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# *Vanity Fair*

WILLIAM MAKEPEACE  
THACKERAY



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

# VANITY FAIR

*A Novel without a Hero*

William Makepeace Thackeray

*Introduction, Bibliography and Notes by*

CAROLE JONES & OWEN KNOWLES

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## VANITY FAIR

## GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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## INTRODUCTION

William Makepeace Thackeray (1811–1863) was a relatively little known author when, in January 1847, his *Vanity Fair* began to appear in the popular *Punch* magazine in twenty monthly parts. If the serial made no immediate impact, it was probably because its early episodes and subtitle, ‘Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society’, suggested a work of loosely connected sketches in the typical *Punch* satiric manner, to whose conventions Thackeray further conformed by supplying his own illustrations or ‘candles’. Significantly, the author’s letters during the first stages of composition show that the ‘Sketches’ were evolving in ways that he had not anticipated. His gathering serial audience was being similarly surprised – into admiring enthusiasm. After reading an early number, Thomas Carlyle’s wife Jane wrote to her husband that Thackeray’s work was ‘very good indeed, beats Dickens out of the world’ (quoted in Simpson, p. 22).<sup>\*</sup> Soon after, the serial’s first ten

<sup>\*</sup> For the full reference to this and subsequent citations, see the Bibliography that follows this Introduction.

numbers were favourably greeted by the *Edinburgh Review*. It was, however, left to Charlotte Brontë, an avid reader of Thackeray's serial, to champion its author as a new star in the firmament. Her preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, prepared in December 1847 (when the *Vanity Fair* serial was roughly at mid-point), greeted Thackeray's achievement and prompted her to explain: 'I have alluded to him, Reader, because I think I see in him an intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognised; because I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day . . . [and] because to him . . . I have dedicated this second edition of "Jane Eyre"' (Smith (ed.), p. 4). Thackeray's serial having been a considerable *succès d'estime*, the novel was published in volume form in 1848 with a new and provocative subtitle, 'A Novel without a Hero'.

## I

Thackeray's final title and subtitle offer a revealing key to some of the novel's central preoccupations and energies. The main title derives from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678; 1684), a religious allegory in which two pilgrims, Christian and Faithful, are diverted on their journey towards salvation in the Celestial City by the sights and sounds of Vanity Fair:

Beelzebub, Apollyon, and Legion, with their companions, perceiving by the path that the Pilgrims made that their way to the City lay through this town of Vanity, they conceived here to set up a fair; a fair wherein should be sold of all sorts of vanity and that it should last all the year long. Therefore at this Fair are all such merchandise sold, as houses, lands, trades, places, honours, preferments, titles, countries, kingdoms, lusts, pleasures, and delights of all sorts, as whores, bawds, wives, husbands, children, masters, servants, lives, blood, bodies, souls, silver, gold, pearls, precious stones, and what not . . . Now, as I said, the way to the Celestial City lies just through this town, where this lusty Fair is kept; and he that will go to the City, and yet not go through this town, must needs go out of the world.

[Sharrock (ed.), p. 125, 126]

Bunyan's famous work exerted a strong and varied influence on Victorian literature, but there is a special aptness in the reappearance of his *Vanity Fair* in a serial occupying the pages of a journal famous for its presiding puppet, Mr Punch, who puckishly surveyed the Victorian merry-go-round. A bridge was thus created between literary

fairgrounds, allowing Thackeray access not only to Bunyan's classic but to a rich symbolic and satiric tradition that notably includes Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). Central to the conception of Vanity Fair in both Bunyan and Thackeray is the ubiquity of market interests – buying, selling, borrowing, fleecing and robbery – as the defining features of this ancient place. Bunyan's descriptive catalogue of the objects for sale further evokes a shocking image of moral confusion in its yoking together of the obvious coin of material acquisition with the spectacle of human beings transformed into merchandise ('wives, husbands, children . . . souls, silver, gold'). Thackeray's work intensifies this shock-value by its concentrated focus on the marriage-market, undisguised cupidity and the commodification of the human.

In addition, Bunyan's perception that Vanity Fair represents an inescapable and permanent temptation during the pilgrimage of life is echoed but deepened in Thackeray's re-creation. While *Vanity Fair* retains vestiges of the Bunyanesque convention of allegorical naming (as in Lord Steyne/stain or Lady Bareacres), it does so in the act of depicting the upper-class and aristocratic world between 1812 and 1832 as a remorselessly secular Vanity Fair that excludes any possibility of release to the Celestial City. 'What I want,' Thackeray wrote to his mother about his novel-in-progress, 'is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy pompous mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue' (quoted in Pollard (ed.), pp. 33–4). Unlike Bunyan's pilgrims, Thackeray's secular wanderers remain permanently trapped within the confines of Vanity Fair: whether they travel from London to Brighton, Hampshire, Ostend, Brussels or Paris they are always imagined as moving within a known and time-bound worldly fair. There is yet another way in which Bunyan's Vanity Fair is crucially modified in Thackeray's novel. In a move of striking originality, the novel's narrator represents himself as an inescapable part of the masquerade he witnesses. Although this presiding figure has certain god-like powers, they are invariably linked with his function as a 'Manager of the Performance' who has control over the puppets of his creation: so, disconcertingly, the Manager's function rests upon the puppets he manipulates just as much as theirs rests upon him. On other occasions, the narrator represents himself in an even more limiting way – that is, as a performer *in* the swarming fair by virtue of his role as the wise jester or wearer of motley who must wearily perform his part in a world of increasingly tired performers. This position established, it is but an

easy step for the narrator to generalise upon his predicament by claiming that *we*, the reading audience, are fellow-wearers of motley. Little wonder, then, that Thackeray's and the reader's comic enjoyment of the fair's sideshows is always double-edged: in laughing at the puppet-like figures in the novel, we are placed in the uncomfortable position of laughing at our own predicament.

Thackeray's conception of *Vanity Fair* in these terms helps to explain why his work is 'A Novel without a Hero'. Indeed both title and subtitle have the anticipatory function of encouraging the reader to take a detached interest in the very question of why the society depicted in the novel does not seem to allow for the heroic. The subtitle has other anticipatory functions. It warns the reader that, unlike many typical Victorian novels, *Vanity Fair* is not centred upon the developing history of a single central character, but – more disconcertingly – rotates between multiple classes, groups and individuals in such a way as both to unsettle simple responses to the meaning of heroism and to draw attention to the economic imperatives at work in their society as a whole. And vitally, the subtitle anticipates the prevailing satiric and ironic tone in a novel whose narrator can find human worth in unexpected places – the Rawdon Crawley of the second part of the novel, for example – while also discovering that all potential heroes have feet of clay. Rawdon's possible opposite is Dobbin who, seemingly the novel's moral gentleman, has some claim to be its unacknowledged hero. This claim is established early in the novel when Dobbin bravely and disinterestedly battles with Cuff in defence of George Osborne. But Dobbin the adult is a different matter. His very name, signifying the lumbering workhorse, makes the reader pause, as do certain telling details (such as his habitual nail-biting) that indicate something of the schoolboy in the adult man. But most importantly, Dobbin's claim to moral and civic heroism has to be weighed against the fact that, in his attitudes towards Amelia and George, he exemplifies what the novel as a whole studiously resists – that is, a tendency towards uncritical hero-worship.

Thackeray, the sceptical observer of the heroic, is especially prominent in the celebrated chapters (27 to 32) dealing with the Battle of Waterloo. Here was an opportunity to depict one of the period's most famous European military engagements and to dramatise the epic confrontation between the forces of the Duke of Wellington and Napoleon. However, in contrast to the many Victorian writers who sought to supply their culture with visions of the heroic (as, for example, Thomas Carlyle in *On Heroes, Hero-*



*Worship, and the Heroic in History* [1841]), Thackeray is more sceptical, dissident and deflationary. In the Waterloo chapters the narrator begins by empathically sharing the intoxicated hopes of the young soldiers or 'champions' whose school ethos has prepared them for military glory, but he then coolly remarks:

Time out of mind strength and courage have been the theme of bards and romances; and from the story of Troy down to today, poetry has always chosen a soldier for a hero. I wonder is it because men are cowards in heart that they admire bravery so much, and place military valour so far beyond every other quality for reward and worship? [p. 283]

The subsequent five chapters implicitly extend this sceptical question by retreating from the battleground to follow the fortunes of the bustling crowd of relations and hangers-on from *Vanity Fair* who quickly convert Brussels into their playground. While the battle takes place off-stage, *our* attention is mainly focused on the spectacle of the individual in motley through Jos's pretentiously obtuse posturing as the military hero. Neither does the aftermath of the battle bring any note of sentimental hero-worship. When Mr Osborne goes back to Waterloo and is escorted by a sergeant to see where his 'heroic' son fell, he is quite oblivious to certain details that do not escape the narrator: 'The peasants and relic-hunters about the place were scrambling round the pair as the soldier told his story, offering for sale all sorts of mementoes of the fight – crosses, and epaulets, and shattered cuirasses, and eagles' (p. 340). We are back – are we not? – with a spectacle familiar in Thackeray's version of *Vanity Fair*, that of vulture-like treasure-seekers hovering around the vulnerable, the dying and the dead.

## II

'In *Vanity Fair* the chief character is the World,' observed G. K. Chesterton (quoted in Pollard (ed.), p. 29) – and, he might have added, the world as predominantly driven by acquisitive greed, the quest for material gain and the mythology of rags-to-riches transformation. As John Carey emphasises, Thackeray's obsessive preoccupation with material 'spoils' has an obvious connection with the novel's prodigal cataloguing of possessions and objects: Mayfair and Bloomsbury houses, carriages, family crests, massively furnished rooms, dresses, cosmetics, jewellery, food, wine and drink. *Vanity Fair* is one of the most stifflingly commodity-heavy novels of the nineteenth century,

anticipating the ostentatious splendour of the Great Exhibition that was to take place three years after its publication. From this same interest stems the novel's main ways of picturing fashionable London as a combination of dangerous jungle, market-place and gambling-house. Aspects of this jungle-like quality manifest themselves in characters who characteristically 'sneer', 'leer', 'snarl' or 'smile coldly' at each other as part of a wider drama in which they figure as strong, sleek animals engaged in preying upon and surviving at the expense of the less strong; or else they appear as not-so-sleek animals – like the servant Betsy Horrocks in her predatory clinging to Sir Pitt Crawley – who attempt to emulate their stronger masters. In its resemblance to a market-place, London emerges variously as a vast emporium or as a public theatre (like Vauxhall) that requires nothing more from the participants other than the ability to perform their allotted parts for the watching audience. Some of the secondary indications of how fashionable London works also absorb Thackeray. He delights in showing how, in a society where luxury manifests itself so ostentatiously, it is possible for the artful to join the masquerade by taking on the external trappings of material well-being. The chapter 'How to Live Well on Nothing a Year', Thackeray's mock-instructional manual, rightly has a central position in the novel as a main text for those who wish to succeed in the Regency world. In addition, as many commentators have pointed out, in *Vanity Fair* (and his earlier *Book of Snobs*), Thackeray is partly instrumental in creating a significant linguistic shift: he pushes the term 'snob' away from its earlier sense of someone who is vulgar and unrefined towards its modern sense of a person with an exaggerated respect for money, possessions, rank and social position.

Above all, most of the novel's pivotal events are structured around patterns of acquisitive cupidity or financial agreement or exchange. In setting his novel in the first decades of the nineteenth century, the mid-Victorian Thackeray gained access to many early manifestations of the economic and commercial forces that would determine the character of his own age. Most significantly, the novel testifies to the intense public interest in the growing institutions of popular capitalism, with their potential for investment, speculation – and ruin. The period about which Thackeray writes was notable for the growth of large merchant companies, the mushrooming of merchant banks, the increasing power of the East India Company (which employs Jos), stocks and shares, and bubble companies. And along with this, the period also witnessed spectacular evidence of the

possibility of large financial collapse, such as took place in 1816 and 1825. The emergent dangers of popular capitalism are vividly registered in the career of Mr Sedley who enters the novel as a well established and prosperous owner of a merchant company. His daily routine takes him from his comfortable Bloomsbury home to the Stock Exchange and back. When the collapse in the market-value of his stocks and shares arrives, it does so in a way that irrevocably ruins both the man and his family. The remainder of Sedley's life provides Thackeray with the opportunity to dramatise an imagination dominated by hopelessly speculative dreams of re-entering the commercial world: 'It was wonderful to hear him talk about millions, and agios, and discounts, and what Rothschild was doing and Baring Brothers' (p. 368). Clearly Sedley does not live in a world without heroes – his are, characteristically, the heroes of powerful and international family banks.

Other of the novel's long narrative sequences are structured around a markedly different form of wealth acquisition. Through its focus on the aristocratic Crawley family, the novel's first half pivots upon the issue of inherited wealth and the question of who will inherit it. Two deaths in the family – those of Miss Crawley and Sir Pitt Crawley – transform the already fragmented family hierarchy into the more familiar configuration of birds of prey circling around rich pickings and locked in acquisitive battle. This spectacle of incessant cupidity draws upon some of Thackeray's most glorious farce (as when young James is sent to rich Miss Crawley's home to further the claims of the Bute Crawleys), but cumulatively his chapters on the Crawleys embody a mordant view of a degenerate aristocratic line whose inherited monies and properties allow them illegitimate privilege and power, through, for example, their access to Parliament as occupants of rotten boroughs.

A further concern in the novel is with women's relation to the economic market-place, particularly in relation to the marriage-market. As we shall see, Becky's involvement with this market is a particularly active and dynamic one. Other of the novel's middle-class and respectable single women are, however, in a less flexible position. They are confronted with the simple choice of either seeking financial security through marriages arranged for them by their powerfully ambitious fathers or being consigned to a grim spinsterhood. Such bleak economic determinants are especially evident in the choices allowed to the younger generation of the Osborne and Sedley families. A long-standing agreement between the two households is that George Osborne will marry Amelia

Sedley. With the loss of the Sedley fortune, however, Mr Osborne deems that George must break off this engagement and turn his attention to a more marketable property, the fabulously wealthy heiress Miss Swartz. A further financial readjustment occurs when George is ostracised from the family, since at this point his two sisters acquire an increased share of their father's fortune that multiplies their value as marriageable prospects. The first sister, with a likely increment of thirty thousand pounds, suddenly becomes especially attractive to her suitor Fred Bullock ('He knew what money was, and the value of it'); the second sister, as Fred joyously declares to her, may turn out to 'be a fifty thousand pounder yet' (p. 209). However, by virtue of her appearance, age and her father's desire to maintain control of her, Jane Osborne does not find a husband, and her subsequent fate allows Thackeray the opportunity to show the misery of an isolated spinsterhood defined by the dead routines and massy commodities in her father's house. Thackeray's brilliant descriptive ability comes into play here, transforming her situation into that of time-bound, material purgatory: 'The great glass over the mantelpiece, faced by the other great console glass at the opposite end of the room, increased and multiplied between them the brown holland bag in which the chandelier hung; until you saw these brown holland bags fading away in endless perspectives, and this apartment of Miss Osborne's seemed the centre of a system of drawing-rooms' (p. 412). The record of how Mr Osborne extends the principles of merchant banking life into the private is not yet finished: a telling (if depressing) detail several chapters later in the story reveals that the old banker has himself made an unsuccessful bid to secure Miss Swartz as his own wife.

It is important to emphasise how unrelenting the forces of predatory material interest are in Thackeray's novel. *Vanity Fair* supplies us with one of the most startling endings in the whole of Victorian fiction precisely because it suddenly throws up the possibility of an act of extreme criminal greed. The conventions of poetic justice at work in much Victorian fiction might seem to require that Thackeray supply a suitably happy domestic ending, and in one sense he does – with the marriage between Amelia and her 'rugged old oak' Dobbin (p. 667). But the summary description of their probable future pales into insignificance when measured against Thackeray's accompanying *tour de force*. We are told that a developing association between Jos (who has undergone the characteristic fate of having his property 'muddled away in speculations . . . and valueless shares in different bubble companies' [p. 669]) and Becky has been cut short by

his death. The news that Becky is to be part-beneficiary of an insurance policy that Jos has taken out leads the insurance brokers to suspect her of some 'infamous conspiracy' (p. 670). But a conspiracy of what kind? Is Becky to be suspected of murder? Thackeray's text teasingly insinuates the strong possibility of crime in giving Becky's lawyers – 'Messrs Burke, Thurtell & Hayes' – the names of three actual Victorian murderers. However, the author's accompanying illustration, with the caption 'Becky's Second Appearance as Clytemnestra', is much less ambiguous. It shows Jos in supplicating pose before Dobbin, with Becky hiding behind a curtain and holding what looks suspiciously like a phial of poison. The use here of a feature from crude melodrama seems very much the product of Thackeray the *enfant terrible*, who puckishly disallows the conventional ending. Through Becky, acquisitive greed drives to its most extreme point and escapes conventional punishment.

### III

The reader's pilgrimage through Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is largely conducted along two parallel but contrasting routes, those taken by Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp. This structural parallel, the most distinctive feature of the book's design, has naturally exercised generations of critics and readers: why did Thackeray choose such a dual focus and how are we to respond to the two women and their life-histories? Many readers of 1848 were inclined to regard the novel as having a simple moral design. In Amelia they could easily find a blueprint of the conventionally middle-class 'Angel in the House', whose credentials include her infinite capacity for self-sacrifice, commitment to home and family, and decorous anonymity. By reference to such a revered domestic norm, only one judgement was possible concerning the novel's other female protagonist: Becky Sharp was Amelia's moral opposite. In deliberately flouting the limits deemed appropriate for respectable women, Becky could easily be regarded by the conventional reader as little more than the eternally designing adventuress: foolishly moving beyond her proper sphere, she commits herself to conquer the fashionable world and, by the exercise of her female wiles, determines that she will gain her own portion of its wealth and opportunities. According to this 'moral' reading, her punishment arrives in the form of an inevitable fall after her spectacular rise. Several problems immediately arise with a simple dualistic reading of this kind. One of them is that the novel, especially in its second part, sometimes betrays a marked impatience

with the limits of the domestic haven that have made the doll-like and unworldly Amelia so instinctively ready to 'sacrifice herself and to fling all that she had at the feet of the beloved' (p. 552). At a late stage in the novel, Becky confronts Amelia with the charge: 'You are no more fit to live in the world than a baby in arms' (p. 663). In doing so, she reintroduces a note of impatience evident in the narrator's earlier description of Amelia:

A world under such legislation as hers would not be a very orderly place of abode; but there are not many women, at least not of the rulers, who are of her sort. This lady, I believe, would have abolished all gaols, punishments, handcuffs, whippings, poverty, sickness, hunger, in the world; and was such a mean-spirited creature that – we are obliged to confess it – she could even forget a mortal injury. [pp. 637–8]

The narrator's movement beyond the confined drawing-room to the 'real' world surely suggests a decided impatience with the very basis of the conception of the 'Angel in the House'. The restlessly sceptical Thackeray would seem, by extension, to be paving the way for a more positive response to the provocative challenge offered by Becky.

How does this challenge inhere in the figure and career of Thackeray's most celebrated creation? Two interrelated possibilities immediately suggest themselves. Thackeray's view of a woman like Becky embodies a shrewd – and in many ways, very modern – sense of the social and economic options open to all women of the time; and, as a consequence, this figure crystallises some of his most powerful iconoclastic energies. Much sympathy is gathered for Becky, in the first place, by virtue of the fact that, as an orphan and social outsider, she is offered such a meagre selection of options by her society (as symbolised perhaps in the cast-off clothes she receives from Amelia). Upon leaving Miss Pinkerton's, she quickly acquires a sense of what these options are: she can either marry well or consign herself to the position of governess, one of the few professions available to her. The choice made by Becky – to go for a rich marriage – is unsettling in its swiftness. Behind her decision lies the implicit assumption that since most middle- and upper-class women have rich marriages arranged for them – thereby fulfilling the laws of capitalism everywhere at work in *Vanity Fair* – then she is eminently justified in wanting her niche in the marriage-market. To the extent that Becky in the early chapters of the novel uncritically digests the prevailing economic norms of her society, she is useful to Thackeray as a puppet-like creature who reflects in sharply undisguised form the

hypocritical pretences of *Vanity Fair*. But Becky's ever-growing consciousness adds another disturbing dimension to Thackeray's satire. With striking speed, she soon grows to realise what the novel as a whole provocatively tends to endorse, that her society is fundamentally Darwinian in its operation: capital domination resides with a powerful patriarchy; the stronger or more adaptable animals survive at the expense of the weaker; there is a glaring chasm between the haves and have-nots. This being the case, the burning question for Becky is how, as a social orphan without obvious credentials, she will *survive* in an unwelcoming world. The cutting edge of Thackeray's ironic satire is at its sharpest when at various points Becky, seeming to collaborate with the author who has created her, explicitly debates the possibility of a 'moral' life, or exclaims, 'I think I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year' (p. 406). Such an exclamation, with its informing vision of morality as relative to economic situation, throws up a number of further unsettling assumptions: Becky's proposition that only the rich can afford to be moral involves the corollary that the simple moral life is impossible for anyone trying to gain a foothold in a society that crudely exploits all finer feelings for its own material ends; only the rich, who are protected by their wealth, can afford to be moral.

The topsy-turveydom created by Thackeray's ironic satire means that an attractive carnival-like atmosphere attends Becky in her upward-mobility. In her energy and forward movement, she creates narrative momentum and so dominates the reader's attention. Her growing recognition that female identity is conferred rather than innate leads her to throw off such constructed roles – as signified by the governess's uniform – and embrace the principle of performance: hence, metamorphosis becomes essential to her perpetual reinvention. The provocative challenge of *Vanity Fair* mainly resides in the fact that the novel simultaneously voices moral disquiet at Becky's choices in life *and* celebrates the potentially liberating features of her transformation.

In bringing Amelia and Becky into a parallel but interlocking relationship, Thackeray can also be seen to play with the effects of two different types of traditional novel. Amelia corresponds to a model of good-natured and maternal womanhood associated with the conventional nineteenth-century domestic novel: she is a static figure, invariably defined by her relationship to hearth, home and family. Becky as a type can be seen to derive from a different kind of novel altogether. Her precedents lie in the long-standing tradition of picaresque novels, a kind of novel devoted to following the career of



the picaro or adventurer. The prototypical picaro normally finds himself in a cruelly unyielding world where he must simultaneously serve the needs of several masters. So numerous are these competing demands that, in order to survive, he invariably becomes a master of deception, simulation and multiple disguise. Unable to afford the niceties of a conscience, the picaro is amoral rather than designedly immoral, and his amorality – it is often ironically implied – is a kind of victory over the essentially warped and cynical society that he serves. Unexpectedly then, in this kind of novel the flawed servant/adventurer can be a powerfully satiric agent and attract a sympathetic response from the reader. Becky's links with this breezily amoral and keen-witted figure are obvious. A keen strategist, she is always one step ahead of others because they are generally so dull-witted. On the few occasions when Becky is not under threat she can often be generous and concerned, but more generally she knows that her quick-wittedness is her greatest asset. Picaro conventions are also fulfilled at the end of the novel, since Becky outwits the forces of law and order as a consequence of which she can continue her career of reinvention in Bath and Cheltenham.

Finally, one additional reason for Becky's unusual appeal may be explained by thinking of some of the unexpected links she shares with her creator. 'I like Becky in that book,' Thackeray is reported to have said in later life. 'Sometimes I think I have myself some of her tastes' (quoted in Gilmour, p. 19). Thackeray's teasing confession paves the way for some interesting possibilities. Like her creator, Becky is an adept fiction-maker and on occasions actually takes control of the narrative as the author's surrogate. Further, as a supreme manager of people, she partly emulates Thackeray's position as puppet-master, or, dressed in her own version of motley, can be found to partner him in playing the wise fool. More than any other character in the book, her sparkling appearance and dialogue require the full range and richness of Thackeray's novelistic skill. Above all, her expert mimicry and irreverent impatience are sometimes so markedly close in kind to Thackeray's that she can act as a vehicle for her creator's satire and so share with him a secretly compliant relationship. As Robin Gilmour has remarked: 'By mimicking conventional behaviour Becky makes it comic, and Thackeray's narrative tone tends to comply with her exploits; as the agent of his satirical exposure, she is the beneficiary of his and our enjoyment of the satire' (p. 19).



## IV

The last third of *Vanity Fair* makes clear why the novel is one of the period's great *serio-comic* epics. After the relatively short temporal period covered by the main body of the work, its later chapters cover over ten years and witness to the death of most of the major figures – Sir Pitt Crawley, Miss Crawley, Rawdon Crawley, Mr Osborne, Mr Sedley and Jos. In response to this lengthening temporal sweep, the novel takes on the character of an elegiac chronicle. The chronicle includes scattered memories of earlier life, relics speaking of a time past and gone, and changes that have come with age. One disguised, but underlying feature in the conception of *Vanity Fair* thus emerges – that all who live in the Fair, as in the world itself, are transient beings, suffer defeat at the hands of time, and must acknowledge the vanity of human wishes. Old Mr Sedley's death captures a dominant chord in the later chapters:

Perhaps as he was lying awake then his life may have passed before him – his early hopeful struggles, his manly successes and prosperity, his downfall in his declining years, and his present helpless condition – no chance of revenge against Fortune, which had had the better of him – neither name nor money to bequeath – a spent-out bootless life of defeat and disappointment, and the end here! Which, I wonder, brother reader, is the better lot – to die prosperous and famous, or poor and disappointed? To have, and to be forced to yield; or to sink out of life, having played and lost the game? That must be a strange feeling when a day of our life comes, and we say, '*Tomorrow*, success or failure won't matter much; and the sun will rise, and all the myriads of mankind go to their work or their pleasure as usual, but I shall be out of the turmoil.'

[pp. 587–8]

Thackeray's novel also emulates the logic of Sedley's final farewell to the world. The creator of *Vanity Fair* has, through his creation, shared in all the glancing lights, passing shows, and elaborate masquerade of the fairground. At the end of the novel, with many of his characters now dead and his function fulfilled, he is only left the task of putting away the remaining puppets: '*Ah! Vanitas Vanitatum!* Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied? – Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out' (p. 671).

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