



## Men and Masculinity in Vanity Fair

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### INTRODUCTION

William Makepeace Thackeray was born in Calcutta on 18 July 1811. Both his parents, Richmond Thackeray and Anne Becher were of Anglo-Indian descent. He died suddenly from the bursting of a blood vessel in the brain on 24 December 1863. He was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery on December 30, with an estimated two thousand mourners paying their respects. Only a bust does honor to his memory in Westminster Abbey. William Makepeace Thackeray had the most gentle and lovable manners, and was the idol of his children and all young people. William Makepeace Thackeray is one of the greatest novelists of the Victorian age. He found that English novel had strayed from the paths of realism. He reacted against all romanticism and led it back again to real life. In his hands, the novel is not irradiated by the glow of romance; neither is it brightened by the rose spectacles of sentiments. There are no intrigues, no hair breadth escape, no long last hairs, no mistaken identities, no haunted castles and no ghosts. Indeed the entire paraphernalia of conventional romance has been done away by him. His novels deal with the real and probable human situations, and provide an escape from the realities of life.

In 1847-48 William Makepeace Thackeray hit the big time with *Vanity Fair*. It is the best known of his novels. The novel had a slow start; the first chapter was rejected by several publishers, but eventually it sold in the neighborhood of 7,000 numbers in a month. Just as importantly, it was the talk of the town, and Thackeray finally had a name that gained notice and reviews in journals. *Vanity Fair* was his first great work, and was intended to express his own views of the social life about him, and a protest against the over drawn heroes of popular novels. There are many different booths in the novel, given over to the sole of 'all sorts of vanities,' as cheats, rogues, juggling, games, plays, fools, apes, knaves and that of every kind. But there is also another side of social life of that time in *Vanity Fair*. There are men and masculinity in the characters of Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*. He styles this work 'a novel without hero'. The whole action of the story, which is without plot or development, revolves about two women who lets nothing stand in the way of their selfish desire to get the most out of the fools who largely constitute the society.

Even though the two protagonists of *Vanity Fair* are women, now the question is what it means to be a man? But particularly the masculine ideal of a gentleman is central to the novel. Each male character represents a separate and distinct version of how gentlemanliness could be achieved: through wealth and external appearance, intellectual and political power, blue blood, or the cultivation of personality and character. At the same time, there are secondary masculine characters that offer a vision of manhood run amok, whether through extreme and undeserved vanity or through the corruption of the power that high social rank brings. "These aspects of life have been crystallized in the novel, as they were in Victorian life through social relationship and these centers around marriage and money" (Kettle 149)

Women are actually completely totally secondary in the novel, which is in reality about the way men want to be close to each other, or even be each other. For example, Jos is never happier than when hanging out with just George and Rawdon in Bath. When women are involved, it is as a go between for the men – for instance, Amelia is

simply a way for Dobbin to be as close as possible to his childhood idol George and even become him by replacing him as her husband.

The more familiar ways of defining manhood are success in public life or through the display of machismo. The novel argues that true masculine achievement is revealed through a man's relationship with children. Those who form lasting and meaningful connections with children are Rawdon with his son, Dobbin with his daughter and George Jr. are forgiven past trespasses. Those who cannot are Lord Most of the men in the novel need to be managed or handled by women who know how to do it. Here Becky is practicing the art of sealing the deal. She is not in the usual feminine mold, to be sure, but it's interesting how often she is shown to be the aggressor and the men she deals with her victims.

[Becky]; for the conversation, as may be judged from the foregoing specimen, was not especially witty or eloquent; it seldom is in private societies, or anywhere except in very high-flown and ingenious novels [...] Almost for the first time in his life, Mr. Sedley found himself talking, without the least timidity or hesitation, to a person of the other sex. Miss Rebecca asked him a great number of questions about India, which gave him an opportunity of narrating many interesting anecdotes about that country and himself. (Thackeray 61)

This is a pretty creepy passage and might also speak to the culture of all-male private schools, which Thackeray was not a fan of. What do we make of this passage? Man crush? An obsession that then leads Dobbin to fall in love with Amelia and try to become George by marrying her? Not that Jos is the only guy who is vain, of course. We love that George is unable to give a compliment to another man without reassuring himself about his own continuing awesomeness in a nearby mirror. Check out Becky's knowing look at him – that's another nice bit of gender bending as well.

The next masculine figure is Rawdon Crawley who is half jock, half born at the right place at the right time. His straightforward masculinity is a nice counterpoint to the "gentleman show" that Jos and George laboriously put on every day. The activities of Rawdon Crawley exhibits by following lines.

"A perfect and celebrated "blood," or dandy about town, was this young officer [Rawdon]. Boxing, rat-hunting, the fives court, and four-in-hand driving were then the fashion of our British aristocracy; and he was an adept in all these noble sciences. And though he belonged to the household troops, who, as it was their duty to rally round the Prince Regent, had not shown their valour in foreign service yet, Rawdon Crawley had already (apropos of play, of which he was immoderately fond) fought three bloody duels, in which he gave ample proofs of his contempt for death [...] Silly, romantic Miss Crawley, far from being horrified at the courage of her favorite, always used to pay his debts after his duels; and would not listen to a word that was whispered against his morality. "He will sow his wild oats," she would say, "and is worth far more than that puling hypocrite of a brother of his." (Thackeray 23)

George tries to display the kind of masculinity that comes naturally to Rawdon. He's pretty good, but only manages to fool basically the most naïve and youngest of the soldiers. Stubble's name implies that he's not shaving yet, and a Spooney is a slang word for a weakling or softy. We get the sense that George is putting on an act from the fact that his behavior is compared to a literary figure "Don Giovanni," the famous seducer, and the mythological Apollo. He isn't himself, he just reminds people of other, more authentic people. To Dobbin he is "Admirable" James Crichton, a 16th century intellectual, and he reminds Mrs. O'Dowd of a relative. On the other hand, Rawdon's more animalistic activities are just described as "wild oats". He is always simply himself.

"Stubble and Spooney thought that to be a "regular Don Giovanni, by Jove" was one of the finest qualities a man could possess, and Osborne's reputation was prodigious amongst the young men of the regiment. He was famous in field-sports, famous at a song, famous on parade; free with his money, which was bountifully supplied by his father. His coats were better made than any man's in the regiment, and he had more of them. He was adored by the men. He could drink more than any officer of the whole mess, including old Heavytop, the colonel. There were other people besides Amelia who worshipped him. Stubble and Spooney thought him a sort of Apollo; Dobbin took him to be an Admirable Crichton; and Mrs. Major O'Dowd acknowledged he was an elegant young fellow, and put her in mind of Fitzjurd Fogarty, Lord Castlefogarty's second son." (Thackeray 30)

Mr. Rawdon's marriage was one of the honesties actions of the gentleman's biography which has to do with the present history. No one will say it is unmanly to be captivated by a woman, or, being captivated, to marry her; and the admiration, the delight, the passion, the wonder, the unbounded confidence, and frantic adoration with which, by degrees, this big warrior got to regard the little Rebecca, were feelings which the ladies at least will pronounce were not altogether discreditable to him. When she sang, every note thrilled in his dull soul, and tingled through his huge frame. When she spoke, he brought all the force of his brains to listen and wonder. If she was jocular, he used to revolve her jokes in his mind, and explode over them half an hour afterwards in the street. Her words were oracles to him, her smallest actions marked by an infallible grace and wisdom.

“How she sings,--how she paints, thought he. ‘How she rode that kicking mare at Queen's Crawley!’ And he would say to her in confidential moments, ‘By Jove, Beck, you're fit to be Commander-in-Chief, or Archbishop of Canterbury, by Jove.’ Is his case a rare one? And don't we see every day in the world many an honest Hercules at the apron-strings of Omphale, and great whiskered Samsons prostrate in Delilah's lap?” (Thackeray 16)

Rawdon is tamed and housebroken by his marriage, which turns him into a respectable and exemplary man. The novel is pretty consistent in thinking well of people who can be satisfied by a faithful and loving family life. It's always a little clash in this caustic and cynical novel to come across a gentle, emotional moment like this one. Check out how Stubble is still trying to figure out how to be a man. He plays with weapons and has enlisted in the army, but he uses his sword like a toy. At the thought of war, his first reaction is to write a letter to his mom, the thought of whom makes him cry. But even through the tears, he is using adult-sounding swear words like ‘dam.’ [Ensign Stubble]--Such was his military ardour--went off instantly to purchase a new sword at the accoutrement-maker's. Here this young fellow [...] had an undoubted courage and a lion's heart, poised, tried, bent, and balanced a weapon such as he thought would do execution amongst Frenchmen. Shouting "Ha, ha!" and stamping his little feet with tremendous energy, he delivered the point twice or thrice at Captain Dobbin. [Then, he and Ensign Spooney] sate down and wrote off letters to the kind anxious parents at home--letters full of love and heartiness, and pluck and bad spelling."(Thackeray 45)

Like Jos, Pitt is always showing us a different way to be a man. Unlike Rawdon, he is all brains and no brawn, and unlike George, he is all strategy without any outward display. But clearly, his style really works for him, as he easily gets rid of Jim Crawley, a kind of George / Rawdon mix in the making.

There are so many characters of the men in *Vanity Fair* so deeply infatuated with their appearance. Many of them are described staring at themselves in mirrors. There patterns to the conditions under which men become vain. It is an invariable situation to all of them male characters. The two protagonists of *Vanity Fair* are women it is a real fact, but particularly the masculine ideal of a gentleman is central to the novel. Each and every male character represents a separate and distinct side that how to gentlemanliness could be achieved through wealth and external appearance, intellectual and political power, blue blood, or the cultivation of personality and character.

And at the same time, there are secondary masculine characters that offer a vision of manhood run amok, whether through extreme and undeserved vanity or through the corruption of the power that high social rank brings. Female characters are secondary in the novel, which is in reality about the way men want to be close to each other, or even be each other. At the last we can say that the novel *Vanity Fair* argues that true masculine achievement is revealed through a man's relationship.

## REFERENCES

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