparent” in his sickness, Janet’s are clearly imbued with life and strength, as she devotedly tends to him in his frailty. Performing her “sacred office,” Janet’s hands become an instrument of sanctity, sacrificing her own needs to serve his. Indeed, by supplying his “every want” – language that echoes Paul’s description of the Lord in Philippians – Janet herself becomes the godly figure.⁶ Furthermore, Eliot reverses the established chain of hands here; rather than Mr. Tryan’s godly outstretched hand coming to Janet’s aid, it is Janet’s “ready hand” – her divine, tender touch – that provides for him.

It is Janet’s hand that Mr. Tryan holds in his final moments on earth, before their lips meet in a “sacred kiss of promise”: “‘Janet,’ he said presently, in his faint voice– he always called her Janet now. In a moment she was close to him, bending over him. He opened his hand

⁶ See Phil. 4:19.
as he looked up at her, and she placed hers within it” (Eliot 299-300). Significantly, in this scene, Janet’s intimate, comforting touch mirrors the hand offered by Mr. Tryan in Mrs. Pettifer’s parlor. In this earlier scene, the Reverend corporeally extends an offer of restoration to Janet, metaphorically shepherding her from a place of death – sin and despair – to new life – reconciliation and hope. Similarly, on Mr. Tryan’s deathbed, it is Janet’s hand that holds the Reverend’s as he experiences an earthly death to enter into eternal life. Thus, in another reversal of hands, Janet’s hands take on the sacred, pastoral role of Mr. Tryan’s, again underscoring her redemption.

Eliot continues to reveal Janet’s restored relationship with her mother through the pair’s fully represented hands at the end of the novel. After Mr. Tryan’s death, Janet leaves the funeral to go home to Orchard Street, where her mother is “waiting to receive her” (Eliot 300). Janet suggests that they walk around the garden together and the narrator states: “And they walked round in silence, with their hands clasped together, looking at the golden crocuses bright in the spring sunshine” (Eliot 300). This scene is rich in edenic imagery; “golden crocuses” and “spring sunshine” speak to a sense of rebirth, while “garden” and “Orchard Street” connote the Eden of Genesis. Moreover, the house once defiled by Robert Dempster’s abusive hands, and consequently absent of the filial and maternal hand, is now a place where mother and daughter’s hands are fully fleshed out. Not only are they represented, but they are also unified, “clasped together” in love and strength, against the backdrop of bursting new life. Thus, this redeemed and fully represented haptic interaction within this edenic setting, reveals a fully restored mother-daughter relationship and a restoration of agency. By reinscribing female hands, Eliot underscores the powerful, unified feminine triumph over masculine abuse.
Eliot further affirms Janet’s renewal through her hands at the end of the novel, as her arms take on the Christ-like characteristics Mr. Tryan describes earlier in Mrs. Pettifer’s parlor. In one of the final paragraphs of the novella, the narrator describes Janet as a woman in old age, with particular attention to her arms and hands:

Janet is living still. Her black hair is grey, and her step is no longer buoyant; but the sweetness of her smile remains, the love is not gone from her eyes; and strangers sometimes ask, Who is that noble-looking elderly woman, that walks about holding a little boy by the hand? The little boy is the son of Janet’s adopted daughter, and Janet in her old age has children about her knees, and loving young arms round her neck. (Eliot 301)

Here, Janet has evidently adopted the little girl of one of Dempster’s distant relatives, referenced earlier in the novel.7 Seen walking and holding “a little boy by the hand,” presumably her adopted grandson, Janet’s has clearly become a recognized maternal figure for at least two generations within her community. Just as Mr. Tryan describes how the Lord guides his children – “He asks you to cling to him, to lean on him; he does not command you to walk alone” – so too does Janet walk alongside her grandchild, holding him by the hand (Eliot 290). The depiction of Janet with “children about her knees, and loving young arms around her neck” distinctly resembles the image of Christ in the Book of Matthew: “Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” When he had placed his hands on them, he went on from there” (New International Version, Matthew 19:14-15). By drawing a parallel between the hands of Christ blessing the children and Janet’s own arms embracing them, we again see a redemptive chain of hands at work. Just as Mr. Tryan

7 See Chapter XXVI of “Janet’s Repentance:” “She had fleeting thoughts that perhaps among her husband’s distant relatives there might be some children she could help bring up, some little girl whom she might adopt; and she promised herself one day or other to hunt out a second cousin of his – a married woman of whom he had lost sight for many years” (Eliot 294).
instructed Janet in her despair to rest on God, “as a child rests on its mother’s arms,” now Janet’s adopted children rest within her compassionate embrace (Eliot 290). Her arms, in a sense, become the arms of God. Additionally, by choosing not to directly specify the identity of these children, Eliot adds a sense of universality to Janet’s maternal care. Like Christ, she is tending to the children of God. Thus, by the end of the novel, Janet’s hand fully takes on all the attributes of Christ’s, first described to her by Mr. Tryan in the parlor. From an abused victim, longing for the hope and comfort of a divine embrace, to a renewed woman, offering this very touch to those around her, Janet is fully restored, illustrated by her haptic transformation.

The phrase “noble-looking elderly woman” also elevates Janet, corresponding with Mrs Raynor’s earlier comparison of her daughter to “a glorious Greek Temple” (Eliot 243). However, unlike this comparison and within the context of this later passage’s imagery, Janet’s noble beauty is highly Christianized. “The sweetness of her smile,” her eyes filled with love, her hand holding that of her adopted grand-son’s, all speak to how Janet’s body has become a living temple of God’s spirit, overflowing with tender affection, rather than an ancient one, scarred by “time and barbarous hands” (Eliot 301, 243). Thus, Eliot transforms the character of Janet’s dignified beauty from one of pagan origins to one deeply imbued with Christian virtue, and from one of aging ruins to one of vibrant life. Indeed, to underscore this latter point, in her old age, it is the youthful hands of her grandchildren that hold hers, signifying Janet’s youthful restoration. This development again suggests Janet’s genuine transformation under the tutelage of Mr. Tryan.

The haptic relationships described at the end of the novel continue to confirm Janet’s sincere break with her past. While the identity of her adopted children remains ambiguous, we can infer that they are the children of her “husband’s distant relatives” (Eliot 294). This relationship makes Janet’s outstretched embrace even more redemptive, as she tenderly touches
the hands that are tied through kinship to her former abuser. The resurgence of Janet’s hand in this context speaks to the denial of the power of the past over her. To briefly contextualize the discussion of hands in relation to the past, it is useful to quote Katherine Rowe: “During the nineteenth century, the figure of the dismembered hand developed into a small but flourishing genre of narrative fiction,” which Rowe refers to as mortmain tales (Rowe 15). The dead hand came to represent, “the testamentary clutch of the past on the present, a concept drawn loosely from the legal term “dead hand” (from medieval Latin manus mortua)” (Rowe 15-16). Indeed, Eliot would later use the dead hand to illustrate this “consistent and intelligible” relation to the past in *Middlemarch* (Rowe 117). Yet, in “Janet’s Repentance” Eliot leaves her reader with an optimistic vision of Janet, free from the clutches of her history:

> There is a simple gravestone in Milby Churchyard, telling that in this spot lie the remains of Edgar Tryan, for two years officiating curate at the Paddiford Chapel-of-Ease, in this parish. It is a meagre memorial, and tells you simply that the man who lies there took upon him, faithfully or unfaithfully, the office of guide and instructor to his fellowmen. But there is another memorial of Edgar Tryan, which bears a fuller record: it is Janet Dempster, rescued from self-despair, strengthened with divine hopes, and now looking back on years of purity and helpful labour. The man who has left such a memorial behind him, must have been one whose heart beat with true compassion, and whose lips were moved by fervent faith. (Eliot 301)

“Looking back on years of purity and helpful labour,” Janet has clearly fully broken away from the “heavy arm” that used to abuse her, and instead views her past with serenity. There is no spectral dead hand of the past at the end of this narrative – only Janet’s fully redeemed one. As an embodied “memorial of Edgar Tryan,” she carries the likeness of his compassionate, tender touch into the future, visible in her embrace of her adopted children. Indeed, Tryan’s hand and

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8 See Katherine Rowe’s discussion of “the dead hand of Causubon’s will which haunts the fifth book of *Middlemarch*” (Rowe 3), specifically found on pages 116-117 of *Dead Hands.*
the hand of God carry through to Janet’s hand. While Dempster’s abuse violated the sanctified covenant of their marriage, Janet’s hand restores sacred value to this marital promise as she embraces his relatives. While Dempster’s abusive touch may have led to their barren marriage bed, Janet’s nurturing hand of love brings new life. Furthermore, her hand, outstretched in forgiveness to Dempster’s relatives, reveals an overturning of his brutal touch, a sanctifying of this broken relationship, and thus a victory over her abusive history.

Consequently, through Janet’s transformed hands, Eliot constructs a full circle of redemption, revealing her heroine’s restoration; the hand that was once abused becomes a hand of gentleness and strength, the hand that clung to her mother for forgiveness becomes a hand of maternal care, and the hand that yearned for divine comfort becomes the hand of godly love.

Eliot also underscores the feminine triumph over masculine abuse through the haptic; absent, helpless female hands become fully represented in strength and solidarity, the male hand of retribution is stripped of its power, and the hand of history is overturned.

June Skye Szirotny, author of George Eliot’s Feminism, whose first chapter is entitled “Janet’s Repentance: Entire Submission, Perfect Resignation,” would perhaps disagree with this reading. Szirotny argues that Janet’s willingness to return to her abusive husband’s bedside emphasizes that she is “penitent and submissive…selflessly bent on doing good,” and thus embodying “patriarchy’s model wife (and George Eliot patriarchy’s advocate)” (Szirotny 45). Szirotny asserts that, “Like contemporary feminists, George Eliot feels sympathy for an abused wife, but far from endorsing feminine rebellion, George Eliot admires Janet’s submissiveness as saintliness” (Szirotny 46). Szirotny’s certainly makes a valid point; George Eliot is not actively endorsing what a modern reader would consider feminine rebellion in “Janet’s Repentance.” However, I would contend that Eliot is far from “patriarchy’s advocate” in this work, evident
when one traces the female haptic restoration present in “Janet’s Repentance.” Eliot transforms Janet from an abused alcoholic, lacking agency signified by her erased hand, into a redeemed and recognized figure within her community. She becomes the very arms of Christ, arguably one of the most potent, universal symbols of both divine love and almighty power. Indeed, as the female hand extends grace and provision, and becomes fully-fleshed out by the end of the novella, it comes to openly embody strength, endurance, compassion and vitality. Indeed, Janet’s embrace of Dempster’s distant relatives speaks to her victory, as a woman, over her history of abuse at the hands of her husband, and her redemption of this broken relationship. Notably, the end of the novella could have also moved towards the standard nineteenth-century marriage plot. Eliot sets up the Reverend Tryan as a perfect potential love interest for Janet. Sharing a “sacred kiss of promise” with Janet before his death, Tryan clearly develops amorous feelings for Janet, which Janet likely returns (Eliot 299). However, by choosing to let Tryan die, Eliot also chooses to let Janet live as an independent, single woman. What’s more, Janet ends the novella with children – though not as the result of a corporeal relationship with any man. She cultivates a sense of family by her own hand.

This transformation is even more significant given nineteenth-century sentiment towards female alcoholics and widows. As previously discussed, the “Mid-Victorian viewed the woman drinker with loathing,” attributing her alcoholism to her own moral defectiveness (Shaw 177). Even Henry James was critical of a heroine “stained with the vice of intemperance. The theme is unpleasant; the author chose it at her peril” (Shaw 175). Yet, Janet not only gracefully overcomes this alcoholism, countering the Victorian idea of the female alcoholic as a sullied villain, but also ends the novella a widow. Historically, due to a lack of economic opportunity in a social system dictated by the doctrine of separate spheres, the Victorian female widow was
susceptible to poverty. She often “suffered in relative obscurity” or was “shunted among barely tolerable relatives” (Curran 236). However, Janet ends the novel as none of these. Instead, Eliot redeems and elevates her recovering alcoholic widow – arguably one of the most vulnerable and despised members of Victorian society – to the level of a deity through her hands, strikingly combatting the sexist social attitudes and expectations of her time.

Nevertheless, despite this countercultural elevation of Janet through her haptic transformation, it is important to note the possible classist undertones to this redemption. Janet is a middle-class woman. As Shaw points out, this social status makes her alcoholism even more surprising, since fictional nineteenth-century female alcoholics were depicted as “1) poor; 2) depraved; 3) comical; or 4) invisible” (Shaw 176). Janet Dempster blatantly opposes this archetype. As Shaw states, “George Eliot broke all the rules when she wrote “Janet’s Repentance”…Janet Dempster, an unhappy, battered wife, is not poor, not depraved, not comical, not invisible and not always sober” (Shaw 177). However, despite opposing this traditional characterization of the female alcoholic, Janet’s redemption still conforms to the middle-class redemption narrative. When considering this point, it is useful to draw on Deborah Denenholz Morse’s discussion of lower-class versus middle-class drunken mothers in religious tract society writer Hesba Stretton’s fiction. Although Stretton was writing in the late 1800s, her treatment of drunken mothers speaks to the prevalent attitudes towards female alcoholics throughout the nineteenth century. As Morse states, “The social class of the drunken mother is the most crucial aspect that divides drunken mother narratives” (Morse 119). While the middle-class drunken mother in Stretton’s Brought Home (1875) “is not only treated with great sympathy but is allowed to keep her son,” the lower-class drunken mother “could not be tolerated or forgiven” (Morse 106). She is characterized “as unredeemable” (Morse 116). Thus,
despite the groundbreaking feminist nature of Janet’s redemption, it has its limits; Janet still belongs to the class of women considered redeemable.

Analyzing the story of “Janet’s Repentance” against Eliot’s own religious formation, also implicitly begs the question, why would the author, after renouncing her own evangelical faith, create a story where her female heroine is spiritually redeemed? Why construct a character who becomes the very hands of God? Indeed, at twenty-two, after moving to Folehill, a suburb of Coventry, Eliot “found new friendships that opened up a world of free intellectual exchange and inquiry” (Henry 46). Through her friendships with Independents, Unitarians and more specifically the progressive Charles and Cara Bray, Eliot began to question her Evangelical roots. She found herself fascinated by a more rational, humanist perspective on faith, like that articulated in *An Inquiry Concerning Christianity*, by Charles Hennell, Cara Bray’s brother (Henry 48). On January 2nd 1842, Eliot “made the famous gesture of refusing to attend church with her father and visit friend Maria Lewis, thereby starting what she referred to as ‘Holy War’” (Henry 50). “By the time she began translating David Strauss, as she wrote to her father in 1842, she already viewed the Scriptures as ‘mingled truth and fiction’” (Henry 53). When Eliot came to write *Scenes of Clerical Life* in 1857, as Nancy Henry puts it, “she had liberated herself from the restrictions of Christian dogma” (Henry 61). Thus, why create a character like Janet, who first-handedly experiences a profound religious repentance?

Notably, the religious tenets at the core of this story speak to Eliot’s upbringing, which naturally influenced her writing. Eliot’s memories of people and places from her childhood shaped *Scenes of Clerical Life*. The town of Milby in “Janet’s Repentance” is based on Nuneaton and the protests against the Reverend Tryan, “related the Evangelical disturbances in the Nuneaton of her schoolgirl days” (Taylor 159). As Eliot scholar Nancy Henry discusses, citing
biographer Gordon Haight, “The Reverend Tryan in “Janet’s Repentance” was inspired by the evangelical curate in Nuneaton, John Edmund Jones” (Henry 38). In fact, “After the publication of two of the four parts of ‘Janet’s Repentance,’ the Reverend William Jones wrote from Lancashire to find out just how many more parts of his unfortunate brother’s troubles were going to be published” (Taylor 159). Clearly, much to the displeasure of some, Eliot dipped her quill in the metaphorical ink of her memories, to inspire, guide and color her writing.

With this influence of Eliot’s religious upbringing in mind, it is natural to wonder how much her faith still influenced the outlook of her fiction. While scholars have diverging views on this subject, intellectual historian Peter Hodgson argues that Eliot’s, “Christian beliefs of her youth never left her and continued to inform the moral perspective of her fiction” (Henry 43). This view would certainly speak to the “sacrificial ethic” of “Janet’s Repentance,” as scholar June Skye Szirotny discusses (Szirotny 40). Arguably, Janet becomes the very embodiment of Christ, sacrificing her own needs to extend love and mercy, revealed through the haptic at the end of the novella.

However, one must not only consider Eliot’s faith, or lack of it, when analyzing “Janet’s Repentance,” but also the influence of her partner, G.H. Lewes. When Eliot conceptualized the idea for her first novella in Scenes of Clerical Life, it was Lewes who lay beside her. In an “unusually expansive and intimate journal entry,” as Nancy Henry describes, published as “How I Came to Write Fiction” Eliot writes:

But one morning as I was lying in bed, thinking what should be the subject of my first story, my thoughts merged themselves into a dreamy doze, and I imagined myself writing a story of which the title was – “The Sad Fortunes of the Reverend Amos Barton.’ I was soon wide awake again, and told G. He said, ‘O what a capital title!’ and from that time I had settled in my mind that this should be my first story. (GEJ 289)
Indeed, Lewes initial encouragement from the onset of Eliot’s creative process, developed into a dedicated commitment to her writing. After reading the story whose title Eliot dreamt up in bed, Lewes “was overwhelmed by the quality of Marian’s work and believed she could be the second Jane Austen if marketed carefully. Her prose far surpassed his expectations and instead of suggesting massive rewriting, he edited the text and proposed trying it on a publisher” (Taylor 156). Sending “the story out as the work of ‘a friend,’” Lewes initiated the dialogue with Blackwoods, playing the role of Eliot’s agent.

Indeed, Lewes was not only Eliot’s literary champion, but also her deeply loved partner, who infused her life with significance. Phyllis Rose’s discussion of the couple’s relationship in *Parallel Lives* underlines the depth of their partnership:

> Her mother died when she was seventeen, and her father, to whom she was even more strongly attached, renounced her when she was twenty-one over her loss of faith, reconciled with her uneasily, then died when she was thirty. The only way she could reconstruct the network of love she had known as a child in her family was through marriage. So she came to that relationship with the utmost seriousness and the intention that she and the man she chose would be the twin pillars supporting all meaning in life - he the center of her life and she was of his. (Rose 227)

Eliot, devoid of family and faith, arguably turned to Lewes to be both, creating him to be the center of meaning in her life. As Rose goes on, “The relationship between a man and woman was to her as important as the relationship between human being and God had once been – the centrally serious business of life, an index of the degree of meaning you could infuse into the occupation of living” (Rose 212-213). For Eliot, her relationship with Lewes was as sacred as her faith had once been, perhaps even more so.

Thus, it is interesting to consider Janet’s redemption through the lens of Eliot’s relationship with Lewes. Janet experiences the very tenderness of God through the arms of Mr. Tryan. It is the metaphorical covenant seal that takes place between their hands, that leads to her
creative restoration, like that of Michelangelo’s Adam. Tryan is the one she leans on; he is the one through which she experiences the sacredness of the divine. Thus, just as Tryan sanctifies Janet’s hands to become productive agents of outstretched love and forgiveness, so too did Lewes metaphorically propel Eliot’s hand to writing. But this is not to negate the power of the female hand, in both the literary and fictitious instances. Both of these relationships are arguably grounded in equality. In a reversal of the established gendered dynamic, Janet’s hand become the outstretched arm to the dying Mr. Tryan. She lovingly shepherds and upholds him. Similarly, Eliot’s hands were often the first to edit Lewes’ manuscripts, speaking to her own influence on the literary career of her partner (De Sailly 137).

Thus, through the haptic we are permitted an enriched reading of “Janet’s Repentance,” one that provides deepened insight into Eliot’s complex characters and perhaps into Eliot as a writer herself. Ultimately, in her novella, the hand of the woman considered one of the most shameful by nineteenth-century standards, becomes the most sacred hand of all, pointing to a culturally defiant redemption. It is this story of powerful restoration that was arguably shaped by the influences guiding Eliot’s own hand, from her early scriptural formation to the sacred relationship with the man she loved. As we shall see, this haptic interest continues throughout Eliot’s early works, as the sacred hand takes on new forms in *Adam Bede*. 
“Hands that have long ago mingled with the soil”:
Consecrating the Rural Worker in *Adam Bede* ⁹

Hands continue to feature prominently in *Adam Bede*, Eliot’s next work of fiction published in 1859. Set sixty years earlier, in 1799, the novel follows the story of four characters in the rural, fictional community of Hayslope; Adam Bede, a carpenter in love with a local farmer’s niece, Hetty Sorrel, who is infatuated with the young squire, Arthur Donnithorne, and Dinah Morris, the Methodist minister who eventually marries Adam. Due to the hand’s pervasiveness in this novel, haptic relations have already been treated by at least two scholars: Philip Mahone Griffith, who analyzes Adam and Arthur’s “withdrawn handclasp restored” as a symbol of a restoration of Paradise to Hayslope (Griffith 202)¹⁰ and Kimberly Cox, who treats erotic touch in *Adam Bede*, particularly in relation to the hand of Hetty and the hand of Dinah.¹¹

Diverging from these readings, I will analyze the way Eliot treats the rural working hand against the context of England’s changing rural landscape in the first half of the nineteenth century. I will primarily consider the working hand of Adam, the artisan, as well as the haptic representation of supporting characters, like his mother Lisbeth, the knitter, and old Kester, the farmer. Each of these forms of labor were crucial to the pastoral world, and yet at Eliot’s point of writing, rural England was under severe physical and economic threat. Thus, how does Eliot’s treatment of these rural hands shed light on her attitude towards an industrializing and urbanizing

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¹⁰ Griffith argues that through Adam and Arthur’s handshakes, the old feudal relationship of master and man survives and is made whole again. See his article “Symbols of the Arm and Handclasp in George Eliot’s *Adam Bede*.”

¹¹ Cox focuses on the tactile interactions between Hetty and Arthur and Adam and Dinah, ultimately arguing that, “Reading *Adam Bede* through the lens of tactility reveals that there exists no place outside of marriage for active female desire in a patriarchal society” (Cox 186). See Chapter III of her dissertation, Part I: The Touch that Thrills in *Adam Bede* pp. 164 – 187.
England? By exploring this haptic representation while considering the development of rural England, I argue that Eliot venerates and consecrates the rural hand, further underscoring the importance of traditional rural labor to England’s history and to its future.

Firstly, it is important to ask the question, whose hands are the rural working hands in Eliot’s *Adam Bede*? Naturally, Hetty, who labors in the dairy at Hall Farm, comes to mind. Indeed, her hands, much to her own discontent, are coarsened by her agricultural work: “She looked down at her arms: no arms could be prettier down to a little way below the elbow—they were white and plump, and dimpled to match her cheeks; but towards the wrist, she thought with vexation that they were coarsened by butter-making and other work that ladies never did” (Eliot 151). Hetty’s hands clearly bear the traditional hallmarks of her rural labor. As the eighteenth-century agriculturalist William Ellis describes, a dairymaid “may be known by her red plump arms and hands” (Ellis 92). However, despite Hetty’s physical tie to the rural working world, she is arguably distinguished from it. As Cox argues, her attraction to the young squire, Arthur Donnithorne, is connected to her “lust for luxury”: “Hetty longs for a way out of her current social situation which she assumes wealth will facilitate…She aspires for more than the life of her Aunt Poyser or Lisbeth Bede, Adam’s mother” (Cox 170). Thus, her desire for Arthur’s hand in marriage separates her from this sphere, since she yearns to escape it.

Dinah Morris, Eliot’s other female protagonist and an integral part of the Hayslope community, is also differentiated from the rural working world. When Lisbeth Bede receives a visit from Dinah, she is struck by her hands, which bear the “traces of labour from her childhood upwards” (Eliot 109). As the reader learns, Dinah worked in a cotton mill in her childhood, and it

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12 Unless otherwise noted, when I refer to Cox it is to her dissertation, *When Hands Touch: Manual Intercourse in Victorian Literature*.  

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is this work that has marked her hands (Eliot 109). As I will later explicate, the mill is a hallmark of industrialization, therefore linking Dinah’s hands to a distinctly new form of labor that diverges from traditional pastoral work. With this in mind, I will center my analysis on the hands of Adam Bede, his mother Lisbeth, and old Kester, characters who, as we shall see, are firmly tied to the rural sphere through the haptic.

Before analyzing the haptic characterization of these rural workers in *Adam Bede*, it is important to contextualize the development of rural England from the turn of the nineteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, in order to distinguish Eliot’s own time period (1859) from that of her novel (1799). Between 1790 and 1830, agricultural laborers were the largest group of workers in any industry (Thompson 213). “In 1801, 66% of the population was rural” (Reay 20). However, as Parliament passed the Enclosure Acts, these rural populations suffered. Enclosing about a quarter of all cultivated acreage (Williams 96), these acts “removed previously existing rights of local people to carry out activities in these areas, such as cultivation, cutting hay, grazing animals or using other resources such as small timber, fish, and turf” (“Enclosure Acts”). While various Enclosure Acts had been passed since the twelfth century, the movement peaked between 1760 and 1832, and in essence, finished the destruction of the medieval peasant community by the latter date (Moore 25-29). As a result, many of the landless left their rural communities to join the new urban working class (Winstanley).

The enclosure movement was not the only factor contributing to this rural exodus. From the late eighteenth century, new industrialized means of production, centered in towns and cities, undermined rural industry (Winstanley). For example, “The rural woolen and linen industries of the South West and East Anglia collapsed in the face of increased competition from Lancashire and the West Riding of Yorkshire. The subsequent growth of factory spinning and power-loom
weaving, then undermined the rural economy of the North, leading to marked falls in population in many upland townships in the Pennines from the 1820s” (Winstanley). Thus, rural workers flocked to urban areas in hope of employment, as their own village communities came under economic threat. Expanding railroad networks facilitated this migration, linking the country and the city (Lawton 57). Consequently, by 1851, nine years before Adam Bede’s publication, the rural population had shrunk to 46 percent. It continued to decline throughout the nineteenth century; by 1911, it was a mere 21 percent (Woods 303). Moreover, by the mid-nineteenth century the conception of the working hand was rapidly shifting from one largely synonymous with rural work, to one associated with a growing urban, industrial environment. Indeed, to affirm this change, “in factories and mills up and down the land the industrial proletariat was now known collectively as ‘the hands’” (Hughes 186). 13

Thus, set in 1799, Eliot’s rural community of Hayslope is an emblem of a simpler, older, pre-modern society, one that has yet to feel the full effects of the enclosure movement or nineteenth-century industrialization (McDonough 43). As Nancy Henry asserts, Adam Bede is a “drama of rural peasantry,” and as Eliot articulated to her publisher, it is “a country novel – full of the breath of cows and the scent of hay” (GEL 2:387). Indeed, the text contains multiple references to common green fields, signifying the presence of unenclosed, public land. 14 “In this world there is no alienation from the production process,” as artisans and farmers inherit the

13 Unless otherwise noted, when I refer to Hughes it is to her book, Victorians Undone: Tales of Flesh in the Age of Decorum.

14 For example, Dinah Morris is described preaching on the Green (Eliot 17-18), denoting a common grassy land (“Green”), and on “th’Common” (Eliot 503). In Chapter XII when Arthur Donnithorne is out walking, he passes Halsell Common (Eliot 128). At the beginning of Book Second, when Eliot’s narrator pauses to describe, “life sixty years ago – it is a long time, so no wonder things have changed” – he references “common green fields” (Eliot 175-176).
skills of their forefathers to work the land or produce local goods (Roberts xix). Notably, when later Victorian critics considered Eliot’s full oeuvre, it was her early works like *Adam Bede* they considered best, since, as Kathryn Hughes articulates, “the landscape they inhabited was beginning to slip from living memory. Harvest festival suppers, carpenters’ workshops, the handloom weaves, country dances, watermills, stagecoaches, farmhouse dairies and milkmaids – here were delightful tokens from a vanishing world” (Hughes 175).

Notably, Eliot’s childhood and family memories contributed to this picture of older, rural life in *Adam Bede*, including the meticulous description of Hetty Sorrel’s milking (Hughes 199). Eliot, born to Robert and Christiana Evans in Warwickshire in 1819, was christened Mary Anne (Uglow 14). Soon after her birth, her family moved to Griff House, a large brick farmhouse with a dairy attached to the back of the kitchen, surrounded by “rough orchards” and “open fields” (Hughes 164 and Uglow 14). Notably, Griff House resembles the home of the Poyser family in *Adam Bede* (Martin 1). While Mary Anne attended Mrs. Wallington’s Boarding School in Nuneaton, during her vacations she learned the principles of dairy work from her mother (Hughes 195-197). In fact, when her mother (who suffered from breast cancer) became too sick to work, it was Mary Anne who volunteered her hands for milking:

Robert Evans, always so fond of his youngest girl, offered to hire a local woman to run the farmhouse, so that the expensively educated hands that had so recently been engaged in translating French verbs and playing Chopin did not have to concern themselves with the churn. But Mary Ann, desperate to be as perfect at drudgery as she was at everything else, refused. Instead, she insisted on becoming in Cross’s words, ‘a most exemplary housewife’, and in her own, ‘the presiding nymph’ at Griff. (Hughes 197-198) ¹⁵

¹⁵Christened Mary Anne, Eliot changed her name to Mary Ann, sans e, in 1837 (Ashton, “Evans, Marian”), and later to Marianne, then Marian, in 1849 (Uglow xii) hence the variance in scholarly reference.
Yet, while Eliot was in touch with these aspects of pastoral life as a child, she simultaneously witnessed this rural world’s progressive destruction. In her girlhood, Eliot watched transportation networks and commerce spring up, drastically altering the economies of traditionally isolated rural communities (Henry 26-27). Griff House was on a coach road, so “stepping out to watch the coaches became part of her early memories – a thrilling glimpse of the present that she would turn into a figure of nostalgia for the past once these coaches had been supplanted by railroads” (Henry 27). As Jennifer Uglow discusses, by the mid-nineteenth century, Eliot looked back to the countryside of her childhood as a vanished world: “The pace of life had accelerated, the railway had pierced provincial seclusion…and the old economic base of farms and market towns was crumbling with the development of the mines and rise of the factory system, which was already throwing local hand-loom weavers out of work when she was a girl” (Uglow 13). Indeed, by the time Eliot published *Adam Bede* in 1859, England had largely transformed from a historically pastoral nation of shared common land, to one economically driven by urban industry and private land ownership – a transformation that she, in part, witnessed herself.

With this changing landscape of England in mind, and its implications for the rural worker, it is important to note the intent of the overarching hand of the narrative as *Adam Bede* opens. The novel begins with the following paragraph:

> With a single drop of ink for a mirror, the Egyptian sorcerer undertakes to reveal any chance comer far-reaching visions of the past. This is what I undertake to do for you, reader. With this drop of ink at the end of my pen I will show you the roomy workshop of Mr Johnathon Burge, carpenter and builder, in the village of Hayslope, as it appeared on the eighteenth of June, in the year of our Lord 1799. (Eliot 1)

Here, “The historicizing intention of *Adam Bede* is manifest” (Cunningham xxxix). Through her narrator, Eliot establishes herself as a kind of enchanting historian, from whose fingers flow “far-reaching visions of the past” for her reader. “With this drop of ink,” Eliot invites the reader back
in time to “the village of Hayslope…in the year of our Lord 1799.” This dating terminology particularly encourages a sense of antiquity; *Adam Bede* is a story set in a bygone era, and Eliot’s living hand is reviving it for her mid-nineteenth century readership.

As the reader steps into the carpenter’s workshop, the narrator focuses on Adam Bede, the tallest workman in the group of five, who is carving a shield in the center of a wooden mantelpiece. As a carpenter, Adam is employed in a trade crucial to the history of rural work and he excels at it (Reay 26-27). The narrator precedes to describe Adam at length, paying attention to his hands: “The sleeve rolled up above the elbow showed an arm that was likely to win the prize for feats of strength; yet the long supple hand, with its broad finger-tips, looked ready for works of skill” (Eliot 6). Here, Adam’s hands are both strong and skilled. Actively working with the raw materials of the English countryside, they possess the vigor and dexterity for craftsmanship.

Interestingly, as the carpenters discuss religion while they work, Adam comments on his own hands, and the hands of his fellow workmen:

‘…I'm not for laughing at no man's religion…But what does the Bible say? Why, it says as God put his sperrit into the workman as built the tabernacle, to make him do all the carved work and things as wanted a nice hand. And this is my way o' looking at it: there's the sperrit o' God in all things and all times—weekday as well as Sunday—and i' the great works and inventions, and i' the figuring and the mechanics. And God helps us with our headpieces and our hands as well as with our souls; and if a man does bits o' jobs out o' working hours—builds a oven for 's wife to save her from going to the bakehouse, or scrats at his bit o' garden and makes two potatoes grow istead o' one, he's doin' more good, and he's just as near to God, as if he was running after some preacher and a-praying and a-groaning.’ (Eliot 9)

Here, Adam creates a link between the hands called to build God’s tabernacle in the Old Testament and the hands that manually labor in 1799. As Adam says, God originally “put his sperrit into the workman as built the tabernacle.” Here, Adam refers to Exodus 31, when God
anoints the artisans with his Spirit to do his sacred work. It is Adam’s hands, and the hands of his fellow workmen, that continue this legacy, as God “‘helps us with our headpieces and our hands as well as with our souls.’” While Adam refers to the hands responsible for “‘great works and inventions,’” his dialogue primarily focuses on the hands of ordinary rural laborers and artisans; those hands that carve, build, tend the garden, and work “‘bits o’ jobs.’” It is this form of manual labor that arguably allows one to be “‘just as near to God’” as “‘running after some preacher and a-praying and a-groaning.’” Thus, like the hands of the Israelites ordained to construct the sanctuary that allowed God’s presence to dwell with the people, the hands of these rural workers are similarly guided by the Spirit, encouraging a closeness with God through their labor. The labor of the rural worker is a sacred calling and his hands are sanctified for it. Interestingly, this conversation also takes place within the carpenter’s workshop, evoking the image of Joseph’s workshop, where a young Christ would have learned carpentry skills from his father. Consequently, Adam’s hand, and the broader rural working hand, is tied to both God’s chosen people in the Old Testament and the sacred hands of the New Testament. As instruments of hallowed craftsmanship, these working hands are imbued with holiness.

The rural working hand is also characterized as an agent of earthly deliverance. As David Meaken discusses in Man & Work, “Not only is good carpentry ‘God’s will’, but earthly salvation as well…” (Meaken 60). I would add that it is the hand, engaging in “good carpentry,” that is the agent of Adam’s “earthly salvation.” His strong arm, much like the arm of God, has the capacity to produce a kind of deliverance as he works, restoring individual balance and peace. Consider the following excerpt from Chapter XI of Book First. After the tragic loss of Adam Bede’s father, who drowns, Adam awakens the next day to construct his father’s coffin:

…he was eager to begin the new day, and subdue sadness by his strong will and strong arm…
‘There’s nothing but what’s bearable as long as a man can work,’ he said to himself: ‘the natur o’ things doesn’t change, though it seems as if one’s own life was nothing but change. The square o’ four is sixteen, and you must lengthen your lever in proportion to your weight, is as true when a man’s miserable as when he’s happy; and the best o’ working is, it gives you a grip hold o’ things outside your own lot.’

(Eliot 115)

As David Meaken states, “The prospect of work restores a sense of balance…amidst the flux of human life, work and its stable laws establish permanence, fixity” (Meaken 60). It is the arm and hand that play an essential role in directing this labor, and thus establishing a regained sense of equilibrium. Adam’s arm and hand are both explicitly and implicitly referred to here. Adam trusts his “strong will and strong arm” to subdue sadness while he labors. He contemplates lengthening “your lever in proportion to your weight”– which not only requires a mind operating in relation to “stable laws,” but an arm to engage in this routine act of craftsmanship. From this physical grip comes “‘a grip hold o’ things outside your own lot.’” One can imagine that just as Adam grips his tools, he is able to reclaim a sense of control over his circumstances. Thus, his hands, when they are put to work, have the power to renew his mental and spiritual strength. To further affirm Adam’s assertions, the narrator notes that he feels “completely himself again” as he enters the workshop and prepares to build his father’s coffin (Eliot 115).

Adam’s “strong arm” simultaneously evokes the arm of God. As discussed in the previous chapter on “Janet’s Repentance,” biblically, the arm of God is one of power, rescue and comfort. It is the Lord’s arm that defends and strengthens the assaulted; it is his hand that provides security, upholding the weak and the dismayed. God’s strong arm is also one of craftsmanship. As it describes in the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, it is with his “great strength

16 See Psalm 89:13, Psalm 139:10, and Isaiah 41:10 for example.
and powerful arm” that God “made the earth and all of its people and every animal” (Jer. 27:5).
Notably, the qualities associated with God’s strong arm converge in Adam’s, and are in fact inextricably linked. Adam attests that a man finds refuge from the tumultuous change of life, through the stable work of his limbs. From this biblical standpoint, Adam’s working hand is endowed with a kind of heavenly strength, as he trusts his haptic labor to deliver him from chaos and grief. His rural working hand possesses the same divine qualities as the master craftsman – God himself.

It is this living, skilled hand that is also characterized as a kind of honorable inheritance. When Lisbeth, Adam’s mother, waits for her son to return home from the workshop in Chapter IV, the narrator notes her “work-hardened hands,” as she stands “knitting rapidly and unconsciously” (Eliot 39). Although Lisbeth’s knitting is most likely for her family’s benefit rather than for profit, the skill itself was an essential part of rural women’s work in the eighteenth century. Merchants outsourced work to village women, like knitting, weaving, lace and cotton work, button-making and gloving, as a form of domestic labor to complete in the home (Mokyr 5). The narrator then moves from Lisbeth’s hand to the connection between the hand of a father and his child. He contemplates how, “Nature, that great tragic dramatist, knits us together by bone and muscle” (Eliot 39). 17 Within this universalized discussion, extended to the reader through inclusive pronouns (we, our, us), he speaks of the likeness between father and child. Here I quote the oft cited family likeness passage: “The father to whom we owe our best heritage – the mechanical instinct, the keen sensibility to harmony, the unconscious skill of the modelling hand…” (Eliot 40). This human hand, endowed with “mechanical instinct” and “unconscious skill,” takes on particular significance considering the boom of mechanized industry at the time

17 I follow most Eliot scholars in identifying the narrator as “he.”
of Eliot’s writing. As Peter Capuano discusses in Changing Hands, by the turn of the century, machines had begun “to supersede the human hand in economically significant ways” (Capuano 1). Indeed, labor historians associate the period between 1822-1850 with “the most exponential development and implementation of mechanized production” (Capuano 45). As Capuano cites, Thomas Carlyle famously commented in his 1829 essay “Signs of the Times” that, “On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop to make room for a speedier, inanimate one” in which “the shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster” (Carlyle 34). Indeed, the rural knitting industry began to die out at the end of the eighteenth-century due to the rise of factories and developments in knitting technology (“Knitting Traditions of the British Isles and Ireland”). Thus, the fact that Eliot attributes “our best heritage” to the hand’s inherited instinct and “unconscious skill,” while Lisbeth’s hands knit “rapidly and unconsciously,” elevates the working hand for her mid-nineteenth century readers, at a time when the mechanized industrial hand increasingly displaced the rural one.

This characterization of the skilled hand as a valuable inheritance continues in Book Second, Chapter XIX, specifically applying to rural workers. In “Adam on a Working Day,” the narrator instructs the reader to “look at this broad-shouldered man with the bare muscular arms,” as he goes about his work, measuring and heaving timber while contentedly humming. The narrator celebrates the hands of this workman, and the workmen like him:

Adam, you perceive, was by no means a marvellous man, nor, properly speaking, a genius, yet I will not pretend that his was an ordinary character among workmen…Yet such men as he are reared here and there in every generation of our peasant artisans—with an inheritance of affections nurtured by a simple family life of common need and common industry, and an inheritance of faculties trained in skillful courageous labour: they make their way upwards, rarely as geniuses, most commonly as painstaking honest men, with the skill and conscience to do well the tasks that lie before them. Their lives have no discernible echo beyond the neighbourhood where they dwelt, but you are almost sure to find there some good piece of road, some building, some application of mineral produce, some improvement in farming practice, some reform of parish
abuses, with which their names are associated by one or two generations after them. Their employers were the richer for them, the work of their hands has worn well, and the work of their brains has guided well the hands of other men. (Eliot 212-213)

The narrator does not affirm the character of every rural workman here, nor does he make a claim for Adam’s genius. However, he does honor Adam’s hand of labor, and more broadly, the hand of the honest, courageous peasant artisan who inherits and passes down his skills.

“Reared here and there in every generation,” this rural worker is nurtured by “a simple family life of common need and common industry.” Inheriting “faculties trained in skillful courageous labor,” the artisan’s expertise—presumably including the ability of his hands— is passed down to him by his forefathers.

Indeed, we see Adam’s muscular arms and dexterous hands as a kind of inheritance earlier in Book I, Chapter IV, when Adam describes his childhood memories of going to work with his father. Although Thias Bede struggles with drunkenness and tragically drowns, Adam remembers “what a fine active fellow his father was” (Eliot 48). As a boy, “When people asked Adam whose little lad he was, he had a sense of distinction as he answered, ‘I'm Thias Bede's lad.’ He was quite sure everybody knew Thias Bede—didn't he make the wonderful pigeon-house at Broxton parsonage?” (Eliot 48). Clearly, in his younger years, Thias Bede was an accomplished craftsman, and it is Adam who shares this “common industry,” inheriting, to cite an earlier quotation, “…our best heritage – the mechanical instinct, the keen sensibility to harmony, the unconscious skill of the modelling hand…” (Eliot 40). Significantly, the name “Adam” also speaks to this idea of the inherited hand of labor; biblically, as God’s first creation, Adam originally tended the Garden of Eden. From this first man’s union with Eve, came all people to follow, inheriting the responsibility of tilling God’s earth and producing crops through
the work of their hands. Thus, this skilled hand of rural labor is characterized as a noble–even sacred–legacy, passed down through the ages.

Just as the skilled working hand possesses its own venerable familial history, it also shapes communal history. While the lives of these rural workmen “have no discernable echoes” beyond their communities, “the work of their hands has worn well.” By building roads, constructing buildings and improving farming practices, their hands leave enduring traces, recognized by the generations after them. “Guiding well the hands of other men,” these workmen continue to influence the labor of the hands to follow; thus, they have shaped English history and continue to shape it. Moreover, just as the skilled hand is a personal, familial inheritance, its labor is a communal inheritance. The sense of history embodied in the working hand, is further accentuated by Adam Bede’s name. “Bede” evokes The Venerable Bede, an eighth century monk who completed “The Ecclesiastical History of the English People” in 731 A.D. Today, Bede is “widely regarded as the greatest of all the Anglo-Saxon scholars” and known as “the father of English history” (“The Venerable Bede”). Thus, just as the hand of the Venerable Bede is tied to English history through his penmanship, the hand of the peasant artisan is tied to the formation of England through its labor.

Yet, while these rural hands have shaped, and continue to shape England, the novel does not ignore the fact that the physical and economic landscape of rural England is transforming at the turn of the nineteenth century. As Josephine McDonagh states, “the steady progression of time…is inescapable” in *Adam Bede* (McDonagh 44). Hayslope is subject to the coming change of the new era, arguably exemplified through the hints of impending land enclosure. In Chapter XVI of Book First, the young squire, Arthur Donnithorne, describes the changes he would like to make to the land:
‘I’ve been reading your friend Arthur Young’s books lately, and there’s nothing I should like better than to carry out some of his ideas in putting the farmers on a better management of their land; and, as he says, making what was a wild country, all of the same dark hue, bright and variegated with corn and cattle.’ (Eliot 169-170)

Notably, Arthur Young was an avid writer and promoter of agricultural reform during the late 1700s, conducting his own research and producing “25 books and pamphlets on agriculture” (Brunt 265). He also defended enclosing land. Eliot read his *Six Months Tour through the North of England*, which discusses the enclosure movement, in 1857, when she began working on *Adam Bede* (Fleischman 31). While Young notes the expense of enclosure by Act of Parliament in this volume, he defends the principle: “There is scarcely any point in rural economics more generally acknowledged, than the great benefits of inclosing open lands” (Young 222). While Arthur Donnithorne may only be contemplating enacting some of Young’s agricultural reforms in this instance, the reference to this agriculturalist – further emphasized through their shared name – points to the inevitable change coming to the ‘‘wild country.’’

There are also indications of a shifting rural economy. When Jonathan Burge offers Adam a share in his business, Adam dreams of the future: “he might come to build a bridge, or a town hall, or a factory, for he had always said to himself that Jonathan Burge's building business was like an acorn, which might be the mother of a great tree” (Eliot 355). While Adam still envisions the future within pastoral terms, imagining the building business flourishing from acorn to tree, the mention of “factory” is a loaded term, connoting the onset of industrial expansion. The rise of industry within the rural world is also signaled through the description of Snowfield, a town near Hayslope, where Dinah Morris grows up. As referenced, Dinah’s hands bear the traces of labor from working in the Snowfield cotton-mill, an emblem of new industry

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18 “‘Inclosure’ is an old or formal spelling of the word now more usually spelled ‘enclosure,’” hence Young’s spelling of “inclosing” (Armitage).
(Eliot 109). As Margaret Homans discusses, Dinah probably works in a spinning mill, and this “factory spinning, in contrast to the un-modernizable building trades” is a “threatening modernity” (Homans 162). Snowfield, as a site of industry near Hayslope, signals the encroaching industrialization of the English countryside.

With this transforming pastoral world in mind, it is the hand of the rural worker that Eliot’s narrator pays homage to. In the third-to-last chapter before the Epilogue, “The Harvest Supper,” the narrator describes the farm workers at the traditional harvest table, giving particular attention to the wrinkled, sun-browned old Kester—“One of those invaluable laborers who can not only turn their hand to everything, but excel in everything they turn their hand to” (Eliot 517). The narrator goes on:

I am not ashamed of commemorating old Kester. You and I are indebted to the hard hands of such men—hands that have long ago mingled with the soil they tilled so faithfully, thriftily making the best they could of the earth's fruits, and receiving the smallest share as their own wages. (Eliot 518)

By using “you and I” here, Eliot directly calls on her mid-nineteenth century readers to honor and remember the hard-working hands of sixty years prior. These rural hands have dutifully, and perhaps even sacrificially, tended the earth, receiving little in return for their labor. Tilling the soil “so faithfully,” Kester’s “hard hands” and the other “hands of such men” again take on a sense of sacredness. “Faithfully” suggests that their work is honorable and sanctified.

These are also the hands that have “long ago mingled with the soil they tilled.” This ancient mingling of hand and soil suggests that, by the time of Eliot’s writing, rural laborers like old Kester have passed away. These dead hands signal the greater decomposition of pre-modern pastoral society, epitomized by the Hayslope community, by the time of Adam Bede’s publication in 1859. Just as Eliot hints at the change coming to the rural world throughout the
novel, here she confirms its passing, through both a metaphoric and very real burial of the hands that embodied it.

However, as part of the very soil of England, these rural hands are invaluable to the nation’s development. Indeed, it is the soil that provides the structure and the nutrients for growth. Therefore, mingled into England’s foundation, these holy limbs of hallowed labor serve as a rich bedrock for the country’s current and future progress— a fertile foundation that England is “indebted to.” Their labor is not something to be ashamed of in the tide of mid-century industrialization and urbanization. Rather, just as the skilled human hand is described as “our best heritage,” so it is England’s best heritage. Indeed, as Nancy Henry asserts, “Through her own memories and those of others, as well as through research and imagination, [Eliot] recreated provincial England…In this way, she represented to her contemporary Victorian readers their own national childhood, their social, political and cultural inheritance” (Henry 22-23). As the enchanting historian penning this history of England, and perhaps further still as the Venerable Bede herself, Eliot’s living hand calls upon her reader to remember and honor the working hands of the past and their labor— England’s noble and sacred inheritance.

Thus, through the haptic characterization of rural workers, like Adam, the carpenter, Lisbeth, the knitter, and old Kester, the farmer, Eliot consecrates the rural laborer at a point in history when his world was disappearing. His hand is an honorable familial and national inheritance that shapes history, even after its death. It is an instrument of sacred craftsmanship, endowed with divine power and strength. In Adam Bede, Eliot reconstructs the sacred hand from the hand devoted to and sanctified by faith in “Janet’s Repentance” to the hand hallowed by its devotion to sacred, rural work. Eliot’s treatment of the rural working hand confirms her veneration of these workers and their labor for England, at a crucial historical moment when
their hands were increasingly replaced by machines, or forced into urban labor due to the enclosure movement.

“When they…clasped their little hands in love”: Sacred Duty in The Mill on the Floss19

The theme of love and duty pervades The Mill on the Floss, Eliot’s third novel published in 1860. Following the life of Maggie Tulliver, whose family works the mill on the River Floss, the novel tracks Maggie’s development from childhood to womanhood. In Book Sixth “The Great Temptation” and Book Seventh, “The Final Rescue,” both of which this chapter will focus on, Maggie is caught between passion and responsibility as she becomes romantically involved with Stephen Guest, her cousin’s fiancé. Maggie finds herself wrestling with two claims; on the one hand, her desire for the man she loves, and on the other hand, her enduring ties to her cousin Lucy, her brother Tom and her childhood friend Philip, which this romantic relationship jeopardizes. As Rosemary Ashton discusses, in Eliot’s essay on “Antigone and its Moral” published four years before The Mill on the Floss, Eliot “had written that tragedy arises pre-eminently from ‘the antagonism between valid claims’” (Ashton, George Eliot 42). Drawing on this essay, Ashton argues that Stephen represents the claim of “instinctive attraction,” which tragically conflicts with the “counter-claims of prior duties, in this case to Tom, to Philip who loves her, and to Lucy, who is engaged to Stephen” (Ashton, George Eliot 42).

I believe that this very conflict between desire and duty is navigated and expressed through Maggie’s haptic interactions throughout the novel. Who she touches, who touches her, when they touch, how they touch and the following corporeal effects, give insight into the clash between these claims for Eliot’s heroine. In this chapter, I will chronologically track Maggie’s

19 Eliot 483.
most significant tactile interactions in Book Sixth and Book Seventh, centering my analysis on erotic touch, or the claim of passion: the first touch between Maggie and Stephen, his offered arm in the garden, the touch in the conservatory, the proposal in the lane, and the hand press in the boat as the couple elope. I will simultaneously consider the touch of the past, or the claim of duty: Maggie and her childhood friend Philip’s handclasp, her tactile interactions with her brother Tom, and her final embrace with her brother.

These tactile interactions would have held even more significance for the author and her audience, given the scientific and cultural context of Eliot’s time period. By analyzing these touches against the backdrop of nineteenth-century social etiquette and the developing science of sensation, I intend to provide deepened insight into how and why Eliot centers meaning on her characters hands. I will ask questions like, how does Maggie’s tactile interactions spark her sexual consciousness? How does Eliot create ambiguous spaces of contact for Maggie to navigate passion, based on the etiquette of the day? What link does Eliot establish between haptic contact and remembering the past? It is also essential to consider what claim wins Maggie’s hand at the end of the novel and why. This topic could not go discussed without considering Eliot’s own private battle with duty and desire. “The Mill on the Floss is often called Eliot’s most autobiographical novel”; Eliot herself faced estrangement from her brother Isaac, when she chose to stay with her lover, G.H. Lewes, outside of wedlock (Henry 12). How does this personal history complicate the reader’s understanding of touch in The Mill on the Floss? I argue that through Maggie’s haptic interactions, Eliot ultimately sanctifies the claim of duty over desire, perhaps because she too experienced the hold of sacred responsibility on her own life.

Firstly, to analyze the claim of passion on Maggie’s life is to begin with her first touch with Stephen Guest in Book Sixth. Arguably, Maggie reaches a heightened state of sexual
consciousness, facilitated by the meeting of her and Stephen’s hands. In “‘At least shake hands:’ Tactile Relations” Cox argues that characters such as Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre and Anne Brontë’s Agnes Grey “reach a new level of sexual awareness through touch,” growing conscious of their own fleshly desires after touching the hands of their prospective lovers (Cox, “‘At least shake hands’” 9). I believe Maggie experiences these same effects after the couple’s hands first touch during their first day out together. Notably, when Maggie’s cousin Lucy introduces Maggie to her suitor, Stephen, he is taken aback by the “tall dark-eyed nymph with her jet-black coronet of hair” (Eliot 347). While he declares to Lucy that Maggie is “too tall…and a little too fiery,” his inner thoughts betray his emerging desire for her (Eliot 352). As the band of three go out boating on the River Floss, the narrator describes Stephen’s internal musings, centered on their haptic relationship:

...he walked to the boat-house calculating, by the aid of a vivid imagination, that Maggie must give him her hand at least twice in consequences of this pleasant boating plan, and that a gentleman who wishes ladies to look at him is advantageously situated when he is rowing them in a boat. What then? Had he fallen in love with this surprising daughter of Mrs. Tulliver at first sight? Certainly not. Such passions are never heard of in real life. Besides, he was in love already, and half-engaged to the dearest little creature in the world; and he was not a man to make a fool of himself in any way. But when one is five-and-twenty, one has not chalk-stones at one's finger-ends that the touch of a handsome girl should be entirely indifferent. It was perfectly natural and safe to admire beauty and enjoy looking at it, – at least under such circumstances as the present. (Eliot 352-353)

Significantly here, Stephen’s desire for Maggie finds locus in her hand. Calculating that she “must give him her hand at least twice,” Stephen actively anticipates when her fingers will meet his own. Clearly, he wants to touch her and to be touched by her. As Eliot’s narrator states, this is not because Stephen has necessarily fallen in love with Maggie at first sight, but rather because, “When one is five-and-twenty, one has not chalk-stones at one’s finger-ends that the touch of a handsome girl should be entirely indifferent.” Here, Eliot’s narrator slyly points to the
finger-ends as a potential source of romantic excitement for Stephen. Indeed, during the
nineteenth century scientists were beginning to pinpoint the fingers as sites of high nerve density,
leading to a cultural awareness of the hand as a site of potential sexual arousal. For example, in
Charles Bell’s *The Hand: Its Mechanism and Vital Endowment*, published in 1833 as part of the
Bridgewater Treatises, the anatomist describes the finger’s sensitivity:

…on a nearer inspection, we discover the points of the fingers a more particular provision
for adapting them to touch. Wherever the feeling is most exquisite, there we see minute
spiral ridges of the cuticle. These ridges have corresponding depressions on the inner
surface: and they, again, give lodgement to soft pulpy processes of the skin called
papillae, in which lie the extremities of the sentient nerves. (Bell 141)

Bell goes on to describe that human fingers are “sensible of every vibration” (Bell 156).
The German anatomist Georg Meissner made similar assertions about these “sentient nerves” of
the fingers in 1852. According to Cox, he found that “sensory receptors in the fingers and palms
differed from those in other parts of the body, affording hands a more refined sense of touch”
(Cox 93). Popular etiquette books and handbooks on hand-physiognomy and hand-phrenology
then popularized the knowledge that these sensory receptors, known as “Meissner’s corpuscles”
appear most densely in places of sexual arousal (Cox 93-94). Thus, hands became sexual

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20 The Earl of Bridgewater commissioned eight Bridgewater Treatises on his deathbed in
1829, to demonstrate the power of God in creation, at a time when evolutionary theory and
theology was coming into conflict. Eliot certainly read at least one of these treatises in 1841,
William Buckland’s *Geology and Mineralogy Considered With Reference to Natural Theology*
(Fleischman 8). Notably, she also alludes to the Bridgewater Treatises in Book Sixth, Chapter II
of *The Mill on the Floss*: “Did Lucy intend to be present at the meeting of the Book Club next
week? was the next question. Then followed the recommendation to choose Southey’s ‘Life of
Cowper,’ unless she were inclined to be philosophical and startle the ladies of St. Ogg’s by
voting for one of the Bridgewater Treatises” (Eliot 351). Both of these details signal her likely
awareness of Charles Bell’s *The Hand.*
appendages based on the skin’s intense capacity to feel “every vibration” or to experience erotic pleasure (Cox 30-31).

Given this context, Eliot’s audience would most likely have understood the subtext of the narrator’s tongue-in-cheek comment on Stephen’s finger-ends. As a twenty-five-year-old man, Stephen cannot help but feel something when he touches a handsome girl. Interestingly, the narrator then moves his commentary to the sense of sight: “It was perfectly natural and safe to admire beauty and enjoy looking at it – at least under the present circumstances.” Here, the narrator’s tone suggests a sense of danger. Despite his preceding comment on the hand, the narrator seems to imply that while there is no threat in looking at Maggie for Stephen in this present moment, the same cannot be said for touching her. Thus, the meeting of hands is underlined as a possible source of male excitement and stimulation, one that carries a greater potential for awakening desire in this instance than visual contact.

Much to Stephen’s satisfaction, the couple’s hands do meet while they are out boating—and this interaction’s effect on Maggie confirms that a young woman is not “entirely indifferent” to the touch of a young man either. Maggie, roused by the “rhythmic movement of the oars,” declares she will not be satisfied until she learns to row, and then slips while stepping out of the boat. Stephen readily comes to her rescue: “but happily Mr Stephen Guest held her hand, and kept her up with a firm grasp” (Eliot 353). The narrator notes Maggie’s reaction: “It was very charming to be taken care of in that kind graceful manner by some one taller and stronger than oneself: Maggie had never felt just this way before” (Eliot 353).

After this outing, Maggie spends the rest of the day at Park House with Stephen and Lucy, where Stephen entertains the ladies with songs from Henry Purcell’s The Tempest. When Maggie finally returns home that night, she appears corporeally impacted by the day’s events.
Alone in her bedroom, Maggie experiences a “strong excitement” (Eliot 354). The narrator describes her gestures and appearance: “Her eyes and cheeks had an almost feverish brilliancy; her head was thrown backward and her hands were clasped with the palms outward, and with that tension of the arms which is apt to accompany mental absorption” (Eliot 355). Notably, although Maggie is not actively contemplating her and Stephen’s first touch here – the narrator later describes her thoughts on “being looked at a great deal,” the delights of the music, and a “half-remote presence of a world of love and beauty”— her hands perhaps imitate the earlier haptic contact between the couple (Eliot 355). With her clasped hands and tense arms, “apt to accompany mental absorption” Maggie is arguably externally replicating and internally processing the earlier act of her hand in Stephen’s “firm grasp” (Eliot 353). Notably Maggie is also walking “up and down her room,” a movement that adds to the sexual undertones of this scene and perhaps mirrors the earlier rhythmic motion of the boat’s oars.

Maggie’s “excitement,” elevated body temperature, and flushed cheeks indicate her arousal, arguably catalyzed by the touch she now emulates. As Gillian M.E. Alban discusses in “From the Erotic Blush to the Petrifying Medusa Gaze in George Eliot’s Novels,” “Eliot uses the blush as a symbol of overwhelming passion” that accords with nineteenth century thinking on sexual desire (Alban 67, 74). As Alban highlights, in The Expressions of the Emotion in Man and Animal, “Darwin categorized blushing and flushing with their accompanying facial warmth as a response to shame, sexual consciousness or positive attention” (Alban 74). Given the scientific understanding of this blush, and the growing awareness of the hand as a site of erotic sensitivity, Maggie’s blush in relation to the behavior of her hands, speaks to her developing sexual consciousness. Thus, by taking Stephen’s hands, Maggie experiences the first touch of arousal, resulting in her corporeal alterations and, as we will see, initiating the couple’s amorous
relationship. Moreover, through this haptic interaction Eliot reveals that hands function as a site of sexual exploration for both men and women. This significantly challenges the gender constructions of Eliot’s time period. Indeed, Victorian women were supposed to be docile and delicate. In fact, “One doctor, William Acton, famously declared that ‘The majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind’” (Hughes, “Gender Roles in the 19th Century”). Not only does Eliot counter these assumptions through Maggie’s haptic characterization in this scene, but also through the act of her own hand, writing about male and female desire. As Gillian Beer discusses, “The prurient delicacy, the fear of representing, or of feeling what the other sex may feel, sees the woman writer’s entry into masculine sensation as a violation of woman’s delicacy (and an invasion of the club)” (Beer 106). By the time of the publication of The Mill on the Floss, Eliot’s true identity as a female novelist had been exposed.21 Thus, the author boldly violates the notion of a woman’s delicacy, and the theory of separate spheres, through erotic haptics.

Maggie’s erotic first handclasp with Stephen can be compared to the platonic first touch between her and her childhood friend Philip Wakem, as young adults. While both of these handclasps occur between a developing young woman and a young man, Maggie’s haptic interaction with Philip is devoid of sexual feeling for her. Maggie first meets Philip when she visits her brother Tom at school, since the boys are both studying under the tutelage of Mr. Stelling. Despite Tom’s initial dislike of Philip, Maggie treats him with kindly sympathy due to his deformity—Philip is a hunchback. Drawn to his entertaining stories of “great fighters,” Maggie develops a friendship with Philip who longs for a sister like her (Eliot 173). However,

21 For a discussion of Eliot’s anonymity until 1859, see Nancy Henry’s The Life of George Eliot, pp. 109-111.
when Maggie’s father becomes embroiled with Philip’s father, Mr. Wakem, over the ownership of Dorlcote Mill, Maggie and Philip’s friendship is jeopardized. Mr. Tulliver— and subsequently Tom— forbid any further contact between Maggie and Philip.

The next significant moment between the pair after these childhood days occurs while Maggie is out walking in the woods, known to her as the Red Deeps. Maggie is seventeen by this point, and has clearly blossomed into a young woman; “her broad chested figure has the mould of early womanhood…the eyes are liquid, the brown cheek is firm and round, the full lips are red” (Eliot 277). Becoming conscious of a shadow in the path before her as she walks, Maggie is startled to see Philip, “who first raised his hand, and then blushing deeply, came forward to her and put out his hand” (Eliot 277). The narrator notes Maggie’s reaction to his touch: “Maggie too, colored with surpr
[181x433]ise, which soon gave way to pleasure. She put out her hand and looked down at the deformed figure before her with frank eyes, filled for the moment with nothing but the memory of her child’s feelings – a memory that was always strong in her.” (Eliot 277-278).

While Philip’s blush likely signals his amorous desire, for Maggie the handclasp is distinctly unerotic. Maggie originally blushes out of surprise, not amorous desire. While this surprise gives way to pleasure, it is a pleasure tied to the memories of her childhood. As Maggie and Philip’s hands join and their eyes meet, the narrator describes that Maggie is “filled for the moment with nothing but the memory of her child’s feeling – a memory that was always strong in her.” For Maggie, the joint visual and haptic contact with Philip pulls her back to her past, most likely to her memories of meeting him as a young girl.

As the couple then walk through the Red Deeps together, Philip, who the reader discovers is in love with Maggie, expresses his desire to see her again. Maggie, torn between her care for Philip and her allegiance to her family against the Wakems, says she must bid him goodbye and
puts out her hand to him. Shortly after this moment of haptic interaction, Maggie and Philip speak of Maggie’s relationship with her brother Tom:

‘…I remember saying to you, that I thought you cared for me more than Tom did’
‘Ah Maggie,’ said Philip, almost fretfully, ‘you would never love me so well as you love your brother’
‘Perhaps not,’ said Maggie simply; ‘but then, you know the first thing I ever remember in my life is standing with Tom by the side of the Floss, while he held my hand; everything else is dark to me. But I shall never forget you – though we must keep apart’ (Eliot 285)

Here again, the touch between Maggie and Philip seems to precipitate a return to Maggie’s childhood memories. After Maggie touches Philip’s hand, she is drawn back to her first conscious recollection— that of holding her brother’s hand by the side of the River Floss.

This moment of haptic interaction, and Maggie’s resulting memory of her hand in Tom’s, speaks to the power of touch to evoke the past for Maggie, reminding her of her enduring familial duty to her brother. It also emphasizes her fraternal perceptions of Philip; to touch him is to naturally evoke the kinship tie between brother and sister. Thus, this handclasp between Maggie and Philip is one of sibling-like affection, rather than a desire-fueled moment of haptic contact. It is not until her arousing handclasp with Stephen, that Maggie experiences a heightened sexual consciousness for the first time.

Interestingly, the link Eliot establishes between haptic contact and remembering the past, may have ties to Herbert Spencer’s scientific theories on the formation of memory. Eliot was fascinated by biology, physiology and psychology and according to Michael Davis, author of George Eliot and Nineteenth-century Psychology, “Her concept of the mind/body relationships draws on the dynamic, relational models of mind, based on modern physiology, which were formulated by contemporary scientists” (Davis 12). While Spencer has fallen into relative obscurity today, “his ideas had a powerful impact in the developing science of mind” at the time.
of Eliot’s writing (Davis 69). Eliot met Spencer in August 1851, and was emotionally involved with the philosopher and sociologist until July of the following year, when Spencer rejected Eliot’s bold and unconventional expressions of love (Henry 67). Since Spencer was unable to return her feelings, Eliot instead asked for his companionship (Rose 201). They did indeed remain friends— in fact, it was the theorist who reintroduced her to G.H. Lewes in 1852 (Henry 69). Spencer became a frequent guest at the couple’s home for dinner, and Eliot read his work up until at least 1879, a year before her death. In 1875 she wrote, “Of Mr. Herbert Spencer's friendship I have had the honour and advantage for twenty years... Like the rest of his readers, I am of course indebted to him for much enlargement and clarifying of thought” (GEL 6:163-164). Indeed, Spencer makes an appearance in Eliot’s reading list twelve times between 1851 and 1860, the date of publication of The Mill on the Floss, revealing the impact of this friendship on her thinking. Most notably, Eliot reviewed his Principles of Psychology in 1855, and again in 1856, which includes a chapter dedicated to memory.

As Davis explicates, according to Spencer, knowledge is created through external impressions, and it is this accumulation of information that “constitutes an act of memory” (Davis 73). We receive “complicated combinations of impressions” through the senses, like the sense of touch, which “results from the stimulation of the nerves of the skin” (Spencer, Principles 559, 212). It is this stimulation of nerves that, in part, informs our recollection of an experience. Spencer’s discussion of sensation and memory in relation to music is particularly

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23 See Avrom Fleischman’s “George Eliot's Reading: A Chronological List.”
helpful when exploring this subject. He notes the importance of the muscular movement of bringing one’s fingers down on the keys of a piano. One actively recollects this haptic contact when one is learning to play the instrument, until the process becomes automatic and the motion itself is committed to “unconscious or organic memory” (Spencer, *Principles* 563). To play the piano then, is to consciously or subconsciously, recollect the original motion associated with playing. As Spencer discusses, “to remember a motion just made with the arm, is to feel a repetition, in a faint form, of those internal states which accompanied the motion” (Spencer, *Principles* 559). When one touches the keys, it is to actively or passively, remember one’s first touch. Thus, it is interesting to consider how these theories on the relationship between sensation and memory might illuminate haptic relations in *The Mill on the Floss*. For Maggie, to see and touch the hand of Philip, is to naturally evoke the first memories of their meeting in childhood. To hold Philip’s hand, whom she views fraternally, in the Red Deeps, precipitates a recollection of her very first memory – of holding hands with her brother Tom on the riverbank. Thus, one experience, tied to the senses, simultaneously evokes the experience of the original muscular motion.

As Philip’s fraternal touch pulls Maggie back to her history, specifically to her bond with her brother Tom, Stephen’s sexually charged touch is distinctly new – the narrator describes that Maggie had “never felt just this way before” after their first handclasp (Eliot 353). It is this newly experienced erotic touch that in fact jeopardizes Maggie’s memory of the past, as it facilitates a deeper physical and emotional consciousness between the couple. This is visible

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25 Notably, as a pianist, Eliot would have been familiar with this process (Correa 4).
when Stephen unexpectedly visits Maggie at the Deane’s home in Chapter VI of Book Fifth, entitled “Illustrating the Laws of Attraction.” The following scene unfolds as Stephen walks with Maggie into the garden:

‘Do take my arm,’ he said, in a low tone, as if it were a secret. There is something strangely winning to most women in that offer of the firm arm: the help is not wanted physically at that moment, but the sense of help – the presence of strength that is outside them and yet theirs meets a continual want of the imagination. Either on that ground or some other, Maggie took the arm. And they walked together round the grassplot and under the drooping green of the laburnums, in the same dim, dreamy state as they had been in a quarter of an hour before; only that Stephen had had the look he longed for, without yet perceiving in himself the symptoms of returning reasonableness, and Maggie had darting thoughts across the dimness, – how came he to be there? Why had she come out? Not a word was spoken. If it had been, each would have been less intensely conscious of the other. (Eliot 377)

Firstly, it is important to discuss the sexually charged nature of this haptic contact. By describing Stephen’s offered arm as a “secret” the narrator immediately suggests the covert, romantic undertones to this gesture. Stephen’s offered arm is even more suggestive when read through the lens of nineteenth-century hand etiquette. The proffering and acceptance of an arm was no flippant gesture in Eliot’s time. As one pocket etiquette manual underscores, “There are a hundred little things connected with attitude, movement, the carriage of the arms…” (Marr 42). Etiquette manuals offered meticulous recommendations for correct conduct in polite society, from instructions on which lady should take which gentleman’s arm when coming down for dinner, based on status, to whether the left or right arm should be offered to an unmarried woman when escorting her from room to room (the left was preferred) (Etiquette for the Ladies 43 and The Gentleman’s Manual of Modern Etiquette 49). The strict haptic regulation expressed in these manuals was tied to a desire to regulate sexual expression. According to Victorian scholar John Kucich, nineteenth-century culture valued “silenced or negated feeling over affirmed feeling, and the corresponding cultural prohibitions placed on display, disclosure, confession, assertion”
This devaluing and interdiction of open sexual expression meant that Eliot inhabited a world of coded affection—thus, even the offering of an arm was a deeply coded gesture. Given the developing science on the hand as a potential area of erotic contact, etiquette manuals increasingly attempted to regulate its movement during the nineteenth-century. According to one etiquette manual published in 1845 entitled *Etiquette for Ladies; A Manual of the Most Approved Rules of Conduct in Polished Society for Married and Unmarried Ladies*, “An unmarried lady should not take the arm of an unmarried gentleman (unless at night, or when the pavement is slippery;) if she takes his arm, it is to be presumed that she is engaged to him” (*Etiquette for Ladies*, 26). While this is a more stringent example of suggested conduct, it highlights the gravity associated with haptic contact. Walking arm in arm runs the risk of touching hands, and thus presumably exciting illicit sexual feeling between an unmarried couple.

Given this significance attached to an offered arm, Eliot sets up an ambiguous space for this form of haptic contact between an unengaged single woman and an engaged man. Maggie and Stephen are touching outside the bounds of a structured social environment and well past decent visiting hours. Indeed, if Stephen were to offer his arm to anyone at this time, it should be Lucy. Right before this scene, the narrator describes the haptic nature of Lucy and Stephen’s relationship: “…it was Lucy by whom Stephen sat, to whom he gave his arm” (Eliot 372). Naturally, Lucy takes Stephen’s offered arm because the pair have been courting and are now engaged. Thus, by offering and taking his arm in the garden, both Stephen and Maggie enter into murky moral territory.

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26 See Cox’s dissertation, Chapter I and II, for a discussion of the development of etiquette manuals. Cox argues that the silence on the subject of physical interaction in eighteenth-century conduct manuals gave rise to explicit policing in nineteenth-century ones.
Walking arm and arm, in a “dim, dreamy state,” this erotically charged touch seems to precipitate a state of dampened awareness for Maggie. Questions dart across her mind as she attempts to look for clarity and reason—“how came he to be there? Why had she come out?” This touch seems to damage Maggie’s memory, for as long as she holds Stephen’s arm she cannot remember how she arrived in the garden. This moment speaks to Stephen’s greater ability to jeopardize Maggie’s recollection of her past and thus her duty to it, through his haptic contact. As Phyllis Joyce Catsikis argues, this dream-state, “threatens her loss of reality, risking her sense of self and so her ties to the past and family indicated throughout the novel” (Catsikis 131). Thus, building on Ashton’s argument that sexual attraction and prior duties are at odds in *The Mill on the Floss*, by compromising Maggie’s memory, Stephen’s touch more deeply threatens her responsibility to her past ties and affections.

As this haptic interaction jeopardizes Maggie’s historic allegiances, it simultaneously heightens the physical and emotional tie between the couple. In her dissertation, *When Hands Touch: Manual Intercourse in Victorian Literature*, Kimberly Cox proposes the term “manual intercourse” to express this idea. She defines this term as “a specific mode of haptic exchange,” where intercourse speaks to both its social and sexual senses (Cox 3-4). Manual intercourse is “the physical communication of a character’s innermost desires, sympathies, and aversions through various forms of tactile contact made by the hands whether in a social or private setting” (Cox 3, 5). This manual intercourse can function as a form of extra-linguistic communication in itself, facilitating “physical, emotional and psychological connectedness” (Cox 104). The manual intercourse between Stephen and Maggie certainly fosters a deepened emotional consciousness between the couple. The narrator states, “Not a word was spoken. If it had been, each would have been less intensely conscious of the other” (Eliot 377). The fact that Maggie and Stephen
are “intensely conscious” as they touch one another, indicates an acute understanding between them. Their tactile connection has fostered a profound internal one—a connection that no word has the capacity to create.

In fact, when Stephen does speak, telling Maggie to “‘take care of this step,’” the moment is lost, and withdrawing her arm, Maggie runs back to the house. Indeed, as soon as Maggie breaks contact with Stephen, she seems to regain full access to “the embarrassing recollections of the last half-hour” and bursts into tears (Eliot 377). Maggie’s misery after she leaves Stephen confirms her awareness of their intimacy—an intimacy communicated and enriched by a touch that has the potential to wound her cousin Lucy, whom she is devoted to, and her friend Philip, who longs to marry her. She suddenly returns to a past memory, stating, “Philip, I wish we were together again—so quietly— in the Red Deeps.” The use of “quietly” in this line is particularly interesting. Stephen and Maggie have just been walking in silence, and yet she longs for peace. Thus, despite the absence of auditory communication in this moment, Stephen’s touch seems to speak to Maggie as loudly as words. Moreover, this moment of manual intercourse is an overwhelmingly stimulating and expressive experience, one that simultaneously emotionally unites the couple and divides Maggie, by compromising her memory and thus jeopardizing her attachment to her past. Indeed, confronted by this manual intercourse, Maggie instead longs for the gentle touch of one who draws her back to her prior ties and affections.

Maggie and Stephen continue to navigate their romantic relationship through their hands as the novel progresses. The next major moment of haptic interaction between the couple occurs during the dance at Park House, when Stephen fixates upon, clasps and kisses Maggie’s arm in the conservatory. As Helena Michie, author of The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women’s Bodies, argues, “Victorian novels are frequently about women’s hands: hands that
stand for hearts…They form a synecdochal chain where the heart presented by the hand is in itself a synecdoche for more obviously sexual parts of the body” (Michie 98). Eliot certainly uses this form of synecdoche, as Maggie’s bare arm becomes a symbol for her full naked body for Stephen. As Michie discusses, before the dance, Maggie’s Aunt Pullet cannot alter Maggie’s dress to fit her large, round arms and, “as a consequence, Maggie wears short sleeves, and her arms, visible to the world and to the reader, become representative to Stephen both of his desire for Maggie and of her desirability” (Michie 99). Indeed, as the evening proceeds, Stephen invites Maggie to take a stroll through the conservatory and as she smells the roses, he becomes infatuated with her arm. The narrator states:

Stephen was mute; he was incapable of putting a sentence together, and Maggie bent her arm a little upward towards the large half-opened rose that had attracted her. Who has not felt the beauty of a woman’s arm? – the unspeakable suggestions of tenderness that lie in the dimpled elbow, and all the varied gently-lessening curves down to the delicate wrist, with its tiniest, almost imperceptible nicks in the firm softness…A mad impulse seized on Stephen; he darted towards the arm, showering kisses on it, clasping the wrist. (Eliot 409)

“Mute” and “incapable of putting a sentence together,” Stephen’s capacity to speak is overpowered by Maggie’s soft, delicate arms. Here, it is as if Maggie’s arm represents her body as a whole– the “gently-lessening curves” perhaps reflecting the sensual curves of her hips or thighs and the delicate wrist resembling her waist. Stephen’s attraction to her bare arm likely symbolizes his desire for her full naked body– “the unspeakable suggestions of tenderness” that lie in Maggie’s elbow, perhaps hinting at deeper amorous secrets that cannot be spoken aloud in public. Notably, this sexual tension builds to a maddening extent, and Stephen loses all control, “darting towards the arm, showering kisses on it, clasping the wrist.” Unlike the scene in the garden, where Stephen at least asks Maggie to take his arm, here he undoubtedly breaks all forms
of etiquette by seizing hers. “Clasp” particularly underlines Stephen’s desire to take hold of Maggie’s body with force; he longs to attach himself to her completely.

Coupled with the synecdochic importance of Maggie’s arm, this interaction facilitates an important physical and emotional exchange between the couple, visible in Maggie’s reaction to their contact. When Stephen kisses and clasps her arm, Maggie reacts extremely violently—snatching her arm away and glaring at him “like a wounded war-goddess” (Eliot 409). She is “deeply-shaken” and runs to an adjoining room, throwing her body on a sofa “panting” and “trembling” (Eliot 409). Here, Stephen’s loud act of passion is clearly inappropriate, particularly in a culture that prohibits overt display (Kucich 3). Yet, Maggie’s deeply insulted honor and traumatic corporeal reaction seems to mirror that of someone who has been physically penetrated, not just showered with kisses and grabbed by the wrist. Thus, Stephen’s violation of her arm carries as much weight as a violation of her full body, signaling a mutual understanding between the couple of what her arm and his touch might well represent: Maggie’s virginity and Stephen’s desire to take it. Given the developing science on the hand as a site of erotic stimulation, this manual intercourse also acts as a clear erotic encounter in itself. Thus, it both functions as a sexual act and symbolizes the desire for and possibility of a more intimate sexual union. Though no words are spoken, Stephen’s touch powerfully expresses and indulges his desire, heightening Maggie’s physical and emotional awareness of his carnal passion for her.

Maggie, as we have seen, is deeply impacted by this encounter. After throwing herself on the sofa, the narrator states, “That momentary happiness had been smitten with a blight— a leprosy: Stephen thought more lightly of her than he did of Lucy” (Eliot 409). Here, Maggie implies that to Stephen, unlike the virtuous Lucy, she is someone he can touch at will. To Maggie, his liberal haptic contact suggests his perception of her moral licentiousness.
Significantly, Eliot chooses to use “leprosy,” a term with loaded biblical connotations, to characterize the destruction of Maggie’s happiness as she reels from this scandalous touch and its implications. For the ancient Israelites in the Old Testament, this disease was considered to be a punishment for sin. Associated with moral uncleanness and ritual impurity, this withering of the limbs would lead to a sufferer’s exclusion from the community (Grzybowski 3-4). Thus, as this moment is “smitten with a blight,” it is as if Maggie’s skin has been metaphorically infected by Stephen’s touch, a touch that runs the risk of exiling her from the people she holds closest. Thus, through this biblical lens, Stephen’s haptic contact is characterized as distinctly sacrilegious.

After fleeing Stephen, Maggie is bent on rising above this profane haptic contact and severing her relationship with him. She declares, “‘Leave me to myself, if you please…and in future avoid me’” (Eliot 409). Re-entering the ballroom, Maggie feels confident in her rejection of this attraction and in fact affirms her duty to the past the next morning. Indeed, by this point, Maggie, who cares deeply for Philip, has contemplated marrying him. However, recognizing that this union will compromise her relationship with Tom, who carries his father’s bitter resentment against the Wakem family, Maggie decides to leave St. Ogg’s for a position as a governess. Sitting in the garden with Philip, she tells him she must leave and says: “‘I desire no future that will break the ties of the past. But the tie to my brother is one of the strongest. I can do nothing willingly that will divide me always from him’” (Eliot 411). This assertion arguably works on multiple levels. Firstly here, Maggie gently tells her childhood friend that she cannot marry him if it means a separation with her brother, Tom. Given the context of Maggie’s recent haptic interaction with Stephen in the conservatory, and the fact that Philip is continually characterized as a fraternal figure, Maggie may also be suggesting her desire to cut off a potential future with
Stephen, to honor her fraternal bond to Philip. Thus, she is leaving St. Ogg’s to escape two potential unions that would divide her from the past.

Notably, in the course of this conversation, the narrator describes the pair’s haptic interaction. Unlike Stephen’s seizure of her arm, this touch is fully facilitated by Maggie: “A keen remembrance and keen pity impelled Maggie to put her hand in Philip’s. They had so often walked hand in hand!” (Eliot 410). Here, Philip’s hand continues to function as an embodiment of her historic devotion, as she feels impelled to touch him out of “keen remembrance.” As we have seen, his touch is connected to Maggie’s childhood memories; his fraternal clasp linked to Maggie’s attachment to her brother. Thus, by rejecting Stephen’s scandalous, leprous touch, and actively reaching for Philip’s hand, Maggie corporeally affirms her devotion to her historic ties, while affirming them aloud.

However, despite Maggie’s attempts to break contact with Stephen, she finds herself continuing to painfully navigate duty and desire through her hands. Her passion for him is exposed through her haptic behavior. Four days after the encounter in the conservatory, Stephen comes to visit Maggie at her Aunt Moss’s. Apologizing for his earlier offensive actions, Stephen proclaims that he is madly in love with her. Maggie entreats him to leave, but Stephen begs for her forgiveness and her affection. The narrator describes the scene between the couple in the lane:

‘Take my arm,’ said Stephen, entreatingly; and she took it, feeling all the while as if she were sliding downward in a nightmare.
‘There is no end to this misery,’ she began, struggling to repel the influence by speech. ‘It is wicked–base–ever allowing a word or look that Lucy–that others might not have seen. Think of Lucy.’
‘I do think of her–bless her. If I didn’t –’ Stephen had laid his hand on Maggie's that rested on his arm, and they both felt it difficult to speak. (Eliot 414)

Here, the manual intercourse between the couple reveals Maggie’s enduring ties to Stephen.
Despite recognizing the danger of this haptic contact—Maggie feels like she is “sliding downward into a nightmare”—she still chooses to take Stephen’s arm. This decision confirms that she is just as attracted to Stephen as he is to her. Indeed, by taking his arm, Maggie again enters into a morally ambiguous space of physical and emotional intimacy. This touch produces a connection between the couple that silences auditory communication; as Stephen lays his hand on the arm resting on his own, the couple find it difficult to speak. Nineteenth-century readers would have recognized the depth of affection and desire communicated through this gesture. As A Manual of the Etiquette of Love, Courtship and Marriage describes, during the first days of love, no female heart can forget “the silent walk when both their hearts were too full to admit of conversation—when they read each other’s meaning in the glance of love, and in the pressure of the hand…” (A Manual of the Etiquette of Love, Courtship and Marriage 30). Thus, as both Stephen and Maggie find it difficult to speak as their hands touch, there is mutual affirmation and communication of their desire for one another through their manual intercourse.

While Maggie decides to reject Stephen’s proposal in the lane, it is not until the last two chapters of Book Sixth, “Borne Along by the Tide” and “Waking” that this painful conflict comes to a head. After Stephen’s exclamations of love, Maggie meets him once again at Park House, where Lucy plans for Maggie, Philip and her to go out boating. However, observing Stephen’s rude behavior towards Maggie, and Maggie’s blushed cheeks directed towards Stephen, Philip suspects their underlying relationship. He excuses himself from the outing the next day, claiming ill health, and asks Stephen to go in his place. Lucy, who decides to accompany her father to town instead of joining the duo, then sends Stephen to the awaiting and unknowing Maggie. When Stephen arrives at her door, Maggie is startled and agitated. She protests the outing, “taking off her bonnet with hurried, trembling fingers. ‘We must not go’”
(Eliot 429). Here, clearly overpowered by conflicting emotions, Maggie’s trembling fingers speak to her oscillating desires. She lacks authoritative corporeal control over her hand, and thus control over who her hand touches— or where her duty lies. There is an internal battle going on between her hold of the past and her embrace of attraction.

Indeed, as soon as Maggie’s fingers cease trembling, “a warm glow” appears on her cheeks, suggesting the advancing power of desire over her (Eliot 429). In this precarious, aroused state, Stephen takes her hands, leads her down the garden path and “with firm tender care,” helps Maggie into the boat. As she feels the touch of Stephen’s fingers, the narrator states, “Memory was excluded” (Eliot 430). Memory, almost personified in this context, is like a character left behind on the shore as the couple set out. Indeed, without Memory, Maggie’s rational thought process and awareness is compromised, and she finds herself entering into “an enchanted state,” gliding along the tide. Again, under the influence of his strong, gentle grip, Maggie’s grasp on her historic allegiances loosens.

As the boat continues downriver, Stephen proposes marriage once more, drawing Maggie’s hands towards him (Eliot 431). Maggie protests, “trying to get her hands free,” and vocally rejects his advances (Eliot 431). As Stephen pleads, Maggie cannot bear to think of him suffering and the narrator states: “Maggie was paralysed” (Eliot 432). Stephen then finds passage for the couple on a boat bound for Mudport where he intends to marry her. In her confused state, Maggie gradually only becomes aware of “the hand that pressed hers, and the voice that spoke to her, and the eyes that looked at her with grave unspeakable love” (Eliot 435). She falls asleep, Stephen “seated by her, hanging over her as he leaned his arm against the vessel’s side” (Eliot 435). Here, in this physical and metaphorical battle for Maggie’s hand, Maggie experiences both corporeal and emotional paralysis. As she succumbs to Stephen’s passionate touch, and her own
desire, she gradually loses control of her hand, first in Stephen’s grasp, and then as she falls asleep by his side, his arm presumably over her. Maggie’s body, and more specifically her hands, become passive recipients of his touch. Only aware of Stephen’s hand—“the hand that pressed hers”—it is as if Maggie has forgotten the touch of Philip or Tom. What’s more, given the erotic significance of touching hands, and the synecdochic symbolism of Maggie’s arm, this haptic interaction before she falls asleep may arguably communicate a sex act between the couple to a nineteenth-century audience. Overcome by her own desire for Stephen and by Stephen’s desire for her, Maggie has potentially permitted a consummation of their relationship as he presses her hand. Thus, through Maggie’s loss of control over her hands, Eliot underscores the overwhelming power of “instinctive attraction.” Despite Maggie’s attempts to break free from Stephen’s hold, this passion is paralyzing and leads to her estrangement from her sense of “prior duty,” and to a possible consummation of their relationship (Ashton, George Eliot 42).

What releases Maggie from this corporeal paralysis? What or who gains control over her hands? To answer these questions, it is essential to note the dream Maggie has while sleeping next to Stephen, and her proceeding haptic behavior. This dream is notably inspired by the legend of St. Ogg’s, which the narrator recounts earlier in Book First. This legend tells the story of Ogg, the son of Beorl, who ferried a poor woman and her child across the River Floss. This woman was actually the Virgin Mother, who, in return for Ogg’s generosity, blessed his boat with divine protection. When he died, “it was witnessed in the floods of aftertide, that at the coming of an eventide, Ogg the son of Beorl was always seen with his boat upon the wide-spreading waters, and the Blessed Virgin sat in the prow, shedding a light around…” (Eliot 111). As Maggie lies in the boat with Stephen, she dreams of this mystical vessel:

She was in a boat on the wide water with Stephen, and in the gathering darkness something like a star appeared, that grew and grew till it was the Virgin seated at St.
Ogg’s boat, and it came nearer and nearer, till they saw the Virgin was Lucy and the boatman was Philip – no not Philip, but her brother who rowed past without looking at her; and she rose to stretch out her arms to call to him, and their boat turned over with the movement, and they began to sink…” (Eliot 437)

Here, Maggie’s allegiance to her past resurfaces in the figures of Lucy, as the Virgin, Tom, as the boatman, and Philip, who Maggie first believes to be boatman. Since this legend is embedded within the collective memory of St. Ogg’s, this dream is both one of ancient communal history and personal significance to her. Notably, when she sees her brother, the boatman, Maggie stretches out her arms to him. Thus, while Maggie is limited to a conscious awareness of Stephen’s hand pressing hers as she glides down the river, she returns to the “unconscious or organic memory” in her dream of reaching out to touch Tom (Spencer, *Principles* 563). Here, it is as if Maggie affirms her longing for “no future that will break the ties of the past” through her unconscious haptic behavior, as she attempts to grasp her brother’s hand in her dream (Eliot 411). It is the severance of this potential contact– as the dream boat begins to sink, and she cannot reach Tom’s arms– which stirs Maggie to wakefulness, and suddenly urges “the terrible truth” upon her (Eliot 436). Realizing that she could never be with Stephen if it means the “murdered trusts and hopes” of Lucy and Philip, Maggie makes the decision that she must break ties with him (Eliot 436). As the day dawns, she feels the clutch of her past around her. Here, excluded Memory seems to return, depicted much like a rescuing hand: “Daybreak came and the reddening eastern light, while her past life was grasping her in this way, with the tightening clutch which comes in the last moments of possible rescue” (Eliot 437).

Indeed, through this renewed contact with her past– manifest in the dream of reaching out to touch Tom, and symbolized by the greater hand of Memory clutching her– Maggie progressively regains power over her own hand, and thus over where her duty lies. This
reclamation of Maggie’s haptic agency is visible in the couple’s last conversation together. As the boat comes into port and Stephen sits beside her, Maggie “let him take her hand,” (Eliot 437 emphasis added). “Let” suggests a greater measure of control than when Stephen originally takes her hand to lead her onto the boat. Maggie then tells Stephen that they must part. While he grasps her hand, the narrator notes, “this direct opposition helped her. She felt her determination growing stronger” (Eliot 440). While Stephen’s touch previously produced a passive state in Maggie, his touch now elicits an active determination to end the union. To Stephen’s anguish and anger, Maggie then proclaims her allegiance to Lucy, Philip and Tom that keeps her from marrying him: “‘If the past is not to bind us, where can duty lie?’” (Eliot 440). Stephen protests: “‘It weighs nothing to you that you are robbing me of my life’s happiness’” (Eliot 442). Clearly, Maggie is corporeally impacted by Stephen’s grief; the narrator notes that she “pressed her fingers together almost convulsively as she held them clasped on her lap” (Eliot 442). *Convulsively* implies that this action is violent. Maggie’s body seems to be writhing against her decision to reject the man she loves. This behavior may again draw on Herbert Spencer’s theories of the mind/body connection, articulated in *First Principles*. Eliot read this work in 1860 (Fleischman 37), most likely before the April publication of *The Mill on the Floss*, since Spencer first distributed his material in March (Spencer, *First Principles* ix). As Spencer describes, the body affects the status of emotions, just as the emotions affect the behavior of the body. “Modes of consciousness,” as he describes, are produced in us by physical forces, just as “modes of consciousness” induce muscular action: “as the emotions rise in strength, the muscles of the face, body and limbs, begin to move…we see that whatever be the kind of emotion, there is a manifest relation between its amount, and the amount of muscular action induced” (Spencer, *First Principles*, 214). Thus, Maggie’s tense physical reaction speaks to this relationship between the
mental and physical forces. Her outward muscular tension naturally betrays her underlying inner emotional stress.

However, by pressing her fingers together, Maggie simultaneously seems to be attempting to close her body off to Stephen or to cut off the intimate communication that their touch fosters. Stephen counters this motion by drawing Maggie back to him through manual intercourse: “‘Dearest,’ he said in his deepest, tenderest tone, leaning towards her, and putting his arm round her, you are mine now’” (Eliot 443). Here, Stephen asserts corporeal ownership over Maggie, using his arm to affirm their intimate emotional and physical bond. Since the couple have spent the night together on the boat, he implies that they are now bound by their presumed— or as I argue, very real— sexual union, both openly through his words and physically with his body. His arm around her signals their erotic attachment. To further confirm this, he then grasps Maggie’s arm in a fit of passion (Eliot 443). However, Maggie refuses his touch: “‘Dear, dear Stephen, let me go! – don’t drag me into deeper remorse. My whole soul has never consented – it does not consent now’” (Eliot 444). Finally, in the climax of this conflict, Stephen lets go of Maggie’s arm and asks her to leave him. This corporeal release, induced by Maggie, signals the disintegration of the couple’s relationship. Maggie is finally able to part with her lover and go home.

By physically severing this haptic contact with Stephen, Maggie fully takes hold of her duty to the past— something her “whole soul” could never fully relinquish, even when overwhelmed by her passionate desire. Maggie chooses to return to her past ties and affections: “Home– where her mother and brother were– Philip– Lucy– the scene of her very cares and trials – was the haven towards which her mind tended– the sanctuary where sacred relics lay– where she would be rescued from falling” (Eliot 444). Notably, Eliot venerates Maggie’s duty to the
past by characterizing her home as “the sanctuary where sacred relics lay.” It is this sanctuary of holy memory that Maggie believes will rescue her from falling, or succumbing to the temptation of choosing Stephen, much like the hand of Memory reaches for her after her dream on the riverboat. Eliot saturates Maggie’s past life in a language of holiness. Consequently, while Stephen’s leprous touch threatens to corrupt Maggie’s moral integrity, the sacred touch of the past promises deliverance.

However, despite Maggie’s choice to reject the hand of Stephen to honor her past ties, her moral integrity has been compromised in the eyes of her community and her brother. As Book Seventh begins, St. Ogg’s passes judgement on Maggie’s “unwomanly boldness and unbridled passion” (Eliot 455). By returning “without a trousseau, without a husband,” Maggie has entered into a “degraded and outcast condition” to the people of St. Ogg’s (Eliot 454). Tom Tulliver similarly scorns his sister’s behavior: “Would the news be that she was married – or what? Probably not married; Tom’s mind was set to the expectation of the worst that could happen – not death, but disgrace” (Eliot 447). As Maggie returns and approaches Dorlcote mill, she knowingly fears her brother’s reaction to her supposed elopement. It is important to note that Maggie’s sense of duty to the past is not an easy burden to bear. It comes with intense trepidation: “Her brother was the human being of whom she had always been most afraid, from her childhood upwards…that deep-rooted fear was shaking Maggie now” (Eliot 447). Indeed, when Maggie returns home, these “deep-rooted fears” are justified, as she is greeted with “disgust and indignation” (Eliot 447-448). On seeing Maggie, Tom rebukes her completely:

‘You will find no home with me,’ he answered, with tremulous rage. ‘You have disgraced us all. You have discarded my father’s name. You have been a curse to your best friends. You have been base – deceitful; no motives are strong enough to restrain you. I wash my hands of you forever. You don’t belong to me’ (Eliot 448).
In this passage, we again see a return of biblical hand imagery. Particularly in the Old Testament, washing one’s hands functioned as a sin-cleansing ritual (Burdick 106). By stating “‘I wash my hands of you forever,’” Tom is physically and emotionally breaking contact with Maggie to separate himself from her presumably unclean touch. Since Maggie is metaphorically infected by the leprous hand of Stephen, she faces exile at the hands of her brother who renounces their tie: “You don’t belong to me.”

Forced out of her family home by Tom, Maggie takes refuge with Bob Jakin, a kindly family friend, and becomes a governess to the children of Dr. Kenn, the parish priest. Despite reconciling with Lucy and Philip, Maggie wrestles with feelings of desolation as Tom refuses to accept her (Eliot 475). However, ultimately her bond with and duty to her past proves unbreakable, revealed by the reconciliation with her brother in the final scene of Chapter V, Book Seventh. Notably, before this reunion, Maggie receives a letter from Stephen, once again asking for her love. For hours, she struggles: “And here—close within her reach—urging itself upon her even as a claim—was another future, in which hard endurance and effort were to be exchanged for easy delicious leaning on another’s loving strength” (Eliot 476). Here, through the act of letter writing, Stephen’s hand of passion imaginatively resurfaces. Maggie envisions “leaning on another’s loving strength,” evoking the image of his offered arm, again within her reach.

However, Maggie once more decides to eternally reject his outstretched hand in order to honor her family, however painful the decision is: “I will bear it, and bear it till death” (Eliot 477). It is at this moment, on her knees in despair, that Maggie feels “a startling sensation of sudden cold” (Eliot 477). After incessant rains, the Floss has burst its banks and begins to flood the nearby houses. After waking Bob Jakin and getting his family to safety, Maggie springs to
action, taking their boat and rowing to Dorlcote Mill. Here, she is reunited with her brother Tom and rescues him from the flooded house. Tragically, these are their last moments together. As huge fragments of wooden machinery from the wharf come hurtling towards brother and sister in the current, the two clasp each other in the row boat: “It is coming, Maggie! Tom said, in a deep hoarse voice, loosing the oars and clasping her.” (Eliot 483). The narrator describes their final embrace:

The boat reappeared – but brother and sister had gone down in an embrace never to be parted: living through again in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love, and roamed the daisied fields together. (Eliot 483)

Here, Eliot affirms Maggie’s ultimate duty to her past ties and affections over her passion for Stephen, as her hands find their final rest in Tom’s embrace. As they hold hands, the pair experience a return to Maggie’s first conscious memory, living through “in one supreme moment the days when they had clasped their little hands in love.” Thus, returning to Herbert Spencer’s theories, this touch again evokes the muscular motion of their first clasp. The pair feel “a repetition” so to speak, “of those internal states which accompanied the motion,” as their embrace pulls them back to the experience of the original sensation (Spencer, Principles 559). Brother and sister are now fully reconciled, and brought back to their childhood union. As Gillian Beer argues, “in the end it is blood-bond and primitive memory that hold her,” and this hold is as much physical as it is metaphorical (Beer 92).

Consequently, for Maggie, choosing to clutch the hand of Tom is choosing to cling to history and memory, and ultimately to hold onto her sense of duty. It is this clasp that Eliot consecrates in the waters of the Floss. While Tom previously washed his hands of his sister, her skin contaminated by Stephen’s leprous touch, their clasp is now arguably a baptismal cleansing in the rushing river. Maggie and Tom, “found in close embrace” after the flood, are then buried
together with the words on their tomb, “In their death they were not divided” (Eliot 484).

Notably, this is the epigraph to the whole of Eliot’s novel, and refers to David’s lamentation for Saul and Johnathon, in 2 Samuel 1:23. As Mary Jean Corbett argues, this epitaph, “invokes the brother sister-bond, and, more explicitly, the loving tie of Jonathan and David – friends, soldiers and brothers (-in-law)” (Corbett 116). Biblically, the David and Jonathan relationship is one of covenantal significance.27 Thus, the handclasp between brother and sister—“never to be parted,” even in death—affirms the unbreakable, covenantal nature of first family bonds. Like the relationship between David and Jonathan, this relationship is equally sacred. Thus, Maggie and Tom’s haptic interaction is deeply imbued with a sanctified, shared history. Here, Eliot once again reconstructs the sacred hand, transforming it from the hand devoted to and sanctified by faith in “Janet’s Repentance,” to the hand hallowed by its devotion to sacred, rural work in Adam Bede, to the hand devoted to and sanctified by an enduring duty to the past. Thus, by tracing Maggie’s hands, the hands that touch hers, and the hands she chooses to touch, the reader not only gains insight into how Eliot’s protagonist navigates this conflict but also where the author imbues sanctity. In The Mill on the Floss, it is ultimately duty, over desire, that possesses the sacred touch.

However, it is also important to address the fact that Maggie’s hands are only reconciled with Tom’s on the verge of death. Indeed, the two drown in each other’s arms. What does it mean that Maggie dies rather than lives, as she clutches her brother? To decipher how this dead embrace complicates the reader’s understanding of sacred duty, it is useful to consider Gillian Beer’s reading of the ending:

Maggie drowns. She sloughs off compromise. The narrative finally rejects the form of Bildungsroman, in which the growing ego of a young man comes to terms with the

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27 See 1 Sam.18:3.
society in which it dwells and accepts both attrition and continuity. Maggie’s *Bildung* takes her only to the point where she knows that there is no place for her in her own community, since she has rowed with Stephen and returned not married to him. All would have been forgiven in time if they had married. But her individualistic insistence on old attachments, not on social forms, puts her irrevocably at odds with the codes by which her community is conditioned, despite their lip-service to kinship. (Beer 98-99)

Here, Beer underscores that Maggie’s “individualistic insistence on old attachments” conflicts with the social codes of her community. Indeed, if Maggie had accepted Stephen’s hand in marriage— if she had returned with a trousseau and a husband, after he pressed her hand on the boat ride— all would have been forgiven. However, Maggie chooses the hand of her brother over the hand of Stephen, putting “her irrevocably at odds” with the rest of her social world. Thus, for Maggie, as a young, unmarried and socially degraded woman, honoring her own sacred duty at the expense of obeying social codes means an inevitable death, as it places her outside the bounds of communal acceptance. Duty, then, can be as sacrificial as it is sacred, as ostracizing as it is sanctifying.

Significantly, this winning claim of sacred duty in the final chapter of *The Mill on the Floss* necessitates a discussion of Eliot’s own battle with duty and desire. Eliot “wrote about the experience of writing the novel as mining the layers of her past” (Henry 12). The autobiographical nature of the novel is largely attributed to the fact that Eliot, much like Maggie, was cut off by her brother Isaac, due to her unconventional and, by nineteenth-century standards, adulterous relationship. Since Lewes was married but unable to separate from his wife, he and Eliot lived together outside of marriage. After Eliot confirmed “this non-legal union with Lewes” to Isaac via letter in 1857, further confirming “his suspicions of his wayward sister,” she

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28 Her “Brother and Sister” sonnets, published nine years after *The Mill on the Floss*, “treat some of the same events of her childhood” (Henry 12).
received no further word from him ("The Mill on the Floss:” A Natural History, Ashton 79). Thus, “By the time The Mill was published in April 1860, Eliot’s estrangement from her past [had] become a settled fact” (Henry 116).

According to Beer, this rupture between brother and sister, “form a complete and punctuated story on which, painfully, she continued to look back” (Beer 94). This is certainly visible when we consider the evidence presented in letters and journal entries, concerning Eliot’s thoughts and behaviors while writing The Mill on the Floss. In March, 1860, as Eliot was finishing the ending of her novel, G.H. Lewes wrote to John Blackwood, Eliot’s publisher:

Mrs. Lewes is getting her eyes redder and swollener every morning as she lives through her tragic story. But there is such a strain of poetry to relieve the tragedy that the more she cries, and the readers cry, the better I say. (GEL 3: 269)

Eliot herself conveyed a similar sentiment to Blackwood, when she travelled to Rome after the publication of her novel: “I think Rome will at last chase away Maggie and the Mill from my thoughts: I hope it will, for she and her sorrows have clung painfully” (GEL 3: 285) Given the fact that Eliot felt Maggie’s pain so keenly while writing, speaks to her likely capacity to fully empathize with her struggles. Like Maggie, Eliot had to navigate her passionate desire for G.H. Lewes, one who awakened her sexual consciousness, and her duty to her past life through her tie with her brother Isaac (Rose 212). Just as Maggie’s hands navigate this tension and sacrifice in the novel, so too did Eliot’s, both in reality and in the imaginative process of writing her fiction.

Cox, in her analysis of manual intercourse in Jane Eyre, argues that tactile interaction allows the reader to consider what it feels like to be Jane (Cox, “Tactile Relations” 198). Arguably, tactile interaction in The Mill on the Floss not only allows the reader to consider what it feels like to be Maggie, but perhaps what it feels like to be Eliot too.
Unlike Maggie, Eliot chose to cling to her passion for Lewes at the expense of her relationship with her brother Isaac. However, Eliot’s commitment to her romantic partner arguably contained the same sense of sacred duty as Maggie’s devotion to Tom. As Phyllis Rose explicates in *Parallel Lives*, Eliot asserted over and over again, “how serious, how moral (if rightly understood)” her union with Lewes was (Rose 218). Referring to herself as Mrs. Lewes in her letters, Eliot clearly believed her non-legal union with her partner carried as much weight as a legal covenantal marriage. Indeed, for Eliot, after renouncing her evangelical faith, as previously quoted, “the relationship between a man and woman was to her as important as the relationship between human being and God had once been” (Rose 213). For Eliot, it was a sacred duty to remain faithful to “the man she had willed into central importance in her life,” even at the cost of her relationship with her brother (Rose 213). Thus, Eliot’s desire for her lover arguably transformed into the highest sense of duty, one that carried with it the weight of sanctity and sacrifice.

Given this intermingling of duty and desire within Eliot’s own life, it is interesting to note the possible transmutation of responsibility into passion in Maggie and Tom’s final embrace. Despite Maggie’s ultimate choice of sacred duty over desire, her reunion with Tom is arguably erotic. As Beer, and several other scholars address, as Maggie and Tom clutch each other in the boat, their bodies overtaken by the flood, “the orgasmic reference is overwhelming”: “As individual and as sexual symbol, the flood is Maggie’s” (Beer 102, 100). If we consider this flood as a sexual symbol, while keeping the hand’s erotic significance as a zone of stimulation in

29 In 1857, Eliot wrote to her family saying, “I have changed my name and have a husband” (*GEL* 2: 342). For a deeper discussion of Eliot’s use of Mrs. Lewes, see “George Eliot’s Deed: Reconciling an Outlaw Marriage” by Harriet F. Adams.
mind, it raises questions: does Maggie’s passion find some fleeting release in her haptic union with Tom? Moreover, does Maggie discover a sense of desire in duty before her death, just as Eliot found duty within desire? If this is so, despite the tragic pain and sacrifice that arises from “the antagonism between valid claims,” as Eliot wrote in 1856, desire and duty can conceivably coexist, if one becomes the other.

In conclusion, through Maggie’s haptic interactions, Eliot provides her reader with a window into the complex, conflicting feelings of a young woman. Read through the lens of etiquette and the developing science on sensation, Maggie explores sexual desire, negotiates romance, rekindles the memories of her childhood, and confirms her allegiance to her historic, familial ties, all through her hands. Ultimately, Eliot sanctifies this claim of duty— a claim she felt deeply within her own life— as signaled by Maggie’s final embrace with her brother Tom. Thus, by tracing Maggie’s haptic behavior, we gain an enhanced reading of the novel, and perhaps an element of firsthand insight into how it felt to be Eliot herself.
Conclusion

From the outstretched hand in “Janet’s Repentance,” through the hands “that have long ago mingled with the soil” in Adam Bede, to the clasped “little hands in love” in The Mill on the Floss, the hand plays a remarkable, multi-faceted role in Eliot’s early fiction (Eliot, Adam Bede 518 and Eliot, The Mill on the Floss 483). Eliot was writing in an era when the conception of the hand was changing; its sensory capacity was a subject of exploration, its relationship to work was shifting, and its conduct was policed. Eliot uses this dynamic cultural significance, alongside the hand’s established biblical meaning, to negotiate issues ranging from religion to gender to work to erotics.

By examining the hand in light of Eliot’s scriptural formation, we trace the redemption of her heroine, Janet Dempster; against the backdrop of urbanizing and industrializing England, we consider the validation of her nation’s pastoral inheritance; against the context of the science of sensation and tactile etiquette of the day, we see the veneration of duty’s claim on Maggie Tulliver’s life. Through haptic representation and interaction, Eliot also counters nineteenth-century gender attitudes and expectations. Eliot gives her tragic heroine the opportunity to explore her sexuality through her hands in The Mill on the Floss, as she boldly writes of both female and male desire. In “Janet’s Repentance,” Eliot reveals a feminine triumph over masculine abuse, ennobling a woman considered one of the most shameful, by Victorian standards.

Ultimately, just as the sacred hand transforms throughout “Janet’s Repentance,” it progressively metamorphoses across all three of her works, revealing where Eliot imbuies sanctity. Faith, rural work, and duty each take on hallowed significance, simultaneously sacred and sanctifying. In “Janet’s Repentance,” spiritual faith in the arms of God, or perhaps more
accurately, faith in the arms of the godly Reverend Tryan, leads to Janet’s redemption. In *Adam Bede*, divine rural work fosters personal renewal and endows England with a sacred inheritance. In *The Mill on the Floss*, the claim of duty— one of history and memory— possesses the sacramental touch. Thus, to discover what holds holy value in Eliot’s early works, is to think about her characters’ hands. And to think about her characters’ hands, is to perhaps consider what it feels like to be the author— from the pain of her tragic, broken relationship with her brother Isaac, to the restorative nature of her relationship with G.H. Lewes, to a nostalgia for the pastoral world she watched disappear from the time of her childhood.

Curiously, Eliot’s own hand became the subject of controversy after her death in 1880. Apparently, her right hand was larger than her left. As Kathryn Hughes details in “George Eliot’s Hand,” the third chapter of *Victorians Undone: Tales of the Flesh in an Age of Decorum*, one of Eliot’s dear friends, Cara Bray, told Eliot’s first biographer, Mathilde Blind, that her right hand “was thicker than her left as a result of the years she had spent churning butter and crushing cheese in the dairy at Griff House” (Hughes 174). The Canon Frederic Evans, Eliot’s nephew, strongly disagreed, openly asserting at various literary conventions that his aunt’s hands were of equal proportion (Hughes 204-206). Why did he so keenly contest this rumor? It was not simply the odd issue of an oversized limb that Eliot’s nephew railed against, but rather the associations that went along with it. The rumor of his aunt’s large right hand suggested she worked in a dairy, naturally invoking the licentious reputation of the dairy maid: “It wasn’t just that the story of George Eliot’s large right hand gave her the clumsy body of a working-class country girl; it hinted that she had the sexual morals of one too” (Hughes 200-206, 204). Thus, just as Eliot’s own hand penned her characters’ strong arms, delicate wrists and enticing fingers, the Victorian preoccupation with hands posthumously touched her.
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