

**“If only there would pass away the horror of those hands!”:
Cholmondeley, Jerome and the Woman’s Touch
in the *Fin de Siècle* City**

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In their fictional constructions of gender in the 1880s, two very different writers, the “New Woman” author Mary Cholmondeley and the “New Humourist” Jerome K. Jerome, nonetheless agree in locating women at the heart of the city, and both use the emblem of feminine hands to explore their presence there as subversive or culturally threatening. The upper-class (and at this stage, country-based) Cholmondeley writes very much as a tourist, in marked opposition to the detailed knowledge of streets and habits shown by Jerome, who had grown up in the East End and briefly slept rough as a young man. Notwithstanding these differences, both writers implicitly acknowledge that, in Richard L. Stein’s words, “[the] city demands special skills, including the mastery of specialized languages” (234), and both show a preoccupation with women’s struggle or failure to gain these skills. In bringing images of purity and fallenness into collision, through the interpretive failures of the loving touch, Cholmondeley’s “Geoffrey’s Wife” and Jerome’s “The Fawn Gloves” subtly examine the cost of maintaining traditional gender ideals, and the fate of women who fail to do so.

This article explores Cholmondeley’s and Jerome’s accounts of urban women, mediated specifically through a narrative tension between seeing and touching as interpretive modes, and considers the implications for *fin de siècle* literary representations of urban-based women as they navigate the streets, particularly through moments where characters are interpreted purely through one sense in isolation from the other. Particularly useful in considering both Cholmondeley and Jerome is Wendy Parkins’s positing of an “affective and emotional dimension expressed in relation to women’s mobility” (16) through encounters with both rural and urban spaces. In “Geoffrey’s Wife” and “The Fawn Gloves” this emotional dimension is shared with the reader as an intensely embodied experience, through temporary deprivation of the sense of sight. While Constance Classen has recently argued that “[the] emphasis on visibility in the modern city was indicative of the new status given to visual experience ... touch was no longer understood to provide any important information about the world. The important thing was to *see*” (182), David Parisi’s account of scientific research during the period stresses that “touch too became the object of a scientific method that, by the century’s end, enabled tactility to be portrayed as rational, predictable, and manageable” (192). However, rather than locating the “master sense” in either touch or sight, both Cholmondeley and Jerome use sensory experience to destabilise meanings that may initially appear not only knowable but also obvious.

One of Cholmondeley’s first published stories, and one of her most radical, “Geoffrey’s Wife” appeared in *The Graphic* in 1885 when she was twenty-six. The first publication of Jerome’s “The Fawn Gloves” is uncertain; collected with *Malvina of Brittany* in 1916, it clearly draws on his experience as an impoverished clerk in 1880s London when he battled not only the threat of near starvation but also social isolation and loneliness, recalling how “[in] the daytime I could forget it, but when twilight came it would creep up behind me, putting icy hands about me” (*My Life and Times* 33). As a successful writer and editor, he would later express particular sympathy for young women in this position, whose social outlook was yet more constricted than his own had been, even as their “invasion” of the workforce appeared to align them with the threat posed by the incorrigible “New Woman.”

The ambiguities surrounding the position of women at the *fin de siècle* are explored in both stories through the positioning of a stock feminine victim in a context where she becomes anonymous, literally “unseen” by others. Strategically deferring the moment of recognition, both writers use touch in different ways to question or explore the codification of femininity, disorientating a reader who may be more confident in the transparency of visual codes such as dress. The two stories, set in Paris and London respectively, repeatedly demonstrate the unreliability of touch as a means of interpreting the world; however, this apparent reinforcement of sensory hierarchies paradoxically reveals the instability of sight as well. A focus on touch alone may be used to insist that characters and readers “look again” at what they think they already know. However, in a further deferral of value attribution, sight itself is seen to depend on the ability correctly to decode sometimes deceptive visual signs. In focusing on moments of enforced division (where a character is temporarily obliged to replace sight with touch), both writers find ways to deconstruct established or remembered social roles and expectations, through abruptly defamiliarising conventional tropes such as the body of the beautiful woman, making it increasingly difficult for readers to judge the status of a character.

The ambiguous movement of the unaccompanied woman through the streets of London (and cross-country) is a significant feature of numerous early to mid-Victorian novels. She may appear as an unknown figure in the crowd, momentarily encountering the central protagonist, as the hotel barmaid just on the right side of respectability (a trope exploited by William Makepeace Thackeray in the 1850 *Pendennis*), or as the disorientated middle-class traveller – mid-century accounts in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) and Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* (1850), for instance, tackle the difficulty for women travelling alone in finding and correctly identifying respectable lodgings. As Parkins notes, women in this period are depicted as moving “dangerously,” as “[the] unevennesses of mobility associated with class ... sometimes allow the complexities of women’s agency to be depicted in unexpected ways” (15). The sheer logistical difficulty of navigating space without a male companion is indicated by novels as different as Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby* (1839) and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861). Dickens both registers the threat to lone women and presents anxiety as a comic sign of class aspiration – at one point in *Nicholas Nickleby* Mrs Kenwigs ostentatiously wonders if it is permissible for her daughter Morleena to walk to the neighbouring hairdresser without an escort. In more serious terms, *East Lynne* presents the vulnerability of an aristocratic daughter after the death of her spendthrift father. Invited to live with her uncle and his family, the carefully protected Isabel Vane must indecorously accept help from a middle-class lawyer and virtual stranger (whom she later marries) when she finds herself with insufficient cash for her immediate expenses. Notably after Isabel’s fall halfway through the novel, when she allows herself to be manipulated by a faithless lover and so makes herself an outcast from both the upper class into which she was born and the middle class into which she has married, her mobility becomes considerably less problematic.

The significance of determining the status of women in the city was highlighted and became more obviously threatening through the implementation of the 1860s *Contagious Diseases Acts* (finally repealed in 1886 after a sustained public campaign). Specifically, women might fear being mistaken for a prostitute by corrupt or over-zealous police, as in Judith Walkowitz’s words, “the new social mix challenged the conventions of surveillance and disrupted the prevailing codifications of identity and desire. In particular, it led to territorial conflicts, complex social negotiations and confusion” (4–5). The difficulty for writers of representing women in an urban setting was increasingly complicated by the challenging of social codes towards the end of the nineteenth century; in the last decades of the century,

women workers were becoming more numerous and more socially visible, in both the literal sense as they travelled to work and in the advertisements by and for female typists and office workers. Writers often responded to these difficulties through representations of observing or being observed, particularly in the case of women, who might be judged both on their level of visibility in particular contexts and on what they themselves chose to see or to ignore. While such accounts use the language of sight, they often take as a subtext the desire for, or fear of, sexualised touch. For instance, as Walkowitz explains, the *fin de siècle* West End became a site for competing constructions of womanhood, as the behaviour of female shoppers, workers and consumers was variously interpreted in the context of both casual and unwanted encounters with men.

In Wilkie Collins's 1860 sensation novel *The Woman in White*, this dilemma is memorably described by Walter Hartright in his famous late-night encounter with Anne Catherick, which symbolically takes place on an ambiguous site, on the then border between London and the country:

... in one moment, every drop of blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my shoulder from behind me. I turned on the instant, with my fingers tightening round the handle of my stick.
(20)

In tightening his hold on his stick, Walter is registering the touch on his shoulder as a potential threat – at the same time, he cannot be sure that he is being assaulted without *seeing* who has accosted him. The actions of tightening his grasp and turning his head are simultaneous, but the next logical action – to use his stick as a weapon – is deferred, reinforcing the privileging of sight over touch as a means of determining character. Having established that he has been accosted by a woman, Hartright next assures his reader that her manner and specifically her appearance (she is symbolically dressed in white) placed her respectability beyond doubt. In other words, her appearance in a lonely place at that time of night suggests that she might be a prostitute, but the visual cues lead a close observer to reject this conclusion out of hand. The processing of Walter's responses through his sense of touch collapses the reader/character hierarchy, highlighting the text's privileging of the visual while forcing the reader (who cannot "see" either) to endure the same suspense as the first-person narrator. Walter's continued uncertainty, as he asks himself whether he has acted rightly in aiding Anne's escape, likewise forces the reader to unravel the novel's depiction of "moral" status as socially constructed rather than innate.

Such disruption becomes a keynote of much New Woman writing on the city in the 1890s, in which the *déclassé* female character is traumatically absorbed into the anonymity of the crowd, remaining fully visible to the narrator and reader alone. George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893) is perhaps the most famous example; female-authored texts include Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman* (1894) and Annie E. Holdsworth's chilling *The Years that the Locust Hath Eaten* (1895). There are also numerous short stories in which a female figure is the subject of a transient encounter, or passes mysteriously through the city streets. Conversely, more conservative writers often reveal less concern about the status of individual figures, choosing instead to focus on the sheer number of unchaperoned working women entering the workplace and public places of entertainment as an inherently disturbing spectacle.

But the conventional warning that women would be damaged by *contact* with the world of the city – in some accounts, these female figures are presented as literally jostling their male

rivals as they “usurp” their rightful place in the employment market – contains the added anxiety that where sight is disturbing, implied touch can entail irrevocable damage. Like Collins’s Walter Hartright, both Cholmondeley and Jerome register the knowledge derived from touch alone as unstable or unreliable; yet, perhaps for this very reason, they use the trope of feminine hands to destabilise the perceptions of characters and readers alike. In its interruption of, or distraction from, the clues offered by sight, touch serves to distance readers from predictable lines of narrative enquiry and, in so doing, allows a re-writing of familiar storylines. As Barbara Epstein Nord observes, “[the] eighties was a pivotal time in the public lives of women ... London was a place of opportunity for women ... But it was also a place of danger” (182–83). This perceived danger was figured as a physical corruption of, or assault on, the body. Towards the end of the decade, the Ripper murders would come to embody the “dark” side of the city in stark images of the mutilated female body. Deviating from familiar accounts of the fallen woman and the corresponding insulation of her more “innocent sister,” however, both Cholmondeley and Jerome actually reveal that the “pure” woman is as likely – even more likely – to be destroyed as the prostitute.

Notwithstanding her ambivalent response to feminist issues, such as women’s employment and suffrage, Cholmondeley is remembered primarily as a New Woman writer committed to exploring opportunities through her compelling female characters, whereas Jerome categorically opposed women’s paid employment outside the home as “unnatural” and a threat to the future of the race. However, they share an awareness of the ways in which traditional feminine ideals constrain women or render them vulnerable in the competitive world of the city. For Cholmondeley, the apparently “perfect” woman is dangerously dependent on male protection, and both she and Jerome explore the predicament of women whose economic survival forces them to compromise traditional femininity without necessarily allowing them greater freedom. Critics such as Deborah Logan have long shared “a fascination with the intense ideological energy generated by a culture’s behavioural anomalies,” which they suggest represent “an energy unmatched by conforming angels in the house” (20). However, as Logan argues, literary representations of such “anomalies” are complex rather than simply binary, usually presented from class- and gender-inflected perspectives that “in large part construct the fallen stereotype even in the process of codifying it” (10).

As an upper-class visitor to the metropolis in the 1870s and ’80s, Cholmondeley’s experience was very different from Jerome’s: she recorded standing or walking for about seven hours in a day only because she was eating “strawberry cream ices,” visiting dressmakers and the Kensington Museum, going to see Charles Matthews and travelling on the underground with no worse misadventure than being driven rather fast on one occasion by a cabman who she suspected must be tipsy (as she admitted to her diary, she enjoyed “the galop [sic] home through the night streets.” Diary 4 May 1876). Nonetheless, as Christine Bayles Kortsch has shown, the trope of the female cross-class encounter was integral to her short stories throughout her career (“Writing Women” 49). In “Geoffrey’s Wife,” published the year before the repeal of the English *Contagious Diseases Acts*, she forces the reader to confront the presence of prostitution in the crowded streets of Paris (while the foreign setting perhaps encourages a sense of alienation or disorientation, her English readers would surely have made the connection with London).

The story revolves around a handsome young couple on their honeymoon, and the very name of the heroine, Eva, invokes the Genesis story of Adam and Eve, without the constant reminder of her childish “innocence.” Persuaded by the hotel concierge to stay in Paris for

one more night and see the illumination, Geoffrey and Eva unexpectedly find themselves caught up in a mob on their way back; to allow her to breathe, Geoffrey orders his delicate wife to climb on to his back. He accordingly bends down for a moment and sets off when he feels a pair of hands round his neck. There is a further moment of suspense when he is knocked to the ground, but he recovers himself and finally emerges from the crowd, only to find that he has saved an ageing prostitute rather than his bride, who it transpires has been trampled to death.

In this context the naming of Eva becomes suggestive not only in invoking innocence but also for the mirror image of fall it likewise suggests. At the moment when she enters the crowd, the symbol of “light” itself become fraught, subtly disorientating the reader. Notably Geoffrey and Eva have stayed in Paris to see the “illuminations.” On the way back to the hotel, the streets are well lit but the idea of light itself becomes implicitly threatening (even hellish) as:

Long lines of flame burn red along the Seine, and mark its windings as with a hand of fire. The great electric light from the Trocadéro casts heavy shadows against the sky. Jets of fire and wild vagaries of leaping stars rush up out of the Bois de Boulogne.

Classen notes that the nineteenth-century replacement of the narrow mediaeval streets of Paris with wide boulevards was designed partly to allow greater visibility (182); this moment in the story re-imposes scenes associated with eighteenth-century revolution as civilisation is seen to be unstable and characters lose control over their senses. Specifically, Deborah L. Parsons argues that from the 1880s the development of crowd theory revealed particular anxieties about the positioning of women as “mob,” insofar as “in the eyes of crowd theorists, women in a group amounted to chaos” (45).

Geoffrey is unable to see Eva, while the dislocation of the characters in the crowd allows the reader to recall that, in a city setting, seeing is itself often associated with the voyeuristic violation of the body as well as with transparency. In *Sexual Anarchy* Elaine Showalter argues that “[figures] of female sexuality at the *fin de siècle* are frequently represented as both exotic and veiled” (144), a source of both excitement and danger to the fascinated male observer who risks death in order to gain knowledge as the veil is lifted to reveal the face behind. But at this point in the story, Geoffrey wrongly assumes that he already knows what he cannot see. It is unclear whether the “nervous hands” he first feels around his neck are deliberately displaced when he falls in the crowd, or whether he has been carrying the wrong woman from the beginning. Disturbingly, however, he has been unable to tell the difference until he sees the woman “slinking away” under the gaslight as day breaks. In this formulation, Eva is implicitly conflated with the prostitute simply by having unwanted contact with her, and by being where she is at a particular time. Writing on London, Walkowitz suggests that if the Victorian woman was still largely categorised as either “fallen” or “virtuous:”

We might also say that these opposing categories were always ambiguous and that they demanded a regulatory force of observers to police the boundaries. In the mid- and late Victorian period, police provided the most official form of surveillance, as they endeavored to clear the streets and theaters of prostitutes to make room for respectable women. Yet police activities simply provoked further instabilities on the street. (7)

Similarly, the tourist Geoffrey believes that he can tell the difference between “good” and “bad” women on the streets of Paris, even without having access to such codified status indicators as mannerism and dress.

Just over 4000 words long, the story makes eleven references to hands and three to arms, many of these being allusions to the young bride childishly clapping her hands or placing her hand on her husband’s arm as they walk through the streets. But the difficulty of judging the status of women without reference to dress and other material clues, rather than instinctively by touch, reminds the reader of the close proximity (or even interchangeability) of the “pure woman” and the prostitute in an urban setting. If, as Amanda Anderson argues, “the fallen woman is less a predictable character than a figure who displaces multiple anxieties about the predictability of character itself” (2), the city itself contains not only elements of progress and commerce associated with the day but also illicit sexuality relegated to the night. However, for Cholmondeley, the two cityscapes are not divided by the visually demarcated night and day but crucially co-exist. In Walkowitz’s analysis:

Melodrama may have offered a powerful cultural resource for female political expression, but it set limits to what could be said, particularly in relation to female agency and desire. With its emphasis on pure victimized womanhood, it always placed some women ... the “bad women” ... beyond the pale of feminine sympathy and community. (20)

Cholmondeley’s story complicates this model in its representation of the prostitute. Contrary to the arguments of the pro-regulation lobby, the image of the pure woman is defiled and ultimately destroyed by the “night side” represented by the “fallen woman.” The prostitute herself is both aggressor (even arguably murderer) and victim, her survival attained at the cost of Eva’s death; at the same time, from the received contemporary viewpoint, her very presence in the crowd suggests her own economic exploitation and the lack of protection available to her.

It is not known for certain whether Cholmondeley had read Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* in 1885, although she is known to have admired it in later years. Nevertheless, the language of heroic rescue is reminiscent of the famous scene in which Jean Valjean exerts almost superhuman strength in his rescue of Marius from the blockade in Paris, carrying him to safety through the network of sewers despite his growing exhaustion. As he struggles through the crowd, Geoffrey seems to attain a similar heroic status. Like Jean Valjean, he feels himself becoming exhausted with the sustained effort of carrying an unresponsive burden, but “as his strength wanes a dogged determination takes its place. He steels his nerves and pulls himself together. It is only a question of time. He will and must hold out.” The irony of this chivalric determination only becomes clear at the end, when the misidentification of bride with prostitute is revealed.

Cholmondeley herself was highly sensitive to the ambivalence of touch, which she would have associated with not only care but also pain and a loss of agency. An acute invalid throughout her adult life, she would refer in her diary in later years to bouts of serious illness of which she only recalled “the exhaustion, the hand round my head, the morphia, and the horror which it throws on everything” (9 Oct. 1899); worse still was the withdrawal of this treatment, which left her with cravings that seemed “to break the whole body, down to the finger tips” (letter to George Bentley, December 1894). This sense of intrusion and consciousness of the body as a vehicle for pain would emerge more fully in her major fiction of the 1890s, but is already a key feature of “Geoffrey’s Wife” as both male and female

figures are subjected to unwanted touch and potentially agonising contact with the bodies of strangers.

Notably feminine behaviour in this context is interpreted according to the class of the woman; in fact, the narrative makes clear that the terrified prostitute is “weak” and dependent in the crowd just as Eva is assumed to be weak, and they can only be judged through being seen. Once the status of the prostitute is revealed, she can be unreflectingly relegated to her assumed place in the moral hierarchy. Notably, when the unnamed woman and Geoffrey momentarily confront each other, she is depicted as being without intuitive sympathy and only “dimly conscious of the sudden agony of the gray, blood-stained face” as she “whimpers for mercy, and limps away into a doorway, to shiver and hide her worn face from the growing light.” Significantly, while the woman is unable to interpret her rescuer’s facial expression, she instinctively hides her own face, easily identifiable as it makes her through the “tawdry hat and paint upon her cheek.” Temporarily placed on the same interpretive level while he has been obliged to go by touch, Geoffrey is restored to his condition of superior awareness the moment he can see. However, by this point the damage has already been done.

If the status of female characters is determined largely by their apparel, this crucial recognition is by definition suspended in the press of the crowd. Kortsch argues that “[for] a reader to pick up the cues provided by a character’s dress choices, he or she had to possess literacy of at least two kinds – literacy in dress culture and literacy in the print culture surrounding women’s dress” (*Dress Culture* 57). At the crisis of the story, Eva is invisible both because it is night and because her dress is crushed between the bodies surrounding her. Nonetheless, after her death it is her clothing that allows her to retain her respectable position as Geoffrey’s wife, through the “literacy” of a female servant. In the final lines of the story, it transpires that Eva’s body has been found but is now so disfigured that she is only identifiable by what remains of her dress. Without her remembered beautiful appearance, her identity and status can only be established by the testimony of her maid.

Her left glove is restored to Geoffrey as a tangible symbol, in which sight and touch coalesce – it is slightly marked by the imprint of her wedding ring. However, the momentary exchange of hands has been fatal, and the now soiled glove not only invokes the uneasy conflation of pure and fallen but also potently suggests that touch cannot always be instinctively interpreted or appropriately registered. The friend who has retrieved the glove as both relic and proof of identity respectfully places it on a table until it can be restored to Geoffrey, rather than hold it in his own hand. But his sense of complicity in the symbolic destruction of female purity is subtly suggested by his action of placing a barrier between himself and it, literally refusing to see what has happened as he places his head (and therefore his eyes) in his hands.

While the eyes are apparently privileged as a means of identification, the failure of touch in this story subtly creates doubts about the authority of sight itself. In the context of late Victorian urban culture, this caveat becomes increasingly urgent. In her history of Victorian London, Judith Flanders suggests that far from it being easy to recognise a prostitute (as so many novels and stories of the period reassuringly assume), “[the] places where women were seen defined them: if women passed through certain places, they were automatically prostitutes, no matter how they behaved or dressed” (403). In the context of this anxiety to define female purity, the tension between touch and sight provides a disturbing insight, namely that women’s status is judged on what an observer thinks they already know. In the final reduction of the prostitute’s moral sensibility, the narrator apparently confirms the gap in class values as innate. However, in juxtaposing the two women, as one literally takes the

rightful place of the other, diverting the affectionate care of her husband to herself, the story implicitly determines femininity as much a moral construct as a social one.

In “The Fawn Gloves” Jerome uses an unexpected collision between touch and sight as an indictment of the economic exploitation of respectable women in London. In his journalism, Jerome often invokes touch to register cruelty, particularly associated with vivisection or the maltreatment of children or servants. In this story, perfectly shaped but damaged hands register the vicissitudes of the “pure” woman who, unlike Cholmondeley’s Eva, has failed to marry and is instead forced into social isolation and poorly paid work. In *Hidden Hands: working-class women and Victorian social- problem fiction*, Patricia Johnson notes the dilemma for female factory “hands,” who were both rendered anonymous (even dehumanised) by this description and stigmatised as “the rise of domestic ideology meant that a true woman adhered to a middle-class standard that was impossible for the working class to achieve” (6).

Numbers of these women were unable to marry, and debates over female purity were further inflected by the questionable status of the “spinster” or her counterpart in the final decades of the century, the “bachelor girl.” By the end of the century, increasing numbers of women were of necessity working outside the home. As Emma Liggins points out, “Cultural uncertainties about the social usefulness of single women and whether the celibate spinster should be aligned with the women of the future surfaced in the periodical press from the late 1880s” (100). While he insisted that this situation was vitiating women’s instincts and threatening the health of future generations, Jerome was sympathetic to the plight of the women themselves, writing in 1897:

Civilisation has decreed that a certain number of women must shift for themselves, upsetting Nature’s scheme, which intended that they should be provided for by men. A larger number of women are every year compelled to fight the battle of life for themselves. Their existence in such towns as London must be a dreary one. Their earnings are not sufficient to allow them much amusement-seeking, nor is even the emancipated young woman quite comfortable in going about to music hall or theatre by herself. The lack of companionship, the lonely evenings, the weary Sundays, are troubles very real. (Editorial *To-day* 328)

Having lived in urban poverty himself, Jerome emphasises the condition of such women as restrictive rather than necessarily rebellious; despite their subversive presence among the city workforce, they remain trapped by conventional expectations. Assessing the connection between factory work and military drill, Classen notes that “[in] the factory it was necessary for the rhythms of the body to be attuned to the rhythms of the machinery. Everyone was required to work in concert with the mechanical pace, performing the same meticulous actions over and over again” (169). Jerome observes this process of mechanisation, but with the additional insight that, unlike machines, a woman’s hands are not “purpose built” and become damaged by the repetitive processes they are called on to perform. Significantly, Classen also notes that the “repetitive, tedious, and physically *wearing* nature of the work undertaken in the prison closely resembled that of the factory” [175; emphasis added]. The lonely characters of Jerome’s urban narratives are imprisoned both by the mundane nature of their work (including, in this case, factory work) and by the class sensibility that preserves respectability, only through forbidding their seeking social contact on the streets.

In the semi-autobiographical *Paul Kever* (1902), Jerome’s first-person narrator remembers how “in the evenings the sense of desolation gripped me like a physical pain” (196) and

describes the equally lonely young men and women he encounters: “Each imprisoned in his solitary cell of shyness, we looked at one another through the grating with condoling eyes” (196). Only once does Paul instinctively reach out to take the hand of a young girl on a bench, an incident that forms the focus of the earlier story. Significantly, in this formulation, the eyes are free to travel but only because they are subject to a boundary, the invisible “grating,” signalling the limits of their social interaction. In this context the positioning of a girl on a park bench (facing outwards and possibly towards approaching pedestrians) invokes the complexities of urban travel and a woman’s right to encounter or return the male gaze, suggested by Ana Parejo Vadillo. In her account, “although women could still be the object of the male gaze, women were forced to learn how and when to look because of the spatial conditions of the omnibuses and trains (two rows of seats facing each other)” (212).

Alone in the city, the main character in “The Fawn Gloves” is initially too shy to assuage his loneliness by approaching a young woman who he sees sitting on a bench in the evening, and who deliberately resists meeting his gaze. However, he is irresistibly drawn to her “little spiritual face, the little brown shoes pointed downwards, their toes just touching the ground; the little fawn gloves folded upon her lap” (136). From the start, the unnamed character separates the strange woman from others of her assumed class, based on the minute indicators of her appearance and behaviour – her reserve and her care for her clothes are clearly presented as middle-class attributes. As Richard Stein notes, “City seeing always requires a quick and comprehensive transformation of people into Others, into forms that are simultaneously recognizable and more anonymous than they might have been otherwise” (235). In common with Cholmondeley, Jerome begins by apparently portraying an Edenic space within the city, “between St Johns Wood and Albany Street God planted a garden” (137), where the unnamed characters meet and reveal their potential for individual development.

Like Jerome himself in the 1880s, the male character “was not always going to be a clerk in an office. He was going to write poetry, books, plays” (140). This romanticising tendency, with its subtly self-questioning use of free indirect speech (within the text, “he was going to” has no actual reference point in the future), focuses attention on the connection between social status, education and the uses of human hands. The character is provisionally defined by what he does – he *is*, rather than works as, a clerk – but in his account the work itself becomes disembodied, or at least not particularised. In the imaginary future he will forge a new identity through the physical act of writing, enumerated as “poetry, books, plays.” This direction of the reader’s attention to hands (used for writing) takes on a different set of associations in relation to the female character. Johnson’s *Hidden Hands* is primarily concerned with the mid-century novel, but her insights into the contradictoriness of writing about women factory workers has direct implications for Jerome’s story of a middle-class woman reduced to working in industry:

To narrate the life of a working-class woman meant describing the hard labor she was made to perform, the money she earned in full-time or part-time labor, and the strength and independence that these tasks demanded, all elements which conflicted with the Victorian view of “the feminine.” (7)

This difficulty is one that the male lover of the story refuses to confront. Having finally managed to engage the strange woman in conversation, he falls in love with her precisely because she does not offer “the bold challenges, the sly glances of invitation flashed upon him in the street or from some neighbouring table in the cheap luncheon room” (137). Noting the neatly mended gloves and “fringe of dainty petticoat, always so spotless and with never a

tear, and the neat, plain stockings” (138) of the young woman, the male figure is able to identify her as both pure and self-respecting, allowing her initially to elude, what Kortsch terms, “the ongoing tendency to condemn working-class women for any desire to appear fashionable, as well as for failing to adhere to an idealized standard of neat and tidy domestic labour” (41). While the reader’s attention is subtly directed to the tension between the “delicate” stitching and neat gloves, and the poverty revealed by the need for such visible mending, the admiring male protagonist notably refuses to consider the means by which this idealised standard of femininity is sustained. Likening her to a lily of the valley and repeatedly to a fawn, he quickly comes to idealise her as a “muse” and, for this reason, never wants to know how she earns her living or where she lives, always saying goodbye to her in the park where they meet.

The narrator is clearly torn between a shared desire to idealise the “spiritual” face and apparently perfect form of the woman and a more mature awareness of her predicament, forced as she has been by the death of her parents to survive in a competitive market. Significantly, the male character is “of a finicking nature, to whom the little accessories are almost of more importance than the whole” (138). He links the desirability of the woman to her delicate taste and care for her appearance; however, in his admiration of her clothing, he forgets Jerome’s own dictate that women “should be provided for by men.” At one point he notes that her shoes “must have been expensive when new, for they still kept their shape” (138); this description notably circumvents the question of who paid for them. The reader is left to infer that the shoes were bought, presumably by the girl’s mother, before she was forced to earn her own living. In this way the narrator subtly indicates that sufficiently stable middle-class origins render her status beyond reasonable doubt, despite her now having to maintain herself. Registering the fabric and cleanness of her clothes as attractive, he dismisses his own implied responsibility to save her from her situation, quickly disregarding the poverty suggested by their worn and darned appearance:

They appealed to him, her gloves, in spite of their being old and much mended; and he was glad they were of kid. Had they been of cotton, such as girls of her class usually wore, the thought of pressing his lips to them would have put his teeth on edge. (138)

Sight is clearly substituting for the desired sexualised touch here, as the appearance of the gloves segues into a fantasy of kissing, through the association of sight and the feel of particular materials. Notwithstanding the approving comment on her once expensive shoes, the woman is now relegated to a particular class based on the evidence of her faded clothes (“girls of her class”). However, this in itself means that she can then be further idealised for transcending this type through her choice of gloves (“he was glad they were of kid”). It is the feel of a new pair of gloves, “so smooth and soft and cool” (140), that serves as a catalyst for an unpremeditated kiss. Linguistically, even the sense of smell is co-opted into an image of touching as the woman has appeared one evening with “some little added fragrance that made itself oddly felt, while she herself seemed to be conscious of increased dignity” (140).

Impulsively, the man kisses her hand on saying goodbye, but on being pressed to explain why she always wears gloves outside, the woman reluctantly shows him her hands, which are red and blistered from her work. Characteristically, Jerome chooses to make the woman a factory worker, rather than a more securely middle-class office worker, precisely to demonstrate the way in which paid employment renders women anonymous and destroys their domestic value. By making her damaged hands a tangible symptom of her being “desexed,” he implies that she is being both physically and psychically “destroyed.” At this crucial moment, touch

and sight are split: when the man's attention is focused on the appearance of these hands, he fails to see the agonised appeal in his lover's eyes. The breakdown of the sense of sight is used to govern the idea of avoided or deferred touch, but as in Cholmondeley's story, sight itself is revealed to be a learned process of decoding rather than an infallible instinct.

The man reacts to his disgust at the damaged hands by abruptly leaving London: "The pale, sweet face, the little nymph-like figure, the little brown shoes kept calling to him. If only there would pass away the horror of those hands! All the artist in him shuddered at the memory of them" (141). As an artist rather than a scientist, the man is ill equipped to interpret what he has seen without further empirical knowledge. Learning through a chance conversation with a doctor that the skin condition is purely local and easily treated, he returns to the city and once again looks for the woman in the park, only to learn that she has given up hoping for his return and no longer waits there. He realises too late that he knows neither her name nor her address; he places advertisements in the papers in a final attempt to trace her, but knows that she is unlikely to see them.

Similar to Cholmondeley's account, the location of the pre-lapsarian sanctuary within the wider city is shown to be illusory. Both characters in Jerome's story can be seen as victims of the city. Ironically echoing the loss of the young prostitute Ann to the crowded streets of Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (1821), the lovers are separated by both poverty and a particular kind of idealism: the male character was reluctant throughout their courtship to confront the reality of his lover's daily life, and so never asked either her name or her address; meanwhile her very isolation makes it unlikely that she will learn of his belated attempts to rescue her. By the end of the story, what the narrator initially presents as an Edenic communion between the lovers comes to underscore the dangerous anonymity of the city woman.

This sense of loss complicates the narrative stance, raising unanswered questions about how the male figure should be judged. The end of the story shows him unable to regain the lost paradise because he has become complicit in the system that has trapped the anonymous woman, as his rejection has left her condemned indefinitely to a life of uncongenial work. Ultimately then he is self-exiled through his own failure to protect the woman he has idealised. However, his sense of longing, expressed in the opening lines as "Always he remembered her as he saw her first" with "the little fawn gloves folded in her lap" (136), permeates the rest of the story, suggesting both his need to picture the hands as gloved and an implicit acceptance of the damage those gloves conceal.

A slightly later story, George Egerton's "A Little Grey Glove" from *Keynotes* (1893), challenges the male narrator to make a different choice. In Egerton's story the owner of the glove first meets the narrator on holiday in the Medway, when her fish hook becomes caught in his ear and "[her] hands are soft and cool and steady, but there is a rarely disturbing thrill in their gentle touch. The thought flashed through my mind that I had just missed that, a woman's voluntary tender touch, not a paid caress, all my life" (100). The suggestion of illicit sexuality in the phrase "paid caress" foreshadows the revelation that the woman has been divorced by her husband; significantly, she has been aged and disturbed by her visits to London, where she has been tried for adultery. Exposed to the public gaze, she comments that "it is funny ... to buy a caricature of one's own poor face at a news-stall" (112). Nonetheless, Egerton's protagonist twice refuses to defend herself, allowing her husband's subordination of witnesses to pass unchallenged and finally agreeing to marry the narrator in a year's time on the understanding that she will not see him in the meantime, and will never account to him

for her past. The narrator carries the grey glove about with him as both keepsake and symbol of his trust while he waits for the year to pass.

In both “Geoffrey’s Wife” and “The Fawn Gloves” the tragic fate of the female character is mediated through a similar focus on elusive touch – Geoffrey keeps the now empty glove taken from the crushed body of his wife, while Jerome’s protagonist invokes the lost woman through remembering her gloves. This displacement of the woman by a focus on her accessories evokes a response to traditional femininity that seems increasingly unstable in the context of changing gender roles at the *fin de siècle*. If such “little accessories,” to use Jerome’s phrase, signify a type of the pure and not the “New” woman, clearly such figures are not adapted to survive the hostile setting in which they are placed. This dilemma is carefully explored in the stories through refocusing the reader’s attention on the exploitation, and ultimately the consumption, of women’s bodies in the anonymous crowd of the city.

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