Queer beauty: illness, illegitimacy and visibility in Dickens's *Bleak House* and its 2005 BBC adaptation

Rachel Carroll *University of Teesside*

Abstract

The visual plays a prominent role in the narrative of Charles Dickens' 1853 novel *Bleak House*; more specifically, a complex relationship between the visual and knowledge is integral to the identity intrigues at the core of *Bleak House*. This article will explore the relationship between the 'visual economies' (Robyn Wiegman) of Dickens' novel and its 2005 BBC adaptation. More specifically, it will focus on the relationship between illness, illegitimacy and the visible; it will suggest that the visible signs of Esther's illness, as inscribed on her face, can be read as signifying an invisible condition: illegitimacy. This article will explore the ways in which this adaptation, as a neo-Victorian television drama, lends renewed visibility to issues of gender, power and legitimacy at work in Dickens's novel.

Keywords

Adaptation; television; Charles Dickens; *Bleak House*; illegitimacy; neo-Victorian.

The visual plays a prominent role in the narrative of Charles Dickens's 1853 novel *Bleak House*; more specifically, a complex relationship between the visual and knowledge – that is, between what can be *seen* and what can be *known* – is integral to the identity intrigues at the core of the novel. This article will explore the '*economies* of visibility [original emphasis]' (Wiegman, 1995) at work in the 2005 BBC television adaptation of *Bleak House* (dir. Justin Chadwick and Susanna White, screenplay Andrew Davies) with particular reference to the 'marking' of Esther Summerson's body and identity. In her introduction to *Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race and Religion*, Linda Schlossberg has written that 'to be "unmarked" is to occupy a position of privilege, in which the subject hides behind an apparent transparency' (Schlossberg 2001: 5). In Dickens's novel, social marginalisation is made spectacularly visible in the marked face and body of Phil

Squod, a foundling who can date his birth only by parish calculations: his face is 'spile[d]', 'singe[d]' and 'scorched' (Dickens 1996: 421) and his hands 'notched', 'seamed' and 'crumpled' (Dickens 1996: 351). Both his appearance and his gait have a 'sinister' (Dickens 1996: 351) bent suggestive of an oblique relationship to social legitimacy: 'He has a curious way of limping round the gallery with his shoulder against the wall, and tacking off at objects he wants to lay hold of, instead of going straight to them, which has left a smear all round the four walls, conventionally called "Phil's mark" (Dickens 1996: 350-351). Squod is irrevocably marked by his origins: his 'beauty [is] queer, wery queer' (Dickens 1996: 421).[1] By contrast, Esther Summerson is initially unmarked by her illegitimate origins; the invisibility of her condition enables her to 'pass' in respectable society. Her capacity to pass unmarked, however, is compromised by the after effects of smallpox; I will argue that the visible signs of Esther's illness, as inscribed on her face, can be read as signifying an 'invisible' condition: illegitimacy.

Robyn Wiegman describes vision as 'the privileged sense of modernity' (Wiegman 1995: 3) but qualifies this statement by asserting that 'its ability to establish and guarantee both meaning and truth is repeatedly undermined not only by modernity's own philosophical and representational preoccupations but also by its relationship to technological production and reproduction' (Wiegman 1995: 3). Wiegman refers to the '*economies* of visibility' [original emphasis] (Wiegman 1995: 3) and their threefold modalities of vision, the visual and the visible: that is, firstly, '[the] epistemologies of vision', secondly, 'the representational ideologies of visual technologies' and finally, 'the appropriations and significations of the body as the determinative site of visible differences' (Wiegman 1995: 3). The economies of visibility to which Wiegman refers can be mapped onto *Bleak House* and its 2005 television adaptation. This article takes as its focus the visible marking of Esther's body as signifying an 'invisible' difference. More specifically, motifs of misrecognition, in the novel and its adaptation, will be considered in relation to

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[1] In the 2005 adaptation Squod (Michael Smiley) is relatively normalized and the 'spectacle' of the disabled body largely projected onto the figure of Smallweed (Philip Davis), a character of malevolent energy. For recent discussions of disability in Dickens, see Julia Miele Rodas (2004) and Martha Stoddard Holmes (2004).

questions of vision and narrative knowledge; the significance of the mirror and the veil, as deployed by Esther and Lady Dedlock respectively, will be analysed as technologies of the visual. I aim to suggest that the economies of visibility at work in the 2005 BBC adaptation ultimately resist the legitimising impetus of Dickens's narrative; Esther's 'queer beauty' persists as a testament to the 'social death' of illegitimacy as a gendered condition to which both Esther and Lady Dedlock are subject.

Reading faces: Esther's moments in the mirror

The status of knowledge, especially in relation to questions of identity, is deeply implicated in questions of visibility not only in the 2005 adaptation but also in its source text. Indeed, the capacity to read visible signs is a signifier of power in *Bleak House*. The trope of surveillance, both investigative and disciplinary, in particular conveys the implication of the visible in regimes of knowledge and power. An inability to decipher the written word, as manifested by both Krook and Jo, seems to signify a precarious grasp on the symbolic and material world. Moreover, the narrative of Esther's illegitimate daughterhood and Lady Dedlock's illegitimate motherhood is one which is made visible through the reading both of inscriptions – of signatures and of 'the hand' – and of faces; indeed, a series of uncanny recognitions and misrecognitions discloses illegitimacy as a story written onto the body. These recognitions are uncanny in the sense that they are founded in a perception of resemblance whose origin is unknown; in the 2005 adaptation they are communicated by lingering or repeated gazes in which the visible is held in suspension but the meaning which it contains remains inaccessible.

The viewer's gaze is implicated in this unknowing seeing in a scene in which Esther (Anna Maxwell Martin) first encounters her mother, Lady Dedlock (Gillian Anderson). Lady and Sir Leicester Dedlock's (Timothy West) belated entry into the Chesney Wold parish church is met with the mostly deferential attention of its congregation, with the exception of Boythorn (Warren Clarke) whose disrespectful outburst arrests the progress and penetrating gaze of Sir Leicester. This disruption of social etiquette draws Lady Dedlock's attention to the pew in which Esther, as Boythorn's guest, sits. A shot / reverse shot sequence establishes Lady Dedlock's

awareness of Esther's presence (though not of her identity) and Esther's consciousness of Lady Dedlock's notice. However, as Lady Dedlock enters the pew directly in front of Esther their faces occupy the same frame for the first time. Lady Dedlock is brought into focus as she inclines her face, her eyes cast downwards and shadowed by the brim of her hat, towards Esther seated behind her. While remaining in the foreground Lady Dedlock's face then recedes in terms of visibility as the focus shifts to Esther in the background; her unguarded gaze is framed by the outline of the bonnet set high on her head, as she looks openly but unseen towards Lady Dedlock, whose features are visible only to the viewer. This subtle shifting of perspective confounds the temporal relationship apparently established by the spatial positioning of its subjects, in which Lady Dedlock comes *before* her daughter. Lady Dedlock precedes her daughter as her maternal origin, but the effects of her 'authorship' are temporally deferred given that her identity as Esther's mother has yet to be disclosed, both to herself and to her daughter; in a sense, Lady Dedlock is destined to *become* Esther's mother in the course of the narrative. This scene establishes an almost palimpsestuous layering of the faces of daughter and mother, as one and then the other comes into focus. The concept of the palimpsest has been deployed as an analogy by which to suggest the complex relationship between an adaptation and its source text; for example, Linda Hutcheon has suggested that adaptations are 'inherently "palimpsestuous" works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts' (Hutcheon 2006: 6). This analogy is perhaps especially apt where the source text is experienced by the viewer for the first time through the adaptation. In one sense an adaptation, however 'faithful', necessarily overlays and obscures its source text; in another sense, an adaptation, no matter how 'free', inevitably preserves the source text as its integral trace, whether acknowledged or denied. Sarah Dillon has written that: 'The "present" of the palimpsest is only constituted in and by the "presence" of texts from the "past", as well as remaining open to further inscription by texts of the future' (Dillon 2005: 249). The layering of Esther and Lady Dedlock's faces is suggestive of the persistence of the past and the return of a repressed history; for Esther, Lady Dedlock is the trace of an illegitimate origin, whereas for Lady Dedlock Esther is the trace of a traumatic past. Indeed, the female face is the recurring and uncanny site of a sequence of mis/recognitions in the 2005

adaptation which seem to be mistaken or misplaced but which are retrospectively understood to be 'true'. When Guppy (Burn Gorman) 'sees' Esther in a portrait of Lady Dedlock the visible is at odds with what is known, but it anticipates what will be discovered. When Jo (Harry Eden) mistakes Esther for the 'lady in a veil', we know that he sees what Esther cannot yet know: that Lady Dedlock is her mother. These mis/recognitions, then, constitute a visual economy through which Esther's unknowing relationship to Lady Dedlock is revealed. Indeed, the role of unknowing recognitions is foregrounded in the 2005 adaptation in a scene in the opening episode (which does not feature in Dickens's novel) in which Esther encounters her own father, Hawdon (John Lynch); his lingering glance is contrasted with her averted gaze, but only the viewer with prior knowledge of the narrative is able to 'recognize' the significance of this scene.

By translating a written narrative into a visual one, a televisual adaptation might be expected to make visible to the viewer what can only be imagined by the reader; most dramatically in an adaptation of *Bleak House*, the evidence of the after effects of smallpox on the face of its protagonist Esther Summerson. The 2005 adaptation was broadcast not in the Sunday evening slot often reserved for the screening of 'quality' classic serialisations but in weekly half hour instalments in prime-time slots more commonly occupied, in contemporary schedules, by soap operas or lifestyle programming. Contemporary British television audiences for the 2005 adaptation could be expected to be familiar with televisual conventions for the staging of a woman's encounter with her transformed image as popularized in the makeover genre.[2] As makeover programmes centring on the predominantly female face and body extend the scope of intervention from fashion and style to cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, and extend the scope of objectives from the renewal of self-esteem to a defeat of the aging process, the message that they implicitly convey is that no change is irrevocable. In this context, the 2005 adaptation of *Bleak House* is highly distinctive in offering a representation of a body and identity irrevocably

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[2] *What Not to Wear* (BBC / ITV 2001 -) and *10 Years Younger* (Channel 4 / Maverick 2004 -), both broadcast in prime-time slots on terrestrial UK channels, exemplify the generic conventions of this form of reality television.

changed by illness; Esther's 'moment in the mirror'[3] reveals a face whose previously smooth and even surface is now blistered and inflamed. Nor does the 2005 adaptation evade the long-term consequences of her illness; shots of her face and body in subsequent episodes confirm that while the scars fade they remain prominently visible on her face, neck, chest and hands. Esther's adoptive family and friends – figures who, in the context of the contemporary makeover genre, would constitute a chorus charting and affirming the subject's transformation – respond to her illness by denying its gravity; they insist that she is 'unchanged' and endeavour to conceal from her any indications shock or dismay. The contemporaneous illustration by Hablot Browne (Phiz), entitled 'Magnanimous Conduct of Mr Guppy', reflects this discretion with regard to Esther's post-illness appearance by depicting her with her face averted (Dickens: 1996, 969). However, the reality of her alteration is visually inescapable; while the reader of the novel may choose to believe that the effects of Esther's illness are as truly immaterial as her friends insist the viewer of the adaptation is swiftly disabused of any such fantasy.

The mirror is problematically enlisted as an arbiter of objective truth in the context of the makeover genre; its unforgiving reflection in the 'before' scenes underlining its authority in the 'after' scenes, as an affirming witness to radical transformation. I wish to reflect on the *mediating* role of the mirror as a visual technology – that is, the extent to which it produces and constructs the visual knowledge which it appears to disclose – and the ways in which this is made apparent in the 2005 adaptation and its source text.

In Dickens's novel, Esther's own encounter with her 'altered self' (Dickens 1996: 561) is mediated by a sequence of screens through which she both conceals and reveals her own image to herself:

> My hair had not been cut off, though it had been in danger more than once. It was long and thick. I let it down, and shook it out, and went up to the glass upon the dressing-table. There was a little muslin curtain drawn across it. I drew it back; and stood for a moment looking through such a veil of my own hair that I could see nothing else. Then I put my hair aside, and looked at the reflection in the mirror [. . .] I was very much changed – O, very, very much.
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> (Dickens 1996: 572)

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[3] A generic motif discussed in Moseley (2000).

The muslin curtain concealing the mirror's surface is suggestive of conventions of mourning; Esther's veil of hair both deprives her of vision and conceals her face from viewing. The suspenseful and charged deferral of the moment of self-revelation in Dickens's novel – and indeed Esther's carefully staged re-entry into society – is much foreshortened in the 2005 adaptation. The prolonged disorientation and distress which Esther suffers alone in the course of her illness in Dickens's novel are neither directly depicted nor inferred in the adaptation. Esther's illness, and the unavailability of her subjectivity to the viewer, is signified only by a shot of her body turned away and obscured by bedclothes; the face in which her child nurse Charley (Katie Angelou) reads her illness is concealed from view. In the 2005 adaptation the fact of Esther's alteration becomes visual currency in advance of her apprehension of it; in this way it foreshadows the way in which her 'altered self' will always go in advance of her. Esther confronts her reflection within the enclosed frame of a hand-held mirror, under the tearful watch of Charley whose solicitude has betrayed in advance the gravity of her change. Where the conventions of makeover television conflate the perspective of the subject and her voyeuristic audience by delivering the visual gratifications of the 'big reveal' to both simultaneously, this visual revelation of a changed self retains a distance between seeing and the subjective experience of seeing others see oneself.

Esther's request for a mirror on her recovery in both Dickens's novel and the 2005 adaptation, can be contrasted with an earlier refusal of a mirror; in a scene reproduced in the first episode of the adaptation, Esther declines Guppy's offer of a mirror in the antechambers of the Courts of Chancery as she waits to be summoned to appear on a very public stage. Her refusal in these establishing scenes can be read as signifying her modesty and lack of vanity but is also, perhaps, indicative of a desire to evade notice, to believe herself unseen and invisible. Esther's insistence, from the confinement of her sickbed, that she be given access to a mirror, and her sober assessment of her altered features, indicates an understanding that she can no longer pass unnoticed. The mirror here echoes the layering effect of the encounter scene in church; it signifies a temporal layering of subjectivity in which a 'former' but surviving self is overlaid by the visible and altered self of the present and future. This

effect is further enforced in the 2005 adaptation during Esther's reunion with Woodcourt (Richard Harrington). Woodcourt, like Hawdon before him, has been feared lost at sea but, like Esther, has survived a traumatic encounter with death. At Woodcourt's approach at the door of her room, Esther gazes at her own reflection in a mirror whose glass is far from transparent; its surface is mottled with age and superimposes over her reflection a layer of tarnished shadows. This mottled mirror not only mimics the way in which her features seem to be obscured by the scarring of smallpox but also calls attention to the mirror as a kind of screen through which the self is viewed. Esther's romantic hopes, already compromised by her illegitimacy and by Woodcourt's relative poverty, seem to recede just as the image of her former self recedes into the mirror. However, Woodcourt's capacity, unlike her friends and adoptive family, both to acknowledge her change and continue in his fidelity to her is suggestive of another interpretation for this image: the mirror *preserves*, in palimpsestuous fashion, the traces of Esther's identities while refusing, in its opacity, to disclose any fixed or definitive account of her identity.

I would suggest that the tactful refusal, on the part of Esther's adoptive family and friends, to acknowledge the impact of her changed appearance and its implications powerfully echoes the tact which they exercise in relation to her illegitimacy; the loyalty of Esther's circle defies both the conventions of femininity (in relation to her appearance and its implications for her prospects as an unmarried woman) and the social and legal structures by which Esther's status is defined. However, Esther *is* changed. She can no longer conceal her difference from others and must witness anew the apprehension of her difference by others: that is, she can no longer 'pass' as unmarked.[4] Crucially, in Dickens's novel Esther conflates the visible traces of her illness with the invisible stigma of her illegitimacy: hence, she refers to 'my disfigurement and my inheritance of shame' (Dickens 1996: 692) as if her disfigurement were an embodiment of her shame. Esther's illness, and the economies of visibility in which it is implicated, can be considered a metaphor for her illegitimacy; the scarring which results from her contraction of smallpox can be read

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[4] Helena Michie refers to these encounters as 'moments of painful triumph' in which '*Bleak House*'s cast of characters is forced to read the autobiographical calendar of distress' concealed to date by Esther's silence and invisibility (Michie 1989: 207).

as the visible signifier of an invisible stigma. Moreover, her illness can be understood as a re-enactment of the trauma of her birth; its delayed and displaced relationship to her origin only confirming the way in which it functions as the site of a traumatic memory.

Drawing the veil: the social death of illegitimacy

When Esther recounts the details of her illness in Dickens's *Bleak House* it becomes not simply a story of ill health, recovery and its after effects but a narrative of a more profound reconfiguring of identity:

> I had no thought, that night – none, I am quite sure – of what was to happen to me. But I have always remembered since, that when we had stopped at the garden gate to look up at the sky, and when we went upon our way, *I had for a moment an undefinable impression of myself as being something different from what I then was* [added emphasis]. I know it was then, and there, that I had it.
>
> (Dickens 1996: 489)

It is in her illness, then, that Esther suffers her illegitimacy. She experiences a temporal disorder in which she is separated from 'all my experiences, mingled together by the great distance' (Dickens 1996: 555) and in which 'there was little or no separation between the various stages of my life [. . .] the way in which these divisions of time became confused with one another, distressed my mind exceedingly.' (Dickens 1996: 555). This disordered experience of time and memory is suffered by one who is forever determined to live in the aftermath of another person's past: that is, of one who must, in Jenny Bourne Taylor's words, 'grapple [. . .] with the problems of bearing the mark of an unknowable past, of having an identity shaped by a life prior to her own . . .' (Taylor 2000: 567). Indeed, her illness can be read as a traumatic re-enactment of the social death of her birth. As a newborn baby Esther is mistakenly 'laid aside as dead' (Dickens 1996: 583); this 'death' anticipates the way in which she will be socially 'laid aside' by her mother's sister, who conceals her existence to protect the family name from shame: 'So strangely did I hold my place in this world, that until within a short time back, I had never, to my own mother's knowledge, breathed – had been buried – had never

been endowed with life – had never borne a name' (Dickens 1996: 583).[5] Esther's illness awakens a 'terror of self' (Dickens 1996: 583; 586; 669) borne of the experience of being mistakenly alive, both in surviving her illness and outliving her illegitimate origins:

> I felt as if I knew it would have been better and happier for many people, if indeed I had never breathed. That I had a terror of myself, as the danger and the possible disgrace of my own mother, and of a proud family name. That I was so confused and shaken, as to be possessed by a belief that it was right, and had been intended, that I should die in my birth; and that it was wrong, and not intended, that I should be then alive.
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> <div align="right">(Dickens 1996: 583)</div>

Her sense of being somehow posthumous to her own identity is conveyed in her characterization of her living self as a ghost: 'I felt for my old self as the dead may feel if they ever revisit these scenes' (Dickens 1996: 708). The traces of Esther's 'old self' survive to haunt her 'altered self' but in a strong sense it is her 'altered self' which bears the closest relation to her origins, bearing as it does a sense of stigmatized difference. I would suggest that Esther and her mother's experience of illegitimate daughterhood and maternity respectively becomes uncannily overdetermined – and does so because illegitimacy, as a legal, social and cultural construction, is deeply implicated in patriarchal power.

As a discursive construction, illegitimacy is symptomatic of a culture which effectively consigns *all* women to the social death of having no name. Taylor suggests that:

> [The] creation of a distinction between legitimate and illegitimate children is clearly central to both the definition and establishment of patriarchal power, of the ascendancy of the name and genealogy of the father over that of the mother, of the transmission of property and established power.
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> <div align="right">(Taylor 1996: 121-2)</div>

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[5] The strangeness of Esther's plight as an illegitimate is echoed not only in the figure of Squod but also that of Jo, the homeless child street sweeper from whom Esther contracts smallpox: "To be hustled, and jostled, and moved on; and really to feel that it would appear to be perfectly true that I have no business, here, or there, or anywhere; and yet to be perplexed by the consideration that I *am* here somehow too, and everybody overlooked me until I became the creature I am! It must be a strange state, not merely to be told that I am scarcely human [. . .] but to feel it of my own knowledge all my life! [original emphasis]" (Dickens 1996: 257-8).

Indeed, the laws of legitimacy ensure the perpetuation of patriarchal power in both material and symbolic forms. A paternal genealogy ensures the transmission of economic power, through the inheritance of property, between generations of father and son; it also enacts the erasure of a female genealogy through the privileging of the patronym. Implicit in the laws of legitimacy is the construction of women as objects of exchange between men and of children as subject to ownership by the father. As such, legitimacy can be considered a regime whose purpose is to control female reproductive sexuality; the arbitrariness of the power it mobilizes is evident in the cultural distinction between the marital mother as 'natural' and the illegitimate mother as 'deviant' (see Fink and Holden 1999). Indeed, illegitimacy can be considered both an exercise of patriarchal power and a symptom of its precariousness; as Taylor writes: 'Illegitimacy marks the breach of the rule on which its existence depends; it is thus both constitutive and transgressive' (Taylor 1996: 121). Historically, common law defined the illegitimate as *filius nullius*: that is, 'nobody's child'. It is ironic, then, that in *Bleak House* it is Esther's father, Hawdon, who appropriates the name which describes her illegitimate condition: Nemo or 'no name'.[6] Hawdon is an interestingly feminized figure in his social destitution, addiction and abject demise; played sympathetically by John Lynch in the 2005 adaptation, his expressive eyes and long, curling dark hair suggest a rather sensuous vulnerability. However, the 2005 adaptation also seems to attempt to recuperate his masculinity; a close-up of a collection of military medals, pawned to support his addiction to opium, serves not only to dramatically establish Hawdon's name but also to reveal his commendations for bravery. Jenny Teichmann has written that 'under the *filius nullius* rule no one had a legal obligation to support an illegitimate child. But *no one* did not necessarily mean no one: it meant, rather, *no legal person* – in effect, *no man* [original emphasis]' (Teichman 1982: 107). This denomination not only instates the illegitimate child's lack of legal identity but also reiterates the denial

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[6] Also the title of Wilkie Collins's 1862 novel about illegitimacy, *No Name*.

of legal existence to the mother; she is the 'nobody' whose child the illegitimate is.[7] The illegitimate is its mother's child and as such is feminized to the extent that it shares with its mother her nameless condition as a woman. The illegitimate who is also female is then doubly marginalized; as Carolyn Kraus writes, 'an illegitimate woman is doubly alien to the culture in which she lives' (Kraus 2003: 196).[8] As Miss Barbary insists to the child Esther, the illegitimate daughter understands the disgraced condition to which she and her mother are subject 'as no one save a woman can' (Dickens 1996: 30). In the traumatic structure of the narrative, mother and daughter are lost to each other again and again, in an almost compulsive re-enactment of the 'social death' to which they are both committed.[9] Not only is Esther 'orphaned' by her removal from her mother at birth but Lady Dedlock is bereaved by the removal of her daughter as stillborn; in her childhood, Esther is 'frozen' (Dickens 1996: 30) by punitive nurturing and Lady Dedlock 'falls' into a 'freezing mood' (Dickens 1996: 22). It is only in her illness that Esther apprehends a loss of self and that Lady Dedlock, having discovered that her daughter is living, experiences what it might be to lose her. Their reunion paradoxically effects a renunciation; rather than the beginning of a relationship it marks the end of what has never been: it is both the first and 'the last time' (Dickens 1996: 582).

I have suggested that through her illness Esther experiences, in a kind of traumatic repetition, the social death of her illegitimate birth. I would further propose that both Esther and her mother, Lady Dedlock, are implicated in an economy of visibility in the 2005 adaptation which draws attention not only to their biological relationship but also to their shared condition as women whose identities are unauthorised by patriarchal culture.[10] I have suggested the significance of the mirror as a visual technology through which Esther's apprehension of her identity is

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[7] Carol Smart writes that "it is the paternity of a child, rather than the 'maternity', that provides the link with the kinship network [. . .] In the legal sense the illegitimate child did not exist" (Smart 1987: 101).

[8] Kraus makes an analogy between women and illegitimates: 'historically, the disadvantages suffered by bastards in patriarchy have often been similar to, if more dramatic than those endured by women, their fellow representatives of the other' (Kraus 2003: 196).

[9] Carolyn Dever (1998) has commented on the way in which Esther 'loses' her mother not once but three times in the novel.

[10] The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'illegitimate' as: 'Not legitimate, not in accordance with or authorized by law; *unauthorized* [added emphasis], unwarranted; spurious; irregular, improper' in addition to 'not born in lawful wedlock; not recognized by law as lawful offspring; spurious, bastard.'

mediated; I now wish to explore the role of the veil in relation to Lady Dedlock. The veil can be read as a technology of the visual employed by Lady Dedlock in an attempt to manage the ways in which her face is read. However, like the mirror, what it reveals is a complex, palimpsestuous layering of subjectivity. Lady Dedlock assumes a literal veil as a disguise to conceal her identity, for example when visiting the scene of Hawdon's death. However, the 'veiling' of Lady Dedlock's face is also achieved facially by a regime of emotional management, practised by one 'long accustomed to suppress emotion, and keep down reality' (Dickens 1996: 851). Hence, as Dickens's novel suggests, her face is itself deployed as a veil behind which she is able to retreat: 'she drew her habitual air of proud indifference about her like a veil' (Dickens 1996: 579). A sense of the face as a concealing surface is conveyed in Gillian Anderson's performance as Lady Dedlock. Repeatedly depicted in frozen postures, her figure and face demonstrate a stillness in dramatic contrast to the otherwise dynamic pace of the action. The composition of Anderson's expression is suggestive of a sustained and practiced repression: the pursed lips, arched eyebrows, taut neck and drawn posture. At stake in this repression is the concealment not only of her status as the mother of an illegitimate child but also of her publicly unacknowledged grief at the loss both of her lover and her apparently stillborn daughter. A key scene in the 2005 adaptation occurs where Lady Dedlock visits the former residence of Captain Hawdon. As she raises her face to the upper window of the room in which he died, the veil which is intended to conceal her identity – and indeed to mistakenly identify her as her own maid – ripples across her face like the fabric of a screen. Her features, habitually arrested, are set in motion; we see on the surface of her veil the emotion it is intended to conceal as her face appears to waver and dissolve. The televisual rendition of this moment, in which Lady Dedlock attempts to see what can no longer be seen, echoes Dickens's description of her response to Guppy's inadvertent revelation that her daughter lives:

> Lady Dedlock sits before him, looking him through, with the same dark shade upon her face, in the same attitude even to the holding of the screen, with her lips a little apart, her brow a little contracted, but, for the moment, dead. He sees her consciousness return, *sees a tremor pass across her frame like a ripple over water* [added emphasis], sees her lips shake, sees her compose them by a great effort, sees her force herself back to the knowledge of his presence, and of what he has said.

Lady Dedlock's face becomes a kind of screen and its relationship to the visible is as complex as that of a screen; one the one hand it serves to hide and conceal that which she wishes to protect from exposure, but on the other hand it becomes a surface onto which impressions may be projected.

The absence which Lady Dedlock seems to suffer in the above scene re-enacts – and anticipates – her social death. In another scene of apparent misrecognition in Dickens's novel, at the location of Lady Dedlock's death, Esther discovers 'the mother of the dead child [. . .] a distressed, unsheltered, senseless creature' (Dickens 1996: 915). Mistaking Lady Dedlock disguised in the clothes of an impoverished and bereaved mother (Jenny), Esther recognises her mother as the traumatised and socially destitute subject which she is; Esther also confirms her status as the 'dead child' to whom Lady Dedlock is mother. I wish to conclude by reflecting on the scene of visual abjection which accompanies the graveyard discovery of Lady Dedlock's body in the 2005 adaptation. Throughout the adaptation Lady Dedlock is repeatedly depicted in carefully framed, static profiles in which the formal composition of the shot is echoed in Anderson's rigidly composed facial bearing and deportment. Here, however, the location of Lady Dedlock's body is revealed in a sequence of images rapidly edited to reveal a sudden and shocking identification. The presence of Lady Dedlock's body within the establishing shot is at first difficult to discern; while its location occupies the centre background its status within the scene is obscured by the oblique and fragmenting angles of declining headstones, low-lying moss covered branches and heavily falling rain. A rapid close-up reveals Lady Dedlock's body slumped behind black iron railings, her hair loose and covering her shoulders and her red dress splayed over the ground. A reverse angle shot only further exacerbates the sense of visual disorientation as the drapes of her dress are all that are visible, her head and face being concealed from view. The outlines of Lady Dedlock's body recede and fragment as she finally succumbs to the 'social death' decreed by her transgression. The wavering dissolution suggested by the veil at the location of Hawdon's death is here a property not *of* the veil but its removal; the veil is drawn away to reveal an existence erased. In surviving, Esther

becomes visible; the scars which mark her 'altered self' may be socially stigmatizing but they also signify her ongoing existence in the world. By contrast, Lady Dedlock succumbs to obscurity, both visual and social, in her death.

In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes that '[t]he story of Esther seems a model for a certain simplified but highly potent imagining of coming out and its transformative potential' (Sedgwick 1990: 75). Sedgwick is not discussing Dickens's Esther in *Bleak House* but rather the Biblical Esther as represented by Racine and Proust.[11] However, her discussion of Esther's story as a narrative of passing is suggestive when considering the significance of Esther's name in *Bleak House*.[12] I opened this discussion with a suggestion that Esther's narrative can be read as a story of passing in relation to her illegitimacy and the economies of visibility in which it is implicated. Indeed, Schlossberg suggests that passing is implicated in a 'seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known' and thus becomes 'a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcation' (Schlossberg 2001: 1). In her study of representations of illegitimacy, *The Name of the Mother: Writing Illegitimacy*, Marie MacLean draws a distinction between restorative narratives of 'relegitimation' and narratives of 'delegitimation'; the latter reject the logic of legitimacy either by 'self-exclusion from a world one rejects and by which one is rejected' or by 'self-inclusion in a world of the marginalized' (MacLean 1994: 6). Esther's apparently assiduous assimilation into the legitimate world in *Bleak House* might seem to suggest that her narrative is aligned with relegitimation; however, the visual economies of illness and illegitimacy which I have explored tell a different story. They align her with the world of the marginalized and of the 'marked'. In a significant departure from the text of Dickens's novel, the 2005 adaptation does *not* have Esther rejoice, after her reunion with the mother, 'that I was so changed [. . .] that I could never disgrace her by any trace of likeness' (Dickens 1996: 579). On the contrary, Esther's post-illness 'queer beauty' affirms her affinity with those whose 'likenesses' evince an uncanny or oblique relationship to the normative world. The cost of survival is Esther's

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[11] Esther's Jewish identity is concealed in her marriage to Ahasuerus; in acting to save the Jews from massacre she also reveals her identity as Jewish.
[12] The significance of Esther's multiple names are also discussed by Briganti (1990).

subjection to the ways in which she will now be seen and read; a fate which her illegitimacy has taught her to evade at all costs. However, 'visibility is not transparency' (Treichler, Cartwright and Penley 1998: 3): to see is not to know, or rather the knowledge which seeing both discloses and screens is not transparent. In the 2005 adaptation of *Bleak House*, a complex interaction between vision, the visual and the visible is evident which confounds any understanding of what can be *seen* as the exclusive and legitimating origin of what can be *known*.

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Contributor details

Dr Rachel Carroll is Principal Lecturer in English at the University of Teesside. She has published widely on representations of gender and sexuality in twentieth century and contemporary fiction, including neo-Victorian fiction. She is the editor of *Adaptation in Contemporary Culture: Textual Infidelities* (Continuum, 2009).

School of Arts and Media, University of Teesside, Middlesbrough, TS1 3BA, r.carroll@tees.ac.uk.