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Touch and sociability

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Abstract

The historiography suggests a growing culture of polite sociability across the course of the eighteenth century. One dimension of this 'politeness' is the extent to which men came to respect and pay due deference to conventions of physical etiquette that women sought to claim (doing so, in part, to protect their reputation and their standing in society). The evidence suggests that, while norms may have gradually changed, these were often ignored by men. Violations of these standards of polite conduct, largely without physical contact, were both frequent and were seen by women as putting them at risk of further and fuller violations.

In *The Miser Married* (1813), Catherine Hutton's heroine, Charlotte Montgomery, notes:

‘Dancing introduces a kind of familiarity that would be quite inadmissible in a drawing room. When a gentleman solicits the honour of your hand, it is not a figure of speech; your hand really belongs to him, for the time; and if he persists in taking it a little after the time, it would be very ill-natured to withdraw it – unless one did not like him. For my part I found something so admirably persuasive in the touch of a man I do like, even through two pairs of gloves, that I could not find it in my heart to cut short its eloquence.’¹

Charlotte both claims a degree of female agency and acknowledges the excitement that forms of touch can generate in a society that was wary of bodily contact between men and women. Her comment should encourage reflection on the conditions under which this experience of touch had this kind of intensity: was it the slightly forbidden element of this touch – the tentative extension of the formal privilege extended by entering the dance – that accentuated its significance against a background of wider restrictive conventions concerning when an eligible woman might trust herself in a man’s hands?

The literature on British sociability over the long eighteenth century points to the emergence of a culture of politeness, sociability and sensibility that came to discipline the behaviour of men in relation to women, moderating the lewder, intrusive and boisterous (and sometimes cruel) conduct that marked the earlier part of the century.² Relatedly, constructions of female sexuality also gradually changed. The acknowledgement of women’s sexual appetite in the early modern period was followed by its increasing smothering and denial by the beginning of the nineteenth century.³ These changing assumptions would have had an impact on male emotions and experiences of sensuality in their contact with women. Indeed, we might see the conventions of conduct and courtship becoming increasingly complex, thereby allowing ever more subtle distinctions and variations, simultaneously masking and refining issues of attraction and desire. My discussion focuses on binary gendered relations as a wide normative standard – without prejudice to other forms of contact and relations, which clearly did exist but were much less subject to commentary in the novels, letters and diaries of the day. And my aim is to help us grasp some of the complexities that lie behind Catherine Hutton’s evocative reference to that additional stolen moment of touch.

In 1715-16, when he was 24, the aspiring lawyer, later High Court Judge, Dudley Ryder kept a diary. It recorded, amongst other things, his concerns about his own masculine performance in company, especially in relation to women, together with anxieties about his breath being bad and his risk of venereal disease from resorting to prostitutes. He sharply distinguished marriageable women and women of the latter sort, and the former figure prominently. With this group his comments often concern their response to his attempt to kiss them. While playing at cards at his brother’s he noted: ‘I sat next to Mrs Lloyd, with whom I talked and even kissed her every now and then, that I was agreeably entertained.’ Nonetheless, ‘Mrs Lloyd is a smart girl, has good natural sense and reads pretty much, but wants something of good breeding.’⁴

Ryder subsequently fell rather hard for Alice Marshall who was a guest of his sister. Alice was not similarly enamored: she refused him a kiss, and when he was leaving to return to London he recorded: 'Was very uneasy about taking leave. Did not dare kiss Mrs Marshall, though I kissed all the rest.' When they did part – after having spoken to her 'by remote hints and very soft sayings' from which he could get nothing – he recorded: 'she seemed perfectly tired on any discourse and said so herself. I left her at past 4 and found an opportunity of kissing her' (Matthews 250-251).

Three weeks later, he encountered her again at his brother's. 'She seemed very civil and kind, as far as anything of words and looks could go, and I dared not kiss her.' A month later, hearing she was having breakfast with his sister, he also turned up: 'She appears to me more agreeable every time I see her. I gave her a kiss which she took very temperately [...]'. He became, however, increasingly concerned at the favour she showed to his cousin. His response was: 'Only once I ventured to attack her for a kiss by open force upon some proper occasion, but I could not conquer it at first and left off'. Whereas, Cousin Joseph 'was not allowed to be very free neither. But he resolved to endeavour to kiss her by main force and did so after some striving' (Matthews 264, 280, 332, 333).

In Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773), Mr. Marlow believes himself to be in an inn and imagines Kate Hardcastle to be a barmaid. Shy with women of his own class, he treats women from lower classes with great familiarity – and so, within seconds of encountering Kate (who presents as a barmaid) he is talking of the nectar of her lips, trying to kiss her, and struggling to gain mastery of her hand. As she becomes more true to herself, so his conduct changes too, signaling that, in polite circles, the lustier, more intrusive manner of Marlow's conduct with the lower sort (and that Ryder earlier imposed on his equals), was no longer acceptable. When men and women met in polite society as relative equals, relations were much more formal. Nonetheless, the exact boundaries of this more polite world, and its precise requirements of masculine conduct, were hardly set in stone.

[Fanny Burney](#) records meeting a Mr. Thomas Barlow in 1775 at the home of some of her relations where her grandmother was taking tea. When she took her leave:

'[...] my grandmother, according to custom, gave me a kiss and her blessing. I would fain have eluded my aunts, as nothing can be so disagreeable as kissing before young men; however, they chose it should go round; and after them Mrs. O'Connor also saluted me, as did her daughter, desiring to be better acquainted with me. This disagreeable ceremony over, Mr. Barlow came up to me, and making an apology, which, not suspecting his intention, I did not understand, - he gave me a most ardent salute! I have seldom been more surprised. I had no idea of his taking such a freedom [...] However, I have told my good friends that for the future I will not chuse to lead, or have lead, so contagious an example. I wonder *so modest a man* could dare to be so bold.'

Mr Barlow subsequently dogged Fanny Burney's footsteps, much to her annoyance, and it is only with difficulty that she extricated herself from his desire for a match. This exemplifies the difficulty facing a modest woman with a keen sense of the propriety of her conduct, who was potentially at risk from men who did not feel similarly constrained, and whose reading of 'appropriateness' tended to serve their own purposes.

[Burney](#) made this clear in her first novel *Evelina* (1778) – perhaps especially in vol. 1, when our heroine is thrown into London society, ill-prepared by her rural education. Consequentially she becomes prey to the advances of a variety of 'men about town' and is constantly invaded by their touch: Sir Clement Willoughby scoops her up in his arms after a coach accident; Lord Orville helps himself to her hand (which she is not entirely against) to comfort her; Sir Clement grabs her hand to lead her away from her party; one of Willoughby's servants tries to take her hand to assist her to a carriage she does not want to enter; Willoughby seizes her hand to make a declaration to her; a stranger, Lord _____ takes her hand, she withdraws it, he takes it again, she struggles to demonstrate her lack of connection to him, only for him to seize it unbidden under the 'necessity' of conducting her to her coach. It is a struggle to touch and to resist being touched, and once in someone's hands there is the problem of hands being kissed or worse.

These various men of fashion are one thing, but [Burney](#)'s Diary raises wider questions about who has any claim to touch or kiss her. When she first met Samuel Johnson with Burney's father and her sister Hetty (who had met Johnson before and to whom Johnson had made a present of *The Idler* when she was little) '[...] my father introduced Hetty to him as an old acquaintance, and he cordially kissed her!'⁶ At a subsequent meeting, when [Dr Johnson](#) seemed to be ignoring her at Mrs Thrale's – she asked him 'why': ' 'I was not sure of you,' Johnson explained, 'I am so near-sighted, and I apprehended making some mistake,' Then drawing me very unexpectedly towards him, he actually kissed me! (in front of [Mrs Thrale](#)) [...] he held both my hands; and when Mrs Thrale went, he drew me a chair himself facing the window, close to his own; and thus tête a-tête we continued almost all the evening'.⁷ Burney's exclamation marks signal her sense of surprise. She does not see him as lecherous, but clearly felt he was ignoring conventions about physical contact, salutations and personal space, ones she rather prized. She read his conduct as avuncular rather than sexual, but he clearly rather pushed the boundaries. She was partly flattered, but also concerned about how far she had left herself open to this behaviour. Indeed, her response suggests that any fault would be assumed to lie with her. If stricter norms of propriety were to be adhered to, they had to be led by women and by their circles, rather than by visiting males.

This seems evident further down the social scale. In 1806, the young William Upcott took a perambulation with a companion in the Midlands. On one occasion, seeking out another friend, they found he had set off on a walk with his wife and two young women. When they overtook the group Upcott was deeply offended by their reception:

‘[...] not an atom of freedom – not the smallest particle of affability – not a shadow of politeness or good breeding was to be found in either – [...] The idea of offering them my arm struck them with astonishment. 'Twas a crime almost second to treason to make the attempt – and even the squeamish Anne Moore shrank from such an offence – and seemed as much terrified with it, as if it had been the paw of a lion.’⁸

These various experiences across a wide section of the middling orders from the early eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries suggest a gradual shift in the extent to which young women tolerated the intrusive touch of the hands and lips of men who were keen to do them the honour. It does not suggest that men were less keen to make such advances, although many did respond to signals that set limits to their conduct. Others were clearly unconcerned as to whether their advances were welcome.⁹ Even with Hutton’s depiction of Charlotte’s wooer it is not obvious that he is responding to her wish, her response is essentially passive, but that might be signal enough.

Women in contexts of polite sociability could ward off at least some of these advances when they wished to. Nonetheless, on many occasions norms of propriety might be more open to interpretation – usually to the discomfort of the woman. At the same time, the development of stricter norms of polite conduct also intensified and deepened young women’s emotional and imaginative responses to their interactions with men. Codes were more nuanced, but less legible; more intense, but potentially also more embarrassing and compromising.

Young women framed their responses to a man’s behaviour by what they saw as a reasonable interpretation of it – whether a kiss was familial(r); whether it was a mere salutation (which the French were known for),¹⁰ but which does not seem to have been encouraged or accepted in Britain); whether it was seen as pushing the boundaries of acquaintance - [Fanny Burney](#)’s exclamation marks about [Dr Johnson](#) indicate that his conduct was not anticipated, even if it was not overtly sexual or compromising in character; whether it was seen as a bid for intimacy and how that was to be treated; or whether it was experienced as an ‘assault.’

Assaults might be entirely physical or merely socially transgressive. But the latter might be itself a jeopardizing act – one that compromised the victim’s social standing, leaving her vulnerable to a repetition or to similar conduct from others.

Those on the receiving end of such conduct had to consider: the immediate risks of further such conduct and its possible escalation, and the extent to which they were exposed in virtue of their situation and/or past conduct; the degree to which it was in any sense welcome; and the grounds that the perpetrator might think they had for taking such liberties (and what this signaled about her to other observers). And a woman’s response would have been framed by her interest in marriage, her feelings about the individual involved, and her concerns about maintaining the reputation she had among her peers and potential suitors.

Evelina's anxieties are fueled by a sense of exposure among her new acquaintance – she does not know how far to trust in their judgment. Her guardian, whom she really trusts, is not to hand; and she is anxious about whether she is mis-signaling by her behaviour. For her, the hands and mouths of others are a continual source of anxiety – the latter both in relation to intrusions of touch, infelicities and immodesties of discourse.

High social status might protect against such intrusions if appropriately signaled, both (differentially) to those of lesser and of equal rank. Women further down the social scale faced a triple problem of rapaciousness from above, from within their status circles, and the need to command compliance from those they regarded as owing them some deference. And it seems likely that the greater degree of anonymity available, as in the city, and the greater the chance of encountering strangers, the more such boundaries might be at risk of transgression. As [Burney](#) also emphasized, the metropolis was a uniquely threatening world.

There was no code of honour for women to identify, manage and revenge a man's 'insult' – except by proxy through a husband or a member of her family.¹¹ Many men clearly acted in ways that women found inappropriate, intrusive, or in various ways compromising of their self-conception, and they were especially vulnerable if without familial or spousal male protection or if their associates behaved 'inappropriately'.¹² Anne Lister's Yorkshire diary shows her repeatedly concerned about the coarseness of her associates, despairing of finding a circle in which she would be comfortable, and alienated from her father by his 'vulgarity.'

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Moreover, neither women's diaries nor their letters were wholly candid about such matters. Revealing oneself and one's humiliations in letters might risk further exposure, since letters often circulated, and diaries were not sacrosanct. But it is likely that a great many women experienced some such conduct (not least because it was a staple of the female novel throughout this period).

This set of issues confirms Siolè Ylivuori's sense that the late eighteenth-century conception of chastity was not simply an issue of virginity but had become a complex social performance marked by a range of signs that amounted to a public display of purity. The battles over women's hands, and over the kiss, were clearly unequal in physical terms. Women had to mobilize a self-representation, backed by others, that established them as persons of modesty and chastity (in the broadest sense) who could command the respect of others. This might never be enough for the most determined – but for gentlemen who valued their own social standing and saw that as dependent upon the judgments of those who shared their social worlds, such normative performances were to be respected. Moreover, these norms were also set out, perhaps especially for the aspiring middle classes, in the conduct books for girls and young women published especially in the second half of the century – although these were extremely reticent about matters of touch and bodily contact.

Writers of the Scottish Enlightenment, such as John Millar and Henry Home, Lord Kames, recognized that as society grew more complex the roles of women changed, leading to them

being appraised in different, less physical, terms, and as they became educated, they also became more equal, commanding the respect as well as the affections of the opposite sex.¹⁴ Kames and Millar were silent on the persistent impact of differences of class and status, which continued to license a degree of predatory conduct between male gallants and women with little protection. Lest we think that most women were able to use the language of politeness and sociability, and of modesty and chastity, to set limits to the intrusiveness of masculine conduct, we can find a range of novels detailing the seduction and abandonment of women without protection – as in Inchbald’s *Nature and Art* (1797), Alderson’s *The Father and Daughter* (1801), Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Women* (1797) and Hay’s *Victim of Prejudice* (1799). These novels attested to (and these writers knew intimately) the fragility of a single woman’s position without a strong set of social and familial circles capable of protecting her and doing so by projecting an image of her modesty and worth.

The rise of commercial society and its accompanying culture of sociability both exposed women to many dangers that were absent in a narrow pastoral life, while providing the conditions for the emergence of a wider, more inclusive, and somewhat less hierarchical normative framework in which they sought to project their status, command respect, and secure themselves from unwelcome touch. But any such achievement remained fragile. As such, it might be permissible to accept the pressure of a hand, but passively: Charlotte’s response could raise a question as to her pleasure, but insufficiently for certainty, since that would betray her modesty, at least on an early encounter. And these ambiguities served both to disguise and to enhance the sensuality of the touch.

1. Catherine Hutton, *The Miser Married, a Novel in Three Volumes* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1813), vol. II, p. 170.

2. For example, Soile Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth Century England* (London: Routledge, 2018)

3. Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution* (London: Allen Lane, 2012), p. 354.

4. Mrs indicated a woman of marriageable age, not necessarily someone who had already been married. I read ‘kisses of Mrs Lloyd’ as indicating kisses he has given to Mrs Lloyd. Nothing else indicates that she was the more active participant. William Matthews (ed.), *The Diary of Dudley Ryder 1715-1716* (London: Methuen 1939), p. 131, see also p. 126 and 163.

5. Frances Burney, *Journals and Letters*, Peter Sabor and Lars E. Troide (eds) (London: Penguin books, 2001), p. 46.

6. *The Early Diary of Frances Burney, 1768-1778: with a selection from her correspondence, and from the journals of her sisters Susan and Charlotte Burney*, Annie Raine Ellis (ed.) (London: Bell, 1889), vol. II, p. 156. Conduct books are largely silent on the questions of touch – they are extremely concerned about whom a woman gives her hand to – but almost entirely in the metaphorical sense of marriage. See for example, *The Lady’s Pocket Library or Parental Monitor* (Edinburgh, 1793). But see p. 21 for concerns about spontaneous conduct, such as laughter or showing spirit while dancing, being read for deeper and damning significance.

7. Bonnie Hain and Carole McAllister, ‘James Boswell’s Ms. Perceptions and Samuel Johnson’s Ms. Placed Friends’, *South Central Review* (9 (4) 1992), p. 65.

8. *The Diary of William Upcott*, British Library Add ms 32,558, fol 115r.

9. Although this might be emphasized by women novelists and playwrights – and largely ignored by many male writers – see for example how Sterne depicts Yorick’s encounter with the French fille de chambre in his *Sentimental Journey* (1768).

10. Sterne suggests that it was the custom between men in France, but not otherwise.

11. A point made by Mary Robinson in *A Letter to the Women of England* (London, 1799), p. 5: 'If a man receive an insult, he is justified in seeking retribution. He may chastise, challenge, and even destroy his adversary. Such a proceeding in MAN is termed honourable [...] But were a WOMAN to attempt such an expedient, however strong her sense of injury, however invincible her fortitude, or important the preservation of her character, she would be deemed a murderess.'
 12. See *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister*, Helena Whitbread (ed.) (London: Virago, 2010)
 13. For some of the complexities of women's position see Soile Ylivuori, *Women and Politeness in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 2018) and 'Rethinking female chastity and gentlewomen's honour in eighteenth-century England', *Historical Journal* (59 (1) March 2016), p. 71-97.
 14. John Millar, *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (Edinburgh: 1777), chapter 1: 'Of the Rank and Condition of Women in Different Ages'; and Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man* (Edinburgh, 1788), book 1, Sketch vi 'Progress of the Female Sex.'
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Further Reading

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Lyonell Beacher's Valentine Greatrakes (1665)

The Young Lady's Pocket Library (1793)