



**In Bed with Dickens:
Questioning the Representation of Sex
in Ralph Fiennes' Film *The Invisible Woman*
(2013)**

Sara Martín Alegre
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
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Abstract:¹

The Invisible Woman (2013), directed by Ralph Fiennes and written by Abi Morgan, adapts the controversial biography of Ellen Ternan (1990) by Claire Tomalin; in it the secret love story between Charles Dickens and the young actress is presented as fact, despite the lack of material evidence. Fiennes' biopic tackles its contentious subject matter with remarkable elegance. We must, however, consider what exactly we learn from this film and specifically from the sex scene involving Charles and Nelly. A notable contribution to the cinematic representation of Victorian sexuality, this scene illustrates, as I argue, how our obsession with celebrity and sex distorts our view of Victorian Literature, and of Dickens in particular. The voyeurism that Fiennes' film promotes, no matter how subtly, undermines Dickens' right to protect his privacy without offering an insight into his literary genius, for the key to this should be his books and not his bedfellows.

Keywords: *The Invisible Woman*, Ralph Fiennes, Abi Morgan, Claire Tomalin, film adaptation, writer's biopic, sexuality, Charles Dickens, Ellen Ternan.

Claire Tomalin's *The Invisible Woman* (1990), the biography of Ellen Ternan, Dickens' secret mistress for thirteen years, does not include any sex scenes, for this is not, in principle, habitual in biographies. *Dickens's Secret Lover* (2008),² the documentary on their relationship directed by Sarah Aspinall, does include some romantic scenes with David Haig as Dickens and Amy Shiels as Nelly, which are not sexual. In contrast, the feature film *The Invisible Woman* (2013) based on Tomalin's volume and directed by Ralph Fiennes (who also plays Dickens), contains two sex scenes. Screenwriter Abi Morgan takes in them a narrative licence that Fiennes

1. This is the article based on the working paper presented at the "1 International Seminar on (Neo-)Victorian Studies in Spain", 10-12 May, 2017, Universidad de Málaga, organized by VINS (Neo-Victorian Network in Spain), <https://vins-network.org/>, of which I am a member. It is not published anywhere else.

2. Aspinall's documentary (or docudrama), broadcast within Channel 4's *Victorian Passions* season, failed to generate substantial comment despite its sizeable audience of 1.5 million viewers (Rogers 2008). Tomalin's biography is not mentioned in it.

translates onto the screen in his own personal directing style. My aim here is to enquire what kind of licence this is and what is gained by watching the on-screen representation of Victorian star writer Charles Dickens having sex with his mistress, Nelly. The sex scenes in Fiennes' film make a remarkable contribution to the history of how sex is represented in neo-Victorian cinema, but they also promote a type of prurient voyeurism that seems insufficiently justified by our collective interest in Dickens as a literary artist. They do not further, either, the feminist investigation of Ternan's role in his life.

My critique of the decisions made by Morgan and Fiennes questions the widespread idea that the private life of authors provides us with significant insights into the process of writing fiction. Fiennes, himself a very private celebrity, comments in an interview that although "People are still furiously protective of their privacy" there is "more license to be curious"; he grants, however, that "I feel uneasy about this ferocious curiosity that we give ourselves licence to have" (in GoldDerby 2013: video). Logically, this raises the question of why his own film attacks frontally Dickens' decision (and, arguably, right) to protect his private life. As Juliette John reminds us, the author "was highly aware of himself as a brand" and "ruthlessly 'managed' public knowledge of his life—most famously in the case of Ellen Ternan [...]—in order to maintain the familiar image of Dickens" (2008: 154). Even Tomalin acknowledges that "Dickens himself would not have welcomed our curiosity" (1991: 259).

The 2012 Bicentennial "revisions, reappraisals, and transformations" of Dickens focused on issues such as imperialism and politics, but also extensively on the "representations of gender" in his private and public life (Boyce and Rousselot 2012: 10). Fiennes' film was released one year later, in 2013, but belongs to the same process of scrutiny. In her indispensable article on the 'commemorative adaptations' of Dickens (1870-2012), Karen Laird refers to *Invisible Woman* as "much anticipated" and asserts that it will "please audiences if it replicates the bicentennial script for success" by contributing to "the cultural work of forgiving our hero-novelist for being *as fractured and fallen as we are*" (2012: 30, my italics). Laird first used in this essay the label 'Fallen Dickens' to describe how the 'BBC Dickens Bicentenary Season' presented the author. Dickens' public image as "the spokesperson of social injustice"

was questioned, and he was presented instead as "mainly *relatable to us* in his insatiable sexuality and his psychological guilt" (Laird: 25, my italics). As part of this trend Fiennes' film uses the Victorian author's private life to discuss the construction of our own sexuality in ways only tangentially related to Dickens' literary output and, what is even more problematic, to question his personal conduct.

1. Biography to Biopic: A Complex Double Adaptation

How the genres of the literary biography, biofiction and the biopic connect with each other through adaptation is important to understand how specific images of authors are circulated. As Linda Hutcheon notes, an adaptation may entail "a shift in ontology from the real to the fictional, from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama" (8). A biopic based on a biography is, therefore, a double kind of adaptation and, so, Fiennes' *The Invisible Woman* certainly requires the ontological shifts that Hutcheon identifies. Besides, as Vidal observes, with the onset of postmodernism the biopic became "a metagenre: that is, a genre that intently reflects on its own forms of life writing" (2013: 5). Fiennes' double adaptation belongs, then, to the most complex category of the postmodern biopic as a film that considers how Dickens is presented by Ellen Ternan's biographer.

Literary biography used to be, Michael Benton reminds us, the Cinderella of Literary Studies until the 1990s. This changed, he speculates, because neither formalist criticism, dominant in the first half of the twentieth century, nor theory, rampant in the second, could satisfy the common readers' appetite for "the lives, the minds, and the times" (2005: 44) of the most admired authors. Charles Dickens plays indeed a major role in the history and evolution of the literary biography and of its study. The year 1990 marked a turning point in the development of this genre with the publication of Peter Ackroyd's *Dickens* and of Claire Tomalin's own *The Invisible Woman*. Also a sophisticated postmodern novelist, Ackroyd opened up literary biography by daring to include some fictional scenes (or interludes) in a controversial move that is "at best an indulgence, at worst mere aberration" (Fokkema 1999: 42). Ackroyd may have intended to satisfy the readers' craving for "a biographical replica of their favourite novelists' fiction", a hunger which demands "from the biographer that

he or she be a novelist" (Fokkema: 42). Tomalin's well-received volume gratified another kind of appetite by providing information about the novelist's most intimate circle. Taking an important risk, she extended the literary biography beyond the author to focus on Ellen Ternan, a person who most likely would have been otherwise ignored by biographers and whose close association with Dickens remains controversial.

The romance joining Nelly to Charles Dickens was already known, of course, before Tomalin's intervention.³ The affair became an object of public scandal when forty-five-year-old Dickens cruelly abandoned his wife of twenty-one years, Catherine, in 1857, shortly after meeting Ellen, then just eighteen. Thomas Wright's *Life of Dickens* (1935) and Gladys Storey's biography of Kate Perugini (1839-1929), *Dickens and Daughter* (1939), offered sundry accounts based, as both authors claimed, on first-hand oral evidence. Since Dickens burned all their correspondence and no other written documentation is available, there have always been reservations about Nelly's role in his life and also about how his biographers have reconstructed their love story.

The scant evidence has been, therefore, constantly re-assessed. Writing in 2014, Brian Ruck wondered whether we can "really be sure" that Wright's 1935 volume reflects accurately what Ellen told her confidant, Reverend Benham, forty years before he spoke to the biographer (122). The obvious answer is 'no', for, as Ruck points out, even if her words had been reproduced verbatim, their meaning may have varied from one period to the other. He also doubts that Ellen would have trusted Benham with the very private revelation that she felt disgusted by the sexual intimacy with Dickens, which Wright reports (and that colours Tomalin's view of the affair). As for the possibility that she and Dickens had a stillborn baby boy in France, Ruck stresses that without reliable written documentation no biographical claim may stand.

Tomalin's attitude towards Nelly is, in contrast, free from these qualms. Her volume offers an extremely valuable insight into the life of Victorian actresses (Ternan's mother, sisters and she herself were stage professionals), yet Tomalin's biography is also a formidable piece of speculative gossip. Overlooking this

3. Michael Slater's 1983 volume *Dickens and Women* contains, apart from the segment "Ellen" (202-220), "Appendix B: Dickens and Ellen Ternan: A Chronological Record of the Evidence" (376-380).

shortcoming, many scholars and readers welcomed the book in sympathy with Tomalin's wish to raise so far unexplored feminist issues. She presents Ellen as a "young woman who was very nearly crushed by the huge weight of Dickens on her life, and who fought to save herself in the only way she knew" (1991: 11). Tomalin's task as Nelly's biographer, however, stumbles upon a major obstacle when she reaches the four years (1861-5) during which Ellen's name ceased to appear in any kind of documentation. "At a guess, she has been living in France", Tomalin writes. "It is only a guess. This is to be a chapter of guesses and conjectures, and those who don't like them are warned" (135). This unabashed declaration does undermine her biography, and makes particularly unconvincing the claim that Ellen did indeed deliver a stillborn baby boy in that opaque period of her life.

In his generally positive review of Tomalin's Bicentennial biography of Dickens (2012), Moseley also rejects her assumption that the author actually died in Nelly's house (a point already made in Ternan's biography). This highlights how Tomalin's "interest in Dickens the adulterer clouds her good judgment" (2013: 466) and shows a bias that casts a suspicious coloration on both biographies. Other critics insist that, whereas Ellen's importance in Dickens' life seems more evident today, "the exact nature and emotional timbre of their relationship remain, as they both seem to have desired, radically enigmatic" (Bowen 2011: 17). Fred Kaplan, another Dickens biographer, politely stresses that "Barring the discovery of some long-lost revelatory document, the rest is and will be mostly untenable guesswork" (2014: 29).

Tomalin's approach to Nelly Ternan (and certainly Fiennes' biopic) raise, then, important doubts. Michael Slater argues in his book about the Ternan scandal that our fascination with the author's private life is, somehow, spiteful. Dickens represents "the benign face of those Victorian values once so memorably invoked by Margaret Thatcher", which is why any aspect of his life and work connected "even remotely [with] the salacious is therefore bound to have for us an interest that seems destined never to lose its piquant savour" (2012: 28). Although the 'salacious' and the 'piquant savour' are firmly denied as implicit motivations in feminist research into the author's private life, the spitefulness is not really denied. Biographer Lilian Nayder claims that her volume on Dickens' wife, Catherine, "helps us to understand the workings of her

culture and ours" (2010: 17). Her embarrassing position as the writer's brutally cast-off wife, Nayder claims, illuminates the "potential vulnerabilities" (17) of Victorian women, while inviting us to consider why women are still willing today to accept subordinate roles. Thorpe's review of *The Other Dickens* praises Nayder indeed for "putting Catherine back at the centre of her own life" (2014: 104).⁴ This, however, raises the question of why Mrs. Dickens' life matters more than the life of other Victorian women who were not married to famous authors nor romantically involved with any. Why, besides, should so much energy be poured into researching the lives of Ellen Ternan or Catherine Dickens when so many Victorian female authors have never received a similar kind of attention? The only possible answer is that this energy is part of the wish to tarnish Dickens's reputation both as man and writer by outing him as a patriarchal husband and lover. Whether this strategy really benefits feminism is doubtful.

The biofiction on Dickens falls outside the scope of this article, but it needs to be mentioned that many novels and plays about the author's life bridge the gap between biography and biopic. "Ostensibly providing a (fictional) glimpse into the author's private life", Novak and Mayer observe, "the genre of biofiction caters to the *voyeuristic gaze* of the public and their obsession with recovering the (historical) author's 'true' and 'authentic' self behind the mask of his/her renowned public persona" (2014: 25, my italics). This voyeurism has another variant satisfied by, among other Dickensian institutions, the Charles Dickens Museum and even the unsuccessful theme park, Dickens World. Whereas this attraction ultimately failed to satisfy the hunger for "an immersive, performed adaptation of Dickens and the Victorian age more generally" (Fleming 2016: 26), biofiction like, among many other titles, Patricia K. Davis's *A Midnight Carol* (1999), or Sebastian Barry's play *Andersen's English* (2010), has succeeded better. Dickensian biofiction, of course, has also extended its grasp to the topos of 'Fallen Dickens', with, for example, Anne-Marie Vukelic's *Far Above Rubies* (2010), the "fictionalised autobiography" (Novak and Mayer: 37) of Catherine Dickens,

4. Holdenec's review of Fiennes' film reads her as "a complicated, multilayered human being. In other words, Dickensian in the fullest sense" (2013: online). Dickens's shadow cannot be escaped.

and Gaynor Arnold's novel *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), also about Dickens' estranged wife.

Although we might also read it as biofiction, Fiennes' *The Invisible Woman* must be contextualized within the cinematic sub-genre of the biopic. Extremely abundant and popular, the biopic has been, nonetheless, very slow to generate relevant academic work. George F. Custen's pioneering effort in *Bio/Pics: How Hollywood Constructed Public History* (1992) was only fully acknowledged at the onset of the twenty-first century,⁵ perhaps because "biopics have been so much a part of other film genres that they inevitably serve more as illustrations for those other kinds of movies" (Man 2000: v). The writer's biopic is, nonetheless, remarkably handicapped because "there is nothing more dull than filming someone writing" (Cheshire 2015: 49). This is why quite often biopics focus on male authors notorious for their lifestyles, from Lord Byron to Charles Bukowski (Maloney 2010: online), or on heterosexual romance presenting a woman as literary inspiration (49), as Fiennes' film does.⁶

The Invisible Woman is a remarkably hybrid biopic because although "Nelly's subjectivity [...] governs" the film (Taubin 2014: 30), Dickens has more weight in it than in Tomalin's biography. Fiennes' film might appear to be a 'female biopic' of the kind that "play[s] on tensions between a woman's public achievements and women's traditional orientation to home, marriage, and motherhood" (Bingham 2010: 213), yet this is not really Ellen's case. She did have a career as an actress which she abandoned, aged only twenty, simply because she lacked talent and not because Dickens forced her. Fiennes' film is not, either, a writer's biopic dealing exclusively with how the author found a new muse. Despite Abi Morgan's insistence on connecting Ellen with Stella in *Great Expectations* (1860), to the point that Dickens uses the final words in the happy version of the novel to declare his love to Ellen, the composition of this book occupies a very marginal position in her script.

5. See Anderson and Lupo's volume (2002), their monographic issue for the *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2008), and Brown and Vidal (2013).

6. There are, of course, many exceptions to this rule, beginning with William Dieterle's *The Life of Emile Zola* (1937), which focuses on the writer's involvement in the Dreyfuss affair. The biopics on female writers that remained single (like the Brontës or Emily Dickinson) need not follow the romance plotline. In Jane Austen's case, however, the biopic *Becoming Jane* (Julian Jarrold, 2007) presents involves the budding author in a supposed love story.

The ambiguous profile of *The Invisible Woman* as a biopic raises, thus, an important question which, arguably, Tomalin's openly feminist biography can dodge more easily: what is the point of presenting Dickens as, basically, a sexual predator and an extremely cruel husband? Asked about his message by a concerned female spectator, Ralph Fiennes replied that stories need not have messages. For him, the plot is "about the vulnerability of the human heart" (in SAG-AFTRA Foundation 2013: video). Not minding how negatively portrayed Dickens is, Fiennes presents Nelly—either for gentlemanly or for pro-feminist reasons—as an abuse survivor, perhaps even a sufferer of post-traumatic stress disorder. He was motivated to make *Invisible Woman*⁷ by the idea of "a woman seeking closure with a relationship, with a past love affair, past intimacy" (in SAG-AFTRA Foundation: video). Ironically, Tomalin herself denies that closure can be reached at all in a comment that, besides, is quite critical of Ellen:

The film portrays a love story and is given a happy ending. It leaves out Nelly's deviousness⁸ and suggests that she finds resolution by confessing to a benevolent clergyman, but this is not what happened. The Margate life, and the school, failed. Her husband George had a breakdown. The clergyman betrayed Nelly's confidence. Never mind. [...] It is not a simple-minded film—it allows for people being complex, changeable, human. (Tomalin 2014: online)

This ambiguity is commendable but also a source of discomfort for some viewers. A disgruntled spectator complains that "given Dickens' reputation as the tireless champion of the poor and downtrodden, it is pretty horrifying to watch him for two hours making the most of his social status to have his ways with a poor innocent, fatherless girl half his age" (R.S. 2014: online). Another spectator concludes that, since the film cannot do justice to any of the persons involved, "It would be a far, far better thing to stay home and read Dickens' letters or other biographies or more of Dickens'

7. Abi Morgan's screenplay reached Fiennes through the producers of his Shakespearian adaptation *Coriolanus* (2011). "[I]f screenwriter Abi Morgan had her way", Bloomenthal notes, "Fiennes would also enjoy a writing credit alongside her; so robust was their collaboration; so substantial was his narrative contribution" (2014: online).

8. Dickens died in 1870 when Nelly was just 32. When she eventually met young Reverend George Wharton Robinson Nelly took 14 years off her real age and pretended that Dickens was a family friend whom she had met in childhood. Her deception was only discovered (by their son) after her death in 1914.

own writing or Edward Wagenknecht's *Dickens and the Scandalmongers*⁹ or more about the social and sexual mores of the time [...]" (pwiltsh 2014: online). Significantly, those who did enjoy the film mostly ignored the sexual exploitation underlying the affair. They judge *Invisible Woman* well made but complain that it lacks something indefinite—implicitly more passion.

The strong sexual attraction that, it is assumed, led Dickens and Nelly to risk their public reputations is, then, insufficiently explored by Fiennes' adaptation. Yet, this is a key element in our collective curiosity about the author's private life and, surely, what led many spectators to cinemas to finally see Dickens in bed.

2. Sex, Neo-Victorian Cinema and Television

Despite the efforts of censorship agencies, like the British Board of Film Censorship (established in 1919)¹⁰ or the one set by the Motion Picture Association of America in 1922, sex scenes became ubiquitous on both sides of the Atlantic, particularly after the release of landmark films *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Last Tango in Paris* (also 1971). Art cinema, rather than popular Hollywood fare, "was at the forefront of sexual explicitness" (Larsson and Hedling 2008: 5); predictably, as sex scenes were incorporated to mainstream cinema, the market for art-house films diminished. Beyond this circuit, according to feminist Film Studies specialist Linda Williams mid-1970s American hard-core pornography initially "enjoyed a rare prestige" (2001: 20). This seemed to harbour, as many in the industry hoped, "a utopian future when porn films might become real movies and real movies might have porno (i.e., real sex)" (20). Williams laments how the dream turned sour, because while "most male actors kept their clothes on" (20) women were sexually objectified on the screen. The scenario in which "porn stars would cross over to the mainstream, and respected actors would consider the performance of sex acts part of the challenge of their craft" (20), Williams bemoans, never happened.

9. First published in 1950 (Chicago: Caxton Club).

9. About the BBFC see the volume edited by Edward Lamberti (2012), also Eko (2016) and Brett (2017). Julian Petley's volume (2011) offers a study of film and video censorship specifically since 1979. For the beginnings of American film censorship, see Doherty (1999).

Sex in mainstream films may still be fake but after *Basic Instinct* (1992) neither aspiring stars nor well-established actors have hesitated to simulate increasingly explicit sex on screen. In a recent article, Williams herself comments on new European films covering a variety of sexual identities—such as Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Blue is the Warmest Colour* (2013), Alain Guiraudie’s *Stranger by the Lake* (2013) and Lars von Trier’s *Nymph(,)maniac* (2013)—which are actively blurring the line between pornography and simulated sex. One of the most relevant British contributions to this new trend is Steve McQueen’s controversial portrait of a male sex addict, *Shame* (2011),¹¹ a film which McQueen co-wrote with Abi Morgan, Fiennes’ screenwriter. Williams wonders “whether these new levels of sexual ‘explicitness’ constitute pornography”, and also “What is meant today by sexually ‘explicit,’ and according to what codes?” (2014: 9).¹² As Forshaw concludes, films have always been “boundary-pushing in their representation of sex from the silent era onwards, and despite the greater explicitness sanctioned today, there is every sign that they will continue to perform very useful social function: to shock” (2015: 188).

Romance films used to be more moderate in depicting sex, even in the relatively recent past. The extremely popular *Pretty Woman* (1990) has no sex scenes, which is surprising and certainly hypocritical since the character played by Julia Roberts is a prostitute who meets her love interest (Richard Gere) as her client. In the twenty-first century, as the release of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (2015-2018) shows, romance films are expected to include a diversity of sex scenes. Period films seemed to be, until recently, the main exception to this rule. Adaptations of Jane Austen’s novels are still unlikely to show us her ladies and gentlemen enjoying sex in bed, though this is bound to happen sooner or later.¹³ Leaving aside the diverse films about the Romantic poets, such as Ken Russell’s *Gothic* (1986), and the eroticism of neo-Victorian art-house period films like Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993), the new sexual explicitness in twenty-first century period films appears to have been imported from television.

11. See Featherstone (2016) on *Shame*.

12. On these issues see also Siegel (2015) and Coleman (2016).

13. On eroticism in Jane Austen’s adaptations, see Shears (2012). Ironically, the sub-genre of the Austenian adaptation has welcomed bloody horror with Burr Steers’ film *Pride and Prejudice with Zombies* (2016), based on Seth Grahame-Smith’s spoof of Austen’s novel.

Series set in the present with a high sexual content, from *Sex and The City* (1998-2004) to *Queer as Folk* (UK 1999-2000, USA 2000-5), have habituated spectators to watching uninhibited on screen sexuality. In period drama, high-impact series like *Rome* (2005-7), *The Tudors* (2007-10), *Spartacus* (2010-13), the ongoing *Game of Thrones* (2011-), or the recent *War and Peace* (2016) have conquered new territory by bringing a contemporary view of sex into (pseudo)-historical fictions.¹⁴ The label 'period porn', which used to refer to pornography staged in the past, is now used to name this trend.

Concerning specifically neo-Victorian fictions, the film adaptation of Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1993) was among the first to be quite sexually explicit, whereas *Wilde* (Brian Gilbert, 1997) was possibly the first film to show a Victorian writer having sex. On TV, no doubt a turning point was reached with the 2002 BBC mini-series adaptation of Sarah Waters' picaresque lesbian story *Tipping the Velvet* (1998), scripted by Andrew Davies; this was quite a revolution, as was the novel (O'Callaghan 2012). Although in comparison to LGBTBI+ predecessors such as the mini-series *Portrait of a Marriage* (1990), on Vita-Sackville West's relationship with Violet Trefusis, *Tipping the Velvet* was far more sexually explicit, Amber Regis still complains that it was not "an unqualified triumph for tolerance and increased [lesbian] visibility" because it still needed "metatheatrical artifice" as a "legitimizing framework" (2012: 144). *Tipping the Velvet* set, nonetheless, a standard of sexual explicitness for TV which later neo-Victorian adaptations, particularly that of Michel Faber's *The Crimson Petal and the White* (mini-series 2011), had to obey in order to meet new audience expectations.

Even Queen Victoria herself has become an essential element in the reconfiguration of the neo-Victorian sex scene, with ageism clearly shaping her sexualized representation. John Madden's *Mrs. Brown* (1997) simply hinted that the ageing widowed queen (played by Judy Dench) harboured sexual feelings for her Scottish servant. Jean-Marc Vallée's *The Young Victoria* (2009) went much further. The depiction of Victoria and Albert as "a young affectionate couple in bed" with "no sign of royalty", appeared, nevertheless, to domesticate the most powerful woman in nineteenth-century Britain, "reducing her to the status of an ordinary wife after the

14. The BBC adaptation of Robert Graves' novel *I, Claudius* (1976) must also be acknowledged, of course, as a pioneer.

wedding night" (Kinzler 2011: 63). In the ongoing television series *Victoria* (2016-), the monarch is also characterized as a sex-loving woman. This may be an accurate view of the young Queen and a necessary deconstruction of Victorian prudishness but quite another matter is the media publicity for the series: "Queen Victoria's VERY raunchy side revealed in ITV's new bonkbuster" was the unsubtle sub-heading used in a *MailOnline* article, according to which the series creator "hinted" that her series "could feature steamy scenes" (Chan 2016: online, original capitalized text).

Discussing the novel by Scottish author Janice Galloway *Clara* (2002), on the life of nineteenth-century German composer Clara Schumann, Louisa Hadley argues that Galloway's representation of Clara's sex life with her husband Robert "reveals the dual impulse that underpins the contemporary interest in the Victorians: the impulse to render them both strange and familiar" (2010: 46). Through neo-Victorian fiction and film, then, authors and audiences are debating whether the past was essentially different from the present (or essentially the same); sex has become one of the grounds for comparison, rather than, for example, religion or politics. The way we picture Victorian sexuality with "its contradictions, excesses, dissimilarities from or correspondences with our diversity of experience holds an irresistible appeal for the neo-Victorian imagination" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 107). According to Cora Kaplan from Fowles to Waters (but with Michel Faber's exception), this neo-Victorian imagination has always shown "more than a hint of nostalgia for a less sexually knowing and brazenly expressive society" (2007: 195).

The representation of sex in neo-Victorian fiction generally and in *The Invisible Woman* specifically, then, obeys a double type of nostalgia. On the one hand, the film appeals to the spectators' erotic, romantic nostalgia for the imagined Victorian past in the terms described by Kaplan. On the other hand, Fiennes' film expresses nostalgia for a past cinematic style which did not require explicit sex to narrate love (whether or not this was an effect of censorship). The sex scenes in his film are, thus, also a comment on how sexuality is represented in the other neo-Victorian adaptations

mentioned above and, generally speaking, in neo-Victorian cinema.¹⁵ Fiennes hints that their sexual explicitness might even be anachronistic, offering instead a representations of sex which might be historically far more accurate. That's his challenge to the (neo-Victorian) spectator.

3. Subtle Sex in *The Invisible Woman*: Against the Neo-Victorian Codes of Representation

Fiennes' film, Fuller concludes, "is less an analogue to *The Crimson Petal and the White* [...] than a belated continuation of the mid-nineteenth century artistic and literary preoccupation with the tragic trajectories of women who have been sexually active outside marriage" (2014: 32). Reviewers, though, did not follow this feminist trend and were generally mystified by the sex scenes, which show the couples involved making love "while still in their night dresses" (Macnab 2014: online).¹⁶ Michael Slater objected that while "we are left in no doubt" that the romance between Ellen Ternan and Dickens "was a full-blown sexual relationship" (2014: 72), viewers unfamiliar with Tomalin's biography may miss much of the plot. Slater gives the wrong impression, though, that *The Invisible Woman* has much more sex than it actually offers, unless he refers to the "subtle eroticism" which another reviewer underlines (Foundas 2013: online). In this sense, like Abi Morgan herself (in Red Carpet News 2013: video), Foundas highlights as "carnal" although "no garments are removed", the scene when Dickens and Nelly count the money collected at a charity benefit, as her mother dozes by.¹⁷

15. And in current fiction generally. The relationship between a successful contemporary male writer in his forties and a much younger girl is also the subject of Hanif Kureishi's autobiographical novel *Intimacy* (1998). The 2001 film adaptation by Patrice Chéreau, starring Mark Rylance (a musician, rather than a writer) and Kerry Fox, includes many explicit sex scenes.

16. Macnab, among others, took much more direct exception, rather, to the peculiar shot of Dickens urinating in his chamber pot.

17. Mrs. Ternan is played by the elegant Kristin Scott-Thomas, who was Fiennes's romantic interest in *The English Patient* (1996, directed by Anthony Minghella, adapted from Michael Ondaatje's novel). The casting of Scott-Thomas, then 53, as Nelly's mother offers indirectly a disheartening comment on how mature women are ignored as love interests in current films focused on ageing men.

Disregarding both current film fashions and audience expectations, Fiennes films Victorian sex in quite a subdued way.¹⁸ Early in the film we see Nelly having sex with her husband George (whom she married in 1876, six years after Dickens' death). Both are in bed and wearing long nightgowns. Nelly is on top, which might seem unusual for a Victorian woman, and Fiennes portrays her orgasm without exaggeration, as her husband looks on, a bit puzzled by an intense pleasure which he does not match. Nelly lies down then next to George and the pair share a brief moment of contented intimacy. The camera is placed throughout the scene at the headboard, offering an unusual foreshortened view of their bodies. In the second scene, much later in the film, and also quite brief (both scenes run below one minute), Dickens and Nelly are shown in bed, he lying on top of her; they are also both wearing long nightgowns. The camera only shows their shoulders and heads and the close shot focuses mainly on Nelly's face, as she moans softly, by no means as pleasurably as with George. In neither case is the sexual pleasure of her partner shown. Even so, both scenes remain ambiguous, unless we conclude that whereas young Nelly was sexually submissive to Dickens, perhaps even faking a pleasure she did not feel, the older Ellen controls her relationship with George (and finds sex much more enjoyable).

In Morgan's screenplay the two scenes are more conventionally passionate. Nelly "grips" George, "lost in lovemaking, intense and connected" with him. Fiennes, nevertheless, wisely avoids clichés, sparing his audience the image of Dickens' fingers intertwining with Nelly's, "their palms flat together, clenched and then released as Dickens comes" (Morgan 2012: online). When asked why the relationship was not more overtly sexualized, Morgan declared that, having written *Shame*, "I probably would have pushed it a bit more sexually" (in Red Carpet News 2013: video). Yet, she defends Fiennes' choice to "restrain" the sex scenes because he "really understands what an audience needs and what it wants"; also, because this cinematic restraint connects with the "much more oppressed" Victorian society (in Red Carpet News: video).

18. It is worth mentioning that whereas *The Invisible Woman* was classified 12A by the BBFC, the MPAA gave it an R (Restricted) certificate, requiring spectators under 17 to be accompanied by a parent or adult guardian.

As for Fiennes, despite having played in his long, accomplished career a variety of romantic leads including Heathcliff (in Peter Kosminsky's 1992 adaptation), he presents himself as a director who eschews passion. Interviewer Chris Smith wonders why he portrays the relationship between Dickens and Nelly as an "intellectual love" rather than "as overtly lustful, overtly passionate"; Fiennes replies, quite hesitantly, that "I was very keen to avoid what I feel are the tropes of [...] people looking, sort of passionate, so restless across rooms. I don't believe that" (in Smith 2014: video). He names as his inspiration to narrate "the complicatedness and delicacy of human passion" Japanese film director Yasujirô Ozu (active 1927-62), best known for his elegant masterpiece *Tokyo Story* (1953).

Reviewer Peter Bradshaw asserts that Morgan "cleverly builds in echoes of John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman*" in her screenplay (2014: online), though he possibly has in mind Karel Reisz's 1981 adaptation, based on Harold Pinter's script rather than the novel by Fowles. The many scenes showing the older Nelly walking at a furious pace on Margate's beach, trying to exorcise Dickens from her past, recall somehow Sarah's habit of walking the Cobb on Lyme Regis in stormy weather, as part of her strategy to build her public image. These are, nonetheless, very different moments and very different stories, though the brief sex scene between Sarah and Charles in Reisz's film is very close in its purpose and historical accuracy to Fiennes' presentation of sex between Dickens and Nelly. The image of Jeremy Irons as Charles and Meryl Streep as Sarah having sex partly clothed in a very brief scene of Reisz's adaptation is, certainly, very similar to the moment shared by Dickens and Nelly in Fiennes' film.

There is, however, a major difference: Sarah and Charles are fictional characters and the sex scene is designed to introduce a major turning point in their story—far from being a fallen woman as she pretends, Sarah is a virgin who has lured Charles to her bed with the spicy, false story of her disorderly sexual conduct. In contrast, Charles and Nelly are based on historical Victorian persons, which adds a strange awkwardness to the sex scene the actors perform. The sex scene, therefore, is more appealing as a comment on our current voyeuristic obsession with sex and celebrity than as part of

Dickens's and Nelly's characterization in the film. Actually, Fiennes seems more interested in breaking the neo-Victorian codes of representation by giving the sex scene a historically accurate tone, than in explaining through it how the relationship between Nelly and Dickens actually worked.

Logically, Fiennes' film had to go further than Tomalin's biography because what is mere suggestion in her book needs to be transformed into actual event and image in the film.¹⁹ Sex is implied and implicit in the book but needs to be directly shown in the film. Both biography and film adaptation, nevertheless, are complicit in their voyeurism. As part of the current Dickens bashing, the two texts jointly make the point that great writers may be appalling men in their private life and not very good lovers. Indeed, the details of Dickens' cruelty to his wife Catherine take possession of readers' and viewers' minds with much more power than his love for Nelly. The film insists that their relationship inspired the marvel that *Great Expectations* is but since their love is always tainted with a sordid, exploitative undertone, so are Dickens' imaginative powers. The mystery of literary creation remains, anyway, a closed book, whereas, regrettably, both Tomalin and Fiennes perpetuated the stereotype of the muse, no matter how reluctantly Nelly accepts the role in and out of Dickens' bed, in reality and in fiction.

4. Conclusions: Authorship, privacy, and representation

The restrained yet voyeuristic sex scene in Fiennes' *Invisible Woman* is, as I hope to have shown, is a relevant element to start a much needed debate in Literary Studies. Tomalin's biography and Fiennes biopic are outstanding examples of their genre which deserve our attention. We need to approach them, however, with a more solid understanding of why we feel entitled to deny writers like Charles Dickens the right to protect his privacy and the secrecy of his love life. If our curiosity—our licence to pry into the private lives of Victorian literary authors—overcomes us, let's at least

19. Not just in relation to sex. Dickens' and Nelly's stillborn baby is shown, a pitiful, tiny dead body covered in blood. His birth certificate (supposing the baby existed at all) also appears, even naming him as Nicholas Guillaume.

bring into our reading or our viewing a more sophisticated awareness of our position as plain readers or spectators, and as scholars.

It is clear that our current obsession with sexuality and with celebrity (and with the sexuality of celebrities) colours our research on literary creativity. I am not questioning here academic biographical research per se though I have certainly questioned Claire Tomalin's inadequate justification of her own faulty narrative in Ellen Ternan's biography. Above all, I have questioned whether we gain anything at all by breaching the writer's right to privacy when this is fictionalized in audiovisual representation. Tomalin does not describe Nelly and Dickens' sexual encounters but Fiennes' and Morgan's film adaptation of her book does. The cinematic style chosen by the director to represent sex is elegant and subdued; also, possibly more historically accurate in comparison to that employed in other neo-Victorian films and TV series. Still, this seems insufficient justification to show Dickens in bed, not because the scene is offensive in any way but because it is simply voyeuristic and brings no insight into his literary talent and creativity. Nelly, is besides, presented in a passive role which may comment on her submission to her much older lover but does little to transmit any significant feminist message. A conversation would have served the purpose, arguably, much better. As Fiennes himself notes, "I think sometimes we can understand ourselves better through the prism of period films and classic drama" (in *The Hollywood Reporter* 2013: video). In the last instance, then, *The Invisible Woman* adds to this understanding of who were much more than to our understanding of who Dickens was.

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