Gender, violence and corporeality in *Manfroné*

Réka Takács

PhD candidate of modern English and American literature doctoral program, department of English, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary, 11, I. Street, Budapest, 1224, Hungary; e-mail: pufiguri@gmail.com

Abstract

The aim of the article is to adumbrate the relationship of gender, corporeality and violence in Mary Anne Radcliffe's *Manfroné* with a special focus on authorial treatment of the hand, as well as its social and literary implications. The hand is apparently a prominent symbol in the novel as it features in the title and crops up in climactic moments, always to threaten the heroine's integrity. The first two sections of the article discuss the diverse connotations of hands and arms in female and male corporeal behaviour: while the limbs of women tend to highlight female inactivity, the description of male movements of the hand and arm seems to emphasize the owners' capability of socially as well as self-destructive behaviour. Finally, a handful of examples from contemporary literature will serve to delineate the significance of the hand and arms in a wider social context; namely, the commodification of the female body in the hands of expanding masculinity that attempts to eradicate equalizing femininity.

For citation


Keywords

Introduction

The present study aims at displaying the connection between gender, violence and corporeality in Mary Anne Radcliffe's *Manfroné; or, the One-Handed Monk: A Romance* (1809). What is presented here is part of my research and doctoral dissertation about the representation of corporeality in late eighteenth-early nineteenth-century English female Gothic fiction; however, the confines of an article have made me focus on a particular feature of Radcliffe's novel; the hand.

Mary Anne Radcliffe's obsession with an amputated male limb is not unprecedented in the female Gothic: "The positive/negative fantasy of the body within the code of propriety is writ large in the eighteenth-century Gothic" [Shapira, 2006, 9]. Diane Long Hoeveler has drawn attention to the fact that Joanna Baillie stares almost obsessively on dead male bodies in *De Monfort*, while she fixates on an amputated arm in *Basil*: "The bodily extremities draw her obsessive gaze. It has long been a commonplace that female bodies, especially maternal bodies are abjected in the Gothic text; it seems obvious that Baillie also deals with the male body as abject. Baillie's abject male bodies continue to haunt the text, they cannot be rid of; therefore, they represent indestructible patriarchy, uncanny phallic power that constantly resurrects itself in an erect position" [Hoeveler, 2001, 118].

The same is obviously true for Mary Anne Radcliffe's *Manfroné*: the hand is apparently a prominent symbol in the novel as it features in the title and crops up in climactic moments, always to threaten the heroine's integrity. As we will see, hands and arms in the novel draw alternate scenarios for woman and man, while the limbs of women tend to highlight female inactivity, the description of male movements of the hand and arm seems to emphasize the owners' capability of socially as well as self-destructive behaviour. Anne Chandler claims that eighteenth-century female Gothic tended to "fluctuate between peaks of rhetorical hyperactivity and valleys of intellectual torpor" [Chandler, 2006, 133]: the same dichotomy might be observed in Mary Anne Radcliffe's novel with a special emphasis on male corporeal hyperactivity as opposed to female physical torpor. Finally, a handful of examples from contemporary literature will serve to delineate the significance of the hand and arms in a wider social context; namely, the commodification of the female
body in the hands of expanding masculinity that attempts to eradicate equalizing femininity.

The female limb as an indicator of inactivity

The heroine, Rosalina's first encounter with the hand is in her room, when a midnight violator sneaks into it to rape her: the memento of this sexual trauma is the severed hand that lies on the floor. The description of the hand is intriguing if we consider what it stands for throughout the novel: "the bleeding hand was large and muscular, but no rings being on the fingers, they were at a loss to conceive whom the owner could be" [Radcliffe, 1809, 6]. Being large and muscular, the hand of Rosalina's violator is a phallic symbol that threatens her virginal body with aggressive male sexuality, and the fact that it bears no signet seems to indicate that, unlike earlier Gothic novels [cf. Domínguez-Rué, 2014], in which there has always been one particular villain who persecutes the heroine, in Manfroné it is men in general who intend to victimize and penetrate the heroine's body. This feature of Manfroné delineates a highly disturbing scenario for the heroine, since while earlier Gothic novels afforded a shelter for the heroine's virtue in the character of a hero, Rosalina's saviour does show signs of aggressive masculinity, hence he cannot be regarded as a conventional hero of the Gothic novel, despite the fact that he saves Rosalina on a number of occasions [cf. Durant, 1982].

Another important aspect of the severed hand as representative of male aggression is that it is covered in blood, which signals its relation to the male act of revenge, the greatest possible threat to the heroine's integrity, mental and physical health. Women's response to the sight of the hand is very telling, both Rosalina and her maid, Carletta show signs of death at their first encounter with sexually abusive masculinity: "what, with horror, she perceived to be a human hand, blood-stained, and apparently but lately severed from its limb. She sickened and turned pale at the sight, and sinking into a chair, covered her eyes with her hands, lest she should again behold so unpleasant an object, while Carletta lay inanimate on the floor, close to the cause of her alarms" [Radcliffe, 5 – 6]. Interestingly, the sight of the hand silences women and, thus, the novel seems to support theological conventions: David
Calabro, in his study of the *Book of Mormon* highlights that a hand stretched forth almost always initiates speech on the part of the one making the movement [Calabro, 2012, 48]. It appears to indicate that Radcliffe could have relied on theological representations of physicality to expose male practices of hand movements as indicative of their usurpation of speech in order to silence women.

Rosalina's attitude towards sexuality is an evasive one: seeing the phallus of a man who has just attempted to rape her makes her cover her eyes with her hands, meaning that she is unable to face its implications i.e. the loss of her virginity and the possibility of a sexualized body. Rosalina seems to be the epitome of the asexual Gothic heroine whose tender feeling for Montalto is "unmixed with the base dross of sensual passion" [Radcliffe, 2007, 52]. The movement of the hand is all the more important because it is indicative of what is beneath the surface. Poussin said that "just as the 24 letters of the alphabet are used to form words and express our thoughts, so the forms of the human body are used to express the various passions of the soul and to make visible what is in the mind" [qtd Heppner, 1995, 5], whereas Le Brun, a follower of Poussin thought that the face in general and especially the eyebrows were the central indices of the feelings of the soul, and also the arms and hands [Heppner, 5]. An early nineteenth-century text also points out the hand as an important means of expressing thoughts and emotions: Gilbert Austin's *Chironomia* (1806) quotes Lavater's description of the eye as the tongue for the understanding and Cresellius's account of the hand as a second tongue, because "nature has adopted it by the most wonderful contrivance for illustrating the art of persuasion" [qtd Leask, 1992, 62 – 63]. As Miles points out, women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used the "semiology of the body" to articulate their desires, since language was a medium disallowed for women; and Radcliffe also resolved to the extensive usage of bodily movements so that her characters may find an avenue for expression.

Rosalina is only using her hands to lean on the arm of Carletta whenever she feels faint, or else to use them as shield against the disturbing sight of sexuality. Rosalina's passivity and helplessness is indicated by the movement of her hands: they do not have a single active movement but merely reach out for help and provide coverture against the harshness of experience. Le Brun also mentions the arms as "cen-
Rosalina's arms are only mentioned twice in the text and both instances show her in a state of utter passivity ("her head was reclined on her lovely arm, far whiter than the marble form of the Medicean Venus" 190). As Rosalina's hands and arms are indicative of her passivity and helplessness, the hands and arms of men provide them with activity which is either related to sexual aggression or vengeance. When Rosalina is almost raped, then pursued by Manfroné, he tries to grasp her and when she is attacked by ruffians, the narrator consecutively uses the word 'grasp' to indicate male movement toward woman [Radcliffe, 2007, 50]. The term 'grasp' is used in another context in the novel: the grasping of the sword that always precedes murderous intentions and is indicative of vengeful passions. Interestingly, it is only at moments of vengeance when men become aware of their bodies; in other words, physicality, especially masculinity is engendered and only made possible for man at the time when they embrace revenge, which emphatically means the exclusion and forgetting of femininity. Furthermore, revenge and dangerous male masculinity do not only exclude but rather eradicate femininity as there are a number of textual evidences that substantiate this hypothesis.

The male limb as a symbol of avenging masculinity

Montalto's body is torn between two juxtaposing desires: one would be to gratify his thirst for the blood of his father's supposed murderer, the midnight assassin, Rosalina's father – an act which would render his body active hence decidedly more masculine, the other would cool his passion and ensure his asexual relation with Rosalina, which would apparently render his body effeminate and inactive. As soon as his actions tend towards the fulfilment of the dictates of his blood, he becomes all body: "My heart is steeled against reflection – I could wade in a sea of blood; my passions are roused […] Montalto looked all he said; his brows lowered – his teeth fast closed – his eyes unsettled in their gaze – his hand fast clenching around the hilt of the dagger – his step unsteady" [Radcliffe, 2007, 111]. However, when he suddenly remembers Rosalina, his arm is stopped during the attempt to kill her father though he would be able to avenge his father's wrongs. Grimaldi's question at this point is remarkably revealing ("Are you a man, are you a son?" 112), since it
highlights the very dilemma Montalto is facing – in his inclination towards embracing passivity as well as femininity, he rejects being a man, which is equated with acting like a son whose father has been done wrong. While his hand is fast grasping the dagger, his arm is stopped by the memory of Rosalina – in other words, the hand and arm that signal passivity in a woman, as we have seen in Rosalina's case where hand and arm only served as means of help and cover, for men it signifies the means of active masculinity. Montalto's speech provides further evidence to this, when he confesses to Rosalina: "You have disarmed me – you have rendered me incapable of pursuing those measures which filial duty and my unmerited wrongs require" [Radcliffe, 2007, 57]. The intriguing term "disarmed" seems to be proof of the above pattern – the woman's image and body stands as a shield that blunts the point of the lethal weapon; it renders men incapable of action, it robs them of initiative while at the same time makes them vulnerable. This pattern shows remarkable parallels with Burke's discussion on 'love'. He notes how the body falls into a kind of stupor: "the head reclines something on one side; the eyelids are more closed than usual… the mouth is a little opened, and the breath drawn slowly, with now and then a low sigh: the whole body is composed, and the hands fall idly to the sides. All this is accompanied with an inward sense of melting and languor" [qtd Shaw, 2006, 61, italics mine]. For Burke the "bracing tension of the sublime" is "softened, relaxed and enervated" by love [Shaw, 2006, 61], which leads to Philip Shaw's concluding that Burke's sublime masculinity is "shown to be constantly at the mercy of feminine stupefaction" [Ibid.]. Radcliffe's hero apparently shows the same symptoms as a result of his being in love with the beautiful Rosalina: his over-masculine body becomes relaxed, even feminine, forgetting its sublime energies. When Montalto acts according to the dictates of his blood, hence he follows the natural desire of his masculine body, his actions are prompted by Grimaldi/Manfroné, who claims "revenge is the deity" he worships [Radcliffe, 2007, 246]. It is Grimaldi or Manfroné's skeletal hand that grasps the dagger that eventually kills the duca; hence it is the hand of revenge that keeps the earthly lovers apart.

The heroine's pointed inactivity seems to serve the purpose of reducing men to the same state of passivity where she herself stagnates. Woman interferes at precisely those moments when masculinity is at its most assertive: the act of revenge. I
have already referred to that particular characteristic of the novel, according to which revenge enables man to feel his physical superiority; however, woman constantly interferes with his designs. Montalto is torn between his filial duties that would require him to avenge the death of his father, and his effeminate self that would urge him to 'relinquish his arm' and unite with Rosalina in a tender love unmixed with sensual passions. The battle of masculinity and femininity is pointedly displayed in the following passage: "Dreadful was the countenance of Montalto while he uttered these disjointed sentences – it bespoke the horrible agitation of his mind; he breathed short and quick, his eyes were distended, his brows lowered, a dark gloomy hue overspread his features, his hand firmly grasped his sword; already had he started from his seat, which was the marble surface of a tomb, when Rosalina, almost as agitated as himself, hastily seized his arm" [Radcliffe, 2007, 135].

In this passage Radcliffe seems to highlight the gender ideology of her day: while dangerous masculinity seems to articulate itself through the movement of the hand that grasps its sword – its most emphatic weapon since it, being a phallic symbol, ensures man's power position – and it also erects itself via its connection to physicality, femininity seems to make an attempt to freeze man in a state of passivity similar to her own. It is important to note that Montalto, while engaging in conversation with Rosalina, is sitting on the marble surface of a tomb; therefore, we might assume that his engagement with a woman would reduce him to a state of metaphorical death – a state of passive inactivity that excludes the possibility of murderous fantasies, the dictates of blood and of the body; in other words, it would deprive man of the power that carries the possibility of sexual and social threat to a woman.

In another passage, a similar relation between revenge and corporeality is emphasized, in which Montalto declares his wish to murder the duca to avenge the supposed death of his father: "While thus he spoke, the furious conflict of contending passions that warred within his breast shook his frame, and his intelligent countenance at one time was flushed with a crimson tint, while he thought of the prince and the duca, and the next moment it became pale and sorrowful as he reflected on the dangerous situation of Rosalina" [Radcliffe, 2007, 38]. The moment Montalto is reflecting on his father and their family rival, he becomes aware of the strength of his masculine body, and his cheeks are overspread with blood, but as soon as he
reflects on Rosalina, the blood disappears from his face and is replaced by paleness, a sure sign of death. Robert Miles claims that *Manfronè* is one of several female gothic novels which "incorporate conflicts between parent and child and the conflict almost always shapes itself as one between the demand of alliance (blood) and the urgency of personal choice (sexuality)" [Miles, 2002, 25]. Although Miles very aptly observes that it is problematic for the child in the gothic world to ally with their parentage i.e. to follow the bloodline, in the case of Montalto the conflict is not about blood versus sexuality but rather about blood i.e. masculinity versus passivity/death allied with femininity.

The dichotomy of man-physicality versus woman-death seems to pervade the whole text: in another instance of the novel, the monk, Grimaldi shows Montalto his father, the chained captive of the duca, and as "the determined intents of his soul appeared in his rageful eye, Rosalina was forgot – Rosalina whose remembered beauties would have soothed his rage, and lulled the transports of fury which shook his frame, was distant from his thoughts" [Radcliffe, 2007, 109]. We have to realize that it is in the passion of revenge that man is conscious of his body – when his senses are overpowered by the image of the woman, he moves closer to death; so close actually, that soon it is he himself that looks forward to death that would liberate his feminine spirit from his manly body: "Oh, Rosalina, were death to pay his chilling visit to my agonized form – were he at this moment to liberate my soul from earthly thought how great would be the blessing!" [Ibid., 135]. Although at certain times Montalto fights Rosalina's charms, which turn out to be deadly charms indeed, he eventually drops his weapon, and satisfies himself with the deathlike state his engagement with femininity engenders: after Rosalina is restored to Montalto, he falls asleep on a marble bench, which prefigures the death of his masculinity in marriage, and sure enough his body loses its strength and integrity and gets penetrated on the very spot: he is stabbed and almost dies. Radcliffe seems to have found the connection between Montalto's unconscious passivity as a happy lover and his fate intriguing as she places remarkable accent on the transformation of the hero's actively masculine body into a passively feminine one that is attacked while asleep: "The soul of Montalto, calm and full of content, communicated its repose to its mortal habitation, and the happy lover, slumbering became unconscious of what was passing around him" [Ibid., 205 – 206].
The commodification of the female body

The heroine's body, on the other hand, is not torn between internal desires but external forces that seek to commodify it. Dóra Csikós asserts that rape was familiarly understood in the eighteenth century as a crime against property and that "the commodification of female sexuality is subtly reflected in contemporary slang for the female genitals as purse or commodity" [Csikós, 2011, 45]. The fact that Rosalina's father severs the hand of the intruder seems to suggest that the attempt to rape her is considered by men as a crime against property: stealth was traditionally punished in England by cutting off the hand of the thief; consequently, when the duca cuts off the hand of the intruder, he does not do so to protect his daughter but to punish his rival for violating his property. Manfroné's claiming possession over Rosalina's body/person, if not her soul does not leave any doubt as for his intentions: he regards the woman's body as nothing more than a battlefield on which he might defeat his rival: "though Montalto has your affections, Manfroné will possess your person: tomorrow is the day appointed for the nuptials; then shall I triumph over Montalto" [Radcliffe, 2007, 31].

Current scholarly research on the relationship between gender and violence has found that "violence against others and against the self is the result of non-conformity to gender norms" [Marshall, 2013, 4]. Marshall claims that those who fail to accomplish normative gender would suffer from performative melancholia that leads to violence [Ibid., 8] and in his arguments he relies on Judith Butler's claim that rigid forms of gender and sexual identification, whether heterosexual or homosexual, appear to spawn forms of melancholy in case the subject is unable to accomplish masculinity or femininity [Ibid.]. Butler's idea that masculinity and femininity are not dispositions but accomplishments that need to be continually materialized substantiates the claim that men need to recourse to more and more aggressive means to prove their masculinity, and they achieve this end by objectifying women. The last decade of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century were especially famous for their obsession with prescriptive gender, and it is quite well-known that those who did not fit rigid gender categories, were ostracized and socially eliminated. Marshall reads Blake's Visions as a poem about the consequences of failed roman-
tic coupling but he claims that Oothoon is a representative of normative femininity and she was in search for romantic coupling and motherhood when she set out to meet Theotormon [Marshall, 2013, 31]. When she does not manage to accomplish normative femininity, that is she loses her honour when she gets raped by Bromion, Oothoon invites the eagles of Theotormon to prey upon her bosom; in other words, she subjects herself to violence as a result of performative melancholy. Bromion does not take but affects violence so that he would conform to contemporary ideals of aggressively expanding masculinity, and he exploits Oothoon's body to defeat and humiliate his rival, Theotormon. Oothoon, like Rosalina, becomes a marginalized character in patriarchal wars, and both will be subjected to the violence of men who seek the assertion of masculinity.

It is significant that Radcliffe emphasizes the hand as a limb whose movement or inactivity constitutes masculinity, since it is also that particular body part which is associated with male masturbatory practices [Cf. Wennerstrom, 2005]. I have argued so far that in Manfroné male characters strive for the articulation of masculinity; however, their goal can only be achieved if women/femininity are pushed into the background, or else marginalized. It also presupposes a peculiar attitude towards sexuality [Cf. MacKenzie, 1999]. The elimination of femininity achieves its greatest articulation in a novel to be published shortly after the publication of Manfroné, Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, demonstrating "the clash between sexual and medical ways of viewing the dead body" [Liggins, 2000, 142; cf. Rauch, 1995]. Probably the best known of all women's gothic novels, Frankenstein has been studied as a text that conceptualizes the eradication of femininity by dangerously aggressive and expanding masculinity. The latter attribute is embodied in the novel in the character of the enlightened scientist, Victor Frankenstein who seeks to usurp female power of reproduction and breeding by becoming the mother and father in one person of the monster he creates. As scholars like Mellor and Gilbert and Gubar have emphasized, Victor works on his creature for roughly nine months, which seems to suggest that he is actually imitating women's pregnancy, during which time he spends his time confined to his study. His hostility to femininity is equally well-portrayed in the scene in which he destroys the female monster because he fears that the two creatures might reproduce a whole generation of monsters; however, his act repeatedly displays his
aversion of natural reproductive processes which necessitates female cooperation. We can see that the usurpation was a gradual process. In the time of Wollstonecraft, the issue was merely the usurpation of the profession of midwifery: at the time men contented themselves with penetrating the mystery of the birthing room and women's confinement, however, by the time of *Frankenstein*, the problem became more extensive with regards to the female body. In the light of recent research, Victor's actions are no longer viewed exclusively from the perspective of the usurpation of the female territory of birth giving, but he is regarded as the ultimate masturbator who excludes woman not only from the process of breeding but also from the sexual intercourse itself [Crockett, 2010, 133]. He claims that the monster is the "work of his own hands" [Shelley, 1816, 71], which suggests that male reproduction is an act of autoeroticism. The fact that Victor is a scientist and learns science at Ingolstadt University further proves that he is distancing himself from everything that might be termed 'natural', since the figure of the scientist by the late eighteenth century has become more and more associated with the unnatural. William Blake's *Newton* print seems to substantiate this idea: it depicts Newton, the ultimate scientist, sitting on a rock and leaning over his compass and a manuscript on which he is doing various calculations. Newton's position is a very telling one indeed; his posture appears to be extremely unnatural and uncomfortable as his body is bent and distorted from its natural stature. Furthermore, though he is supposed to pry into the secrets of nature, he shows his back on that very emphatic natural symbol: the rock overgrown with vegetation. Instead of turning towards nature, he is immersed in his own calculations; therefore, Blake's print thematizes the unnatural measures the enlightened scientist takes during his studies that become more and more distanced from nature. It is also worth noting that Newton's figure is displayed as immensely masculine: his muscular and perfectly proportioned body parallels the classical male ideal but it also emphasizes the manly scientist's virility and aggressive masculinity in his encounter with feminine nature that he is increasingly marginalizing.

If Victor is the "student of unhallowed arts" of Mary Shelley's dream, Crockett reads those unhallowed arts to be masturbatory practices. She enumerates Victor's bodily symptoms that show the decay of his health while he is shut up in his room, and claims that "the decay of Victor's body parallels the draining energies of the mas-
turbator; his body displays the symptoms described by medical texts to be the result of frequent masturbation: pale cheeks, emaciated body, disturbed sleep, coldness in the extremities" [Crockett, 2010, 135 – 136]. As I have mentioned earlier, Victor's autoerotic practice and its result was the culmination of a gradual process that started to take place in the second half of the eighteenth century. The process might be best labelled with the title of Meghan Burke's article, "Making Mother Obsolete". Burke claims that by the mid-eighteenth century a very important change occurred in the understanding of conception: while earlier it was commonly believed that the female orgasm was necessary for conception, by the mid-eighteenth century this view was replaced by the understanding that the "passive egg" was activated by the "aggressively mobile sperm" [Burke, 2009, 369]. This view proved to be a double-edged weapon though, because, on the one hand, in rape cases for instance, it might have been relieving for women as it could testify to their innocence in the act; however, such understanding also deprived women of the power and mystery of impregnation and reproduction. The passivization of women and the corresponding activization of men became crystallized in midwifery as well. It is worth quoting Burke's article at some length in order to understand the efforts of eighteenth-nineteenth-century scientific masculinity to achieve male dominance in reproduction: "Midwifery taken over by men is symptomatic of men's desire to physically penetrate the secret world of the birthing room with their hopes of ultimately infiltrating the secret workings of women's reproductive capacity. If men could finally explore and define the maternal body in scientific and rational terms, the tantalizing possibility arose that they could potentially appropriate both its figurative power as the source of mysterious, exclusively feminine experiences, and perhaps even its actual generative power. After all, the ultimate way to achieve male dominance would lie in the creation of the definitive unnatural maternity: a masculine kind of generative 'motherhood' in which man could reproduce other men without relying on the female sex" [Burke, 2009, 359].

Burke goes on to claim that the lithotomic position (when the mother is lying on her back with the knees spread apart) was institutionalized with the rise of male midwifery since it really served male purposes as it forced women into a passive role during labour; in other words, woman ceased to be an active agent delivering her child with female help but was forced into a position that was counterproductive.
to the facilitation of birth [Burke, 2009, 369]. It implies that the focus in childbirth shifted from mother and child to the male scientist, and delivery ceased to be the effort of woman; she did not make it happen any longer, but it actually happened to her.

**Conclusion**

As we see, the process of 'making the mother obsolete' was carefully designed by late eighteenth-early nineteenth-century patriarchy in order to exclude women from the most important offices of life, including childbirth. What Mary Shelley envisioned in *Frankenstein* was the culmination of a long-lasting struggle founded on the idea that woman needs to be objectified so that men could engage in a masculine power play. At the end of the day, woman ceased to be the mirror reflecting man but patriarchy counted only on its own members to reflect its achievement. Man's narcissistic desire to control all aspects of life presupposes his autoerotic inclination which is articulated by Mary Anne Radcliffe through an almost obsessive fixation on the hand, hence Rosalina's efforts to freeze Montalto's movement of the arms that would strengthen his position in competitive male society. She makes repeated attempts to direct Montalto's actions from the autoerotic, narcissistic, self-indulging, and self-absorbed inclination that would ultimately result in the marginalization or exclusion of the female.

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Гендер, насилие и телесность в «Манфроне» А. Радклифф

Токач Рика
Соискатель докторской степени по современной английской и американской литературе, отделение английского языка, Будапештский университет, 11, I. Street, Budapest, 1224, Hungary; e-mail: pufiguri@gmail.com

Аннотация
Статья посвящена тематике пола, телесности и насилия в готическом романе писательницы Анны Радклифф «Манфроне» («Manfroné»). Автор анализирует образ руки, представляющий важный символ романа; у женщин образ кисти используется для выражения пассивности, а у мужчин — для выражения социального поведения.

Для цитирования в научных исследованиях

Ключевые слова
Женская готическая литература, гендерные исследования, телесность, английская литература девятнадцатого века, «Манфроне», «Франкенштейн», Блейк.

Réka Takács