

VANITY FAIR

A full-page illustration of two women in 19th-century fashion. The woman on the left is dressed in a light-colored, possibly white or pale blue, gown with puffed sleeves and a high collar. She has dark hair styled in an elaborate updo with curls and is wearing a tiara and earrings. The woman on the right is wearing a dark, possibly black or dark green, gown with a high collar and a large, ornate hat. She also has dark hair in an updo and is wearing a necklace and earrings. The background is a soft, painterly style with muted colors.

This sweeping panorama of early 19th-century English life is a satirical masterpiece. With a cheerful, sometimes cynical, tone Thackeray charts the rise and fall of his characters' fortunes as they pursue fame, fortune and happiness in the heartless world of *Vanity Fair*. Star of the show is the immoral, high-spirited schemer Becky Sharp, the greatest adventuress of them all.



**MORE
VILLAINS
THAN HEROES**

A biting satirical attack on Regency England, Vanity Fair also reveals the author's delight in the absurdity and folly of human nature.



Written in a breezy, infectiously cheerful style which makes even its most odious characters loveable, Thackeray's great novel whirls the reader through all the ups and downs of its characters as they try to claw their way up the social ladder.

THE PLOT

The story opens with Amelia and Rebecca, the two main female characters – neither can truly be called a heroine – leaving school together to make their way in the world. From the start Becky hopes for an advantageous marriage, first with Amelia's brother, Jos Sedley, and then within the Crawley family, whose house she enters as a governess. She secretly marries Rawdon Crawley, who is disinherited when the marriage is revealed.

By contrast, Amelia looks for love, but her first husband George Osborne fails to provide it. His death at Waterloo leaves her a poor widow with a son whom she adores. They are supported by the kindly William Dobbin, who is besotted with her.

Becky also has a son, but she pays him little attention. She is more concerned with advancing in high society, towing her husband behind her. Ultimately her attempts fail because Rawdon believes her to be unfaithful and their marriage ends.

Rawdon is appointed governor of a tropical island and Becky leaves for the continent, where she leads a nomadic existence, living off her wits. She finally settles in Bath, becoming – at least outwardly – respectable in her old age. Amelia, meanwhile, comes to appreciate Dobbin's true worth and marries him.

THE AUTHOR'S INTENTIONS

Thackeray set his satirical masterpiece in the Regency England of his childhood, but castigated the snobberies and avarice of his contemporary society. He took his title from *Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan's

strongly puritanical book of 1678. Despite the obvious moral note, Thackeray was not concerned with rewards or punishments. In *Vanity Fair* the immoral, like Becky, fare little worse than the virtuous, like Amelia – and it is obvious where the author's sympathies lie. His sub-title, 'A Novel Without A Hero', reflects his cynical approach. The novel's light tone is closer to 18th-century books than to most Victorian literature.

THE NARRATIVE

Thackeray chiefly follows the career of Becky Sharp, the liveliest of his many characters, as she makes her way in the world, beguiling everyone she meets.

• **A thwarted proposal.** Having set her cap at the portly but wealthy Joshua Sedley, Becky is thrilled when he pays her the most ardent attentions on an outing to Vauxhall Gardens and eagerly awaits a

proposal. Instead, he writes to say that he is going away and to apologise to Becky for his drunken behaviour. Thus Becky has no alternative but to take up her post as governess to Sir Pitt's children – and as a result of going to Queen's Crawley to

'I want to show a set of people living in a world without God...'

W. M. THACKERAY IN A LETTER TO HIS MOTHER, 1848.

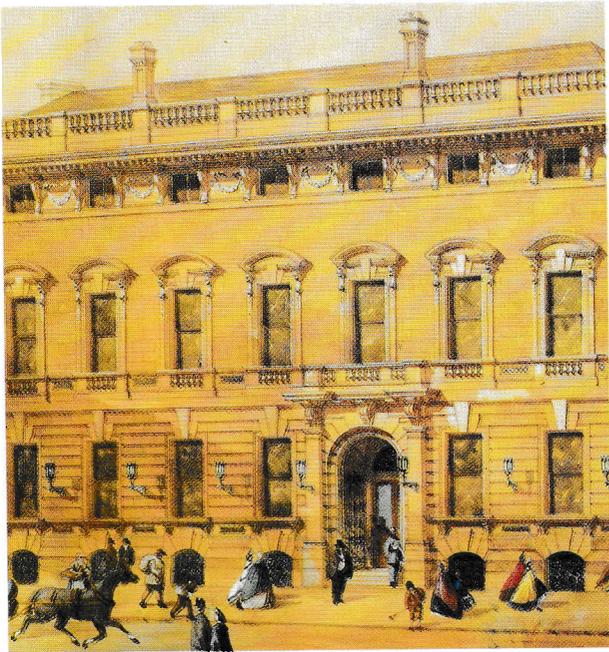
work, she meets and wins the hearts of both her employer and his son Rawdon.

• **The truth is out.** On the death of his wife, Sir Pitt Crawley proposes marriage to Becky. She has to make a shocking revelation: she is already secretly married to Rawdon. In consequence, Rawdon – heir to his aunt's fortune – is disinherited and the young couple are plunged into poverty. They are forced to set out on their somewhat dubious career, Rawdon gambling to raise money, Becky using charm, beauty and credit to avoid bills.

• **Caught in the act.** Rawdon is arrested for debt and is distressed that Becky makes no attempt to get him out of prison. He arranges his own release and returns to the house to find Becky alone with the wealthy Lord Steyne. Believing her to be unfaithful, he attacks Steyne. This episode effectively ends both their marriage and Steyne's support of Becky. Uprooted yet again, she travels alone around Europe surviving as best she can.

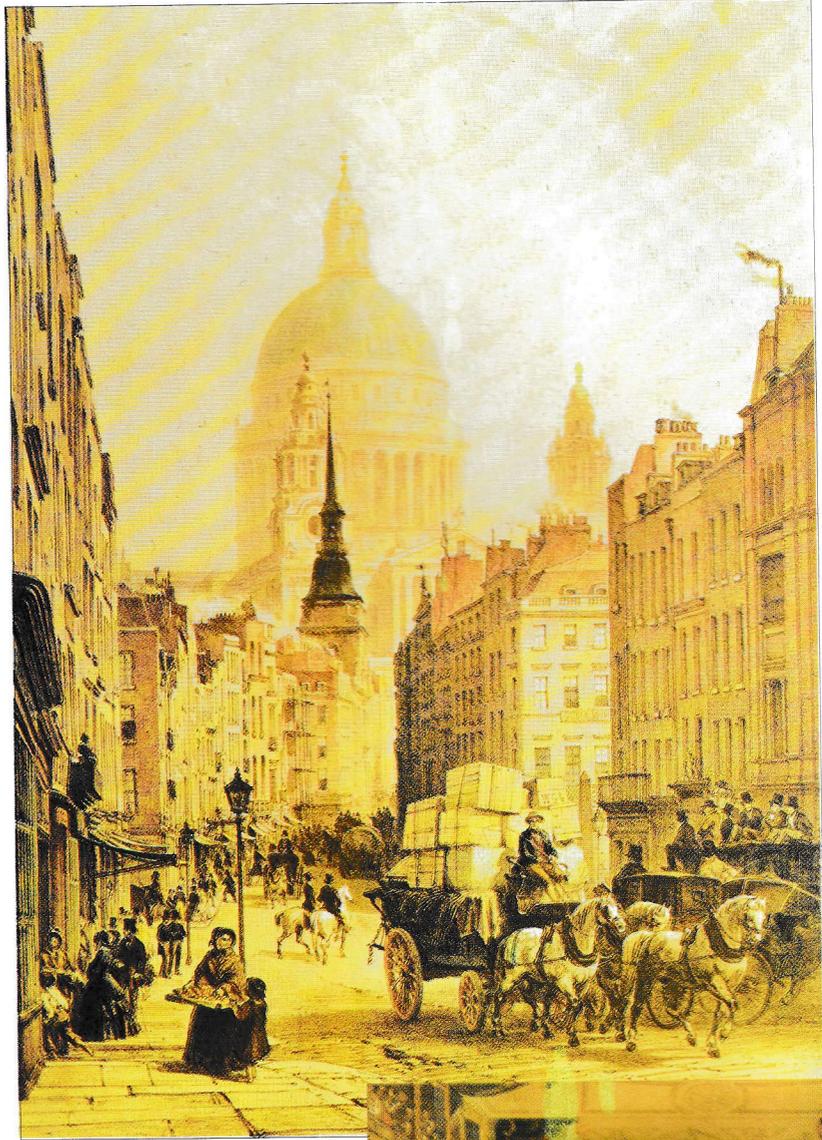
Left: Barbara Couper as Miss Crawley, Dyson Lovell as Rawdon and Susan Hampshire as Becky in the 1967 BBC production of *Vanity Fair*.

THACKERAY'S WORLD

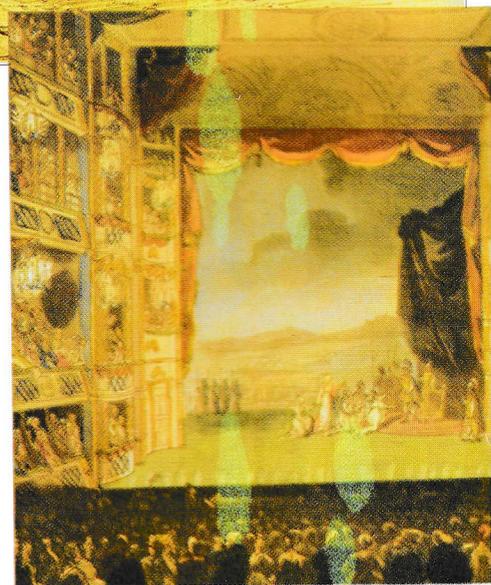


Above: The most famous authors of Thackeray's day congregated at the exclusive Garrick Club.

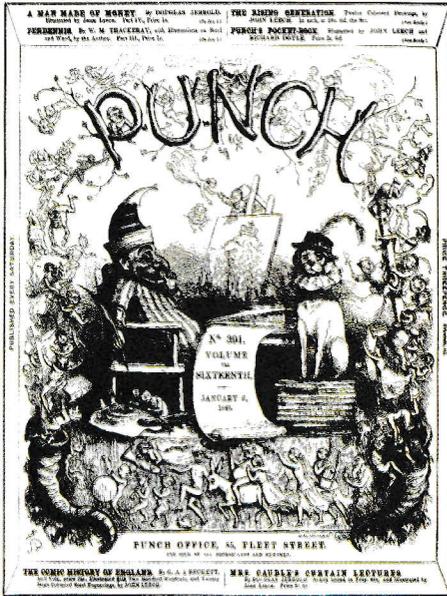
Right: Fleet Street was thronged by journalists and writers, who often met up in its busy – and at times rowdy – hostelries to discuss business and pleasure.



The Fleet Street of Thackeray's day was a hive of activity. In the 1830s and early 1840s many great journalistic institutions made their names: *The Times*, edited by Thomas Barnes, gained its reputation as 'The Thunderer' and *Punch* was first published in 1841. Magazines like *Punch* and the earlier *Fraser's Magazine* found a wide market among the growing middle classes and printed serialised works by writers like Anthony Trollope and Thackeray. Writers and journalists thronged the Fleet Street hostelries and Thackeray often wrote in pubs such as Don Saltero's in Chelsea, where he penned his travelogue, *Notes on a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*.

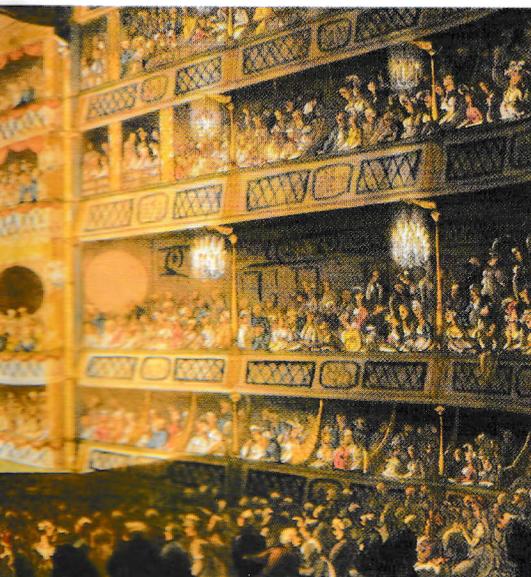


William Thackeray moved in two different worlds – intellectual literary circles and the most exclusive high society – crossing the invisible barriers that existed between the two.



Above: Many of William Thackeray's works were first serialised in *Punch*, including *The History of Pendennis*.

Below: It was fashionable for the rich to take a box at the Drury Lane Theatre. Thackeray rarely declined an invitation to join them.



Right Rich aristocrats often invited writers and intellectuals, like Thackeray, to their elegant soirées. They were eager to show their friends that they moved in intellectual and artistic circles.



Above: Writers and journalists often frequented London's busy public houses, mixing with people of a lower social class but enjoying the atmosphere and the colourful characters they found there.

Literary lions like Thomas Carlyle, author of the much acclaimed *A History of the French Revolution*, and the great Charles Dickens belonged to clubs like The Garrick and frequented the London Library. There was a tight-knit circle, but at times the literary world overlapped with that of the aristocracy. Both the intellectuals and the high-born would visit the latest art exhibitions, or go to Drury Lane for the theatre. Many aristocrats, such as the Count d'Orsay, a noted dandy, liked to cultivate friendships among successful writers, glad to claim links with intellectual circles. Thackeray himself enjoyed his associations with the rich and powerful – but most of literary London scorned such hob-nobbing as an ignoble pursuit.



VANITY FAIR

TRACK BY TRACK

Thackeray's novel is a biting satirical depiction of the corruptions of Regency society. But it is also a splendidly readable tale, written in the manner of 18th-century novels. Few of the characters are noted for their virtue, but the zest and enthusiasm with which the narrative bounds along makes the reader overlook, if not forgive, the sins of its rogues and scoundrels. The novel's protagonist, Becky Sharp, goes her own wily way but wins the reader's admiration nonetheless for her resourcefulness and, above all, her sheer daring.

1. Into the World 21'52"

- *Leaving school*
- *An evening out*

Amelia Sedley and Rebecca Sharp leave Miss Pinkerton's Academy with very different farewells: for wealthy Amelia, wine and a dictionary; for penniless Becky, nothing. At the Sedleys' house in Russell Square, Becky plans to marry Jos, Amelia's brother. The three of them, together with George Osborne (Amelia's beau) and his friend, Dobbin, spend an evening at Vauxhall Gardens. Drunk, Jos speaks of love to Becky, who expects him to propose. The next day he flees London and Becky has to make her own way in the world.

2. A Governess's Career 14'21"

- *A remarkable household*
- *The unworthy beloved*

Becky is to be governess to the children of Sir Pitt Crawley and is amazed by the vulgarity of her employer and the squalor of his home. But she soon makes herself indispensable to the family. The younger son, Captain Rawdon Crawley, falls in love with her but she appears to scorn him. When Miss Crawley, a rich maiden aunt, visits, Becky wins her over too. Meanwhile, Amelia is deeply in love with the feckless, if dashing, George.



Above: Vauxhall Gardens was a fashionable place of entertainment in the 19th century – and the site of Jos's drunken overtures to Becky.

3. Secret Marriages 12'56"

- *A proposal too late*
- *Disinheritance and departure*

Becky becomes Miss Crawley's companion. This upsets Sir Pitt, who wants her back – as his wife, if she wishes. But Becky has secretly married Rawdon and they flee to Brighton. Meanwhile, Amelia's father loses his fortune and George forgets her until the kindly Dobbin tells him she is heartbroken. Amelia and George marry but when George's father hears of the match, he disinherits him. George and Amelia also go to Brighton, where they meet Becky and Rawdon. There the four receive news of war. Later, George is killed at the battle of Waterloo.

4. After Waterloo 22'07"

- *Becky in fun, Amelia in distress*

Becky and Rawdon settle in Paris, where their son is born. Soon Becky's charm and beauty attract a circle of friends; but she and Rawdon run up debts and are forced to leave for London. Becky pretends that Miss Crawley has left money to Rawdon. In fact, his brother Pitt, married to Lady Jane, is Miss Crawley's heir. Amelia also bears a son and, as George's father refuses to help her, she goes to live with her parents on a widow's meagre pension. Dobbin, who has loved her all along, leaves for India.

5. In Society 18'18"

- *High life in Curzon Street*
- *Poverty in Fulham*

Becky makes her home in Curzon Street one of the most fashionable houses in London – at least for men; society ladies refuse to meet her. She befriends important people, like the lecherous Lord Steyne, while neglecting her son, Rawdon. After the death of Sir Pitt, she also repairs relations with her brother-in-law, Pitt Crawley, who gives her diamonds. These she wears when he presents her at court. Meanwhile, Amelia's hardships are worsened by her father's repeated financial failures.

6. Debt and Disaster 17'55"

- *In the debtors' gaol*
- *Caught in the act*

Lord Steyne sends young Rawdon to school and persuades Becky to dismiss her companion, leaving the house almost empty. When Rawdon is arrested for debt, Becky defers helping him and he writes to his brother instead. In fact, Lady Jane comes to release him and he arrives home to find Becky entertaining Lord Steyne. Enraged, Rawdon strikes Steyne and throws out his gifts of money and jewels. Both Steyne and Rawdon abandon Becky. Even the maid leaves; Becky is ruined and alone.

7. Wheel of Fortune 19'24"

- *Governor of Coventry Island*
- *Love declared at last*

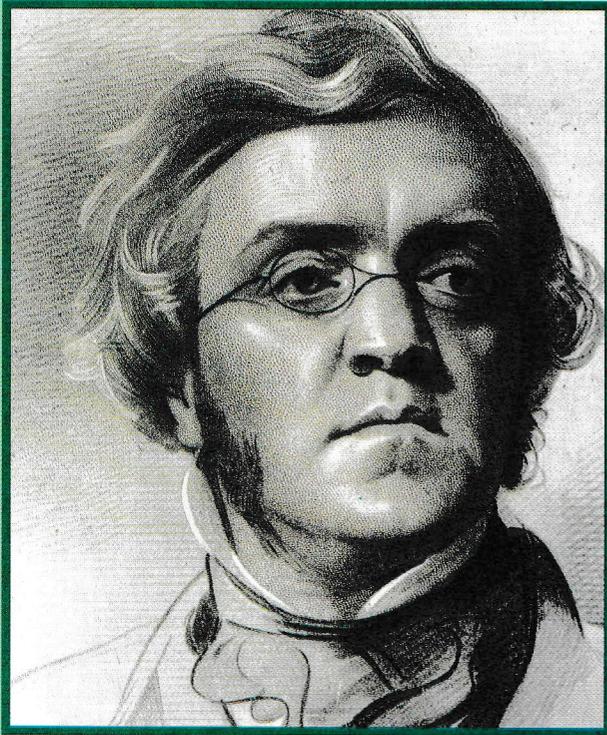
Rawdon is made Governor of Coventry Island, a tropical outpost, and leaves England. He settles an annuity on Becky, who departs for Europe. Amelia struggles to make ends meet and discovers that her father is utterly ruined. However, she continues to care for him lovingly after the death of her mother. Dobbin returns from India, encountering Jos on the journey home. Dobbin declares his long-enduring love for Amelia, who at last recognises his true worth and accepts his proposal of marriage.

8. Just Deserts 14'49"

- *Bohemian life*
- *The Dobbins and the Crawleys*

Becky is driven from Paris by old creditors, but enjoys leading an increasingly Bohemian life. She neglects her son, until he becomes the heir to the Crawley fortune. Finally she ensnares Joseph Sedley, who leaves her a substantial amount of money when he dies. Rawdon dies of a fever on Coventry Island and his son is brought up by Pitt Crawley and Lady Jane, now close friends of Amelia and William. All refuse to have any contact with Becky, who is living a newly respectable life in Bath.

EXTRAVAGANT GENIUS



THACKERAY AT A GLANCE

- 1811:** Born in Calcutta
- 1815:** Death of his father
- 1816:** Sent to school in England
- 1823:** Enters Charterhouse School
- 1829:** Goes up to Trinity College, Cambridge
- 1832:** Inherits a fortune
- 1833:** Fortune lost in crash of an Indian bank
- 1836:** Marries Isabella Shawe
- 1837:** *The Yellowplush Papers* published
- 1840:** Isabella attempts suicide
- 1848:** *The Book of Snobs* published; *Vanity Fair* completed
- 1859:** Becomes first editor of the *Cornhill Magazine*
- 1863:** Dies in London

William Makepeace Thackeray was born on 18 July 1811 in Calcutta, then the capital of British India. His father, Richmond Thackeray, was a wealthy official, with a grand mansion, scores of servants and a beautiful 19-year-old wife, Anne, whom he had married three years before. Anne had been in love with a penniless officer, Henry Carmichael-Smyth, but her parents, who wanted her to marry a wealthy man, told her he had died. So she was astonished when, in 1812, Carmichael-Smyth unexpectedly arrived at her home. Three years later, when her husband died of a fever, Anne married her true love and sent William, aged five, off to school.

UNHAPPY DAYS

England was a cruel shock to a little boy used to Indian heat and luxury. His first boarding-school was tough even by the standards of the day; he never forgot the canings or chilblains.

In 1823 he entered Charterhouse School, where he made lifelong friends

and began to read novels voraciously. In 1829 he went up to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he spent his time drinking and gambling, losing £1,500 in one evening. He spent the summers in Paris, enjoying its restaurants, beautiful women and casinos. Thackeray eventually abandoned his studies, leaving Cambridge without a degree.

BANKRUPTCY STRIKES

Thackeray spent the next few years drifting around Europe on the money he inherited on his 21st birthday. But late in 1833 the Indian banks which held his capital collapsed. Poor but unbowed, he went to Paris. There he fell in love with Isabella Shawe, a pretty Irish girl, whom he married in 1836. Shortly afterwards he returned to London.

Scraping a living as a freelance journalist, Thackeray wrote sketches for *The Times* and *Fraser's Magazine*. Later he wrote a series of articles for *Punch*, which were published in one volume as *The Book of Snobs* in 1848; in them he satirised society and poked fun at the nobility. He began to frequent the smart London clubs and met literary men like Charles Dickens and Thomas Carlyle.

‘Thackeray was a prodigal himself and intrigued by prodigals’

JOHN CAREY,

THACKERAY: PRODIGAL GENIUS 1977.

THE BEST OF THE REST

Thackeray's earlier works are generally considered to be superior to his later, more sentimental fiction. The following works show him exercising his talent for satire.

The Luck of Barry Lyndon

Set in the 18th century, like many of Thackeray's works, this satirical novel

chronicles the adventures of Redmond Barry. Fleeing from his native Ireland after a duel, he becomes a cardsharp and marries a wealthy widow, the Countess of Lyndon – but his problems multiply from then on.

The Yellowplush Papers

First published in magazine form, these are the comic fictional memoirs of a footman, who observes and comments on the lives of his employers with a viciously satirical eye.

Somersaulting from wealth to poverty and back again, William Thackeray lived, whether in high circles or low, with an exuberance which overflowed into his works.



While enjoying his new-found circle of friends, he ignored his wife. After the birth of her third baby in 1840, Isabella developed postnatal depression and attempted suicide. She was sent to an asylum, but never regained her sanity.

RUINED BY SUCCESS

In 1848 Thackeray finished the serial publication of his masterpiece, *Vanity Fair*, to immense acclaim. Invitations from aristocratic families poured in and Thackeray eagerly accepted, rejoicing in the luxury of their grand houses, with

'flowers piled up as high as haystacks', rich food and fine wines. He began to consort with grandees like the Duchess of Norfolk and the Count d'Orsay.

'The world is a better place than some satirists have painted it,' Thackeray said. His later novels, such as *Pendennis* (1850), had a glib sentimentality and sold well. He toured the USA, where life in the southern states made him a virtual defender of slavery. His old friends were appalled.

Thackeray returned briefly to satirical form in 1855 with *The Four Georges*, a

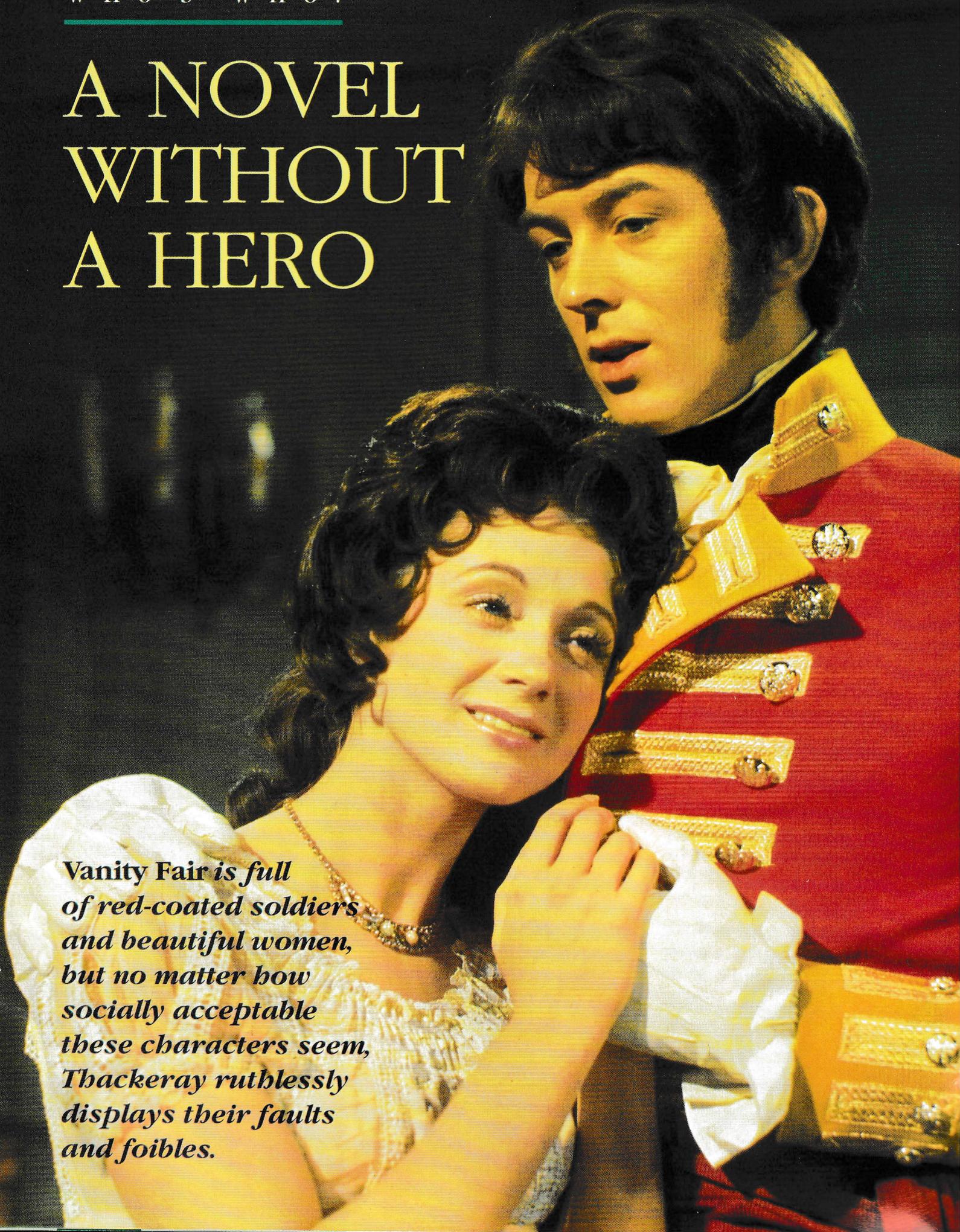
Above: Thackeray loved the gambling tables, playing *écarté* as eagerly as his audacious creation, *Becky Sharp*.

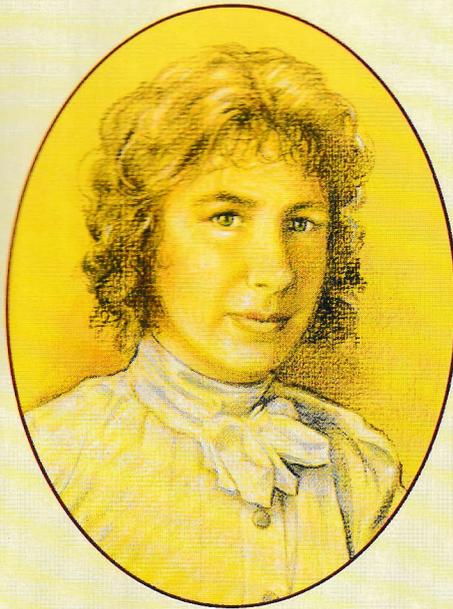
denunciation of the Hanoverian kings. He became editor of the new *Cornhill Magazine* in 1859 but had to give up in 1862 because he was too good-natured to reject contributions. He continued to gamble, eat and drink until his excesses led to his death. Returning from a party one night, he had a fit of retching which brought on a stroke and he died on 24 December 1863.

WHO'S WHO?

A NOVEL WITHOUT A HERO

Vanity Fair is full of red-coated soldiers and beautiful women, but no matter how socially acceptable these characters seem, Thackeray ruthlessly displays their faults and foibles.





BECKY SHARP

An orphan forced to make her own way in the world, Becky Sharp cannot afford fine sentiments and generous actions. 'I am no angel,' she states calmly. For all her hypocritical actions, she is unswervingly honest to herself.

'Her wit, talent and energy ..merited a place of honour in Vanity Fair'

Becky ruthlessly exploits her gifts, including her beauty, to rise socially. She naturally turns to marriage – the only 'career' open to a woman wanting to advance herself. The only occasion on which she sheds genuine tears is when she has to refuse the wealthy Sir Pitt's proposal of marriage because she is already married to Rawdon.

Resourceful and resilient, Becky enjoys life to the full. She supports Rawdon after Waterloo, contriving the getaway from their creditors in Paris. Her encouragement of Lord Steyne's advances comes from her personal social ambitions, rather than concern for her husband's position as she claims. She is ultimately selfish and callous, as her neglect of her child demonstrates.

Left: The virtuous but weak Amelia (Marilyn Taylorson) is besotted with rakish George (Roy Marsden) in the BBC's 1967 production.

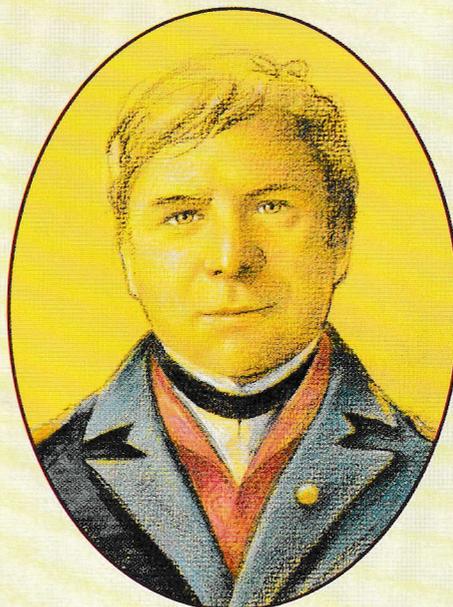
GEORGE OSBORNE

Charming and wealthy, George Osborne is totally caught up in the social climbing of 'Vanity Fair'. His father expects him to marry Amelia, until her father is ruined. George loves her in his own selfish way, but intends to live like a Regency rake before marriage and is deeply embarrassed when his friend Dobbin mentions Amelia to comrades in the officers' mess. He enjoys drinking and gambling and loses a good deal of money at the card table, especially to Rawdon Crawley.

'I must have a little fling now and then. When I'm married I'll reform'

Utterly self-interested, George borrows money to buy Amelia a present, but instead purchases a diamond shirt-pin for himself. When her father loses his money, George is willing to reject her, as his father wishes. Only pressure from Dobbin changes his mind.

For all his faults, George can be brave. He secretly marries Amelia, incurring his father's wrath and disinheritance, and is a respected soldier. His death at the Battle of Waterloo preserves his image in Amelia's eyes, but in fact he is not worthy of her adoration.



AMELIA SEDLEY

Amelia is in every way Becky's opposite, being trusting, obedient, sweet-tempered, gentle and loyal. She is, unfortunately, not very perceptive. Not only is she fooled by Becky's protestations of affection towards her and her brother, she is blind to George's faults and consequently for many years fails to appreciate Dobbin's true value.

'She...sparkled with the brightest and honestest good-humour'

Her good nature is in no way spoiled by her many later misfortunes, which stem partly from her bad choice in love. She falls for the dashing George, but he is incapable of loving her or supporting her as he should. Never strong or self-reliant, Amelia is devastated by her husband's death at Waterloo and only rallies when her son is born.

Amelia then proves herself an heroically devoted mother and daughter, looking after her son with the greatest attention despite her poverty, nursing her mother through her final illness and never criticising her father for the foolish investments that ruin the family. Her goodness and honesty finally have their suitable reward in marriage to Dobbin – the kindest, if scarcely the most glamorous, of men.

RAWDON CRAWLEY

The younger son of Sir Pitt, Rawdon is the favourite of his wealthy aunt, Miss Crawley, until she disinherits him on learning of his marriage to Becky. A typical Regency soldier, he is arrogant, unintelligent and selfish, but brave. His chief skill is gambling, by which he half-supports his wife and child. He wins suspiciously frequently.

‘Rawdon Crawley could love a child and a woman still’

But Rawdon has his virtues. He loves his son, little Rawdon, deeply and is upset at sending him away to school. He also loves Becky and tolerates – or hardly notices – the mockery of her friends as she rises in the world. Rawdon is unresentful until he returns from debtors’ gaol to find Becky alone with Lord Steyne. Then he behaves with both courage and honour. From then on he is a new man, leaving home to become Governor of feverish Coventry Island, dying there in the course of his duty.

WILLIAM DOBBIN

Dobbin is clumsy and lacking in social graces, so his many good deeds go unremarked and unrewarded. A loyal friend of George Osborne, he lends him money and persuades him to marry Amelia after her father has lost his money. This is true self-sacrifice, for Dobbin has loved Amelia since first setting eyes on her.

‘A very tall, ungainly gentleman with large hands and feet’

After George’s death at Waterloo, Dobbin sees to his friend’s burial and takes care of the distraught Amelia, becoming very fond of her son. It does him little good in the short term, for Amelia thinks of him as a friend rather than a suitor, but he wins his just reward in the end – Amelia’s love.

Joseph ‘Jos’ Sedley

Jos Sedley is Amelia’s brother but resembles her not at all, being fat, timid, foolish, self-indulgent in food and drink and totally selfish. After making a fool of himself in Vauxhall Gardens by drinking too much punch, he abandons Becky, who was expecting him to propose. He sends money to his family when they become poor, but is mainly concerned with his own affairs in India. A poor judge of character, he is easily manipulated by Becky, who eventually persuades him to make her his heir.

Sir Pitt Crawley

Becky mistakes Sir Pitt for a servant when she first arrives at his London house. Although he has inherited his title and his wealth, Sir Pitt is vulgar, coarse and absurdly mean. After enduring marriage to his high-born first wife, who could stand up to him, he remarries an ironmonger’s daughter, whom he can maltreat. Charmed by Becky, he lecherously proposes marriage to her – before exploding in wrath at the news that he is her father-in-law. Fittingly, he dies unmourned.

Miss Crawley

Worth £70,000 – a great fortune – which makes her ‘beloved anywhere’, Miss Crawley has a weakness for her dashing younger nephew Rawdon. She

disinherits Rawdon after his marriage and clearly enjoys using her money to control her relations.

John Sedley

Father of Amelia and Jos, old Mr Sedley is a rather vulgar merchant with a taste for practical jokes, laughing when Jos offers Becky a chilli to eat with curry. He has an even worse taste for bad financial ventures which ruin him, leaving him dependent on Amelia. He has the grace to apologise to Amelia for his faults at the end.

Pitt Crawley

The elder son of Sir Pitt, Pitt Crawley is a prig who does not care for his more rowdy military brother, Rawdon. He marries Lady Jane Sheepshanks and is later reconciled to his brother, taking care of little Rawdon after his father’s death on Coventry Island.

Lord Steyne

An elderly reprobate who befriends Becky in London, Lord Steyne is representative of the corrupt aristocracy of Regency England. He is Becky’s chief supporter, financially and socially, but when Rawdon strikes him, he abandons her to her fate and obviously has no depth of feeling for her.

FOOTNOTES

VANITY FAIR ON FILM AND TV

There have been two film versions of *Vanity Fair*: in 1932 a modern dress version starred Myrna Loy, while in the 1935 film *Becky Sharp*, Miriam Hopkins played the title role. The BBC has made three productions. The lead role was taken by Joyce Redman in 1957 and Susan Hampshire in 1967. In 1987 Eve Matheson played Becky opposite Rebecca Saire’s Amelia, while Sian Phillips and Freddie Jones provided brilliant cameo roles as Miss Crawley and Sir Pitt.

