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Reading Literary Rape: Hand-Grabbing, #MeToo, and Haptic Reciprocity in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Novels

By Kimberly Cox, Chadron State College

<1>What do Donald Trump, Aziz Ansari, Alec D’Urberville, and Robert Lovelace have in common? This question may, at first, seem odd given the anachronistic pairing of contemporary living people with eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictional characters. Yet it may not be such a weird question for those of you who follow contemporary politics, are familiar with contemporary news stories, and have read Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891, 1892) and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748–49). The recent turn towards presentism and interest in #MeToo amongst literary scholars makes it possible for me to begin an article with this particular question.<1> This essay unpacks the gripping (pun intended) connection between these contemporary public figures and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fictional characters to highlight one aspect of female sexual assault that has often gone overlooked in literature and in life prior to the era of #MeToo: the violent sexual implications of hand-grabbing. Doing so opens new opportunities for reading rape in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and for considering what such literary representations of rape have to contribute to contemporary discussions about affirmative and enthusiastic consent.

Grab, Grasp, Grip

<2>In 2016, Nicole Puglise’s “‘Pussy Grabs Back’” article in *The Guardian* helped make Donald Trump’s statement about grabbing women’s genitals infamous: “‘I don’t even wait,’ he crowed. ‘When you’re a star they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab ’em by the pussy. You can do anything.’” While many people reacted with shock and dismay at the video of Trump bragging about grabbing women, the rhetoric of grabbing women’s bodies isn’t new. Female characters’ hands are grabbed constantly in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novels. And such uninvited, undesired grips are described, without exception, as painful and sexually threatening to the female characters who suffer them. #MeToo brings the painful, threatening nature of these grasps into focus because it has highlighted the ubiquity of sexual assault in a mainstream public forum using what Karen Boyle refers to as “networked feminism” and encouraged conversation about the many forms assault can take (3).<2> Despite the fictional and centuries-long divide that separates these characters from the modern, living women that I also discuss, their experiences and stories share remarkable similarities. While we may not see characters such as Clarissa Harlowe, Helen Huntingdon, Tess Durbeyfield, and Viola Sedley being “grabbed by the pussy,”<3> I argue that we need to examine the sexual significance of the forceful, repeated, nonconsensual hand-grabbing they suffer. Our explorations of literary rape should account for female sexual attraction, desire, pleasure, and subjectivity in ways that move beyond the legal confines of verbal consent to a consideration of haptic experience. As Kathleen Lubey shows in her reading of rape in *Clarissa*, in Richardson’s novel rape “appears as an

atomized, diffuse set of encounters that prefigure, echo, and recapitulate the genital assault” (163). I elaborate on Lubey’s claim by reading the novels that follow through the lens of #MeToo. It is not the moment of penetration but rather the hand-grabbing that precedes or facilitates that moment that instantiates the violence and violation to follow for readers and characters alike.

<3>Even in the era of #MeToo, it’s rare that we discuss female erotic desire, sexual pleasure, or haptic reciprocity. Feminist activist Jaelyn Friedman identifies sexual pleasure as a gap in U.S. sex education that contributes to a culture “that positions men as sexual actors, [and] women as the (un)lucky recipients of men’s desire.”<4> In other words, Friedman suggests that teaching only about consent—and not mutual pleasure—leaves intact the structures that undergird social acceptance of sexual violence. While affirmative consent was an important movement in continuing discussions about legal consent in sexual encounters, the recent shift with #EnthusiasticConsent encourages those participating in a sexual encounter to make sure that their partner experiences ongoing enjoyment, not just a moment of verbal affirmation.<5>

<4>Those of us who read early literature are very familiar with Friedman’s construction.<6> What’s frightening is the extent to which it has remained the same. In 2018, a woman publicly accused comedian Aziz Ansari of sexual assault on a feminist website. Grace, the pseudonym given to the unnamed recipient of Aziz Ansari’s desiring touch, explained her experience this way, “He probably moved my hand to his dick five to seven times ... [even] after I moved it away” (Way). Grace’s removal of her hand indicates that she did not reciprocate the gesture. She did not initiate the uninvited contact that demands sexual favors. Further, Ansari’s refusal to accept her rejection suggests this unilateral gesture is already an act that violates. The representation of female sexual pleasure in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels differs little from Grace’s descriptions of her experience with Ansari. Novels commonly narrated heterosexual sexual encounters, which often began with a forceful hand-grasp, as events that happened to female characters. Like Grace, such characters could reject the contact, but the notion of their active participation and enjoyment was not represented and rarely discussed. In Frances Burney’s epistolary novel *Evelina; Or the History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778), Evelina explains her encounter with Sir Clement, a man she barely knows but who feels entitled to her body, this way: “I would fain have withdrawn my hand, and made almost continual attempts; but in vain, for he actually grasped it between both his, without any regard to my resistance” (98). Significantly, Evelina makes clear in subsequent letters that she feels no attraction to or desire for Sir Clement. Similarly, Helen Huntington in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) “snatch[es] away the hand [Walter Hargrave] had presumed to seize” only for him to seize it again while shouting, “I must not be denied!” (316). In all instances—two fictional, one not—a woman’s hand is grabbed without her male counterpart’s paying any attention to her level of comfort or displeasure with the uninvited manual intimacy that she continually rejects.

<5>What I’m suggesting is that attention to hand-grabbing in literature makes sexual violence not only visible, but palpable in a new way. Grabbing is a unilateral act. To grab does not require that the gesture be reciprocated. Victorian novels illustrate for readers an association between unreciprocated touches and sexual violence by highlighting the frequency and the danger that female characters experience with such uninvited touch. In Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the*

d'Urbervilles, Tess is raped, though readers are never privy to the particulars. The closest that we get to an outright statement is the narrator's observation that "[d]oubtless some of Tess d'Urberville's mailed ancestors rollicking home from a fray had dealt the same measure even more ruthlessly towards peasant girls of their time" (Hardy 88). The use of the term "ruthlessly" and the image of men in armor returning from war suggest a level of violence in the lack of concern for female enjoyment or pleasure in such an encounter. Additionally, the phrase "had dealt"—like "grabbed"—is decidedly unilateral. This statement clarifies that the sexual event that Tess experiences was not reciprocal. Describing Tess's encounter with Alec as less brutal than what her ancestors' victims experienced as the exploits of war does not make it less of a violation, however. While Tess's rape is not made explicit, the narrator describes it in terms of surface and sensation, querying "[w]hy it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as gossamer, and practically blank as snow as yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive" (88). Hardy's narrator articulates Tess's experience of rape in terms of haptic sensation, juxtaposing "coarse" with "gossamer" to emphasize that Tess's skin—standing in for her hymen—is violently, permanently marred. And, once again, Tess is a passive recipient who is "doomed to receive" what "ha[s] been traced"—a haptic encounter devoid of reciprocity. Scholars have long debated whether Tess was raped or seduced, arguing particularly about her level of consent and voluntary participation.<7> In his legal reading of Tess's sexual assault, William A. Davis, Jr., notes that "the assault upon Tess begins with an absence of verbal communication between Tess and Alec" (223). Rather than focus exclusively on the question of verbal consent, my goal in this article is to argue for the inclusion of haptic reciprocity as a marker of sexual pleasure, (dis)comfort, or pain in our conversations about sexual violence in literature. In this instance, Tess's haptic experience reflects a clear violation as she becomes a non-participatory object of another's touch.

<6>Tess herself associates a woman's control over her hands with control over her body when relating her assault to her mother: "How could I be expected to know? ... Why didn't you tell me there was danger in men-folk? ... Ladies know what to fend hands against because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance 'o learning in that way ..." (Hardy 98–99). Nancy Armstrong and J. Hillis Miller have established the relationship between novel reading and etiquette among a growing female readership during both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.<8> Tess's comment refers to a literary history of touch that extends back to early English novels that taught women about the types of touches that they were responsible for avoiding or controlling.<9> Tess, not having been taught the dangers of unregulated touching, finds her body violated by another's hands even before her experience of sexual assault. Shortly before she is raped, the narrator describes Alec D'Urberville's foreboding touch such that it approximates the sexual assault that follows: "He touched her with his fingers, which sank into her as into down" (86). The description is meant to evoke the lightness of Tess's dress on a chilly night, though the language itself is telling. The image is not one of caress but of penetration. Tess *is* touched. She does not participate. Her "gossamer" skin is not enough of a barrier to keep Alec's appendages safely on the surface.

<7>Tess may not be "grabbed by the pussy," but to fantasize about grabbing a woman by the genitals is to fantasize about using her as an object—about touching her whether or not she reciprocates the contact.<10> "Not all tactile contact is benign," explains Margrit Shildrick, "and the crossing of boundaries may be not so much the occasion of acknowledging shared

vulnerability as a kind of corporeal colonization that exploits the specific vulnerability of the less dominant partner” (118). To be touched without reciprocation as Tess is, then, is to be violated. She is an object that is touched and penetrated. So far as the narrator describes, she is not a participatory subject who gives any indication of experiencing pleasurable reciprocity or shared vulnerability. Tess defends herself to her mother by suggesting that her lack of manual instruction has left her helpless in hands such as Alec’s. But what exactly did novels teach women to fend hands against?

Grab ‘Em by the Hand

<8>Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers understood there to be an intimate connection between touch and affect.<11> As early as the 1760s, Lady Sara Pennington, who was prevented from contacting her children after a scandalous separation from her husband, advises her daughters about the relationship between hearts and hands in her popular conduct manual *An Unfortunate Mother’s Advice to Her Absent Daughters; in a Letter to Miss Pennington* (1761).<12> As she explains it, “a child is very justifiable in the refusal of her hand, even to the absolute command of a father, where her heart cannot go with it” (*Young Lady’s* 37). Pennington advises her daughters in appropriate manual intercourse specifically in relation to the giving of a hand in marriage.<13> Yet Pennington’s advice appears nearly verbatim fifteen years earlier in Richardson’s *Clarissa*. “My hand and my heart shall never be separated,” Clarissa declares to her abductor and rapist Robert Lovelace (Richardson 939). And, before doing so, she makes a similar assertion to her brother who is also trying to compel her into an undesired match with one Mr. Solmes: “[I] will not . . . yield to give my hand to the man to whom I can allow no share in my heart” (227).<14> Such a sentiment remains in handshake etiquette throughout the nineteenth century. In Charles Dickens’s *All the Year Round* for example, an article called “On Hand-Shaking” warns young women that “Ladies, . . . seldom ever shake hands with the cordiality of gentlemen; . . . They cannot be expected to show persons of the other sex a warmth of greeting, which might be misinterpreted” (467). The popular etiquette book *The Habits of Good Society* offers similar advice: “A man has no right to take a lady’s hand till it is offered. . . . He has even less right to pinch and retain it” (326). Perhaps the best example, Charles Jefferys’s ballad “Tis Hard to Give the Hand (Where the Heart Can Never Be)” (c. 1840) nearly rephrases Pennington’s eighteenth-century sentiment a full century later in the title alone. Given the ballad’s obscurity, I reproduce it below in its entirety:

Tho’ I mingle in the throng
 Of the happy and the gay,
 From the mirth of dance and song,
 I would fain be far away;
 For I love to use no wile,
 And I can but deem it sin,
 That the brow should wear a smile
 When the soul is sad within.
 Tho’ a parent’s stern command
 Claims obedience from me,
 O, ‘tis hard to give the hand
 Where the heart can never be.
 O’ tis hard to give, &c.

I have sighed and suffered long,
 Yet have never told my grief
 In the hope that for my wrong
 Time itself would find relief.
 I will own no rebel thought,
 But I will not wear the chain
 That for me must still be fraught
 With but misery and pain.
 In all else I will be bland,
 But in this I must be free,
 And I will not give the hand
 Where the heart can never be.
 And I will not, &c.

<9>In *The Word on the Street*, the online collection of ballads run by the National Library of Scotland, the only article currently written on this ballad explains it as follows: “This is clearly a song dissenting against something or someone, but exactly what or who is left unsaid. The title, which is also the song’s refrain, emphasises that it is difficult to show loyalty to something or someone when one feels that loyalty is not merited. . . . Broadside ballads expressing political or ideological dissent were quite numerous, and were often more directly critical than this song” (“Broadside Ballad”). However, this analysis falters when read in light of the literary history beginning with *Clarissa* and Pennington that I have established, and given that the musical score was written for a woman’s vocal range.<15> Jefferys’s ballad establishes a direct correlation between a woman’s allowing her hand to be touched and the sexual access to her body that such an embrace implies. The speaker of this ballad refuses to give her hand where her heart cannot go with it because that would be interpreted by culture more widely as consent. As Frances Ferguson emphasizes in “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” consenting to marry a man negated the possibility of rape in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century legal culture (92). Thus, a woman granted sexual access to her body when she gave her hand in marriage.<16> For the unnamed speaker of this ballad, giving her hand would put her body at risk because the act itself, depending on the context, is sexually suggestive. Reading sexual encounters in literature in the era of #MeToo reveals that the touch of a hand in literature is a moment of eroticism that not only symbolizes a sexual future, but also betrays a sexual present.

Grab ‘Em by the Pussy

<10>In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Helen Huntingdon, the novel’s female protagonist, is grabbed by the hand menacingly by her husband’s acquaintance, Walter Hargrave. Walter makes clear through the force of his grip that such hand-grabbing conveys his desire to gain sexual access to her body even if by violent, forceful means. Helen, however, claims a new level of agency over herself when she rejects his advances and fights against future overtures. Walter offers her protection and a new life away from her husband Arthur’s drunken abuses in exchange for sexual access to her body. Helen refuses his offer, “snatching away the hand he had presumed to seize and press between his own” (A. Brontë 316). Walter’s touch comes uninvited and undesired. Readers familiar with eighteenth-century novels would recognize the implicit sexual danger that his grasp poses to Helen.

<11>In Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, for example, Robert Lovelace's hand-grabbing precedes Clarissa's rape much like Alec's does Tess's. Yet, Lubey excepted, critics who have written about rape in *Clarissa*, despite their diverse conclusions,<17> seem to agree that "the rape goes wholly unrepresented, as the hole at the centre of the novel towards which this huge mass of writing is sucked only to sheer off again" (Eagleton 61). Terry Castle identifies "Clarissa's rape [as] a primal act of silencing. ... all details of the actual penetration are censored" (115). Castle suggests that all readers get by way of confirmation is Robert's brief letter noting his victory:

Letter 257: MR LOVELACE TO JOHN BELFORD, ESQ.

Tuesday morn. June 13

AND now, Belford, I can go no farther. The affair is over. Clarissa lives.

And I am

Your humble servant,

R. Lovelace (Richardson 883)

Clarissa herself, however, rebukes silence on the matter, claiming the reality of her experience when she asks Lady Betty Lawrence, Robert's aunt, "[W]hy should I seek to conceal that disgrace from others which I cannot hide from myself?" (986). #MeToo has only just created a public platform in which people can make such "disgrace" (to use Clarissa's language) visible and mainstream outside of a legal context.<18> #MeToo and Tarana Burke's original Me Too movement advocate shared experience and collective healing while simultaneously emphasizing the ubiquity of sexual assault on a national (and eventually global) scale.<19> Clarissa's sexual violation is not a "hole at the center of the novel," just as it is not a seduction. As Lubey asserts, "sexual violation [in *Clarissa*] is narrated with explicitness and volatility" through an accretion of Lovelace's many violations that lead up to the instance of vaginal penetration at the novel's core (155). I would add that one particular register in which Clarissa's rape is made visible to readers is through hand-grabbing, her refusal to invite or condone Robert's grasps, and the lack of haptic reciprocity on Clarissa's part in each instance.

<12>Clarissa distinctly notes Robert's repeated grabbing of her hands in the letter she writes to her friend Anna Howe that narrates the events leading up to her rape: "he snatched my hand two or three times, with a vehemence in his grasp that hurt me; speaking words of tenderness through his shut teeth, as it seemed; and let it go with a beggar-voiced humbled accent, ... ; yet his words and manner carrying the appearance of strong and almost convulsed passion! O, my dear! what mischief was he not then meditating!" (Richardson 1010). His touch is a violation that demonstrates his control over both the situation and her body. He seeks "corporeal colonization," as Shildrick puts it, not a shared, mutual intimacy. Clarissa explains that she feels the "vehemence in his grasp" such that the pressure of it hurts her, the force of his grip enacting the painful penetration to follow as well as his indifference to her experience—she neither reciprocates his gestures nor feels pleasure in his grip. Like these "two or three" grasps, the rape, Clarissa later explains, happened in "fits upon fits (faintly indeed, and imperfectly remembered) procuring me no compassion" (1011). Neither character describes the rape, yet the way they narrate their manual encounters embodies that very trauma, as well as the pleasure Robert takes in his abuses.

<13>The question of Clarissa's pleasure is never broached in the novel nor in criticism, as the focus of critical discussions tends to privilege consent and Richardson's commentary on contractualism and marriage law.<20> All that is made clear is that she is drugged and thus by

legal definitions (both in the eighteenth century and in our own) raped against her will. As Ferguson explains, “Clarissa’s unconsciousness during the rape eliminates her capacity not to consent to her rape. . . . For the law of rape specifically stipulates that unconsciousness . . . ‘negatives’ consent” (100). In contrast to an investigation of consent as a verbal declaration of affirmation, my contention is that attention to hand-grabbing in such literary texts requires readers to explore the nonverbal dynamics of pleasure—and pain—represented in characters’ physical responses to manual encounters.<21> Clarissa’s hand *is* snatched. The sentence structure positions her as a passive object acted upon. Like Tess, Clarissa is “doomed to receive” rather than participate—or reciprocate. Neither Robert nor Clarissa describe her reciprocation of his grasp except to note that it is painful.

<14>Clarissa’s experience differs little from contemporary representations of female sexual experience. As Friedman notes, “our culture believes a woman’s resistance is a fun challenge for men to overcome, and that ‘consent’ is a free pass one can bully out of a woman if persistent or crafty enough” (“I’m a sexual consent educator”). Ferguson and Sandra Macpherson both note that marriage was “an option that retroactively turned rape into pre-contract” (Macpherson 108).<22> If we accept Friedman’s description of contemporary sexual practices as accurate (which #MeToo and the more recent #EnthusiasticConsent supports), then what does it mean that we have seen no real change in that perspective since at least 1748? In both *Clarissa* and the article about Grace’s date with Aziz Ansari, the lack of tactile reciprocity on Clarissa’s and Grace’s parts is ignored by the men pursuing them. Robert grabs Clarissa’s hands in an attempt to bully consent (or, more rightly, the compliance he could interpret as consent) much as Ansari grabs Grace’s hand in demand of manual genital stimulation. In other words, if he can grab her by the hand, he can grab her by the pussy.

<15>Because Clarissa betrays no enjoyment, Robert continues his pursuit, explaining to his friend John Belford that his next rape “shall be her last trial; and if she behave as nobly *in* and *after* this *second* attempt (*all her senses about her*), as she has done after the *first*, she will come out an angel . . . : then shall there be an end to all her sufferings” (Richardson 945). Robert contends that he will marry Clarissa to erase the effect of rape on her reputation if she dislikes it as much awake as she did unconscious. Thus, he presumes his ability to distinguish between Clarissa’s experience of pain and pleasure. But what, we must ask, would Clarissa’s enjoyment look like to Robert? His descriptions seem to suggest that it has to do with consciousness and a lack of struggle rather than any form of reciprocal or enthusiastic participation in the act itself. Libertine masculinity was associated with force and violence while chaste femininity was associated with sexual passivity, submission, and endurance.<23>

<16>In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* written a century after *Clarissa*, Walter Hargrave behaves similarly to Robert Lovelace. Walter rebels against the rules of decorum by grabbing Helen’s hand without her first offering it. Following Helen’s removal of her hand from his grasp, he replies, “I must not be denied!” “and seizing both [her] hands, he held them very tight” (A. Brontë 316). Again, as with Robert Lovelace and Alec D’Urberville (and Aziz Ansari and Donald Trump), Walter grabs Helen’s hands, physically demonstrating his feeling of entitlement to her person. Walter’s grasp threatens not only Helen’s sense of propriety, but also her sense of physical safety in a grip that violates her body and prefigures rape. Helen responds by crying out that he let go of her hand, “[b]ut he only tightened his grasp” (316). In contrast to Grace, Tess,

and Clarissa, however, Helen fights back.

<17>Helen forcefully rebukes Walter “at length releasing [her] hands [from his], and recoiling from him” (316). This rebuke embodies the boundary that she works to establish between herself and the men who would dominate her through the social, political, and physical power they possess by virtue of their sex. Thus, as Walter approaches her yet again, she explains, “I snatched up my palette-knife and held it against him” (316–17). Rachel K. Carnell has already noted the similarity between this scene in *Tenant* and the following scene from *Clarissa*, narrated by Robert:

But she turned to me: Stop where thou art, Oh vilest and most abandoned of men!—Stop where thou art!—Nor, with that determined face, offer to touch me, if thou wouldst not that I should be a corpse at thy feet!

To my astonishment, she held forth a penknife in her hand, the point to her own bosom, grasping resolutely the whole handle, so there was no opening to take it from her. (Richardson 950)

Carnell suggests that “Helen escapes Clarissa’s fate in part because she is able to teach Gilbert [Markham, her final love interest,] the one thing that Clarissa never manages to teach Lovelace: how to read his moral obligation from her narrative distress” (16). However, I contend that Brontë offers an even more complex revision of Richardson’s novel. When Clarissa grabs the penknife, she commands Robert “offer [not] to touch [her],” and he explains that he “could not seize her hand” (Richardson 951, 952). In other words, Clarissa uses the penknife to threaten to take her own life if he touches her again. She claims violence as a way to establish bodily autonomy, threatening what he wants in a way that directly contravenes his desire. He fantasizes that she desires to be dominated, so if she kills herself, then he loses access to her body and the narrative that he has constructed.

<18>Unlike Clarissa’s defense, Helen’s turning the palette-knife on Walter has different implications. Helen does not threaten to do violence to herself and thus remove the object of Walter’s desire. Rather, Helen claims her subjectivity by directing her violence at him. Helen would not rather die than be defiled; she would rather fight and make her displeasure known. Walter would risk his own safety if he pursues her embrace any further. By grabbing the palette-knife, Helen rejects the intimacy that Walter seeks to force and, in so doing, asserts her sexual subjectivity and her right to control whose hands have access to her own. Helen does what Clarissa is never able to do. Metaphorically speaking, she grabs back.

<19>In Mona Caird’s *The Wing of Azrael* (1889), Viola Sedley takes it a step further than Helen, grabbing back with the same penetrative violence forced on her. Caird’s novel comments on the perils that marriage posed to Victorian women, and Caird herself was known for her public chastisement of marital rape.<24> Towards the end of the novel, Viola is set upon by her husband Philip Dendraith who suspects her affair with Harry Lancaster: “a tall familiar form emerged, and without apparent interval her wrist was gripped by a hand, powerful and merciless” (Caird 290). That this grip is nonreciprocal is made evident by the fact that, as the narrator informs us, “Viola made an effort to free her wrist, but the hard fingers closed round it more firmly” (290). Philip threatens Viola with “tender punishment”—what begins with forced kisses but, as the grip suggests, will end with a more violent sexual encounter (294). As Clarissa and Helen before her, Viola too cries out, “‘Don’t touch me, don’t touch me, or’—” (294). But Philip

maintains his grip. “His touch,” the narrator informs us, “constraining, insolent as it was, ... excited her to very madness” (295). Fearing for her physical safety, given the sexual threat inherent in Philip’s grasp, Viola pulls a knife from her hair and threatens him with it. This scene is reminiscent of the two discussed above. However, Viola does what Clarissa and Helen don’t: “He [Philip] laughed, and bent down till his lips touched her cheek; his hand was seeking hers to seize the knife . . . Then in an instant—a horrible instant of blinding passion—the steel had flashed through the air with a force born of the wildest fury—there was a cry, a curse, a groan, a backward stagger, and Philip lay at his wife’s feet mortally wounded” (295). Viola responds with an equally unreciprocated, violent gesture that reconfigures the power and mercilessness originally attributed to Philip’s grip. By grabbing the knife and grabbing back, Viola asserts her subjectivity and bodily autonomy, forcibly rebuking Philip’s violent, violating touch. She makes her displeasure known and asserts her right to a pleasurable, reciprocal sexual existence as she confirms to Harry, ““I meant to do it. I knew it would kill him—I would do it again ... !”” (296).

Grabbing Back

<20>Hand-grabbing in Victorian literature functions as a stand-in for unmentionable rape—or, at the very least, the very real threat of it. As Jill Ehnenn notes in her article on Victorian feminist futures, “It is extremely difficult [in our present moment] to figure out how to grab on, let alone grab back” (52). In the #MeToo era, new ways of reading eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels’ representations of hand-grabbing as examples of, and precursors to, sexual violence may help us as we continue to challenge both legal and social definitions of consent. These novels’ representations of violent manual intercourse may help us facilitate classroom conversations about desire, pleasure, and bodily communication in literary rape scenes—conversations that address reciprocal participation, not simply verbal consent. Further, it can encourage us, as scholars, to reconsider nineteenth-century literature’s relevance to our own historical moment.

<21>In his recent Netflix comedy special *Aziz Ansari: Right Now* (2019), Ansari comments on being accused of sexual misconduct. “I haven’t said much,” he begins, “I just felt terrible that this person felt this way” (00:03:52–00:04:26). And then he continues, saying that a friend shared “[t]hat the whole thing made me think about every date I’ve ever been on” (00:04:40–00:04:45). Ansari concludes, “It’s made not just me but other people be more thoughtful, and that’s a good thing” (00:04:48–00:04:53). Who are these “other people”? What are they more thoughtful about? Extending these questions further to account for the literary history explored in this article, we might ask one more question: Whose experiences might a reconsideration of Victorian literature in the era of #MeToo make us more thoughtful about? As teachers, scholars, and consumers of pop culture, these are the questions we should ask of ourselves and others in our writing and in our classes. As we do, we shift the conversation in two important ways. First, we emphasize that comments like Trump’s have a long-standing history that has shaped contemporary views on female sexual subjectivity and on what we legally count as sexual assault. Second, we advocate for understanding affirmative consent in sexual encounters as more than a single instance of the verbal pronouncement “yes” but rather a series of verbal and physical actions that indicate active, enthusiastic participation from all parties. Reading Clarissa’s rape through hand-grabbing doesn’t simply make her experience of rape palpable, it broadens our conception of sexual violation by requiring us to acknowledge tactile forms of communication. That, in turn, opens possibilities for literary analyses of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature and for reading contemporary accounts in social media, magazine

articles, Netflix specials, or more traditional literature that might recuperate stories of sexual violation previously silenced.

<22>As I have demonstrated in my analysis of hand-grabbing in *Clarissa*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *The Wing of Azrael*, rape was a process that culminated, at least for Clarissa, in penetrative sexual violence but that began with repeated, uninvited hand-grabbing without attention to female reciprocation of the gesture or any other physical indication of pleasure at the grip. The debates surrounding Grace's sexual encounter with Ansari have incited a discussion about women's pleasure in sexual encounter as more than a momentary instance of verbal affirmation of willingness to engage in a sexual act. In reading literary representations of sexual violation, I advocate doing something similar by reading textual depictions of nonlinguistic communication. Teaching and reading tactility in Victorian literature in the era of #MeToo asks us to consider unspoken interpersonal communication. We must pay heightened attention to how bodies and their physical responses are described and then analyze what those descriptions suggest about characters' emotional states. Such considerations place responsibility on readers to recognize that a female character feels imperiled when she tries to free a hand held against her will just as a reciprocated caress suggests intimacy and trust. Reading the interpersonal and intercorporeal power dynamics that hand-grabbing communicates in nineteenth-century literature and contemporary life makes clear that rape means more than vaginal penetration.

Notes

(1)V21: *Victorian Studies for the 21st Century* states in one of its ten theses, “One outcome of post-historicist interpretation may be a new openness to *presentism*: an awareness that our interest in the period is motivated by certain features of our own moment” (“Manifesto,” italics original). In a similar vein, Ehnner queries how our present circumstance might drive the way we approach reading, thinking, and teaching about the past. Though the “Me Too” movement began nearly a decade before the hashtag rose in popularity, with the work of activist Tarana Burke in support of young Black girls in underprivileged communities who were victims of sexual assault (see metoomvmt.org), my focus in this article is on the Twitter iteration that went viral in 2016 before making its way into scholarship. See Hill and also Boyle, pp. 4–8, for discussions of the history surrounding “Me Too.”

(2)Boyle defines networked feminism as “a feminism made possible by the affordances of the social media platforms on which it circulates” (3).

(3)This list is not exhaustive, which is my point. Characters such as Jane Eyre and Mina Harker in the nineteenth century and Evelina Anville and Pamela Andrews in the eighteenth century are additional examples in a long list of female characters whose hands are grabbed in such a manner.

(4) Friedman’s article responds to allegations against comedian Aziz Ansari published on babe.net by Grace (the pseudonym given the anonymous woman) and to the bevy of responses from various generations of feminists who debated whether Grace’s experience should be classified as sexual assault or a bad date. While Friedman’s article comes from her larger book (*Unscrewed: Women, Sex, Power, and How to Stop Letting the System Screw Us All*, Basic Books, 2017), I reference the article here because it engages directly with other popular articles that commented on Grace’s encounter with Ansari. Boyle notes that these are “opinion pieces, and whilst the[y] often make use of a feminist language around meaningful consent, power and sexual pleasure, the genre of opinion writing privileges morality and judgement” and thus risks “justif[ying] the suspicion of feminism” (40, 41). I emphasize the similarities between such media discourse and early literary discourse in their representation of sexual violation. See Way for the original article published on babe.net that details the anonymous woman’s date with Ansari.

(5)Project Respect led this movement; see yesmeansyes.com/consent/.

(6)One of the most well-known perspectives on Victorian female sexuality today came from William Acton: “I should say that the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feeling of any kind” (101). While it was commonly believed that modest women had limited knowledge of and thus desire for sexual intercourse, Acton’s hyperbolic claim was questioned by his contemporaries (Smith 185).

(7)For discussions of the ambiguity associated with the depiction of Tess’s sexual assault see Daleski, Rooney, and Brady. For a reading of it as acquaintance rape see Cairney, and for a reading of it as an exercise in psychological force see Conly. Such discussions of Tess’s level of

complicity in this sexual encounter prove similar to those amongst scholars of Richardson's *Clarissa*, which I will say more about below.

(8) *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) and *Literature as Conduct* (2005) are foundational for reading literature as actively shaping conduct.

(9) Hands and their touches, however, remain conspicuously absent from scholarly readings of eighteenth-century novels with the exception of Van Sant, "Crusoe's Hands"; Franta; and Ritzenberg. Aside from them, the only two scholars to mention the eighteenth century do so in order to highlight the importance of reading beyond it. "Readers will notice the absence of a chapter focused in the eighteenth century," Rowe notes in her prologue to *Dead Hands* (xii). "But the discontinuous arc of this narrative is deliberate" as her goal is to establish connections between dead hands in the early modern and modern periods (xii). Similarly, Capuano asserts that "One reason why people in the eighteenth century paid so little attention to hands was because of the fact that they were more interested in faces [as a result of the Enlightenment]" (186). Capuano's reading focuses on handwriting in epistolary novels, arguing that it "is a relatively unremarkable subject because handwork had not yet become seriously threatened" (189).

(10) While I specify "woman" here given Trump's statement and Tess's biological sex, I want to clarify that my argument can be extended to any person or character who experiences unreciprocated contact though the power dynamics and implications of such encounters will differ depending on sex, age, gender identity, sexuality, class, or race. A discussion of such, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

(11) See Ahern, who traces the etymological and critical roots of the term "sentimental," linking it with "*sensibility* [which] denotes a physiological capacity of sensation or sense perception" (16). In *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel*, Van Sant further develops this link between sensation and psychology in eighteenth-century affective theory, explaining that sentimental fiction relied on the language of sensibility and described affective states of being through haptic experience (93, 94). Ritzenberg explores the link between sentimental fiction and sentimental touch in a transatlantic context.

(12) Pennington's conduct manual was later published in a collection titled *The Young Lady's Pocket Library or Parental Monitor* (1790) along with two other advice manuals.

(13) See Cox, "A Touch," for a full explanation of the term "manual intercourse"—a *double entendre* that highlights the social and sexual intercourse that hand encounters in literature make legible.

(14) *Clarissa* does not use "hand" simply in the metonymic sense. She describes her manual intercourse with Mr. Solmes in terms of sexual violence too: He "t[ook] my hand, which he grasped with violence" (306).

(15) Because of this ballad's popularity, it was set to music in America by Charles Glover and published as sheet music between 1845 and 1858. The musical score further supports my

analysis of the poem. The song falls under the broad category of music called “art song,” which was poetry set to music intended for voice and a piano accompaniment. It is strophic, rendering it what music historians would likely refer to as a “parlor” or “popular” song during the period. The treble clef in the sheet music signifies the range of a female voice given the absence of the little “8” beneath it, which would indicate a range for male tenors. Thus, the ballad was transformed into a parlor song intended to be sung by a woman, which suggests something about how Jefferys’s contemporaries understood the ballad itself. Instead of providing an image of the sheet music, an audio file of how the ballad would be performed is available below (and for the first time since the nineteenth-century, or whenever it fell out of favor, as far as I know). It was created in collaboration with Chadron State College’s Music Department and funded by a grant from CSC’s Research Institute. Bobby Pace (piano) and Asha Mullins (voice) perform the ballad according to the nineteenth-century sheet music. As you listen, pay particular attention to the pitch and pacing as you consider whether or not the speaker could be simply a “dissenter” contemplating “loyalty” as *The Word on the Street* suggests (“Broadside Ballads”). (I would like to thank Bobby Pace, in particular, for helping me with this point by analyzing the sheet music and explaining the significance of the treble clef. Additionally, I would like to thank Brooks Hafey and Una Taylor for their help with the execution of the grant that funded the recording.)

An audio file of this performance is available on the web-version of this article at <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue162/cox.html#audio>

(16) Consider, for example, that *Jane Eyre* thinks with horror after St. John Rivers proposes, “Can I receive from him the bridal ring, endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe) and know that the spirit is quite absent?” (C. Brontë 405). Not long after she notes “[w]hat a cold, loose touch [St. John] impressed on [her] fingers!” (411). See Cox, “At least,” for a full reading of this scene.

(17) See Doederlein for a review of scholarship on *Clarissa* through the 1980s, which reflects varied perspectives on Clarissa’s complicity in her own rape.

(18) The legal category of sexual harassment in the late 1970s created an early public platform for legal action, but its focus was on legislation and legal protection, particularly in the workplace. #MeToo offers a mainstream, public platform for networked feminism (Boyle 3–4).

(19) #MeTooIndia and #MoiAussi are examples of how women of color across the globe have responded to #MeToo.

(20) See Macpherson and Ferguson.

(21) In fact, “consent” as defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* means “to feel together; to agree in sentiment”; its roots in physiology and pathology suggest that it designates “a relation of sympathy between one organ or part of the body and another, whereby when the one is affected the other is affected correspondingly” (*OED*). Its etymological roots come from the Latin *consentire*.

(22) See also Ferguson, p. 92.

(23)See Laqueur for a discussion of the eighteenth-century shift from the one- to two-sex model of the body. See also Harvey: “Female submission was integral both to male denial of rape and to women’s accusations of rape. Men claimed that women were willing and complicit. However, because women were expected to be modest and submissive, women in court were unable to claim that they had resisted *and* retain their reputation as modest” (191).

(24)See Godfrey, Heilmann, Oulton, and Surridge.

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