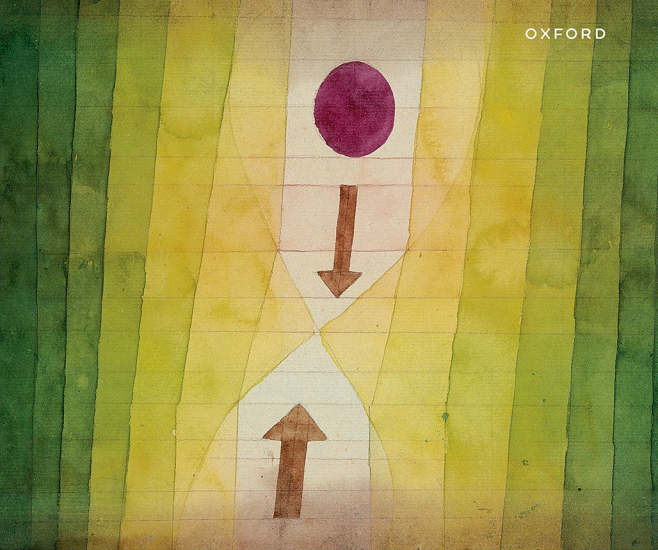


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Literature and the Senses

Edited by Annette Kern-Stähler
and Elizabeth Robertson

Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature

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ANNETTE KERN-STÄHLER
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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2023936138

ISBN 978-0-19-284377-7

DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780192843777.001.0001

Printed and bound by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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CONTACT, CONDUCT, AND TACTILE NETWORKS

Touch and its Social Functions in Middle English Verse Romance

HANNAH PIERCY

Kepe fete and fyngers and hondys styll in pese.
 [Keep feet and fingers and hands still, in peace.]
 Crache not thi fleche for ought that may befall.
 [Scratch not your flesh for anything that might happen.]
 Ete thou not mete with thi unwasche hondys.
 [Do not eat food with your unwashed hands.]¹

When thi better take thee the coppe,
 Drinke thi selffe and sett it uppe;
 Take the coppe with thi hondys.
 [When your better gives you the cup,
 Drink for yourself and set it upright;
 Take the cup with your hands.]²

These instructions, from two conduct texts for children included in the fifteenth-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (*Stans Puer ad Mensam* and *Dame Courtesy*), establish rules for what children are and are not allowed to do with their hands. They set out what children may touch, the requirements for them to engage in touch (such as cleanliness), and how their touch should be modified in the presence of their social superiors. Medieval and early modern conduct literature regulates sensory experiences and proscribes tactile

¹ 'Item 7, Stans Puer ad Mensam', in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, ed. George Shuffelton (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), 60–7 (ll. 55, 62, 72). Translations are my own.

² 'Item 8, Dame Courtesy', in *Codex Ashmole 61*, 67–70 (ll. 133–5). Translations are my own.

behaviour as part of its programme of education, so this focus on appropriate touch is not surprising. What is more unexpected is that this preoccupation with regulating touch permeates the less explicitly didactic genre of Middle English verse romance as well.³

In *The Book of Touch*, Constance Classen asks, '[d]o we learn a "mother touch" along with a mother tongue? A tactile code of communication that underpins the ways in which we engage with other people and the world?'⁴ Conduct texts explicitly taught medieval people contemporary codes of touch, but imaginative literature had a role in this tactile education too. Indeed, Classen's suggestion that 'touch has what could be called a vocabulary and a grammar' applies particularly well to Middle English romance. Although Classen cautiously reflects that 'language seems too formal and linear a model for tactile communication', in the romances I discuss touch *is* formal and to some extent linear; it is governed by precise rules and expectations; and different forms of touch serve distinct functions in a manner akin to the different parts of speech in grammar.⁵ Given that touch and romance are often associated with the bodily and carnal, in contrast to the refinement of sight or the morality of religious and didactic literature, this may seem surprising. However, as I shall demonstrate, the portrayal of touch in romance is often restrained, codified, and ordered, revealing the surprising affinities between portrayals of the senses in imaginative fiction, conduct literature, and religious writing.

I focus in this chapter on four romances written in Britain, primarily in Middle English.⁶ These works range in date from the thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, but they share a focus on hands or tactile behaviour that draws particular attention to their representations of touch. In *Havelok* (c.1280–90), the eponymous hero cuts off the traitor Godrich's hand in battle; in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (c.1400), Gawain's tactile conduct with the Carle's wife is carefully policed; *Eger and Grime* (c.1450) features a severed finger and a dismembered hand; and *Sir Degaré* (early fourteenth century) includes a magical pair of gloves that will fit only Degaré's mother. These representations of hands are not necessarily the focus of this chapter, but they form the background to the romances' carefully constructed representations of touch as a social and communicative sense. The romances I discuss, written for a non-courtly audience, do not describe tactile or indeed other sensory experi-

³ Romances are included alongside the conduct texts in Ashmole 61, although these particular romances are not my focus in this chapter. While these conduct texts are explicitly addressed to children, romances too have been argued to appeal to a young readership: see Phillipa Hardman, 'Popular Romances and Young Readers', in Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, eds, *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 150–64.

⁴ Constance Classen, 'Contact', in Classen, ed., *The Book of Touch* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 13–15 (13).

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Eger and Grime* was probably written in Scotland (the first reference to it is a record of the performance of 'Graysteil' before James IV of Scotland in 1497), but it survives in an anglicized form and context in the version in London, British Library, MS Additional 27879 (the Percy Folio), and I therefore include it amongst my discussion of Middle English romances here (in keeping with common critical practice).

ences in detail, as they focus primarily upon action and plot rather than description and reflection. Their lack of extended sensory description is perhaps why Middle English romances have been somewhat under-represented in scholarship on the senses. However, in this chapter I explore the ways in which brief references to touch, of the kind found in the romances on which I focus, can help us to uncover the everyday ways in which touch was understood to operate. Mark Smith, following Alain Corbin, has argued that historians of the senses ‘must understand the actual ways in which people understood the senses, their relation, and their social meaning, and to do that demands that we listen to multiple voices from multiple contexts and discourses.’⁷ Clarifying that these multiple voices should include everything ‘from the quotidian and everyday to the abstract and rarefied’, Mark Paterson describes touch itself ‘[a]s a reprehensibly under-examined component of everyday, embodied experience.’⁸ The ways in which touch functions in Middle English romance indicate its place in everyday experience. Romances offer an alternative to medieval scientific understandings of the senses: while they sometimes draw upon scientific ideas, they were familiar to a more representative (but still predominantly middle- to upper-class) audience, revealing how the senses were understood outside of intellectual and medical circles.⁹ In my discussion of tactile actions and their functions in romance writing, I build upon previous work by J. A. Burrow, Gerd Althoff, and Barry Windeatt, which has explored the importance of gesture in medieval narratives, including romances.¹⁰ But while these scholars consider gestures that involve touch (Althoff emphasizing the binding function of the *Handgang*, for example), they focus on the sensory experience of gestures only tangentially; in contrast, I attend to the particular meaning of touch within tactile gestures, exploring how romances’ use of tactile gestures aligns with treatments of touch in conduct literature and religious writing.

To set out how medieval romance may have educated its readers about tactile conduct, I begin by addressing the ways in which romances eschew eroticism and

⁷ Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 15.

⁸ Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects, and Technologies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 2.

⁹ On romances’ engagement with scientific understanding, see Corinne Saunders, ‘Thinking Fantasies: Visions and Voices in Medieval English Secular Writing’, in Hilary Powell and Corinne Saunders, eds, *Visions and Voice-Hearing in Medieval and Early Modern Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 91–116.

¹⁰ J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Barry Windeatt, ‘Towards a Gestural Lexicon of Medieval English Romance’, in Elizabeth Archibald, Megan G. Leitch, and Corinne Saunders, eds, *Romance Rewritten: The Evolution of Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), 133–51; Gerd Althoff, *Rules and Rituals in Medieval Power Games: A German Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); see especially ‘Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order: Strengths and Weaknesses of Ambiguous Signs’, 159–69, and see ‘Do Poets Play with the Rules of Society?’, 217–33, for Althoff’s application of his theories of symbolic communication and *Spielregeln* (implicit, unwritten societal rules) to medieval literature (including Middle High German romance).

carnality in their representation of touch. Assigned by Aristotle to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy, touch was most often described as a base and carnal sense.¹¹ Yet the romances I discuss reorient eroticism away from touch, sometimes linking it to a different sense, and sometimes controlling or avoiding erotic touch altogether. The dissociation of eroticism and touch in these romances elevates touch and its functions, challenging its place at the bottom of the sensory hierarchy. If touch is not carnal and erotic in romance, then, what functions might it serve in this genre? In the second section, I argue that romances use touch to represent and mediate social relationships, attending to the precise social nuances of different forms of contact, and revealing how tactile practices are used to form and regulate communities and social connections. In the final section, I explore how these tactile networks can work in a more subversive manner, arguing that they reveal a counter-narrative beneath the primary storyline in *Sir Degaré*. In doing so, I suggest that reading touch in medieval romance can provide new insights into individual romances like *Sir Degaré*, as well as a different view of the elevated social functions of touch, allowing us to reconsider the medieval hierarchy of the senses.

Carnality or Restraint? Controlling Erotic Touch in Middle English Romance

The romances I discuss contain a rape, sex both outside of and within marriage, and men and women socializing in private, intimate locations. They therefore provide opportunities for depicting lust, love, and eroticism, but whereas Elizabeth D. Harvey argues that '[t]he judgment about where touch belongs in the sensory echelon has much to do . . . with definitions of love and lust, the value of eroticism, and the place of the material or the fleshly,'¹² in Middle English romance the erotic potential of touch is restrained despite the genre's apparent 'sensationalist taste for sex and violence.'¹³ Instead, romance values touch for the social and political meanings it conveys, attending to the nuances of different forms of contact. This redirection of touch away from eroticism and towards a communicative social function is clearly shown in *Havelok*. Two examples of touch in this work occur in a context where we might anticipate eroticism: a kiss between the eponymous hero Havelok and his wife Goldeborw, and an embrace between this couple while they lie naked in bed. Other romances emphasize a couple's sexual pleasure upon marriage, yet in *Havelok*

¹¹ See Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*, trans. James Lynn (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 61–71.

¹² Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'Introduction: The "Sense of All Senses"', in Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1–21 (4).

¹³ Nicola McDonald, 'A polemical introduction', in McDonald, ed., *Pulp fictions of medieval England: Essays in popular romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1–21 (1).

touch is dissociated from eroticism. The only time Goldeborw kisses Havelok is when she discovers, through the revelation of an angel, that her husband is not the low-status man he appears to be. At this news, '[s]he was so fele sipes bliþe / Þat she ne mithe hire ioie mythe, / But Hauelok sone anon she kiste' [she was so very glad / that she could not hide her joy / but kissed Havelok immediately].¹⁴ The kiss is explicitly an expression of Goldeborw's 'ioie' rather than of sexual or erotic desire. Nor is there any eroticized description: as Windeatt has argued of romances more generally, here kissing forms 'part of [the] emotional texture', but it 'remains noticeably undescribed and functional'.¹⁵ The kiss conveys Goldeborw's emotional reaction to the news that her husband is the rightful king of Denmark, rather than expressing erotic desire.

Goldeborw's kiss has a further communicative social function, which becomes especially evident in comparison with another moment of kissing in the romance. When Ubbe, the Danish earl, kisses Havelok's feet upon discovering that this is his rightful king, the kiss again expresses joy at an unexpected revelation. However, the location of Ubbe's kiss also indicates the way that romances are alive to the precise social nuances of particular forms of contact, as well as illuminating connections between touch in romance and religious writing. The location of Goldeborw's kiss is not specified, which, as Burrow observes, is common in medieval writing. However, Burrow notes that 'where writers do specify, kisses are said to be given mouth to mouth', suggesting this may be how we should read Goldeborw's kiss.¹⁶ In contrast, Ubbe kisses '[h]ise fet... / Þe tos, þe nayles, and þe liþes' [his feet... / the toes, the nails, and the tips, lines 2163–4]. Ubbe kissing Havelok's feet may recall Mary (conflated with Mary Magdalene by Pope Gregory the Great) wiping Christ's feet with her hair after anointing them (John 12:3), or Christ washing the disciples' feet (John 13:5–14), adding to the Christological associations Kimberly Bell identifies in this romance.¹⁷ But while Bell suggests Ubbe 'behave[s] as if... worshipping a statue or image of a saint', his kiss and the posture he adopts, as '[h]e fellen sone [straightaway] at hise fet [feet]' (line 2159), also takes on social significance, embodying his new, subordinate relationship to Havelok.¹⁸ Burrow notes that 'the more you lower your body, the more humbly you submit', highlighting the deferential nature of Ubbe's posture.¹⁹ This contrasts with Goldeborw's unspecified kiss, which may not just express relief at Havelok's refined social status but may physically manifest her new sense of their equality if she is read as kissing Havelok on the face. These two instances of touching by kissing in *Havelok* are not described in

¹⁴ *Havelok*, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), ll. 1278–80. All translations are my own.

¹⁵ Windeatt, 'Towards a Gestural Lexicon', 143. ¹⁶ Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 33.

¹⁷ Kimberly K. Bell, 'Resituating Romance: The Dialectics of Sanctity in MS Laud Misc. 108's *Havelok the Dane* and *Royal Vitae*', *Parergon* 25, no. 1 (2008), 27–51 (42–51). I would like to thank Rachel Fennell for encouraging me to think about this, and for her comments on an early draft of this chapter.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49. ¹⁹ Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 18.

erotic terms; instead, they demarcate the specific social relationships of the people involved in this contact.

A second example of potentially erotic contact in *Havelok* more directly challenges the hierarchy of the senses that positions touch as a lower, carnal sense, relocating eroticism to the sense of sight (traditionally placed at the top of this hierarchy). When Ubbe recognizes Havelok as his king, Havelok is sleeping in bed, '[j]n his armes his brithe [radiant] bride: / Bi þe pappes he [down to the breast they] leyen naked' (lines 2132–3). However, it is not Havelok and Goldeborw's embrace that is erotic in this scene: it is the fact that there are observers of this embrace that creates vicarious erotic pleasure. The watching knights see the nudity of this pair and 'þouth of hem god gamen, / Hem for to shewe and loken to' [thought it was a good sport / to look and gaze upon them, lines 2136–7]. The 'gamen' (a word elsewhere used for sexual intercourse, for example in 'þe prive love game' of *William of Palerne*) is looking at their entwined bodies, not feeling an embrace.²⁰ Sight, not touch, is the more carnal and erotic sense here, an unexpected correlation that inverts the conventional hierarchy of the senses.

Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle does not challenge the association between the erotic and touch, but it does model the restraint of carnal touch through the interactions between Gawain, the Carle, and the Carle's wife. As part of the way this romance tests the limits of obedience to social codes of hospitality, Gawain is instructed by the Carle to 'take my wyfe in thi armus tweyne [between your arms] / And kys her in my syghte'.²¹ However, the Carle carefully governs which forms of touch are permitted: when Gawain gets carried away '[f]or softnis of that Ladys syde' (line 463) and 'wolde have doun the prevey far' [wanted to do the private act, line 466], he is swiftly prevented. Touch can be tempting, and the 'softnis' of the lady's skin briefly evokes this tactile pleasure for the reader, but touch is also carefully controlled here. The restraint of tactile pleasures in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* aligns it with its manuscript context in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Brogyntyn ii.1 (formerly MS Porkington 10), where it is accompanied by 'quite humorous moral stories', such as 'The Friar and the Boy', and 'might be experienced by a reader more in terms of its moral lessons when read from this manuscript than it might otherwise have been if viewed in isolation'.²² This moral yet humorous focus upon regulating touch is even continued when Gawain is permitted to have sex with the Carle's daughter, as their tactile engagement and pleasure are not described. Instead, sight comes to the fore, as the lady is described as

²⁰ *William of Palerne: An alliterative romance*, ed. G. H. V. Bunt (Groningen: Bouma, 1985), l. 1020.

²¹ 'Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle', in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 85–103 (ll. 455–6). All translations are my own. This romance survives in a unique copy, although a different version of the same story is preserved in the Percy Folio ballad *The Carle of Carlisle*.

²² Elisabeth Salter, *Popular Reading in English c. 1400–1600* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 196, 197.

'bryght(e)' (lines 489, 493, 507, 508), 'feyr' [fair, line 491], and 'cler' [beautiful or bright, line 507], and wonders '[w]her I schall se enny mor [see any more] this knyght / That hathe ley [laid] my body so ner [near]?' (lines 509–10). The lady's primary desire is to see Gawain, again moving away from the erotic associations of touch.

The moral restraint of touch in the Scottish romance of *Eger and Grime* is less explicit, but *Eger and Grime* may advocate restraining erotic touch by modelling opportunities for eroticism that are ultimately avoided. The importance of space, particularly the chamber, to *Eger and Grime*'s representation of touch reveals the necessity of considering sensory experiences within their precise spatial contexts, as *Eger and Grime* illustrates what Hollie Morgan describes as the 'cultural understanding that women had a degree of power in the chamber, which they did not have elsewhere.'²³ This power provokes questions about 'the nature of women's secrecy', as the lady Loosepaine is able to attend to the men she wishes in her chamber, which appears to be entirely isolated from the control of the patriarchal head of the household.²⁴ Yet the form of touch in which Loosepaine engages is healing, not loving, modelling a restrained non-erotic mode of contact. The moments where she tends to Eger's wounds are the most detailed descriptions of tactile sensation in the romance, as Eger describes how she 'searched my wounds full soone' and 'with her white hands shee did wash mine', before

all my bloodye tents* out shee drew,	*dressings	
again shee tented* my wounds anew:	*dressed	
wott* yee well itt was noe threede,*	*know	*thread
the tents* that into my wounds yeede,*	*dressings	*went
they were neither of lake* nor Line,*	*cambric	*linen
but they were silke both good & fine. ²⁵		

Sensory experience is attended to here in the 'warme water' (line 250) in which Loosepaine washes Eger's injured hands, as well as the silk she uses to dress his wounds, but this intimate touch is not an erotic experience. *Eger and Grime* engages less explicitly with erotic touch than *Havelok* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, but creating the opportunity for erotic touch only to reorient it towards healing touch continues the emphasis upon restrained tactile contact in the other romances I have discussed.

Touch in these romances, then, is not primarily an erotic sense. Sight rather than touch facilitates erotic experience in *Havelok*, tactile temptation in *Sir Gawain and*

²³ Hollie L. S. Morgan, *Beds and Chambers in Late Medieval England: Readings, Representations and Realities* (York: York Medieval Press, 2017), 188.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 189.

²⁵ *Eger and Grime: A parallel-text edition of the Percy and the Huntington-Laing Versions of the Romance*, ed. James Ralston Caldwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), Percy, ll. 244, 252, 277–82. All citations are to the line numbers of this edition, and to the Percy Folio version unless otherwise stated. All translations are my own. I discuss the relationship between the two versions later.

the Carle of Carlisle is carefully controlled, and *Eger and Grime* avoids erotic touch entirely. Instead of conveying erotic experience, these romances use touch to construct social relationships; while I have begun to explore this already in *Havelok*, the next section more comprehensively examines the way in which touch emerges not as a carnal sense but as ‘a sense of communication’ in medieval English romance.²⁶

Making Contact: Constructing Relationships through Tactile Networks

Touch in Middle English romance forms and regulates communities, expressing social relationships to those immediately involved in moments of contact, to characters observing this contact, and to the romance’s readers. In this light, romances not only recommend the restraint of erotic touch but go further in positing a social and even at times quasi-legal function for touch that again shifts it away from its carnal associations. In *Havelok*, touch creates and signals social relationships and binding agreements of trust, as the most direct reference to two people touching in the early stages of the romance is when King Birkabeyn of Denmark entrusts his children to Godard (who later betrays them). When he asks Godard to care for them, Birkabeyn ‘on Godard handes leyde, / And seyde “Here biteche [entrust] I þe [to you] / Mine children alle þre” [three]’ (lines 383–5). This is a highly formalized act which endows the recipient of the king’s touch, Godard, with both power and responsibility, indicating the social, political, and even legal functions touch could serve. *Havelok* here aptly attests Classen’s contention that ‘[t]ouch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies.’²⁷ The king’s active instigation of touch expresses his power as ruler. His touch formalizes a relationship and agreement between the two men, making this visible (or tangible) to the people witnessing this exchange of contact and contract, as well as impressing this responsibility directly upon Godard. This moment is not present in either of the sources for the Middle English *Havelok* (Geffrei Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis* and the *Lai d’Havelok*), suggesting touch may have had particular meaning for the Middle English redactor or in the context in which they were working.

Touch also acts as a medium for expressing relationships in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, where the focus on tactile restraint in Gawain’s encounter with the Carle’s wife is accompanied by the Carle’s use of contact to express approval or disapproval of his guests’ conduct. When the Carle finds Kay’s and Baldwin’s obedience wanting, he strikes them down. In contrast, when he is pleased by Gawain’s

²⁶ Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 1.

²⁷ Constance Classen, ‘Fingerprints: Writing about Touch’, in *The Book of Touch*, 1–9 (1).

deference, the Carle not only praises him but ‘be the honde hyme hente [took]’ (line 402). This accords with Burrow’s discussion of leading by the hand as ‘an act of courtesy by which the leader bestows honour on the led’, as touch accompanies and affirms the Carle’s praise.²⁸ The Carle taking Gawain by the hand also signals the closer relationship these men will develop, as Gawain eventually marries the Carle’s daughter. Different forms of touch convey the Carle’s approval or disapproval of his guests, revealing the social relationship in which each stands to the other, but touch also signals the development of these relationships and the formation of new communities and social bonds. These patterns of tactile contact are even more pronounced in the later ballad *The Carle of Carlisle*, preserved in the Percy Folio (London, British Library, MS Additional 27879) and not thought to derive directly from the romance discussed here, further revealing the signifying potential of touch in short literary works without extensive descriptions.

Individual moments of touch mediate and represent particular relationships, but some romances construct more comprehensive tactile networks, which reveal how the grammar of touch reflects broader aspects of social identity like gender and status. *Eger and Grime* offers this more comprehensive picture of tactile communication. This romance survives in two different versions, one in the Percy Folio, and the other (the Huntington-Laing redaction) in three Scottish prints. Each version presents its tactile networks differently, but in ways that internally cohere; as I will argue, this suggests that tactile networks were used to signal social relationships to medieval readers. In the Percy Folio text, two primary kinds of touch indicate the social relationship of one person to another: touching hands and kissing. Those whose hands touch in the Percy version (listing the initiator of touch first) are Loosepaine and Eger; Winglayne’s father and Eger; Grime and Loosepaine; Loosepaine’s father and Grime; and Grime and Eger. Meanwhile, Winglayne’s mother kisses Eger when he is said to be leaving on adventure, Loosepaine kisses Grime in greeting, and Loosepaine kisses Grime multiple times when he returns from battle victorious. Even this brief overview suggests that forms of touch differ depending on gender and status: men and women touch hands, but only women kiss men—even though men kissing is normal in other romances.²⁹ The women who kiss Eger and Grime in this romance are also their social superiors: Winglayne’s mother is a countess, while Loosepaine is not only Grime’s host but also an earl’s daughter. Tactile agency correlates with status here, and this is consistent with the manual contact of Winglayne’s father and Eger, Loosepaine’s father and Grime, and Grime and Eger, all of which are repeated gestures. In each case, the person who takes the other’s hand is their social superior, suggesting the touching of hands is a hierarchical gesture that takes into account and expresses differences of status and agency by distinguishing active and passive touch. These hierarchical patterns of touch as instigated by the person of higher social status are sometimes supported by

²⁸ Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 48.

²⁹ Windeatt, ‘Towards a Gestural Lexicon’, 143.

the surrounding actions, as the taking of another's hand may be followed by a line that gives a command (for example, 'the Erle tooke Gryme by the hand, / & said, "gentle Knight, doe thou vpp stand!"' [lines 1243–4]), or by one person taking control over the other's behaviour, as when Grime dresses Eger in fine robes before informing the earl that Eger will be reconciled with Winglayne (his former lover). Forms of touch depend on and indicate gender and status in *Eger and Grime*.

Tactile networks of this kind also chart changes in individual relationships across a romance. Forms of touch signal the changing status of Loosepaine and Grime's relationship: Loosepaine kisses Grime in greeting when she believes he is Eger come to visit her, but she casts the jewels he gives her away when she discovers his pretence. To apologize to her and re-form their relationship, Grime takes Loosepaine by the hand, and she picks the jewels back up when she accepts his apology. These shifts in their tactile engagement indicate changes in their relationship. This includes touch that is mediated by objects or gifts, which we could call 'vicarious touch', akin to the 'vicarious kissing' Burrow identifies in both romance and sacred contexts.³⁰ The numerous kisses Loosepaine gives Grime upon his return from fighting Gray-Steel may also chart their evolving relationship as she starts to consider becoming his wife, according with Windeatt's observation that '[w]hat the romances ignore in not particularising the physical activity of kissing, they sometimes make up for by emphasising how kisses recur in time on the same occasion.'³¹ Loosepaine's numerous kisses, more than the manner of the kisses (which, as with Goldeborw, is unspecified), express her emotional involvement with Grime at this stage of the romance. These shifts in tactile engagement as Loosepaine and Grime touch or avoid touch according to their feelings for and trust in one another again evidence touch's nuanced social functions. We may be missing an important signal of changes in social relationships when we read romances without attending to their representation of sensory connections and communities.

The social networks highlighted by touch, and particularly touching hands, overall align with perceptions of *Eger and Grime* as more interested in relationships between men than in those between men and women, as men repeatedly take each other's hands, engaging in more tactile contact than men and women. This suggests that tactile networks can offer an accurate map of the narrative and emotional interests of medieval romances. However, there is a difference here between the Huntington-Laing and Percy Folio texts. Whereas patriarchal figures of power (Winglayne's and Loosepaine's fathers) repeatedly take the hands of more subordinate men (Eger and Grime) in the Percy Folio text, in the Huntington-Laing redaction both earls take their wives by the hand, not Eger or Grime. In place of the Percy Folio's 'the Erle tooke Egars hand in his fist, / the countesse comlye [elegantly] cold him Kisse' (lines 633–4), in Huntington-Laing Eger 'could the Countess kiss. / The Earl then took her hand in his' (lines 979–80). Again, with Grime, instead of the

³⁰ Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 53–4.

³¹ Windeatt, 'Towards a Gestural Lexicon', 143.

moment when ‘the Erle tooke Gryme by the hand’ (line 1251), in Huntington-Laing ‘[t]he Earl.../ took the Countess by the hand’ (lines 2083–4). Such variation may seem to imply that who touches whom is not regulated so specifically, but each version does construct a network of touch that is internally consistent. In the Percy Folio, the earls take the hands of the younger men who seek their daughters’ hands in marriage, ratifying and endorsing their developing relationship. In Huntington-Laing, the earls do not touch the younger men, forming a different kind of tactile network that indicates already existing bonds rather than the development of new ones. The consistent nature of this shift suggests that touch does not change because it is insignificant, but because touch signifies differently in each version of the romance. This may indicate a change in understandings of appropriate touch on the part of the redactor or audience of each version. Unfortunately, as which version is the earlier is unknown, it is difficult to offer any specific conclusions from this about the development of practices of touch over time. The social functions of touch and the way in which it creates and maintains communities changes according to very localized customs, and the way touch is represented in fictional narratives responds to and perhaps also shapes such changes.

Havelok, Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, and Eger and Grime are sensitive to how touch mediates relationships between people, both within each romance and to each romance’s readers. Medieval authors and readers were carefully attuned to the social and political meanings of tactile networks and the nuances of individual moments of touch, able to recognize the implications of affirmation, hierarchy, and trust that different forms of touch encode. Touch creates and maintains relationships and communities in romance writing, and extensive tactile networks, like those in *Eger and Grime*, can accurately chart the emotional interests and priorities of romance narratives, indicating which characters and relationships are the primary focus of a particular text. In the final stage of my argument, I want to turn to *Sir Degaré* to explore how its tactile networks might uncover counter-narratives that go against the grain of the dominant storyline.

Tactile Networks and Counter-Narratives in *Sir Degaré*

Sir Degaré recounts how Degaré is conceived when his mother is raped by a fairy, is separated from his mother and raised by a hermit, sets out to seek his family, and narrowly avoids committing incest with his mother and killing his father. The text survives in substantial form in four manuscripts and three early prints: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ MS 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript); Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. poet. 34 (henceforth Rawlinson); and the Percy Folio; the printed texts are by Wynkyn de Worde (c.1512–15), John King (1560), and William Copland (1565).

Two fragmentary manuscripts also survive, in London, British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (olim Tretham-Sutherland) and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261, as well as a fragmentary print by an unknown printer (c.1535). These surviving witnesses can be grouped into two distinct versions, as I will discuss shortly. In both versions, the motif of incest averted relies upon a pair of gloves, which both invite and prevent Degaré from committing incest. He is instructed to 'lovie no womman in londe / But this gloves willen [will fit] on hire honde', as well as being informed that the only person they will fit is his mother.³² The role of the gloves invites us to consider whose hands are permitted to touch, as gloves prevent skin-to-skin contact through the part of the body most commonly associated with active touch, the hand.

While Margaret Robson has commented that 'Degarré's mother has her hands covered before she is allowed to touch her son' at the moment of their reunion, reading this as part of the concern with mother-son incest, I want to explore the regulation of their tactile intimacy at an earlier stage of the romance.³³ After the princess has given birth to Degaré,

The maiden servede here at wille,*	*according to her desire
Wond* that child in clothes stille,*	*wound *quickly
And laid hit in a cradel anon,*	*immediately
And was al prest* tharwith to gon.	*ready
Yhit is moder was him hold:*	*faithful
Four pound she tok of gold,	
And ten of selver also;	
Under his fote she laid hit tho, -	
For swich thing hit mighte hove;*	*benefit
And seththen* she tok a paire glove	*then
That here lemman* here sente of* fairi londe,	*lover ³⁴ *from
That nolde* on no manne honde,	*would not [fit]
Ne on child ne on womman yhe nolde,*	*they would not [fit]
But on hire selve wel yhe wolde.*	*they would [fit]
Tho gloven* she put under his hade,*	*gloves *head
And siththen* a letter she wrot and made,	*then
And knit hit with a selkene* thred	*silken
Aboute his nekke wel gon sped.*	*in good time (lines 185–202)

³² 'Sir Degaré', in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 101–29 (ll. 215–6). All translations are my own. This edition is based on the Auchinleck manuscript with the ending of the Rawlinson text; I primarily refer to this edition but note significant variations.

³³ Margaret Robson, 'How's Your Father? Sex and the Adolescent Girl in *Sir Degarré*', in Amanda Hopkins and Cory James Rushton, eds, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 82–93 (91).

³⁴ 'Lemman' can be translated as 'lover' or 'sweetheart'. The fairy tells the princess she will be his 'lemman' '[w]ether the liketh wel or wo' (ll. 107–8) before he rapes her; it is unambiguous, however, that this is rape. I have translated 'lemman' as 'lover', but I want to note the disturbing use of this term for a rapist.

There is an intriguing absence of direct touch between mother and child here. It is the princess's maid and confidante, the only person she has told of her pregnancy and rape at this point, who wraps up the child and makes him comfortable; the mother plays no role in this tactile act of care, whereas the mother in *Lay le Freine* wraps her baby up in cloth herself.³⁵ Degaré's mother does place items around the baby (which will help the child to be cared for by others), but direct touch is never clearly indicated even as she places the money '[u]nder his fote', the gloves 'under his hade', and ties the letter '[a]boutte his nekke'. Presumably she must touch the child to do these things, but this is not mentioned directly. That 'hold' is used for 'faithful', when this does often denote tactile engagement, may foreground the lack of direct touch in this scene. The Rawlinson manuscript uniquely revises this line so that the mother 'bygan yt hold' [began to hold it], but this is the only one of the seven substantial witnesses of *Sir Degaré* to include explicit touch between mother and child.³⁶ The other texts get close to but ultimately avoid describing direct touch between mother and child, delegating this instead to the maid.

This may obliquely suggest the emotional difficulty of the princess's situation, forced to send her child away to strangers. In the Auchinleck manuscript and Ff.2.38, this is supported by the direct attention paid to the princess's emotions when the maid returns from the hermitage. We are told that she 'fond the levedi al drupni, / Sore wepinde, and was sori' [found the lady all wretched, / sorely weeping, and was sad, lines 231–2]; the princess has a clear emotional response to the loss of her child here. This interest in her emotions is absent from the Rawlinson and Percy manuscripts and the printed texts, which omit these lines, supporting William Stokoe's argument that there are two distinct versions of *Sir Degaré*: AC (the Auchinleck and Cambridge manuscripts) and the later Z redaction (the Rawlinson manuscript, MS Douce 261, the Percy Folio, and the printed texts).³⁷ In the AC version, I suggest that we can map the princess's emotional response after the loss of her child back onto the avoidance of direct touch after Degaré's birth. The absence of or ambiguity concerning her tactile relationship with her baby may imply her reluctance to develop any connection with him, because she knows she cannot

³⁵ 'Lay le Freine', in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, 68–75 (ll. 137–9).

³⁶ 'Sir Degaré', in *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, ed. Thomas C. Rumble (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 45–78 (l. 173). This is the only edition based on the Rawlinson manuscript.

³⁷ William C. Stokoe, Jr., 'The Double Problem of *Sir Degaré*', *PMLA* 70, no. 3 (1955), 518–34. Like much of the other material in the Percy Folio manuscript, *Sir Degaré* was probably copied into the manuscript from a printed edition. See John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall, 'Sir Degree', in *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript: Ballads and Romances*, ed. Hales and Furnivall, 3 vols (London: Trübner, 1868), III, 16–48 (17); Raluca L. Radulescu, 'Percy Folio', in Siân Echard, Robert Rouse, et al., eds, *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain*, 4 vols (Chichester: Wiley, 2017), IV, 1512–5 (1514). MS Douce 261 was also copied from a printed text: see Maldwyn Mills, 'EB and his Two Books: Visual Impact and the Power of Meaningful Suggestion. "Reading" the Illustrations in MSS Douce 261 and Egerton 3132A', in Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson, eds, *Imagining the Book* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 173–91 (173).

maintain contact—in every sense of that word—with him. Touch (or its avoidance) conveys emotional complexity here, and this function recurs in the lead-up to and ultimate reunion of mother and child.

When Degaré and his mother meet again, it is when they are about to be married, and touch again seems to be avoided here. The king does declare to Degaré, ‘[m]i douwter I take the bi the hond, / And seise the her in al mi lond’ [my daughter I give you by the hand, / and endow her to you with all my land, lines 603–4], but if this indicates that the king physically places his daughter’s hands in Degaré’s, rather than suggesting a metaphorical exchange of hands in marriage, it is a very indirect reference. Physical contact through the hands, however, would be expected during a marriage ceremony based on the Sarum rite of marriage in the later Middle Ages: this manual contact was sometimes called ‘handfasting’, although handfasting also occurred in the context of betrothal and other legal or quasi-legal contexts in which oaths and pledges were required.³⁸ Two illustrations that accompany *Sir Degaré*, a woodcut of the marriage in the de Worde print (Figure 19.1), and an illustration in MS Douce 261 (Figure 19.2), accord with this expectation.



Figure 19.1 *Syr Degore* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, c.1512–15), sig b2v. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York; PML 21135. Photographic credit: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

³⁸ See Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 43–6; Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 15; Windeatt, ‘Towards a Gestural Lexicon’, 139–40.



Figure 19.2 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261, *Sir Degore* (1564), fol. 009v. © The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; CC-BY-NC4.0. <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/8e01260b-1455-4048-bb69-332600cfd631/surfaces/695ddcf5-18e9-4c5f-861e-77453503a095/>.

In both images, Degaré and his mother appear to be holding hands, even though the text itself gives no indication that they touch during the ceremony. As the woodcut in the de Worde print was not custom-made (Edward Hodnett notes it was previously used by de Worde in Stephen Hawes's *Pastyme of Pleasure*, in *Generides*,

and in *Kynge Ponthus*), and the Douce illustration is probably based on this woodcut, these images seem to be generic illustrations of a typical marriage scene.³⁹ This generic status, further suggested by the similarity of a second marriage scene in the Douce manuscript (Figure 19.3), may draw attention to usual marital practice and the text's divergence from this. Indeed, *Sir Degaré* highlights this deviation, partly by encouraging consideration of touch and its avoidance through the symbol of the gloves, but also by reminding us that the couple who are to be married are mother and son. The narrator insists that 'God, that alle thingge mai stere, [guide] / Wolde nowt [did not want] that thai sinned ifere [together]' (lines 627–8), foregrounding the danger of incest, and in doing so suggesting a reason for the absence of touch.⁴⁰ The determination to avert the ultimate sinful touch of mother and son in incest perhaps makes the romance cautious about other forms of touch between them in a romantic or marital context; only when Degaré remembers the gloves and his mother puts them on are they finally allowed to form an appropriate tactile relationship.

The moment of their mutual recognition and reunion is a rare expression of tactile intimacy and love in this romance, which overall tends to prioritize violent touch—the first act of touch between two people is when the fairy rapes the princess. In this context, the embrace of Degaré and his mother stands out, as

Sire Degarre tok his moder tho*	*then	
And helde here in his armes two.		
Keste and clepte* here mani a sithe;*	*embraced	*time
That hit was sche, he was ful blithe.*	*very glad (lines 673–6)	

The affectionate tactility of their reunion here (emphasized in its emotional intensity by the cumulative embraces and kisses, as Windeatt has argued) contrasts with Degaré's aggressive tactile reunion with his father.⁴¹ This is first mediated by violence, as they fight before recognizing each other, engaging with dints and blows rather than embraces and kisses. Even when they do recognize each other, they do not embrace. Instead, Degaré's father, recognizing the sword his son uses by its missing point,

tok the point and set therto;*	*[it to the sword]	
Degarre fel iswone* tho,*	*in a swoon	*then
And his fader, sikerli,*	*truly	
Also he gan swony;*	*swooned	
And whan he of swone arisen were,		
The sone cride merci* there	*apologized	
His owen fader of his misdede.	(lines 1062–8)	

³⁹ Edward Hodnett, *English Woodcuts 1480–1535* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 305 (no. 1241); Jordi Sánchez-Martí, 'Illustrating the printed Middle English verse romances, c.1500–c.1535', *Word & Image* 27, no. 1 (2011), 90–102 (95–7).

⁴⁰ Only the Percy Folio and Ff.2.38 do not contain lines that refer to God in this way, but Ff.2.38 finishes abruptly just before this point.

⁴¹ Windeatt, 'Towards a Gestural Lexicon', 143.



Figure 19.3 Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261, *Sir Eglamour of Artois* (1564), fol. 44r. © The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; CC-BY-NC4.0. <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/8e01260b-1455-4048-bb69-332600cfd631/surfaces/9c63609c-3392-450a-a71a-d5115703c6a8/>.

This scene has often been identified as the narrative climax: in 1975 Bruce Rosenberg suggested that ‘the story is not resolved until the father is found: that reconciliation provides the climax of the narrative’, while Rachel Moss argued in 2016 that ‘[t]his scene has a far greater emotional and physical intensity than Degaré’s romantic scenes. *This* is the climactic moment of the romance, far more than Degaré’s brief love affair.’⁴² Implicit in these statements is the assumption that Degaré’s reunion with his father is not just more intense and climactic than his love affairs, but also than his reunion with his mother. However, from the perspective of the tactile networks formed in this romance—networks that I have argued have representative power in other romances, like *Eger and Grime*—Dégare’s reunion with his mother offers more of an emotional climax than has been acknowledged previously. Moreover, while emotional intensity is expressed by swooning in Degaré’s reunion with his father, this intensity is in fact erased from the Z redaction, which opts for a more prosaic description:

He toke the poynt and sette it to
 And they accorded bothe two
 So longe they haue spoke togyder
 Bothe the sone and the fader
 That they be ryght well at one*.⁴³ *accorded

Swooning and its corresponding emotional intensity are absent here, making the tactile affection and joy of the maternal reunion even more striking in this version. Nonetheless, tactility is significant in Degaré’s reunion with his mother in a way that it is not with his father across all the extant witnesses. This emphasis on their embrace stands out within a romance that is concerned with policing touch and that emphasizes violent and inappropriate touch over tactile affection, and this indicates, I suggest, an emotional and perhaps even climactic significance to their reunion. Reading tactile networks in *Sir Degaré* therefore opens up a counter-narrative that challenges previous understandings of this romance’s emotional interests and narrative emphases. In this counter-narrative, the princess is given more prominence and more capacity to express her emotions, revealing the fruitful nature of critical approaches that combine sensory history and feminist criticism. Uncovering touch and tactile networks in medieval romance not only helps us to understand the medieval sensorium of touch but can reveal new perspectives on these romances.

⁴² Bruce A. Rosenberg, ‘The Three Tales of *Sir Degaré*’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76, no. 1 (1975), 39–51 (41–2); Rachel E. Moss, ‘“And much more I am sorry for my good knyghts”: Fainting, Homosociality, and Elite Male Culture in Middle English Romance’, *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 42, no. 1 (2016), 101–13 (108).

⁴³ *Syr Degore* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, c.1512–15), EEBO [no pag.]; King and Copland differ only in spelling, and Percy contains only a minor variation.

Conclusion

In the romances discussed in this chapter, touch is not a carnal sense but a communicative and social one. Of course, touch is erotic in some romances, such as *Partonope of Blois*, but even here Partonope's desire to see his lover Melior (who is magically invisible to him but whom he is allowed to touch as he pleases) to some extent overturns the idea of touch as carnal, erotic, and immoral, as sight is more strongly associated with desire and disruption. More often than facilitating eroticism, touch in Middle English romance mediates and expresses the relationships between individuals, and (re-)forms and regulates wider communities. Touch takes into account, reflects, and thereby reinforces social differences such as gender and status. These hierarchical functions of touch, and the restraint of erotic touch modelled by these romances, align the imaginative fictions of medieval romance with the portrayals of the senses in conduct literature and religious writing. '[M]edieval pastoral theology was driven by the need to educate and control the senses,' but romance also serves this purpose by modelling restraint and avoiding eroticism.⁴⁴ This is a more implicit approach than the explicit rules and guidance offered by conduct literature and pastoral works, but romances are perhaps no less effective as 'a form of courtesy text' for this.⁴⁵ The implicit education in restraining touch and engaging in practices of touch appropriate to gender, social status, and specific communities—the focus on 'the "tact" within *contact*', as Abbie Garrington puts it—points to an important function of literary representations of the senses: literature does not just record but also actively shapes, creates, and changes the ways in which people experience and interpret sensory stimuli.⁴⁶ The tactile practices modelled in the romances I have discussed may have encouraged their readers to moderate their own sensory engagements, changing the ways in which people deployed and interpreted touch. Returning to Classen's question with which I began—'do we learn a "mother touch" along with a mother tongue?'—I suggest not only that we learn a communicative code of touch but that imaginative literature offers one means by which we do so.⁴⁷ Yet the nuanced communicative functions of touch in romance can also teach us something about this genre itself, opening up space for both conservative and subversive readings of the tactile networks formed within individual romances.

⁴⁴ Annette Kern-Stähler and Kathrin Scheuchzer, 'Introduction', in Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse, and Wietse de Boer, eds, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–17 (9). See also Richard G. Newhauser, 'Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages', in Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses*, 1–22.

⁴⁵ Felicity Riddy, 'Middle English romance: family, marriage, intimacy', in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235–52 (242).

⁴⁶ Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 3.

⁴⁷ Classen, 'Contact', 13.

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