

Manus Ex Machina: The Tactile Interface of Lady Audley's Secret

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Mary Elizabeth Braddon's novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) is part of a sustained preoccupation and almost obsessive fascination with hands and the implications of tactility in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. Hands and touch are used by Christina Rossetti, Thomas Hardy, Wilkie Collins, George Egerton and many others in very specific ways to address issues of morality, materiality, and embodiment. However, in *Lady Audley's Secret* the appearance of hands, both physical and ghostly, is sustained throughout the novel to create a tactile interface and a palimpsestic narrative. There is an "inscription—the physical mark, the trace—" (Kirchenbaum 2) just as we see in electronic storage today. In the novel even when information is seemingly destroyed or untraceable, there is still the reminder that "every contact leaves a trace" (Kirchenbaum 3) which guides the forensic nature of the plot. In Braddon's novel as well as in C.H. Hazlewood's dramatic adaptation, the "surface lying between two portions of matter or space [...] forming their common boundary" ("interface") which is the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of interface, becomes an area impossible to erase because hands leave a tactile, or at times, textual, residue.

The domination of hands in the narrative as well as an emphasis on tactility highlight a haptic expression and understanding of interface. Further, the narrative that Braddon and other sensation novelists put forward in the mid-nineteenth century demonstrates "that careful reading was necessary not only to puzzle out a novel's clever plot, but also to survive in the new Victorian culture of information" (Houston 28). The tactile clues placed in *Lady Audley's Secret* allow the reader to follow an epistolary (and at times epistemological) network back in time. Hands and touches become their own information points and the way that Braddon isolates "questions of identity, and [...] the kinds of personal information that could be forged, hidden, blackmailed, or sold in the newly technological Victorian world" (Houston 18) is through a continuous recall of "a hand which is stronger" (Braddon 197) guiding the plot. This is the interface, the tactile trace that leads the readers through the narrative, leaving clues that become the entry-point to the plot's resolution. In *Lady Audley's Secret*, we see how the creation of false information, through handwriting for example, has the ability to temporarily modify social position or identity. Ultimately these new identities are exposed through different hands and the way that touch is described. I argue that looking at reciprocal, material, and ghostly touch used to negotiate one's environment within Braddon's novel as well as in Hazlewood's stage production, uncovers that it is the hand from within the machine, a *manus ex machina*, or tactile interface that is guiding the plot.

Touching My Jewels: Tactile Clues and Continuity

From the beginning of the novel, when attention is placed on Lady Audley and her demeanor, the narration narrows in on how Lady Audley touches her neck and her possessions. The touches

demonstrate either guilt or deep-seated anxiety. In the proposal scene Lucy Graham (the future Lady Audley):

wore a narrow black ribbon around her neck, with a locket or a cross, or a miniature, perhaps, attached to it: but whatever the trinket was she always kept it hidden under her dress. Once or twice, while she sat silently thinking, she removed one of her hands from before her face, and fidgeted nervously with the ribbon, clutching at it with a half-angry gesture, and twisting it backwards and forwards between her fingers. (50)

It is interesting that at the beginning of this passage what is attached to the ribbon is seemingly inconsequential, it could be a locket, a cross – but rather what is of importance is the manipulation and touching at what is around her neck. This manipulation and clutching of the ribbon, which we later find out contains her ring and license from her previous marriage, foreshadows the manipulation exposed in the remainder of the narration and how that interface – what lies between the surfaces of known and hidden – is reinforced through tactility.

The idea of manipulation is important to the novel and the various definitions of manipulation intersect in the narrative and within Lady Audley's actions as part of the expression of a tactile interface. First, her touching of the ribbon is the "action or an act of manipulating something; handling" ("manipulation, n.," def. 3a), yet this touching also relates to her "act of managing or directing a person, etc., esp. in a skillful manner; the exercise of subtle, underhand, or devious influence or control over a person, organization, etc.; interference, tampering" ("manipulation, n.," def. 4). Lady Audley can seemingly make anything disappear from plain sight, or manipulate it so that it does disappear, in order to maintain her status. This kind of manipulation is a concept explored in sensation fiction by Lyn Pickett (1994), Andrew Radford (2009), as well as Anne-Marie Beller and Tara MacDonald (2013). Emma Liggins (1997) looks at this manipulation in Braddon's work in particular; an exploration of the physical manipulation innate in sensation fiction is a necessary means of addressing the motivations and socio-cultural framework of the text. Lucy's ambitious nature leads her to manipulate physically and socially in order to forge a position for herself and maintain a sense of power, even if it may be a false sense of power.

The focus on the locket and the way Lady Audley touches the ribbon highlights a material nature to her position as well. Lady Audley is often described as touching her possessions or keeping her possessions close at hand. This need to keep her possessions close is of course motivated by a need to keep information tightly guarded, and to highlight possessions as the marker of class mobility. However, this interaction with her ribbon and ring also highlights a tension between materiality and embodiment in the text as seen through tactility. As Lady Audley is touching and manipulating this ribbon, the description suggests that this ribbon is actually touching her back or enacting tactile violence. In the same proposal scene, Lucy's anxiety and agitation seems to rise with "her hands clutching at the black ribbon about her throat, as if it had been strangling her" (52) as she continues with the marriage negotiations of sorts.

This description of the ribbon as strangling her is one example of reciprocal touch found in the novel. I define reciprocal touch in Merleau-Pontian terms as most commonly seen between two characters in a narrative but it can also be applied to material interactions as seen here. Reciprocal touch is a phenomenological conceptualizing of tactility that blurs the active/passive boundaries of sensation which is informed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty's work in *The Visible and the Invisible*

where he states between “my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we must say that the things pass into us as well as we into the things” (123). Reciprocal touch also rests at the heart of the conceptualizing interfaces; there is a passing through but also a layering innate. Through this concept of reciprocal touch we can understand how in the proposal scene Lady Audley’s material possessions encroach, reminding her of her past by a touch that is described as having the ability to strangle.

Jewellery often becomes the material loci for descriptions of reciprocal touch in scenes of heightened anxiety or when pieces of information are revealed in the novel. For example, when Lucy is attempting to lay the foundation that will cause Sir Michael to ask Robert Audley to leave, she is described as having “her hands locked together upon the arm of her husband’s easy-chair. They were very restless, these slender white hands. My lady twisted the jeweled fingers in and out of each other, as she talked to her husband” (297). Here we have not only a type of restless-hand syndrome with the movement of her fingers in and out but also the jewellery on her fingers marks these points of touch, reminding her of what she has gained and also of what she has to lose. The slender whiteness of her hands also serves to mark her social location but it does not reflect her inward turmoil. In that same scene “she still twisted her bonnet- string round and round her fingers” (296) where this focus on ribbons and strings, hands and fingers reveals a larger tactile continuity throughout the novel that indicates when Lucy is anxious.

Lady Audley’s character is informed and maintained through other characters describing her or speaking about her in terms of her hands and tactility. For example, Alicia’s description of Lady Audley to her father reinforces Lady Audley’s hands: “You think her sensitive because she has soft little white hands, and big blue eyes with long lashes, and all manner of affected, fantastical ways, which you stupid men call fascinating. Sensitive! Why, I’ve seen her do cruel things with those slender white fingers, and laugh at the pain she inflicted” (136). This suggests that Alicia is not fooled by the outward appearance of Lady Audley’s hands and she is aware that it is not the appearance of the hands that matters but rather the tactile cruelty that one can enact with their hands. Towards the end of the novel even Dr. Mosgrave suggests that if Lady Audley “could have sprung at my throat and strangled me with her little hands, as I sat talking to her just now, she would have done it” (386-387). Thus, there is an underlying potentiality for violent tactility in Lady Audley and the visual appearance of her hands should not be the only clue. Rather the description of the hands is but one part of the tactile trace created in the novel. The second part is the hands’ function within the “mediating environment” (Drucker 10), the interface of the narrative. Lady Audley has a strong touch, for example she drags Phoebe away from Mount Stanning, where with “convulsive pressure of her right hand [she] held her companion as firmly as an iron vice could have held her” (335). Lucy is capable of a violent reciprocal touch with those white slender hands entrapping Phoebe, making her seemingly complicit in the evil deed.

Lady Audley is not the only character defined through her hands and reciprocal touch in the novel. The description of Phoebe Marks’s hands and the way she touches her husband, Luke, highlights her social mobility within the narrative. As Anna Peak suggests in “Servants and the Victorian Sensation Novel,” there are multiple layers of class interaction at play here (838). When Phoebe “put one of her hands, which had grown white in her new and easy service, about [Luke’s] thick neck” (66), the description of Phoebe’s hands as white is a tactile class distinction yet her touch does not suggest a caring loving touch for her husband, but rather echoes the stranglehold that the ribbon has on Lady Audley’s neck. Both Phoebe and Luke play a large

narrative role in the tactile interface of *Lady Audley's Secret*. As their last name suggests, the Marks literally leave their mark on the narration and they are both personified figures of the tactility we can trace throughout the narrative. In fact, one of the earliest descriptions of Luke Marks is given in relation to touching material objects and possessions as markers of status. When Phoebe gives Luke entrance to Lady Audley's chambers while Lady Audley is away, he focuses on the Lady's jewels and his desire to possess them: "[h]e wanted to handle the delicate jewels; to pull them about, and find their mercantile value" (70). Lady Audley's jewels play an important role within the narration and serve as a material presence, not only for Lady Audley herself but also for the other characters.

A desire to possess riches is a strong motivator for Luke who is punished for this desire for social mobility, first through a literal tactile maiming and then by death. The fire at the Castle Inn causes temporary anaphia for Robert where he "bore the traces of the night's peril, for the dark hair had been singed upon one side of his forehead, and his left hand was red and inflamed from the effect of the scorching atmosphere" (376). For Luke the fire is more severe, for towards the end of the novel we are told "Luke Marks stretched out his left hand – the right had been injured by the fire, and was wrapped in linen – and groped feebly for that of Mr. Robert Audley" (417). Luke's hand is "coarse but shrunken" (417) and he becomes a pale reminder/remainder of his former self. Braddon's attention to detail in writing the novel is highlighted in this scene where she has Robert and Luke with hand injuries on opposite hands, emphasizing how Robert dragged Luke out of the Castle Inn. The right and left hand injury of both characters also positions them within the narrative frame; Luke is more sinister and thus is left with his left hand intact. Luke appreciates the care and attention Robert gives him, which leads Luke to tell his part of the story, tying all the remaining pieces together and ultimately causing Lady Audley's plot to unravel.

The Letter as Trace: Epistolary Interface

Letters and letter writing also become part of the tactile interface that binds the novel together for it is through the letters that a trace and continuity is maintained throughout the plot. Touch plays an inherent role in the letter writing process. Not only when a letter is written is touch required, for pen touches paper, paper touches pen, but as we see in the novel, many hands become complicit in the transport and delivery of letters as well. When the letter reaches its destination, the letter becomes a way of touching from afar. The receiver is touching the same paper the letter writer did, one part in a long chain of tactile interactions. There is also of course the hand that writes and the obsession over tell-tale signs and distinct characteristics seen in handwriting. Lady Audley's hand and her handwriting become proof in Robert Audley's investigation of the disappearance of George Talboys. Lady Audley even goes so far as to confiscate letters that are in Robert's possession in order to escape detection through handwriting analysis. Robert describes Lady Audley's distinctive hand after he tells her that he has seen letters written by George's presumed deceased wife:

"There are very few who write so charming and uncommon a hand as yours, Lady Audley."

"Ah you know my hand of course."

“Yes, I know it very well, indeed.” (171)

“The evidence of handwriting” (286) becomes part of the case, the literal body of evidence that Robert puts together. It is Lady Audley’s own hand that essentially entraps her and reveals her elaborate plot. However, Lady Audley’s letters are not the only handwritten notes that become part of the material evidence of Robert Audley’s case. When George Talboys attempts to write a letter to Robert with his broken arm after his incident with Lucy and the well, the letter is said to be “not in his friend’s familiar hand” and this is because “he wrote it with his own hand; but it was his left hand, for he couldn’t use his right because of his broken arm” (424). Like Luke Marks’s burnt hand, George Talboys’s broken left hand is one of the novel’s many images of maimed hands, highlighting the inability to touch or connect.

The prevalence of letter writing in the novel not only underscores the dissemination of information but is also part of a larger theme of touching from afar, which relates to the ghostly tactility seen throughout *Lady Audley’s Secret*, an absent presence within the tactile interface of the narrative. Letters in *Lady Audley’s Secret* do not always demonstrate guilt; they can in fact, relate or evoke strong emotion or affection. When Robert receives a letter from Clara Talboys, the description echoes the affection that Robert feels for her: “[t]he third was addressed in a hand the young barrister knew only too well, though he had seen it but once before. His face flushed redly at the sight of the superscription, and he took the letter in his hand, carefully and tenderly, as if it has been a living thing, and sentient to his touch” (401). The sentient nature of touch is key in this novel – the touch of a letter is a trace back to the author of the letter. Letters provide epistemological clues through the tactile means of the epistolary and function as an interface, a place of contact that mediates the narrative. Letters and messages also have a performative valence in the novel. A perfect example of this performative nature, is the “telegraphic message” (96) that Lady Audley receives from Mrs. Vincent early in the novel. The message functions as a means to get Lady Audley away from George Talboys and detection, and thus performs its purpose and reinforces what Nicholas Daly suggests about sensation fiction, that “[n]ew technologies are not a simple backdrop to these stories; victory goes to whoever masters them” (Daly 474). Lady Audley clearly has the upper hand at this point in the novel.

The Performative Tactile Interface

The performative nature of *Lady Audley’s Secret* goes beyond letters, however, and has a larger tactile relation to performance. Not only was “the novel adapted for the stage almost immediately” (Houston 9), demonstrating the performative nature of the novel, but as Houston suggests, “Braddon weaves the language of performance through the novel, revealing the constructions and costumes that make up the social world” (Houston 24). Braddon’s theatrical background seems to have informed the narrative and in turn the performative constructs of the novel. Braddon was an actor for seven years during a time where acting had a strong societal connection to immorality. Making the female body a public spectacle suggests an objectification of the body and the materiality of female embodiment (Houston 12-13), however, Braddon addresses these very concepts through a focus on the sensory and tactility in the novel. Putting

Lady Audley's Secret onto the stage is a way to continue to explore space and tactile interface outside of a purely textual surface.

A well-known adaptation of *Lady Audley's Secret* was staged at the Royal Victoria Theatre on May 25th 1863 by Colin Henry Hazelwood. This was just one of at least four 1863 theatrical adaptations of the novel. Touch is as important a part of the stage performance as it is in the novel. The use of tactility as a way to negotiate space, to literally interact with a haptic environment, where one is not spoken by the text but touched by it and through it (Drucker 2) is highlighted in theatrical adaptations. In the Royal Victoria performance of 1863, the stage directions in the text relate the hand movements that Maria Daly in the role of Lady Audley would have enacted:

LADY AUDLEY. I will [*George goes up, and as his back is turned she goes to the well, takes off the iron handle, and conceals it in her right hand behind her...*]

[...]

[*Lady Audley creeps up behind him unperceived.*]

LADY AUDLEY. [*striking him with the iron handle*]. It is indeed – die! [*Pushes him down the well, the ruined stones fall with him*] He is gone – gone! And no one was a witness to the deed. (1.1)

The violent tactility enacted here by Lady Audley is used to underscore the immorality and instability of her character. In the novel, Lady Audley describes her actions as: “I drew the loose iron spindle from the shrunken wood, and saw my first husband sink with one horrible cry into the black mouth of the well” (398). The scene in the novel lacks the tangible violent action, in fact it is presented as though it is simply by drawing the loose spindle that George falls. Similarly her actions are later described by George as “the treacherous hand that had sent me to what might have been my death” (443), another rather vague description devoid of the physicality of this scene as enacted in the play. Yet in the play, the physical tactile violence is not an isolated act, and in fact the physical violence can and is used more liberally in a theatrical performance. The play reads between the lines of the novel.

As the play is only two acts, it must condense the mystery and speculation of the novel while engaging the audience in Lady Audley's history and tendency towards deception. Also as Catherine Quirk states, most adaptations of sensation novels were “interested only in the sensational elements of the novels and the ease with which they might be put on stage and bring in crowds” (Quirk, para. 1). Thus, the stage directions of the texts emphasize a violent physicality that is oftentimes only alluded to in the novel. However, in Act Two Scene Five Lady Audley's violence towards Phoebe is one that is similarly described in the novel. The stage directions state:

PHOEBE. Let me run instantly, and inform him, my lady.

[*Going L. Lady Audley seizes her by the wrist,*

LADY AUDLEY. No, stay here; I will go.

[...]

PHOEBE. Why do you hold me? Why do you wish to prevent me returning home? You have some wicked motive, I can see it in your eye.

LADY AUDLEY. You are mistaken, girl.

[...]

PHOEBE. But I am not! I will denounce you to justice – I will proclaim you as a murderess! Help! Help! Murder! Help! Help!

[Lady Audley drags her off, resisting, R] (2.5)

In the novel that same scene is described as: “She took the girl’s arm, and half-led, half-dragged her from the house. The convulsive pressure of her right hand held her companion as firmly as an iron vice could have held her” (335). Here, the physical dragging motion, the ability of tactility to restrain and reinscribe areas of mobility is similar to Braddon’s novel. Yet the play seems to centre its depiction of touch as violent whereas the novel uses many different valences of tactility throughout the narrative.

Later in Act 2 Scene 5, Lady Audley continues her attempt to use violent tactility to remove all those who stand in her way:

LADY AUDLEY. What will you do? – proceed without evidence? And who are *you* that dare accuse me? Who are you that oppose yourself to me so constantly? I have wealth, boundless wealth, and I will use it to crush you – to crush you, Robert Audley.

ROBERT. How?

LADY AUDLEY. Thus!

[Rushes towards him with poignard, he wrenches it from her hand]

ROBERT. And thus I rob the serpent of its sting! (2.5)

In this scene Lady Audley starts by suggesting that she can destroy Robert through monetary means “to crush you” and yet, she ultimately resorts to physical and tactile means, highlighting a faster more direct way to protect herself from his accusations.

The last lines of the play are given to Lady Audley and her dialogue again brings the idea of tactility to the fore:

LADY AUDLEY. Aye – Aye! *[Laughs wildly]* Mad, mad, that is the word. I feel it here – here! *[Places her hands on her temples.]* Do not touch me – do not come near me – let me claim your silence – your pity – and let the grave, the cold grave, close over Lady Audley and her Secret.

[*Falls – dies – Music – tableau of sympathy – GEORGE TALBOYS kneels over her*] (2.5)

Unlike her banishment to Belgium seen in the novel, the play expedites her demise by ending the play with her death. Her death also comes with directions to George to avoid touching her which also demonstrates an acute awareness that the greatest punishment is not simply death but being denied care and tactile interaction with another.

Patrick Brantlinger states that, “because of its moral ambiguity, the sensation novel was felt to be dangerous by many of its first critics, while stage melodrama seemed less threatening” (5) yet, the ending of the theatrical adaptation of *Lady Audley* does not seem to have the same moral ambiguity as the novel and could be read as a much more threatening ending. As Dunbar suggests, “the novel’s peculiar ending feels borrowed from another genre” and as such the ending seems to be necessary in order “to smooth over the epistemological and narrative problems caused by *Lady Audley*’s disturbing confession” (Dunbar 101). As a result, *Lady Audley* gets ushered out of the narrative and the remaining fifty pages of the text are centred on tying up Robert’s story. On stage *Lady Audley*’s madness is replaced with a demand for sympathy and an awareness of the need to avoid tactile interactions for touch can create one’s downfall through violence. Hazelwood’s adaptation of *Lady Audley’s Secret* demonstrates the ability of tactility to expose what is seen in the novel but it also complicates how touch functions in intersubjective relationships. How one is literally positioned on stage and in relation to others while acting, gives a new perspective to the interlocking tactile frames of materiality confines, the epistolary, and reciprocal tactility that can at times be violent as seen in Braddon’s work.

It is important to point out that there are spaces in the novel that are also described through reference to tactility, similarly to what is provided in stage directions. The architecture and negotiation of these spaces are achieved through a description of touching the material objects present in the space. A good example of this in the novel is when George and Robert visit Captain Maldon for the first time and George “wandered restlessly about the room, looking at and sometimes touching the knickknacks laying here and there” (79). George’s tactile interaction with the material possessions in the room is his attempt to materially reconnect with his wife in a space she used to inhabit. This also creates echoes of wanting to explore her corporeality as well. The fact that he touches the knickknacks and not substantial pieces of the room, such as the furniture or the walls, also speaks to a sort of frivolity in the former Mrs. George Talboys; there is nothing of substance in her room. George is very much framed in relation to how his touch helps him move through spaces. Towards the end of the novel, he has to use his hands to “climb like a cat” (443). He is described as “helping myself as well as I could with my hands, though one arm was crippled” (444); he finds his way to safety to escape the “treacherous hand” (443) of his wife who had left him for dead.

However, this would not have happened if George and Robert had not crawled through a passageway in order to bypass *Lady Audley*’s locked door to gain entrance to her room in the first place. George and Robert gain access to *Lady Audley*’s room, because they “don’t mind crawling upon hands and knees [...] for that very passage communicates with her dressing-room” (104). In fact, because they let themselves down by their hands (105), George has the opportunity to see the painting that unmistakably resembles his “late” wife. As Elizabeth Langland suggests, the architectural penetration by George and Robert echoes the penetrability of *Lady Audley*: “one would expect a lady’s chambers to be penetrable, like her body, only by

the master” (Langland 10). Yet, by being penetrable through tactile means, her private space, as well as her bodily architecture, is laid visible to all, not just to her master. It is an instance of the “private space [being] gendered feminine so that the woman who is most protected by the architecture is also most exposed by it” (Langland 8). Lady Audley’s apartments expose the secrets of her past as well as tell the tale of her present. When these secrets are exposed by her private space being penetrated, it sets Lady Audley’s downfall in motion. This is ultimately achieved through various types of tactility in the narrative. This navigation of private spaces through tactile means is another example of negotiating the interface. However, it is not simply the performance of George and Robert’s negotiation of space through their hands and touch that highlights the tactile trace in the text, nor is it Lady Audley’s manipulation or the numerous fragments and epistles littered throughout the narrative; there is one more piece that is part of this tactile interface and that is the ghostly hand.

The Spectre of Touch: *Manus Ex Machina* and the Haptic Narrative Interface

There is a hand within the narrative machine of *Lady Audley’s Secret*. This invisible ghost hand is the touch that guides Robert to the truth about Lady Audley, and it is omnipresent within the narration of the novel. *Lady Audley’s Secret* is seemingly guided by “the hand of genius” (161). This hand of genius is one that helps Robert find George and expose Lucy Audley as a fraud. On many occasions Robert suggests that “a stronger hand than my own is pointing the way to my lost friend’s unknown grave” (192). This hand is the *manus ex machina* in *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Robert repeats a variation of the same phrase four times as he is searching for answers about George’s disappearance. He states:

- 1) “It is not myself; it is the hand which is beckoning me further and further upon the dark road whose end I dare not dream of” (196);
- 2) “A hand which is stronger than my own beckons me on” (197);
- 3) “A hand that is stronger than my own is beckoning me onward upon the dark road” (221); and
- 4) “A hand that is stronger than my own is beckoning me onward to the dark road that leads to my lost friend’s unknown grave” (274).

Robert’s obsession with this hand that is stronger than his own is a manifestation of the monomania of which he is frequently accused. Richard Nemesvari (1995) has explored the homosocial valence of Robert’s monomania and this ghostly tactility is a trace that can support this homosocial reading that also reaffirms the interface analysis of the novel. Robert seems to be “haunted by the ghost of George Talboys” (282), and this ghost affirms its presence only through a ghostly hand an ethereal touch that positions, directs, guides, and beckons from beyond.

The ghost hands and ghost touches also lead to ghostly impressions. The appearance of bruises on Lady Audley’s wrist signals that something more sinister is at work:

[Robert] looked at her pretty fingers one by one; this one glittering with a ruby heart; that encoiled by an emerald serpent; and about them all a starry glitter of diamonds. From the fingers his eyes wander to the rounded wrists: the broad, flat, gold bracelet upon her right wrist dropped over her hand, as she executed a rapid passage. She stopped abruptly to rearrange it; but before she could do so, Robert Audley noticed a bruise upon her delicate skin. (122)

Her excuse for these bruises is that “I am unfortunate in having a skin which the slightest touch bruises” (122). Though Lady Audley attempts to explain away their appearance, her bruises are a perfect representation of pressure applied via a hand and fingers:

It was not one bruise, but four slender, purple marks, such as might have been made by the four fingers of a powerful hand that had grasped the delicate wrist a shade too roughly [...] Across one of the faint purple marks there was a darker tinge, as if a ring worn by one of these strong and cruel fingers had been ground into the tender flesh. (123)

These bruises are a literal memory and reminder of a violent touch; even the source of this tactility seems ghostly.

This is but one of many ghostly touches that seem to affect Lady Audley. As mentioned previously, even her jewelry seems to strangle and choke her with invisible tactility. Towards the end of the novel after Lucy has told her tale, she is also haunted by her “mother’s icy grasp upon [her] throat” (357). Lady Audley’s mother is yet another example of a ghostly touch that rests within the narration of the text. The perpetual haunting through tactility serves as a reminder that Lady Audley is ultimately trapped by her past, as much as Robert Audley is guided by a haunting hand and touch that speaks to his Sybarite (293) nature and deep connection to the sensuous and sensory.

Elizabeth Steere takes this concept of ghostly hands and telepathic touch further by suggesting that the true ghost touch within the text is that of Phoebe Marks. Steere reminds us that “[w]hile sensation fiction does not generally include overtly occult episodes, it does use occultized images to depict crime and social evils” (Steere 302). Thus, here the ghostly hand and the ghost touch reinforce the immorality and criminality of what Lady Audley has done and lead Robert to find the answers he seeks.

However, one must question what the controlling ghostly power is that dominates Lady Audley’s rise and fall. Steere contends that the “passing of Phoebe’s hands over Lady Audley’s head as she brushes her mistress’s hair and her victim’s responsive ‘jerks’ reinforce the maid’s image as a mesmerist” (Steere 306). Though this speaks to larger ghostly and telepathic interpretations of some scenes, it does not sufficiently explain the course of the narration as a whole. As Robert Audley states, “who can fail to recognize God’s hand in this strange story?” (433), and the *manus ex machina*, the unknown hand, the unknown force, leaves a palpable mark on the narration of *Lady Audley’s Secret*.

The use of tactility in *Lady Audley’s Secret* demonstrates that the sensation novel “stimulates a vulgar curiosity, weakens the established rules of right and wrong, touches, to say the least, upon things illicit, raises false and vain expectations, and draws a wholly false picture of life” (Steere

300). As I have argued, touch seems to be the driving force of Braddon's novel and touch appears within the narration, leaving clues, creating a sense of continuity, and reminding us that everything has a trace. The use of tactility as a tool to both create and maintain barriers is also evoked by Robert when he "shaded his eyes with his hand; putting a barrier between my lady and himself; a screen which baffled her penetration and provoked her curiosity" (238). Robert seems more attuned than the other characters in the novel to the power of hands and touch. As William A. Cohen states in *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses*, "not only is the visual tactile, but the means of touching has now become a way of seeing" (125), and Robert follows the tactile clues he is given like bread crumbs, making the tactile visual. Touch is the ghostly presence in the machine of mid-Victorian society evoking morals, social boundaries, concepts of embodiment, and materiality confines – all traces of which become part of the narrative interface of Braddon's novel.

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