The Representation of Sexuality And Gender
In William Makepeace Thackeray's
Vanity Fair

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Abstract

This paper inquires into the dynamics of gender and sexuality in one of the most acclaimed nineteenth-century texts, William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, as these issues are not sufficiently addressed in its extensive critical appraisal. While drawing on feminist and gender-focused critique, the paper explores Thackeray’s representation of women, gendered power relations, sexuality as a site for power, and societal strategies that delimit female agency and exclude women from the public sphere. The discussion of society’s ideas about gender-specific functional domains; cultural constructs of womanhood, motherhood, and propriety; stereotypes that enhance cultural normative structures; and recurrent literary iconic figures is instrumental in examining the ways in which Thackeray’s female characters either break through the representational confinements of the nineteenth-century gender discourses, or find their agencies impended by and entrapped in the patriarchal law of Victorian culture. Thackeray positions his characters in a society that is clearly patriarchal, yet he exposes various human vanities and vices rather than intentionally offering a critique of the circumscribed role of women. However, issues of gender are compellingly epitomized in Thackeray’s main character, Becky Sharp, the social upstart who consistently defies and transgresses nineteenth-century gender roles and thus unbalances established power relations. By representing Becky as a trespasser of societal norms, Thackeray himself violates social conventions, challenges traditional assumptions about women, and questions the Victorian ideal of domesticity.
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In her comprehensive study on William Thackeray and women, Micael M. Clarke states: “[I]t is a puzzle why *Vanity Fair* is not more studied and appreciated by feminist critics today. One explanation for this anomaly is that Thackeray’s complex, highly allusive, and ironic narrative voice is rather perplexing, and so *Vanity Fair* is not taught nor read nearly so often as it deserves” (69). Another reason for this “anomaly” is that influential feminist criticism, from the 1970s onwards, focused primarily on women’s literature while inquiring into Victorian constructs of gender. David Glover and Cora Kaplan explain that this gynocritically oriented group of leading feminist scholars unambiguously aligns itself with the proto-feminist protagonists of this [Victorian] period and their authors, seeing both as pioneering forerunners of late twentieth-century bourgeois women heroically struggling against the limitations of marriage, exclusion from public life and the still active double standard of sexual morality. (20)

There was yet another tendency that emerged in the 1980s, whose proponents were—if not exactly claiming Victorian grand men of letters, including Thackeray, as feminist writers—quite vigorously emphasizing that men’s literature was part of a Victorian “feminism.”

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Given these diverging vectors in scholarship, I intend to examine here the dynamics of gender and sexuality in Thackeray’s novel, as these issues are not sufficiently addressed in its extensive critical appraisal. Although my theoretical and critical scope is limited, my paper, nevertheless, offers supplementary insights into both hidden and explicit aspects of gender formation, as well as into the process of utilizing and fixing certain ideas about gender and sexuality in the work of one of the most celebrated writers of the nineteenth century whose *Vanity Fair* enjoyed enormous popularity.

I am going to draw on feminist and gender-focused critique and some elements of theory, while examining Thackeray’s representation of women, gendered power relations, sexuality as a site for power, and societal strategies that delimit agency in order to efface the possibility of transgression and exclude women from the public sphere. By firmly positioning women in domestic spaces and turning family into “a cell of visibility,” to use Michel Foucault’s expression (249), society ensures control and self-discipline of a female subject. Within the framework of this discussion, the paper will explore:

— commodification of human relations, including the economy of exchange between men and women that regulates the gendered body;

— bourgeois morality as a mode of discipline and its duplicitous gendered standards;

— stereotypes that further enhance cultural normative structures through designated Others:
a) Frenchness as the point of departure in the definition of Englishness and English femininity, and

b) Orientalist ideas and their impact on gender ideology;

- angel-in-the-house cultural construct against which the Victorian ideals of femininity and motherhood are measured and inscribed and which solidifies the asymmetries of gendered power dynamic;

- governess as the figure permeating the boundary between the private (voluntary or domestic) and the public (governmental or market-related) spheres;

- Becky as a driving force in unbalancing power relations through her transgression of gender and class boundaries.

Through the discussion of these issues, the paper will examine the ways in which Thackeray's female characters either break through the representational confinements of the nineteenth-century gender discourses, or find their agencies impended by and entrapped in the patriarchal law of Victorian culture.

Additionally, at certain points in my discussion, I will compare *Vanity Fair* with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the “cult text” of a feminist individualism (Spivak 263), to look into convergences and divergences in the articulations of femininity by male and female authors. These novels theoretically represent two gendered poles of narrative structure; in men's novels, as one critic contends, characters were placed in a “broader intellectual framework” that “dictated” the artistic composition of the narrative, while women's novels “concentrated on the characters themselves” (Showalter 88). Regardless of these differences in narrative structural motors, both Thackeray and Brontë draw on similar social
and literary conventions. Moreover, being set in the great age of British Empire engaged in redrawing the world map and in forging new gender and sexual identities (Siegel 205-206), both novels allude to the facts of empire, which Edward Said calls "a structure of attitude and reference" (62).

Thackeray positions his characters in a society that is clearly patriarchal, yet he exposes various human vanities and vices (McMaster 320) rather than intentionally offering a critique of the circumscribed role of women. James Phelan suggests that Thackeray, through his female characters' respective quest journeys, conducts a wide-ranging study of society: "He uses Amelia to explore the workings of vanity in the private sphere—the realm of the home and the heart—and he uses Becky to explore those workings in the public sphere—the realm of social climbing and social status" (48-49). Issues of gender are compellingly exemplified in Becky Sharp, who consistently violates and transgresses Victorian gender roles. Because the novel is about two very different women, the issues of "proper" boundaries of behavior (and the interdicted boundaries of gender in particular), power, and sexual propriety come powerfully together as their characters unfold. Thackeray provides a unified analysis of gender inequality and comments on the differing moral codes that governed women's and men's daily existence.

The writer's attitude towards his main character shifts back and forth between frank moralism and proud admiration, a shifting which is not surprising given the unitary and almost inescapable model of female propriety in Victorian England. Developing the line of argument proposed by the authors of Corrupt Relations:
Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope, Collins, and the Victorian Sexual System, Clarke explains such fluctuating attitudes as follows: Thackeray and other Victorian male authors recognized the harm the Victorian sexual system inflicted on women, but because they benefited from this system, they wrote evasively about it in their novels (13). In addition, according to Donald Stone, another factor that accounts for Thackeray's ambivalent feeling towards Becky is the quasi-biographical affinity between the author and his heroine, who exhibits the restlessness and vigor characteristic of the enterprising bourgeoisie, because “[t]he energies which make her (for a time) a social success are akin to those which made him a creative artist” (quoted in Showalter 23-24). In light of this statement, Becky Sharp’s relationship with her creator evokes Gustave Flaubert’s proverbial comment that he himself is his famous character, Emma Bovary (Higonnet 76).

As a satirist, Thackeray’s favorite subject was human follies and vices (McMaster 321), and in examining his particular stress on female failings in Vanity Fair, it is essential to discuss whether there is a certain degree of misogynistic animus that manifested itself in hostility towards independently minded and sexually powerful women, or gender bias that was typical in ways characteristic of the period. “Gender,” as Joan Roughgarden tells us in Evolution’s Rainbow, “usually refers to the way a person expresses sexual identity in a cultural context. Gender reflects both the individual reaching out to cultural norms and society imposing its expectations on the individual” (27). She also emphasizes the performative aspect of gender and its historical nature (27).
That gender was such a distinctly crucial divide in nineteenth-century Victorian society is fundamental to explaining the construction and maintenance of power relations between men and women and the close relationship that existed between the organization of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, it explains the moral and social principles by which Becky Sharp is judged. Placed in a position of dependence because of her gender, but endowed with plenty of intellect and an enormously resourceful drive for survival, she embraces the ethos of male individualism and the “self-made man” ideology that was central to English bourgeois masculinity in the nineteenth century and from which women were excluded. In addition, “upstart women were accused of mannishness” (Kuchta 20) because they both destabilized the social order and disrupted gender codes. Becky Sharp’s “mannishness,” then, is embodied in her status-seeking determination to excel in high society by becoming an active player in the accumulation of wealth and commodity exchange.

The title *Vanity Fair*, taken from John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, clearly alludes to the commodification of human relationships and to the register of societal vices—some of them are explicitly gender specific—in the town of Vanity. On his journey to the Celestial City, Pilgrim encounters a site of symbolic exchange where everything is turned into goods:

Honours, Preferments, Titles, Countreys, 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. And moreover, at this Fair there is at all
times to be seen Juglings, Cheats, Games, Plays, Fools, Apes, Knaves, and Rogues, and that of all sorts. Here are to be seen too, and that for nothing, Thefts, Murders, Adultries, False-swearers, and that of a blood-red colour. (73)

Thackeray uses the Fair as an organizing metaphor of his characters' pilgrimage through the hypocrisy and acquisitiveness of Victorian society. The title of Thackeray's novel expresses the purpose of the book to contrast corruption and integrity. Its viewpoint is an extremely disillusioned one, focusing on self-interest as the well-spring of all human actions. Intelligent people like Becky Sharp, Miss Crawley, Miss Pinkerton, and Lord Steyne recognize this and act accordingly, while those who are not—Amelia Sedley and Briggs—are simply too foolish to further their own interests. In a mischievous work that plays on the juxtaposition of vices and virtues, the virtuous often seem weak or deficient: "She was a very good woman," Thackeray says of Lady Grizzel, "good to the poor: stupid, blameless, unsuspicous" (590). If she had been a brazen philanderer or thief, he could not have blasted her more effectively. But Thackeray's greatest creation, Becky Sharp, lives by discovering the weaknesses of others and flattering their vanity or stimulating their lust for her own capital gain,² while she herself remains cold and calculating.

² As a child, Becky had learned to deceive and flatter in order to obtain favors. Moreover, her early experience with artistic circles makes her despise the shabby decorum of Miss Pinkerton's establishment, the conventionality and moral standards of the bourgeoisie, and the ineptitude of the upper classes, with whom she comes increasingly in contact. She secretly marries Rawdon Crawley, the son of her employer, Sir Pitt Crawley, and in spite of her low origin and poverty, manages to make her way in high society of Paris and London. The climax of the novel comes when Becky, having made her way triumphantly into
Becky demonstrates, quite early in the novel, an enviable aptitude in the monstrous operations of a “free market” under the capitalist order, which dehumanizes people by turning them into commodities and fetishizes the product of human work by alienating it from its maker. One of the first signals that Becky is not going to accept the role of either object of exchange or passive observer in a society, which is driven by the desire for acquisition and profit, comes when Miss Pinkerton, Becky’s mistress at Chiswick, orders her young French teacher to instruct the younger pupils in music. While Miss Pinkerton plans to economize on hiring a music master, Becky rebels against this attempted exploitation of her labor:

The girl refused; and for the first time, and to the astonishment of the majestic mistress of the school. ‘I am here to speak French with the children,’ Rebecca said abruptly, ‘not to teach them music, and save money for you. Give me money, and I will teach them.’ (51)

Thus, Becky is already viewing her services and talents strictly in terms of economic exchange, and their value as productive assets.

society under the patronage of Lord Steyne—and preying upon his purse to the benefit of herself and her husband Rawdon Crawley—has her husband, still for their mutual benefit, shut up for debt. While she is entertaining Lord Steyne at her house, Rawdon Crawley gets out of prison and unexpectedly comes home. Becky’s husband breaks off relations with her, and she continues a vagabond life in places of questionable repute on the Continent, where she eventually manages to get an insurance legacy from her old flame, Jos Sedley, after his death. Becky, assuming a mask of respectability, piety and philanthropy, is well received in Bath where she is thought to have been the victim of poor treatment. Our last sight of Becky is as a wealthy and charitable lady arranging stalls at fancy fairs.
The language of commodification permeates the social structure of *Vanity Fair*. Young women are “finished” so that they can marry well (246), “people’s daughters are universally sold in marriage” (152), and “every sporting gentleman of Vanity Fair” only wishes to “take that fair advantage,” which he almost considers as “his due from his neighbour” (210). Thackeray’s critique of the Victorian marriage-market is discussed by Phelan, who uses Becky’s meeting with Jos Sedley in Chapter Three to inquire into “little schemes” (Thackeray 57) and patterns of courtship behavior elaborately designed by “mamas” for husband-hunting expeditions. According to Phelan, Thackeray is “making his apologia for Becky” (51) by showing that her conniving to marry Jos is no different than habitual societal practices and strategies in marital arrangements:

If Miss Rebecca Sharp had determined in her heart upon making the conquest of this big beau, I don’t think, ladies, we have any right to blame her; for though the task of husband hunting is generally, and with becoming modesty, entrusted by young persons to their mammas, recollect that Miss Sharp had no kind parent to arrange these delicate matters for her. (Thackeray 57)

Thackeray unambiguously explores and exposes the goings-on in society through his characters and indicates, albeit satirically, his discomfort with the system of courtship and marriage that forces women into blatantly marketing themselves for men.

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In addition to positioning herself, on the male-dominated commodity exchange, predominantly as a subject, not a conventional female passive object of commerce, Becky is also violating the social taboo regarding the rigidity of class boundaries by setting her mind so determinedly on Jos. Becky, the governess, performs her femininity in order to facilitate her entry into upper-class culture: “She was dressed in white, with bare shoulders as white as snow—the picture of youth, unprotected innocence, and humble virgin simplicity. ‘I must be very quiet,’ thought Rebecca, ‘and very much interested about India’” (60).

Becky, who becomes thoroughly conditioned in the hypocrisy of selling and buying, enthusiastically partakes in the courtship ritual, being determined to trade her charms for social status.

The corruption of love and family under the pervasive influence of the market and the desires it unleashes is represented in the climax of the novel when Rawdon Crawley, eagerly rushing to his wife after a painfully long night in jail, unexpectedly comes home to find Becky entertaining Lord Steyne:

He took out his door-key and let himself into his house. He could hear laughter in the upper rooms. He went silently up the stairs. . . . Becky was singing a snatch of the song of the night before; a hoarse voice shouted ‘Brava! Brava!’—it was Lord Steyne. Rawdon opened the door and went in. A little table with a dinner was laid out—and wine and plate. Steyne was hanging over the sofa on which Becky sat. (619)

In this melodramatic Victorian tableau, Becky is shown as a sexualized creature of appetite, comfortably consuming men and their money. However, the roles in
this scene do not seem to be that unambiguous because Lord Steyne’s posture more overtly suggests that he is about to consume Becky. The subject-object position here is not rigidly defined and fixed. On the one hand, Becky can be seen as an insatiable consumer; on the other, to assume the “self-made” position of a man, she must become an object of consumption. In essence, Becky and Lord Steyne are represented as parties involved in a business transaction that is interrupted by Rawdon.

By placing her sexuality on display and turning it into commodity, Becky repudiates the sexual prudishness that is so fundamental to the Victorian mainstream. She is not the idealized version of Victorian womanhood, inherently modest and barely sexual, but a startling hybrid of the tainted and the beautiful, an object to be gazed on:

The wretched woman was in a brilliant full toilette, her arms and all her fingers sparkling with bracelets and rings; and the brilliants on her breast that Steyne had given her. He had her hand in his and was bowing over it to kiss it, when Becky started up with a faint scream as she caught sight of Rawdon’s white face. . . . (620)

Here Becky’s role as admired and glamorous courtesan—magically free from any marital bonds—is abruptly changed by Rawdon’s sudden appearance. It switches to that of an adulterous wife, and her sparkling rings and bracelets become emblems of corruption when she pleads her innocence:

There was that in Rawdon’s face which caused Becky to fling herself before him. ‘I am innocent, Rawdon,’ she said, ‘before God I am innocent!’
She clung hold of his coat, of his hands; her own were all covered with serpents, and rings, and baubles. 'I am innocent.' She stood there trembling before him... and he left her without another word. (620)

The reader seems to be left with the impression that this scoundrel, who has literally lived upon the schemes of his wife, is somehow better than she is because he poses as the injured party. This episode exemplifies what Clarke sees as Becky's function in the text. She terms Becky a "barometer of sexual mores" and Thackeray's "instrument of discovery" because every moment of Becky's movement within and through society exposes "duplicitous sexual standards" (100). Clarke also points out that Rawdon's youth was not without shady activities with immoral companions, which social convention does not denounce as unseemly. His misdemeanors remain in the grey area, out of society's scrutiny:

The times are such that one scarcely dares to allude to that kind of company which thousands of our young men in Vanity Fair are frequenting everyday, which nightly fills casinos and dancing-rooms... but which the most squeamish if not the most moral of societies is determined to ignore.

(Thackeray 570)

Rawdon's discovery of Becky's infidelity is shaped into a scene that is managed very intensely and effectively. Becky is represented here as a manipulator of human relations who trades on her beauty and desirability. Although carefully conceived, Becky's "marketing" scheme is frustrated because
under the double-standard morality, men get preferential treatment, while women, who break the rules, are disciplined and severely punished.

It is noteworthy that the duplicitous standards discussed by Clarke, the representation of which might have been attributed to Thackeray's gender bias as a male writer, are also glaringly portrayed in Jane Eyre. Rochester, for example, secretly maintains surveillance over his unfaithful lover Céline, censures her for being involved in an extramarital relation, and yet, by his own admission to Jane, himself turns to mistresses for succor after discovering the madness of his Caribbean wife. Although the distribution of roles, in this particular context, is almost identical in Jane Eyre and Vanity Fair, Rochester's role tends to be more convoluted. He seems to be both a lover—he is still married to Bertha—and a quasi-husband, who provides money and on whom Céline cheats. Nevertheless, the revelation scenarios in both novels are surprisingly similar; Rochester, like Rawdon, interrupts his lover while she entertains another man in her private apartment. Both situations include women objectified by flashy gifts of clothes and jewelry, the source of which is clearly identified, and thus once more reinforces power positions. While the two women can possess sexual power over the two men—which is clearly destructive—the two men are figures of economic power, which is categorically abused by these two wicked and unscrupulous women. So Rochester describes to Jane his lover's crimes and his own outrage:

The couple were thus revealed to me clearly: both removed their cloaks, and there was the 'Varens' shining in satin and jewels,—my gifts, of
course—and there was her companion in a officer's uniform...my love for Celiné sank under an extinguisher....Opening the window I walked in upon them; disregarded screams, hysterics, prayers, protestations, convulsions. (Brontë 139-140)

Rochester's unexpected appearance, like Rawdon's, enforces patriarchal law and privilege, simultaneously underlining the masculine prerogative of sexual freedom that he has clearly enjoyed. Additionally, both scenes shore up a gendered dynamics of power and authority, registered by the male characters' abrupt departure from the painful scenes, without one further thought for the women they leave behind. The connection of both women to bejeweled French "opera dancers"—Céline, a dancer, and Becky, the daughter of one—functions as the signifier of the passionate and impure woman, but, more importantly, defines the proper boundaries of behavior for English womanhood.

Becky's "Frenchness" evokes associations with certain attitudes and stereotypes, which further enhances her "deviance." First, it alludes to a lengthy geopolitical rivalry between Britain and France, which Said characterizes as an intense competition along two major lines—"the battle for strategic gains abroad... and the battle for a triumphant nationality" (83). While discussing the nineteenth-century Anglo-French contest for European supremacy, which inviolably contrasted "Englishness" with "the French," Said refers to Thackeray's Becky Sharp as a show-case of xenophobic attitudes in English society because, according to him, this character "is as much an upstart as she is because of her half-French heritage" (83). Second, the French are stereotypically associated
with libertine behavior, and women, specifically, with unbridled sensuality and charm. France, for example, has traditionally been regarded as a "pernicious source of erotic literature," and its "perversity" has been long diagnosed as "almost exclusively a French disorder" (Rosario 5). In addition, there is a superimposition of this "national" stereotype on a "professional" one. A woman on the stage, according to Tracy Davis, was automatically assumed to be of looser morals than other women because of her "allure, and flouting of sexual mores" (70). Finally, both Becky and Céline prove incapable of proper and caring motherhood, giving up their offspring to others to care for. Adèle Varens, Céline's daughter, is adopted by Rochester, and Rawdon Jr. is, likewise, willingly given over to the care of Lady Jane at Queens Crawley.

It is not surprising, then, that through a half-French female character, *Vanity Fair* conlates sexual aggressiveness with Napoleon's military campaign in Europe, where much of the novel's action takes place. There seems to exist an implicit parallel between Napoleon's victorious conquest of Europe and Becky's successful advances on the Parisian scene—she "penetrated into the very centre of fashion" (587). The emperor is also recurrently referred to as the "Corsican upstart" (63, 211) as though to reinforce the similarity between them. However,

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Thackeray charts different trajectories related to Becky's endeavors and makes her identity vacillate within a wide spectrum of representations.

His exploration of Becky's character draws not just on Francophobe stereotypes, but employs more exotic ones related to European visions of the Orient. The writer places Becky in a position of ultimate submission, while staging a scene of upper-class decadence with a harem charade in Lord Steyne's house—"the amiable amusement of acting charades" is said to have come "among us from France" (593). The harem sketch alludes to a forbidden world of women, caged and unattainable sexuality, and male domination. The vignette is populated by women in "gorgeous Oriental costume[s]," who are put on display as objects of commerce at slave markets: "'Bid the slave-merchant enter,' says the Turkish voluptuary, with a wave of his hand. Mesrour conducts the slave-merchant into my lord's presence: he brings a veiled female with him. He removes her veil. A thrill of applause bursts through the house" (594). The performance appeals to male instincts of possession and supremacy and assigns woman the role of an enchanting seductress combined with that of a sex slave.

Likewise, themes of sexual license are integral to Jane Eyre's relationship to Rochester, in the framework of which the disturbing harem metaphor appears to illustrate a troubled relationship between women's autonomy and equality in love. Rochester claims to value Jane more than a whole "seraglio"; she sees his "sultan's" smile but scornfully repudiates the equivalency established by "Eastern

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allusion" (268). In addition to the harem parallel, Brontë depicts Rochester's charade of courtship, which involves cross-dressing, power play, and mystification and in which Rochester appears in a guise of an old fortune-teller, the "brown and black" (192) gypsy, who is "a shockingly ugly old creature as black as a crock" (188). The race rhetoric in the description of yet another oriental apparition also evokes clichéd associations with nomadic tribes, whose "barbaric" lifestyle has been traditionally seen as inferior to an orderly, civilized Western world and its values.6

These brief touches of exoticism in both Thackeray and Brontë, which explicitly draw on asymmetrical power relations between genders, have rather telling ideological implications. They are related to a colonial project of "defining" the peripheries of empire exposed and analyzed by Said in his influential Orientalism (1977). One of the major premises in these definitions and imaginary constructs involves a distinct gender aspect since the colonized nations were represented as essentially feminine races, where femininity as a racial trait was

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6 The rhizomatic nomads as an alternative to Western arborescent civilization are discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

According to one of the beliefs, gypsies had been nomadic inhabitants of Bohemia before they first appeared at the gates of Paris and were refused entry, in 1427 (Highwater 165). Jamake Highwater contends that the term "bohemianism" applied to intellectuals and artists derives from the lifestyle of gypsies and says that it was Thackeray who "officially introduced the outcast connotation of the term 'bohemian' into English in his 1848 novel Vanity Fair" (165).
linked with subordination to the “masculine” colonizer. This imperial undertaking also revealed covert processes of gender and sexual identity construction in the metropolis by creating one of the biggest mystifications of Orientalism—an over-pervasive myth of oriental sensuality. The harem, one of this myth’s central symbols that turned into a locus for articulation of desire, mirrored Western psychosocial needs and provided the space on which to project fantasies of illicit eroticism. This stereotype drew on diverse sources, such as the translation of Bahmane, a Turkish sixteenth-century guide, which became popular in Europe in the nineteenth century, numerous nineteenth-century pornographic novels representing the harem as the “garden of delight” in the manner of The Lustful Turk (1828), and a wide range of travel writing.

These Orientalist details in both Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre seem to support Said’s statement that all major English novelists of the mid-nineteenth century “accepted a globalized world-view and indeed could not (in most cases did not) ignore the vast overseas reach of British power” (76). Throughout his discussion, Said refers to a large number of literary texts, which includes both novels. He terms Bertha Mason, Rochester’s crazy wife from West Indies, “a threatening presence, confined to an attic room” (62). One should also add St.


8 I am grateful to Maryna Romanets, who allowed me access to her current research on this fascinating subject.

John’s plans that involve marriage to Jane and their further missionary work in India, as well as the fortune Jane inherits from her deceased uncle, John Eyre, who leaves her all his wealth accrued from Madeira, a tropical island in the Atlantic. Most importantly, crucial changes in Jane’s life are eventuated by various “colonial” factors: malignant, in the case of Bertha; impedimental, in the case of Mr. Mason’s mysterious arrival from Spanish Town in Jamaica, which intervenes and stops Jane’s marriage to Rochester; and facilitatory, in the case of the arrival of the unexpected fortune. However, Said’s register of Thackeray’s colonial allusions looks more impressive than his brief reference to Brontë’s Bertha:

Thackeray’s Joseph Sedley in *Vanity Fair* is an Indian nabob whose rambunctious behavior and excessive (perhaps undeserved) wealth is counterpointed with Becky’s finally unacceptable deviousness, which in turn is contrasted with Amelia’s propriety, suitably rewarded at the end; Joseph Dobbin is seen at the end of the novel engaged serenely in writing a history of the Punjab. (Said, 62)

It is interesting that the “geography” of male mobility, in both *Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre*, includes the “peripheries” of British Empire, but neither Becky nor Jane takes a passage to India because Jane declines St. John’s proposal, and Becky fails to net Jos Sedley, “the fat officer in the East Indian service” (Thackeray 333), into marriage. Men, as free agents, roam the empire, while women, for different reasons, are either firmly positioned within a small area in their homelands (Jane), or enjoy somewhat limited mobility that takes them as far
as Europe (Becky). However, both male characters, involved in a colonial enterprise, are strategically eliminated by their respective authors.

Although Said elaborates on the aspects of colonial discourse, his above statement contains observations concerning Becky's "deviousness" and Amelia's "propriety" that once again highlight the binary opposition in the structure of Thackeray's narrative. In one of the first groundbreaking studies on nineteenth-century women's literature, Susan M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that in "patriarchal texts ... for every glowing portrait of submissive women enshrined in domesticity, there exists an equally important negative image that embodies ... sacrilegious fiendishness" (28) and refer to "angelically submissive" Amelia and "stubbornly autonomous" Becky as an exemplary case (29).

*Jane Eyre* also utilizes this antithetical paradigm by playing out a number of structural dichotomies but investing them with personalized meanings. It has its own Angel—Helen Burns, who, according to Elaine Showalter, is "the perfect victim and the representation of the feminine spirit in its most disembodied form" (118) and a no less perfect manifestation of ultimate goodness (deprived of maternal and domestic components). Gilbert and Gubar, however, have their own candidate for the angel position—Miss Temple, "who dispenses food to the hungry, visits the sick, encourages the worthy, and averts her glances from the unworthy" (344). Both of them turn out to be vanishing angels though: Helen is disposed of by death, Miss Temple, by marriage.

As a monstrous alternative for the angel, Brontë's novel features Bertha
Mason described by Jane as “fearful and ghastly,” with “a discoloured face... a savage face... [and] the roll of the red eyes and the fearful blackened inflation of the lineaments” (283). Bertha comes across as a representation of female deviance, threatening sexuality, and beastliness, “a racialized creature... without gender or human attributes” (Glover and Kaplan 26). Likewise, *Vanity Fair* is not utterly limited to the opposition between Becky and Amelia, for it features Bertha’s milder counterpart, Miss Swartz, “the woolly-haired young heiress from St Kitts” (153), an orphan who inherits her mother’s color and her father’s vast fortune, and moves to London, after her father’s death, to find a white husband. Although Miss Swartz is a marginal character, her presence signals another of Thackeray’s colonial trajectories. He places Miss Swartz as best friend to Amelia Sedley. After her father’s loss of fortune, the disgraced Amelia can only look good next to the hideous vanity of Miss Swartz in her “turquoise-bracelets, countless rings, flowers, feathers, and all sorts of tags and gimcracks, about as elegantly decorated as a she chimney-sweep on May Day” (252). The racially “impure,” ungainly woman enhances the fortuneless white woman, thus showing how wealth can be sabotaged by race, while at the same time embellishing the ladylike Amelia.

In her intolerable virtue, Amelia, Becky’s antagonist and boarding-school friend, is opposed to explicit and implicit portrayals of the transgressive and exotic femininities previously discussed. Her devotion to George Osborne borders on fixation; she does not even seem to notice the volatility of the European situation and political turmoil that take her, with George, to Brussels.
Thackeray casts Amelia’s fascination with George in the idiom correlated with supreme authority, power, and imperial masculinity. The metonymic relationship established between George and the whole continent of Europe reflects the all-absorbing nature of Amelia’s feelings:

...the fate of Europe was Lieutenant George Osborne to her.... He was her Europe: her emperor: her allied monarchs and august prince regent. He was her sun and moon; and I believe she thought the grand illumination and ball at the Mansion House given to the sovereigns, were especially in honour of George Osborne. (151)

Alongside this blind adoration, Amelia embodies the quintessential goodness that is utterly dormant in Becky. She provides an important panoptical vantage point—to use Foucault’s term—from which to evaluate Becky’s character because she also brings a contrasting set of values embodying cherished ideals of self-sacrifice and submission. Yet Amelia is not altogether an attractive figure because of her continuous self-abasement in her relations with George. Elizabeth Langland goes so far as to say that “[s]he is not as good as her society would like to believe” (78). However, she achieves some measure of redemption at the end of the novel and is able to renounce her allegiance to George and his memory. She marries the faithful Dobbin, but only because Becky tells Amelia about Osborne’s plans of elopement. In addition to her unconditional love for George, Amelia is an exemplary mother as opposed to Becky, who cannot like children anymore than the Devil can like Holy water (534).
There is little doubt that Amelia occupies the idealized position of the
angel in the house, a figure with which feminist writers and critics have had an
ambivalent relationship. In her essay "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf,
for example, denounced this emblematic representation of self-effacing
womanhood, launched into circulation by Coventry Patmore's The Angel in the
House (1835):

I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She
was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the
difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken,
she took the leg; if there was a draft she sat in it—in short she was so
constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred
to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others. (278)

Woolf saw her war waged against the Victorian "ideology of domesticity" as part
of the mission of a woman writer and was determined to kill the Angel in the
House.

Woolf's belligerent attitude, however, has been challenged by later
feminist critics. Nina Auerbach's Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian
Myth presents a subversive rereading of Victorian culture and reassesses a
range of its cultural codes and conventions. Auerbach's interpretation confronts
Woolf's project of assassinating the domesticated angel, as well as questions
clichéd views of certain stereotypes: "When more properly understood, the angel
in the house, along with her seemingly victimized Victorian sisters, is too strong
and interesting a creation for us to kill" (12). Auerbach talks about the
transformative potential of femininity myths and invests this potential with women’s power because an angel could “modulate almost imperceptibly into a demon, while retaining her aura of changelessness” (107). She unties the meaning of ostensibly fixed feminist concepts by turning them upside down and providing yet a different angle for their understanding, but her line of argument in no way undermines the centrality of the Victorian myth of ideal womanhood.

The concept of “angel in the house” is linked by Katherine M. Rogers to the nineteenth-century exaltation of women (192). They were the nobler half of the human race, whose role was to elevate men’s sensibilities and inspire their higher impulses. Women were purer, more religious, and more devoted. As Joan Perkin observes in *Women and Marriage in Nineteenth-Century England*, the middle classes had a strong faith in the “angel of the house with her special mission of raising the moral and material standards of the home, and in the outside world” (314). As members of the delicate sex, and objects of virtuous love, women, according to Auguste Compte, represent “veneration, attachment, and kindness. We are to regard them whether dead or alive, as our guardian angels” (quoted in Nathan 145). Anglican minister Charles Kingsley, in *Yeast* (1848), draws an allegorical picture of the “Triumph of Woman” in which Woman moves through a desert with flowers springing up beneath her feet (124) and inspires love and tenderness in everyone she meets, for her heart “enshrines the priceless pearl of womanhood... before which gross man can only inquire and adore” (127-128).
Clarke notes that for Victorian society women’s issues were emphatically a public matter and presented the platform for the debate between the proponents of women’s rights and the articulations of femininity promoted by conservative public commentators. She states that “even apparently antifeminist rhetoric served to expand the arena of women’s activities” and refers to John Ruskin, who “urged middle-class women to use their special ‘womanly’ gifts to benefit society” (Clarke 8). Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies (1865), indeed, seems thus to be a classic nineteenth-century document on the natures and duties of men and women. Divided into two sections, Ruskin’s work critiques Victorian manhood in “Of Kings’ Treasuries,” and counsels women to take their place as the moral guides to men in “Of Queen’s Gardens,” advising parents to raise their daughters to that end:

We cannot determine what the queenly power of women should be, until we are agreed what their ordinary power should be. We cannot consider how education may fit them for any widely extending duty, until we are agreed what is their true and constant duty... quite vital to all social happiness. (134)

Ruskin draws a strict demarcation between men’s and women’s spheres of influence. He relegates women to a safe position of domesticity that “protects” them from all the dangers of the open world and its temptations, and sends men to the public battle fields to “encounter all peril and trial” (151). The obvious corollaries to this affecting picture, however, are that Woman must be protected because she is, by nature, intellectually and morally incapable of looking after
herself, and that her vocation is self-sacrifice and devotion of her life to ministering to men. Woman is naturally weak, and it clearly follows that any attempt that she may make at independence is doomed to failure; therefore, she must resign herself to a subordinate role, which is, of course, her calling in any case.

These views must have been so pervasive at the time that they almost became a part of the Victorian collective cultural unconscious. For example, R. S. Rintoul, London reviewer of Thackeray’s work for the *Spectator* in 1850, implies that every man, including Thackeray, should agree with the angelic view of women: “[E]very man who knows English society will acknowledge that the women are purer and less selfish than the men, not only in those classes which Mr. Thackeray chiefly depicts, but in all classes—and may we not add, in all countries and in all ages” (Rintoul 100). This statement testifies to the fact that critical circles must have devised a clear-cut framework in which to assess the representations of Victorian womanhood. That is why Rintoul reprimands Thackeray for being mostly impressed by women’s “foibles and selfishness” (100).

Yet Becky’s resistance to the overestimation of female purity and motherhood by the Victorians bespeaks an assumption of masculine entitlement to live one’s life in one’s own way, for which society eventually punishes her. However, she attributes societal strictures on her personal liberty to the meanness of her husband and all her old friends. By employing rhetoric and
gestures of melodramatic conventions, Becky performs the role of injured womanhood as if trying on a new, socially sanctioned persona:

‘All my friends have been false to me—all. There is no such thing as an honest man in the world. I was the truest wife that ever lived.... I was true, and he trampled upon me, and deserted me. I was the fondest mother. I had but one child, one darling, one hope, one joy, which I held to my heart with a mother’s affection, which was my life, my prayer, my—my blessing; and they—they tore it from me—tore it from me;' and she put her hand to her heart with a passionate gesture of despair, burying her face for a moment on the bed. (757)

In this speech, Becky refers to the two main social functions of women—wifehood and motherhood. However, the position that Thackeray is taking here is that Becky’s dalliances with Lord Steyne (and possibly others), and her failures as a mother compel dishonesty and subterfuge in the face of society’s continuous surveillance. For “although surveillance rests on individuals, its functioning is that of a network of relations from top to bottom... since it is everywhere and always alert,” observes Foucault in his discussion of disciplinary structures in society (176-177). Thus, Amelia’s queries to Becky about the removal of her son function as “alert” surveillance, and Becky, obviously taken by surprise at the question, is expected to have a ready answer: “The child, my child? Oh yes, my agonies were frightful,’ Becky owned, not perhaps without a twinge of conscience. It jarred upon her, to be obliged to commence instantly to tell lies in reply” (763).
Clarke suggests that Thackeray is trying to show the “psychological effects of gendered patterns of thought and behavior: men learning to like their women to be slaves, as he put it, and women learning to make gods of their men” (4). However, Becky’s protestations over her innocence in her dealings with her husband and son clearly show that Thackeray is skeptical about a society whose expectations coerce women into pretence and duplicity, particularly in the realm of domestic relations, because they are apprehensive about being seen as inappropriate wives and mothers. Furthermore, he evaluates the social conventions that promote the idea that only a woman, whose interests are limited exclusively to the domestic, the matrimonial and the maternal, is worthy of respect and adoration.

Amelia is an exemplary mother and a paragon of domesticity, in addition to her unconditional love for George. Becky, as Amelia’s antipode, is devoid of such qualities and sentiments since “gentle thoughts and simple pleasures were odious to Mrs. Becky; they discorded with her; she hated people for liking them; she spurned children and children-lovers” (534). Amelia redeems herself because, although foolish, she is endowed with a quality above most people—love. She embodies the “culturally idealized image of motherhood” discussed by Martha McMahon (27), which was indispensable for the concept of Victorian femininity and involved “an intense emotional relationship and exclusive maternal care of children” (McMahon 27). Thackeray’s portrayal of such an idealized “maternal care” further reinforces the antithetical relationship between Amelia and Becky:
She [Amelia] had to teach George to read and write, and a little to draw. She read books, in order that she might tell him stories from them. As his eyes opened, and his mind expanded, under the influence of the outward nature round about him, she taught the child, to the best of her humble power, to acknowledge the Maker of all.... (Thackeray 461)

Thackeray inspects the dichotomy of maternal and amaternal and shows how constricted and attenuated an ideal woman is in the harsh world of commodification and self-interest, and also how sanctimonious is the treatment of rambunctious Becky at the hands of morally false and hypocritical “Society.”

Further, Becky problematizes the usual gender distinctions between masculine/active and feminine/passive, and Thackeray shows this by her willingness to engage with the public sphere. As mentioned earlier, she embraces the “self-made man” ideology, and we see an example of this in an exchange between Becky and Rawdon as they speculate on his old aunt’s promises to leave Rawdon her money:

’S’Suppose the old lady doesn’t come to,’ Rawdon said to his little wife, as they sat together in the snug little Brompton lodgings. … ‘suppose she don’t come round, eh, Becky?’

‘I’ll make your fortune,’ she said; and Delilah patted Samson’s cheek.10

(204)

10 The Old Testament allusion to Samson, with his “disreputable career” full of “mavellous and diverting incidents,” and Delilah, “a false woman, who wormed from him the secret of his great strength and then betrayed him to his enemies” (Frazer 270), establishes a specific frame of reference for the relationship between Thackeray’s characters.
Once Becky has achieved success, however, she falls prey to public opinion that negatively characterizes women, especially those who are livelier and more sexually self-determined than other women, and is finally undone by her mistaken belief in her own prodigious powers to change moral and social reality.

Indeed, her lack of interest in the domestic sphere and her primary interest in the public, and the power it offers, are moral signs that she is incapable of the warmth and sympathy—as Ruskin would have it—that are supposed to mark the proper Victorian woman. Nancy Armstrong contends that "the social climbers of the 1840s invariably threaten to become intruders, if not tyrants in their own right, by pursuing individualistic goals" (52), and Thackeray, in fact, shows a tyrannical Becky shouting orders "in great wrath" (633) at her servants after Rawdon leaves her. Thackeray also seems to make a point that a social upstart, particularly when the upstart is a woman, produces anxiety, especially when she sets out to boldly make her fortune.

Becky understands too well the schism between feminine and masculine spheres but overestimates her talents to conquer the power system that forces people to conform to its values. Becky makes a fundamental error when she mistakenly believes that only money and position are the real determinants of "an honest woman's" sexual identity. Her speculations intertwine with the social construction of woman as both powerful and powerless agent, and with Thackeray's own assumption that sexuality acts as a categorization for "honest" women, which sometimes includes class distinctions:
'I could be a good woman if I had five thousand a year.... I could pay everybody if I had but the money. I could dawdle about the nursery, and count the apricots on the wall. ...This is what the conjurers here pride themselves upon doing. They look down with pity upon us miserable sinners who have none.' And who knows but Rebecca was right in her speculations—and that it was only a question of money and fortune that made the difference between her and an honest woman? (495-496)

The description clearly alludes to an enclosed, claustrophobic space, and Becky resists the incarceration in domesticity because it inhibits her ability to enact the self-made ideology that insures the fortunes for her and her husband. Although Thackeray is at his satirical best when representing a penniless upstart who invents an aristocratic background, he has been criticized for being too ambiguous to clearly fashion an insightful and morally powerful language to describe the dominant masculinist and hierarchical system in Victorian England (Clarke 4). However, in my view, here he sympathizes with women's plight by showing that social conventions need reforming, particularly those that equate "money and fortune" with "honest women" and marginalize fortuneless ones like Becky. If he were to write about rebels against the mechanisms of social coercion and control in general, male characters would have more than sufficed, but his choice to use women characters is important because it points towards his desire to expose the unjust position of women in Victorian society.

Additionally problematic for Thackeray are other social structures that reinforce gender lines within and between the private and the public. He explores
such divisions by featuring one of the most recurrent literary figures of the time, a figure that also occupies centre stage in *Jane Eyre*, the socially meandering governess. In her comprehensive discussion of the governess character in Victorian literature, Mary Poovey explains:

> That representations of the governess in the 1840s brought to her contemporaries' minds not just the middle class ideal she was meant to reproduce, but the sexualized and often working-class women against whom she was expected to defend, reveals the mid-Victorian fear that the governess could not protect middle class values because she could not be trusted to regulate her own sexuality. (170)

While Poovey reveals the sexual economy underpinning the governess issue, Millicent Bell presents another facet of the governess by arguing that the incongruities and difficulties of her role placed her outside the socially constructed feminine. Bell points out that governesses often suffered “from what the modern sociologist calls status incongruity“ (94). They had to uphold the rules of the household, even though they were disdained; they had to stand in authority as a mother, to be a symbol of perfection and an extension of the “angel of the house“ persona. The governess was acceptable only if she remained in her proper sphere—in the home, caring for children. However, “the governess

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11 In addition, both Becky Sharp and Jane Eyre represent another stock character—the female orphan. While examining Raymond Williams' views on Victorian novel as the space where both gender and genre undergo revision, Glover and Kaplan claim that “the female orphan stands for the anomie and misery of the alienated psychic life of men and women in industrial societies where communal feeling has been destroyed“ (19). Given the above conceptual implications of this recurrent character, Thackeray's and Brontë's orphans can be regarded as avatars of modernity's crisis.
had to be a lady to carry out her role” (Bell 94) despite the fact that it was clearly unrealistic in a society that was rigidly stratified. Being caught in between two different classes, neither a lady nor a servant, the governess found herself in the role of

a woman burdened with the task of upholding and transmitting the increasingly 'Victorian' domestic ideal, though she herself was single and unable to count on the prospect of a marriage; she was a 'lady' in the nineteenth-century sense of the term, yet anomalously earning her own living. (Bell 91)

Christine Doyle argues that Victorian culture made it “difficult for women to support themselves and to maintain respectability at the same time” because British society considered working to be so “fundamentally immoral” for middle-class women that governesses were considered “morally suspect” (144-145). In essence, because she worked, the governess was in the peculiar position of having one foot in the male sphere, and because she was required to be a model of womanhood and femininity, she had one foot in the female sphere. She was seen neither as fully human nor as specifically gendered; not being part of the family either, she was an object of suspicion and derision.

The governess opens up a world of complex and individuated character traits that are normally restricted in the angel-of-the-house figure. She has the power to enchant and fascinate the family, or like Miss Wirt in *Vanity Fair*, give into a warped angel-like persona. Becky Sharp is called a bewitcher, a sly little devil, a little fox, and a serpent; Jane Eyre is characterized as a toad, a mad cat,
a rat, and an elf by different characters throughout the novel. These recurrent parallels punitively relegate them outside both the family unit and human domain as eerie species of glorified outcasts—imagistic reflections of their socially undifferentiated governess status.

Jane Eyre talks oddly about her “powers” and conquers every environment she enters—especially Thornfield, one of the bleakest houses in British fiction. The first dialogue between Rochester and Jane as employer and employee is quite minimalistic; however, it contains Rochester’s reference to their prior encounter in the woods featuring Jane as an otherworldly creature:

No wonder you have rather the look of another world. I marvelled where you had got that sort of face. When you came on me in Hay Lane last night, I thought unaccountably of fairy tales, and had half a mind to demand whether you had bewitched my horse: I am not sure yet. (Brontë 117)

Jane unwittingly releases the stored up madness and passions of the house, but also manages to tame Thornfield and Rochester, tending the ruins of both by the end of the novel.

Becky relishes all the dissimulation and deceit that her acting requires of her while she tames every house she enters. Compared to the benign elfishness of Jane, Becky is transformed, even supernaturalized, in one of Thackeray’s descriptions into a lurking and dangerous creature. In a much quoted passage, Thackeray links her cold amphibious nature to a dangerous mermaid/siren, indifferent to the lives she destroys:
In describing this siren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster’s hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous.... When, however, the siren disappears and dives below, down among the dead men, the water of course grows turbid over her, and it is labour lost to look into it ever so curiously. They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good.... (738)

The image of the siren/mermaid is endowed with hidden, uncontrollable elemental powers. While examining this trope popular in Victorian culture, Auerbach argues that the mermaid is “a creature of transformation and mysterious interrelations, able to kill and to regenerate but not to die, unfurling in secret her powers of mysterious, pre-Christian, pre-human dispensation” (7). Beside this archetypal dimension, Thackeray draws here on a paradigm of the monstrous double so eloquently epitomized in the Dr. Jekyll—Mr. Hyde dichotomy at the end of the century. This aspect is also there in Brontë’s novel, whose Bertha, “submerged” in the attic, can be seen as a representation of
Jane's repressed desires (Showalter 118-119). But if for Brontë this duality signifies an unconscious and subconscious personality split, for Thackeray the danger of duplicity lies in its concealment and camouflage.

"Plain Jane's progress," to use Gilbert's and Gubar's phrase, and Becky Sharp's picaresque life reciprocate each other. Becky is a social climber, just like Jane Eyre is in her own way. Becky turns her ascent into a breathtaking art form that requires multiple talents of role-playing and deception, as well as enviable resourcefulness and entrepreneurial skills, to mold herself according to her own design until she finally loses at her own games. Jane, so passionate about her autonomy and so longing for equality, depends, to a certain degree, on exterior factors—Bertha's self-immolation, Rochester's mutilation, and her uncle's unexpected legacy, among others—to culminate her quest journey for selfhood by marrying Edward Rochester, which signifies, as Said suggests in his discussion of nineteenth-century English novels, the protagonist's accession to stability (71). Although Thackeray and Brontë draw on different aspects of

12 Armstrong argues that "the good marriage concluding fiction of this kind" is instrumental in resolving a number of socio-political conflicts, and thus these novels "helped to transform the household into what might be called the 'counterimage' of the modern marketplace, an apolitical realm of culture within the culture as a whole" (48). She also claims a central role for nineteenth-century women writers in the making of modern literature and culture. This view is not unanimously shared by critics, some of whom see it as problematic because it represents the femininity produced in Victorian texts authored by women as "endowed with an exaggerated and malign agency in the making of the modern self, an argument it would be difficult to sustain if we looked at a wider range of discourses on gender and identity" (Glover and Kaplan 22). Yet another aspect of the subject-constitution in Jane Eyre is examined by Spivak, who states that Bertha must kill herself "so that Jane Eyre can become the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (270). She sees Bertha's destruction as "an allegory of the general epistemic violence of imperialism, the construction of a self-
English novelistic tradition and invest different capacity for agency into their characters, both Becky and Jane, at the end, settle for much less than they aspire to because their experiences reveal the limits of what female agency allows.

In her extravagant rollercoaster societal ride, Becky does not realize the extent of the intertwining of the economic and the sexual in all its hypocritical glory, but, rather, considers money as merely the tangible representation of things she can buy. As Jeff Nunokawa describes it in *The Afterlife of Property*, the Victorians focused on the preservation and transmission of value through reproductive and familial relationships that defined a complicated association between the domestic, and the money accruing sphere reserved for men, the usual inheritors of wealth (29, 42). The images of lurking danger that surround Becky throughout *Vanity Fair* allude to the panic that can be set off by such a powerfully acquisitive and unabashedly aggressive woman. Acquisition is reserved for men, the lawful inheritors of land and estates, as is also the business sphere run by the marketplace, and the mysterious principles of its operation in the city. Hiding within the interests of the narrow and severely regulated economic world is the threat of gender and sexuality that problematizes the safety and security of property and possession.

The Crawley family's aversion to Becky's insinuating herself into the heart of old Sir Pitt is based on fears surrounding a beautiful but unworthy upstart damaging the "natural" progression of property through aristocratic heirs.

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immolating colonial subject for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (270).
Complicating things further, the drunken Sir Pitt Crawley boils with rage after he learns the news that his son Rawdon Crawley has married his Becky. There is an unspoken but blatant principle of ownership on Sir Pitt's part, laced with the feeling of loss of a potential sexual gratification, in this highly satiric portrayal that Thackeray draws of an old aristocratic reprobate's sexual longings for his richly sensual and young governess:

'Where's Becky?' he said, coming in. 'Where's her traps? She's coming with me to Queen's Crawley.'

'Have you not heard the astonishing intelligence regarding her surreptitious union?' Briggs asked. 'What's that to me?' Sir Pitt asked. 'I know she's married. That makes no odds. Tell her to come down at once, and not keep me.'

'Are you not aware, sir,... of Captain Crawley's union with her?'

When Sir Pitt Crawley heard that Rebecca was married to his son, he broke out into a fury of language... wild with hatred and insane with baffled desire... he burst like a madman into the room she had used... dashed open her boxes with his foot, and flung about her papers, clothes, and other relics. (203-204)

Becky challenges nineteenth-century ideas about what working women can aspire to, but her marriage venture does not succeed with members of her husband's family. Since she transgresses class boundaries by marrying above her station, Becky also endures the outrage of the extended Crawley family. This is primarily due to their basic and unremitting concern that she is nothing more
than a dangerous *femme fatale* concealing her duplicitous designs on wealthy members of the family. Becky becomes emblematic of a dangerous intrusion into the carefully guarded wealth of the ruling classes.

The gentry and aristocracy were as a class the substantial landowners of England, and, as Eileen Spring explains, “they owned the greater part of English land, and for long they owned the greater part of the nation’s total wealth.... These are the landowners who have left elaborate estate accounts, collections of correspondence, boxes of title deeds, and copies of family trees” (4). Marriage was “an important method of accumulating property” because of the demand that “brides bring more into marriage” (150). It is important, therefore, that Thackeray is presenting an emerging struggle of female sexuality against its restraint by male control, alongside the emerging struggle of capital investment outside of the traditional land-based economy.

This is made evident by Thackeray in the cheating and lying of Sir Pitt in his business affairs, his numerous lawsuits, ill-advised investment speculations, and his increasing demands on a woman—Becky, his object of “baffled desire”—to create order out of business chaos:

He speculated in every possible way; he worked mines; bought canal shares; horsed coaches; took government contracts; and was the busiest man and magistrate of his county. For want of proper precautions, his coal mines filled with water; the government flung his contract of damaged beef upon his hands; and as for his coach horses, every mail proprietor in the
kingdom knew that he lost more horses than any man in the country, from under-feeding and buying cheap.

Vanity Fair—Vanity Fair! Here was a man who could not spell, and did not care to read—who had the habits and cunning of a boor; whose aim in life was pettifogging... and yet he had rank and honours, and power, somehow.... (122-123)

Thackeray reconceives Sir Pitt not as a mere representative of the failures of nineteenth-century capitalism, although he certainly is a failure in that regard, but rather as a signifier of crude upper-class male hypocrisy. In turn, Becky deviously twists male practices in the business sphere. While Sir Pitt insatiably speculates “in every possible way,” Becky “gambles” her charms as a part of her social climbing. Carol Smart argues that Becky's unpredictable societal maneuvers make her a fundamentally “problematic and unruly body, whose sexual and reproductive capacities need constant surveillance and regulation because of the threat [she] would otherwise pose to the moral and social order” (8).

Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* inquires into societal mechanisms that allow for monitoring public behavior and thus eliminate any attempt at transgression, which threatens the established order and its compulsory boundaries. In the context of my discussion, Foucault's concept of prison discipline might operate as a metaphor for society’s surveillance and control over individuals along a gender divide. One of the disciplinary structures examined by Foucault is the Panopticon, a ring-like building with a tower for guards placed at the hub of this ring. The whole point of this arrangement is that the prisoners
should know that they are being observed and, more importantly, might be being observed (Waugh 511). The force of discipline thus shifts from “outside” to “inside” and leads to absolute self-restraint under potentially permanent scrutiny (Foucault 176-177). Within this structure, absolute surveillance and self-discipline ensure absolute obedience: “[T]here is no danger of a plot, an attempt at collective escape, the planning of new crimes” (Foucault 200).

This kind of prison regime illuminates the regime of personal regulation that monitored the gendered spheres of the Victorian era.\textsuperscript{13} Society’s ideas about gender specific functional domains, cultural constructs (womanhood, motherhood, propriety, etc.), stereotypical images of femininity, prescriptive behavioral patterns, among others, played the role of the discursive instruments of surveillance that induced women to self-regulate in their daily lives. Under these circumstances, family as a socio-economic institution and, by extension, the domestic sphere turn, in part, into a space of containment (cell), where women’s behavior can be monitored in the most efficient way. During the Victorian era, according to Elizabeth Paul, “self-control, discipline, delayed gratification, self-sacrifice, and repression characterized sexuality” (192).

Thackeray subverts the ideal of separate spheres and gendered entitlement to their control, and in its skilful inversion, Becky has Rawdon shut up in a debtors’ house, thereby reorganizing gendered power relations. He is confined and under a watchman’s surveillance; she is at large, a free agent,

\textsuperscript{13} Armstrong uses Foucault’s work to explore these issues in her influential study, \textit{Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).
working the public marketplace and trading on her charms: in this instance, entertaining Lord Steyne and manipulating him into giving her thousands of pounds. Becky is untroubled by her appearance outside the private sphere and neither is she anxious about leaving its safety. Becky’s failure to adequately self-regulate and adhere to those specific duties that belonged to her gender—the supervisory skills involved in running a household, and nurturing and caring for her family—brings about her downfall.14 “All her lies and schemes... all her wit and genius had come to this bankruptcy” (Thackeray 622), comments the narrator, as Becky surveys the wreckage after Rawdon comes home and spoils her evening with Steyne. She loses both her entry into high society, which was granted to her by introduction at royal court, and the husband whom she skillfully managed into getting a government appointment in the colonies.

_Vanity Fair_ is a novel without a hero, but fortunately it more than compensates for this lack in its memorable heroine. Thackeray’s ingenious relationship with this extraordinary heroine, his greatest fictional creation, is important because in documenting the adventures of Becky Sharp, he has affirmed the issues surrounding gender in the public sphere in the society that he

14 The strict division of public and private is not without controversy though. It has been contested in recent works on gender. Glover and Kaplan argue, for example, against fixed binaries of public and private, as well as against simplifying the dichotomy of passive and repressed Victorian womanhood versus liberated female agency and insist upon a more complex relationship between two spheres: “The ‘private’ in which middle class femininity was supposed to reside might have been a daily business of maternity, marriage and domestic life, but in ideological terms such femininity, conceived as a set of emotional attributes, did highly public work” (23). In this context, characters, whose representation advances the conventional Victorian views of the feminine, do not seem to be that straightforwardly imprisoned in the private. But this is a subject for further discussion and investigation.
knew—and Becky has to pay for her transgressive agency. By representing
Becky as a trespasser of societal norms, Thackeray himself violates social
conventions. Judith Fisher points out that “Thackeray’s challenge to established
assumptions about women became increasingly unorthodox” because he wanted
to question “the satisfaction of the Victorian domestic idyll” (111). The very
meaning of civil society was constructed through the significant exclusion of
women from the public sphere, but Thackeray sexualizes the public sphere with
the use of a female social upstart, who knows no fear in her rapid rise to the top
of “Society.” At the same time, however, Thackeray appeals many times over to
the females in his audience, humorously demonstrating women’s “evil” qualities,
yet creating a brilliant, clever, and assertive character, who is quite clearly
indispensable to the success of his novel. Becky breaks through and blatantly
defies gender enclosure like a prisoner breaking out of prison. Yet, if the prison
allusion is taken a step further, she is still subject to the panoptic gaze, whose
power nearly everyone else exercises and which causes her inevitable disgrace
from “Society.” Judith Mitchell contends that “female desire remained largely
unspeakable in the nineteenth century,” and states that the attempts of novelists
to break through this convention should be “applauded” (23). Thackeray
undoubtedly should be applauded for a novel that sympathizes with the lack of
clear autonomy that governed the lives of nineteenth-century English women.
There are gender reversals in the relationship between Becky and Rawdon that,
for a period of time, overturn male/female roles, which are satirically explored by
Thackeray in the climax of the novel.
"Vanity Fair" demands an inspection by anyone interested in contemplating the nineteenth century's vision of women, and the issues raised whenever someone, even a novel's characters, disrupts the boundaries of this vision. Of course, it is somewhat misleading to say that Thackeray was overtly concerned with gender and gender roles in his decision to chart the "booths of Vanity Fair" (211). While portraying vices and follies of humankind in general, he created complicated, selfish, and immoral interactions between men and women, particularly with his main character, the formidably deceitful and scheming Becky Sharp. Alongside this critical commentary, there is a remarkable degree of appreciation in Thackeray's female characters who, according to Clarke, become "in part a critique of socially constructed ideas of the feminine" (6). Becky's unruly persona is used by Thackeray as a signifier of society's desire to control the dangerously self-directed female, underscoring the schism between the masculine and feminine gendered spheres, whose interplay is essential to the novel's story. Further, he explores the hypocrisy of a society in which people are continually hiding their true characters in obedience to the rules of deportment and market relations that regulate human interactions. However, from the moment she flings Miss Pinkerton's parting gift into the school garden; through her extended stay in the shabby hotel in Europe surrounded by rakish, bohemian admirers; to her settling for a middle-class respectability, Becky Sharp remains the only personality, out of Thackeray's crowd of characters, whose creator exulted equally in her brilliant successes and ignominious failures.
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