Having the Whip-Hand in *Middlemarch*

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I begin with an incident which takes place in Chapter 12 of *Middlemarch*.\(^1\) The scene is Stone Court, the residence of the old miser and misanthrope Peter Featherstone, and the occasion is the first meeting between Rosamond Vincy and Lydgate. Lydgate comes in just as Rosamond is about to leave, and Featherstone mentions that she has been singing to him: she is, he boasts, the best in Middlemarch.

‘Middlemarch has not a very high standard, uncle,’ said Rosamond, with a pretty lightness, going towards her whip, which lay at a distance.

Lydgate was quick in anticipating her. He reached the whip before she did, and turned to present it to her. She bowed and looked at him: he of course was looking at her, and their eyes met with that peculiar meeting which is never arrived at by effort, but seems like a sudden divine clearance of haze.

(Chapter 12, p. 117)

The meeting of Rosamond’s and Lydgate’s eyes may be unpremeditated, but the same cannot be said of the narrative of that meeting, or the dramatic irony which it enfolds. It is all about anticipation: the physical gesture on the part of the character is made to coincide with the writer’s employment of prolepsis, the rhetorical figure of anticipation: power is to be an issue in Lydgate’s relations with Rosamond, and in handing her the whip he is making a rod for his own back. She goes on to make use of the whip, mastering him in ways which he precisely does not anticipate; indeed, his quickness in anticipating her here is deceptive, just as her pretty lightness turns out to conceal an unbending will and grip. We can trace the figure all the way to the other end.
of the novel, to the moment in Chapter 78 when someone – but not Lydgate – finally gets the whip-hand of Rosamond. This person is Will Ladislaw, and he does it with a metaphorical whip, with his voice, when he rejects the touch of her hand:

She put out her arm and laid the tips of her fingers on Will’s coat-sleeve.

‘Don’t touch me!’ he said, with an utterance like the cut of a lash [...]. He wheeled round to the other side of the room and stood opposite to her, with the tips of his fingers in his pockets and his head thrown back.

(Chapter 78, p. 777)

In the care with which the tips of Rosamond’s fingers are opposed to the tips of Ladislaw’s, the realism of both gestures (disposing us to believe them ‘in character’) is subsumed by a different design. This design is the subject of my essay. When Lydgate hands Rosamond her whip, he, too, is acting in character, yet his action has another quality. The ‘touch’ of the passage – spectral, disembodied, yet palpable and powerful – is that of the writer’s hand.

I want to connect the fact that *Middlemarch* is George Eliot’s handwork with the predominance, in the novel’s system of representations, of hands and everything associated with them. I have seventy pages of extracts, a Casaubon-like heap of material, in which hands are mentioned: either directly, or by association with the actions and gestures they perform, or in a multitude of figurative expressions.2 Naturally the novel provides a fine collection of whips, Rosamond’s being in every way exceptional, since all the others belong to men; moreover they are singularly ineffectual in their use of them, except in one instance. Sir James Chettam, in Chapter 6, beats his whip nervously against his boot and then drops it when Mrs Cadwallader informs him of Dorothea’s engagement to Casaubon (p. 58); Fred Vincy also beats his boot with his whip, in Chapter 12, as he is being tormented about money by his uncle Featherstone (p. 111), and sulkily takes up his hat and whip in Chapter 14, when Mary Garth rebuffs him (p. 140); in Chapter 24, in the Garth family kitchen, his whip becomes a toy and he is embarrassed by one of the Garth children asking to be taken out riding, since it is because of his ill-advised dealings in horse-flesh that he has got into debt and involved Mr Garth in difficulty (p. 246). Later on, however, Fred uses his whip to good effect, when he chases the