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Kielty, D (2021) "For at her touch our lives had at last fallen into a pattern": tactility in Rebecca West's The Return of the Soldier. Feminist Modernist Studies, 4 (1). pp. 53-70. ISSN 2469-2921

https://doi.org/10.1080/24692921.2020.1848333

"For at her touch our lives had at last fallen into a pattern": Tactility in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*

This article explores the relationship between tactility and point of view in Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier*. It uncovers how etiquette books, hand-care articles and interior design copy regulate the narrator's sensory and social perspective, arguing that her narration reconstructs and critiques the figuration of feminine tactility as an instrument of social control – one which I show was regularly employed during the Great War.

Keywords: touch, gender, class, point of view, Great War, First World War

Santanu Das has highlighted how the physical conditions of life on the Western Front during the Great War gave rise to the language of touch and intimacy found in many literary narratives of the period. Das observes that

> Amidst the dark, muddy, subterranean world of the trenches, the soldiers navigated space … not through the safe distance of the gaze but rather through the clumsy immediacy of their bodies: "crawl" is a recurring verb in trench narratives, showing the shift from the visual to the tactile.[1]

This shift from the visual to the tactile is also apparent in the memoirs of Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses, which focus on the traumatic and alienating experiences of handling the male body in pain. In *A Diary Without Dates* (1918), Edith Bagnold writes of her first experience of a hospital ward:

> He holds my hand in a fierce clutch, then releases it to point in the air, crying 'There's the pain' … As he wakes it centralizes, until at last comes the moment when he says, 'Me arm aches cruel,' and points to it. Then one can leave him.[2]

Recollections like these often mark points of ideological rupture; the "detached narrative"[3] of *A Diary Without Dates* "becomes her critique of the impersonal ethic of nursing" through which "the image of the nurse as the bedside Madonna is exploded through shocking examples of medical callousness."[4] In this reading, Bagnold's account of her tactile experiences at the Front exposes a gulf between the popular portrayal and the actuality of nursing.

In *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), Jenny Baldry's account of her cousin Chris' homecoming from the War addresses the markedly different ways in which female tactility was configured on the Home Front. To the dismay of Jenny and Chris' wife, Kitty, the soldier's amnesia causes him to forego contact with his upper-middle-class wife in favour of a rekindled intimacy with the working-class Margaret Grey. Bagnold's *A Diary Without Dates* highlights the importance of "the material conditions [on the Western Front] which produced the literature."[5] By contrast, Jenny's fear that "it would have been such agony to the finger tips to touch any part of [Margaret's] apparel"[6] reflects pre-war constructions of tactility found in Victorian and Edwardian etiquette books, hand-care articles and interior design manuals. If Bagnold's descriptions of manual labor in hospital wards call idealized models of femininity into question, West's novel highlights the ways in which female tactility formed part of attempts to reinforce them on the Home Front.

The idealized models of femininity foregrounded by pre-war constructions of tactility find their most prominent devotee in Gerty MacDowell, the heroine of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922). Her hands "of finely veined alabaster with tapering fingers … as white as lemon juice and queen of ointments could make them"[7] suggest she has been following hand-care advice that was common in early-twentieth century women's magazines. This advice aimed to help

women like Gerty live up to cultural prescriptions of feminine beauty which dictated that whiter hands were more desirable. Moreover, Joyce highlights the influence that hand-care advice has on her conception of acceptable female qualities. Vicki Mahaffey notes that Gerty's maintenance of hands that resemble "finely veined alabaster" feeds her belief that "a heroine should be an inanimate *objet d'art.*"[8] Such constructions of tactility, Joyce suggests, help to indoctrinate Gerty with a patriarchal belief in the essential passivity of women. In *The Return of the Soldier*, West stresses that these pre-war configurations of tactility continued to shape the experiences of women during the War. Jenny's first-person narration foregrounds the bodily, social and interpersonal tensions created by wartime writers who sought to adapt these discourses to fit the experiences of women on the Home Front. Such discourses sought to enforce women's conformity to the ideology of separate spheres by encouraging tactile attachments to the domestic interior and by encouraging them to view physical and social interactions as perilous forms of bodily contact. The narrative point of view that West constructs, I argue, recreates and critiques the ways that tactility was used to enforce female participation in the patriarchal system.

The sensory turn in modernist studies has uncovered how literary depictions of sensory experience reflect contemporary ideologies of gender, yet little attention has been given to the specific configurations of the senses that encouraged female engagement with them.[9] West's novel provides important evidence of modernist critical engagement with these configurations by foregrounding the connection between women's participation in early-twentieth-century patriarchal ideologies and a long-established presumption of their openness to a range of tactile threats, textures, acts and responses. In Western culture, female tactility has long been an important factor in attempts to shape and discipline women's personal and social relations. Laura Gowing has demonstrated that, in early modern society, the female body was recognisably part of an "intimate and quotidian network of power"[10] in which touch was "one

of the most intimate instruments of patriarchal regulation."[11] In *Ulysses*, popular publications such as the "Princess novelette,"[12] the "*Lady's Pictorial*"[13] and "Pearson's Weekly"[14] are identified as central to the functioning of the early-twentieth-century incarnation of this network. Abbie Garrington observes that "Gerty's reading diet is filled with injunctions to care for one's bodily resources,"[15] which are crucial to ensuring that she is perceived as a passive woman. "There was," Joyce tell us, "an innate refinement, a languid queenly *hauteur* about Gerty which was unmistakably evidenced in her hands."[16] In *The Return of the Soldier*, Jenny's narrative highlights how her engagements with the tactile regimes, behaviours and qualities promoted by Victorian and Edwardian popular etiquette books, hand-care articles and interior design manuals regulate her personal and social relationships during a period of apparent change for women. West uses Jenny's narration to show how the configurations of tactility in these materials were crucial to attempts to maintain existing patriarchal constructions of femininity in books, poems and advertisements that addressed women's war work during the War.

Debra Rae Cohen has shown that by "manipulating the narrative of Jenny …, West is able to offer a more far-reaching critique … of the ways in which women could allow themselves to be passively 'placed' in wartime roles – including the exalted role of mother."[17] Cohen demonstrates that "by manipulating the assumptions, gaps, and slippage of Jenny's narrative, West draws attention to the various exclusions and confinements of the text, chief among them Jenny's own entrapment in … and vulnerability to patriotic rhetoric."[18] By focusing on the tactile imagery which accompanies Jenny's use of such rhetoric, we can see how West specifically addresses wartime propagandists, writers and advertisers who exploited existing notions of female tactility to frame confrontations during the War and to present women's war work as an extension of traditional female roles. Jenny briefly points toward moments of "unmediated contact" which seem to transcend the class and gender assumptions

that discourses of tactile femininity reinforced. Yet the continuing influence that these discourses have on Jenny's narration finally prevent her from sustaining any meaningful contact.

Victorian and Edwardian discourses of feminine tactility

Victorian and Edwardian discourses of feminine tactility emerged as part of attempts to describe observable differences between the hands of laboring and leisured women. Whereas Victorian and Edwardian working-class women were often portrayed as laboring drudges, the ideal (middle-class) woman was expected to live a leisured existence at home whilst her husband went out to work. As the bodily appendages most associated with labor, the hands became an important marker understood to reveal whether a woman was leisured or laboring. Due to their constant engagement in manual labor, working women's hands usually looked very different to those of leisured ladies. The Victorian diarist Arthur Munby wrote that the hands of working-class women were "large and strong and coarse."[19] By contrast, middle-class hands are described in Mrs Noble's *Every Woman's Toilet Book* (1908) as "shapely, finely made, and white, with blue veins, taper fingers, and rosy nails, slightly arched."[20] Aristocratic hands, meanwhile, are labelled as "long and sometimes too thin."[21] For some, the appearance of a woman's hands could reveal if a woman had descended from laborers even if she herself was a lady of leisure. An article on "The Cult of Chiromancy" (1904) points out that "Darwin and Walker both observed that the hands of children of the labouring classes are larger than those whose ancestors lived idle lives or followed vocations not needing the use of their hands."[22] Anchored in the supposedly watertight assumptions of evolutionary theorists, the article asserts: "[I]f we see large, coarse hands on a smartly-dressed woman, no matter how

pretty or refined her face may appear, we immediately conclude that her family cannot have been of aristocratic origin."[23]

The starkly different socio-economic circumstances that shaped the lives of working and middle-class women meant their hands often were a reliable indicator of a life defined by leisure or labor. However, hand-care articles published during the Victorian and Edwardian period also sought to persuade middle-class women to work hard to ensure that their hands reflected the leisured existence associated with their place within the ideology of separate spheres. In "The Care of the Hands" (1910), Priscilla Craven writes that "few people realise how expressive the hands can be, what secrets they betray, what stories!"[24] To obtain hands that remained "shapely, finely made, and white, with blue veins, taper fingers, and rosy nails,"[25] Craven advises the reader to become "her own manicurist," "to soften the water she washed in," to "use some good cold cream overnight, and [to] sleep in gloves."[26] Women must guard "against the skin becoming 'chapped'" and are reassured that "no woman's hand need be rough if she will take a little care."[27] In *Ulysses*, the lower-class Gerty's "hands … of finely veined alabaster with tapering fingers … as white as lemon juice and queen of ointments could make them,"[28] signals her attempt to establish the appearance of middle-class digits through careful adherence to hand-care advice supplied by figures like Craven.

More than just about body care then, hand-care articles aimed to help middle-class women ensure their hands signalled the leisured existence they were expected to live in the ideal Victorian and Edwardian home. In her analysis of Victorian glove-wearing, Ariel Beaujot notes that

> gloves were essential props for middle-class women who attempted to conform to the separate sphere ideology. To glove the hand was an important part of the process that middle-class women used to achieve small white hands which showed an absence of labor. However, a

> woman's soft white appendages were not natural but had to be kept up on a daily basis as an indication of her leisured status.[29]

Perhaps annoyed by the implication that her lower-class hands might especially require glove-wearing at bedtime, Gerty is touchy about this practice: "it was not true that she used to wear kid gloves in bed."[30] Though she distances herself from this practice, her use of "lemon juice and queen of ointments"[31] proves that she uses other methods to keep up the leisured look of her hands. Craven provides an anecdote intended to warn her readers about the consequences of failing to maintain hands that "showed an absence of labor"[32]:

> A man was once taking leave of his hostess in a drawing room. She was very pretty, and well gowned. He took her hand in his to say "Good-bye," and an expression of surprised repugnance passed over his face. Her hand was rough and unkempt! It sent a shudder through him.[33]

Here, the "surprised repugnance" prompted by the hostess's "rough and unkempt"[34] hand bluntly suggests that the disgust elicited by a hand revealing one's involvement in labor overrides the appeal of a beautiful face and dress.

Whereas hand-care articles sought to persuade women that their marriageability depended on their ability to preserve the appearance of labor-free fingers, they came up against a countervailing belief that "the devil finds work for idle hands." Whilst embroidery and piano-playing were accepted forms of manual work for middle-class women, "necessity dictated that many … women had to do housework and gardening to keep up the appearance of another marker of middle-classness – the home."[35] This necessity explains why the tactile discourses that defined Victorian and Edwardian theories of interior decoration encouraged women to fill the domestic space with textures and objects that would enhance its status as a site of leisure rather than labor. In M.H. Baillie Scott's *Houses and Gardens* (1906), for example, readers considering "wall treatment" in their homes are advised: "To obtain a sense of comfort it is generally desirable that the lower parts of the walls should be finished with a material not too

cold or rough to the touch."[36] If maintaining soft and shapely hands provided one way of affirming and differentiating a middle-class woman's absence of labor, then the felt textures they chose for their homes offered another. Contemporary American interior design magazines exploited this appetite for objects which created a "sense of comfort" in order to convince their wealthy female readers of the superiority of hand-made products they were selling over the machine-made objects sold to those of more limited means.[37] A 1903 *House and Garden* magazine article by Samuel Swift on "American Garden Pottery" argued that "one always feels the life-giving personal touch"[38] and the "visible mark"[39] left by "the human eye and brain and hand"[40] in the hand-made object. By contrast, another *House and Garden* article by "A.W.B" claimed that the mechanical process which creates the factory-made object "beats on the same nerves with the same monotonous and inevitable touch"[41] in a way that "wearies" the handler and denies their "natural craving for stimulus and rest, for variety and variation."[42] Here, the implication is that the monotonous and wearying labor associated with the manufacture of factory-made objects are transmitted to the handler, whilst the hand-made object fulfils the lady's "natural craving for stimulus and rest."[43]

These examples illustrate how discourses of feminine tactility attempted to persuade middle-class women that they risked unwanted bodily and social contact if they did not discipline their hands and homes in accordance with certain (usually soft) tactile qualities. In turn, Victorian medical practitioners deduced that the cossetted lifestyles of wealthy women made their bodies more physically sensitive and susceptible to environmental stimuli than working women, whose constant labor had hardened them to it. Patricia Vertinsky notes that in the late-nineteenth century

> society doctors viewed affluent women as being in special need of protection because of their delicate nature and refined life-style, and saw working-women as naturally robust and less susceptible to difficulties brought on by bodily exertion.[44]

This view is borne out in Henry James' portrayal of Mrs. Gereth's peculiar tactile intimacy with domestic objects and agoraphobia in *The Spoils of Poynton* (1897). Thomas Otten argues that Mrs. Gereth's intimacy with the objects at Poynton – "Blindfold, in the dark, with the brush of a finger, I could tell one from another"[45] – reflects associations between hand-made objects and restful "personal touch"[46] in contemporary design magazines. By contrast, her belief that she can't "leave her own house without peril of exposure."[47] possibly stems from the fear that the machine-made "beats on the … nerves."[48] Read in this way, James' novel indicates that tactile discourses shaping contemporary distinctions between hand-made and factory-made goods encouraged leisured ladies to become so intimately attached with the domestic space that they came to view the world of work outside the home as a place where they risked damaging their carefully maintained bodies. Etiquette books also tried to persuade middle-class women that leisured hands were more sensitive and adept than laboring hands. Indeed, Noble claimed that

> character … is largely to be determined by the hands. … You hear people say she is neat-handed, or has such strong, kind capable hands, or the sensitive hand of an artist … No woman should ever allow hands to get rough, even in the coldest and most severe weather, it is always a sign of carelessness.[49]

Beaujot observes that "with the maintenance of the skin through the use of gloves and creams … women styled their bodies into a femininity that was particular to the middle-class" and "used their constructed identity as the norm against which to judge all other classes and femininities."[50] Noble's distinction between the neat-handed and the rough-handed woman implicitly presumes that the well-maintained digits possessed by leisured women are far more "sensitive" than the "careless" roughened hands of laboring women.

Jenny Baldry, hand culture and the Great War

Jenny's frequent use of tactile imagery highlights the far-reaching influence that Victorian and Edwardian discourses of feminine tactility has on hers and Kitty's understanding of their place within Baldry Court. Notwithstanding the onset of the War, she continues to follow the kind of hand-care advice outlined by Craven in a bid to ensure that her hands keep up the appearance of leisured living: "I read *Country Life* with ponderous interest, I kept my hands, which I desired to wring, in doeskin gloves for most of the day; I played with the dogs a great deal and wore my thickest tweeds."[51] Jenny's glove-wearing – carried out alongside her reading of *Country Life* and her donning of tweeds – is done to prevent her hands "becoming 'chapped'."[52] Moreover, she draws upon the imagery of hand-culture to equate the work required to maintain leisurely female digits with the effort that has gone into the renovation and maintenance of Baldry court. Jenny notes that "when Chris rebuilt Baldry Court after his marriage, he handed it over to architects who had not so much the wild eye of the artist as the knowing wink of the manicurist"[53] and that the gardens are as "well-kept as a woman's hand."[54] Garrington observes that the novel's use of the term "'manicured' is most often applied to lawns, suggesting that the massaging of Baldry Court relates to neatness, improvement and order, … contrasting in the strongest possible terms with 'the brown rottenness of No Man's Land'."[55] In part then, Jenny's commitment to hand-culture is defensive: her way of keeping at bay the messy horrors unleashed by the war. In addition, the imagery of hand-culture mediates her understanding of personal and social relationships during a time when these were being put under ever-greater strain by the War. Early in her narrative, Jenny informs us that Kitty "had come along and picked up [Chris'] conception of normal expenditure and stretched it as a woman stretches a new glove on her hand."[56]

Jenny's absorption of these discourses also causes her to figure interactions with the working-class visitor as a form of unwanted and threatening tactile contact. From the moment

that Margaret arrives at Baldry Court to deliver the news of Chris' injury, Jenny's reactions to her reflect the anxieties encouraged in Victorian etiquette books. Kitty views Margaret's presence as a kind of invasion: "The people that come breaking into one's nice quiet day."[57] Jenny, however, fears that Margaret's coarse hands threaten the carefully maintained interior of Baldry Court:

> [Margaret] had rolled her black thread gloves into a ball on her lap, so that she could turn her grey alpaca skirt well above her muddy boots and adjust its brushbraid with a seamed red hand which looked even more horrible when she presently raised it to touch the glistening flowers of the pink azalea that stood on a table beside her.[58]

The disgust elicited by Margaret's "seamed red hand" reaching out to touch the azalea indicates that Jenny subscribes to etiquette manuals' attribution of carelessness and insensitivity to the coarse hands of working-class women. In *Etiquette of Good Society* (1893), Lady Colin Campbell argues that "hands [which] have been accustomed to handle the spade and besom, to grooming horses, … have not the delicacy of touch necessary for the handling of glass and silver."[59] Jenny's anxiety about Margaret reveals a corresponding concern about her perceived lack of tactile grace. Consequently, her fears about the supposed carelessness and insensitivity of Margaret's hands shapes her reaction to her awkwardly delivered news of Chris' injury:

> there was no doubt in my mind but that this queer clumsy episode, in which this woman butted like a clumsy animal at a gate she was not intelligent enough to open, would dissolve and be replaced by some more pleasing composition in which we would take our proper parts.[60]

Jenny's suggestion that Margaret "butted like a clumsy animal at a gate she was not intelligent enough to open" attributes her social clumsiness to the supposed carelessness of her hands and again characterizes her presence as a form of tactile incursion.[61]

If pre-war discourses of feminine tactility helped to cultivate a middle-class fear of bodily contact with the poor, West suggests, then wartime discourses encouraged women like Jenny to frame the prospect of such interactions in ever more combative terms. In response to Margaret's insistence that Chris is ill, Jenny recounts how "it took a second for the compact insolence of the moment to penetrate,"[62] describes the "gaze she flung at us" and how she "scurried to the open door like a pelted dog."[63] Jenny's evident "peril of exposure"[64] recalls that of Mrs. Gereth, yet her fear is characterized by a more marked sense of violence: "Mrs. Grey moved on her seat so suddenly and violently."[65] Notable in this imagery is its connotations of combat, of an attack followed by the treatment of wounds: "since I had dealt her no direct blow, I might be able to salve the news she brought from the general wreck of manners."[66] Indeed, Jenny frequently remembers awkward social situations as a form of wounding: "I was past speech then, who had felt his agony all the evening like a wound in my own body."[67] In part, her language here is an attempt to align her experience with that she has seen depicted "on the war-films."[68] Cohen notes that, "like so many women in wartime, Jenny strains to experience battle vicariously, imaginatively projecting herself into Chris's experience, but she can only filter her imaginings through accounts derived from the popular media."[69] Her filtering of domestic exchanges with Margaret using imagery more suited to describe combat appears extreme, implying that her tendency to view her social interactions in terms of bodily injury feed off portrayals of hostilities on the Western Front. For example, the notion of female bodily violation was exploited by propagandist depictions of the German invasion of Belgium as a "rape." As Ruth Harris notes, "the actual victimization of women was transformed into a representation of a violated, but innocent, female nation resisting the assaults of a brutal male assailant."[70] West manipulates the pre-war tactile fixations of her narrator to imply that Jenny's tendency to frame her social interactions with the working-class as a form of damaging bodily contact have been heightened by just such military discourses.

West also insinuates that Jenny's fear of contact reveals her absorption of discourses encouraging a tactile aversion to labor in leisured women. She is an unreliable narrator modelled on those pioneered by Henry James and she is a believer in the "life-giving personal touch"[71] elicited by hand-made objects. Fleda describes her experiences of the *objet d'art* at Poynton as like being in "warm closeness with the beautiful."[72] Correspondingly, Jenny spends her time at Baldry Court "basking in the colour that glowed from all our solemnly chosen fabrics with such pure intensity that it seemed to shed warmth like sunshine."[73] Moreover, like Mrs. Gereth, Jenny can't "leave her own house without peril of exposure."[74] When she leaves Baldry Court to collect Margaret from the nearby industrial town of Wealdstone, she is again gripped by a fear of bodily contact with her. This is partly caused by the appearance of Margaret in the act of manual labor: "when she opened the door she gazed at me with watering eyes and in perplexity stroked her disordered hair with a floury hand."[75] Additionally, Jenny's fear extends to Margaret's clothing. She recounts how she had "defensively clutched my hands" at the sight of her "yellowish raincoat," "hat" and "grey alpaca skirt," noting how "it would have been such agony to the finger tips to touch any part of her apparel."[76] Celia Marshik observes that Jenny "aligns the mackintosh with the dreary practicality poverty necessitates;" she fears that merely touching clothes associated with work would be enough to ruin her carefully maintained hands.[77] Whereas pre-war interior decoration articles claimed the factory-made object "beats on the same nerves with the same monotonous and inevitable touch," the agony that Jenny fears suggests an even more extreme aversion to material objects associated with labor.[78]

Jenny's fears about the consequences of contact with the material signifiers of labor reflects those of conservative writers who emphasized the bodily threats faced by women war workers. Those who believed women's hands were not intended to carry out nursing, munitions work and agricultural labor worried that it would damage their digits and ruin their ability to

carry out their traditional duties. Jenny's fear that contact with a workaday Mac might cause her bodily pain is over-the-top, revealing a snobbishness about the poor which emphasizes her failure to empathize with Margaret's circumstances. Nevertheless, the tactile basis of her aversion echoes fears about the impact of labor which were stoked by female involvement in war work. This concern is evident in Mary Gabrielle Collins' poem "Women at Munition Making" (1916), which frets that those with "fingers [that] guide/ The rosy teat, swelling with milk/ To the eager mouth of the suckling babe" are "coarsened in munitions factories" and "bruised against the law/ to 'kill'."[79] Collins' contrast between "fingers [that] guide / The rosy teat" and hands which are "bruised" and "coarsened in munitions factories" stresses that women's involvement in manual labor risked ruining their maternal capacities.[80] Despite these fears, Collins' poem fails to acknowledge that the majority of munitions workers were working-class, meaning that their hands were already likely to have been "coarsened" by their pre-war work in professions like domestic service. There is evidence, in the memoirs of VAD nurses, that the perceived risks of female involvement in war work fuelled anxieties about the effects of manual labor on their hands and bodies. Unlike munitions workers and professional nurses, VAD nurses were recruited from middle-class homes where anxieties about the impact of manual labor would have been more pronounced. In *A Diary Without Dates*, Bagnold notes that

> the cap wears away my front hair; my feet are widening from the everlasting boards; my hands won't take my rings. I was advised last night on the telephone to marry immediately before it was too late. A desperate remedy. I will try cold cream and hair tonics first.[81]

Bagnold's resolution to "try cold cream"[82] to restore the softness of her fingers indicates that she (half-seriously) feared the look of "surprised repugnance"[83] which purportedly awaited women who allowed their hands to become rough. Advertisements for Vinolia talcum powder and hand-cream found in numerous issues of *The Landswoman*, the official magazine of the

Women's Land Army, suggest that similar anxieties were stoked among agricultural laborers who were drawn from both the middle and working-classes. In one 1918 issue, a Vinolia advert promises "instant relief" to "the chapped hands and roughened skin which result from the exposure to all weathers."[84] The accompanying tagline, "Beauty on Duty has a Duty to Beauty" reminds land girls that they must also work to maintain the "feminine" appearance of their hands.[85] Placed in these contexts, Jenny's over-the-top fear of touching Margaret's laboring apparel appears in-step with contemporary concerns about the perceived fragility of middle-class femininity that, in the case of Collins' poem, are projected onto working-class women. Her defensiveness reflects wartime discourses that evoked the perceived risk of damage to women's hands in order to emphasize the otherness of the enemy and the unnaturalness of female involvement in war industries.

Mediated intimacies

Both Jenny's fear of tactile contact with Margaret and her references to tactile intimacy highlight her susceptibility to discourses of feminine tactility which sought to police the activities of the female body. Additionally, she uses metaphors of tactile intimacy to emphasize the deep sense of comfort felt by her and Chris within the domestic environment at Baldry Court. Jenny describes her mind "creeping from room to room like a purring cat, rubbing itself against all the brittle beautiful things that we had either recovered from antiquity or dug from the obscure pits of modern craftsmanship."[86] She also believes that Chris has carried "with him to the dreary place of death and dirt the completest picture of everything about his home, on which his mind could brush when things were at their worst, as a man might finger an amulet through his shirt."[87] Her framing of domestic comfort in tactile terms partly stresses that she and Kitty have succeeded in turning Baldry Court into an ideal Edwardian home. Hallie Eustace

Miles had characterized the "felt" aspect of the perfect domestic interior in *The Ideal Home and Its Problems* (1911), which argued that the "ideal of a house which expresses the word '*home*'" is a space which makes "the mind calmed and rested by the influence and atmosphere *felt*, on entering the open door."[88] Moreover, the amorousness of Jenny's intimate imagery indicates that their creation of a comfortable domestic space is an expression of hers and Kitty's love for Chris. Roszika Parker notes that, because middle-class women "did not 'work' for money," the domestic activities of women like Jenny and Kitty "could be seen entirely in the light of their primary duty – to love their husbands."[89] However, conventional late-nineteenth-century morality dictated that "love could not be expressed sexually or passionately, but through the providing of *comfort.*"[90] Embroidery in particular was seen as "providing the comfort that would win a husband's love and prove a wife's devotion."[91] This emphasis on comfort explains Jenny's observation that Kitty "held some needlework to her bosom" in her attempt to win back Chris' affection.[92] Here, Jenny's tactile imagery stresses that Kitty has "proved" their devotion to Chris through their ongoing maintenance of a comfortable domestic environment. Furthermore, Jenny relies on this rhetoric of comfort to give expression to her repressed sexual desire for Chris. Her satisfied "creeping from room to room like a purring cat" is an articulation of desire displaced onto the "brittle beautiful things" that she has purchased for his comfort.[93]

This tactile emphasis on the devotional nature and purpose of Jenny's and Kitty's domestic efforts enables West to stress the currency that patriarchal ideologies of feminine labor still enjoyed during a period when unprecedented numbers of women were being recruited into war work. In *The Woman's Part: A Record of Munitions Work* (1918), L.K. Yates dwells on the tactile aspects of munition-making:

> The women, in fact, soon get attached to the machines they are working, in a manner probably unknown to the men. … An understanding has arisen between the machine and the operator

> which amounts almost to affection. I have often noticed the expression of this emotion in the workshops; the caressing touch of a woman's fingers … as a bore is being urged on to the job on the machine. This touch, which cannot be taught, or imparted, enables the operation to be started in the most effective method possible, and goes to the making of an excellent and accurate worker.[94]

Whereas Jenny's love/desire for Chris is signalled by her imagined rubbing against the "brittle beautiful things"[95] purchased for his comfort, Yates suggests that in the munitions factory a similar sort of amorous devotion is expressed by "the caressing touch of a woman's fingers"[96] on her machine. Though Yates acknowledges that "this touch … goes to the making of an excellent and accurate worker," her framing of female manual labor in amorously intimate terms is likely aimed at assuaging public anxiety about women's involvement in industrial work traditionally carried out by men.[97]

West argued before the War that manual domestic activities had prepared women for greater involvement in public life, rather than just the production of home comforts. In "Cause of Women's Restlessness: Suffragist's Spirited Reply to Male Critics" (1913), she argues that "there is no doubt whatever that the long continued endeavour that is characteristic of women's work would be valuable in matters of government."[98] The "long continued endeavour" likely refers to the laborious effort associated with tasks like sewing and, during the War, West implied this prepared women for work in the industrial environment of the munitions factory.[99] In "Hands That War. The Night Shift" (1916), she recounts a visit to a munitions factory where she witnessed "a great circle of women sitting at sewing-machines, making covers for these charges out of the fine cambric that is used for expensive baby-frocks, and turning gleaming sheets of Japanese silk into sachets, for gun-cotton."[100] Here, West deliberately highlights how the women have adapted sewing skills that were previously used to make luxury domestic products like baby-frocks to the production of practical war material. Despite West's claims,

the tendency to emphasize the domestic orientation of women's labor persisted. In the July 1918 issue of *The Landswoman*, Elizabeth Lincoln Otis' poem "An 'If' For Girls" praises agricultural workers who can "do a man's work when the need arises," before applauding those who "can make good bread as well as fudges / Can sew with skill, and have an eye for dust."[101] Such attempts to downplay the public and industrial nature of female war workers' contribution to the war effort must have frustrated West. Yet by highlighting the tactile imagery of attachment which elaborates Jenny's containment within patriarchal notions of female roles, she attributes the continuing influence that ideologies of femininity wielded to their ability to regulate women's embodied experience.

As well as demonstrating that discourses of feminine tactility help place a domestic emphasis on hers and Kitty's displays of affection toward Chris, Jenny's narrative also shows that they condition and distort her understanding of his intimacy with Margaret. She believes that the visible effects of labor on Margaret's skin will dissuade Chris from fraternising with working-class women:

> Down there by the pond he would turn at the sound of those heavy boots on the path, and with one glance he would assess the age of her, the rubbed surface of her, the torn fine texture, and he would show to her squalid mask just such a blank face as he had shown to Kitty the night before.[102]

Jenny's assertion that the "rubbed surface" of Margaret would make Chris recoil in horror reflects the contemporary assumption that men of his social station were attracted to the softer skin of leisured women.[103] Indeed, her reaction echoes the "surprised repugnance" recounted in Craven's anecdote about the man exposed to rough hands.[104] However, Jenny is shocked to discover that the rubbed surface of the working-class visitor helps to reignite her bond with him:

> "In a minute he will see her face, her hands." But although it was a long time before I looked again they were still clinging breast to breast. It was as though her embrace fed him, he looked so strong as he broke away. They stood with clasped hands, looking at one another (they looked straight, they looked delightedly!).[105]

The shock with which she describes how Margaret's "embrace fed him" partly reflects her own jealousy.[106] Yet Chris' reaction is also astonishing to Jenny because it challenges her belief in discourses that present male interactions with coarse feminine hands as a form of unwanted contact.

Jenny's attempt to rationalize the troubling physical intimacy established between Chris and Margaret enables West to further emphasize the extent to which her distorted understanding of bodily contact is conditioned by a fixed ideology of women's manual work. The challenge that Chris and Margaret's physical intimacy poses to her assumptions about the social impact of rough hands causes Jenny to attribute this to her maternal power. Her description of Chris and Margaret's embrace casts the soldier as a child and positions Margaret as a watchful mother:

> She had run her dreadful hands over the rug so that it lay quite smooth and comfortable under him when at last he felt drowsy and turned on his side to sleep. He lay there in the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child.[107]

Cohen argues that Jenny's portrayal of Margaret as a mother figure "serves her own need to repress the sexuality of Chris and Margaret's relationship"[108] and echoes the wartime "rhetoric of […] patriotic maternalism that itself had reconfigured as a positive trope Olive Schreiner's minatory image of sons as 'the primal munition of war'."[109] Additionally, Jenny's specific re-appraisal of Margaret's hands as motherly recapitulates the wartime tendency of framing women's manual labor within a maternal framework of female roles. Jenny's description of Margaret running "her dreadful hands over the rug so that it lay quite smooth and comfortable

under [Chris]" echoes contemporary depictions of VAD nurses.[110] Katherine Tynan's wartime poem, "The Nurse" (1917), portrays a VAD nurse's actions as maternal rather than professional: "Such younglings to be comforted / Before their mothers came, she had / Soft hands to make rough pillows smooth / A passionate kindness for all pain."[111] The description of the nurse's "soft hands to make rough pillows smooth" characterizes her labor as motherly rather than medical or professional.[112] Sheila Rowbotham observes that some VAD nurses exploited this trope to allay public concern about the socially transgressive nature of their work: "when they encountered opposition to their engagement in the public arena, middle-class and working-class women invoked motherly care."[113] West has Jenny call upon this same assumption in order to suppress the equally transgressive appeal that Margaret's "dreadful hands"[114] have for Chris.

Unmediated intimacy?

Throughout *The Return of the Soldier*, Jenny's recourse to tactile imagery highlights how bodily discourses of class and gender define her lived experience. Yet even her account of Margaret's first visit to Baldry Court hints at the stirrings of a bodily response to the working-class visitor which unsettles her learned fear of contact with her: "there was something about the physical quality of the woman … which preserved the occasion from utter baseness."[115] Notwithstanding the instinctive disgust that hand-care articles have trained Jenny to feel at the sight of seamed hands, her actual physical proximity to Margaret elicits a reaction which troubles her conditioned response. Recounting Chris' first night at home following his return from the Front, Jenny notes that

> I was near to weeping because whenever he thought himself unobserved he looked at the things that were familiar to him. Dipping his head he would glance sideways at the old oak panelling;

> and nearer things he fingered as though sight were not intimate enough a contact, his hand caressed the arm of his chair, because he remembered the black gleam of it, stole out and touched the recollected saltcellar.[116]

Chris' tactile traversals upset Jenny because they signal his disinterest in the domestic articles which they had "either recovered from antiquity or dug from the obscure pits of modern craftsmanship"[117] for his comfort, thereby unsettling the basis of her presumed intimacy: his fingers desire contact with the older sections of the house. In particular, Jenny is troubled and intrigued by the unmediated nature of Chris' touching. Despite her belief in the socially transgressive nature of Margaret and Chris's relationship, she notes that this is characterized by an unrestricted directness of touch which is absent from his relationship with herself and Kitty: "Soon he stirred, groped for her hand and lay with his cheek against its rough palm … He caught her hand again. It was evident that for some reason the moment was charged with ecstasy for them both."[118] Moreover, Jenny later recalls that she managed to set aside her own fear of touching Margaret to experience something of the intense intimacy of their relationship: "We kissed, not as women, but as lovers do; I think we each embraced that part of Chris the other had absorbed by her love."[119] Though her understanding of contact remains regulated by long-established discourses of class and gender, these moments signal a desire for a more unrestrained form of intimacy.

Jenny specifically suggests that Chris and Margaret's seemingly unmediated sense of touch is characterized by childlike inquisitiveness and uninhibitedness. She understands that discourses which encouraged women like Kitty to maintain their bodies have stunted their ability to express themselves freely: "By her kind of physical discipline she had reduced her grief to no more than a darkening under the eyes."[120] By contrast, the memory loss induced by Chris' injury enable him to act with the easy freedom of a child: "He walked … loose limbed like a boy."[121] This independence is also attributed to the inquisitiveness of Chris' hands: "As

his fingers glided here and there he talked bravely about noncommittal things; to what ponies we had been strapped when at the age of five we were introduced to the hunting-field."[122] Margaret, who follows Jenny "upstairs and along the corridors very slowly, like a child paddling in a summer sea,"[123] displays a similarly unrestrained tactile relationship with the house. Notwithstanding the threat that Jenny initially associates with Margaret reaching "to touch the glistening flowers of the pink azalea that stood on a table beside her,"[124] she later recalls how

> she moved forward slowly, tremulous and responsive and pleased, as though the room's loveliness was a gift to her; she stretched out her hands to the clear sapphire walls and the bright fresco of birds and animals with a young delight.[125]

The uninhibited "young delight" that Jenny attributes to Margaret's "tremulous and responsive" hands contrast with the conditioned fear of tactile contact and displaced touch which defines her interpersonal relationships.[126] West implies that Chris and Margaret's contact offers women like Jenny a way out of the ideological and bodily enclosure formed around them by discourses of feminine tactility.

Despite Jenny's recognition of Chris and Margaret's uninhibited contact, however, this does not prevent her from reverting back to her maternalist understanding of their physical intimacy. Cohen notes that Jenny reads Margaret – in terms consistent with wartime maternalist propaganda – as a sacrificial mother carrying out her "maternal 'duty' in returning Chris to the battlefield."[127] This is most apparent after Margaret helps to restore Chris's memory, which destroys their relationship and aids his to the Front: she is viewed as "a figure mothering something in her arms. Almost had she dissolved into the shadows" (117). Jenny's reading of Margaret's hands as "mothering" suggests that at the novel's close her notion of tactility helps sustain her conservative values, lending weight to critics who highlight the novel's emphasis on the pervasiveness of the contemporary ideological framework. Claire Tylee argues that

"Chris's return to sanity is a resumption of the materialistic values of the bourgeois marriage, which have never really been at risk."[128] Laura Cowan, meanwhile, posits that "West shows that the world as it exists will not allow Margaret's spirituality … Far from being the book's weakness (or internal contradiction), that is its point."[129] Throughout *The Return of the Soldier*, West proposes that middle-class women were specifically motivated to maintain the class and gender distinctions which shape this world by discourses which stressed the vulnerability of their bodily borders and sought to choreograph their tactile attachments. Whether it be the fear of injury she associates with Margaret's presence or her repeated stress on the maternal nature of her hands, Jenny's point of view is reinforced by an array of corresponding tactile textures, behaviours and qualities. Alongside this, West's narrator observes brief moments of tactile intimacy that seem to exist outside of the established bodily network of class and gender interactions. Though previously claiming to have "felt his agony all the evening like a wound in my own body,"[130] she eventually recognizes the lack of intimacy characterising her physical proximity with Chris: "When he had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders under that sky more full of flying death than clouds."[131] Despite this, Jenny's regulated understanding of tactility continues to condition her social interactions. Her observation that Margaret "made such explanatory gestures as I have seen cabmen make over their saucers of tea round a shelter"[132] illustrates how her preoccupation with the class implications of Margaret's hands ultimately prevent her from maintaining any meaningful connection.

The differing notions of tactility portrayed in West's novel demonstrates a sensitivity to the ways in which ideological frameworks are given coherence via their appeal to the felt dimensions of sensory experience. She constructs a first-person point of view to more directly evoke how discourses of feminine tactility generated an "intimate and quotidian network of power"[133] which encouraged female conformity to a conventional framework of class and

gender interactions. The creation of a narrator whose notion of tactility frequently reinforces her conservative viewpoint reconstructs the range of tactile discourses that were simultaneously mobilized in response to – and called into question by – the wartime recruitment of women into "masculine" manual roles and environments. Jenny's narrative partly serves the political purpose of highlighting the limitations that discourses of feminine tactility imposed on women's personal relationships and social mobility. Her emphasis on both the threatening and maternal aspects of Margaret's laboring hands echo pre-war attempts to deny women the civic right to vote by emphasizing their domestic importance. In *Ulysses*, Gerty's adherence to cultural configurations of touch offer her a means to pass as a woman of higher social status within the patriarchal system of the pre-war years, yet Jenny's narration is used to show how they hindered women from moving beyond its stereotypes during the War.

Notes

1. Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, 5.
2. Bagnold, *Diary Without Dates*, 102.
3. Das, *Touch and Intimacy*, 216.
4. Ibid., 217.
5. Ibid., 6.
6. West, *The Return*, 83.
7. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 333.
8. Mahaffey, "*Ulysses* and the End of Gender," 148.
9. In *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception and, Aesthetics* (2002), Sara Danius has explored how Gerty's body reflects common associations of the feminine with "nature." More recently, in *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (2013), Abbie Garrington analyzes the "feminine" connotations of hands in Sinclair Lewis' *Babbitt* (1922).
10. Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 6.
11. Ibid., 80.
12. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 334.
13. Ibid., 335.
14. Ibid., 338.
15. Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, 6.
16. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 333.
17. Cohen, *Remapping the Home Front*, 66.
18. Ibid., 67.
19. Hudson, *Munby, Man of Two Worlds*, 72.
20. Noble, *Every Woman's Toilet Book*, 56.
21. Ibid.
22. "The Cult of Chiromancy," 138.
23. Ibid.
24. Craven, "The Care of the Hands," 675.
25. Noble, *Every Woman's Toilet Book*, 56.
26. Craven, "The Care of the Hands," 675-676.

27. Ibid., 676.
28. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 333.
29. Beaujot, "'The Beauty of her Hands'," 169.
30. Joyce, *Ulysses*, 333.
31. Ibid.
32. Beaujot, "'The Beauty of her Hands'," 169.
33. Craven, "The Care of the Hands," 675.
34. Ibid.
35. Beaujot, "'The Beauty of her Hands'," 169.
36. Scott, *Houses and Gardens*, 69.
37. Ibid.
38. Swift, "American Garden Pottery," 33.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 34.
41. A.W.B., "Notes and Reviews," 251.
42. Ibid., 252.
43. Ibid.
44. Vertinsky, *The Eternally Wounded Woman*, 16.
45. James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 35.
46. Swift, "American Garden Pottery," 33.
47. James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 13.
48. Otten, "*The Spoils of Poynton* and the Properties of Touch," 271.
49. Noble, Every Woman's Toilet Book, 58.
50. Beaujot, "'The Beauty of her Hands'," 179
51. West, *The Return*, 95.
52. Craven, "The Care of the Hands," 676.
53. West, *The Return*, 48.
54. Ibid., 49.
55. Ibid., 14-15.
56. Ibid. 52.
57. Ibid.
58. Ibid., 53.
59. Campbell, *Etiquette of Good Society*, 133.
60. West, *The Return*, 56.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid., 58.
63. Ibid.
64. James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 13.
65. West, *The Return*, 56.
66. Ibid., 58.
67. Ibid., 70.
68. Ibid., 49.
69. Cohen, *Remapping the Home Front*, 71.
70. Harris, "The 'Child of the Barbarian'," 170.
71. Swift, "American Garden Pottery," 33-34.
72. James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 13.
73. West, *The Return*, 49.
74. James, *The Spoils of Poynton*, 13.
75. West, *The Return*, 80.
76. Ibid., 83.
77. Marshik, "The Modern(ist) Macintosh," 48.
78. A.W.B, "Notes and Reviews," 251.
79. Collins, "Women at Munition Making," 24.
80. Ibid.
81. Bagnold, *Diary Without Dates*, 47-48.
82. Ibid., 48.
83. Craven, "The Care of the Hands," 675.
84. "Royal Vinolia Cream," 15.
85. Ibid.
86. West, *The Return*, 49.

87. Ibid., 51.
88. Miles, *The Ideal Home*, 229.
89. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 154.
90. Ibid.
91. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, 155.
92. West, *The Return*, 66.
93. West, *The Return*, 49.
94. Yates, *The Woman's Part*, 20.
95. West, *The Return*, 49.
96. Yates, *The Woman's Part*, 20.
97. Ibid.
98. West, "Cause of Women's Restlessness," 380.
99. Ibid.
100. West, "Hands That War," 388.
101. Lincoln, "An 'If' For Girls," 15.
102. West, *The Return*, 91.
103. Ibid.
104. Craven, "The Care of the Hands," 675.
105. West, *The Return*, 92-93.
106. Ibid., 92.
107. Ibid., 100.
108. Cohen, *Remapping the Home Front*, 80.
109. Cohen, "Getting the Frame into the Picture," 94.
110. West, *The Return*, 100.
111. Tynan, *Late Songs*, 19-20.
112. Ibid.
113. Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day*, 2.
114. West, *The Return*, 100.
115. Ibid., 54.
116. Ibid., 67.
117. Ibid. 49.
118. Ibid., 102.
119. Ibid., 116.
120. Ibid. 104.
121. Ibid., 117.
122. Ibid., 67.
123. Ibid., 105.
124. Ibid., 53.
125. Ibid., 111.
126. Ibid.
127. Cohen, "Getting the Frame into the Picture," 94.
128. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, 143.
129. Cowan, "The Fine Frenzy of Artistic Vision," 305.
130. West, *The Return*, 70.
131. Ibid., 117-118.
132. Ibid., 114.
133. Gowing, *Common Bodies*, 6.

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