Vanity Fair: A new television adaptation of the great 19th century novel

By David Walsh
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"But we are bound to stick closely, above all, by THE TRUTH—the truth, though it be not particularly pleasant to read of or to tell."— Catherine: A Story *(1839–40), William Makepeace Thackeray*

A seven-part series based on William Makepeace Thackeray's novel, *Vanity Fair*, was broadcast in the UK in September and October, and released in the US on December 21. It was distributed by ITV in Britain and Amazon Video in the US.

Vanity Fair, published in 1848, is one of the great novels of the 19th century. Thackeray (1811–1863) set his work during and after the Napoleonic Wars, with the Battle of Waterloo in June 1815 playing a role in the events.

It follows, over the course of two decades or so, a group of characters—Becky Sharp ("Sharp by name, and sharp, I fear, by nature," as someone in the series suggests), a young woman from a poor family who survives by her wits and charms; her friend, then rival … and then friend again, the naïve Amelia Sedley; Amelia's husband George Osborne and her adoring lover from a distance for much of the book, William Dobbin; and Becky's spouse Rawdon Crawley, and their respective families, lovers and friends.

It is a remarkable social satire and picture of life. Without moralizing or lecturing, Thackeray holds up to the light the opportunism, hypocrisy and greed of the middle classes, the pseudo-greatness and viciousness of society's "betters," the high price to be paid for "getting ahead" in society at any cost, etc., all these social features and more.

The title comes from John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), the extended Christian allegory. In that book, often considered the first English novel, "Vanity Fair" is a location built by the devil, where people are sinfully attached to the things of this world. For Thackeray, who uses the title somewhat ironically, "Vanity Fair" refers to contemporary Britain, whose inhabitants, he writes in Chapter Eight, have "no reverence except for prosperity, and no eye for anything beyond success."

During its 19-month serialization in *Punch*, the British humor magazine, in 1847 and 1848, the author gave his novel the subtitle *Pen and Pencil Sketches of English Society*, giving notice that he had also included many of his own illustrations. When it appeared as a single volume, it carried the unusual subtitle *A Novel without a Hero*.

Both subtitles are correct—and both are significant.

The new television series, written by Gwyneth Hughes and directed by James Strong and (for one episode) Jonathan Entwistle, opens with Thackeray himself (Michael Palin), who acts as narrator throughout, introducing us to "Vanity Fair," which he explains, "is a very vain, wicked, foolish place, full of all sorts of humbug, falseness and pretension."

In London, 1814, Becky Sharp (Olivia Cooke), the daughter of an "opera girl" and an artist, and Amelia Sedley (Claudie Jessie), from a wealthy background, leave Miss Pinkerton's school for girls, where Becky has been teaching. She quits the place on bad terms, complaining about her poverty wages and insulting its headmistress. Leaning out of the departing carriage, Becky shouts, "Vive la France! Vive Napoleon!" In his novel, Thackeray observes that "in those days, in England, to say, 'Long live Bonaparte!' was as much as to say, 'Long live Lucifer!'"

Before she takes up her position in the countryside as a governess for the Sir Pitt Crawley family, a prospect she dreads, Becky spends a week in London with Amelia and her family. The vain, oafish Jos Sedley (David Fynn), Amelia's brother, described by his own father as a "lardy loafer," who has been making his fortune in India, is home for a visit. Captain George Osborne (Charlie Rowe), Amelia's fiancé, also comes around. George, whose family is rich, takes an instant, snobbish dislike to the ambitious Becky, who openly sets her cap at Jos. George's friend, Captain William Dobbin (Johnny Flynn), also loves Amelia, hopelessly. A memorable outing to Vauxhall Gardens, one of the leading venues for public entertainment in London at the time, provides Jos, who is known to be "terrified of young ladies," the opportunity to propose to Becky, but he drinks too much, makes a fool of himself and evades the opportunity. Becky heads off to her governess position.

She sets to work in the household of Sir Pitt Crawley (Martin Clunes), a horrible, miserly, dishonest man, taking care of his two neglected young daughters. Thackeray writes of Sir Pitt, "Vanity Fair—Vanity Fair! Here was a man, who could not spell, and did not care to read—who had the habits and the cunning of a boor: whose aim in life was pettifogging: who never had a taste, or emotion, or enjoyment, but what was sordid and foul; and yet he had rank, and honours, and power, somehow: and was a dignitary of the land, and a pillar of the state. He was high sheriff, and rode in a golden coach. Great ministers and statesmen courted him; and in Vanity Fair he had a higher place than the most brilliant genius or spotless virtue."

Becky makes herself useful, as a secretary, to Sir Pitt, who, in turn, develops a longing for her. His second wife's health is fading. However, Pitt's handsome son, Rawdon Crawley (Tom Bateman), a dissolute, debt-ridden cavalry officer who earns his living by gambling, catches Becky's eye instead. The entire Crawley clan are in economic thrall to Miss Matilda Crawley (Frances de la Tour), their wealthy and eccentric relative (Thackeray writes that she was considered "a dreadful Radical … She read Voltaire, and had Rousseau by heart; talked very lightly about divorce, and most energetically of the rights of women"). Becky worms her way into Matilda's good graces, until the older lady learns that her new protégée has gone and secretly married Rawdon! His aunt instantly cuts Rawdon out of her will, largely determining the course of the new couple's future.

A renewed war with France looms, as Napoleon has escaped from exile on the island of Elba and assembled a new army. George is generally inattentive to Amelia, who naively adores him. Thackeray, throughout his works, writes strongly about the situation of women. He observes that Amelia's "heart tried to persist in asserting that George Osborne was worthy and faithful to her, though she knew otherwise. … She did not dare to own that the man she loved was her inferior; or to feel that she had

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given her heart away too soon. Given once, the pure bashful maiden was too modest, too tender, too trustful, too weak, too much woman to recall it. We are Turks with the affections of our women; and have made them subscribe to our doctrine too."

Amelia's father goes bankrupt and George's cold, unforgiving banker-father (Robert Pugh) demands that his son instantly end the relationship with her. George proceeds to marry Amelia against his father's wishes, and is cut off financially for his efforts. This couple too is now poor. George grows resentful of Amelia, who he blames for his difficulties. To make matters worse, on the eve of the Battle of Waterloo, with the various characters now temporarily quartered in Brussels, George falls for the flirtatious, conniving Becky and begs her to run away with him, which she refuses to do.

George dies at Waterloo, and Amelia, pregnant with his child, dedicates herself to his memory. Dobbin knows the truth about George's failings and disloyalty, but can't bear to tell her.

Becky becomes disgracefully involved with Lord Steyne (Anthony Head), a rich, powerful and cynical marquis. "I have arrived," she says, when the nobleman inveigles her an invitation to court.

In one of the most powerful, disturbing sequences in both the novel and new series (in Episode 6), Rawdon is locked up for non-payment of debts. Although appealed to and fully capable of doing so (thanks to the depraved marquis' "generosity"), Becky does not extract her husband from debtors' prison. Another of his relatives eventually does so.

Rawdon returns home unexpectedly to find Becky—alone, at night—singing to Lord Steyne, with whom she has been carrying on an affair. Becky protests her innocence. Steyne, believing that Rawdon is aware of the sums he has given Becky, supposedly to pay her debts, interjects: "Innocent! When every trinket you wear on your body I gave to you. Oh, I see what this is. The pair of you mean to lay a trap for me, to con me out of even more money than the thousands of pounds I have already given to this whore … which, no doubt, Colonel Crawley, you have already spent." He calls Rawdon a "pimp," who thereupon attacks and drives him out of the house. The marquis obtains his revenge, having Rawdon appointed to a position on a remote island where he later dies of yellow fever.

Mr. Osborne continues to persecute Amelia, who he blames for the falling out with his son. When Dobbin intervenes on behalf of Amelia and her young son, her deceased husband's father hisses, "She may have seven children and starve, for all I care. She is dead to me." Later, he makes his support for Amelia's son conditional on the boy being taken away from his mother, which she, heart-brokenly, accedes to.

Dobbin, seeming to give up on Amelia, goes off to India. Years pass. In the end, fortune favors Amelia, when her son inherits his grandfather's house and wealth. She now is provided for. Becky wanders the continent, working in gambling dens and such. She has been cold and unloving to her own son, and when he, for his part, ends up with the Crawley estate, he informs his mother, in a letter, "I do not wish to see you. I do not wish you to write to me. On no account should you ever attempt to make contact again."

In Pumpernickel (a fictional Weimar), Germany, Becky and Amelia meet and reconcile. Dobbin arrives from India, with Jos, and hopes that time will have opened Amelia's eyes. When she still persists in her illusions about her dead husband, Dobbin bursts out, "All these years, I have loved and watched you. Now I wonder, did I always know that the prize I'd set my life on was not worth winning? Your heart clings so faithfully to a memory because that is all you are capable of. Your soul is shallow. You cannot feel a love as deep as mine. … Goodbye, Amelia. Let it end. We are both weary of it."

It takes Becky's intervention, who informs Amelia that George proposed their flight together when they were in Belgium, to finally make her friend see the light: "George was not as he was painted! A man who was weary of you, who would have jilted you, but Dobbin forced him to keep his word! Why would anybody do that? Heavens above, Amelia, because he [Dobbin] loves you! Because he wants your happiness above his own!" It is a quasi-happy conclusion for Amelia and Dobbin, while Becky goes off with Jos, to a less certain future.

The new series (*Vanity Fair* has been adapted numerous times for radio, film and television) is a valuable and conscientious one. It starts off slowly enough, but then so perhaps does Thackeray's novel. The first two episodes are slightly colorless. The scene at Vauxhall Gardens is not as spectacular and disastrous as it ought to be. With Becky's departure from the dreary Crawley household and the emerging financial distress of the Sedleys, however, events become more colorful and compelling. The last few episodes are quite riveting. Unfortunately, there seems to be some obligation, bound up probably with contemporary petty bourgeois politics, to have Becky Sharp come off a little too unscathed at the very end, but that is a relatively minor issue.

Cooke is fine as Becky, who exhibits an extraordinary selfishness and ruthlessness (produced by her circumstances), but who is not essentially mean or vindictive, as her ultimate conduct toward Amelia and Dobbin reveals. The younger generation of performers is generally fine, but it is the older generation—a chilling Anthony Head, Frances de la Tour, Robert Pugh, Simon Russell Beale (as Amelia's father), Felicity Montagu (as Matilda Crawley's unfortunate servant) and Suranne Jones (as Miss Pinkerton)—who truly stand out.

The series sincerely attempts, all in all, to do justice to Thackeray's complexities and ambiguities. As one commentator observed, in *Vanity Fair*, "Conventional categories of human types were disregarded in favor of an individualization so complete that we know the characters better than we know our friends" (*A Literary History of England*, edited by Albert C. Baugh, 1948). The book is "without a hero," as its subtitle suggested. Thackeray "possessed a terrible power," asserted the same literary historian, "to detect and expose men's self-deceptions, shams, pretenses, and unworthy aspirations."

The novelist despised cant and mythologizing. For example, in his earlier *Barry Lyndon* (1844—adapted for the screen by Stanley Kubrick in 1975), the story of an Irishman striving to become a member of the English aristocracy in the late 18th century, the narrator, a soldier at the time, remarks that it is very well "for gentlemen to talk of the age of chivalry; but remember the starving brutes whom they lead—men nursed in poverty, entirely ignorant, made to take a pride in deeds of blood—men who can have no amusement but in drunkenness, debauch, and plunder. … While, for instance, we are at the present moment admiring the 'Great Frederick [Frederick II, King of Prussia 1740 to 1786],' as we call him, and his philosophy, and his liberality, and his military genius, I, who have served him, and been, as it were, behind the scenes of which that great spectacle is composed, can only look at it with horror. What a number of items of human crime, misery, slavery, go to form that sum-total of glory!"

In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray flogs the "great ones" in society for their selfish, callous treatment of their servants and the small shopkeepers and others whose bills they refuse to pay. How many noblemen, he asks, "rob their petty tradesmen, condescend to swindle their poor retainers out of wretched little sums and cheat for a few shillings? … Who pities a poor barber who can't get his money for powdering the footmen's heads; or a poor carpenter who has ruined himself by fixing up ornaments and pavilions for my lady's *dejeuner* ? … When the great house tumbles down, these miserable wretches fall under it unnoticed: as they say in the old legends, before a man goes to the devil himself, he sends plenty of other souls thither."

As for the Becky-Rawdon household, "Nobody in fact was paid. Not the blacksmith who opened the lock; nor the glazier who mended the pane; nor the jobber who let the carriage; nor the groom who drove it; nor

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the butcher who provided the leg of mutton; nor the coals which roasted it; nor the cook who basted it; nor the servants who ate it: and this I am given to understand is not unfrequently the way in which people live elegantly on nothing a year."

Thackeray was no political radical himself, and he had terrible blind spots, including the suffering of the Irish people, but he was for the most part a devastating, uncompromising realist about people and society, a figure who belongs alongside Dickens, George Eliot, Scott, Balzac, Stendhal, Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky as a leading practitioner of the novel.

In *The Historical Novel*, Georg Lukács argued that Thackeray "is an outstanding critical realist. He has deep ties with the best traditions of English literature, with the great social canvases of the eighteenth century [in the work of novelists Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett in particular]."

Famously, Karl Marx, in his 1854 *New York Tribune* article, "The English Middle Class," included Thackeray, along with Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, as belonging to that "splendid" group "of fiction-writers in England, whose graphic and eloquent pages have issued to the world more political and social truths than have been uttered by all the professional politicians, publicists and moralists put together."

These writers, Marx indicates, have specialized in depicting "every section of the middle class." And how have they painted this social grouping? "As full of presumption, affectation, petty tyranny and ignorance; and the civilised world have confirmed their verdict with the damning epigram that it has fixed to this class that 'they are servile to those above, and tyrannical to those beneath them.'"

Thackeray's major novels, *Vanity Fair*, *Barry Lyndon*, *Pendennis* (1848–1850) and *The History of Henry Esmond* (1852), along with rambling, uneven but still occasionally fascinating works, like *The Newcomes* (1855) and *The Virginians* (1857–1859), can hardly be recommended too highly. The new television series, in so far as it captures much of Thackeray's intent, also deserves an audience.

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