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Reading Thackeray's Actresses

by

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Abstract

The representation of femininity in culture makes for interesting reading. Can writers and artists accurately depict the complexity of womanhood? When William Makepeace Thackeray created his own fictional females, he took a critical, reflexive approach to writing, often including actresses in his texts to help readers become better informed about the difficulties involved in the construction of femininity. In contrast to other nineteenth-century writers who depicted stage women as endorsements of ideal womanhood, Thackeray uses actresses to question the viability, the creation, and the perpetuation of such notions. He found parody and its reflexive interaction with pre-existing texts a useful way of reminding us of the limitations of characterisation as provided by conventional readings of femininity within culture. By parodying the artists and writers who encourage such readings, Thackeray encourages us to look back with a more critical perspective at the historical and cultural influences that have defined and imaged what it is to be female.

Chapter One begins with a look at his sketches *Flore et Zéphyr*, in which Thackeray features a ballerina, whose muscular physical appearance contradicts the conventional imaging of this stage woman as a delicate, ethereal being. Chapter Two turns to *The Virginians* and examines the deliberate romantic invention of a prominent female in drama, Pocahontas, whose status as a self-sacrificing heroine is still questioned by Native American critics. Chapter Three shows how in *Vanity Fair* Thackeray's allusions to puppet theatre and a prominent theatrical role of a monstrous female (Clytemnestra) undermines our confidence in basing judgements on appearances. Chapter Four suggests that in juxtaposing an actress's personal life with

the melodramatic and Shakespearean heroines she plays on stage, *The History of Pendennis* indicates that if confusing an actress with her roles will produce a naïve reading of femininity. Chapter Five examines the backstage world of theatre in *The Ravenswing* and the manipulative, self-serving forces that try to control female representation on and off stage. Chapter Six argues that *Lovel the Widower* shatters any lingering illusions a reader might have in believing women in real life are like melodramatic heroines.

Jack and Marg:

Friendly reader! may you and the author meet [in fable-land] on some future day! He hopes so; as he yet keeps a lingering hold of your hand, and bids you farewell with a kind heart.

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Abbreviations

AP	*The Adventures of Philip*
Letters	*The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray* 4 volumes, ed. Gordon N. Ray
LW	*Lovel the Widower*
N	*The Newcomes*
P	*The History of Pendennis*
R	*The Ravenswing*
RR	*Rebecca and Rowena*
V	*The Virginians*
VF	*Vanity Fair*
W	*The Wolves and the Lamb*

Introduction

> Is he [a writer] honest? Does he tell the truth in the main? Does he seem actuated by a desire to find out and speak it? Is he a quack, who shams sentiment, or mouths for effect? Does he seek popularity by claptraps or other arts? I can no more ignore good fortune than any other chance which has befallen me. I have found many thousands more readers than I ever looked for. I have no right to say to these, You shall not find fault with my art, or fall asleep over my pages; but I ask you to believe that this person writing strives to tell the truth. If there is not that, there is nothing.
>
> William Makepeace Thackeray, Preface to *The History of Pendennis*

> Art, literature, and film do not simply represent given gender identities, or reproduce already existing ideologies of femininity. Rather they participate in the very construction of those identities. Second (and consequently), culture is a crucial arena for the contestation of the social arrangements of gender.
>
> Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences*

Studies of Thackeray's female characters and his literary practices need to include a close look at his stage women. Works containing ballerinas, chorus girls, singers, and actresses indicate more than just his great interest in theatre; they also point to his concern with the way theatre's female practitioners were depicted in Victorian culture. Thackeray took a reflexive approach to his fiction, whereby he examined the process of writing. According to Rowland McMaster, by "resorting to and disintegrating the patterns of art", Thackeray causes us to "question our assumptions about both" (78). As Robert Stam observes, reflexivity applies to works which "break with art as enchantment and point to their own factitiousness as textual constructs" by interrupting "the flow of narrative" (xi). In pointing to the very forces that create texts—narrative discontinuities, authorial intrusions, essayistic digressions,

stylistic virtuosities (all of which appear in Thackeray's fiction)—reflexive works "share a playful, parodic, and disruptive relation to established norms and conventions. They demystify fictions, and our naïve faith in fictions" (xi). Thackeray's reflexivity in his fiction and illustrations allows him to show how artists and writers used stage women to perpetuate literary conventions that he believed prevented the truthful presentation of femininity.

His criticism of feminine portrayals and unrealistic conventions in fiction, and the reason why he chose stage women as one way to express this dissatisfaction, can be located within his earlier non-fiction writings. Therein we find his insistence upon the need for truthful representation in all forms of art, his recognition that theatre, from staging to acting, is rooted in artificiality, and his observations regarding how women have been depicted in art.

Thackeray's years as a journalist had a tremendous influence upon the writing of his fiction, and consequently upon the way he depicted his female characters. In a detailed study of his career as a literary critic, Lidmila Pantůčková maintains that these critical writings were of "inestimable value for his whole growth as artist" (9). Gordon Ray also writes that Thackeray's background in journalism helped him to develop the critical perspective from which he denounced "the artificiality and pretentiousness that vitiated the taste of the age" (*The Uses* 238). From 1833 to 1847 he worked for the *National Standard*, *Fraser's Magazine*, the *Times*, the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Foreign Quarterly Review*, and the *British and Foreign Review*. Later he continued to write essays, reviews, letters, and articles, often for *Punch* and the *Cornhill Magazine*, wherein he critiqued novels, plays, and art. The concern he voices

in his criticism, identified by Pantůčková as a need for "truth in literature and life, his hatred of hypocrisy, affectation, cant, and his clear-sighted recognition of sincerity and shame" (414), extended into his fiction. In his self-reflexive stories, often in the form of parodies, burlesques, and satires, he continued his criticism of the practices of such literary contemporaries and forebearers as Edward Bulwer-Lytton, G.P.R. James, Sir Walter Scott, and Shakespeare. As Ina Ferris observes, "From the beginning his work attempts to correct what he considers to be the false view of reality implied in the popular novels of his day. His early writing is especially aggressive in this respect, and the world that he presents in reaction to the sentimental, idealised world of popular novels is thoroughly brutal and sordid" (*William* 12).

Like John Loofbourow, Ferris notes that it was parody to which Thackeray often turned as a way of expressing his scepticism about literature. As Stam observes, works which employ parody are anti-illusionist—they do not purport to be a "window on the world but a palimpsest, an intertextual event, in which references to other texts hover between the lines or linger in the margins . . . . The intertextual references may be explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious, direct and local or broad and diffuse" (132). Parody also opposes antiquated literary techniques and perceptions:

> Parody, one might argue, emerges when artists perceive that they have outgrown artistic conventions. Man parodies the past, Hegel suggested, when he is ready to dissociate himself from it. Literary models and paradigms, like social orders and philosophical epistemes, become obsolescent and may be superseded. When artistic forms become historically inappropriate, parody lays them to rest. Parody highlights

> art's historicity, its contingency and transcience. It sweeps away the artistic deadwood . . . associated with stultifying social conventions. Parody performs the perennial rehistoricization of the artistic process. As new novelistic and cinematic forms, like rising social classes, struggle for power and respect, they often fight with the weapon of parody. (Stam 135)

Margaret Rose also points out that parody, long denigrated as a type of plagiarism or imitation, functions like irony in that both generate multiple readings, offering "more than one message to be decoded by the reader" (51); in fact, parody complicates reading because it reflects "on the communicative function of literary language as a vehicle of the transmission of messages" (61). Since parody is not limited to critiquing literary norms, it can raise social questions about a text's relationship with its audience: "In refunctioning the preformed language material of other texts and discourses parody not only creates allusions to another author, another reader, and another system of communication, but to the relationship between the text, or discourse, and its social context" (44). Thus, Rose concludes that parody, which criticises "naïve views of the representation of nature in art" and which takes a critical look at the "processes involved in the production and reception of fiction from within a literary text" (65-66) can enrich our understanding of literature:

> in its role as a meta-fictional critique of the production and reception of literary texts, parody raises questions not only of a theoretical literary nature about the processes involved in the writing of fiction but, in focusing too on the role of the reader in the reception of the text, or on

> the role of authority in the control of both its production and reception, raises questions of a sociological nature which relate the text again to its social context. (187)

Thackeray's fictional texts frequently implicate the reader in the action. Narrators directly address readers, calling upon them to go beyond a superficial response to what they have read and enter the text themselves. They must interpret action and characters; they must question the writing of the fiction. The reading process for Thackeray's audience is deliberately complicated by the fact that he also parodies authorial control; the traditional stable figure of an all-knowing narrator upon whom the reader can trust is often replaced with one who refuses to conform to literary conventions or one who suffers "breakdowns" in his conflict with such conventions.

Regarding Thackeray's essays, reviews, and stories, parody was one of the chief means by which he reacted to the trends of other novelists. Loofbourow says that

> In parodying the fashionable and other modes, Thackeray shares the satirist's traditional purpose of discrediting accepted illusion. Illusion is involved in most human experiences and may be attacked in various ways, dramatic or analytic; but Thackeray was mainly concerned with exposing the delusions expressed in artistic conventions themselves—the sequence of idealized poses or poeticized fantasies, the literary modes associated with social or psychological artifice. (*Thackeray* 15)

Consequently, when he began to write his own fiction, Thackeray, the critic/artist, often parodied the practices of other writers to reveal their dated methods. Or he self-consciously incorporated literary criticism into his stories to indicate more bluntly his antipathy toward such devices as forced poetic justice and happy endings, which concluded stories with the same finality as a curtain dropping after the last act of a play. An example of his use of metacommentary on literary endings appears in Chapter 26 of *Vanity Fair* when the narrator makes wry remarks about the popular literary trend to use marriage as a convenient way to affect closure:

> As his hero and heroine pass the matrimonial barrier, the novelist generally drops the curtain, as if, once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there: and wife and husband had nothing to do but to link each other's arms together, and wander gently downwards towards old age in happy and perfect fruition. (319)[1]

In an article for the *Morning Chronicle* Thackeray had made a similar reproach—again voicing his criticism with allusions to theatre--against writers whose use of trite conventions furnished cheerful, unrealistic (theatrical) resolutions to serious, real problems:

> At the conclusion of these tales, when the poor hero or heroine has been bullied enough—when poor Jack has been put off the murder he was meditating, or poor Polly has been rescued from the town on which she was about to go—there somehow arrives a misty reconciliation between the poor and the rich; a prophecy is uttered of better times for the one, and better manners in the other; presages are made of happy

> life, happy marriage and children, happy beef and pudding for all time to come, as they do at the end of a drama when the curtain falls, and the blue fire blazes behind the scenes. This is not the way in which men seriously engaged and interested in the awful question between rich and poor meet and grapple with it. (73-74)

In contrast, Thackeray's fiction, in keeping with reflexive texts, often denies closure or frustrates readers' expectations for happy endings or romantic scenes. Hence, his narrator informs us at the end of *The Newcomes* that if we want a conventional ending, we need to write that kind of conclusion ourselves, but at the same time he points out this kind of happy ending is located in the fable-land (fiction), not reality:

> But for you, dear friend, it is as you like. You may settle your fable-land in your own fashion . . . . the poet of fable-land rewards and punishes absolutely. He splendidly deals out bags of sovereigns, which won't buy anything; belabours wicked backs with awful blows, which do not hurt; endows heroines with preternatural beauty, and creates heroes, who, if ugly sometimes, yet possess a thousand good qualities, and usually end by being immensely rich; makes the hero and heroine happy at last, and happy ever after. (N 1009)

While the narrator of *The Newcomes* offers the possibility for a happy ending (if we write it in the style of a pantomime script), Thackeray's narrative voice in *Rebecca and Rowena* is blunt in his insistence that marriage is not always a guarantee of happiness. In this 1850 sequel to Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*, Thackeray takes a

decisively reflexive approach. Subtitling it, *A Romance Upon Romance* and alluding to theatre (he titles the first chapter "The Overture"), Thackeray uses this short work to question standard literary devices in characterisation and endings. The conclusion is a pensive description of Ivanhoe and Rebecca's life after marriage: "Married I am sure they were, and adopted little Cedric; but I don't think they had any other children, or were subsequently very boisterously happy. Of some sort of happiness melancholy is a characteristic, and I think these were a solemn pair, and died rather early" (RR 572). The narrator's final comments echo his beginning words wherein he laments the practice of ending stories with happy endings and peopling fiction with youthful heroes and heroines. His primary motive for writing the sequel is his belief that *Ivanhoe* should have united Ivanhoe and Rebecca in marriage, not Ivanhoe and Rowena:

> What is to be done? There is no help for it. There it is in black and white at the end of the third volume of Sir Walter Scott's chronicle, that the couple were joined together in matrimony. And must the disinherited knight, whose blood has been fired by the suns of Palestine, and whose heart has been warmed in the company of the tender and beautiful Rebecca, sit down contented for life by the side of such a frigid piece of propriety as that icy, faultless, prim, niminy-piminy Rowena? Forbid it, fate! forbid it, poetical justice! There is a simple plan for setting matters right, and giving all parties their due, which is here submitted to the novel-reader. (RR 501)

In his defiance of poetic justice, Thackeray's narrator takes other writers to task for their propensity to end stories as happily and tidily as a pantomime. The public, he says,

> likes to see virtue righted, true love rewarded, and the brilliant Fairy descend out of the blazing chariot at the end of the pantomime, and make Harlequin and Columbine happy. What, if reality be not so, gentlemen and ladies; and if, after dancing a variety of jigs and antics, and jumping in and out of endless trap-doors and windows, through life's shifting scenes, no fairy comes down to make us comfortable at the close of the performance? Ah! let us give our honest novel-folks the benefit of their position, and not be envious of their good luck. (RR 501-502)

Vanity Fair contains a good example of another narrator who refuses to fulfil a reader's expectations. He will not describe a romantic scene using a grand, elevated style. Instead, he uses the vernacular to turn the incident into a humorous parody of the writing of romance:

> A lady in a dripping white bonnet and shawl, with her two little hands out before her, went up to him, and in the next minute she had altogether disappeared under the folds of the old cloak, and was kissing one of his hands with all her might; whilst the other I suppose was engaged in holding her to his heart (which her head just about reached) and in preventing her from tumbling down. She was murmuring something about—forgive—dear William—dear, dear, dearest friend—

> kiss, kiss, kiss, and so forth—and in fact went on under the cloak in an absurd manner. (VF 870)

Thackeray, thus, demystifies romance, as he often does to remind us we are reading fiction as part of his "uncompromising critical campaign against literary artifice of any kind" (Pantůčková 306). Thackeray's reflexive commentaries about happy endings and love scenes signal that such practices *are* fiction and not representative of real life, that in fact they have been so over-used as to have become absurd.

Thackeray's art criticism indicates the same concern for truthful representation. Helene Roberts finds that when he reviewed paintings, for example, he again insisted that they should correspond to the real world and that artists should base their work on their personal observations of nature, rather than imitating the observations of other artists. His attitude was not unique, but comparable to the opinions of other early nineteenth-century art critics. At this time, says Roberts, "the meaning of one of the critics' favorite criteria, that of 'truth to nature' had shifted significantly. In the early part of the century nature appeared in her idealized perfect form, but by midcentury she had largely recaptured her stripes and even her warts" (25). She remarks that in keeping with this point of view, Thackeray "condemned falsity to nature in whatever form he found it. He condemned the coldness of classical art, the pretensions of neoclassic art, the pomposity of history painting, and the affectation of the gift book engravings, for all violated truth to nature"; he also filled his criticism with adjectives such as "actual," "real," "precise," "exact," "faithful," "accurate," and "correct," and he used nouns such as "truth," "reality," and "fidelity" (28, 29) to reiterate his view. In an 1839 article for *Fraser's Magazine*, he advises

artists to strive for authentic representations in their work by closely observing nature, to see for themselves the forms that exist in nature rather than copying the pre-existing forms that have been produced by other artists: "See how much nobler she [Nature] is than your pettifogging art!—how much more beautiful Truth is than your miserable tricked-up lies" (II 378). Thackeray's insistence that artists study nature for themselves echoes that of John Ruskin, who likewise believed that detailed observation was essential to imitating truth in nature: "we require to produce the effect of imitation only so many and such ideas of truth as the *senses* are usually cognizant of. Now the senses are not usually, nor unless they be especially devoted to the service, cognizant, with accuracy, of any truths but those of space and projection. It requires long study and attention before they give certain evidence of even the simplest truths of form" (II 22). Like Thackeray, Ruskin believed that outward form often interfered with depictions of truth. If a viewer sees that the form, or expression, of an idea is based upon imitation, truth is destroyed:

> the mind, in receiving an idea of imitation, is wholly occupied in finding out that what has been suggested to it is not what it appears to be: it does not dwell on the suggestion, but on the perception that it is a false suggestion: it derives its pleasure, not from the contemplation of a truth, but from the discovery of a falsehood. So that the moment ideas of truth are grouped together, so as to give rise to an idea of imitation, they change their very nature—lose their essence as ideas of truth—and are corrupted and degraded, so as to share in the treachery of what they have produced. Hence, finally, ideas of truth are the

> foundation, and ideas of imitation the destruction, of all art . . . . no picture can be good which deceives by its imitation, for the very reason that nothing can be beautiful which is not true. (Ruskin II 24-25)

Thackeray takes a similar attitude toward theatre, particularly toward melodrama and its conventions. For example, he believed that even *The Stranger*—which Thackeray's actress friend Fanny Kemble (1809-1893) called "stuff and nonsense" (*Records* 316) contains within it truths about human nature; it is in its expression and outward forms (including costumes, gestures, and dialogue) that this truth is corrupted when an audience recognises the sham and becomes pre-occupied with it:

> The Stranger's talk is sham, like the book he reads, and the hair he wears, and the bank he sits on, and the diamond ring he makes play with—but, in the midst of the balderdash, there runs that reality of love, children, and forgiveness of wrong, which will be listened to wherever it is preached, and sets all the world sympathising. (P 46)

Kemble expressed a similar sentiment about the truth that may be found within theatre if one looks beyond outward appearance when she watched a young actress perform for the first time: "I hoped for her that she might be able to see the truth of all things in the midst of all things false" (*Records* 465).

Thackeray's frequent references to theatre throughout his criticism, whether directed toward art, literature, or drama, should not be overlooked as they are central in revealing his literary principles and his insistence upon truth in art. Through explicit references to theatre, Thackeray expresses his awareness of falsity in art. For

example, he once used an anecdote from theatre to voice his dislike of exaggeration in literature:

> Mr. ___ was once behind the scenes at the Opera when the scene-shifters were preparing for the ballet. Flora was to sleep under a bush, whereon were growing a number of roses, and amidst which was fluttering a gay covey of butterflies. In size the roses exceded the most expansive sunflowers, and the butterflies were as large as cocked-hats; --the scene-shifter explained to Mr. ___, who asked the reason why everything was so magnified, that the galleries could never see the objects unless they were enormously exaggerated. How many of our writers and designers work for the galleries? (II 486).

An excerpt from one of his critical examinations of painting shows once again that he felt too many artists were using theatrical exaggeration in their works so as to destroy their beauty and truthfulness:

> I have seen so many white palaces standing before dark purple skies, so many black towers with gamboge atmospheres behind them, so many masses of rifle-green trees plunged into the deepest shadow, in the midst of sunshiny plains, for no other reason but because dark and light contrast together, that a slight expression of satiety may be permitted to me, and a longing for more simple nature. On a great staring theatre such pictures may do very well—you are obliged there to seek for these startling contrasts; and by the aid of blue lights, red lights, transparencies, and plenty of drums and appropriate music, the scene

> thus presented to one captivates the eye, and calls down thunder from the galleries.
>
> But in little quiet rooms, on sheets of paper of a yard square, such monstrous theatrical effects are sadly painful. You don't mistake patches of brickdust for maidens' blushes, or fancy that tinfoil is diamonds, or require to be spoken to with the utmost roar of the lungs. Why, in painting, are we to have monstrous, flaring, Drury Lane tricks and claptraps put in practice, when a quieter style is, as I fancy, so infinitely more charming? (II 526-527)

Theatre is necessarily a larger-than-life world of exaggeration in its stage devices and acting. But Thackeray felt that realistic novels should avoid using these contrivances, and that novelists should not become stage practitioners.

Also useful to keep in mind when assessing Thackeray's use of theatre is the definition of *theatrical*. As explained by Kemble,

> Things dramatic and things theatrical are often confounded together in the minds of English people, who, being for the most part neither the one nor the other, speak and write of them as if they were identical, instead of, as they are, so dissimilar that they are nearly opposite.
>
> That which is dramatic in human nature is the passionate, emotional, humorous element, the simplest portion of our composition, after our mere instincts, to which it is closely allied, and this has no relation whatever, beyond its momentary excitement and gratification,

> to that which imitates it, and is its theatrical reproduction; the dramatic is the *real*, of which the theatrical is *false*. ("Notes" 23)

Thus, Charles Dickens, whose work on the whole Thackeray admired, came under scrutiny for his theatrical elements in such works as *The Cricket on the Hearth*, which Thackeray felt contained characters more suited to theatre than to literature:

> To our fancy, the dialogue and characters of the 'Cricket on the Hearth' are no more like nature than the talk of Tityrus and Meliboeus is like the real talk of Bumpkin and Hodge over a stile, or than Florian's pastoral petits maîtres, in red heels and powder, are like French peasants, with wooden shoes and a pitchfork, or than Pierrot and Carlotta in a ballet, smiling charmingly, jumping and dancing astonishingly amidst wreaths of calico roses and fragrant pasteboard bouquets, are like a real spotless nymph, fresh from Ida, and a young demigod lately descended from Olympus. This story is no more a real story than Peerybingle is a real name. It is like one—made, as the calico-roses before-mentioned, much redder and bigger than the common plant. The 'Cricket on the Hearth' has the effect of a beautiful theatrical piece: It interests you as such—charms you with its admirable grotesque: but you cannot help seeing that Carlotta is not a goddess (dancing as she does divinely), and that that is rouge, not blushes on her cheeks. (*Contributions* 88)

In the same vein as his commentary on painting, Thackeray's assertions about Dickens' story show the connection between theatre and unrealistic fiction. He also said this of Dickens' work:

> I quarrel with his Art in many respects: which I don't think represents Nature duly; for instance Micawber appears to me an exaggeration of a man, as his name is of a name. It is delightful and makes me laugh: but it is no more a real man than my friend Punch is: and in so far I protest against him . . . holding that the Art of Novels *is* to represent Nature: to convey as strongly as possible the sentiment of reality—in a tragedy or a poem or a lofty drama you aim at producing different emotions; the figures moving, and their words sounding, heroically: but in a drawing-room drama a coat is a coat and a poker a poker; and must be nothing else according to my ethics, not an embroidered tunic, nor a great red-hot instrument like the Pantomime weapon. (*Letters* II 772-773).

Thackeray enjoyed the entertainment value of his fellow writer's work, but he felt novels should not become literary pantomimes featuring broad action and characterisation.

While both Thackeray and Dickens were playgoers and infused their works with allusions to plays and commentary about nineteenth-century stage practices, they took different approaches to their fictional crafts. Dickens once said, while delivering a toast to Thackeray at a Royal General Theatrical Fund banquet in 1856, that "every writer of fiction, though he may not adopt the dramatic form, writes in effect for the

stage" (Fielding 262). Dickens' love of acting shines through his works, influencing his creation of melodramatic characters and sensational plots. His daughter Mamie once recalled a morning when she witnessed him carrying out a "facial pantomime"; she saw him repeatedly leave his writing desk to rush to a mirror to make "extraordinary facial contortions", and years later realised that he had been acting out the character he was creating: "for the time being he had not only lost sight of his surroundings, but had actually become in action, as in imagination, the creature of his pen" (48-49). According to J.B. Van Amerongen, Dickens' dramatic approach to characterisation is his great strength; his best characters are "sometimes exaggerated, grotesque even, but always striking" (255).

Whereas Dickens is author/actor/character, Thackeray is author/manager/critic. Like Dickens, he had some acting experience, but it was limited to a few performances in private theatricals. For example, when he was a schoolboy at Cambridge in 1828, he performed the role of Fusbos in *Bombasto Furioso*, a burlesque tragic opera by William Barnes Rhodes (1772-1826). Like Dickens, he tried his hand at writing plays, but found that his tendency to stress commentary at the expense of action did not suit the dramatic form. Thus, rather than depicting performance, Thackeray's primary interest lies in reaction *to* performance. His narrators make remarks about what they see and ask audiences to evaluate what they read. Instead of creating plots and characters that are as much at home on the stage as they are on the written page (perhaps the reason why Dickens' texts have been so easily and frequently dramatised on stage and screen), Thackeray tends to use his plots and characters as commentaries *about* theatricality in literature.

Thackeray's use of theatre to criticise art ostensibly seems to contradict his reputation as an enthusiastic playgoer. Yet his dislike of the theatrical in art did not negate his love of theatre. Thackeray, along with many other Victorians, loved going to the theatre precisely because it *was* sham and pretence. As Michael Booth, who has produced several in-depth studies of Victorian theatre, observes, the great appeal of nineteenth-century theatre was its artificiality, its "escapist entertainment": what audiences wanted was "thrilling action, stirring emotion, spectacle" (*Prefaces* 25). John Carey notes, too, that Thackeray's favourite type of performances were "theatre's most unreal forms"—pantomime, ballet, and opera—an indication that "their extravagant, transparent sham partly accounted for their appeal" (103). However, as Thackeray matured, as he spent time back stage seeing theatre up close, he found that it was best suited to the young viewer, still naïve enough to be swayed by its make-believe. As such, says Catherine Peters, for Thackeray theatre developed into a paradigm for "youthful illusion" (29), particularly for the young male viewer and his initiation into the adult world.

Central to this initiation is the stage woman. For Thackeray and the young male viewer the stage woman appears not so much as a "real woman," but as what she represents to their imaginations. Seen at a distance, enveloped by the romantic aura of gas lighting, she seems the very essence of ethereal femininity, a sublime figure of fantasy. Thackeray writes of going to the theatre and seeing the stage "covered with angels, who sang, acted, and danced" and dancers "as beautiful as Houris" (XVII 428-429). In *The Adventures of Philip*, Thackeray delineates in his narrative voice a

mature person's recognition of the difference between fantasy and actuality, unrealised at this time by the young Philip:

> And now you may fancy of what old, old times we are writing—times in which those horrible old male dancers yet existed—hideous old creatures, with low dresses and short sleeves, and wreaths of flowers, or hats and feathers round their absurd old wigs—who skipped at the head of the ballet. Let us be thankful that those old apes have almost vanished off the stage, and left it in possession of the beauteous bounders of the other sex. Ah, my dear young friends, time *will* be when these too will cease to appear more than mortally beautiful! To Philip, at his age, they yet looked as lovely as houris. At this time the simple young fellow, surveying the ballet from his stall at the opera, mistook carmine for blushes, pearl powder for native snows, and cotton-wool for natural symmetry; and I dare say when he went into the world he was not more clear-sighted about its rouged innocence, its padded pretension, and its painted candour. (AP 38-40)

Thackeray's early letters show that he, like Philip, experienced a similar fascination about stage women, but it was also a fascination that ebbed and flowed. On August 6, 1829, he told his mother that French actress "Leontine Fay at the Theatre de Madame [is] the most delightful little creature I ever set eyes on; she has a pair of such lips! out of w[hich] the French comes trilling out with a modulation & a beauty of w[hich] I did not think it capable", but within a few weeks he found his passion receding: "I don't know how it is that my love for Leontine Fay sh[ould] go

off but it is not so strong to day as usual" (*Letters* I 91, 93). Another of his favourite dancers, ballerina Marie-Louise Duvernay (1813-1894), is in July 1833 "la belle Duvernay," but by October he writes, "I saw my ancient flame Duvernay at the French Opera the other day & wondered how I could have ever been smitten" (*Letters* I 262, 266). A letter to Mrs. Bryan Waller Proctor in 1841 indicates even more strongly the views of an older Thackeray in this regard, as he describes an audience's reaction to a play starring Mademoiselle Dejazet:

> This young creature who is neither so innocent nor so good looking as Vestris, but on the other hand incomparably older & cleverer chose to act the part of a young girl of sixteen, in a little muslin frock & pinafore, with trowsers and long braided hair like the Misses Kenwigs; when this hideous leering grinning withered old painted simpering wretch came forward, do you know I was seized with such a qualm as to shout out 'Why—she is too ugly,' and I was obliged to stride over 10000 people in a most crowded pit in order to get rid of the sight of her. Is it that one is growing moral? par hazard in one's declining years, or only more difficult? There were hundreds of young wicked fellows casting I have no doubt eyes of fire towards this hideous old grinning wretch. Ah happy days of Youth! (Harden *Letters* 107).

An infatuation with a stage woman may be fine for impressionable young boys; as in his own life, Thackeray thought this kind of fascination constituted for many boys their sexual awakening into manhood. But Thackeray did not consider it fine for

mature artists and writers to deliberately continue this romantic illusion in their works, making stage women cultural icons of femininity.

The stage woman's dual identity (one in the roles she enacts on stage and the other in the life she leads off stage) further allows Thackeray to expose the discrepancy between the way women are frequently portrayed, or perceived, in art, and their actual selves. He will say, for example, of women pictured in *Keepsake* prints, that artists have completely falsified their renditions of femininity: "There is not one of these beauties, with her great eyes, and slim waist that looks as if it has been painted from a human figure. It is but a slovenly, rickety, wooden imitation of it, tricked out in some tawdry feathers and frippery" (II 344). He then laments that a painting by Mr. Uwins depicts a "group of females (the Hyacinths) who have limbs that females never had, and crouch in attitudes so preposterous and unnatural" (II 345).

Regarding literature, Thackeray voices similar concerns. He found that fictional women were often not round characters or true to life, but flat, uninteresting stereotypes. The typical heroine, happily married off to the hero at the end, was to him an idealised and insipid individual. Women created from the pens of such writers as Sir Walter Scott and Shakespeare disappointed him with their lack of originality:

> Take all Shakespeare's heroines—they all seem to me pretty much the same, affectionate, motherly, tender, that sort of thing. Take Scott's ladies, and other writers'—each man seems to draw from one model—an exquisite slave is what we want for the most part; a humble, flattering, smiling, child-loving, tea-making, pianoforte-playing being,

> who laughs at our jokes however old they may be, coaxes and wheedles us in our humours, and fondly lies to us through life. (VIII 324)

In her study of Thackeray's use of female characters, Micael Clarke contends that Thackeray voiced strong objections to such depictions. Hence, he produced texts that were a deliberate "protest against an entire system of false social values, including false ideas of male honor and female virtue, and of the role of the novel in shaping a culture" (47). *Rebecca and Rowena* is again a good example to illustrate Thackeray's reflexive inclination to discuss literary conventions within his own fiction. With the character of Rowena, he points out the banal effect of the typical fictional heroine. In *Proposals for a Continuation of Ivanhoe,* she is described as someone possessed with "distinguished politeness," a "spotless modesty of demeanour" and "unalterable coolness under all circumstances"; in short, she is the perfect "pattern of correctness for all the matrons of England"; however, as the narrator will then announce in the *Rebecca and Rowena* story, her propriety as an English lady has rendered her a frigid, "faultless, prim, niminy-piminy" (RR 466-467, 501).

Clarke's study is valuable in its observations of Thackeray's interest in the problems encountered by Victorian women, particularly the injustices they faced in society and the way they were, often unjustly, portrayed in culture. Calling him a liberal Victorian, she points out that his library contained the works of writers who were outspoken about women's issues, such as Judith Drake's 1696 *Essay in Defence of the Female Sex*, John Stuart Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, and Sydney Owenson's (Lady Morgan) *Woman and Her Master*. Clarke also notes that he fostered friendships with many women who influenced female emancipation,

including Caroline Norton, who challenged the British legal system's divorce, child custody, and married women's property laws (3, 8-9). Thackeray, she insists, affirms that concepts of femininity, although arbitrary, have imprisoned women within legal, economic, and social systems; his works further "our ability to understand gender in its historical dimension" (22). As someone opposed to oversimplifications of human nature in art, Thackeray was aware of the complexities of womanhood, and this awareness explains why he was drawn to the figure of the stage woman.

The work of modern film critics involved in gender studies helps to inform Thackeray's works and to explain why so many Victorian writers were intrigued by actresses, often using them to promote and endorse the ideology of the passive, domestic woman. The visibility of an actress as she occupies public space renders her as a perfect form by which to represent an era's ideology. The observations of Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams in regard to cinematic women equally apply to stage women: "even the most blatant stereotype is naturalized by a medium that presents a convincing illusion of a flesh and blood woman . . . . the very notion of 'woman' in a patriarchal society is a narcissistic construct, because the female always exists in some sense *to be seen*" (6). Sue-Ellen Case points out that scholars interested in exploring the connection between theatre and gender have studied how the stage woman acts as a sign onto which the beliefs of a society are imprinted: "The norms of the culture assign meaning to the sign, prescribing its resonances with their biases. For a feminist, this means that the dominant notions of gender, class and race compose the meaning of the text of a play, the stage pictures of its production and the audience reception of its meaning" (116-117). Philip Green has

also described ideology as an attempt to stabilise our relationship with the world, to prepare us for our social identities, and to keep us from suspecting that such traditional roles as housewives and mothers may be "full of contradiction, pain, and self-abasement" (16). Green argues that visual culture encourages us to accept our roles:

> When ideological discourse 'works,' it does so by the apparent lack of any effort to promote it, by seeming to be just a believable story about real people and their lives. Visual culture is thus an ideal material for ideology to work with, for in a successful visual culture we meet 'real people' . . . . Whatever social roles are eventually to receive us, visual culture is capable of presenting these roles as *natural*, and also of confirming us as passive subjects rather than social actors when confronting those conditions. (16)

However, if visual culture as represented by the actress is shown to be unnatural—that she and her roles are male-conceived, deliberately manufactured, and replete with contradictions—then the ideological gender codes she images are undermined. Thackeray's insistence that we see the fiction in fiction, the acting in acting, disputes the "truth" of ideology's definition of women.

Thackeray's stage women reiterate the arbitrary conception of womanhood; as their theatricality is emphasised, so too is the false perception of femininity. By the nature of their professions, as women playing fictional roles, their existence is partially rooted in the artificial, the theatrical. That women's behaviours have been classified as theatrical is a topic that has been explored by writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. Wollstonecraft objected to the notions

promulgated by Dr. John Gregory, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Dr. James Fordyce, who in their eighteenth-century manuals and sermons encouraged girls to suppress their intelligence and passions and to disguise their true feelings so that they could adopt a restrained and proper image that was pleasing to men. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft forcefully declared, "It is this system of dissimulation . . . that I despise. Women are always to *seem* to be this and that" (175). Despite her censure, the ideas of these men remained influential in the nineteenth century. In 1869 Mill stated in his *The Subjection of Women*, that "What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others" (138).

Years later, scholars are still exploring the same issue. Molly Haskell, for example, has suggested that the figure of the actress as a character in modern cinema reminds us that the view of women as a fictional or artificial construct is deep-rooted in our culture. "In one sense," she says, "the actress merely extends the role-playing dimension of woman, emphasizing what she already is" (*From* 243). In *Gone With the Wind*, Scarlett O'Hara laments that role-playing has become the norm for women, that consequently her identity is based upon being a "social actress":

> 'I'm tired of everlastingly being unnatural and never doing anything I want to do. I'm tired of acting like I don't eat more than a bird and walking when I want to run and saying I feel faint after a waltz, when I could dance for two days and never get tired. I'm tired of saying 'How wonderful you are' to fool men who haven't got one-half the sense I've

> got, and I'm tired of pretending I don't know anything, so men can tell me things and feel important while they're doing it.' (81-82)

Similarly, drama critic Lucy Fischer cites the 1941 film *Two-Faced Woman*, wherein a woman (Karin) pretends to be another woman (Katrin) in order to rekindle her husband Blake's attentions, as one of several examples of how culturally women are pressured to become "actresses": "this film reveals the need for all women to be 'two-faced'—to cover their identities with a mask. The real Karin is never as appealing to Blake as the role of Katrin that she plays—a persona molded for male desire" (66).

The suggestion (which these examples reiterate) that human nature is endowed with a performative aspect, that masquerade and artifice are components of femininity, intrigues scholars. Judith Butler, for example, asks "Does being female constitute a 'natural fact' or a cultural performance, or is 'naturalness' constituted through discursively constrained performative acts that produce the body through and within the categories of sex?" (*Gender* viii). Thackeray would undoubtedly have said the answer lies in cultural performance. Echoing Mill's sentiments, his narrator in *Mr. Brown's Letters to His Nephew* states that a woman is encouraged to be false because we "order and educate her to be dishonest" (VIII 325). Gail Cunningham also points to a speech in *Vanity Fair* in which the narrator provides a clear-cut example of "the deceit necessarily involved in womanly submissiveness" (39):

> The best of women . . . are hypocrites. We don't know how much they hide from us: how often those frank smiles, which they wear so easily, are traps to cajole or elude or disarm—I don't mean in your mere coquettes, but your domestic models, and paragons of female virtue.

> Who has not seen a woman hide the dullness of a stupid husband, or coax the fury of a savage one? We accept this amiable slavishness, and praise a woman for it: we call this pretty treachery truth. A good housewife is of necessity a humbug. (VF 208)

The encouragement of women to be role-players has subsequently caused females to be stereotyped as devious—a belief Thackeray often counters in his fiction by having his stage women expose deceptiveness in male characters. Haskell says the "actress as a metaphor for women" implies that women are inherently deceptive: "role-playing is lying, and lying is a woman's game" (*From* 243). She argues that fictional actors rarely appear as the main subject in films (and literature) because the implications associated with acting would negate a heroic male image: "Role-playing and the seeking of approval are narcissistic, vain, devious; they go against the straightforward image man has of himself" (244).

According to Alison Byerly's study of *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray's female characters help to expose theatre's influence on the definition of femininity:

> In depicting feminine theatricality as the result of social conditioning, Thackeray countered a longstanding tradition of seeing theatricality as somehow natural to women. Theatricality represents a kind of false show that is historically associated with femininity. While any form of theatricality was suspect, nothing was more dangerous than a woman who could act. In Thackeray's fiction, actresses are indeed very dangerous, but they do not act alone. They are products of and

> participants in a social world where the accepted—indeed, the required—mode of behaviour is theatrical. (273-274)

The fictional stage woman in Thackeray's reflexive texts is dangerous because she exposes falsity in the social and cultural worlds. Her profession underscores the connection between women and theatre, allowing her to enact what Luce Irigaray calls "playing with mimesis" (*This Sex* 76)—exposing the artifice and fabrications of conventional feminine images that appear in culture to endorse ideological perceptions of gender.

The idea that society trained women to be dissemblers so that they could seem to be properly passive and submissive to male authority has been ingrained in Victorian culture. The proper woman was to be an Angel in the House, as coined by Coventry Patmore's 1854-56 sentimental poem of the same name. Inspired by Patmore's first wife Honoria, the work endorses an ideal view of femininity contained within the domestic sphere that inspires the production of art:

> Yet it is now my chosen task
>
> To sing her worth as Maid and Wife;
>
> Nor happier post than this I ask,
>
> To live her laureate all my life.
>
> On wings of love uplifted free,
>
> And by her gentleness made great,
>
> I'll teach how noble man should be
>
> To match with such a lovely mate. (Canto II.I.37-44)

The poem shows marriage as a civilising institution which mirrors the love of God for man. As Marlene Springer notes, the celebration of "married harmony" as "fostered primarily by the saintly, submissive woman" made the work so popular among Victorians that a quarter of a million copies of the text had been sold before the author's death in 1896 (131).

Thackeray, however, found that femininity is too complex to be reduced to the literary stereotype of an Angel in the House. In a review of Robert Montgomery's sentimental poem *Woman: the Angel of Life*, he printed the last fourteen lines backward to show, in the opinion of John Dodds, that Thackeray believed the poem "makes as much sense read backward as forward" (11).[2] Other writers seemed more willing to accept ideal femininity as a basis for female characterisation. For example, Van Amerongen says that Dickens' ideal female characters remind him of a type commonly enacted on stage—"the long-suffering, sacrificing heroine, the Griselda-type" (243). Van Amerongen contends the "Desdemona-like Lizzie Hexams, Florence Dombeys and little Nells" may be modelled on theatrical females found in Shakespeare or Victorian drama since "as in early nineteenth-century drama, Dickens still firmly holds on to the principle of man being the 'Lord of Creation,' woman a more or less negligible quantity" (243).

Van Amerongen's identification of the existence of an ideal woman on stage remains a matter of interest for modern-day critics of stage and screen. The Angel in the House may seem by now a trite concept; however, the notion persists. Today's feminist playwrights are trying to counter this conception of women, but Ida Prosky

points out that it is still a staple of the theatrical world: "A woman who becomes an actress must be capable of portraying the stereotypical loving, caring, 'soft' woman, particularly in the commercial theatre. For actresses, that image is still the bread and butter of the business, especially in film and television" (11). Mainstream drama and cinema, then, reiterate the idea of the passive, submissive woman either through roles that enact this view of women, or through roles that display the antithesis of this Angel in the House. In these latter roles, wherein women are represented as strong, independent females, the characters are more than likely to be portrayed as monstrous or abnormal. Because they are punished for their rebellious acts, often by death or spinsterhood, they, too, act as endorsements for the passive ideal, warning female viewers of what could befall them if they imitate such abhorrent behaviour.

To explain how this kind of idealised representation of women found its way on stage, and subsequently into literature and film, critics often look back in history, to when women were banned from the acting profession, and thus did not have a public stage by which to display female behaviour as perceived *by* females. Sue-Ellen Case argues in *Feminism and Theatre* that when men were required to perform female roles, a fictional concept of women was created on stage. In order to signal to the audience that an actor was enacting femininity, a man had to distinguish himself as being "non-male" through costume, gesture, movement, and intonation—practices that were assimilated over time into culture and accepted as feminine. Thackeray himself underwent such a transformation when he performed a female role in an 1826 school performance. "I am to be the heroine!" he excitedly wrote to his mother, while supplying details about his costume: "My dress I shall make myself with the aid of

your needle & thread, & some silver paper tucked to my white trousers. My bedmaker is going to lend me a white gown" (*Letters* I 106). He even included a sketch of himself wearing an apron, crinolines, and feathered headdress, and accompanied by his "lover" Dr. Faustus.

Thackeray's cross-dressing experience is a reminder of the male influence upon theatre in acting, managing, producing, directing, and viewing. These influential positions produced a male vision of femininity which persisted even when women returned to the Restoration stage in 1661. Actresses then found themselves imitating the stylised performances of their male predecessors and playing sexual objects in "bawdy comedies and narratives of lust" (Case 27). The type of roles available to women further restrained their characterisation. In *Acting Women: Images of Women in Theatre*, Lesley Ferris identifies the most common archetypes as the speechless heroine, the penitent whore, the wilful woman, and the woman in drag—archetypes that Thackeray felt compelled to challenge within his fiction.

Martha Roth argues that the diametric differences between male and female produced by male-run theatre is a "theatrical convention" because in "real life, we

don't look or act so differently. The female performer is imprisoned within a caricature of femininity, because her role—in its cultural inheritance—was meant to be played by a man" (8). Irigaray has also maintained that the construction of femininity has a theatrical basis, one of masquerade that allows for women to be represented as something which is distinct from men:

> What do I mean by masquerade? In particular, what Freud calls 'femininity.' The belief, for example, that it is necessary to *become* a woman, a 'normal' one at that, whereas a man is a man from the outset. He has only to effect his being-a-man, whereas a woman has to become a normal woman, that is, has to enter into *the masquerade of femininity*. In the last analysis, the female Oedipus complex is woman's entry into a system of values that is not hers, and in which she can 'appear' and circulate only when enveloped in the needs/desires/fantasies of others, namely men. (*This Sex* 134)

In terms of needs/desires/fantasies, audiences have also been studied for their influence upon female characterisation. While women are encouraged to read the fictional female as a model upon which to behave and display themselves, male viewers are encouraged to read the stage woman as projections of their masculine longings. Thus Roth argues that women's bodies in performance "wear the masks of male attribution. The ways in which the female masks perform in plays, films, operas, dance, and TV constitute an argument, and the argument is that women *should* behave according to the male fears and desires that shape the performing image" (5). The belief that a female performer is subordinate to a male viewer is a prominent topic of

discussion among today's film critics. Initiated by Laura Mulvey's work in cinema, the theory of "the gaze" postulates that spectators of film, television, and video imitate the restricted and gendered view of the voyeuristic "male" camera which stares at the actress on screen through its limiting lens. As Case observes, the female subject is positioned as a "passive object to the male viewer"; hence, "The male looks; the female is looked upon" (120). That "the gaze" existed years before Mulvey's hypothesis is evident from Fanny Kemble's observations on her years as an actress. She writes in *Records of a Girlhood* that what she found most disagreeable about her profession was "the public personal exhibition, the violence done (as it seems to me) to womanly dignity and decorum in thus becoming the gaze of every eye and theme of every tongue. If my audience was reduced to my intimates and associates I should not mind it so much, I think" (432). Her recollection of watching a new actress, Miss Sheriff, perform also indicates her recognition and fear of the power of the male gaze:

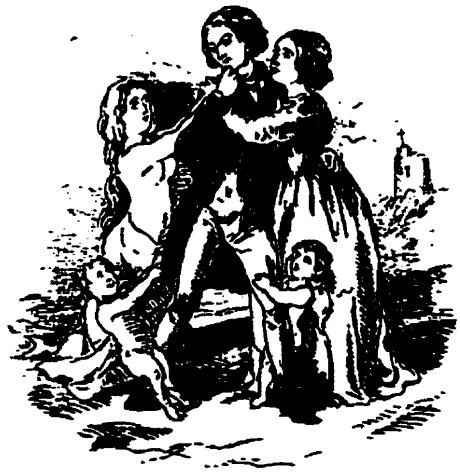
> When I saw the thousands of eyes of that crowded pitful of men, and heard their stormy acclamations, and then looked at the fragile, helpless, pretty young creature standing before them trembling with terror, and all woman's fear and shame in such an unnatural position, I more than ever marveled how I, or any woman, could ever have ventured on so terrible a trial, or survived the venture. It seemed to me as if the mere gaze of all that multitude must melt the slight figure away like a wreath of vapor in the sun, or shrivel it up like a scrap of silver paper before a blazing fire. (*Records* 465)

Tracy Davis finds in her study of the relationship between women and nineteenth-century theatre that a common criticism of the Victorian actress was the ideological split between her public and private lives. Professionally she could play the roles of devoted wife and tender mother, but her very appearance on a public stage denounced her as an immoral woman ("Spectacles" 52). John Berger has also commented on the paradox involving male viewers of art who approve of their own voyeuristic activity, while at the same time censuring the object of their gaze: "you paint a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you call the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure" (51). Similar sentiments about theatre appear later in the century, in Arthur Wing Pinero's 1838 play *Trelawny of the 'Wells,'* where an actress voices the paradox: "It is Avonia, the suburban soubrette in the principal boy's tights, who stands up to Sir William Gower and bravely demands that the respectable world recognize the hypocrisy by which they enjoy women on the stage and despise them for being there" (Bratton "Introduction" xx).

Theatre's history of male performers in drag, its power base in male authority figures (from conceptions of femininity to receptions by audiences) have prompted critics to revise the old notion of theatre and its actors as mirrors of real life that reflect truths about the human condition. Maggie Hamm argues that actresses reflect masculine truths, masculine conceptions of femininity. Women who appear on stage, she says, are "ideological signifiers" (6). Influenced by Jacques Lacan's theories of the mirror stage of human development, wherein women serve as a mirror for masculine identity, feminist critics insist that actresses often mirror male fantasies,

female (3, 7). Hence, nineteenth-century theatre's "hands" held a mirror that favoured and benefited the retention of a system wherein males were icons of power and authority and females were icons of fragility and acquiescence. According to Pam Morris, cultural misrepresentations of women by men over the years have proved to be a successful sanctioning of their domination over women (33).

When women are portrayed in art, literature, and drama, they are usually depicted as an angel/whore binary. In an illustration in *The History of Pendennis*, Thackeray pictures these polarities of femininity. His hero stands between two women—one symbolising the female as temptress, the other as the good female, "Demure Duty" (Fisher "Siren" 392-393). Because Pen is a writer, they represent not only his moral choices in life, but also the choices he thinks he has to make in regard to female characterisation in his works. [3]



For the fictional stage woman, these polarities are usually depicted in terms of her on and off stage identities. While on stage, in ballet, melodrama, and Shakespearean drama, she may enact angelic roles, or roles that endorse the need for angelic behaviours in women, off stage she is usually portrayed as an immoral, dangerous individual. In *Women and Victorian Theatre*, Kerry Powell argues that nineteenth-century theatre "conspired in producing repressive codes of gender even as it provided women with a rare opportunity to experience independence and power" (xi). Powell notes that men were both "attracted and repelled by female power on stage" and thus

> reacted with speech of their own—a strategic rhetoric designed to ensure male dominance in their own personal lives, in the theatre, and in society as a whole. By formulating the actress as intrinsically different from other women, having little or nothing in common with their own wives and daughters, Victorian men defended themselves, and society at large, against the apocalyptic terrors which female power evoked for them. (xi)

As part of their strategy to negate the power of this visible, independent woman, Victorian men developed a rhetoric that emphatically defined the actress in her private life as the opposite of the Angel in the House and of the idealised women she often portrayed in plays. Even respected stage women were accused of being deceptive, egotistical, and self-serving. Accusations included charges that actresses existed on the same level as prostitutes, and as such they were wanton women who schemed to seduce susceptible husbands away from their wives, thus destroying the family unit.

The stigma attached to actresses in their private lives was clearly an attempt to nullify the potential power their careers might have afforded them. Hence, Davis makes a valid observation when she notes that accurate histories of female stage performers must account for both their professional and personal lives (*Actresses* xi).

When Powell turns to a study of Victorian novels and plays in which theatre and in particular the actress are dominant components, he finds that many texts affirm nineteenth-century ideological codes of gender. For example, they often designate the theatre as a locus of decay and danger, an environment unsuitable for a "good woman." As Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette* suggests, women were often fascinated by actresses, seeing them as symbols of the independence denied to the ordinary, non-professional woman. The heroine Lucy Snowe participates in a school vaudeville and later attends a performance to see the actress Vashti, both experiences allowing her to release repressed longings for power and a desire to express that power. When she performs in the vaudeville, Lucy enacts a male role—although she refuses to garb herself completely in men's clothing, limiting herself to a cravat—in a love scene with her friend Ginevra. In her study of the novel, Judith Newton assesses the complexities involved in this portrayal, and argues that Lucy's acting allows her to release "repressed sexual and romantic feelings" encoded within the play but which cannot be expressed outside of the play; "It is not possible in the world of *Villette* to defy men's emotional control in this way" (120). Of the performance by Vashti, Lucy remains a spectator, experiencing a powerful emotional response to the actress, unlike that of her male companion. Lisa Surridge says that Vashti's identity as a Jewish female performer, which forces her to face both anti-theatrical and anti-Semitic

prejudice, is appealing to Lucy. Vashti exists "beyond the boundaries of social acceptance" and "embodies a radical challenge to artists seeking to depict the feminine . . . . [she] is a female Moses leading an exodus of women from artistic misrepresentation" (7,10). Brontë, though, recognises that the independence Vashti represents is dangerous for those women who must repress artistic and independent longings in order to conform to a stable social order. Thus, Lucy's visit to the theatre ends with the threat of the building burning up, the heat and chaos of the fire mirroring the passions that burn within her but cannot be openly released: "'Fire!' rang through the gallery. 'Fire!' was repeated, re-echoed, yelled forth: and then, and faster than pen can set it down, came panic, rushing, crushing—a blind, selfish, cruel chaos" (374). Earlier Lucy had described Vashti in similar terms, as a fiery being capable of causing bedlam: "She could shine yet with pale grandeur and steady might; but that star verged already on its judgment day. Seen near, it was a chaos—hollow, half-consumed: an orb perished or perishing—half lava, half glow" (368). Vashti's description foreshadows the actual fire and reminds Lucy that actresses and the theatre permit the liberation of pent-up emotions and desires, a release that is typically forbidden to the ordinary woman.

Powell finds that in several texts, actresses are women who are unhappy with their profession, and who are more than eager to exchange their theatrical careers for marriage. William Prynne's 1632 *Histriomastrix—the Player's Scourge, or, Actor Tragedie* that warned girls about the dangers of seeking employment in the theatre seems to reside in the background of those works which remind actresses that they are ruining their chances for marriage with respectable men, that their actions will plunge

their families into disgrace, that the acting profession is akin to prostitution. A common attitude of such disapproval toward actresses appears in Geraldine Jewsbury's novel *Half Sisters*:

> I have got a real horror of all professional women. A woman who makes her mind public, or exhibits herself in any way, no matter how it may be dignified by the title of art, seems to me little better than a woman of a nameless class. I am more jealous of the mind than of the body; and, to me, there is something revolting in the notion of a woman who professes to love and belong to you alone going and printing the secrets of her inmost heart, the most sacred working of her soul, for the benefit of all who can pay for them. . . . I could not love a professional woman, and I would cut my right hand off sooner than marry one; they are all very well in their way, but no wife or daughter of mine should ever, with my consent, form an acquaintance with actress, artist, singer, or musician. (214-215)

According to Powell, this speaker (a male friend of the novel's hero) likens an actress to a "published text"; she is "available for anyone to 'read,' rather than the property of one man, a fact which links her in the mind of Geraldine Jewsbury's hero to prostitution" (31). Powell also cites the hero of the 1878 novel *MacLeod of Dare* as a respectable man who dreads public knowledge of his association with an actress. MacLeod declares, "'I hated the theatre whenever I thought of her in it. I dared scarcely open a newspaper, lest I should see her name. I turned away from the posters in the streets: when I happened by some accident to see her publicly paraded in that

way, I shuddered all through—with shame, I think'" (131). Many writers warn women that if they should take to the stage, they will never be accepted into genteel society. As Sir Charles, who has an affair with an actress in Charles Reade's novel *Peg Woffington*, says, "Why is it every man of intellect loves an actress once in his life, and no man of sense ever did it twice?" (53). For some writers, the common ways of dealing with the actress, to negate her power or to punish her for her rebellion, are to portray her as a monstrous, unnatural, or maddened woman, to give her a fatal illness, or to remind her and her readers that a failure to embrace marriage and motherhood makes women sombre, bitter spinsters.

In many Victorian works, fictional actresses enjoy the power they exert as women speaking on a public stage, but fear their independence will render them unnatural. Indoctrinated by the idea that a woman's natural job is to be wife and mother, they experience either an enduring anxiety to find a husband or they adopt a defensive stance to legitimise their career choice. Hence, actress Gertrude White in *MacLeod of Dare* wishes she could marry a rich man and leave the acting world behind her:

> She went to the mirror and regarded herself; and almost unconsciously an expression of pride and resolve appeared about the lines of her mouth. And she would show to herself that still she had a woman's feeling by going out and doing some actual work of charity; she would prove to herself that the constant stimulation of noble emotions had not deadened them in her own nature . . . . She was trying to imagine herself as having already left the stage and all its fictitious allurements.

> She was now Lady Bountiful: having looked after the simple cares of her household she was now ready to cast her eyes abroad and relieve in so far as she might the distress around her . . . . her heart was happy and her courage rose. It was not for nothing, then, that she had entertained the bold resolve of casting aside for ever the one great ambition of her life—with all its intoxicating successes, and hopes, and struggles—for the homely and simple duties of an ordinary woman's existence. (212)

Another good depiction of an actress' dissatisfaction with the theatrical profession and her yearning to be accepted into the domestic sphere appears in Pinero's *Trelawny of the 'Wells.'* Rose Trelawny is an actress who marries into respectable society, having grown up with her mother's advice ringing in her ears: "Mother said, 'if ever a good man comes along and offers to marry you and to take you off the stage, seize the chance—get out of it'" (I.i.446-447). Mindful of her mother's warnings that a career in theatre is short-lived for a woman once she grows older and loses her beauty, Rose marries Arthur Gower. While she finds life in the Gower household stifling and dull, she also finds it uncomfortable to return to her former life. She warns her theatre friends of the false world they inhabit:

> We are only dolls, partly human, with mechanical limbs that *will* fall into stagey postures, and heads stuffed with sayings out of rubbishy plays. It isn't *the* world we live in, merely *a* world—such a queer little one! I was less than a month in Cavendish Square, and very few people came there; but they were *real* people—*real*! For a month I lost the smell of gas and oranges, and the hurry and noise, and the dirt and the

> slang, and the clownish joking, at the 'Wells'. I didn't realize at the time the change that was going on in me; I didn't realize it till I came back. (III.i.234-242)

Rose's interaction with the "real" world has thus made her unhappily aware of the artificiality of the theatre world. Other actresses, who have chosen career over motherhood, find they must defend their decision. The singer and actress Alcharisi in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876), who refused to play the role of mother to her son, is later very much aware of how society views such behaviour as monstrous and unnatural: "'Every mother is supposed to have the same set of motives, or else to be a monster. I am not a monster, but I have not felt exactly what other women feel—or say they feel, for fear of being thought unlike others'" (539).

Like his literary contemporaries, Thackeray was conscious of society's denigration of stage women. Consequently, any association with the theatre, whether familial or professional, is precarious in terms of status for his fictional women. So, for example, in *Lovel the Widower* Bessy Prior tries to hide her theatrical background when she becomes a governess. When the truth of her past emerges, she faces accusations from her employer's mother and mother-in-law that she has polluted her young charges; in the eyes of the older women, Bessy is a "Serpent" and a "viper" (LW 181). The "respectable" society of *Vanity Fair* likewise objects to Thackeray's Becky Sharp. Educator Barbara Pinkerton feels she must warn others that Becky is the daughter of an opera dancer, that theatre and all of its negative implications are thus in her blood:

> My dread is, lest the principles of the mother—who was represented to me as a French countess, forced to emigrate in the late revolutionary horrors; but who, as I have since found, was a person of the very *lowest order and morals*—should at any time prove to be *hereditary* in the unhappy woman whom I took as an *outcast*. (VF 117)

Pinkerton is voicing, and emphasising, the common belief that theatre and its practitioners lack morality, a belief that makes her use of the term *outcast* appropriate since women who had an association with the stage, however slight, were social outcasts. Hence, Lady Maria in *The Virginians* is exiled from her aristocratic community of friends and relatives when she marries an actor.[4] When young Hetty asks her mother why the family feels insulted by Maria's marriage and why they should object to a union between two people in love, the older woman merely responds that the girl is too young to comprehend the situation: "'Never mind,' cries mamma. 'Little girls can't be expected to know, and ought not to be too curious to inquire, what Lady Maria's conduct has been! Suffice it, miss, that I am shocked her ladyship should ever have been here; and I say again, no honest person should associate with her!'" (V 739). These comments are disturbing for two reasons. Firstly, they indicate that a woman's character, no matter how spotless or respectable, is immediately and irrevocably denigrated the instant she enters into a liaison with theatre. Secondly, these opinions are being passed on to members of a younger, susceptible generation; the young girl is encouraged to view Lady Maria as her mother does, even though the mother is unwilling, or unable, to provide an explanation for her aversion. She is simply following established social tenets and instructs her daughter

to do so as well. As a product of this society herself, Maria would have, or should have, anticipated the negative reaction to her marriage. So, as with women who defy convention by becoming actresses, Maria is castigated for an act of love that society chooses to interpret as an act of rebellion against established traditions.

One of Thackeray's primary concerns was to emphasise that such critical attitudes toward women's association with theatre lack viability because they are rooted in hypocrisy, ignorance, and blind obedience to ideological codes. The world that judges Becky Sharp to be egotistical and conniving is itself vain and deceptive. In *Lovel the Widower*, Bessy hides her past because she knows society will condemn her if the truth emerges.

Hence, Thackeray's stage women often expose social elitism, and they also make us rethink our own readings of them as dangerous, deceptive, or unnatural women. Conclusive judgements are not as easy to make as might be the case in the works of other writers, primarily because Thackeray undermines authorial control. What also causes his work to stand apart from others is the relationship he includes in his texts between stage women and writers. As part of his reflexive strategy, his works either allude to real writers and artists (illustrators and playwrights) or he includes fictional writers within his works, as narrators who lose control of their stories or as characters who are writers. It is this relationship that has prompted my choice of texts. In *Flore et Zéphyr*, Thackeray alludes to and parodies the work of nineteenth-century illustrators of ballet, whose drawings promoted a false ideal of women as ethereal, floating beings. In *The Virginians*, Thackeray alludes to and parodies playwrights of Pocahontas melodramas, who, like his fictional writer George

Warrington, romanticised history in order to depict a heroine that conformed to ideological codes of gender. In *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray creates a narrator who cannot fully control his leading female character, a girl who has acting in her blood, and consequently he unsettles our confidence in judging her, as does her social world, a dangerous woman. In *Pendennis*, the hero is a writer who in his immaturity is artistically inspired to create art based on romantic illusions of an actress, delusions that have been strongly influenced by his reading of romantic and sentimental literature. In *The Ravenswing*, wherein a narrator finds he cannot control the heroine of his story, Thackeray parodies the "god-like" authority of authors, and he also takes direct aim at the shoddy practices of journalists who in the name of egotism and competition falsify reviews of theatrical performances. As well, in *Lovel the Widower*, Thackeray creates a narrator who tries to write a script with a former actress as his heroine; however, he is an unsuccessful playwright because his heroine will not conform to the dictates of the standard melodramatic text and act the part of the typical leading lady. Although the artists and writers in these works should have control of their texts and their heroines, Thackeray undermines their authority, exposes their failures, or parodies the absurdity of their works so that he can reveal the falsity that exists behind standard depictions of women in culture.

Chapters One and Two focus on Thackeray's criticism of two stage women—the ballerina and Pocahontas—who continue to be regarded as models of femininity. Thackeray's use of these female figures, when placed in the context of historical models and modern feminist theory, shows his objections to idealised depictions of women and anticipates modern-day concerns about gender representation.

Thackeray's visual examination of ballerinas appears in a series of sketches entitled *Flore et Zéphyr*, in which he depicts scenes from this ballet, ranging from the dancers' performances on stage to audience reactions and backstage gatherings. The ballerina is of particular importance to Victorian culture because the nineteenth century ushered in the cult of the romantic ballerina and illustrators frequently turned to her to promote ideal womanhood. In fact, Lynn Garafola points out that the nineteenth century created a "mystique of the ballerina" that persists today (96). According to Janet Wolff, dance is subversive when it "questions and exposes the construction of the body in culture" (137). Hence, Thackeray's sketches must be subversive because in them he parodies these illustrators' depictions of the ballerina as the epitome of the perfect Victorian woman. In his art, the typically silent, fragile, floating ballerina is instead a strong, muscular woman—as indeed the realities of the profession demand physical, not ethereal, performers. Thackeray further questions the veracity of the ballerina as ideal female by showing that in performance she could be read not only as "angel," but also as "whore" since despite her virginal stage appearance, she often invoked strong sexual responses among male audiences. It is significant that Thackeray chose a visual medium by which to study this particular type of female performer, thereby emphasising her visual and silent nature. However, unlike his artistic counterparts, he provides us with a text that offers an unconventional reading of femininity, an interpretation that becomes apparent when the sketches are placed in the historical context of the ballerina's ascendance.

Like the ballerina, Pocahontas, who is alluded to in *The Virginians*, has become an icon of femininity, and a character whose identity has been lost amid a

merging of history with fiction. When the novel appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, Thackeray and his readers had become aware that playwrights in the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century had taken the few brief historical facts written about her and creatively magnified and distorted them. Thackeray's visits to America, where Pocahontas continues to be regarded as a great folk heroine, would have reminded him of her tremendous popularity in the public imagination, particularly as fostered by the many plays written about her in the United States and England. Pocahontas was an exceptionally attractive character to those nineteenth-century audiences who saw in her willingness to sacrifice her life to save a man the ideal Victorian woman. But other audiences, more interested in historical truth, recognised that these plays were based on deliberately created fictions, largely constructed so that the works would promote idealised notions of male heroism and codes of proper behaviour for women.

The scant historical facts recorded about Pocahontas need to be read in juxtaposition with her representation in eighteenth and nineteenth-century plays (and also twentieth-century movies). These dramas became so numerous by the mid-nineteenth century that other writers began to parody the previous plays, in effect exposing Pocahontas as the fiction she had become. In *The Virginians*, Thackeray takes a reflexive look back to the eighteenth century and the writing of these types of plays. Chapter Two of this dissertation will show that in the context of the historical Pocahontas and her romantic character in drama, Thackeray used the figure of George Warrington, and the creation and reception of his Pocahontas play, to anticipate his own century's criticism of these earlier writers. The play fails because, like other

eighteenth-century writers, Warrington creates an absurdly romanticised version of Pocahontas.

The antithesis of the ideal female is the subject of Chapter Three. *Vanity Fair* provides another perspective on how we interpret femininity based on pre-existing texts. Becky Sharp, the daughter of a female stage performer, herself exhibits a great talent for amateur performance and thus faces social censure for her contemptible heritage and for her unorthodox behaviour. She refuses to conform to the traditional roles of wife and mother, and is thus deemed despicable. But are the novel's characters—and we as readers—correct in judging her monstrous? Thackeray complicates an easy, and negative, assessment of Becky's character. Through the written text of *Vanity Fair* and its illustrations, he suggests the connection between Becky and one of theatre's most dangerous females, Clytemnestra (whose character she enacts during a private theatrical performance), is a tenuous one and susceptible to misreadings and oversimplifications. By undercutting his narrator's authorial control of her character, and suggesting that the text's illustrations have ambiguous interpretations, Thackeray is able to challenge traditional renderings and readings of women as either angel/whore.

Chapter Four will focus on *The History of Pendennis*, wherein Thackeray also differentiates between an actress in private life and the roles she plays on stage. The hero Pendennis, a budding author, suffers the great disappointment that the actress he adores, the woman he would script as his perfect heroine, is not a grand Shakespearean lady, nor a melodramatic damsel in distress. In turn, he cannot then write himself as the hero/saviour of his text, for such a role exists only in the realm of

fiction and imagination. Through the disillusions of Pendennis, Thackeray is able to show just how far apart the portrayals of women in literature and drama are from women in real life. The use of a stage woman to expose this discrepancy is a reflexive suggestion that many women's portrayals in literature are rooted in the theatrical.

The lack of authorial control Pendennis faces in trying to make an actress conform to his romantic "script" is even further emphasised in *The Ravenswing* and *Lovel the Widower*, wherein the criticism Thackeray levels at the practices of other writers becomes even more direct. *The Ravenswing*, the subject of Chapter Five, contains a narrator who apologises for the behaviour of his heroine when she will not conform to standard representations of women in drama. She refuses to obey the dictates of his authorial pen. It is perhaps this inability to control her that causes his story to become in large part a text that parodies the control others try to exert upon her. In this story, Thackeray produces a compelling study of the forces that create the performers who enact the roles other women are encouraged to emulate. *The Ravenswing* takes a backstage view of theatre, from immoral mangers to corrupt journalists, and turns the spotlight on how a woman of average talent becomes a star because a succession of men are motivated by the possibility of financial or sexual rewards. The actress, the Ravenswing, fits Irigaray's observation that "just as a commodity has no mirror it can use to reflect itself, so woman serves as reflection, as image of and for man, but lacks specific qualities of her own. Her value-invested form amounts to what man inscribes in and on its matter: that is, her body" (*This Sex* 187). But this attempt at inscription does not go unnoticed by the Ravenswing, who is capable of responding with hearty physicality. Her off-stage persona thereby belies

her professional persona as a fragile woman who obeys male scripts and literary conventions.

The same defiance of conformity appears in *Lovel the Widower*. Chapter Six examines this important later work, which was based on Thackeray's unproduced play *The Wolves and the Lamb*. Thackeray here uses a woman from an acting background to reveal the fictionalised concept of the Angel in the House. Despite the efforts of the narrator, Bessy Prior does not fit into a script that would have her perform the role of a helpless melodramatic heroine. Instead, like the Ravenswing, she frustrates male control, and she uses a response that anticipates the theory of "the gaze." When Bessy Prior stares back at the male viewer/reader/writer who wishes to construct her as a passive heroine of romance, she destroys his "script" and makes him aware of his own heroic limitations and subsequently the inadequacies of literary practices to portray accurate views of human nature.

Thackeray's reflexive texts, then, indicate his concern about cultural misrepresentations of women. His use of stage women allows him to suggest that artists and writers have falsified femininity in art, fiction, and drama—in effect, that standard depictions of femininity, which have long been accepted as accurate indicators of "true womanhood," are rooted in the theatrical. By suggesting the artificiality of femininity has been created from romanticised histories and oversimplified literary conventions, Thackeray is able to undermine and destabilise ideological codes of gender.

Both his fiction and non-fiction works reveal his insistence upon truth in art, his recognition of theatre's sham, and his concern that artists and writers had become overly reliant upon theatrical conventions as a way of depicting human nature. In terms of one type of depiction, the representation of women in culture, he felt artists and writers oversimplified their portrayals of femininity and thus promoted false notions of womanhood. Thackeray counters these representations and complicates our reading of femininity by offering other alternatives. He shatters our faith in the old concept that a woman can be categorised as either angel or whore, and he suggests that woman, as she has traditionally been depicted in fiction, is an inaccurate or limited model of femininity. The use of parody serves as an intertextual underscoring of his criticism of other works in which women are used to confirm the authenticity of happy endings, poetic justice, and male heroism. His texts, in contrast, use stage women to shatter his narrators' and his readers' confidence that these conventions convey accurate representations of human nature. Parody, in its insistence that readers become critically interested in the process and creation of fiction, serves Thackeray's concerns about gender representation in literature. By becoming aware of the existence of more than one text--the parody itself and the work upon which the parody is inspired--readers are encouraged to consider that multiple readings of femininity are available beyond that which are produced by literary stereotypes and conventions. Thackeray thus makes us aware of the limitations of texts, while at the same time he opens up the possibility for the creation of new texts.

Notes

[1] References to Thackeray's works throughout are to *The Oxford Thackeray*, ed. George Saintsbury (London 1908) 17 vols.

[2] Thackeray rewrote the final lines as,

> Angel of life! That home is thine
> Till human hearts become divine;
> To feelings in their fond repose,
> And love his godhead can disclose
> Where nature most reveals its worth;
> And if there be a home on earth
> To charm the clouds of time away.
> Born of her magic, blend their sway.
> Domestic hours Elysium call,
> The glory and the might of all;
> And self from out the selfish take,
> The hopes that keep the heart awake;
> Of what our softer moods bestow
> The grace, the lustre, and the glow. (*Stray* 29)

[3] For readings of the illustration that argue it is an allusion to The Choice of Hercules, between Virtue and Pleasure, or Sir Joshua Reynolds' painting *Garrick Between Tragedy and Comedy* (1761), see Judith Law Fisher ("Siren and Artist: Contradiction in Thackeray's Aesthetic Ideal") and Martin Meisel (*Realizations: Narrative, Pictorial, and Theatrical Arts in Nineteenth Century England*).

[4] Lewis Melville, *Some Aspects of Thackeray*, says Thackeray may have based Lady Maria's marriage to O'Hagan on the elopement of an actor named O'Brien and Lady Susan Fox Strangways, whose "relations then sent them to America, with an allowance of four hundred a year, settled by Lord Holland on his niece; but the daring couple eventually decided not to accept expatriation, and returned to England, where they led a happy and contented life" (191).

Chapter One:

Flore: The Ballerina as Icon of Femininity

> More than any other era in the history of ballet, the nineteenth century belongs to the ballerina. She haunts its lithographs and paintings, an ethereal creature touched with the charm of another age. Yet even when she turned into the fast, leggy ballerina of modern times, her ideology survived. If today the art of ballet celebrates the *danseur* nearly as often as the *danseuse*, it has yet to rid its aesthetic of yesterday's cult of the eternal feminine.
>
> Lynn Garafola, "The Travesty Dancer in Nineteenth-Century Ballet"

> 'When the virile toga has taken the place of the jacket and turned-collar, that Columbine, who will float before you a goddess to-night, will only be a third rate dancing female, with rouge and large feet. You will see the ropes by which the genii come down, and the dirty crumpled knees of the fairies—and you won't be in such a hurry to leave a good bottle of port as now at the pleasant age of thirteen.'
>
> Thackeray, "A Night's Pleasure"

In 1837, dance critic Théophile Gautier celebrated the brilliance of ballerina Marie Taglioni: "she flies like a spirit in the midst of the transparent clouds of white muslin with which she loves to surround herself, she resembles a happy angel who scarcely bends the petals of celestial flowers with the tips of her pink toes" (431).[1] This kind of rhapsodic praise was not uncommon during the early nineteenth century. According to Judith Mackrell, the tendency for writers to refer to female dancers as birds, feathers, or moonbeams, rather than as real women, extended into the visual arts as well:

> A similarly overwrought idealism also affected painters and illustrators, who showed ballerinas perched weightlessly on flowers or twigs, tipped forward in some impossible off-balance position as if supported

> by a passing summer breeze. Careless of the rules of anatomy, these dancers were drawn with skins translucent in a pearly light, with feet absurdly tiny. There was no suggestion of muscle and sinew in their bodies; their limbs were so delicately rounded they couldn't possibly have borne the dancers' weight. (19)

Such depictions conformed to the types of roles these women performed on stage—sylphs, ghosts, and other ethereal beings who were delicate and enigmatic, and beyond a hero's grasp. Innovations such as gas lighting, introduced in London in 1817, which bathed the stage in mysterious "moonlight," machines that allowed dancers to fly across the stage, and the adoption of *pointe* dancing by which they could raise themselves so high on their toes that they seemed to be floating above the ground caused ballerinas to be viewed as "fragile inhabitants of another world";[2] thus "To Romantic poets and intellectuals, who yearned fashionably after the Ideal, these dancers seemed miraculously to garb the Spirit in physical form" (Mackrell 18). "It is not coincidental," says Lesley Ferris, "that dance, specifically the Romantic ballet, a voiceless and speechless performing art, focuses almost relentlessly on the female performer and elevates her to a position of mute feminine perfection" (110).[3] Thackeray, however, never forgot that there was a flesh-and-blood woman living beneath this ideal, nor that other illustrators were legitimising a false conception of femininity through their idealistic renditions of the ballerina.

It is fitting to start an examination of his stage women with Flore since, as Teresa de Lauretis notes, visual images of female dancers are among the most important conveyors of ideological codes of gender:

> the representation of women as image . . . and the concurrent representation of the female body as the locus of sexuality, site of visual pleasure, or lure of the gaze is so pervasive in our culture . . . that it necessarily constitutes a starting point for any understanding of sexual difference and its ideological effects in the construction of social subjects. (*Alice* 37-38)

Alexandra Carter also stresses the importance of dance: "The images of women inscribed by traditional western theatre dance forms are synonymous in our society with notions of what it is to be not just female, but feminine" (43). Thackeray's recognition of the ballerina's significance in culture is noteworthy, since as Ann Daly's remarks in 1987 indicate, scholars of theatre have been slow to investigate her importance to gender representation: "The issues surrounding the ballerina as a cultural icon of femininity have been left virtually unexplored in print and met with impatient, if polite, interest in most public discussions" (8). And yet, as she points out, the ballerina's appearance on a public stage had a great influence upon cultural and social conceptions of womanhood; when "an artificial construction takes on a 'natural' appearance, ideal representations (woman) instead of realities (women) set standards for everyday life" (9). De Lauretis also emphasises the impact feminist critics have had upon showing the connection between visual images of women and ideological representations:

> it is precisely the feminist critique of representation that has conclusively demonstrated how any image in our culture—let alone any image of woman—is placed within, and read from the encompassing

> context of patriarchal ideologies, whose values and effects are social and subjective, aesthetic and affective, and obviously permeate the entire social fabric and hence all social subjects, women as well as men. (*Technologies* 38-39)

Carter further remarks that the mute, visual dancer has no power to influence the way her image is read: "Whilst in some respects it may be important to consider what the dance maker or dance performer thinks about his/her work, personal intent is relatively powerless in the face of the cultural meanings that accrue to images of the female body" (46).

Thackeray's references to ballet in his fiction and art work, wherein he parodies the notion of the ethereal dancer and her representation in art, anticipate the later observations of modern-day critics who have examined dance's influence upon gender definitions. Because ballet is an art form dominated on stage by female performers, but controlled off stage by male producers, managers, and choreographers, the conception of femininity that appears is encoded with ideological images of male strength and female passivity. Lynn Garafola reminds us that the ballerina as icon of femininity is misleading:

> Beginning with romanticism and continuing throughout the nineteenth century, femininity itself became the ideology of ballet, indeed the very definition of art. Ideology, however, turned out to be a false friend. Even as nineteenth-century ballet exalted the feminine, setting it on a pedestal to be worshipped, its social reality debased the *danseuse* as a worker, a woman, and an artist. (98)

According to Carter, dance provides us with some of our most "potent symbols of femininity":

> The images of women inscribed by traditional western theatre dance forms are synonymous in our society with notions of what it is to be not just female, but feminine. . . . an analysis of the way in which the female body is presented in dance can reveal dominant notions of what it is to be 'female' in particular cultural contexts. These notions are embodied in the image of the dancer which becomes a symbolic location of patriarchal society. (43-45)

Judith Hanna also observes that "Traditional dance defamiliarizes the ordinary social and sexual experience of women as people and creates a social object, a representation of a desired feminine type" (*Dance* 228).

The most visible of dancers in the nineteenth century was the Romantic ballerina, who eclipsed the male dancer on stage. Hanna has noted the importance of dance in reaffirming social codes, arguing that the medium of dance "nonverbally communicates identity, social stratification, and values" ("Tradition" 224). She also contends that dance "mirrors the cultural life of ambiguity toward sexual expression as well as the patterns of gender and socioeconomic class that reflect male upper-class dominance," and she suggests that the role of the sylph, which represented the "idealization of the female as 'lady'" was perhaps "compensation for middle-class women's loss of a key economic role in the family with the onset of the Industrial Revolution" (*Dance* 175, 126). The Romantic ballerina's embodiment of ideal womanhood was aided by costuming and choreography. When hemlines rose, when

lighter muslin replaced wide heavy skirts, and when flat shoes supplanted high-heels, female dancers were liberated from the cumbersome clothing that had greatly restricted their movements. The ballerina changed from a relatively static performer into an active one, represented in art as gliding across the stage, a romantic creature in frothy white tulle. The male dancer seemed to be relegated to a subordinate position, one in which he assisted the ballerina to dance on her toes or partnered her in the *pas de deux*.

But this occupation of centre stage contained with it inconsistencies in female empowerment. The ballerina may have seemed to outshine the male dancer, but Ferris argues that choreographers of nineteenth-century ballet "imbedded in their narratives the attributes of the ballerina which developed this idea of women as ideal object, the floating, perfect, doll-like icon of femininity" (109). Hanna, too, points out that the movements on stage were carefully choreographed to highlight female dependency upon the male partner. For example, in the *pas de deux* partnering, the ballerina can be read as being weak and dependent upon male strength: "The woman 'looks up' to the man, rises *en pointe* to meet him. Rising *en pointe* in some positions renders the dancer insubstantial. Unable to stand alone, the male supports or assists her" (*Dance* 168). This image of female dependence upon male strength fits nicely into the Victorian ideology of ideal femininity; however, in actuality, ballerinas were anything but weak, fragile women. "There is a laboured irony behind this idealised and romanticised ballerina," says Ferris, noting that

> in order to achieve her 'natural' state of perfection she has to spend years in training, she has to develop a powerful, physical presence

> which involves the distortion of her legs and feet, to endure great hardship and deprivation—all to learn a technique which paradoxically makes invisible the real woman, and creates instead an ethereal, dream-like, passive image floating across the stage. (110)

The nineteenth-century ballerina was in reality not the ethereal floating being depicted in paintings and lithographs. Rather, she needed to be muscular in order to leap and bound, to hold difficult awkward poses, and to dance *en pointe*. The delicate, ethereal sylphs on stage had to undergo off stage many hours of intense training and rehearsal in order to achieve that illusion of frailty. Joan McConnell is among many writers who stress ballet's unnaturalness; this type of dance, she says, "represents the victory of the body over nature. A dancer must carefully and painfully train her body for years so she can transcend its natural limitations. Thus perfection for the dancer means dehumanizing the body" (20). Lesley-Anne Sayers observes that a ballerina's physical strength had to be hidden in order to conform to the ideal feminine conception of delicacy and powerlessness: "A central ideal of the classical technique is the masking of technique and strength, particularly so in the case of the ballerina where a display of strength would be inappropriate to the ideology that informs it. Similarly critics, like lithographers, most often colluded with the illusion of the work in this respect" (170-171).

Romantic ballet, which flourished from 1830-1850 with its "cult of the ballerina," proved to be an important initiation into the theatre world for Thackeray. Like other playgoers, Thackeray was captivated by Marie Taglioni, who was most identified with her role in the classic 1832 Romantic ballet *La Sylphide*. After

witnessing a performance by Taglioni in Paris in 1829, he wrote enthusiastically to his mother that she "hath the most superb pair of pins, & maketh the most superb use of them that I ever saw a dancer do before" (*Letters* I 85-86). It was an admiration that would reappear in his fiction; however, by this time he was no longer the naïve young man entranced by visions of angels floating across the stage. Hence, instead of idealising the ballerina, he chose to challenge this idealism.

His most sustained look at ballet appears in a series of sketches entitled *Flore et Zéphyr*, which was inspired by a one-act ballet written and choreographed by Charles-Louis Didelot that was first performed in London in 1796.[4] When Thackeray saw a performance in 1833, he felt its dancers, particularly Francois Decombe Albert (1789-1865) as Zéphyr, were too old to be convincing as nymphs and spirits. Adopting the pseudonym Théophile Wagstaff,[5] Thackeray used his drawings to parody the romantic excesses of Victorian dance illustrators and to caricature the falsified images of ethereal femininity as represented in ballet. That he had Romantic ballet in mind is evident by the dancers' costumes; instead of the appropriately fashioned Greek tunics normally worn by the ballet's performers, Thackeray's Flore and Zéphyr wear clothing affiliated with Romantic ballet, Flore clad in the white dress made famous by Taglioni in *La Sylphide*, and which from then on became a standard costume for Romantic ballerinas.

A synopsis of the plot shows that the ballet's action centers on the romantic interactions between the nymph Flore and her wayward lover, the spirit Zephyre:

> Zephyre, the inconstant Breeze, descends from heaven with Cupid in his arms. The God of Love fosters Zephyre's fickleness by finding

> Flore, a nymph, to replace his first love, but warns him he must repent. Zephyre's new partner traces his shadow thrown on a temple wall (an allusion to the invention of the art of painting). Cupid warns Zephyre that his first love is about to appear, at which the inconstant spirit abandons the new nymph and flies away. Later, to prove his constancy, he lets his wings be clipped; the nymph takes them for her own, and she flies up and out. In the end, Zephyre recovers his wings, and all is well. (Kirstein 130).

Thackeray's first lithograph (Figure 1), which appears on the title page and acts as a frontispiece to the remaining eight, is a caricature of Taglioni, to whom the drawings are dedicated. Posing in her Sylphide costume, with its bell-shaped skirt, tight-fitting bodice, pearl necklace, and wreath of flowers, she stands with both feet pointed in an unnatural outward stance. Her arms are folded across her chest in a pose that associates her with Taglioni, who would cross her arms as she danced in order to hide the "ungainliness" of her "disproportionately long" limbs (Muresianu 235).

References to Taglioni appear in Thackeray's later fiction as well, and serve to reveal the disparity between a male's romanticising of an ideal woman and the real woman before him. In *Pendennis*, for example, Pendennis refers to Blanche Amory as a Sylphide, an allusion to the ballet Taglioni made famous. But as Pen will learn, Blanche is far from being an idealised icon of femininity; hence the comparison between her and Taglioni only emphasises her distance from the feminine ideal.[6] Comparisons between female characters and Taglioni are also ascribed to older men in the throes of whimsical memories. Hence, in *The Newcomes*, the narrator—this time

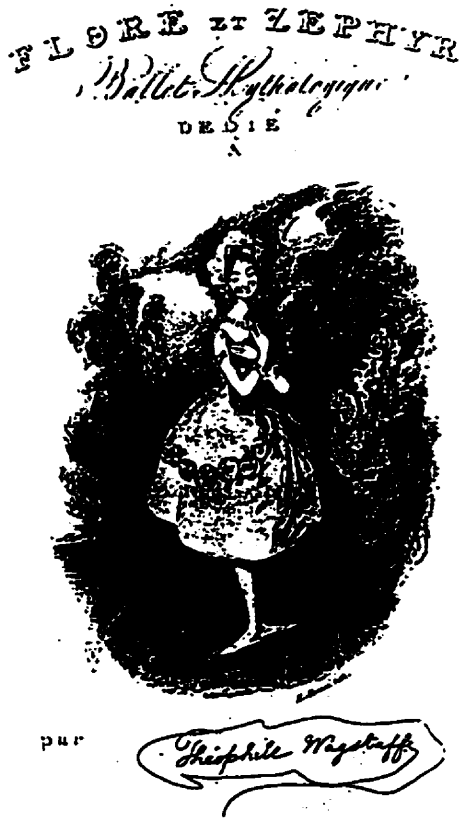


Figure 1

Figure 2
"La Danse fait Ses Offrandes sur l'Auteil De L'Harmonie"

Figure 3
"Triste et Abattu Les Seductions Des Nymphs Le Tentent En Vain"

Figure 4
"Jeux Innocents de Zéphyr et Flore"

an older Pendennis—after watching, and admiring, Ethel dance a waltz, lapses into whimsy. He thinks back fondly to former days: "Not till the music stopped did she sink down on a seat, panting, and smiling radiant—as many, many hundred years ago I remember to have seen Taglioni, after a conquering pas seul" (N 541). The exaggerated lapse of time—"many, many hundred years ago"—amplifies how long ago Pendennis has actually seen Taglioni in her prime; she exists now as an ideal image in his mind.

Thackeray's parody of the Romantic ballerina as an ideal icon of femininity is further revealed in the sketches that focus on the dancers' performances and the depiction of the hero (Figures 2, 3). Thackeray's allusion to the feminisation of the on-stage male performer in ballet affords him an opportunity to undermine the male heroic image. Flore's partner, Zéphyr, appears with a large quantity of wavy hair (in a later lithograph we see him without his wig); the bulging muscles of his legs, which exaggerate his physicality, are offset by the femininity suggested by his short bell-shaped tunic—a shortened version of Flore's dress—to which wings have been attached. Furthermore, he points his toes in a pose similar to that of Flore. The ballet, which features a love story between the two principals, is here caricatured with a very indifferent hero. Zéphyr looks away from Flore, his eyes lowered, while she must do the pursuing.

The drawing "Jeux Innocents de Zéphyr et Flore" (Figure 4), ostensibly shows the playful innocence of the hero and heroine. However, Thackeray positions Zéphyr as lurking behind Cupid, who is poised to fling an arrow at Flore. Her hands are

raised as if to ward off the blow, but her eyes are turned mischievously toward the audience. S.A. Muresianu reads this lithograph as one which shows

> dancers cavorting in a neo-classic pastoral setting which seems innocuous enough, except for a statue of Eros, mounted on a pedestal, placed between them. Eros at first glance is holding a bow in his left hand, but on closer examination this appears to be a kind of snake, a blatant enough sexual symbol. Apart from this imagery, both Flore and Zephyr are depicted with incredibly lewd countenances, both of them smirking. Flore's eyes are turned obliquely from her lover. Their 'jeux' are obviously not above suspicion. (238-239)

Thackeray's depiction of the gazes of his characters is noteworthy, especially in the context of Laura Mulvey's work on "the gaze" in cinema. She postulates that the woman in film exists as a passive object to be looked at by an active male gaze, the male spectators duplicating the gaze by the male actor upon the actress. A ballerina may be represented as dehumanised and immaterial due to her ethereal and other-worldly roles, but her appearance is still similar to that of an actress in that she *is* "coded for strong visual and erotic impact" (*Visual* 19). The short skirts of ballerinas, the transparency of the material, and the pink tights which stimulated the illusion of nude legs helped to titillate the audience, says Tracy Davis, who also notes the inclination for artists to depict dancers as barefooted; this practice "suggests that the artist's eye (and possibly some spectators') routinely removed the ballet shoe and tights to reveal the foot and the leg as actually nude" (*Actresses* 135).

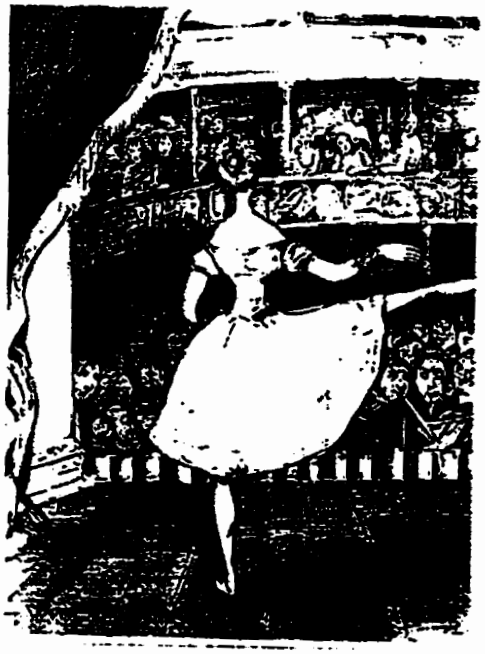


Figure 5
"Flore Déplore l'Absence de Zéphyr"

Figure 6
"Dans un Pas-Seul Il Exprime Son Extrême Désepoir"

Figure 7

In terms of eye positions, Thackeray's Flore does not keep her eyes lowered, but is more sexually aggressive than the ballerinas who appear in nineteenth-century paintings, engravings, and lithographs. Not only does she gaze longingly at Zéphyr, while he looks away demurely (Figure 3), but she also looks at her audience (Figures 2, 4) while Zéphyr does not. In one sketch she faces her audience while she enacts a high lift with her right leg (Figure 5). This drawing is supposed to depict Flore's despondency regarding Zéphyr's absence, but the pose she enacts has nothing to do with melancholy. Because we see her only from behind, we do not see her expression of despair (if in fact she wears one), but we do see the faces of the male audience, who "leer up her skirt" (Carey 106). That Flore may not be looking at her audience and acknowledging their sexual interest in her is unlikely, considering that in all the drawings wherein we do see her face, she is never depicted with lowered eyes. She may, in fact, be acknowledging their reading of her as an object of lust. As well, other details of the sketch further the notion that Flore is anything but ethereal and angelic. For example, the obvious bulge in Flore's strong supporting left leg does not suggest the limb of a weak, passive woman, but rather emphasises the muscular strength of this ballerina.

Zéphyr's own athleticism, and his supposed despondence, is also caricatured in a sketch that places an exaggerated emphasis on his physical prowess (Figure 6). The smile on his face as he flies across the stage in a huge horizontal leap that allows him to float among the clouds and over the heads of his fellow dancers, belies the caption's claim that he, too, is in great despair over the separation of the two lovers. His leap recalls dancer Antoine Paul, a well-known Zéphyre, who was praised for his

horizontal flights and soaring leaps (Winter 233). Thackeray noted his prowess in a letter of 1829, accompanied by a rough sketch (Figure 7): "there is Paul who will leap you quite off the perpendicular & on the horizontal & recover his feet with the greatest dexterity" (*Letters* I 86).

The leap Thackeray's Zéphyr performs parodies and alludes to this ballet's introduction of a "flying machine" that later became popular in Romantic ballets as a way to fly sylphs through the air. Created by the engineer Liparotti, the machine used counter-weighted wires to balance, support, and fly the dancers, and became so popular that it was soon used not only for the principal dancers, but for members of the *corps de ballet* as well (Kirstein 131). While the machine did much to foster the image of the ballerina as a delicate, angelic entity, it also proved to be a device which caused physical injuries and death, ironically demonstrating just how earth-bound and mortal these sylphs actually were. Gautier recorded his dislike of the flying machines in 1838, saying there is

> nothing graceful in the spectacle of five or six unfortunate girls almost dying of fright from being suspended in mid-air by iron wire which may quite well give way; those poor wretches who distractedly move their arms and legs like toads out of their element involuntarily reminds one of stuffed crocodiles hung from a ceiling. At the performance given for Mlle. Taglioni's benefit, two sylphides remained suspended in mid-air, it was impossible to pull them up or lower them down; people in the audience cried out in terror; at last a machinist risked his life and descended from the roof at the end of a rope to set them free . .

> . . It is not unlikely that another difficulty of this sort will soon recur. (437)

Flying machines might have been dangerous for women, but they were essential to creating an impression of masculine strength, which Didelot wanted for his ballet; at one point, says Joan McConnell, Zéphyr literally sweeps Flore away (98).[7]

Masculine strength is further displayed, and exaggerated, in Flore and Zéphyr's reconciliation scene (Figure 8). Flore rests the weight of her body onto Zéphyr by balancing herself with one foot on his right thigh. Zéphyr, with his arms crossed across his chest and his left knee planted on the stage to anchor his muscular body, seems barely to feel her weight, as he nonchalantly stares upward, while she looks coyly at the audience. Their posturing parodies the *pas de deux*, which was first introduced in this ballet and is today "synonymous with love" (McConnell 98). Lincoln Kirstein observes that Didelot wanted to emphasise through his move "the polarity of masculine and feminine movements—male strength in support, lifts, and leaps; female quickness and lightness" (130). Didelot believed that during the *pas de deux*—in which the female with the male's support of her body is able to execute moves that would be impossible without this assistance—"the woman should embody lightness and daintiness, while the man should symbolize strength and power" (McConnell 98). Didelot used the movement to represent a dialogue between the male and female dancers. However, Thackeray's reconciled dancers seem more to be playing to the audience than conversing with each other. Hanna argues that the *pas de deux* enhanced ballet's sexual undertones with its eroticising of the male-female partnership:

Figure 8
"Reconciliation de Flore et Zéphyr"

Figure 9
Flore Backstage

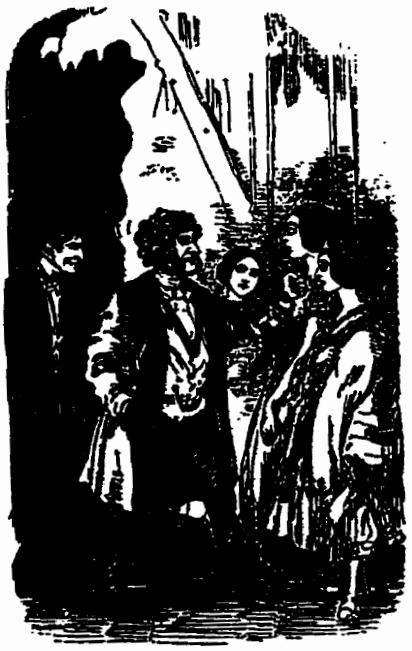


Figure 10

> Overt sexuality is pressed into highly stylized movements in Romantic ballet male-female encounters. A woman may appear as a dryad, *willi*, or *sylphide*. Exalted to ethereality as she is borne aloft by her partner, she is glorified in ways that might seem to transcend sexuality. Yet there are symbolic yearnings as partners reach out toward each other in erotic foreplay and come together, one partner passing over or through the other's personal space of legs and arms in sexual fulfillment or conquest. (*Dance* 168)

As well, when the male dancer lifts his partner high into the air, his actions can be read not merely as showcasing the ballerina, visually making her presence superior to his; rather, the male dancer who balances the female is a "phallic pillar of strength" (Hanna 173). He lends, in the words of Walter Terry, "muscle to the performance" (22), and shows through his greater physical strength that she cannot exist—perform—without him.

The *pas de deux* also raises the question of whether the nineteenth-century male dancer's role was primarily to display the ballerina. Roger Copeland asks, "Had the male dancer actually been demoted—which is what the textbooks tell us? Or did sexual politics dictate that the woman be displayed and that the man do the displaying?" (141). Hanna believes the *pas de deux* could also be read as a "metaphor for male domination and patriarchy", especially when the ballerina needs his support to stand *en pointe*, as Thackeray's Flore does while perched on Zéphyr's leg; thus, the move "can convey a host of contradictory messages—caring as well as power

relations of dominance and submissions, invasion of privacy, and norms of body accessibility""(*Dance* 168).

Thackeray's depiction of Flore backstage (Figure 9) after the performance is over also raises the topic of body accessibility. Although her upper body is covered with a shawl, she is still clearly in costume; her cheeks remain rouged, and her toes remain pointed in a balletic stance. Carey notes that she is in the company of two well-dressed, but "raffish-looking" men (108), while an elderly female chaperone (perhaps Flore's mother) looks on with approval. According to John Chapman, such meetings were common occurrences in the ballet world. The ballerina might play the part of a goddess on stage, but afterward she could quickly be "demeaned to the status of a possession, a sexual object"; off stage, "the wealthiest and most influential could mingle with the dancers in highly elegant surroundings. From this sophisticated market-place the rich buyers selected their mistresses" (35).

Although Muresianu suggests that Flore is "intent upon charming the young fop on the chair, perhaps with the hopes of marriage and a respectable life in mind" (239), Thackeray leaves the interpretation of this drawing ambiguous. The two men could be arranging a sexual liaison between Flore and a wealthy man who has no thoughts of marriage. The overall impression of the drawing is its reminder that it was a common practice in nineteenth-century theatres for men to visit female dancers, and actresses, before and after performances. The Paris Opera, for example, capitalised on men's interest in viewing ballerinas off stage by allowing visitors to "mingle with dancers in the *foyer de la danse*, a large room next to the stage where the ballet company warmed up" (Anderson 69), thus provoking many to disparage ballet as a

type of entertainment in which "essentially girls [were] parading before men" (Carey 107). Any assessments of the Victorian ballerina's position in society must reconcile the image of the ethereal woman on her toes with the backstage reality that in the nineteenth century the status of most dancers was "equatable with that of courtesans" (Sayers 168). Thackeray reprises this view of ballet in *Pendennis* when he shows Lord Steyne in his box at the Museum Theatre. Members of the *corps de ballet* dance before him, while his companions Wenham and Wegg are "ready to slip behind the scenes" to arrange a meeting with any girl that interests him (Carey 107).

Even though not all ballet dancers engaged in these kinds of relationships or turned to prostitution to enhance their meagre salaries, the *corps de ballet* as a whole had to endure accusations that it was composed of persons of low morality. Hence, says Hanna, the term "ballet girl" had a "pejorative connotation until the mid-twentieth century, and in some places it still does" (*Dance* 124). In Thackeray's novels, for a female to have either a familial or professional association with ballet is for her to encounter social opposition. When Pendennis, for example, refers to his time of infatuation with an actress, he cynically denigrates her to the status of a "vulgar dancing woman" (P 836). *Vanity Fair*'s Becky Sharp is the daughter of a lowly opera dancer, and *Lovel the Widower*'s Bessy Prior keeps her earlier days as a dancer a secret. In both cases, when their past histories are revealed, they face ostracism and disapproval from members of a condescending upper-class society.

Thackeray's fiction works often take a backstage look at a ballerina's life, focussing on the lives of women who are far from starring in principal roles and who are far from becoming future Taglionis. *Pendennis*, for example, shows a *corps de*

ballet subjected to the verbal abuse, and the potentially physical abuse, of an enraged manager. Wenham, in the service of Lord Steyne, finds Mr. Dolphin backstage "employed as he not unfrequently was, in swearing and cursing the ladies of the *corps de ballet* for not doing their duty" (Figure 10); Dolphin changes his attitude, but only when Wenham arrives on the scene: "The oaths died away on Mr. Dolphin's lips as soon as he saw Mr. Wenham; and he drew off the hand which was clenched in the face of one of the offending coryphees, to grasp that of the new-comer . . . . smiling, as if he had never been out of temper in his life" (P 162).

Playwright Tom Robertson (1829-71), in a series of articles in 1864, detailed the difficult conditions faced by members of the *corps de ballet* that included long working days comprised of gruelling rehearsals that began at 8 a.m. and performances that ended at midnight:

> This is not a luxurious life; it is not sensual. It is laborious, unpleasant, comfortless, wet, sloppy, and sorefooted. Its monotony is seldom broken except by the happy intervals when a piece has a long 'run' and there are no rehearsals. But this is but a poor compensation for the fatigue and danger incurred at Christmas for the gratification of ardent-minded scene-painters, money-loving managers, and a sensation and splendour-loving public.
>
> The Transformation Scene [of a pantomime]—an ingenious piece of cruelty introduced some fifteen years ago—is a pleasure to the audience but death to the Ballet. The pale girl is swung up to terrific heights, imprisoned in and upon iron wires, dazzled by rows of hot

> flaring gas close to her eyes and choked by the smoke of coloured fires. Sometimes the silver-robed victim faints or goes into hysterics, and so incurs the odium of affectation. The scene painter is relentless, the stage-manager is relentless, and the manager must make a fortune speedily. Hoist 'em up, carpenters—fill their minds with fear, and their lungs with foul vapour. They are young and strong, and it won't kill 'em, unless, a rope break or a wire gives way, and, if so, the spirited and enterprising lessee will behave with that accustomed liberality which has ever characterized, &c. (Booth "Tom Robertson" 58-59)

Thackeray's *Lovel the Widower* gives an example of the type of injuries that could afflict dancers in its reference to a Christmas pantomime where Miss Montanville falls from a rainbow and breaks a leg.[8]

As with the drawing of Flore backstage, in *Lovel* Thackeray stresses the importance of male endorsement for the female dancer. In a scene featuring Dolphin once again, he shows how a dancer's worth and career are dependent upon this approval:

> she passed before him in his regiment of Sea-nymphs, or Bayaderes, or Fairies, or Mazurka maidens . . . scarcely more noticed than Private Jones standing under arms in his company when His Royal Highness the Field-Marshal gallops by. There were no dramatic triumphs for Miss Bellenden: no bouquets were flung at her feet: no cunning Mephistopheles—the emissary of some philandering Faustus outside—corrupted her duenna, or brought her caskets of diamonds. Had there

> been any such admirer for Bellenden, Dolphin would not only have been shocked, but he would very likely have raised her salary. (LW 170)

Thackeray knew that the ideal represented by the ballerina on stage was a theatrical construct. In 1832, four years before he published his sketches, he writes in his diary that he went backstage after a performance of Beethoven's *Fidelio* and saw there two rival dancers, Herberle and Brugnoti. That he describes these ballerinas as being "plastered with rouge & looking like she devils more than graceful women" (*Letters* I 202) shows that his idealisation of ballerinas in his younger days, when he saw them as ethereal beings, had evaporated. He was not alone in this disillusionment. Even the most ideal of ballerinas, Taglioni, could not withstand one of the dancer's worst enemies: old age. Gautier, who could once barely restrain his passion for the sylphide, was to lament her waning powers in an 1838 revival of *La Sylphide*:

> Mlle. Taglioni, tired out from her interminable travels, is no longer what she was; she has lost much of her lightness and her elevation. When she appears on stage, you always see the white mist bathed in transparent muslin, the ethereal and chaste vision, the divine delight which we know so well; but after some bars, signs of fatigue appear, she becomes short of breath, perspiration bedews her brow, her muscles seem to be under a strain, her arms and chest redden; formerly, she was a real sylphide, but now she is merely a dancer, the first dancer in the world, if you will, but nothing more. The princes and kings of the North have so applauded her, so wearied her with compliments, they

> have caused so many showers of flowers and diamonds to fall upon her, that they have weighed down her tireless feet, which, like those of the amazon Camilla, could run over blades of grass without bending them; they have loaded her with so much gold and so many precious stones that Marie full of grace has not been able to take to flight again, and only timidly skims the ground like a bird with wet wings. (435)

Thackeray's sketches, which bring the floating ballerina down to earth, set the stage for the depiction of other stage women who appear in his fiction. Catherine Peters maintains that *Flore et Zéphyr* is a look "in microcosm" at "the fascination with illusion and reality, and the unwincing social realism that were to persist in Thackeray's writing" (66). The sketches show a dark side to ballet and its depiction in art. According to Carey, Thackeray wished to "expose the hideous irrationality of two adults romping around with each other in short skirts, and purporting to express grief, anxiety and suchlike emotions by bounding in the air and waggling their feet" (105); but he further points out that Thackeray's pictures also had a serious purpose. They tell us we should not be taken in by false images: "To have come to accept these conventions is, the satirical half of Thackeray wishes to impress upon us, an abandonment of intellect and innocence" (105). The strength of Thackeray's sketches lies in their parodic, intertextual nature. They engender intellectual readings, making us think of the pre-existing texts upon which they are based, standard paintings and lithographs which encourage an "innocent" reading of the ballerina in her conventional appearance as a fragile, delicate being. Thackeray's drawings, with their muscular Flore, make a startling contrast. A new text, of a ballerina has been created.

Notes

[1] Dance critic Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was also a poet, novelist, journalist, amateur painter, and the librettist for *Giselle* and *La Péri*.

[2] Geneviève Gosselin (1791-1818) was likely the first ballerina to dance *en pointe* during a performance of *Flore et Zephyre* in Paris in 1815 (Woodward 104).

[3] Prominent ballerinas in the Romantic period were Marie Taglioni (1804-1884), Fanny Elssler (1810-1884), Fanny Cerrito (1817-1909), Carlotta Grisi (1819-1899), and Lucile Grahn (1819-1907).

[4] For a performance of the ballet in Russia in 1808, Didelot renamed it *Zephire et Flore* to highlight the male dancer, Louis Duport (Greskovic 29).

[5]Thackeray's pen name may be a caricature of critic Théophile Gautier. Lincoln Kirstein observes that Gautier, like Thackeray, had found *Flore et Zéphyre* to be "a type of outworn convention that Romanticism . . . would replace" (131).

[6] In Chapter 51 of *Vanity Fair* Becky Sharp is compared to Taglioni and to French ballerina Lise Noblet.

[7] Joan McConnell says that the adagio originated from the machines, later to be replaced by male dancers, that were built to support and lift the ballerinas (97-98).

[8] Another threat to the ballerina was fire. The gauzy materials of the costume, which did much to enhance the dancer's ethereal image, were also flammable and more than one dancer suffered from severe burns. One instance occurred in 1862 when dancer Emma Livry accidentally brushed her costume against the gas jet in the wings. This protegée of Taglioni eventually died of her burns.

Chapter Two:

Pocahontas: Femininity as Fiction

Mythmaking is what the story of Pocahontas is all about.
S. Elizabeth Bird, *Dressing in Feathers*

According to Lesley Ferris, the elevation of the female dancer to an icon, "placed high on a pedestal of 'feminine' perfection, both parallels and transcends the creation of the melodramatic heroine" (108-109). She may not have had Pocahontas specifically in mind, but the pedestal of feminine perfection occupied by this heroine of drama remains standing in modern culture. Even though by now we realise the few facts known about her life do not coincide with the image portrayed of her in art, two recent twentieth-century films about her[1] show that culture continues to bypass her history in favour of myth. She remains one of our most prominent icons of the woman who is willing to sacrifice her life so that the man she loves will live.[2]

While the Pocahontas myth reached its literary peak in the early nineteenth century, Thackeray uses an eighteenth-century setting in *The Virginians* to parody, and foreshadow, those writers who romanticised her life, turning her into an icon of ideal femininity. His allusion to Pocahontas is appropriate in a story partially set in America, where she features prominently in folklore. Also, his inclusion of an unsuccessful play based on her life suits his reflexive exploration of the writing of history, and the dramatisation of femininity. Before the story of the Warrington brothers begins, the narrator draws our attention to truth in fiction. *The Virginians* examines heroism and cultural divisions between England and America during the War of Independence by taking an historical examination of a family from Virginia

that is similar to that taken with Pocahontas. The novel begins by asserting that history is a combination of fact and fiction, that artifacts, such as letters, are

> hints rather than descriptions—indications and outlines chiefly: it may be, that the present writer has mistaken the forms, and filled in the colour wrongly: but, poring over the documents, I have tried to imagine the situation of the writer, where he was, and by what persons surrounded. I have drawn the figures as I fancied they were; set down conversations as I think I might have heard them. (2)

Thackeray would have been reminded of the Pocahontas legend when he visited America for a second time in 1855, while lecturing on the *Four Georges*. Shortly afterward he began work on *The Virginians*. Americans venerate the Indian princess, who historians have credited with helping to preserve and sustain the first permanent English colony at Jamestown. Unmindful of her own safety, this favourite daughter of the powerful Indian chief Powhatan risked the disapproval of her father to deliver supplies of venison and corn to the English, and she warned them when members of her tribe planned to ambush the colonists. She later became the first North American Indian to be baptised in the Anglican faith, and under her new Christian name of Rebecca married the Englishman John Rolfe in a union that came to symbolise a bond of friendship between the American and English factions. When she moved to England, her popularity grew to the extent that James I welcomed her into his court, and London pubs changed their names to "La Belle Sauvage" in her honour.

But what really caught the imagination of the public, and the incident that became the motivation for the many Pocahontas plays, was the daring act of heroism

she displayed at the age of 11 or 12 when tribal elders decided to execute the leader of the Jamestown colony, Captain John Smith. Smith, a twenty-eight-year-old soldier who had previously fought with the Austrians against the Turks, had arrived in what is now Virginia in 1607 as part of the English contingent. Smith described his experiences in his *Generall Historie of Virginia*, one of nine books he wrote about his adventures in America and his exploits as a soldier. One adventure that attracted great interest occurred during a hunting trip for provisions. He was captured and taken before Powhatan. Smith was questioned about the colonists' intentions and given a series of tests designed to reveal the strength of the settlers. During his incarceration, he was placed over a large rock while Powhatan's braves stood by with raised clubs, ready to beat him to death. Suddenly, Pocahontas ran over and placed her head over his. Following this intervention, Smith was adopted into the tribe.

The rescue became the event which most defined her character, because her selfless action showed her to be the embodiment of the ideal female, self-sacrificing and pious. She was the "mythic protector" (Tilton 26), the "altruistic savior" (Sundquist 51). Pocahontas was consequently depicted in culture as a "good Indian" or "Princess." According to Rayna Green, in literature, the figure of the Princess exemplifies nobility, civilisation, and self-sacrifice; she is a woman who saves or assists white men, who defies "her own people, exile[s] herself from them, become[s] white, and perhaps suffer[s] death" (703, 704).[3] But, as Åesbrit Sundquist reminds us, the image of Pocahontas as a perfect woman, as an ideal mother and wife, is a very one-sided reading of her historical persona. Writers ignored, for example, negative interpretations of her actions, namely that in deciding to save Smith (if, in fact, she

was not actually part of a staged adoption ceremony) and in helping the settlers she was deserting her own people to befriend a group of foreigners:

> The most common stereotype of Pocahontas in literature is the type I have called Angel. The literature about her could, of course, have been very different. Writers could have chosen to describe her as a traitress to her people, that is, really a Dark Lady, betraying and doing harm not only to one man or a few, but to a whole tribe, and to generally victimized people at that. Her conversion from her own native religion could have been judged as inconsistent and proof of a shallow nature, which is very far from an Angel. (51)

Hence, Pocahontas is culturally regarded as an Angel, a savage who had been taught by foreigners to reject barbarity and paganism, to "choose English culture over that of her own people" (Tilton 27). Her idealised status has allowed her to become a convenient figure to promote and justify English colonialism. To the dismay of historians, more problematic aspects of her life are ignored because they damage England's reputation as a civilised, Christian country. Consequently, many events of her life are downplayed, such as the information that her involvement in effecting peace between the settlers and the natives included being "lured aboard ship and for some time held prisoner" by the English (Keiser 5).

By following Smith's seventeenth-century historical accounts, artists stereotyped Pocahontas as a noble savage. Maurice Wilson Disher says she became regarded less as a person and more as an "abstract" upon whom principles of naturalism and Christianity could be applied (240). Because England believed

conversion to the Christian faith would transform Indians from "infidels, heretics and idolaters" to civilised beings, Pocahontas came to symbolise "the grace and beauty of that process" (Sharpes 238). Sundquist blames John Smith's "romantic and exaggerated" history for turning Pocahontas into a symbol of piety and purity (51). Others have also judged Smith a poor historian.

Robert Tilton points out that prior to the nineteenth century, Smith's accounts of his adventures in Virginia went unchallenged. But doubts began to emerge in 1804 when John Burk implied that Smith's history could be read not as history, but as a piece of romantic fiction or folk tale, albeit lacking the fairytale ending of a marriage between Smith and Pocahontas. Eighteen years later W.H. Gardiner disparaged Smith in a review of James Fenimore Cooper's *The Spy*, by implying that Smith either exaggerated or deliberately lied about his heroic achievements.

Smith's rescue by Pocahontas is the most controversial aspect of his history. Was her gesture of self-sacrifice acted of her own free will, in a deliberate defiance of her father's orders, or were her actions orchestrated by her father as part of an adoption ceremony designed to win over Smith and the English? There are arguments on both sides, but ultimately no satisfactory answer. E.H. Emerson, for example, speculates that "Perhaps Smith was being tested; perhaps Powhatan had arranged in advance for his daughter to rescue Smith. Responsible scholars have made these suggestions, but Smith said nothing. His concern was not really Pocahontas; it was Smith" (981). Philip Young observes that the actions of Pocahontas were typical of Indian custom, but he questions whether Smith would have known of that fact:

> Any member of a tribe had a right to claim a prisoner as son or lover—but how could Smith have known enough about this to invent the tale? That scene in which he describes the weird behavior of his captors following his rescue was clearly a ceremony of adoption into the tribe, the natural consequences of Pocahontas' act. (398)

Sceptics point out that the rescue is not mentioned at all in Smith's first 1612 edition. Although he makes brief reference to the rescue in his 1622 *New England Trials*, it is not until the revised version of the *Generall Historie* in 1624 that the story appears in any detail. Alden Vaughan says publishers and editors might have deleted the incident as "too personal or too detrimental to the reputation of the colony" (36). Or it might have been deliberately omitted because Smith's captivity suggested the potential of this same threat to later English colonists, and this danger might have discouraged them from travelling to America (Young 398). Others, however, have noted that by the time of the 1624 revision Pocahontas had become famous, particularly due to her conversion to Christianity and relocation to England. She had learned to speak English, had married Rolfe, and had given birth to a son, Thomas. By 1624 she was dead, having fallen ill in 1617 while preparing to return home to America, and at 22 years of age she was buried at Gravesend near London on the Thames River. "With Pocahontas and Powhatan [who died a year after his daughter] dead," says Vaughan, "no restraints prevented the captain from inventing an attractive anecdote" (37). The rescue, for some, does not quite fit in with the rest of Smith's accounts wherein he emphasises his own bravery and quick-wittedness and the savagery and the grotesqueness of the Indians (Emerson 80-81). "It is hard to know,"

notes Young, "how much of it he may have made up or borrowed from other travelers of the period" (397).

It is possible that Smith was influenced by stories of earlier travellers or that he modelled his story on pre-existing rescue myths. Pauline Turner Strong argues that the type of rescue Smith describes often appears as a motif in travel narratives ("Captivity" 7). One such account appeared in London in 1609, coincidentally the year that Smith returned to England from America (Young 397). The story tells of the 1528 capture of Juan Ortiz, a soldier in the army of DeSoto, by the Timucuas of Florida. Just before he is to be executed, he is rescued—in Pocahontas fashion—by his captor's Indian daughter (Jenkins 14).

There are numerous literary precedents as well. While it is not known whether or not Smith was familiar with them, similar stories of rescue, many of them in the oral tradition, pre-date 1300, and according to Young, they were well known to Europeans:

> The tale of an adventurer, that is, who becomes the captive of the king or another country and another faith, and is rescued by his beautiful daughter, a princess who then gives up her land and her religion for his, is a story known to the popular literatures of many peoples for many centuries. The theme was so common in the Middle Ages that medieval scholars have a name for it: 'The Enamoured Moslem Princess.' This figure is a woman who characteristically offers herself to a captive Christian knight, the prisoner of her father, rescues him, is converted to Christianity, and goes to his native land. (Young 409)

The tradition includes the medieval story *The Sowdone of Baylone*, "The Turkish Lady and the English Slave," the Balkan ballad "Marko Kraljevic and the Arab King's Daughter,' the *Arabian Nights* story the "Tale of Kamar al-Zaman" and the Scottish ballad "Young Beichan" or "Lord Bateman and the Turkish King's Daughter," wherein a young English adventurer travels to a foreign land, is captured by the King, and is saved from execution by the King's daughter. Smith's rescue could be authentic, but as William Jenkins remarks in summing up the controversy, "whether fact or fiction, it has become so deeply ingrained in American popular culture that the names of both Smith and Pocahontas are readily recognized by almost every elementary school child . . . . who thinks of him [Smith] today in any context other than his rescue from the executioner's club by Powhatan's daughter" (8).

Thackeray's George Warrington appears to have based his play upon Smith's historical writings, as he adapts many of the incidents from the *Generall Historie* into his drama. But his enthusiasm for Smith seems to indicate that he is more attracted to the man's colourful style of writing about his adventures than he is in verifying Smith's historical facts. George recalls with pleasure his avid childhood consumption of Smith's tales of swashbuckling adventure, which made the Englishman a hero worthy of admiration to his young, unsophisticated mind:

> I made acquaintance with brave Captain Smith as a boy in my grandfather's library at home, where I remember how I would sit at the good old man's knees, with my favourite volume on my own, spelling out the exploits of our Virginia hero. I loved to read of Smith's travels, sufferings, captivities, escapes, not only in America, but Europe. I

> become a child again almost as I take from the shelf before me in England the familiar volume, and all sorts of recollections of my early home come crowding over my mind. The old grandfather would make pictures for me of Smith doing battle with the Turks on the Danube, or led out by our Indian savages to death. Ah, what a terrific fight was that in which he was engaged with the three Turkish champions, and how I used to delight over the story of his combat with Bonny Molgro, the last and most dreadful of the three! (843-844)

Years later, when George becomes a writer, he creates a Pocahontas play that is corrupted by a reliance on Smith's historical reports and a deliberate falsification of the events of her life. He wants his play to be entertaining, not necessarily factual. He even claims dramatic licence to include some of Smith's other adventures in his play: "Disdaining time and place (with that daring which is the privilege of poets) in my tragedy, Smith is made to perform similar exploits on the banks of our Potomac and James's River" (844). George's first play *Carpezan*—a tragedy replete with battles and murders—is also based on a book in his grandfather's library, the life of George Frundsberg of Mindelhein—and is also, like *Pocahontas*, a play where he "has departed from historical truth" (666).

Critics of the *Generall Historie*, upon which George bases his play, point out that Smith's focus in his writings is with himself, Pocahontas being a figure that he includes to emphasise his own bravery and heroism. It is a boastful history, Young states bluntly (397). He maintains that the rescue of Smith by Pocahontas clearly "belongs to fiction" (398). But it was this event that became the focus for the

avalanche of plays written about her. This kind of rescue had become a literary convention and a staple of drama, as evidenced in *The Virginians* when George recounts his days of captivity in America. As he expects, his audience anticipates the tale will end with a melodrama, with his rescue by a female saviour, because as Hetty suggests, people have been pre-conditioned to accept this cultural image—women, it seems, have had little other significant purpose in these types of narratives to do anything but help men:

> 'A captive pulled down by malady, a ferocious gaoler, and a young woman touched by the prisoner's misfortunes—sure you expect that with these three prime characters in a piece, some pathetic tragedy is going to be enacted? You, Miss Hetty, are about to guess that the woman saved me?'
>
> 'Why, of course, she did!' cries mamma.
>
> 'What else is she good for?' says Hetty. (534)

But George disappoints his audience—it is bribery, not female heroism, which secures his release. George will turn again to this image of rescue when he writes his Pocahontas play. However, in his writings, he *will* choose to include this romantic convention. Following in the tradition of a host of other playwrights, he recreates the most famous deliverance of a captive male by a woman in history and drama—the rescue of Captain John Smith by Pocahontas. When the play is a dismal failure, George is shocked, and he blames his fidelity to history as the primary cause. Granted, he takes special care to ensure that his actors wear seventeenth-century era

costumes, but as Thackeray makes clear, George's approach is romantic, not historical.

While we are given a detailed plot summary of his first play, *Carpezan*, George is noticeably silent about the specific content of *Pocahontas*. He says only that the play can be read by anyone who chooses to consult his collected works. That the play fails as a written text, as well as a performative piece, is suggested in his admission that it is wearisome. When he tries to read the play out loud, his audience usually falls asleep. The lack of specific reference to the content of his play encourages two interpretations. One, that his readers are already so familiar with the story of the Indian princess, there is no need to tell its plot; George has provided no new insights on her life. Second, we might conclude that the play's content is so slight and insignificant that it is not worth spending any time describing it. Both interpretations suggest that Thackeray is stressing the banality of this type of romanticised story. The play's failure on stage further underscores its weakness. Thackeray deflates George's romantic aspirations to become a writer. Before the Pocahontas flop, he thought he could be a successful playwright, easily able to "'write a play a year'" (708). Through George's failure, Thackeray parodies those writers who produce such trite plays as the Pocahontas dramas, believing they will profit from their creation of a heroine who has little historical truth, but who has wide appeal in popular culture.

He also uses George to parody poets, who, like the dramatists, turned to Pocahontas as an inspiration for sentimental art. George creates such a poem when he tries to spark interest in his play, two days before it opens:

Wearied arm and broken sword
 Wage in vain the desperate fight:
Round him press a countless horde,
 He is but a single knight.
Hark! a cry of triumph shrill
 Through the wilderness resounds,
 As, with twenty bleeding wounds,
Sinks the warrior, fighting still.

Now they heap the fatal pyre,
 And the torch of death they light:
Ah! 'tis hard to die of fire!
 Who will shield the captive knight?
Round the stake with fiendish cry
 Wheel and dance the savage crowd,
 Cold the victim's mien and proud,
And his breast is bared to die.

Who will shield the fearless heart?
 Who avert the murderous blade?
From the throng, with sudden start,
See, there springs an Indian maid.
Quick she stands before the knight,
 'Loose the chain, unbind the ring,
 I am daughter of the king,
And I claim the Indian right!'

Dauntlessly aside she flings
 Lifted axe and thirsty knife;
Fondly to his heart she clings,
 And her bosom guards his life!
In the woods of Powhatan,
 Still 'tis told, by Indian fires,
 How a daughter of their sires
Saved the captive Englishman. (844-845)

The elevated romantic excess of the language of this heroic poem is an indication of the kind of sentimental dialogue George must have written for his play.[4] In her study of Pocahontas, Frances Mossiker refers to this poem, rebuking Thackeray for including this inaccurate text in his novel. He "should have known better: there were

no more 'Indian fires' burning 'in the woods of Powhatan'" because there were "no more Powhatans to be seen on the banks of the James, and few on the York or the Pamunkey by the end of the seventeenth century, certainly none by the mid 1800s, when Thackeray toured America" (328). However, she misses the point that Thackeray was making. He uses George's poem to mock the popularisation of Pocahontas in literature, a trend which Mossiker herself deplores. "The Pocahontas of nineteenth-century poets," she writes, "is a conventional romantic heroine, losing almost every trace of her Indian identity along with her suntan" (327).

George's poem and play prefigure the type of drama that would emerge on the cultural scene in even greater numbers in the early nineteenth century. Leslie Fielder says he is not surprised by "the ease with which it [the Pocahontas story] is turned into stereotype," but rather by "the frequency and fury with which it has been exposed" (80). Theatre was fond of the Pocahontas legend. Her character, Eugene Jones notes, afforded an opportunity to portray idealised femininity in the form of a "perfect dusky Eve" or a "Pathetic Dusky Heroine"; through this depiction she could be "fitted into stereotypical character patterns" such as sympathetic or tragic female, or a "romantic dark lady" (41). The poor quality of the Pocahontas poems and plays were produced by writers who—like George—based their works upon standard literary conventions and characterisations. Young says most writers tried to "romanticize history instead of letting the facts act as a stimulus to fiction. As a result of sentimentality and inaccuracy, there is little or no historical value in their products" (404).

Some of the more enduring Pocahontas plays that would have been known to Thackeray include James Nelson Barker's *The Indian Princess; or, La Belle Sauvage*

in 1808, a "hugely popular" version which advertised itself as a drama that would try to adhere as much to historical truth "as dramatic rules would allow of" (Moses 571). George Washington Custis wrote *Pocahontas; or, The Settlers of Virginia* in 1830. As the step-grandson of the first American president, Custis produced a more romantic and serious play than Barker, and he deviated from the usual order of events found in most of the other dramas. Pocahontas plays usually play the key dramatic moment, the rescue, in the second act—a placement that makes the rest of the action an anti-climax. Custis deviated from the norm and his rescue occurs in the final act. Other plays include Robert Dale Owen's *Pocahontas, A Historical Drama* in 1837, and Charlotte Barnes' *The Forest Princess; or, Two Centuries Ago* in 1848. Even Fanny Kemble joined the trend and composed a Pocahontas ballet. While most of these dramas were performed in America, some did make their way to the English stage. Charles Isaac Mungo Dibdon's *Ko and Zoa; or, The Belle Sauvage* played London in 1802, and Barker's play, revised in 1820 under the title of *Pocahontas; or, The Indian Princess*, was the first American play to appear in London after first opening in America (Young 401).

The failure of George's play in the eighteenth-century world allows Thackeray to parody the fates of these romanticised dramas. The idealised Pocahontas as a romantic child of nature had reached its peak by the mid-nineteenth century. Mossiker calls Barnes' play "an example of nineteenth-century theater at its worst, a pageant rather than a play" (325). In her preface, Barnes had made her views of the Indian princess as an icon of femininity quite clear:

> Considered in her individual career, Pocahontas stands forth from first to last the animated type of mercy and peace, unselfishness and truth. Her benevolence (of which the limits of this play can record but a small part) is neither a momentary impulse nor a cold system of utility: it is a warm, all-pervading and abiding principle. Her life was pure, active, and affectionate: her 'beautiful, godly, and Christian death' was a theme of praise to all beholders. (147)

Such sentimentality could not be allowed to continue. And so, in 1855, Irish actor and writer John Brougham, who since his arrival in New York in the early 1840s had written, produced, and acted in a variety of burlesques, felt impelled to take on the Pocahontas stage tradition. He was a man who "frequently mocked the fads and pretensions of his own industry," particularly the image of the noble Indian (Allen 103). Thus, he produced *Po-Ca-Hon-Tas; or, The Gentle Savage*, subtitled, *An Original, Aboriginal, Erratic, Operatic, Semi-civilized, and Demi-savage Extravaganza of "Pocahontas"; or, The Last of the Pollywogs*, a burlesque full of puns, choruses sung to the tunes of contemporary songs, and comic allusions to Shakespeare's works. Its stage directions playfully discuss its—and the *Generall Historie*'s—own fictitiousness. Its heroine Po-ca-hon-tas is a beautiful but undutiful daughter who "married, according to the ridiculous dictum of actual circumstance . . . Master Rolff," while Smith is described disjointedly as being "The undoubted Original, vocal and instrumental, in the settlement of Virginia, in love with Pocahontas, according to this story, though somewhat at variance with his story." John Rolfe, "The real Husband of Pocahontas, but dramatically divorced contrary to

all law and fact," is furnished with a strong German accent. The opening "Prolegomena" readily exposes the tone of the piece to follow:

> The deeply interesting incident upon which this Drama is founded, occurred in Virginia, on Wednesday, Oct. 12, A.D. 1607, at twenty-six minutes past 4 in the afternoon, according to the somewhat highly colored and boastful narration of Capt. John Smith, the famous adventurer, backed by the concurrent testimony of contemporaneous history; but subsequent research has proved that either he was mistaken, or that *circumstance* had unwarrantably plagiarized an affair which transpired at a much earlier date; for, upon examining the contents of a wallet found in the vest pocket of the man in armor, dug up near Cape Cod, an entire *epic poem* was discovered upon the very same subject, which was written by a Danish Poet, the Chevalier Viking, Long Fellow of the Norwegian Academy of Music, who flourished Anno Gothami, 235. (404)

So popular was this work from 1855 to 1884 that it became "*the* standard burlesque afterpiece in New York and in theatres across the country . . . . In the almost thirty years of its stage life no theatrical season in any American city was complete without a few performances of 'Pokey'" (Moody 401).

In *The Virginians*, Thackeray takes a reflexive look at the production of the early Pocahontas plays and anticipates their subsequent parodies. His readers would have recognised George as the naïve playwright who produces sentimental literature, someone who is so confident his play will be a triumph that he is unprepared for

rejection. One assumption George makes is that his audience will be receptive to the play's fairytale elements, especially that of the heroine's rescue of the hero. In this rescue, George is following Smith's history and a literary convention of captivity and folklore narratives (a convention Smith might have followed himself). As in fairytales, an important element of plot in these stories is a rescue, usually when a white male saves a white female from a red male's captivity. But as Strong makes clear, and as George's story of his own captivity illustrates, this configuration is more a romantic device of fiction than an historical reality. In her study of captivity narratives, Strong finds that prominent Puritan clergyman such as Increase Mather, Cotton Mather, and John Williams deliberately altered texts to justify colonialism, to enhance the moral reputation of the clergy, and to endorse the dominance of the English over Americans, and men over women. Their insistence that the North American Indian be depicted as a brutal "carnivorous beast" who preyed on defenceless English settlers was an image that persisted, especially in nineteenth-century children's school readers, in Sunday School literature, and popular fiction ("Captivity" 35, 79). The female captive who figured in these stories was likewise converted to an image the clergy could use as "a divine lesson to an unregenerate society"; she became a powerful symbol of marital and spiritual fidelity. The clergy posed a disturbing question: when removed from her husband and the clergy and under the influence of her heathen captives, could a wife remain faithful to her spouse and, above all, to God? The clergy implanted the fear in people's minds that perhaps she would turn into an adulteress and "fall prey to the seduction of Satan and his worldly servants" (Strong "Captivity" 66).

The Pocahontas story keeps the essential captivity narrative in place, but inverts the players, so that the vulnerable member of the equation is the white male captive, Smith, who is rescued by the red female redeemer. But while Strong says such alternatives exist, in real life and fiction rarely do they "function truly as counter-hegemonic representations, for they appear as romantic possibilities for contemplation, not as models for action" ("Captivity" 80). When ending his captivity tale, George, in this instance, sticks to the facts. His audience might be conditioned to expect his rescue by a beautiful woman resembling Pocahontas, but he does not include this literary convention. In telling of an Indian woman, who is said to be "partial to me" (534), George uses descriptive words that parallel those used when playwrights and historians characterise Pocahontas—she is a woman who "scours the plain with her nymphs, who brings down the game with her unerring bow, who is queen of the forest", and who has "long straight black hair, which was usually dressed with a hair-oil or pomade by no means pleasant to approach, with little eyes, with high cheekbones, with a flat nose, sometimes ornamented with a ring, with rows of glass beads round her tawny throat, her cheeks and forehead gracefully tattooed" (537). But the "dark beauty the colour of new mahogany" did not save him. While his personal experiences do not afford him the chance to colour his story with romanticised fairytale elements, he does get a second chance when he writes his play. There he can follow convention and include the fairytale rescue denied to him in real life. But Thackeray has already made it clear, in a lengthy diatribe on fairytales earlier in the novel, that such stories, and their timeworn conventions, are only viable for young, immature audiences.

George also assumes his play will be successful because it combines standard theatrical characters with English heroism. Thus, the drama should appeal to a patriotic English audience:

> An Indian king; a loving princess, and her attendant, in love with the British captain's servant; a traitor in the English fort; a brave Indian warrior, himself entertaining an unhappy passion for Pocahontas; a medicine-man and priest of the Indians (very well played by Palmer), capable of every treason, stratagem, and crime, and bent upon the torture and death of the English prisoner;--these with the accidents of the wilderness, the war-dances and cries (which Gumbo had learned to mimic very accurately from the red-people at home), and the arrival of the English fleet, with allusions to the late glorious victories in Canada, and the determination of Britons ever to rule and conquer in America, some of us not unnaturally thought might contribute to the success of our tragedy. (845)

The audience's response is not what he had expected, however, and George is dumbfounded when the play moves them to laughter, not tears. The first snickers, in response to his historically accurate costumes, erupt when Miss Pritchard, dressed as the Indian princess, arrives on stage:

> I had copied myself at the Museum, and tinted neatly, a figure of Sir Walter Raleigh in a frill and beard; and (my dear Theo giving some of her mother's best lace for the ruff) we dressed Hagan accurately after this drawing, and no man could look better. Miss Pritchard, as

> Pocahontas, I dressed too as a red Indian, having seen enough of *that* costume in my own experience at home. Will it be believed the house tittered when she first appeared? They got used to her, however, but just at the moment when she rushes into the prisoner's arms, and a number of people were actually in tears, a fellow in the pit bawls out, 'Bedad! Here's the Belle Savage kissing the Saracen's Head;' on which an impertinent roar of laughter sprang up in the pit, breaking out with fitful explosions during the remainder of the performance. (846)

George is indignant at the laugher, whistles, and hisses that ensue, even though he had earlier behaved in a similar fashion while attending a performance of *Douglas*. Just as playgoers ridicule his Indian costumes, so too did he laugh at the Highlander clothing used in the presentation of John Home's 1756 romantic tragedy. Thackeray may here be giving us another example of how history is vulnerable to romanticised legends and symbols. Hugh Trevor-Roper has found that the kilt, for instance—the celebrated icon of Scottish identity—is actually a modern invention. Although Sir Walter Scott insisted that the tartan had been worn by the ancient Caledonians in the third century A.D., it had, in fact, been created by an "Englishman after the Union of 1707; and the differentiated 'clan tartans' are an even later invention, owing their present form to two other Englishmen, younger than Sir Walter Scott" (19). Trevor-Roper's observations about the "makers of Highland tradition"—James Macpherson and the Sobieski Stuarts—show some similarities between them and those who invented the Pocahontas legend. He notes that the Scottish writers "Both imagined a golden age in the past of the Celtic Highlands. Both declared that they possessed

documentary evidence. Both created literary ghosts, forged texts and falsified history in support of their theories. Both began an industry which would thrive in Scotland long after their death" (41).

Thackeray parallels the audience response to George's and Home's plays. The reaction on the part of Lambert and George to *Douglas*, like that to *Pocahontas*, is anything but solemn:

> How can we help it if, during the course of the performance, Mr. Lambert would make his jokes and mar the solemnity of the scene? . . . [at one point] he nudged George Warrington, and looked so droll, that the young man burst out laughing.
>
> The magic of the scene was destroyed after that. These two gentlemen went on cracking jokes during the whole of the subsequent performance. (613-614)

George later explains that his laughter was produced by his very awareness of the fictionality of the play's characters: "I think we were not inclined to weep, like the ladies, because we stood behind the author's scenes of the play, as it were. Looking close up to the young hero, we saw how much of him was rant and tinsel; and as for the pale, tragical mother, that her pallor was white chalk, and her grief her pocket-handkerchief" (621). The audience at *Pocahontas* likewise seems to have been aware that its heroine is a fictional construct. Her theatricality and her imitative (unrealistic) nature is so evident, as exaggerated by her outward form (the costume), that the play becomes absurd and laughable.

In George's play, then, the depiction of a heroine who is supposed to embody idealised femininity is made to appear ridiculous. Earlier in *The Virginians*, in fact, Thackeray had foreshadowed the type of Pocahontas who would appear on stage. Almost as soon as she appears in the novel, George's mother is referred to as "Princess Pocahontas" and it is clear that those who call her by this name are not using the term as a form of endearment. As a woman who is just the opposite of the idealised, self-sacrificing Pocahontas, the domineering Rachel Warrington is mocked for her aristocratic pretensions with the title "Princess."

Despite Thackeray's belittling of the Pocahontas myth, she still remains a heroine to at least one woman in the novel: George's wife. Following the failure of the Pocahontas play, she stands by her man in a way that provides another parodic look at Pocahontas, who became the idealised heroine of not only drama, but poetry as well. Ignoring the absurd theatricality of George's heroine, she views Pocahontas as an icon of fidelity and courage, her devotion to Smith a parallel to Theo's devotion to George. Thus, in her overly sentimental poem "From Pocahontas"—even George says "I do not say the verses are very good" (851)—inspired by the heroine of George's play and poem, she casts herself in the role of the faithful Indian maiden and George as the distressed knight:

> Returning from the cruel fight
> How pale and faint appears my knight!
> He sees me anxious at his side;
> 'Why seek, my love, your wounds to hide?
> Or deem your English girl afraid
> To emulate the Indian maid?'
>
> Be mine my husband's grief to cheer,
> In peril to be ever near;
> Whate'er of ill or woe betide,

To bear it clinging at his side;
The poisoned stroke of fate to ward,
His bosom with my own to guard;
Ah! could it spare a pang to his,
It could not know a purer bliss!
'Twould gladden as it felt the smart,
And thank the hand that flung the dart! (851)

Theo's equating of two situations—that of George's failure in theatre with a man about to die—produces a parody of the rash of melodramatic poems inspired by Pocahontas. Theo's poem is even more disturbing than the one George himself writes, because this one is composed by a woman, someone who sees nothing wrong in imitating the actions and character of a deliberately manufactured stage role.

Thackeray could not have chosen a better heroine in Pocahontas by which to parody the fictionalisation of femininity in theatre. George's motives for writing his play, his stereotyped conception of the plot and its characters, his audience's reaction, and his wife's poetic response constitute Thackeray's reflexive examination of the Pocahontas story. The legend, both in culture and history, is replete with exaggerations, inconsistencies, and timeworn literary conventions. Playwrights have taken (and continue to take) dramatic licence with her character in order to embellish their sentimental plots; historians have elevated her to mythic status as a great American heroine. Thus, James Chamberlayne Pickett's opinion of Pocahontas, although written in 1847, still holds true: "In all history and in all romance it would be difficult to find a more perfect character than Pocahontas; and taking her as she has come down to us, it appears to me to be impossible to say wherein it could have been

improved" (5). Taking the Native American princess as "she has come down to us" is, of course, the problem that hampers any attempt to retrieve her real story. She might have remained a minor figure in history books had it not been for the popularisation of her image in theatre. By using George to parody playwrights who created a Pocahontas who is more romantic than real, Thackeray is reminding us of the fictionality of their stories; like George's play, they are difficult to take seriously as historical texts. These authors are poor writers, poor conveyors of femininity, because they do not produce original works, but merely imitate popular sentiments found in pre-existing texts. In doing so, they want to produce a cultural heroine who can be read in only one way—as an idealised, self-sacrificing female. However, as Thackeray has shown through his parody of conventional readings of the ballerina and Pocahontas, the writers and artists of these pre-existing texts, and those who imitate them, oversimplify femininity. Thackeray will turn again to conventional representations of womanhood in *Vanity Fair*, his most celebrated work. Through the narrator's interaction with his leading lady, Becky Sharp, complicated by the implications of puppet theatre and allusions to a prominent stage role for women, he takes an even more comprehensive look at the interpretative problems of femininity, and he underscores the need for his readers to be wary of accepting convention as truth.

Notes

[1] *Walt Disney*'s two animated versions of the Pocahontas story, one portraying her life in America and the sequel depicting her life in England, have been soundly criticised by Native Americans. According to S. Elizabeth Bird, the Disney corporation produced a marketable, "white man's" version of a native girl: "the company has come a long way from the offensive portrayals in earlier films like *Peter Pan*. But ultimately, the Indians of *Pocahontas* are, yet again, the objects of White concerns and White fantasies" (3).

[2]English traveller-novelist-poet John Davis (1774-1854) was one of the greatest promoters of the Pocahontas myth, and by introducing an erotic element into the friendship of Pocahontas and Smith, his stories paved the way for future writers to turn the tale into a love story. Mary Dearborn, however, argues that Smith was the first to eroticize the Pocahontas story when he complained in his history that she and her friends constantly followed him about, crying "Love you not me?" (9).

[3]The female native in literature is usually classified in binary terms as either a "Princess" or "Squaw." As the opposite of the "Princess," the term *Squaw* denoted savagery and sexuality. Gordon Johnston notes that the "most common Indian figures in such [Indian] stories clearly represent the masculine projections of their authors and societies. 'Princesses' such as Pocahontas and Minnehaha are idealized, self-sacrificing soul mates; 'squaws' are perfect drudges and sexual conveniences" (54).

[4] In an 1800 story by John Davis, "Farmer of New Jersey, by John Davis, the manner of Smith's near execution has been altered to burning at the stake. This is the same type of aborted execution that Juan Ortiz records in his travel narrative and which also appears in Thackeray's novel—in the initial sketch that begins the chapter "Pocahontas," in the "grand scene" of Act Two in George's play, and in the content of George's poem.

Chapter Three:

Becky Sharp: Punch in Petticoats

> The monster [from *Frankenstein*], Emily Brontë/Ellis Bell, Becky Sharp—these are the heroic figures of an energy and desire that refuse to be classed, gendered, grammaticalized and that offer the promise that some kind of resistance is possible.
>
> David Musselwhite, *Partings Welded Together*

The ballerina and Pocahontas survive on stage as dominant symbols of femininity. Their privileged place in culture legitimises the notion that women are, or should be, fragile and delicate, their heroism residing in their willingness to save a man at the price of their own lives. Another prominent type of stage role for women seems, on the surface, to suggest an alternative reading of femininity. She is the strong, independent woman, the woman who would first save herself, the woman who scorns the traditional roles of wife and mother, the woman who would seek revenge against the injustices of male authority. As a theatrical construct, however, this female role persists, just as much as the ballerina and Pocahontas, as an endorsement of ideal femininity. Her cultural depictions encourage us to read this type of woman as being too powerful. There is something monstrous about her, something dangerous and unnatural. Hence, if she cannot be recuperated into the realm of "true femininity," she must be controlled, punished, or eradicated before she infects society with her poison.[1]

Just as Thackeray looks at the delineation of the ballerina and Pocahontas as accurate models of femininity from another perspective, so too does he re-examine their antithesis. In *Vanity Fair*, he creates one of the most intriguing figures in English

literature: Becky Sharp. She is often seen as an outstanding example of a dangerous, monstrous woman, quite possibly a murderer. However, if her character is read in terms of the novel's reflexivity, this argument loses some of its force. By aligning her character with two important theatrical figures—the puppet, a controllable, performing object, and Clytemnestra, an uncontrollable, rebellious female character—Thackeray again challenges traditional readings of femininity.

As a puppet, or indeed as a character in a novel, Becky should be easy to restrain. However, the novel's narrator (her "puppetmaster") finds that she often eludes his authorial control. Robin Ann Sheets reminds readers that Thackeray's narrator complicates our reading. He lacks confidence in his own reading of Becky's character; he often cannot get his facts straight; he is a "befuddled, middle-aged spectator trying to piece together his own recollections and the hearsay of others":

> The narrator tells us that Becky's verbal accounts are misleading and incomplete, but who is to tell us that his are not? The narrator attempts to record a series of events exactly as they happened and to extract therefrom a universally applicable moral. If, however, he fails to tell the truth and apply the moral, then he raises the possibility that his art is as false as Becky's and that he is, as he himself implies in his preface, a quack. (426)

This narrator's difficulties in assessing Becky's actions adds to our difficulty in judging her character. Becky does not fit comfortably within any category of traditional characterisation that we might expect in a literary work. She functions more as a reflexive vehicle for exposing the fictionality of the text itself and of its

characters. Sally Mitchell has arrived at such a reading. For example, she says Becky's counterpart in the novel, Amelia, is a "deliberately constructed" figure intended to "show how flimsy an ideal woman would be in a world of real people. She is a romantic fiction who can only live happily in a world of pretense"; on the other hand, Becky is a "realist; she understands what people want to believe and she uses their stereotypes for her own ends" (58). While she does become a wife and mother in the novel, Becky's identity extends beyond these roles, and she becomes a metacommentary on the banality of literary conventions and stereotyped female characterisation. Regarding her role as a mother, Mitchell again observes that

> Thackeray also dissects some clichés about motherhood. By making sacrifices for her son, Amelia turns him into a replica of his selfish father; he grows up to tread on other women. Becky's aversion to nurturing makes readers dislike her, but ironically it produces a better son. By peeling the protective covering away from these ideas, Thackeray forces readers to compare literary and social fictions about the world with the reality their own eyes can see. (58-59)

Alison Byerly furthers this argument by astutely assessing Becky as a person whose life is performance:

> she cannot simply abandon acting. She says to herself, 'I wish I were out of it,' but the only alternatives she can imagine are wildly different roles: 'I would rather be a parson's wife, and teach Sunday school than this; or a sargeant's lady and ride in the regimental wagon; or, oh, how much gayer it would be to wear spangles and trousers, and dance before

> a booth at a fair.' In a sense, she longs for complete honesty: she would like to play a performer. The self she imagines is a free, androgynous, carnivalesque figure who would liberate her from the feminine roles to which she has been limited. (273)

Byerly identifies Thackeray's reflexive attitude toward literature when she remarks that the novel is designed to help readers distinguish between the theatrical and the real: "he tries to teach his readers how to look beyond the charade to see what is real" (279).

In Becky's attempts to control her own image, to be her own puppeteer, she reveals to us that she, and female gender in general, largely *is* charade. She uses her acting skills to combat boredom (Byerly 273) and to cope with the various situations in which she finds herself, whether in aristocratic English drawing rooms or seedy hotel rooms on the continent. She experiments with a variety of feminine roles, constantly reinventing herself as a governess, wife, mother, widow, flirt, and gambler.[2] Chameleon-like, she can change her mask to fit the occasion. Once, when she sits opposite her sleeping husband Rawdon and she is no longer subject to his gaze, her face relaxes from its pose. It becomes haggard and terrible, but when he awakens, she quickly schools her features and reverts back to her performance as the doting wife; her countenance consciously lights up, and she kisses him gaily. Edgar Harden notes perceptively that Thackeray's use of the word "it" to refer to Becky's face suggests "an almost disembodied face, [and] powerfully conveys the ghastly effort required to maintain her role" (*Vanity* 75).

To equate Becky with this kind of control seems, however, to oppose the theatrical characterisation with which Thackeray infused her and the novel's other characters. He chose, after completion of the story's serialisation, to frame the novel in the world of puppet theatre. In June 1848, Torrens McCullagh's remark "Well, I see you are going to shut up your puppets in their box!" prompted Thackeray to reply, "Yes; and with your permission, I'll work up that simile" (*Letters* II 392). To that effect, Thackeray prefaced his novel with a noisy fairground setting described in a voice that parodies the start of real puppet performances, when showmen "conventionally boasted of the size and verisimilitude of the mechanical actors" (Shershow 149). In Thackeray's case, a puppetmaster appears before the curtain to mediate between stage and audience. By the end of *Vanity Fair*, the lower-class world of the fairground has been displaced by a children's nursery, the narrator calling out, "Come, children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out" (878). According to Myron Taube, Thackeray's puppet frame was a brilliant but misleading afterthought. The images of children and puppets, he argues, are incongruous with Thackeray's views of his characters, especially as the narrative voice inexplicably changes from a showman in "Before the Curtain" to a *paterfamilias* at the conclusion ("The Puppet" 41-42).[3]

But Henri Talon stresses that the novel "*is* a show"—specifically a puppet show—despite the counter-arguments. Talon points out that such criticism derives from a dislike of literary works that flaunt their own fictionality:

> They take him [Thackeray] to task for giving a warped picture of reality through omission or prejudice, or for making suspension of

> disbelief impossible through interference and commentary. They want levelness with life, a transfer-picture of the world they are familiar with, and lo! they are presented with fiction. (3)

The puppet simile allows Thackeray to underscore the self-reflexivity of his novel, and to punctuate his views about social and cultural falsities. As performing objects, puppets "focus a range of cultural anxieties—about class, about gender, about performance itself" (Shershow 225).

Vanity Fair is a metadramatic work, featuring a leading lady, Becky, fully conscious of herself, and her world, as artifice. Aware of her, and her gender's, puppet status, she can exploit it, becoming not only puppet, but puppetmaster. In her dual role, in which she is both a voice of and against authority, she ushers us into this self-reflexive, forever mirroring, world of representation, and, more specifically, the world of female representation, upsetting traditional notions of femininity, and opening up spaces for new interpretations. The appropriateness of Thackeray's puppet frame and the effectiveness of Becky as a puppet have their foundations in the origins of puppet theatre, in which we can find the metaphorical use of the puppet as a symbol of social subordination, and the close linguistic and representational associations between women and puppets.

Firstly, puppet theatre has always been regarded as an example of low art geared to groups of little or no political, social, and economic power, namely plebeian classes and children. Thackeray's dual settings in his puppet frame, a movement from the fairground to the nursery, nicely illustrates the evolution from the puppet's centrality as a riotous, lawless figure to a diminutive plaything. Scott Shershow's

lengthy study of puppet theatre shows that few other artistic forms have experienced as many cultural refigurings: "Whether as 'fashionable' entertainment, discursive figuration of power, or bourgeois symbol of cultural otherness, the puppet was continually reappropriated from a hypothetical Bakhtinian world of folklore and festivity and used in a process of social and cultural subordination" (111).

Contained within puppet theatre's rebellious history are associations with vulgarity and vagrancy, its early performers living a vagabond existence, travelling about the country, setting up makeshift booths, and performing plays on a wide range of subjects that included biblical stories and old historical legends. Puppet theatre was never accorded legitimate status, but its lack of cultural and legal validity often authorised its voice, allowing it to speak, often in a parodic manner, what legitimate theatre was forbidden to express. In 1647, for example, when theatres were forced to close, puppet drama, which was considered even "too lowly for legal interdiction, continued unhindered" (Speaight *Punch* 37). Puppets metaphorically represented lawlessness and defiance, and were therefore stylised rebellious mouthpieces for the lower classes; as studies of puppetry suggest, these figures show how art can be used to resist, challenge, or oppose dominant culture. Puppet theatre could then be regarded as "a discursive site on which social anxieties about class and gender, dress, deportment, and corporeality were projected" (Shershow 10). The puppet, because of its inanimate form, is uniquely "free from human limitations"; hence, it can "speak the unspeakable and deal with taboos, deal with all our dark sides"; it can "portray an ideal or emotion which cannot be expressed in any other way" (Currell 4).

Thackeray shows in his "Before the Curtain" that the traditional popular puppet show was a staple lower-class entertainment, along with peep shows, at fairs, festivals, and country wakes. The noisy, crowded atmosphere Thackeray depicts in his prologue compares to George Speaight's description of one of the largest fairs held annually at the end of August, Bartholomew Fair. It was a noisy, crowded affair of showmen, pickpockets, and whores, where the rich mingled with the poor: "We hear of the crowds rioting down the alleys, and then of a platoon of soldiers clearing the way as the Prince of Wales strolls around the fair between the flaunting rows of gaudy showcloths" (*Punch* 60). Such events attracted a great many showmen, eager to exhibit freaks, curiosities, performing animals, and conjuring acts so that "Throughout the seventeenth century and well beyond, the performing object would continue to evoke its ancient associations of the magical and the monstrous, even as it also descended into the nostalgic comfort of bourgeois domesticity" (Shershow 49).

The well-known Punch-and-Judy show, often regarded as the quintessential puppet show, began its transformation into a virtually exclusive mode of children's entertainment in the nineteenth century. However, it was once an extremely popular example of street theatre for adults. The show's primary performer, Punch, was a descendant of the Italian marionette Pulcinella. Vain, lecherous, deceitful, he flouts "petty authority" and is a spokesman for freedom from oppression (Baird 103). He beats and kills his shrewish wife, throws their baby out of the window, hits a policeman and doctor, and outsmarts a hangman. Endings to the play vary, however. In some, the Devil arrives to take him off to hell; in others he is allowed to triumph over punishment for his crimes, remaining a symbol of victory over all authority.

Punch became a leading embodiment of a working-class desire to invert mastery; he exposes a plebeian tendency toward disobedience and a tenacity for self-preservation (Shershow 167). Punch, however, does not only display a desire to thwart authority; he also wants authority for himself:

> In its full social context, however, the Punch-and-Judy show must be seen to express an impulse of undifferentiated aggression and thus to reproduce the impulse of domination against which it otherwise seems to rebel. Punch lords it over both Judy *and* the hangman; that both figures become his precisely analogous antagonists and victims suggests the cultural and ideological forces that were inevitably also brought to bear on a show that instantiates as well as overcomes (its own) otherness . . . . Popular festivity, just slightly reconstructed, becomes the restless energy of class aspiration. (Shershow 170)

In short, Punch is both a puppet and a master.

However, once his audience became dominated by children, he was reduced to a cultural image of consumerism, appearing as a paper cutout, doll, and figure in numberless picture books (Shershow 174, Speaight *Punch* 82). As Shershow puts it, the show "moved from the streets to the drawing room, where its apparent working-class rebellion became an amusement to 'pacify' children" (173). Puppet theatre hence descended as it paradoxically "ascended" into bourgeois culture. Appropriated by the middle classes, puppets were stripped of their violence, vulgarity, and anti-authoritarian tendencies; shows became morality tales suitable for children.

Associations of puppets as playthings particularly directed at girls also reveal a long association between females, children, and puppets. Annette Kuhn in *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality* says that the "tradition of representation of women, from myth to fairytale to high art to pornography . . . strip[s] women of will and autonomy. Woman is dehumanized by being represented as a kind of automaton, a 'living doll'" (14). This representation has a correlation in the "linguistic genealogy of the word *puppet*" since the term "embodies a sequence of shifting but persistent associations of femininity" (Shershow 69). The word derives from the feminised Latin word *pupa* for "little child" or "doll" through to the Middle French *poupé*, which can mean "doll" or a child's plaything. Linguistically, women have been described with variations and cognates of the word *puppet*—from Chaucer's Middle English designation of Alison (of *The Canterbury Tales*) as being "so gay a popelote and swich a wench" to today's slang expressions of dolls and baby dolls (Shershow 70).

As befits the dual nature of puppets—they are both metaphoric and material—they engender two interpretations. A puppet can be used as a figure of empowerment, one that circumvents rules and challenges authority. It can also be regarded an object, a tiny material figure—either a marionette or glove puppet. As a "passive vehicle or vessel available for a mastering authorial form," says Shershow, "the puppet is figurally linked to a range of social and sexual subordination—the woman, the child, the servant, the 'upstart' or social climber" (68). Thus, "the puppet may be seen, by turns and at once, either as diminutive and trivial, a mere doll or plaything, or as

mysterious and efficacious, the very epitome of performance in all its supposedly transformative power" (23).

As evident by this historical and cultural context, Becky—female, duplicitous, social climber, anti-authoritarian, socially subordinate, mysterious—has the necessary characteristics to qualify as a puppet. Like Punch, her ending has two readings: in the novel's final illustrations she is depicted in one as a puppet lying in a devil's embrace (is he preparing to take her to hell?), and in another as a pious woman, who has seemingly triumphed over punishment for her crimes.

Although she lacks his hump and hooked nose, Becky has some character affinities with the crafty, sneaky Punch. She, too, is witty; she has a dislike of children; her voice is shrill, often ringing with "demonical laughter." The qualities of Punch which endear the puppet to audiences are similar to those which many critics and readers use to condemn Becky. In a long list of her Punch-like traits, John Tilford remarks that she "habitually indulges in all manner of sneaky and ignoble activities: she reads other people's mail, she eavesdrops, she snitches ribbons, she steals clothes. He [the narrator] portrays her as incorrigible liar, an incessant swindler, and an unconscious hypocrite" (605). For Talon, on the other hand, her liveliness is all-important: "It is not the schemer and the cheat that one sees first in her, but a woman possessed of an extraordinary *joie de vivre* . . . . No boarding house at Boulogne, no garret in Pumpernickel Inn can damp her spirits for there, as well as in Curzon Street, existence is an opportunity and a game" (10). Such comments confirm Thackeray's description of her in "Before the Curtain," where she is among the few characters

singled out, as an enigmatic, intriguing little puppet, "uncommonly flexible in the joints and lively on the wire" (2).

Like Punch, she is a model of anti-authoritarianism. Even the omniscient narrator has a difficult time trying to control her. Often falling silent, unable to assert his narrative authority at crucial moments in the story, he poses questions about her, but he cannot—or will not—always answer them. As to whether she is involved in an adulterous affair with Lord Steyne, he offers rhetorical questions only: "Was she guilty or not? She said not; but who could tell what was truth which came from those lips?" (677). He further compounds the problem by suggesting that even when Becky does speak, her words are suspect, open to interpretation. The final, contradictory, words of Jos in the novel embody this inability to confine her character; to him she is both an "admirable" woman and a "terrible" woman, someone he is "dreadfully afraid of" and "eager in his praises of her" (873-874).

Her name is as varied and fragmented as her character; she is at various times Rebecca Sharp, Mrs. Rawdon Crawley, Madame Ravdonn Cravley, Madame de Raudon, and Madame Rebecque. She is furthermore described with a mixture of contradictory adjectives and terms, causing characters and readers to wonder if she is "dear Becky", "our darling Becky", or if she is a "little adventuress," a "*vipere.*" Is she, as some assert, a criminal or should we consider her, as others claim, "as innocent as a lamb" (818)? We are constantly being asked to choose between the two polarities, a difficult task when it seems we cannot judge her with any measure of confidence. Her history, says the narrator, "was after all a mystery" (817). And, although he makes some harsh judgements against her himself, such as calling her a

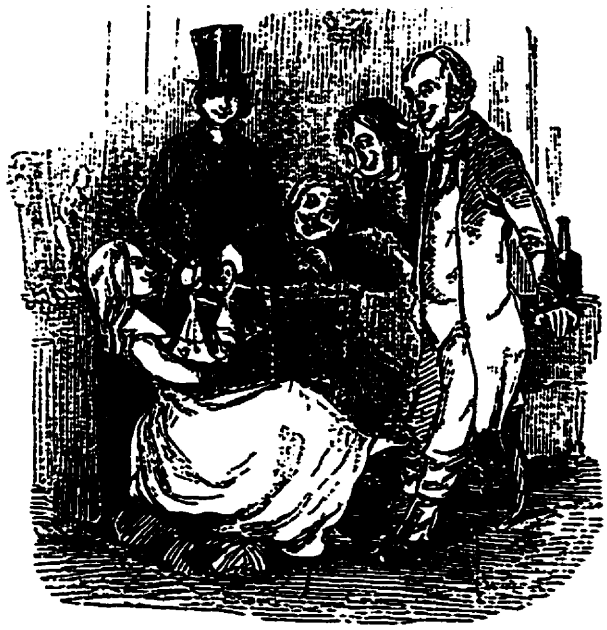
siren and a Circe, he will sometimes also play the role of her protector by casting doubt on the reliability of other interpretations of her character. Thus he says, "I protest it is quite shameful in the world to abuse a simple creature, as people of her time abused Becky, and I warn the public against believing one-tenth of the stories against her" (642).

To all appearances, Becky should be the perfect example of a subservient puppet; socially inferior, and classless, she has, after all, a small place in the world. However, her diminutive stature embodies a puppet's defiance of social and cultural norms, particularly regarding the limited number of representations of women in art, which image them as either good or bad, angel or whore.

At times she can deliberately perform the role of a "good" woman to mirror the artificial veneer of females who pretended, and were educated, to seem virtuous. The Victorian educational system, for females in particular, came under fire by Thackeray for its shallow, inadequate teachings. As schoolteacher Barbara Pinkerton's letter to Amelia's parents—describing their daughter's "scholarly" achievements—shows, girls gain little practical knowledge that intelligently prepares them to enter adulthood. Instead, the focus is on music, dancing, orthography, embroidery, and needle-work—the very arts that Fitz-Boodle savagely criticises in *The Ravenswing*. These are talents that increase the value of women/unmarried girls on the marriage market. As someone whose mother was a lowly French opera-girl and whose father was an art teacher, Becky is never accepted as a legitimate student at the Pinkerton establishment. But she during her time at the school she has learned about the value

society places on those "artistic" skills, which Fitz-Boodle claims enslave women to a lifetime of prison work.

Becky leaves the school with no regrets and with no dictionary. When she makes that celebrated "heroic" and defiant gesture of flinging *Johnson's Dictionary* out of the carriage window, to the horror of Jemima Pinkerton, Becky indicates she has scant regard for rules and textual authority, or for those who do (namely headmistress Barbara Pinkerton, who reveres the great lexicographer Samuel Johnson). Instead, Becky places more value in two dolls she receives on separate occasions from the Pinkerton sisters, using them as handpuppets to mimic and parody the schoolteachers. Becky has no great love for Barbara Pinkerton, who never



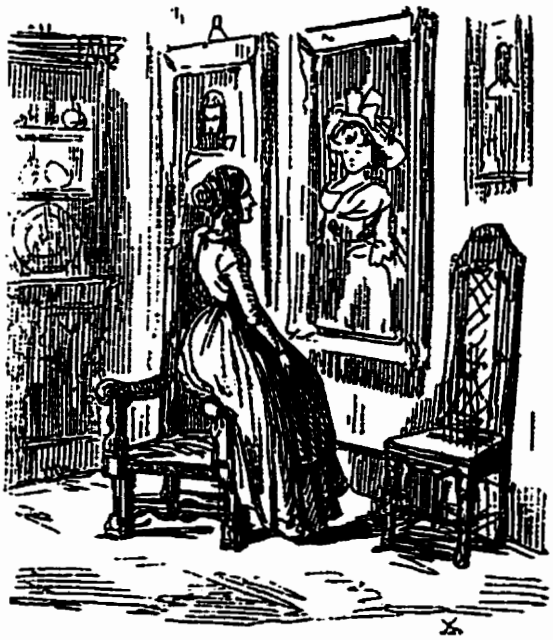
lets the girl forget her social inferiority; but Jemima has shown her some compassion. It is she who secretly sneaks Becky a copy of the dictionary, jelly and cake enough for three children, and a seven-shilling piece when she leaves the school. Why then, wonders John Carey, does Becky "ungratefully" add Jemima "to the act" (110)?

When Becky creates her own puppet show, she is doing more than visually "foreshadowing the way in which she will manipulate other people throughout the novel" (Peters 167). She is showing, through her parodic art, her disdain for this educational system and the puppetlike servitude of teachers. Pinkerton's greatness has been reduced, made small, insignificant, and comic. The sisters, along with the girls they instruct, are puppets, controlled by a system that provides them with little useful education. Like the appreciative audiences at Punch's shows, Becky's performance is well received by members of the lower class—her father's artist friends—those excluded from attending such privileged educational establishments themselves.

Later, as a married woman, she performs to a higher-class audience, but one no less appreciative, during an evening of amateur theatrics wherein participants reproduce, or "act out," famous paintings (*tableaux vivants*). Becky's participation and her audience's reaction to her performance remind us that art has traditionally reduced women to inanimate objects with no will of their own; they exist only to be gazed upon, to be read as monstrous if they represent a defiance of authority. Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" is a vivid example of an independent woman reduced to art. Her husband had not been able to control her behaviour when she was alive, but now that she exists as a flawless piece of art, a painting concealed behind a curtain that he alone can raise, he believes he has gained absolute authority over her. However, Browning makes that authority ambiguous. The Duke says he has complete control of her image, but he is vexed to interpret that image. What *has* caused that spot of joy on her cheek? He does not know if it was his presence in the room as her

portrait was being painted, a compliment from the artist, or some unbidden thought in her mind which conjured up her blush.

Thackeray's creates a vivid contrast to this duchess with Sir Pitt Crawley's second wife, Rose, and the portrait of her that hangs in the house. The artist who painted her portrait has perfectly captured her subservient, puppet-like nature; the painting makes no suggestion she had even a trace of defiance in her character. Like Becky, she comes from a lower-class background (her father is an ironmonger) and thus is never completely accepted by the aristocratic world. She is quickly absorbed into the role of the "good woman," and after producing more children for the Crawley estate, she withers away, finally to become a work of art, a passive portrait hanging



on a wall, barely noticed, or read, by anyone except Becky. W. David Shaw argues that Rose is also connected with Thackeray's reflexivity:

> In the characterless Lady Rose Crawley we find a parody of what the actress or performer becomes when she is not acting. Rose is a mere machine in her husband's house, of no more use than a grand piano. Beyond her small flower garden, she has no likes or dislikes. A mere echo or emptiness, she has not even enough character to take to drink. Her credentials compose an appalling list of negatives: 'she had no sort of character; nor talents, nor opinions, nor occupations, nor amusements, nor that vigor of soul and ferocity of temper when often fails to the lot of entirely foolish women.' (151)

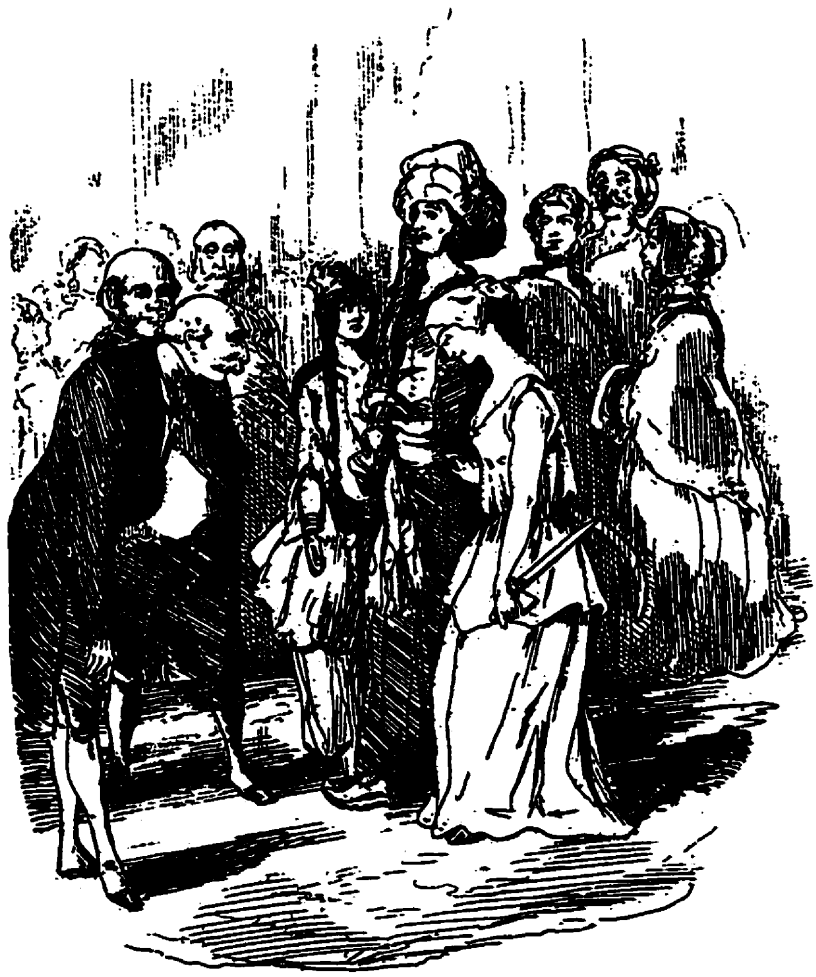
Rose Crawley underscores the performative nature of Becky's character, whose acting skills prevent her from having a similar non-existent identity.

Becky's ambiguous and anti-authoritarian nature exposes hypocrisies and falsities about the "bad woman" in female representation. In a particularly effective charade/tableau vivant, she expertly performs the role of Clytemnestra—who Lesley Ferris says is a "central female image in our theatrical canon" (111). This character has been called a wilful woman because her image has a

> double-edged meaning of adult strength and childish obstinacy; a source of anarchy, an attack on the status quo, and therefore traditionally presented as an 'evil woman.' Additionally, there is a subtext to the term 'wilful' in the world of theatrical patriarchy which

> views women simply *as* children, at times uncontrollable and destructive, incapable of maturity and adultness. (111-112)

This mythical female has two interpretations: she is either an evil murderer, or she is heroic, a symbol of revenge against wrongs men perpetrate on women.



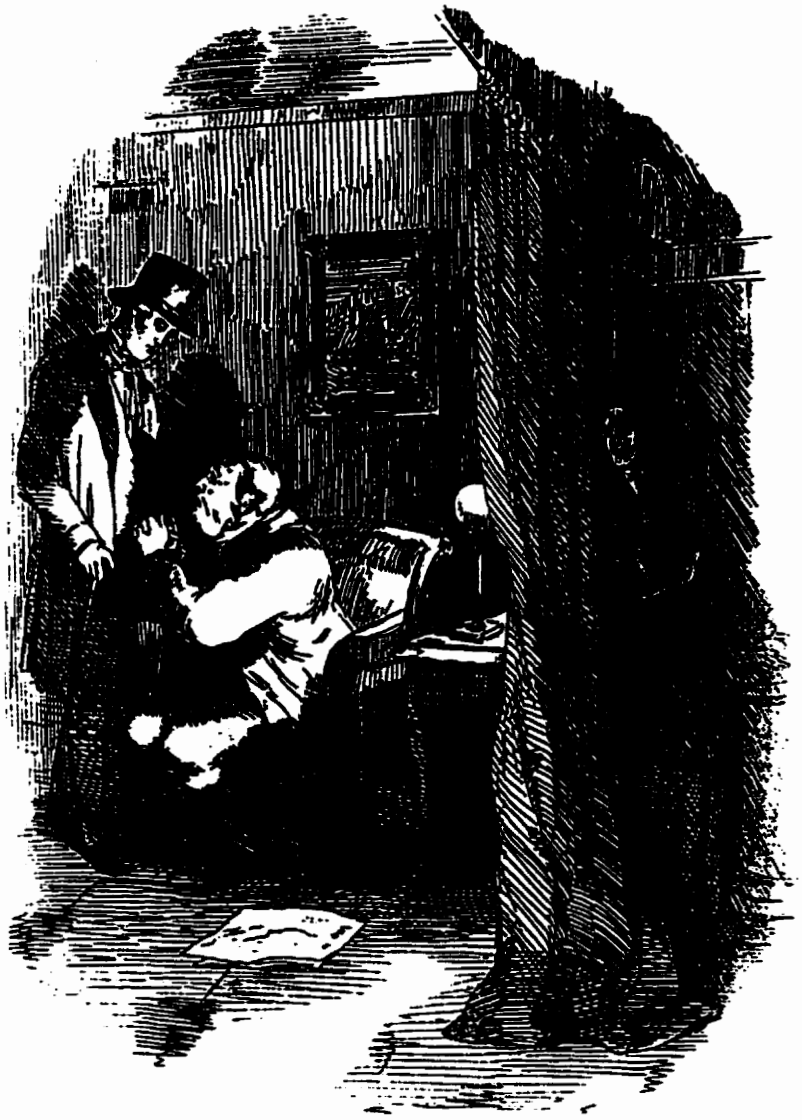
The Triumph of Clytemnestra

The painting Becky "brings to life" during her performance alludes to Pierre-Narcisse Guerin's 1817 work of art, one which Martin Meisel says would have been well known to Thackeray. In this painting, Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus stand behind a curtain. Clytemnestra holds an upraised dagger in her hand; Aegisthus stands behind her, pointing at a figure on the other side of the curtain, her husband--the sleeping Agamemnon. Whereas Guerin's Aegisthus stands behind Clytemnestra, urging her to the deed, in the *Vanity Fair* charade, the actor raises a dagger over the sleeping Agamemnon/Rawdon, but then weakens and cannot follow through with the murder. Clytemnestra/Becky arrives and "Scornfully she snatches the dagger out of Aegisthus's hand, and advances to the bed. You see it shining over her head in the glimmer of the lamp, and--and the lamp goes out, with a groan, and all is dark" (646). Never shown the actual "murder," we must sit in the dark; the power of Becky's acting makes us imagine that the fatal stabbing takes place.

The spectators within the novel react with terror and fear and stunned silence at the darkness and the scene. When Steyne calls out "'By---, she'd do it too'" (646), he makes an ingenuous, and faulty, interpretation. He, apparently along with others in attendance, confuses the actress with the role. On face value, his words imply Becky is capable of murder, not that she is representing a character in theatre who enacts murder on stage.[4]

Many of Thackeray's readers have made a similar conclusion about Becky's character—that this uncontrollable "Punch" puppet has the character of the uncontrollable Clytemnestra. Near the end of the novel Thackeray includes his most intriguing illustration entitled "Becky's second appearance in the character of

Clytemnestra" wherein she is depicted as skulking behind an arras, her hair down and her body shrouded in darkness, while she holds a mysterious object in her hand.



Becky's second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra

The illustration never fails to excite controversy because it is often interpreted as a sign that Becky murders Jos Sedley. Gordon Ray summarises the evidence that is used to find her guilty:

> There can be no doubt Thackeray means it is to be understood that Becky has encompassed Jos's death. Witness the illustration entitled 'Becky's second appearance in the character of Clytemnestra', in which she lurks behind a curtain, knife in hand, while the sick and terrified Jos pleads with Dobbin to come and live near him. Witness the names that Thackeray gives to the firm of solicitors who press Becky's claim to Jos's insurance: Messrs. Burke, Thurtell, and Hayes—each christened after a famous murderer. (*Illustrations* 81)

Andrew Von Hendy points out that it is Jos's insurance company which alleges she is guilty of murder, while Thackeray, on the other hand, "plays a more subtle game. He certainly fosters in his reader suspicion that the insurance investigators may be right" (281).

Lady Eastlake had perhaps the most interesting reaction to the illustration among those who doubt Becky is capable of murder. She told readers in her 1848 essay "Review: *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Governesses' Benevolent Institution*—Report for 1847" to take a pair of scissors and cut it from the book as if it had never existed at all. Becky, she believes, is too clever to commit such a crime. While David Musselwhite finds that the illustration implicates Becky in the death of Jos (113), he makes an interesting observation regarding Lady Eastlake's reaction: "What Lady Eastlake recognized and welcomed was that *Vanity Fair* was designed to

provoke discussion—'was Becky guilty?'—to serve as, to use her telling expression, a social 'ether', to provide occasion for gossip and discussion" (117). As Robert Stam points out, an important aspect of reflexive texts is that because they "inscribe the reader/spectator within their own rhetorical space, they often perform their own hermeneutics, counseling their audience on certain pitfalls of reading or interpretation" (153). The ambiguity of the illustration's meaning, then, is part of Thackeray's reflexive insistence that readers should become active participants in the reading process, that we should question and discuss cultural representations of femininity, rather than simply accepting with blind faith what we see and read.

The matter of Becky's culpability is one of several images in the novel linking female characters with guilt and murder. Similarly their guilt is rendered ambiguous because they are judged strictly on false appearances. For example, at one point, Amelia and Dobbin attend the opera *La Sonnambula*, centered around a sleepwalking woman, Amina, wrongly thought to be guilty of infidelity to her fiancé. Robert Bledsoe has studied the allusion to this opera in *Vanity Fair*, and notes how the "heroine's virtue is doubted but finally vindicated. Although appearances are against her, she is not guilty" (58). While Bledsoe's examination focuses mainly on Amelia's similarities to Amina, there are also obvious parallels to Becky's situation. Amina's assertions of *rea non son* (I am not guilty) resonate throughout *Vanity Fair*. Becky makes similar declarations after Rawdon finds her alone with Steyne (675, 677, 694, 696). When Rawdon says "'If she's not guilty, Pitt, she's as bad as guilty'" (705), he suggests that a guilty appearance is indicative of a person's guilt, an idea the narrator

had earlier stated more explicitly: "If you are not guilty, have a care of appearances: which are as ruinous as guilt" (562).

Thus the word *appearance*, included in the illustration's caption, suggests other ways to interpret the picture and Becky's character. It can indicate that she and the illustration act as representations; this point is especially valid considering there is nothing in the written text to confirm Becky's actual presence in the room. All we have are Jos's words that she "might come in" (874). Hence, when we read the caption to the illustration carefully, we observe that we are told not that she *is* Clytemnestra, only that she is the *appearance* of Clytemnestra. The word *appearance*, according to *Johnson's Dictionary*, is not reality; it is a semblance or a likeness *of* reality. To state categorically that Becky is a murderer is to ignore the ambiguities of the text, to misread *appearance*, and to confuse her with her previously acted role.

Becky's appearance in the second Clytemnestra illustration sways readers toward a guilty verdict. Thackeray, however, refused to confirm this finding. His comments on this matter are as ambiguous as his narrator's. When asked by Richard Bedingfield, a distant relative of Thackeray, as to the meaning of a "certain illustration in which 'Becky' is 'Clytemnestra', he replied, 'I meant she had committed murder; but I didn't want anything horrible'" (114). John Cooke asked Thackeray a similar question and received an equally enigmatic response:

> 'As you speak of Becky Sharp, Mr. Thackeray,' I said, 'there is one mystery about her which I should like to have cleared up . . . Nearly at the end of the book there is a picture of Jos Sedley in his night dress, seated—a sick old man in his chamber; and behind the

> curtain is Becky, glaring and ghastly, grasping a dagger . . . . Beneath the picture is the single word 'Clytemnestra' . . . . Did Becky kill him, Mr. Thackeray?'
>
> This question seemed to afford the person to whom it was addressed, material for profound reflection. He smoked meditatively, appeared to be engaged in endeavouring to arrive at the solution of some problem, and then with a secretive expression—a 'slow smile' dawning on his face—replied, 'I don't know!' (260-261)

Thackeray's comments together with the failure of the narrator to address the matter suggest the illustration is deliberately ambiguous. Designed to stimulate discussion, it is a picture *about* reading visual images.

Even though we are unable to prove conclusively she is a murderer, we can, nevertheless, unequivocally interpret her as a Clytemnestra in the anti-authoritarian sense of both of their characters. Such "evil" women, as Lesley Ferris says,

> necessarily question the rights of a male-dominated society. At the same time they serve as examples of strong, wilful women who are punished for daring to question, to seek autonomy, to make their own choices. Indeed, the whole notion of female choice is brought into question by these archetypal figures. Does woman have free choice? Is she an existential character who can choose? Does she have the freedom to create herself through the power of choice? Or does this classical image of the 'wilful' woman teach us a male lesson: that female autonomy will always be punished? Certainly these women

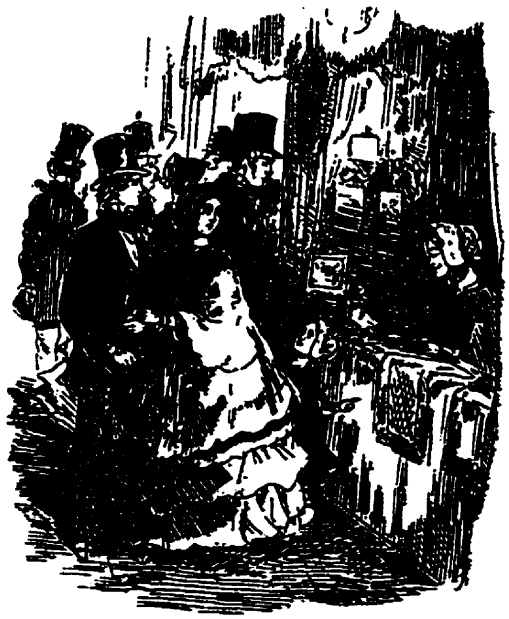
> have been doubly penalised: by the narratives which imprison them and by criticism, both contemporary and historical, which by finding them 'guilty' affirms their punishment as just. (111, 130)

Clytemnestra is punished for her defiance of the status quo; Becky, however, is not. Just as in some versions of the Punch-and-Judy show which invert tradition and where the Devil does not arrive to take Punch to hell, Becky escapes this fate. Thackeray does not infuse his novel with such a didactic religious moral, for as he remarks in a letter to his mother in 1847, he wanted to create a God-less world in *Vanity Fair*: "What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy pompous mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtues" (*Letters* II 309).

Unpunished for her "crimes," Becky resumes her role as the "good woman" by busying herself in works of piety. After her alleged murder of Jos, she appears in an illustration captioned "Virtue rewarded; A booth in Vanity Fair." Lisa Jadwin notes just how much this stall resembles a stage. The illustration

> concludes the image begun in the prefatory 'Before the Curtain' . . . . The charity booth Becky stands behind has a prosceniumlike arch framed by theatrical-looking curtains. Background spectators milling around the proscenium arches of other booths enforce the sideshow aspect of the Fair introduced in 'Before the Curtain.' The booth's implicit staginess is compounded by the presence of the narrator's now-familiar props—a mirror and a puppet-sized doll—resting against the prosceniumlike wall to Becky's right. Becky herself is the object of the

gaze of an audience that includes Amelia, Dobbin, Georgy, and Janey. Though Amelia, apparently in recoil from the face of her brother's murderer, has partly turned away from Becky, she ambivalently looks back beseechingly at her old friend. Meanwhile, Dobbin leans attentively (or menacingly) toward Becky, while Georgy stands bolt upright, evidently enthralled by Becky's 'performance.' Little Janey, dressed exactly like a miniature Becky, inclines toward her, pointing at her with her left forefinger while twisting her upturned face towards Amelia, as if to implore her mother to attend to Becky. (56-57)



Byerly, too, notes the reflexivity in this theatrical illustration where Becky seems framed by the curtains, like a puppet in a booth; it is, she says, "an image that aligns the world of society with the world of Thackeray's novel by showing Becky as an actress in Vanity Fair and Becky as a puppet in *Vanity Fair*" (274). Thus we are taken back, with the illustration's characters and props, to the idea of puppets, and this association may provide another reason why Amelia turns away from Becky.

This is not the first time Becky has scared her. Amelia earlier recoiled when she saw her friend attract the attention of her husband. This attraction threatened to shatter her idealised image of George:

> Rebecca's appearance struck Amelia with terror, and made her shrink back. It recalled her to the world and the remembrance of yesterday. In the overpowering fears about to-morrow she had forgotten Rebecca,--jealousy—everything except that her husband was gone and was in danger. Until this dauntless worldling came in and broke the spell, and lifted the latch, we too have forborne to enter into that sad chamber. (381)

Does her later reaction indicate her recognition and rejection of Becky's hypocrisy? Does Becky still represent a threat? Or does the respectable Amelia, having seen her former friend here acting the part of the good female *par excellence*, scurry away because she now recognises the acting for what it is, that good women are artificial constructs? The Becky puppet has shattered Amelia's illusions about passive femininity; she has held up a mirror to reflect Amelia's face, and like other women in the novel Amelia is reluctant to confront or acknowledge her image in that mirror.

When Becky makes her famous statement that she could be a good woman if she had five thousand pounds a year, she is not necessarily indicating a desire that she wants to *be* such a woman, or that the pursuit of money is her primary purpose in life. When her marriage gains her a place in respectable society, albeit she is not accepted by its members, she is not happy. In an echo of Thackeray's "Ah! *Vanitas Vanitatum*! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?" (878), Becky laments, "am I much better to do now in the world than I was when I was the poor painter's daughter, and wheedled the grocery round the corner for sugar and tea?" (533). Rather, her words can be interpreted as her understanding that female respectability in this society is judged just as falsely as the disreputable female in art. Even someone with her notorious background could act the part of a "good" woman if she had money.

But there is little worth in how a good woman acts. With this five thousand a year, she could

> dawdle about in the nursery, and count the apricots on the wall. I could water plants in a green-house, and pick off dead leaves from the geraniums. I could ask old women about their rheumatisms, and order half-a-crown's worth of soup for the poor. I shouldn't miss it much, out of five thousand a year . . . . I could go to church and keep awake in the great family pew; or go to sleep behind the curtains, with my veil down, if I only had practice. I could pay everybody, if I had but the money. This is what the conjurors here pride themselves upon doing.

> They look down with pity upon us miserable sinners who have none. (532)

The piety and charitable actions toward the poor of these respectable female conjurors are what Becky mirrors at the end of the novel when she is depicted in her booth selling wares for charity.

Thackeray distinguishes the differences between Amelia and Becky in "Before the Curtain." Becky is called a puppet, evoking the rebellious, working-class origins of Punch-like puppets. But Amelia is called a doll, suggesting she is an inconsequential toy, not a defiant Punch. At the end of the novel an illustration shows toy figures representing her, Dobbin, and Janey standing rigidly upright in the box,

beneath the word "Finis." Becky, in contrast, lies on the floor, as if she defies an ending, a "finis." As Jadwin notes,

> Outside, resisting being 'shut up,' are three maverick puppets. One, the pudgy Jos puppet, is upended and propped against the side of the box, evidently vanquished. But in the margin of the woodcut, the narrator's jester's stick lies next to the fallen Becky puppet, his motley flung over

> her in an ambiguous embrace that suggests conquest, or partnership, or both. (57)

Becky is a maverick, a Punch, and her acting talents, making her so adept at the art of disguise and transformation, confirm what twentieth-century actress Elizabeth Ashley says about the acting profession: "I know in my soul that the most important thing for me is to remain always an outlaw—emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and legally—and to keep close touch with the traffic that exists beneath respectable, conventional society" (15).

Thackeray's decision to theatricalise Becky as a puppet who has cut the string tying her to her puppetmaster, reinforces her reflexive challenge to authorial control and complicates any reading of her as a monstrous woman. She is no insipid Amelia, who conforms to traditional scripts endorsing passive femininity. Jadwin says Amelia's "willingness to play out the script that has been supplied to her make[s] her a ready puppet of any mythmaker who seeks to control her" (4). Becky, in contrast, by exposing through performance the artificiality of women's roles, strikes out against stereotypes in culture and against oversimplifications in readings of feminine representation. An illustration showing the narrator looking at his face in a cracked mirror gives another picture of the Becky puppet. Her arm reaches out toward a giant sword, evoking the baton which Punch habitually uses in his struggles (and perhaps also making us think of Clytemnestra's shorter dagger, but likewise a handheld murder weapon), here becoming a symbol of her fight against hypocrisy, false images, and male authority. As a central text in his examination of female representation in culture, *Vanity Fair* has an appropriate frame, set in the world of puppet theatre. By

working backward, applying the frame after completion of the story, Thackeray enhances the fictionality of his story, reminding his readers just how much this fictional world of theatrical puppets needs a Punch to unmask its illusions.

Vanity Fair also shows that when we follow conventional readings of femininity we are limiting our own individual interpretations and contributing to the perpetuation of stereotypes. A negative view of Clytemnestra, for example, should not be accepted blindly but should be challenged, as should a negative view of the actress who performs this role. In *The History of Pendennis*, Thackeray approaches the situation from another angle. In this work he looks at stage women who have traditionally engendered positive responses about ideal womanhood and a viewer who idolises—at least initially—the actress who brings these roles alive on stage. The readings of onstage and offstage femininity are found to be just as distorted and naïve as those produced in *Vanity Fair*.

Notes

[1] Philip Green is among several modern critics who have studied Hollywood's "backlash" at the depiction of strong women in film. In his look at how "male-dominated Hollywood . . . . has responded to the feminist revolution of the 1970s", he finds that films consistently punish female characters who operate outside the traditional roles of wife and mother. Career women, for example, have been made to suffer for their independence: "If they are not actually killers themselves (such as Glen Close in *Fatal Attraction*) very often tough female professionals somehow wind up in the arms or under the knife blade of a dangerous man (think of *Suspect*, *Jagged Edge*, *Defenseless*, *Blue Steel*, *The Morning After*). In dominant cinema's version of unconventionality, as in *Black Widow*, the single career woman can even wind up—almost but not quite—in the murderous arms of another woman. Or, finally, she can be treated with contempt, as was Sigourney Weaver in *Working Girl*" (46).

[2] A chapter initial that shows Becky dressed as Napoleon is suggestive of her powerful skills in mimicry; she can "become" either gender. As Stephen Orgel notes, women in military dress indicate "their mastery of the male role" as well as the female role (112).

[3] Puppet imagery within the novel includes two chapter initials. One, in Chapter 21, shows a girl playing with a black doll. Since this is the chapter where George Osborne refuses to marry Miss Swartz, the mulatto heiress, Catherine Peters interprets this image as "suggesting that Miss Swartz is a puppet in the hands of the white characters" (168). Another is of a figure resembling the lanky Dobbin which

prefaces Chapter 18. This nineteenth-century folk-hero of the touring marionette theatres has affinities with Dobbin. According to George Speaight, he was a "slow-witted country bumpkin named Tim Bobbin, who had, nevertheless, some grains of cunning beneath his stupidity. The origin of this character may be traced to a certain John Collier, an itinerant schoolmaster and sign-painter in Lancashire during the mid-eighteenth century, who wrote a book about the misadventures of a typical yokel of his region, in a phonetic approximation to the Lancashire dialect." Published with the pseudonym Tim Bobbin, the story "gained immense popularity and many imitators in the North of England." The pseudonym then became "attached to the hero, or clown of whom he wrote. Sometime near the middle of the nineteenth century he became a marionette" (*Punch* 142).

[4]David Musselwhite has an interesting reading on Steyne's reaction to Becky's performance, that his comments serve to negate an heroic interpretation of this theatrical female: "In this charade one of the greatest tragedies of western culture, the Agamemnon of Aeschylus, is first reduced to an entertainment for a dissolute aristocracy and then reduced to the smutty ignominy of a pun: 'Mrs. Rawdon Crawley was quite killing in her part [of Clytemnestra].' The heroic has been whittled down to a cheap double entendre: a powerful analysis of politics and history has been reduced to the status of a slippery riddle, tragedy to farce" (121).

Chapter Four:

The Fotheringay: The Quest for Dulcinea

> I have been to see the actress—who received us in a yellow satin drawing room, and who told me she had but one fault in the world that she had *trop bon coeur*—and I am ashamed to say that I pitched still stronger compliments than before, and I daresay she thinks the enormous Englishman is rapturously in love with her—But she will never see him again that faithless giant—I am past the age when Fotheringays inflame: but I shall pop her & her boudoir into a book someday and that will be the end of our transactions.
>
> Thackeray, Letter, Sept. 9, 1843

> That even a woman should be faultless is an arrangement not permitted by nature.
>
> Thackeray, *The History of Pendennis*

"'Ordinary women never appeal to one's imagination,'" bemoans the protagonist of Oscar Wilde's 1891 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. "'But an actress!'" he exclaims, "'How different an actress is!'" (53). Dorian Gray's belief that the actress Sibyl Vane can become "all the great heroines of the world in one" (54) is an echo of Thackeray's 1848-50 novel, *The History of Pendennis*. In both works infatuated young men believe the actresses they adore are living embodiments of the roles they play. Sibyl Vane and Emily Costigan (known professionally as the Fotheringay) portray women who seem to concur with cultural representations of ideal femininity—dutiful wives, mothers, and daughters. But in time, both men come to recognise the fictionality of these stage heroines when they find a disparity between the woman and her roles.

In Wilde's novel, Dorian passionately believes that when Sibyl becomes such Shakespearean heroines as Imogen and Ophelia, she gives "shape and substance to the

shadows of art": her realisation of the "dreams of great poets" is undoubtedly a quality which he seeks to use himself to reach a higher understanding of art (87). But he is not prepared for Sibyl's rejection of her supposed metaphysical artistry. Dorian's love, she cries out in a genuine expression of emotion, has made her aware of what "reality really is" (86). She now hates the pretence of imitating passion and the shams of theatre. Her acting becomes obvious, mechanical. Dorian's immediate reaction to the new Sibyl is swift and harsh. He has no interest in the real woman now that she is merely an ordinary person, "shallow and stupid," nothing better than a "third-rate actress with a pretty face"; he damns her for spoiling "the romance of my life" (87) and she in turn kills herself, ironically offering him a final theatrical image of a melodramatic heroine who sacrifices herself for love.

The Fotheringay, too, plays Imogen and Ophelia on the stage, and she also fascinates members of her audience, particularly the young Arthur Pendennis, a budding writer who wants to marry her and who uses her as an inspiration for his art. Although it takes time for Pen to view her as an ordinary person, Thackeray ensures that his readers remain clear-sighted about this actress. We always see the woman behind the roles, the theatricality in her acting. As a result, he encourages us to read Pen as a parody of the naïve forces that help to produce and perpetuate idealised images of women in our culture.

The Fotheringay is a very ordinary person. Often described in terms of references to food, she is motivated by practical goals, such as finding a wealthy husband. When Pen's uncle reveals that his nephew is not as rich as she had thought, she comments matter-of-factly, "'Sure, if he's no money, there's no use marrying him,

Papa'" (139). The narrator suggests that she is no ideal abstraction, but a woman who is firmly rooted in the concrete, domestic world:

> She cannot justly be called a romantic person: nor were her literary acquirements great: she never opened a Shakespeare from the day she left the stage, nor, indeed, understood it during all the time she adorned the boards: but about a pudding, a piece of needlework, or her own domestic affairs, she was as good a judge as could be found; and not being misled by a strong imagination or a passionate temper, was better enabled to keep her judgement cool. (141)

When Pen writes her long verses and letters replete with expressions of romantic longing, she dismisses them as "full of all sorts of nonsense" (142); they are the long and incomprehensible words of an infatuated schoolboy. The narrator comments wryly on the contrast between her practicality and Pen's impassioned yearnings:

> What hours the boy had passed over those papers! What love and longing: what generous faith and manly devotion—what watchful nights and lonely fevers might they tell of! She tied them up like so much grocery and sat down and made tea afterwards with a perfectly placid and contented heart: while Pen was yearning after her ten miles off: and hugging her image to his soul. (143)

Her conversations with Pen further reveal to us the Emily that lies beneath the Fotheringay's stage makeup:

> Whilst he was making one of his tirades, the lovely Emily, who could not comprehend a tenth part of his talk, had leisure to think about her

> own affairs, and would arrange in her own mind how they should dress the cold mutton, or how she would turn the black satin, or make herself out of her scarf a bonnet like Miss Thackthwaite's new one, and so forth. Pen spouted Byron and Moore; passion and poetry; her business was to throw up her eyes, or fixing them for a moment on his face, to cry, 'Oh, 'tis beautiful! Ah, how exquisite! Repeat those lines again.' And off the boy went, and she returned to her own simple thoughts about the turned gown, or the hashed mutton. (71-72)

Her outward response, in gesture and dialogue, is pure theatre. She really has no personal interest in his subject, but acts the part of the interested listener. Pen remains fascinated by her because he does not yet recognise the theatricality of her character. Thackeray's readers, on the other hand, do. When she is both on and off stage, we see her size up her audience, we see her melodramatic poses and words, we see that she recites her lines but does not understand their meaning.

The Emily Costigan who Pen imagines is an actress of great genius is thus merely a simple, plain-speaking woman who does not spend her free time bent over the works of Shakespeare, trying to determine if Ophelia is in love with Hamlet, or why she becomes insane. The Fotheringay is more concerned with the cleanliness of the satin shoes she will wear while enacting Ophelia's mad scene, and so she spends her time scrubbing away at them with a handful of bread crumbs rather than contemplating the symbolic significance of her character.

How does this most unromantic person become the object of Pen's affections? When he worships her with such praise as "Emily, Emily! how good, how noble, how

beautiful, how perfect she is!" (67), he is, of course, confusing the real woman with her alter egos--the Fotheringay as Ophelia (*Hamlet*), Imogen (*Cymbeline*), Julia (*The Rivals*), Lady Teazle (*School for Scandal*), Mrs. Haller (*The Stranger*), Cora (*Pizarro*), and Ella (*Ella Rosenberg*)—all of them considered in varying degrees to be icons of femininity. Hence, when his secret infatuation is exposed, he defends his loved one against her detractors by calling Emily a "paragon of virtue and delicacy! . . . as sensitive as the most timid maiden . . . as pure as the unsullied snow" (87).

At this point in the novel, Pen dreams of becoming a writer. His insistence on seeing the Fotheringay as an ideal woman subsequently finds its way into his art. As a playgoer, and later as a dramatic reviewer, Pen is part of a system that helps to perpetuate stereotypes about women. But Thackeray stresses that it is Pen's immaturity which is at fault. His views of the Fotheringay and his early artistic productions have been greatly influenced by his reading of romantic texts. Significantly, his first writings are associated with his childhood, mementoes to be put away in the same manner as "his first socks, the first cutting of his hair, his bottle, and other interesting relics of his infancy" (31).

As a fatherless, idealistic, and impressionable youth, under the sway of romantic fiction, Pen the playgoer is immediately susceptible to the allure of the Fotheringay. Even before he sees her, he has been on a quest to find a woman who will match the ideal woman of his imagination. As a boy he idolised women, beginning with his mother, whom he viewed as a perfect, angelic being. The powerful influence of this idealised motherly image is perhaps one reason why Pen is so taken with the Fotheringay. He twice sees her perform the role of a mother, separated from

and then emotionally reunited with her children, as Mrs. Haller in *The Stranger* and Cora in *Pizarro*.

Pen's desire to imitate the style of his favourite writers and the lovesick behaviour of their fictional heroes also draws him to the Fotheringay. As an aspiring writer, Pen needs a muse, someone to inspire him to create his own romantic verses:

> Pen began to feel the necessity of a first love—of a consuming passion—of an object on which he could concentrate all those vague floating fancies under which he sweetly suffered—of a young lady to whom he could really make verses, and whom he could set up and adore, in place of those unsubstantial Ianthes and Zuleikas to whom he addressed the outpourings of his gushing muse. (32)

When he finds his muse in the Fotheringay, he becomes a weekly contributor to the Poet's Corner in the *Country Chronicle*, producing such pieces as "Mrs. Haller," "Passion and Genius," and "Lines to Miss Fotheringay, of the Theatre Royal"; he even signs his works with the pseudonym EROS. Later she becomes the model for a character in his first novel, the gushingly romantic *Walter Lorraine*.

Thackeray makes comparisons between Pen and other writers whose works similarly feature men who pursue perfect images of women, images that are clearly incompatible with the real world. From these we can conclude that Pen's naïve fantasies of his ideal woman are likewise real only in that they have been produced by his consumption of romantic art. In the opinion of the more cynical, world-weary narrator, Pen's infatuation with the Fotheringay is love, but it is love for an abstraction, not a real woman:

> He saw a pair of bright eyes, and he believed in them—a beautiful image, and he fell down and worshipped it. He supplied the meaning which her words wanted and created the divinity which he loved. Was Titania the first who fell in love with an ass, or Pygmalion the only artist who has gone crazy about a stone? He had found her; he had found what his soul thirsted after. (67)

The allusion to Ovid's tale shows how Pen's fantasies resemble this story in which male disenchantment with women in the real world produces a longing for an ideal woman. Pygmalion, the king of Cyprus, creates and falls in love with the ivory statue, which the goddess Aphrodite imbues with life, because real women "do not come up to his vision of ideal beauty" (Reinhold 352). As Lesley Ferris observes, the story is also a commentary on the creation of art and the role of the male artist in depicting femininity. Pygmalion creates an image of feminine perfection which radiates ideal qualities of "beauty, gentleness and obeisance"; when he "gains possession of female perfection, the ideal erotic object [is] shaped to the pattern of his own desires and wishes"; thus, the male artist moves from being inspired by his female model to the ultimate act of creating her" (89). It is a tale which shows the artist in control of women's representation.

When Thackeray's narrator announces Pen's love for the Fotheringay, he reflexively exposes its illusory, fictitious nature: "He was as much in love as the best hero in the best romance he ever read" (50). Pen, the immature writer, is of course in the throes of culturally produced fantasies, as he gallops about on his mare Rebecca (an allusion to his, and Thackeray's, favourite heroine from *Ivanhoe*). At one point,

"Emily Fotheringay" chides him in a letter for being more interested in Miss Diggle's performance of Lydia Languish during a performance of *The Rivals* than in the more sensible Julia, whose character she enacts. Emily, however, has misinterpreted the situation. He is not attracted to the other actress on a personal level; rather, he identifies with Lydia because like himself her mind and behaviour are affected by reading romance novels.

Appropriately enough, then, Pen is compared to the protagonist of one of Thackeray's favourite novels, *Don Quixote*. Don Quixote, also an avid reader, tries to emulate the actions of fictional knight-errants. His search for the ideal woman, Dulcinea fails because she is not real; she exists only as a fantastical image that he has created in his mind. Nevertheless, it is for her—this woman whose beauty and virtue surpass those of famous women in antiquity—that Don Quixote seeks the heroic ideal; she inspires his exploits, and gives him the courage to face danger.

Pen's quest parodies that of Don Quixote. Pen rejects the ordinary women of his neighbourhood because he wants to find a princess. The narrator thus mocks Pen's absurd belief that only a fairytale princess can inspire him to pursue heroic feats:

> the young monkey used to ride out, day after day, in quest of Dulcinea; and peep into the pony-chaise and gentlefolks' carriages, as they drove along the broad turnpike roads, with a heart beating within him, and a secret tremor and hope that *she* might be in that yellow post-chaise coming swinging up the hill, or one of those three girls in beaver bonnets in the back seat of the double gig, which the fat old gentleman in black was driving at four miles an hour. The post-chaise contained a

> snuffy old dowager of seventy, with a maid, her contemporary. The three girls in the beaver bonnets were no handsomer than the turnips that skirted the roadside. Do as he might, and ride where he would, the fairy princess whom he was to rescue and win, had not yet appeared to honest Pen. (35)

Pen finds that theatre, particularly in the genre of melodrama—wherein heroes rescue heroines from the clutches of villains—makes this realisation possible. Notably, when he faces resistance to his relationship with the Fotheringay, as when his uncle warns him that such an alliance will deny him a respectable profession and make his life a misery, Pen threatens to become an actor himself. Such a decision is not incongruous to a man who typically views life in a tragic light and who acts as if he is on stage. When he is in the throes of his passion, he imagines he "was Hamlet jumping into Ophelia's grave: he was the Stranger taking Mrs. Haller to his arms" (88). When his relationship with the Fotheringay ends, he finds a new role to identify with, that of *Pizarro*'s heroic Rolla, whose love Cora has rejected for that of another man. By the novel's conclusion, however, Pen realises that life is not as ordered and ideal as fiction, nor is he destined to be a theatrical hero. He is described, at the end, as an ordinary man, with faults and shortcomings, someone who no longer tries to imitate art—"who does not claim to be a hero, but only a man and a brother"—and who finds that reality is not a three-act melodrama where virtue always prevails over vice (977).

To the young Pen, however, theatre is particularly attractive because it is here where he can find images that correlate with his readings of romantic literature, and where he can find a woman worthy of his heroic longings. Pen believes he has found

his Dulcinea in the Fotheringay, but his is a simple, naïve reading of her character. His naivety about her is foreshadowed as soon as he arrives at the theatre to see her for the first time as Mrs. Haller in *The Stranger*.

Influenced by a hearty consumption of alcohol, the crowd's enthusiasm, and his own predilection for romantic fiction, he is in the mood to fall in love—to see only the Fotheringay. He arrives with "very bright eyes, and a flushed face" (43). He is oblivious to the lack of glamour that is, however, clearly visible to the reader from the moment he enters the provincial theatre. The first woman he sees is an actress, a wheezy, old woman, who slumbers in the money-taker's box. She is a counterpart to the Fotheringay, since there is no idealism at all connected to her character. This mother-in-law of Bingley, the theatre manager, stands for reality in all of its lack of tinsel. She is, in fact, not the only tawdry image Pen encounters at the theatre. The audience, sparse and restless, is also hardly a group to inspire romantic thoughts, especially when some of the spectators hold conversations with the onstage actors.

Pen barely notices these mundane truths about theatre. The Fotheringay overcomes his senses, especially when he hears the audience's thunderous reaction to her appearance on the stage:

> The pit thrilled and thumped its umbrellas; a volley of applause was fired from the gallery: the dragoon officers and Foker clapped their hands furiously: you would have thought the house was full, so loud were their plaudits . . . . More applause, more umbrellas; Pen this time, flaming with wine and enthusiasm, clapped hands and sang 'Bravo' louder than all. (46)

He joins the crowd in worshipping the Fotheringay. Later, when he has a chance to visit her at her home, he is overcome with emotion: "He was going to see her! He was going to see her! In her was the centre of the universe. She was the kernel of the world for Pen" (61).

The narrator's first description of Fotheringay is replete with the same kind of overblown enthusiasm. But his portrait of her as an ideal woman is an ironic contrast with Pen's excessive romantic praises:

> Those who have only seen Miss Fotheringay in later days, since her marriage and introduction into London life, have little idea how beautiful a creature she was at the time when our friend Pen first set eyes on her. She was of the tallest of women, and at her then age of six-and-twenty—for six-and-twenty she was, though she vows she was only nineteen—in the prime and fullness of her beauty. Her forehead was vast, and her black hair waved over it with a natural ripple, and was confined in shining and voluminous braids at the back of a neck such as you see on the shoulders of the Louvre Venus—that delight of gods and men. Her eyes, when she lifted them up to gaze on you, and ere she dropped their purple deep-fringed lids, shone with tenderness and mystery unfathomable. Love and Genius seemed to look out from them and retire coyly, as if ashamed to have been seen at the lattice. Who could have had such a commanding brow but a woman of high intellect? (46)

As the narrator echoes, and mocks, Pen's metaphysical romantic thoughts, prosaic truths about the physical failings of this performer are sprinkled amid the flowery language:

> She never laughs (indeed her teeth were not good), but a smile of endless tenderness and sweetness played round her beautiful lips, and in the dimples of her cheeks and her lovely chin. Her nose defied description in those days. Her ears were like two little pearl shells, which the earrings she wore (though the handsomest properties in the theatre) only insulted. She was dressed in long flowing robes of black, which she managed and swept to and fro with wonderful grace, and out of the folds of which you only saw her sandals occasionally; they were of a rather large size; but Pen thought them as ravishing as the slippers of Cinderella. (456-7)

Pen's intoxication, the crowd's enthusiasm, and the Fotheringay's beauty all contribute to the young man's idealisation of the actress.

Unlike the reader, Pen seems unaware of the mechanical quality of her acting. In fact, the Fotheringay allows Thackeray to parody old-fashioned styles of performance. When his novel appeared in the mid-nineteenth century, there was a growing enthusiasm for naturalistic styles of acting as opposed to the classical and romantic schools. The Fotheringay's large exaggerated gestures and emotional outpourings put her squarely in the outdated romantic school. Of her performance as Mrs. Haller, the narrator, speaking ironically and in the vernacular to further undercut the romanticism of the scene, remarks,

> With what smothered sorrow, with what gushing pathos, Mrs Haller delivered her part! At first, when as Count Wintersen's housekeeper, and preparing for his Excellency's arrival, she has to give orders about the beds and furniture, and the dinner, &c., to be got ready, she did so with the calm agony of despair. But when she could get rid of the stupid servants, and give vent to her feelings to the pit and the house, she overflowed to each individual as if he were her particular confidant, and she was crying out her griefs on his shoulder . . . . All the house was affected. Foker, for his part, taking out a large yellow bandanna, wept piteously. (47)

Unlike the narrator, Pen is initially enchanted with her acting. It is not until much later that she loses her lustre, and he sees her movements as mechanical and repetitive.

At one point the narrator says the Fotheringay is as "pathetic as Miss O'Neill" (125)—a comparison with the well-known Irish actress Eliza O'Neill (1791-1872).[1] Critics have remarked on the similarities between the Fotheringay and O'Neill.[2] Both leave the stage to marry wealthy men with titles, both have Irish backgrounds, and both have protective fathers who safeguard their daughters' propriety off stage. They were also both adept at crying and shrieking, which were two of the most important techniques used in theatre to depict feminine emotions.

Just as we witness the Fotheringay's audience dissolve into sobs at the close of *The Stranger*, so too was O'Neill able to trigger a tearful response in her spectators. Men were reported to be particularly susceptible to her acting, some even fainting "from the excess of their emotions" (Bertram 253, 259). In *Records of a Girlhood*

(1878), Fanny Kemble—who was herself accused of being too artificial a performer—writes that O'Neill, although not a powerful actress, embodied the "ideal of feminine weakness in its most attractive form—delicacy" (196), while Timothy Crusty considered her to be representative of a dying breed of actress, her graceful movements a stark contrast to those who "toss their arms like so many windmills in tall sail" (52). Others, however, found O'Neill's acting to be too conspicuous, too self-consciously artistic (Martin 179). For example, Alan Downer finds that she once delivered such a loud shriek during a performance of *The Stranger* that it was criticised for being more of a stage-trick than an expression of genuine emotion (532). According to Downer, the shriek was a "chief tool of the actress in passionate moments" (532). The Fotheringay learned, through her drama teacher Bows, to master the shriek, and the trick comes in hand during her performance of Cora because it attracts the attention of Mr. Dolphin, a "famous London Impresario" who visits Bingley's theatre. While performing in *Pizarro*, at the moment when Cora's kidnapped child is returned to her, the Fotheringay rushes forward with such an impressive shriek that Dolphin "clapped his hands and broke out with an enthusiastic bravo" (156). So taken is he with her mastery of this "dodge" that he provides her with a London engagement.

The romantic school of acting may appear unnatural, but Ferris says it was ideally suited to the acting of melodrama in which the heroine—the "innocent, virtuous, saint-like woman"—was the "major theatrical sign" (87). As Michael Booth remarks, "Extreme characterization, extreme situation, and extreme acting techniques

blend perfectly in the figure of the heroine, a fitting symbol of all melodrama" (*English Melodrama* 202). According to Booth,

> More interest attaches to the acting of the heroine than to the acting of any other type, except perhaps the villain. It is the heroine who is the principal object of the villain's designs. Therefore, since she is at the very centre of melodramatic action, and suffers the villain's attention and pursuit, the hero's degradation, the good old man's wrath, the distress of hungry children, and the extremes of cold and poverty; she must act terror, pathos, tenderness, courage, outraged innocence, despair, exhaustion, and maternal love—a far wider range than any other character in melodrama. (201)

As the oppressed heroine in James Kenney's *Ella Rosenberg*, first performed in Drury Lane in 1807-1808, the Fotheringay would have had many opportunities to express emotion and thus enhance Pen's immature reading of her as grand, romantic actress. The play's stage directions, in fact, insist that actresses enact many shows of suffering. For example, at one point the heroine is to enter with "*her person in some disorder*," her body "*drooping by degrees*" and her face expressing "*faintness and wild stupour*." Kenney's play also provides a good example of a melodramatic heroine's artificial manner of speaking. In a study of this genre, James Donohue says both aristocratic and plebeian characters were to speak in "faultless standard English," and the heroine, as the ideal character of dignified womanhood, "no matter how low her birth . . . . [is] irresistibly drawn to polysyllabic diction" (*Theatre* 113). When Mountfort, the villain of Kenney's play, attempts to seduce the heroine, she is to respond, "'Monster! You

excite my horror!—leave me—or I must call to my assistance those who will chastise your insolence.'" In response to Ella's impassioned, but stiff, reply, Donohue dryly observes, "One tends to agree with Mountfort's retort: 'This is too much!'" (*Theatre* 113).

An awareness of theatre's artificial acting styles, then, helps to explain Thackeray's views of art as they appear in *Pendennis* in regard to *The Stranger*. Kemble voiced a common reaction to this play, and melodrama in general, when she said that such dramas, although immensely popular, lacked significant meaning: "I need not tell you how much I dislike the play; it is the quintessence of trashy sentimentalism; but our audiences cry and sob at it till we can hardly hear ourselves speak on the stage, and the public in general rejoices in what the servant-maids call 'something deep'" (*Records* 315). Thackeray's narrator, however, says his objections lie in the play's absence of sense, originality, and poetry. Contrary to the views of melodrama's detractors, such a play is not completely devoid of merit since the story itself contains truths about human behaviour and emotions. The criticism lies in its expression of this behaviour and these emotions—the theatricality of the sham language, posturings, costumes, and props. For Thackeray, anything that made a playgoer overly conscious of a drama's fictional nature was a bad sign. For example, during a performance of *Hamlet* in 1850, starring his friend William Macready, Thackeray found that the actor's advanced age destroyed the dramatic illusion of the play:[3]

> when the play began and old Hamlet came on with a gnarled neck and a rich brown wig over his wrinkled old face—the youthful business

> disappeared altogether. What a bore the play was! how I wished myself away smoking a cigar! What a wretched humbug that old Hamlet seemed with an undertakers tray on his head flapping about his eternal white pocket handkerchief, and being frightened at that stupid old ghost! (*Letters* I 382)

In *Pendennis*, the Fotheringay's mechanical style of acting is important in revealing how accurately her roles depict femininity. In the nineteenth century, one of the greatest compliments an actress could receive was an affirmation that her acting seemed spontaneous and unforced, thereby enhancing the naturalness and believability of her roles. Leigh Hunt's comments in 1830 regarding the singer-actress Mary Ann Paton (1802-1864) show his era's disdain for acting that is too obvious. Her acting, as he describes it, has affinities with the Fotheringay's style of performance:

> Her acting seems to have been taught her and she has learnt it well; but the 'system' is displayed at every turn: she is obvious and declamatory; loud or low, indignant or patient, as the surface of the feeling suggests, her face being all the while singularly devoid of expression. In short, she is a very good self-possessed actress, for a singer; and shows how little real feeling of a character is required to attain the conventional style of performance. (*Dramatic Criticism* 243)

The artificial manner by which the Fotheringay acts also reflects on the artificiality of the heroines she enacts, making critical audiences, and readers, aware that they are fictional constructs, not representatives of real life.

Further, her mechanical manner reminds us of her training by Bows, and of the powerful influence males exert upon the depiction of femininity in theatre. When she acts, she only repeats, like an automaton, what he has told her to do. She has not studied the roles independently, nor does she interpret them for herself. She admits that she was a poor performer before Bows became her mentor:

> He shrieked out in his cracked voice the parts, and his pupil learned them from his lips by note, and repeated them in her full rich tones. He indicated the attitudes, and set and moved those beautiful arms of hers. Those who remember this grand actress on the stage can recall how she used always precisely the same gestures, looks, and tones; how she stood on the same plank of the stage in the same position, rolled her eyes at the same instant and to the same degree, and wept with precisely the same heart-rending pathos and over the same pathetic syllable. (73)

The Fotheringay leaves Bows in charge of understanding the female roles she plays; she is only a vehicle through which his interpretations are expressed.

The theatres Thackeray and Pen attended were dominated by females actors who reflected the Victorian ideals of femininity—passivity, resignation, obedience, and silent suffering. Of the plays in which the Fotheringay appears, the matter of a woman's fidelity—her loyalty to a lover, husband, or father—was stressed as being one of the keystones in determining a woman's virtue. It is no coincidence that one of the questions Pen poses to Emily Costigan regarding *Hamlet* involves her opinion about Ophelia's loyalty to Hamlet. She, of course, sees only words on a page, not a

script that is endowed with insights into the human condition. However, her offstage devotion to her father, as she cooks and keeps house for him, is one of the traits that endears her to Pen.

The types of heroines the Fotheringay enacts are often regarded as exemplary figures. John Loftis points out that Julia in *The Rivals*, for example, "is presented without question as the epitome of goodness, patience, sense, sensibility and all the other desirable feminine virtues" (103). Also noteworthy is that by mid-century, *The Stranger*'s adulterous heroine no longer shocked audiences because theatre's notorious "fallen women" had by now become worthy of sympathy. Playwrights had turned them into repentant characters. This play is a prime example of such a "moral cleansing." Because Mrs. Haller feels remorse for her actions and is ultimately restored to the family unit, the play leaves spectators with a final picture of the ideal family unit; Mrs. Haller, in the embrace of her husband and surrounded by their clinging children, is back in her proper roles as wife and mother. Richard Findlater notes that this kind of recuperation would not have occurred in earlier years, because a woman who abandoned her husband and children to run off with another man would have been "sentenced to death by any right-thinking eighteenth-century dramatist" (119). But *The Stranger* (Benjamin Thompson's 1798 English translation of popular German dramatist August von Kotzebue's *Menschenhass und Rue*) gives Mrs. Haller a second chance. Furthermore, the play suggests that she is not all to blame for her abandonment of her family; rather, her husband is held partially responsible because he had neglected his wife, thus leaving her vulnerable to the attractions of another man. According to Robertson Davies, even while we see the husband forgive his wife,

"we are also led to believe that she forgives him, and they are going to make a fresh start, having learned a thing or two from their unhappiness. This does not sound revolutionary now, but in its clear statement that there may be two sides to an infidelity it was something new" (66).

The Fotheringay also performs in Shakespearean dramas, enacting the heroines who had likewise become icons of female faith, patience, and fortitude in the nineteenth century. William Hazlitt gave a glowing endorsement of these women: "No one ever hit the true perfection of the female character, the sense of weakness leaning on the strength of its affections for support, so well as Shakespear—no one ever so well painted natural tenderness free from all affectation and disguise . . . . no one else ever so well shewd . . . delicacy and timidity" (20: 84). Samuel Taylor Coleridge exclaimed that in Shakespeare's plays "all the elements of womanhood are holy" (97). One of the most influential assessments of Shakespeare's heroines was Anna Jameson's *Shakespeare's Heroines—Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical*, which appeared in 1832; it celebrated the playwright's female characters as stellar examples of true feminine virtue. These opinions were still dominant in 1852 when Mary Cowden Clarke published a collection of stories called *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, in which she shows that these fictitious women provided good examples of moral courage, meekness, noble conduct, and high principles for girls to emulate.

It was generally agreed that *Cymbeline*'s Imogen stood as the pinnacle of Shakespeare's women. In Thackeray's novel, it appears that this play was one of Pen's favourites and thus likely influenced his romantic view of the Fotheringay and

women in general. Not only does he write glowing reviews of the Fotheringay's performance of the play's heroine, but this is the play Laura later reads to him while he is recovering from an illness.

Thackeray, who believed that Shakespeare created stereotypical females, would have been drawn to Imogen and *Hamlet*'s Ophelia, because Victorian critics viewed them as symbols of ideal womanhood. Jameson, for example, rhapsodises poetically that Imogen is the "most perfect" Shakespearean heroine because she embodies "youthful tenderness" and "ideal grace" (201). When Imogen is accused (falsely) of infidelity by her husband, Jameson admires her "acute sense of the injustice inflicted upon her" (220). Fanny Kemble lauded Imogen as "a divine image of all that is lovely and excellent in woman" (243). Shakespearean actress Helena Faucit (1817-98), who was herself credited with "personifying the Victorian ideal of womanliness" (Downer 547), said the faithful, long-suffering Imogen was her favourite role. After watching Faucit perform the part in 1864, drama critic Henry Morley was inspired to call Imogen "the purest and most womanly of Shakespeare's women"; her piety, modesty, "gentle courtesy" and "moral heroism" made her a model of "womanly perfection" (293).

In Pen's enthusiasm for the Fotheringay, and her enactment of these roles on the stage, Thackeray was able to parody the "Cult of Imogen." Later in the century, critics such as George Bernard Shaw began to express their objections to the play and its heroine. Shaw's dislike of how Victorian critics viewed Shakespeare's women as perfect beings appeared in his opinions about Imogen. He pointed out that Victorians failed to see that although she was a "natural aristocrat, with a high temper and perfect

courage," she was also an "idiotic paragon of virtue produced by Shakespear's *views* of what a woman ought to be, a person who sews and cooks, and reads improving books until midnight"; he even advised Ellen Terry (1848-1928), when she was preparing for the role, that "If I were you I should cut the part so as to leave the paragon out and the woman in" (63). Twentieth-century Shakespearean actress Harriet Walker is even more vehement in her criticism: "The Victorians gave Imogen the reputation that has stuck. They loved her. She was their perfect fairy-tale princess-as-wife, a role model for women in marriage. So entrenched is this notion that even today, even for some feminists Imogen is still a patient Griselda, resigned and passive, submissiveness personified" (Rutter 73).

Thackeray's novel makes a brief reference to the Fotheringay's performance of Imogen, choosing instead to focus on the Shakespearean heroine Ophelia, with explicit and implicit references to *Hamlet*. It is a performance of *Hamlet* that Pen's mother attends, and it is this play's hero whom Pen often emulates. In the heroine's more ambiguous associations with ideal femininity, Thackeray could point out Pen's naïve reading of the Fotheringay as Ophelia, the passive woman and the dutiful daughter.

Victorian audiences may have found it easy to read Imogen as a perfect woman, but *Hamlet*'s Ophelia was a different matter. Few dramatic heroines have had such an impact on the subject of theatrical representations of women, and few heroines have generated such widespread diversity in reading her character. Bridget Lyons, who considers her to be primarily a visual character, observes that

> As the audience sees her—a character who is passive and obedient at the beginning of the play and mad towards the end of it—she exerts

> little independent influence on the shape of the action, and it seems fair to say that her importance is primarily emblematic rather than consequential. But the meanings she expresses are often ambiguous, and other characters in the play find her difficult to decipher . . . . Those who meet her in her madness try to extract some meaning out of her gestures, as well as her words (IV.v.7-13). Finally, her death—suicide or accident—is pointedly made the subject of conflicting interpretations. Since she is a character who needs to be read by others and who often conveys riddling significances, she expresses the difficulty of straightforward iconographic interpretation in the play. (61-62)

When in the grasp of adolescent love, Pen reads the Fotheringay/Ophelia as an ideal woman. However, Ophelia usually engenders dual readings of her character that make her a good embodiment of the women featured on the frontispiece illustration of *Pendennis*. Ophelia is thought to be either a pious, sacrificial "icon of positive femininity", an underdeveloped character "without dramatic issue" who has little effect on the play's main action (Bamber 72, 78, 79), or she is considered to be deceptive and disloyal to Hamlet, and the cause of the play's tragedy. Gertrude's description of her death also offers up the suggestion that she is either an innocent being, who returns to her natural environment, or a sinister mermaid, a temptress who lures men (Hamlet) to their demise (IV.vii.162-182). While Augustan audiences overlooked the "erotic and discordant" facets of her character and were "determined to see her as an innocent victim," Romantics were "captivated by the spectacle of

Ophelia's sexuality and emotionality" (Showalter *Female* 11). In general, Victorian audiences agreed that she was a picture of gentle innocence, but they found it difficult to muster up the same enthusiasm for Ophelia as they had for Imogen. Both Ellen Terry and Helena Faucit deplored Ophelia's spiritless, timid nature. Faucit called her a "weak creature, wanting in truthfulness, in purpose, in force of character, and only interesting when she loses the little wits she had" (3).[4]

Ophelia's madness became the most fascinating aspect of her character. In an 1852 Royal Academy show, Arthur Hughes's depiction of a waiflike Ophelia sitting on a tree trunk near a stream was juxtaposed with John Everett Millais's sensuous Ophelia floating face up down a river. Ophelia's drowning, of course, never actually appears in the play, and Elaine Showalter says this omission appealed to Pre-Raphaelite painters; "no actress's image had preceded them or interfered with their imaginative supremacy"; her white costume became a "blank page to be written over or on by the male imagination" ("Representing" 84, 89).

Her madness also allows her character to have a powerful theatrical image. When Thackeray describes the Fotheringay's presence on the stage as Ophelia, it is only the mad scene which is featured. In this performance, the incident loses its complex textual implications and is reduced to a picturesque opportunity to show off her emotional melodramatic acting style:

> We have nothing to do with the play: except to say, that Ophelia looked lovely, and performed with admirable wild pathos: laughing, weeping, gazing wildly, waving her beautiful white arms, and flinging about her snatches of flowers and songs with the most charming madness. What

> an opportunity her splendid black hair had of tossing over her shoulders! She made the most charming corpse ever seen. (75)

Pen's mother brings a copy of *Hamlet* with her to the theatre, but the play does not encourage a textual interpretation. Instead, her response is purely visual; she remarks only on the Fotheringay's "exquisite beauty", while Laura perhaps, even at her young age, is aware of Ophelia's complexity, and thus finds the play confusing. The response of Mrs. Pendennis is in accord with Romantic interpretations which implied that "the less said about Ophelia the better; the point was to *look* at her" (Showalter "Representing" 83).

Ophelia has one noteworthy affinity with the Fotheringay. Like the Fotheringay, Ophelia is largely ignorant about art; she does not, for example, understand many of Hamlet's speeches and must ask him to explain the meaning of the dumb show which precedes *The Murder of Gonzago*. When Pen tries to discuss *Hamlet* with the Fotheringay, he finds that she, too, has little knowledge about artistic matters:

> Pen tried to engage her in conversation about poetry and about her profession. He asked her what she thought of Ophelia's madness, and whether she was in love with Hamlet or not? 'In love with such a little ojous wretch as that stunted manager of a Bingley?' She bristled with indignation at the thought. Pen explained that it was not of her he spoke, but of Ophelia of the play. 'Oh, indeed; if no offence was meant, none was taken.' (65)

Pen also tries to spark her into a discussion about *The Stranger*, and again encounters her ignorance about the playwright; nevertheless, her unlearned response does not bother him, his infatuation with her making him laugh "at her adorable simplicity" (65).

As a metatheatrical text, *Hamlet*'s characters are nearly all types of directors and playwrights. Ophelia, says David Leverenz, is "herself a play within a play, or a player trying to respond to several imperious directors at once . . . . She is only valued for the roles that further other people's plots" (120). Her problems begin when two separate and conflicting roles are imposed upon her by Polonius and Hamlet. Polonius casts Ophelia as the dutiful daughter in his "script," a role she fulfills by obeying him without question when he orders her to end her relationship with Hamlet. However, she cannot then be the heroine of Hamlet's "script." During a highly charged meeting between Hamlet and Ophelia, he accuses her of monstrous infidelity and deceit, of having a theatrical character: "I have heard of your paintings well enough. God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig and amble, and you lisp, you nickname God's creatures, and make your wantonness your ignorance. Go, I'll no more on't, it hath made me mad" (III.i.144-149). He blames her for his "madness," an accusation Polonius (who has been listening) takes for truth, and this response is what Hamlet, who likely knows he has a hidden audience, wants. If so, then Ophelia becomes even more of a casualty in their plots. Her subsequent madness can perhaps be traced back to this incident, for if Hamlet blames her infidelity as responsible for his madness and murder of Polonius, then she also bears responsibility for her father's death.

The difficulty readers and audiences have with understanding Ophelia is compounded by the fact that the characters within the play have different interpretations. Her father places her in the role of the innocent, a woman he predicts will be seduced and abandoned by Hamlet; but Hamlet casts her as a whore and actress. Later, when she commits suicide, the priest who attends her burial implies she is a sinner and is reluctant to give her full Christian rites; yet her brother is adamant in declaring her an angel. Laertes, perhaps, makes the most perceptive comment of all when he says "Too much of water [a traditional symbol of femininity] hast thou, poor Ophelia" (IV.vii.184). She has been required to be "too much woman," to play too many roles, to live up to false, theatrical ideals. Hamlet, who never really achieves the heroic status he hoped for as the hero of a revenge play, is ironically borne, in theatrical terms, "like a soldier to the stage" (V.ii.401) following his death. The theatrical connection "to the stage" is clear; he will be regarded as a dramatic hero. Yet Ophelia's death, like her character, is doubtful, and she will always be remembered on stage as a madwoman.[5]

The same cannot be said for the Fotheringay. When her Ophelia dies, the corpse is described simply and briefly, as being charming. She is never consumed by art as is Ophelia, but stands, after her "death" behind the curtain, watching the audience. Lacking Ophelia's timidity and madness, she is happy and healthy, a "wholesome contrast" to her father, who like Pen often merges fact and fiction in his mind (138). She may play the role of a dutiful daughter in real life, but she will also refuse at times to follow her father's "script." When, for example, he proposes a duel with Pen's uncle to avenge her honour—after learning that Pen has "deceived" them

with false implications about his wealth—it is Emily who reminds him that "'Twas you who would have it he was rich, Papa'" (139). Polonius may have dominated Ophelia, but for the Fotheringay, it is the other way around. Costigan must ultimately become "submissive to his daughter, and [be] ready for any plan on which she might decide" (141-2).

Overall, Emily Costigan is no real-life Ophelia, nor is she the other women she portrays—indeed, she hardly understands the meaning of these heroines and is not interested in trying to understand them. But her artlessness has a purpose. As an artificially contrived theatrical persona herself—the Fotheringay—she casts doubts on the veracity of the submissive wives and dutiful daughters she portrays. Ultimately these heroines are reminders that the idealised women featured so prominently in art as icons of Victorian femininity do not exist in the real world, but have been purposely created, enacted, and endorsed under the management of male playwrights, teachers, and managers. In *Pendennis*, Thackeray mocks the naïve young mind that is unaware of the these behind-the-scenes forces, that does not see the disparity that exists between these stage heroines and the woman who enacts these roles, that does not see the theatricality evident in the enactment of ideal femininity. When Pen has to remind the Fotheringay that she is *not* Ophelia, Thackeray ironically reminds the reader that Pen himself has trouble distinguishing art from reality. But Pen does not simply represent Thackeray's bemused look at a young man's entry into adulthood. Through Pen's profession as a writer, Thackeray makes his hero's infatuation a commentary about cultural representations of femininity. In Pen, Thackeray parodies the artist who would attempt to create ideal women as figures in his own texts. Because this is a

novel which in its preface insists that authors must be truthful in their depictions of human nature, no matter how unpleasant this truth may be, this particular writer must ultimately have his illusions shattered. His readings of women in theatre and literature are exposed as simple and unsophisticated, and his own depictions of femininity are acknowledged to be sentimental stereotypes.

Thackeray's readers are from the outset made to realise Pen's interpretative shortcomings. Encouraged to laugh at the parody of Pen as an immature writer figuratively galloping about the countryside with his pen, we are prevented from imitating his innocent and naïve readings of femininity. We are, for example, always given two readings of Emily's character—Pen's rhapsodies juxtaposed with the narrator's more caustic comments. The portrait of Pen's failings as an author is a softer condemnation of falsities in writing than that which appears in the cut-throat, manipulative world of *The Ravenswing*, where we witness the deliberate manufacturing of the kind of female stage personas that fascinate young men like Pen.

Thackeray:
A self-portrait (sketch)

Notes

[1] When creating the Fotheringay, Thackeray may also have had in mind Hannah Pritchard (1711-1768)—or, at least Samuel Johnson's low opinion of this singer-actress. Pritchard acted the title role in Johnson's unsuccessful play *Irene* in a manner that its playwright called "quite mechanical." Johnson also criticised Pritchard's lack of intelligence and her lack of interest in her roles: "She no more thought of the play out of which her part was taken, than a shoemaker thinks of the skin, out of which the piece of leather, of which he is making a pair of shoes, is cut" (Boswell II: 348-9).

[2] For more parallels between the Fotheringay and Eliza O'Neill see John Fyvie, *Tragedy Queens of the Georgian Era.*

[3] George Henry Lewes agreed with Thackeray about Macready's performance of Hamlet, saying his acting was "lachrymose and fretful", that he was "too fond of a cambric pocket-handkerchief to be really affecting; nor, as it seemed to me, had he that sympathy with the character which would have given an impressive unity to his performance—it was 'a thing of shreds and patches,' not a whole" (41).

[4] By the late nineteenth century, however, Ophelia had become the "all-time favorite example of the love-crazed self-sacrificial woman who most perfectly demonstrated her devotion to her man by descending into madness, who surrounded herself with flowers to show her equivalence to them, and who in the end committed herself to a watery grave, thereby fulfilling the nineteenth-century male's fondest fantasies of feminine dependence" (Dijkstra 42). Significantly, these beliefs were most strongly represented through a plethora of paintings, as if only by becoming a

work of art could Ophelia come close to being a manageable and definable woman. She is, says Elaine Showalter, "probably the most frequently illustrated and cited of Shakespeare's heroines" ("Representing" 78).

[5] The theatricality of Ophelia's madness extended into real life. Actresses in the 1860s were encouraged to visit asylums to study real madwomen in preparation for the role. But, as Ellen Terry notes, they were often surprised to find a ward already full of Shakespearean heroines: "Like all Ophelias before (and after) me, I went to the madhouse to study wits astray. I was disheartened at first. There was no beauty, no nature, no pity in most of the lunatics. Strange as it may sound, they were too *theatrical* to teach me anything" (122). According to Showalter, Victorian doctors studied Shakespeare's play and applied Ophelia's madness to real-life women: "Medical textbooks sometimes illustrated their discussions of female patients with sketches of Ophelia-like maidens . . . . And when young women in lunatic asylums did not willing throw themselves into Ophelia-like poses, asylum superintendents with cameras imposed the conventional Ophelia costume, gesture, props, and expression upon them" ("Representing" 91-2). The imposed theatricality of these madwomen, and the popularity of Ophelia paintings, all provide an important insight into her character: she is pure theatre. When Shakespearean scholars complain of Ophelia's lack of depth, they are close to deciphering her character. She is a character not without a role, but a character who has too many roles thrust upon her—all of them endorsements of the ideal woman which ultimately clash with and destroy the real woman.

Chapter Five:

The Ravenswing: The Making of a Star

> But when I becomes *we*—sitting in judgement, and delivering solemn opinions—*we* must tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; but then there is a third party concerned—the public—between whom and the writer, or painter, the critic has to arbitrate, and he is bound to show no favour.
>
> Thackeray, "Our Annual Executions"

> Just as an elaborate and highly artificial, dressed-up, made-up appearance envelopes the movie star in 'surface,' so does her surface supply a glossy front for the cinema, holding the eye in fascinated distraction away from its mechanics of production.
>
> Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity*

The simple and naïve reading of an actress that appears in *The History of Pendennis* is attributed to an immature mind caught up in the sway of romantic literature. In *The Ravenswing*, adult men provide the view of a stage woman, and thus Thackeray's parodic exposure of their attempts to produce and control cultural representations of femininity is more condemnatory. The actions of these men cannot be excused as being caused by boyish love for an older woman. Their "infatuation" resides in their self-serving attempts to profit, financially and sexually, from a woman's stage image. In this short work, Thackeray takes a reflexive backstage look at the making of a professional singer and the forces—husbands, managers, teachers, journalists—which conspire to create a "star."

The popularity of the Ravenswing (Morgiana Walker) is complicated by the fact she has little natural talent; rather, she is a deliberately manufactured performer with little input into creating her own image.[1] As part of his *Men's Wives* series, which

appeared in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1843, *The Ravenswing* extends the three stories' examination of "selfishness and callousness" in marriage (Williams 37) to the deceptions and manipulations which occur backstage in musical theatre and which seek to prevent women from being actively involved in the creation of feminine representation in theatre. The story includes a look at men who wield great influence in theatre.[2] They do not encourage female input into the types of roles that are created for women on the stage, because they are more interested in gaining a profit, whether sexual or financial, from the female performers. Historically, a familial connection to the stage helped a woman avoid such professional hazards. Tracy Davis notes that daughters of parents in the business understood the customs of theatre life and thus they "enjoyed a ready-made syndicate of professional contracts and benevolent protectors [fathers, brothers, uncles, godfathers, and cousins], and suffered less pressure . . . to give in to sexual attentions" ("Does" 45). Ellen Terry is an example of a theatrical daughter who followed in the footsteps of her parents: "I cant [sic] even tell you," writes Terry, "when it was first decided that I was to go on the stage, but I expect it was when I was born, for in those days theatrical folk did not imagine that their children could do anything but follow their parents' profession" (8-9).

Morgiana has a family background in theatre; her mother was once a singer-dancer. Mrs. Crump, who has never lost her love of the stage, named her daughter after one of her most famous roles as the heroic servant-girl Morgiana in *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, and years later continues to attend plays, and to read theatrical gossip. The story's narrator, George Fitz-Boodle, often associates Morgiana with her mother, describing her as a girl with a "fine black eye like her mama, a grand

enthusiasm for the stage, as every actor's child will have" (343). He also stresses both women's gaiety, making frequent references to their joy in singing and their love of laughing. Throughout the story, Morgiana seems most happy when she is in her mother's company.

She seems less happy when men dictate how and when she should perform her art. Her husband, taking over the job of her manager, craftily manipulates her persona. He discourages her mother's involvement in the development of her career, but instead hopes that male management will turn Morgiana's singing into a moneymaking opportunity. He wants celebrated singing instructors Benjamin Baroski and Sir George Thrum to make her into a star. When Fitz-Boodle takes us into their worlds—where they manufacture "the Ravenswing"—he reveals a bitter and ruthless world of sexual politics, manipulations, and rivalries that are in sharp contrast with the easy comradeship of Mrs. Crump's Sadler's Wells crowd. The instructors' attitudes toward their pupils perpetuate a system of male dominance and control; encouraging rivalry, which isolates the students from each other, they train women to become subservient to male authority.

For example, Baroski's teaching method is an abuse of power. His prime interest in his students lies in the collection of their expensive instruction fees. On those who show above-average talent, he will lavish more attention, eagerly envisioning large performance fees, of which a substantial amount will end up in his own pocket. He will also spend more time with female students who appeal to him sexually. Morgiana refuses his romantic advances, and consequently loses her

instructor, and for a time her husband, when Baroski has him imprisoned for non-payment of the singing lessons.

Thackeray's story thus discloses some of the abusive practices that go on behind the scenes, the power that singing teachers exerted over aspiring performers. In doing so, the story reinforces the belief that female stage performers were to tolerate sexual interest from men, even if unwarranted, unsolicited, or unwanted. Submission of one's image, and sometimes even one's body, to the authority of a male gaze is part of the business, something Fitz-Boodle says Morgiana should have already learned from her previous acting engagements: "had she not been on stage, and had not many hundreds of persons, in jest or earnest, made love to her? What else can a pretty woman expect who is much before the public?" (399).

Baroski's infatuation with Morgiana is not surprising considering that he is a vain man who wants to create false images of women in order to legitimise the false images he creates of himself. His pupils help Baroski to pass himself off as a ladies' man. To the amusement of his fellow members of the Regent Club, he tells "astonishing stories of his successes with the ladies" (392). Even though he fails to have a sexual relationship with Morgiana, he will insinuate one, using gesture, a roguish look, followed by a coy denial that "'upon his vort dere vas no truth in *dat rebort*'" (399) to suggest otherwise, and to further the popular conception of actresses as women with loose morals.

Morgiana's second teacher, Sir George Thrum, has the respectability of a title, and is less licentious than Baroski.[3] He is, after all, married to a "large and awful wife," a "dragon of virtue and propriety"; but she may still harbour suspicions about

her husband's actions, since she keeps close "watch over the master and the pupils" (432). However, even this "excellent English composer" (432) is largely motivated to help Morgiana because he believes she can enhance his stature in musical circles and, more importantly, allow him to triumph over his rival Baroski. After he first hears Morgiana sing, he promptly discloses that her interests are not uppermost in his thoughts; rather, he is motivated by his rivalry with Baroski: "'we'll cut the orange boy's [Baroski's] throat with that voice'" (432). Women are the pawns in the great competition between Baroski and Thrum, both of whom take the credit for the success of their pupils:

> If a pupil failed, for instance, Thrum would say Baroski had spoiled her irretrievably; while the German would regret 'Dat dat yong vowman, who had a good organ, should have trown away her dime wid dat old Drum.' When one of these deserters succeeded, 'Yes, yes,' would either professor cry, 'I formed her; she owes her fortune to me.' Both of them thus, in future days, claimed the education of the famous Ravenswing; and even Sir George Thrum, though he wished to *ecraser* the Ligonier, pretended that her present success was his work because once she had been brought by her mother, Mrs. Larkins, to sing for Sir George's approval. (433-434)

This world of theatre encourages and thrives upon the intense rivalry and vanity among singing masters, an antagonism that then encourages their female pupils to become antagonistic and competitive with each other. Through their principal singers, who are swapped back and forth among them like playthings, the masters

engage in mock battles with each other. However, during this war, they occupy a safe, distanced position; it is their women—their weapons—who cannot do likewise. They must expose themselves on a public stage to the slings and arrows of the capricious audience.

But teachers alone cannot ensure their pupils' success. Having worked as a journalist and art critic, Thackeray well understood the power of the media in influencing the public's perception and interpretation of art. He was therefore interested in the interaction between the media and their readers and the processing of information. Thackeray's portrayal of male journalists in this story shows how theatre management in the Victorian age tried to manage and control the media with bribes and favours.

By the nineteenth century, journalism's interest in the theatre was already widespread. Thomas Postlewait notes that a century earlier there was a great demand for published information on actors' public and private lives, even though many of the reports were slanderous and "often salacious" (249). David Garrick's relationship with the press demonstrates that journalists have a history of not always reporting the truth, and that sagacious and powerful actors could exploit this weakness:

> Garrick spent a great deal of time, effort, and money in cultivating his public image. The three volumes of his published correspondence as well as his unpublished, posthumously discovered letters reveal that he was involved in the editorial policy of some newspapers, that he owned stock in a number of them, and was not above bribing journalists to write well of him. He never let an attack in the press remain

> unanswered; he even wrote reviews of his own performances, as his widow confessed to Edmund Kean years after his death. He kept in his employ a certain Paul Hiffernan, nicknamed 'Gallows Paul,' a dubious character whose main job was to insert 'puffs' in newspapers about Garrick. When Hiffernan published his five-volume collected writings on theatre, most of which referred to Garrick, the latter rewarded him with a pension. (Kohansky 92)

According to Fanny Kemble, puffery—or, the art of inserting flattering stories about actors into the newspapers—became commonplace in the theatre world.[4]

The reviewer held a powerful position in theatre. Actors developed a love/hate relationship with the media, waiting in fear for reviews of their performances to come out in print, wondering whether they would receive praise or censure. Helen Faucit, for example, recalls in 1836 her emotional state while waiting for the "horrid newspapers" to react to her playing Belvidera in Otway's *Venice Preserv'd*:

> I amused myself with fretting the whole morning, until I could scarcely see out of my eyes. This was very wise knowing I had got this part to act again at night. It was very silly, I know, for they have written against a thousand times better actors and actresses that I can ever hope to be; but I felt weak and ill, and could not help it. I wish I had made up my mind to do what Mr [Charles] Kemble asked me to promise him before I appeared, which was *not to look at or think of a newsp*aper. He said I should save myself a great deal of annoyance, and that no good could be attained by it; for, put them all together, and see how generally

> the one contradicts the other, and condemns you for what the next you take up very likely praises you for. Which are you to be guided by? (Jackson 95-96)

Faucit makes the important observation that even while many actors quaked under the power of the media, the very reviews that rendered them submissive could be contradictory and ambiguous, and therefore were inconclusive or were faulty judgements of their performing abilities. Additionally, many playwrights were also journalists; therefore, Russell Jackson remarks, "it is not surprising that there were frequent accusations of favouritism and corruption in dramatic reviewing" (296).

Thackeray was also aware of media corruption. Lidmila Pantůčková notes that in his satirical sketch *Reading a Poem*, he looks at "the whole complicated system of blackmail, dishonesty, bribery and snobbery which prevailed among publishers, editors, critics and authors in his time" (107). The work features Lord Daudley, whose lack of artistic talent prompts him to pay two journalists to write his poems: "In the characters of these journalists, Dishwash and Bludyer (who at the same time represent the two opposite extremes characteristic of the methods of contemporary criticism, pure flattery and pure castigation . . .), Thackeray splendidly revealed the subservience of the literary criticism of his time concealed under the cloak of seeming independence" (Pantůčková 107). The sketch ends with the observation that Dishwash has produced a flattering review—a "flaming puff"--of Daudley's *Passion-Flowers*, while Bludyer made a

> furious attack upon the work because Lord Daudley refused to advance a third five-pound note to the celebrated Bludyer. After the critique,

> his lordship advances the five-pound note. And at a great public dinner, where my Lord Daudley is called upon to speak to a toast, he discourses upon the well-known sentiment—THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE PRESS! IT IS LIKE THE AIR WE BREATHE: WITHOUT IT WE DIE. (III 480-481)

In *The Ravenswing*, Bludyer returns, this time as editor of the *Tomahawk*, along with the delicate Mr. Squinny, editor of the *Flowers of Fashion*, and the poetical Mr. Desmond Mulligan, a reporter for a morning paper. Bludyer and Squinny need to be courted because Thrum wants them to give favourable reviews of Morgiana's performance. Bludyer, in particular, needs careful handling because he is a writer noted for his savage pen. Nonetheless, this blunt instrument can be softened under the right circumstances: "For a bottle of wine and a guinea he will write a page of praise or abuse of any man living, or on any subject, or on any line of politics. 'Hang it, sir!' says he, 'pay me enough and I will write down my own father!'" (443). Squinny is "mildly malicious. He never goes beyond the bounds of politeness, but manages to insinuate a great deal that is disagreeable to an author in the course of twenty lines of criticism" (443).

Through Bludyer's response to Morgiana's voice, Thackeray makes a damning indictment of the reliability of artistic reviews. When Woolsey asks for his opinion of Morgiana, Bludyer replies that she is a "very bad one" (447). This opinion matches that of Fitz-Boodle, who has never been captivated by the beauties of her voice as have others; Morgiana's singing, in fact, almost puts him to sleep. "The songs," he says, "which I don't attempt to describe (and, upon my word and honour, as far as I

can understand matters, I believe to this day, that Mrs. Walker was only an ordinary singer), the songs lasted a great deal longer than I liked" (448).

Professionally, Bludyer's reply to Woolsey is noteworthy for two reasons, both relating to money. Fitz-Boodle has previously described Bludyer's nature in monetary terms: "If there is one thing more dangerous than to refuse to lend him a sum of money when he asks for it, it is to lend it to him, for he never pays, and never pardons a man to whom he owes" (443). First of all, Bludyer has already been predisposed to dislike Morgiana because her husband once refused to cash a bill for him, causing him to declare "'I'll do for his wife when she comes out on the stage!'" (443). Secondly, he is short with Woolsey because he does not want to prolong conversation with a man to whom he owes 40 pounds. Upset at Bludyer's disparagement of the woman he loves, Woolsey promptly demands payment:

> 'Then, sir,' says Mr. Woolsey, fiercely, 'I'll—I'll thank you to pay me my little bill!'
>
> It is true there was no connection between Mrs. Walker's singing and Woolsey's little bill; that the 'Then, sir,' was perfectly illogical on Woolsey's part; but it was a very happy hit for the future fortunes of Mrs. Walker. Who knows what would have come of her debut but for that 'Then, sir,' and whether a 'smashing article' from the *Tomahawk* might not have ruined her for ever? (447)

Not surprisingly, considering these circumstances, Bludyer agrees to write a favourable review, pointing out that he could, however, "'write a slashing article better than any man in England: I could crush her by ten lines'" (447).

Helene Roberts' observance that Victorian critics could be "bought off with favours" ("Exhibition" 87) is echoed by Fitz-Boodle, who accuses reviewers of being susceptible to bribery and special treatment. Artists such as Morgiana become weapons in a war of words among journalists who seek an enhancement of their own professional reputations through their articles and reviews. Fitz-Boodle points out that his detailed descriptions of those in attendance at Thrum's party is a digression, but he maintains that he is trying to educate an uninformed and hence potentially gullible public of the reality of journalistic practices:

> The describing of all these persons does not advance Morgiana's story much. But, perhaps, some country readers are not acquainted with the class of persons by whose printed opinions they are guided, and are simple enough to imagine that mere merit will make a reputation on the stage or elsewhere. The making of a theatrical success is a much more complicated and curious thing than such persons fancy it to be. Immense are the pains taken to get a good word from Mr. This of the *Star*, or Mr. That of the *Courier*, to propitiate the favour of the critic of the day, and get the editors of the metropolis into a good humour,—above all, to have the name of the person to be puffed perpetually before the public. Artists cannot be advertised like Macassar oil or blacking. . . . hence endless ingenuity must be practised in order to keep the popular attention awake. (449)

Fitz-Boodle, using Morgiana's experience as a concrete example of the power of "good press," cites sarcastically that even before she makes her professional debut,

"the English press began to heave and throb in a convulsive manner, as if indicative of the near birth of some great thing" (450).

Squinny's and Bludyer's reports of Morgiana's singing at Thrum's party are typical of both writers' characters. The *Flowers of Fashion* piece, with its smatterings of Italian phrases, is enveloped in so much jargon that it is more ornamental than it is understandable: "She sang the delicious duet of the 'Nabucodonosore,' with Count Pizzicato, with a *bellezza*, a *grandezza*, a *raggio*, that excited in the bosom of the audience a corresponding furore: her *scherzando* was exquisite, though we confess we thought the concluding *fioritura* in the passage in Y flat a leetle, a very leetle *sforzata*" (451). Bludyer's review is equally typical of his "bludgeoning" character, the language blunt and coarse in contrast to Squinny's convoluted idiom. Morgiana's teacher is called "Old Thrum" and his opera good "downright English stuff"—a nice change from the "infernal twaddle and disgusting slip-slop of Donizetti." Of the Ravenswing, he says she is a

> splendid woman, and a splendid singer. She is so handsome that she might sing as much out of tune as Miss Ligonier, and the public would forgive her; and sings so well that were she as ugly as the aforesaid Ligonier, the audience would listen to her. The Ravenswing, that is her fantastical theatrical name (her real name is the same with that of a notorious scoundrel in the Fleet, who invented the Panama swindle, the Pontine Marshes' swindle, the Soap swindle—how are you for soap now, Mr. W-lk-r?)—the Ravenswing, we say, will do. Slang has engaged her at thirty guineas per week, and she appears next month in

> Thrum's opera, of which the words are written by a great ass with some talent—we mean Mr. Mulligan. (451)

While he does refer to Morgiana's singing, Bludyer is more interested in her relationship with Walker (thus allowing him some measure of revenge against her husband), and in seeking the upper hand in some professional rivalry of his own. He concludes his piece with yet another dig at poor Mr. Squinny: "There is a foreign fool in the *Flowers of Fashion* who is doing his best to disgust the public by his filthy flattery. It is enough to make one sick. Why is the foreign beast not kicked out of the paper?" (451).

Desmond Mulligan, the poet and reporter for a morning paper, seems an unimportant figure at Thrum's party. No one pays much attention to him or cares that he leaves early, and yet, as Fitz-Boodle observes, he may play the most important role of all in creating the Ravenswing persona. As Bludyer has noted in his review, Mulligan's writing career extends to that of writing songs, including those for Thrum's opera. Consequently, a successful Morgiana, in a successful opera, will profit him as well. As Fitz-Boodle remarks, he is a first-class puff: "This youth was the soul of the little conspiracy for raising Morgiana into fame; and humble as he is, and great and respectable as is Sir George Thrum, it is my belief that the Ravenswing would never have been the Ravenswing she is but for the ingenuity and energy of the honest Hibernian reporter" (452). Mulligan uses his connections with the media and particularly with the Irish press, to keep Morgiana's name constantly in the news and to trumpet "her perfections" (456), so that interest in the opera will be high when it is finally performed. Many of his contributions to the popularisation of Morgiana

include puff pieces on Thrum, her teacher and his musical benefactor. When she eventually performs in the *Brigand's Bride*, the reviews from those papers aligned with Mulligan are extremely favourable—hardly surprising, considering they have no professional qualms about basing their reactions on their personal relationship with Mulligan: "All the reporters who could spare time were in the boxes to support their friend's work" (456).

Further manipulation of Morgiana through the press is to come in a much more personal way. Her professional and private lives merge when her husband, who has once acted as a theatrical agent, capitalises on her fame in order to elevate his social status. Learning of his wife's increasing popularity, "the astute Captain Walker determined to take advantage of it for the purpose of increasing his 'connexion'" (396). First he hosts musical parties attended by prominent members of the business and military professions; they are gatherings which allow him to extend "his 'agency' considerably, and [he] began to thank his stars that he had married a woman who was as good as a fortune to him" (398). Later, when incarcerated, he exercises spousal and managerial control by forbidding her to appear on stage in her much-anticipated debut; she is not to perform until he is released from prison.[5] His plan works and Fitz-Boodle remarks wryly that it is a

> curious thing now to behold how eager those very creditors who but yesterday (and with perfect correctness) had denounced Mr. Walker as a swindler; who had refused to come to any composition with him, and had sworn never to release him—now they on a sudden became quite eager to come to an arrangement with him, and offered, nay, begged

> and prayed him to go free . . . . it was the captain's determination to make some advantageous bargain for himself with his creditors and the gentlemen who were interested in bringing forward Mrs. Walker on the stage. (453-454)

While the arrangements for his release are being concluded, Morgiana is "instructed instantly to have a severe sore throat"—a tactic which garners diverse media reaction: "The journals in Mr. Slang's interest [the manager of the theatre where Morgiana is to appear] deplored this illness pathetically; while the papers in the interest of the opposition theatre magnified it with great malice" (456). When journalists speculate about the severity of her illness and how it may damage her career, they base their reports on what they claim to be authentic and reliable "exclusive resources"; but their source is none other than Howard Walker—the "artful and audacious Fleet prisoner" (456)—who is thinking only of how he may profit from this deception. He knows, too, that this delay in her debut will whet the public's appetite and increase interest in seeing her perform. Predictably, when his creditors are paid and he is released, Morgiana's voice suddenly returns.

Once she is upon the stage, attention turns to the profits her popularity can garner for those around her. They quickly capitalise on Morgiana's success, probably aware that her career will be a brief one. Her debut is a great success and theatre manager Adolphus Slang's "fortune was made, at least for the season. He acknowledged so much to Walker, who took a week's salary for his wife in advance that very night" (457). Walker will continue to profit from his wife's performances, receiving "every shilling before he would permit her to sing a note"; in this way he

protects her from "designing managers" (459), but not, unfortunately, from designing husbands. He uses a good portion of her salary to pay for the maintenance of his mistress and her brood of "over-dressed children" (460) and for the continuation of his extravagant tastes so that he can act the part of the gentleman. Thrum earns so much money that he is "encouraged to have his portrait engraved, which still may be seen in the music-shops" (458). While not many people buy Thrum's portrait (which sells for two guineas), in contrast, there are many portraits of Morgiana which sell well, especially among infatuated male admirers: "all the young clerks in banks, and all the *fast* young men of the universities, had pictures of the Ravenswing in their apartments—as Biondetta (the brigand's bride), as Zelyma (in the *Nuptials of Benares*), as Barbareska (in the *Mine of Tobolsk*), and in all her famous characters" (458).[6]

Placed in roles that appeal to a male audience, Morgiana finds that fame does nothing to enhance her own status in society. Despite her own connections to theatre, and her habit of behaving in a "great high-tragedy way" (438), Lady Thrum is an example of how respectable society continues to shun stage performers. She is "laboriously civil" (442) when she has to be, to those who fall beneath her station, thus making her very much like her husband, who "can condescend to receive very queer company if need be" (440). She had at one time counselled Morgiana to mask her dislike of the crude Mr. Slang, who is an important member of the Thrums' campaign to profit from Morgiana's success:

> 'My dear, in the course of your profession you will have to submit to many such familiarities on the part of persons of low breeding, such as

> I fear Mr. Slang is. But let me caution you against giving way to your temper as you did. Did you not perceive that *I* never allowed him to see my inward dissatisfaction? And I make it a particular point that you should be very civil to him to-night. Your interests—our interests—depend upon it.' (442)

Fitz-Boodle gives the practical, economic, reason for Lady Thrum's attitude: "It was evident that she had a very strong desire indeed to conciliate Mr. Slang; and hence I have no doubt that Sir George was to have a considerable share of Morgiana's earnings" (442).

When Morgiana's popularity begins to wane, the situation changes. Now Lady Thrum would "die sooner than speak to that unhappy young woman" (460); the Thrums are already putting their energies into making another star. They have a new pupil, described in the same terms that were previously used regarding Morgiana: she is "a siren without the dangerous qualities of one, who has the person of Venus, and the mind of a Muse, and who is coming out at one of the theatres immediately" (460). A new Ravenswing is about to be created.[7]

The blunt look at the realities of the theatre world contained within *The Ravenswing* leaves few romantic illusions about the profession. This early Thackeray story supports Catherine Peters' contention that "the world of professional artists is too corrupt for women" (105). For an actress, it is a corrupt world, driven by a self-serving system that encourages women to compete with each other, and that endorses male privilege for lecherous teachers, mercenary managers, and immoral journalists. But is the non-professional world any better? Morgiana is ultimately little different

from other women, who, though lacking talent, are "trained" as amateur artists, performing on a private stage. Fitz-Boodle bemoans the activities of young ladies who spend their days practising music, knitting, sewing, and reading. He stresses the exploitation of this system, which turns women into slaves engaged in "prison work." Ill-suited to playing the piano, they produce only "infernal jingle"; it is, he notes, "the condition of the young lady's existence" (390), to give them something to do; "there was no other exercising-ground for their poor little thoughts and fingers" (390). For Morgiana and these women, pleasure in art, along with any thoughts about seeking artistic enrichment or economic freedom through art, degenerates into "'duties' to be gone through" (390).

And yet, perhaps Morgiana's difficult stage profession does not completely destroy her pleasure in art. The story's final moments, a postscript by Fitz-Boodle, show her years later in the company of her new husband, Mr. Woolsey, who announces with finality that "'my wife has long since left the stage'" (462). That statement seems to suggest Morgiana has abandoned her life as the Ravenswing, that her sole existence lies in her being Woolsey's wife. However, Fitz-Boodle then observes a puzzling action upon the part of Mrs. Crump to Woolsey's words: "the old lady in the wonderful cap trod on my toes very severely, and nodded her head and all her ribbons in a most mysterious way" (462). Whether this means Morgiana has not severed her ties with theatre is unclear, and Fitz-Boodle does not enlighten us. However, he has stressed throughout the story Morgiana's affinities with her mother, a woman who has never lost her love for the stage.

If the women feel a need to keep their love of theatre a secret from Woolsey, who seems to want Morgiana's identity to reside completely in her status as Mrs. Woolsey, not as the Ravenswing, their attitudes accord with two other situations where Morgiana opposes male conceptions of women. One occurs when Morgiana has established herself as a marketable performer. Slang and Walker want her to play a breeches role—that of Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera*. Fitz-Boodle does not elaborate on the reasons for her refusal. She has, after all, already played a man's role when she performed Barbareska in the *Mine of Tobolsk* and disguised herself as an Uhlan, "in order to save her father, who is in prison" (458). This is a role that parallels her own situation. When she cuts her hair and sells the locks to help pay Walker's debts, her shorn hair gives her a masculine appearance but no masculine power. Another role, too, as Biondetta in the *Brigand's Bride*, is close to her own life, as Morgiana is also the bride of a con man. The Barbareska performance earns her much popularity, especially among young men (no mention is made of her popularity with female audiences). But she refuses a similar role, that of Macheath, which would have required a full-performance appearance as a man, in contrast to the limited male disguise she dons in the *Mine of Tobolsk*.

The only time Morgiana does not dutifully acquiesce to her husband is when Walker wants her to play Macheath: "on this point, and for once, she disobeyed her husband and left the theatre" (459). The playing of such a breeches role might have further increased her popularity (and her market value) as it did for actress-manager Madame Vestris, an actress Morgiana has watched perform (343), who first performed Macheath in 1820.[8] The *British Stage & Literary Cabinet* applauded the positive

reaction Vestris received, noting in 1824 that it was due at least in part to the public's admiration of her shapely legs, which were displayed to good advantage in the male costume (Williams 59), and therein lies the contradictory interpretations that breeches roles produce. While some claim that early stage women who donned male attire figuratively assumed male power, others argue that the attention viewers, predominantly male, placed upon the woman's exposed legs merely reduced the actress to her stereotypical role, as a passive, sexual object. Consequently, J.S. Bratton reminds us that breeches roles can be read as a theatrically false image of female appropriation of male power:

> The argument is that women wore trousers (or, rather, tights and tight-fitting breeches) on stage to display themselves for the delectation of the male audience, to add the frisson of role reversals, flagellatory fantasies and other games to their sexual promise, and sometimes thereby also to defuse fears of the possibility of a real assumption of power by women, by charging it with sexuality and so returning it to its proper sphere. In this account the performers never actually impersonate men, but simply adopt a particularly sexually charged costume, in order to titillate them. ("Irrational" 82-83)

In a study of Vestris, Elliott Vanskike remarks that although it is still difficult to explain the significance of cross-dressing for Victorian audiences, he believes many performances were designed "not to disguise the actress successfully as a man but rather to accentuate her sexuality" (481). When men's roles were performed by prepubescent girls, creating an androgynous look and rendering the part genderless,

public reception was poor; thus, "When the gender discontinuity integral to the breeches part was lacking, so was the role's effectiveness" (482).

Morgiana's unwillingness to perform as Macheath, may, then, characterise her as a woman who rejects this theatrical construct and the reading of femininity this type of role produces. Just as Lucy Snowe in *Villette* refuses to dress completely in masculine clothing while she performs during a private theatrical, so too does Morgiana refuse to embrace totally a male role, especially if it does not invest her with masculine power but turns her into a sexual object only. This refusal is in keeping with her earlier objection to be a sex object, during an altercation with Baroski, and her response acts as a contradiction to the notion that feminine representations on stage mirror the natures of real-life women. The stage woman this scene alludes to is the melodramatic heroine, whose passivity and submission to male authority rendered her a prominent example of ideal Victorian womanhood. However, Morgiana's character suggests that a strong woman would resist exploitative masculine control, not capitulate to it.

Thackeray insinuates that the melodramatic heroine delineates an image that functions as a symbol for a loss of female power. Amelia Larkins, Morgiana's rival, for example, enacts this role offstage when Baroski loses sexual interest in her after Morgiana joins the company. The rivalry that exists between the two singers, and which extends to the other students, who quickly divide into the Walkerites and the Larkinsians, is not solely restricted to singing. That Baroski has more than a professional relationship with Amelia is evident during a rehearsal of *Eliogabalo* when her familiarity with her instructor discloses itself with a single word and a faint:

> Miss Larkins, who was evidently unwell, was taking the part of the English captive, which she had sung in public concerts before royal dukes, and with considerable applause, and, from some reason, performed it so ill, that Baroski, slapping down the music on the piano in a fury, cried 'Mrs. Howard Walker, as Miss Larkins cannot sing to-day, will you favour us by taking the part of Boadicetta?' Mrs. Walker got up smilingly to obey—the triumph was too great to be withstood; and, as she advanced to the piano, Miss Larkins looked wildly at her, and stood silent for awhile, and at last shrieked out, '*Benjamin*!' in a tone of extreme agony, and dropped fainting down on the ground. Benjamin looked extremely red, it must be confessed, at being thus called by what we shall denominate his Christian name, and Limpiter looked round at Guzzard, and Miss Brunck nudged Miss Horsman, and the lesson concluded rather abruptly that day, for Miss Larkins was carried off to the next room, laid on a couch, and sprinkled with water. (395-396)

The weakened Amelia then has to be helped home. Morgiana insists that Mrs. Crump travel with her rival in a carriage, while she will proceed on foot; however, Fitz-Boodle says "I don't know that this piece of kindness prevented Larkins from hating her. I should doubt if it did" (396), since the theatrical system does not encourage women to find strength by supporting one another. Fitz-Boodle suggests that Baroski's methods only intensify female jealousies and prevent the women from becoming a united group that would help to empower its members.

Morgiana, in contrast to Amelia, defies the weakness and frailty of the melodramatic heroine. Her background in theatre has undoubtedly made her aware of the qualities of this heroine, primarily that this character needs a male presence (a hero) to save her from a male villain. A crucial meeting occurs between Morgiana and Baroski during a rare moment when Mrs. Crump is not present to chaperone her daughter's singing lesson. Baroski, the villain, takes advantage of the situation to press his advances, but finds the lady is not willing. She does not take him seriously as a romantic suitor—she has privately mocked his manner of speaking and rolling his eyes—and she is quite prepared to resist him, not to faint in distress as did Amelia. When Baroski grabs hold of her left hand, she threatens to box his ears. When he tries to kiss her hand, she uses her right hand to give him "such a tremendous slap in the face as caused him abruptly to release the hand which he held, and would have laid him prostrate on the carpet but for Mrs. Crump, who rushed forward and prevented him from falling by administering right and left a whole shower of slaps, such as he had never endured since the day he was at school" (400). To Baroski's misfortune, the outraged mother's arrival on the scene (Mrs. Crump taking the role of the male hero-saviour) subjects him to the wrath and power of two women: "'What, imperence!' said that worthy lady; 'you'll lay hands on my daughter, will you? (one, two). You'll insult a woman in distress, will you, you little coward? (one, two). Take that, and mind your manners, you filthy monster!'" (400). This thrashing of Baroski shows two women of theatre responding with, as Ioan Williams says, "Healthy violence" (38) to male abuse. This strong Morgiana clearly contradicts the type of idealised or sexualised conception of womanhood her husband and teachers wish her to portray on

stage. She has the power to fend off unwanted male advances when the need arises without male assistance.

By making it clear that the Ravenswing is a manufactured product of theatre who, like the Fotheringay, contradicts the behaviour of her private persona, Thackeray's story challenges the veracity of the feminine image that appears on the stage. A stage woman's ability to depict true femininity is weakened when we realise she and her roles have been created by a corrupt male network motivated by opportunities to satisfy financial greed and sexual desires. Fitz-Boodle's anger is directed not upon the actresses, but upon her makers. Thus, in Thackeray's reflexive text, the authority of these makers is undermined. The great Baroski, famous voice teacher and ladies' man, is reduced to a grovelling figure fending off the blows of two women. The great George Thrum, respectable aristocrat, is exposed as nothing more than a hypocrite, who will associate with the lower class theatre people, but only if these alliances will put money in his pocket. Morgiana's husband is successful in profiting from his wife's performances on stage, but ironically his (her) success kills him; before we hear of his death, Fitz-Boodle describes Walker in his final years as a man who "grows exceedingly stout, dyes his hair, and has a bloated purple look about the nose and cheeks, very different from that which first charmed the heart of Morgiana" (461). Thackeray also challenges the authority of the press by making us aware that their influential reviews are motivated by self-interest, petty jealousies, and acts of revenge. Although the humour of *The Ravenswing* is darker than that found in *Pendennis*, through parody, Thackeray makes these influential forces upon theatre and female representation laughable and absurd. He also gives us another way to read the

melodramatic heroine—as a strong, independent woman—a reading that appears in even greater complexity and results in even greater confusion for the narrator in *Lovel the Widower*.

Notes

[1] Joe Law notes (as does John Carey) that Morgiana could be based on Thackeray's memories of singer Henriette Sontag (505).

[2] The theatre manager stood at the "apex of the Victorian theatrical hierarchy" with duties including choosing actors, selecting plays and scheduling them, superintending rehearsals, reading new plays, supervising doorkeepers and office staff, and, for some, acting as well (Booth *Theatre* 27-29). Some managers, such as Thackeray's Mr. Dolphin in *Pendennis*, travelled the provinces in search of new talent. In this novel Thackeray shows how actors worked hard to gain Dolphin's attention and consequently a chance to rise in their profession: "Even Miss Fotheringay's dull heart, which was disturbed at nothing, felt perhaps a flutter, when she came in presence of the famous London Impresario . . . . In vain the various actors tried to win the favour of the great stage Sultan" (156).

[3] Ronald C. McCail has written on the possibility that the character of George Thrum might have been modelled on Sir George Smart (1776-1867), an organist, singing teacher, conductor of the Philharmonic Society, organiser of British music festivals, and conductor of oratorio, who was knighted in 1811 ("Thackeray" 425).

[4] In her *Records of a Girlhood*, Kemble recalls that during a reading tour of America she was approached to contribute personal stories for an article that was coming out in a popular periodical. While she realised a favourable article would contribute to the financial success of her tour, she was careful to warn the writer not to overdo the puffery, even if this suggested she was rather naïve about the theatre business: "'puff just as quietly as you can.' I rather think my agent left me with the

same opinion of my competency in business that Mr. Macready had expressed as to my proficiency in my profession, namely that 'I did not know the rudiments of it'" (223-224).

[5] In *Vanity Fair*, while Rawdon is imprisoned, he encounters a Captain Walker (Chapter 53).

[6] Similarly, Fanny Kemble's image became commercialised following her early theatrical successes: sketches of her filled shop windows, saucers were adorned with figures of her as Juliet and Belvidera, and small images of her head appeared on neck-handkerchiefs.

[7] Thackeray often inserted the same characters into several texts; Morgiana reappears in *The Adventures of Philip*, to Philip's horror as an unrefined, uncultured woman. See chapter 34.

[8]Vestris became a reluctant performer of Macheath in the early 1800s (Appleton 48). She first performed Macheath in 1830 at the Haymarket, and while some members of the audience found her male impersonation to be an act of impropriety, others, such as the *Theatrical Inquirer*, found her amusing at first. Future performances were not quite so well received, so that by a few months later, the same journal was calling the play disastrous and its female Macheath as the cause (C. Pearce 58). Others, such as the *British Stage & Literary Cabinet*, continued to applaud Vestris, noting in 1824 that positive popular reaction to her was due at least in part to great admiration for her shapely legs, which were shown off to good advantage in the male costume (Williams 59).

Chapter Six:

Bessy Prior: The Actress Strikes Back

> The alliteration in the all-too familiar phrase [the damsel in distress] emphasizes the strong connection in nineteenth-century cultural attitudes (a connection frequently exemplified in traditional and contemporary romance and fairytale as well as in drama) between maiden innocence and the likelihood that its possessor is in difficulty, and further suggests a prime value placed on the importance of rescue. The rescuer is, of course, male.
>
> Joseph Donohue,"Women in the Victorian Theatre: Images, Illusions, Realities"

The moment is pure melodrama. A governess, whose scandalous past life as a dancer is about to be exposed, falls to her knees and pleads to the villain who knows the truth: "As a man, as a gentleman, I entreat you to keep my secret! I implore you for the sake of my poor mother and her children!" He moves to embrace her. She screams. In rushes the hero:

> Hands off, you little villain! Stir a step, and I'll kill you, if you were a regiment of captains! What! insult this lady who kept watch at your sister's death-bed and has took charge of her children! Don't be frightened, Miss Prior. Julia—dear, dear Julia—I'm by you. If the scoundrel touches you, I'll kill him. I—I love you—there—it's here—love you madly—with all my 'art—my a-heart! (W 40)

At this point, the distressed heroine should be grateful for the rescue; the villain should quake in fear; the hero and heroine should declare eternal love for each other. Such responses may be standard on stage, but in Thackeray's world nothing is that simple.

Having set up the classic melodramatic scene, he then proceeds to overturn all expectations. The heroine responds with the hearty admonishment "Howell—for Heaven's sake, Howell!" and the villain laughs, remarking "Here's a novel, by jingo!" (W 40-41).

This rescue scene was not part of a novel then, but it was to become so when Thackeray turned his unsuccessful two-act play *The Wolves and the Lamb* into *Lovel the Widower*, a work of fiction which appeared in the *Cornhill* from January to June in 1860. *Lovel* retains the rescue incident, keeping it as the "dramatic core" of the story (J. McMaster 54), but Thackeray made some important alterations. The distressed heroine, Julia Prior, became Bessy Prior in the story, the villain Clarence Kicklebury became Clarence Baker, and the hero John Howell became Dick Bedford. To this trio Thackeray added another character, Charles Batchelor, who narrates the story. With this narrative addition, Thackeray turned this scene into an important metacommentary on theatre—Batchelor stands at a distance, watching the action unfold in front of him like a play. But Thackeray also implicates him in the plot. He could choose to leave the audience and take the role of the hero who saves the damsel in distress. Batchelor does not, however, because the actress, growing impatient with his hesitation, throws away the traditional script and steps beyond the boundaries of her role as heroine; she saves herself. Traditional roles are inverted—the male is weak and passive; the female is strong and self-reliant.

This reversal defies the conventions of melodrama and its climatic moment of the rescue, and it complicates the relationship between actress and audience, namely that an actress on stage acts as a passive, empty signifier onto whom the male

audience projects its fantasies. His gaze defines, or creates, her. But such defiance of the "rules" is typical of Thackeray, who questioned the veracity of theatre in portraying human nature. The melodrama, in particular, is suspect because of its simplistic offerings of clear-cut plots, resolutions, and characters.

Thackeray seems particularly interested in melodrama's use of the rescue motif, as so many of his works—*The Virginians*, *Pendennis*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Ravenswing*, and *Lovel the Widower*—incorporate and/or comment on this convention. The rescue's importance in characterisation lies in its depiction of male heroism and female passivity. "Early and late, wherever one goes in drama of the nineteenth century, one encounters damsels in distress," says Joseph Donohue ("Women" 118), and this image of the yielding, helpless female was perfectly suited to melodrama and its three-part structure: "Part one, heroine separated from hero; Part two, heroine's chastity or life or both threatened by villain; Part three, heroine saved from villain and rescued by hero" (J. Thompson 292). The rescue is the drama's climatic "storm" and provides an opportunity to show good triumphant over evil, and a strong visual image of conventional gender roles—male strength and female frailty. According to Donohue, the rescue "engages questions of power and control . . . . To rescue a woman from danger, to save her from disaster, requires the male's assertion of his physical strength, his bodily power, his ability to outmanoeuvre or outwit accident, chance, or evil in the world at large" ("Women" 119). Donohue observes that "in the arena of relationships between men and women, the male need for access to power exerts itself through response to a correlative need to construe the female as helpless, as powerless. To put the same idea obversely, a woman must demonstrate her

helplessness in order to be rescued by a man, or more precisely, to merit rescue" (122). So important is this kind of rescue to the plot, says Michael Booth, that without it most melodramas are "incomplete" (*English* 28).

Literature has had a long love affair with the rescue convention. Hugely popular in genres ranging from fairytales and courtly literature to romance and melodrama, it functions as a device to display "the finest human qualities" of heroism, self-sacrifice, brotherhood, and justice (Reep 7). While some works depict a female saving a male (as in the example of Pocahontas), the vast majority of rescues are accomplished by male saviours; hence, the rescue becomes a vehicle to celebrate male heroism and male self-sacrifice. In contrast to the female rescuer, who is almost never recognised for her good actions, the male is rewarded, usually by marriage to the heroine. Thus, melodramas typically conclude with a tableau representing the domestic ideal of the patriarchal family, the type Pendennis observes while watching the Fotheringay in the final moments of *The Stranger*: "the reconciliation arrived, and she flung herself down on Mr Bingley's shoulders, whilst the children clung to their knees" (P 48).

Thackeray was repeatedly drawn to the rescue convention. He alludes to its popularity in fiction in *Pendennis*, where the young Pen searches fruitlessly for such an opportunity: "Do as he might, and ride where he would, the fairy princess whom he was to rescue and win, had not yet appeared to honest Pen" (35). Thackeray makes it clear that Pen's is an immature view of love based on fiction rather than real life. According to Joan Ferrante, heroes in the courtly fiction that Pen reads inevitably must face reality, and it is the female who destroys fantasy: "The woman as realist, as

debunker of male fantasies, is a counterbalance in courtly literature to the woman as image. The whole courtly love game is itself a fantasy, or a series of fantasies, which work best around the man's mental image of a woman. When a 'real' woman intrudes on the fantasy, she is likely to point up its most vulnerable areas" (67). Pen, the pseudo courtly lover, is much like Batchelor, the pseudo melodramatic hero. The romantic fantasies of both suffer when they encounter actresses, when they are forced to deal with the real, rather than the ideal, woman behind the image.

Rescues must have seemed to Thackeray to be too simple and artificial to convey the complexities of human nature. He often places his rescues in a melodramatic context and aligns them with fairytales in order to expose their fictitiousness. They become for him opportunities to show how reality always intrudes upon fantasy. Booth's definition of melodrama is thus appropriate: "Essentially, melodrama is a dream world inhabited by dream people and dream justice, offering audiences the fulfillment and satisfaction found only in dreams. An idealization and simplification of the world of reality, it is in fact the world its audiences want but cannot get" (*English* 14). Or, as George Bernard Shaw claimed, "Melodramatic stage illusion is not an illusion of real life, but an illusion of the embodiment of our romantic longings" (370). The theatrical rescue allowed Thackeray to show how the real supersedes illusion—to show anti-heroism rather than heroism, disorder rather than order, strong females rather than passive heroines, comedy rather than tragedy.

In *Vanity Fair*, for example, a key dramatic moment occurs when Rawdon Crawley finds his wife Becky alone in the company of Lord Steyne. The scene has

been likened to theatre, and with good reason. Here we find the typical villain-heroine-hero confrontation:

> Rawdon Crawley springing out, seized him by the neckcloth, until Steyne, almost strangled, writhed, and bent under his arm. 'You lie, you dog!' said Rawdon. 'You lie, you coward and villain!' And he struck the peer twice over the face with his open hand, and flung him bleeding to the ground. It was all done before Rebecca could interpose. She stood there trembling before him. She admired her husband, strong, brave, and victorious. (VF 676)

Even though Thackeray called the scene a "touch of genius" (*Letters* II 32), others find it too theatrical. Percy Lubbock says it has an "artificial look, by comparison with the flowing spontaneity of all that has gone before. And this is exactly what shows how and where Thackeray's skill betrays him. He is not (like Dickens) naturally inclined to theatre" ("Panoramic" 25). Thackeray, however, may have deliberately made the scene theatrical as part of his reflexive method, in order to stress its artificiality. As G. Armour Craig remarks,

> The theatricality of the passage—Becky's clinging and quivering, the serpents and baubles on her hands, Rawdon's springing out and his terse manifesto, the flame in the eyes of the wicked nobleman and the lifelong scar on his head—all such features suggest that the creator of Punch's Prize novelists is once again engaged in something like parody. ("Style" 95)

Hence, the reader and Becky recognise the scene as melodrama—Rawdon, the hero, has arrived to save her from the villainous Steyne. But because this incident *is* parody, we are reminded of another text, that this is also the world of Vanity Fair wherein evil cannot be so simply vanquished, nor can roles be so easily identified as on a stage. According to W. David Shaw, "As an actress herself, Becky instinctively admires Rawdon's 'strong, brave, and victorious' performance, even though it is a heroic role to end all future roles" (143). In a chapter whose title foretells the outcome—"A Rescue and a Catastrophe"—there is no romantic happy ending for Becky and Rawdon, because he is not a rescuing hero and she is not a damsel in distress. Rather than becoming an opportunity to show a defence of a heroine's virtue, the incident instead places everlasting doubt on her virtue and her possible involvement in an adulterous affair. The scene thus becomes a moment for Thackeray to blur the distinctions between the good and the bad woman, to use a theatrical context to undermine female stereotyping, as he will also do in a more sustained and more parodic way in *Lovel*.

Neither is there a happy ending for Pocahontas and John Smith. The rescue, re-enacted in George Warrington's play in *The Virginians*, does not result in their marriage, something which mars the fairytale quality of their story. As Leslie Fielder puts it, "How hard it is, however, for the child's mind, which loves the story of Pocahontas best of all, to remember, or, remembering, quite to believe that she married the *wrong* man" (70). The rescue was always problematic for dramatists, because the heroine's marriage to Rolfe denied audiences the expected melodramatic ending of a romance between the hero and heroine of the rescue:

> Her saving of Smith grows to be paramount, to the point where whatever happened afterward in the narrative becomes at best anticlimactic, and at worst the spoiling of this romantic, exemplary fable. In fact, by 1804 John Burk can discuss how her marriage to Rolfe rather than to Smith might lead one to disbelieve the entire narrative . . . . The marriage to Rolfe adds doubt, rather than veracity, to the narrative. Burk's sense is that those who will read the more romantic accounts of the story, which heighten the drama and elevate the characters beyond the bounds of common humanity . . . will be disappointed by the ending. As the events of her life began to assume the status of a folk tale, the failure of Smith and Pocahontas to live happily ever after became in some ways the narrative's greatest weakness. (Tilton 26-27)

When George tells the story of his own captivity, he likewise disappoints his female audience because a "Pocahontas" does not come to rescue him. Thackeray's fiction contends that real life does not correspond to fairytales and their conventions.

The rescue scene most comparable to that of *Lovel* occurs in *The Ravenswing*. An unchaperoned Morgiana Walker is forced to contend with the amorous advances of her music teacher, a classic dramatic crisis. But Thackeray's narrator George Fitz-Boodle, while recognising the theatricality of the incident, cannot describe the event in typical melodramatic fashion, and tragedy turns into comedy:

> 'Don't be a fool, Baroski!' said the lady (*I can't help it if her language was not more choice, and if she did not rise with dignity,*

> *exclaiming, 'Unhand me, sir!'*)—don't be a fool!' said Mrs. Walker, 'but get up and let's finish the lesson.' [1]
>
> 'You hard-hearted adorable little greature, vil you not listen to me?'
>
> 'No, I will not listen to you, Benjamin!' concluded the lady; 'get up and take a chair, and don't go on in that ridiculous way, don't!'
>
> But Baroski, having a speech by heart, determined to deliver himself of it in that posture, and begged Morgiana not to turn avay her divine hice, and to listen to de voice of his despair, and so forth, and seized the lady's hand, and was going to press it to his lips, when she said, with more spirit, perhaps, than grace—
>
> 'Leave go my hand, sir: I'll box your ears if you don't.' (R 400, emphasis mine).

The scene is devoid of the male rescuer, but one is scarcely needed, as Morgiana, and later her mother, are spirited enough to deflect Baroski's advances. He makes a rapid retreat, and the women, instead of "being frightened, or falling into hysterics" as might befit a melodramatic heroine, laugh at the "odious monster's discomfiture" (R 401). Again Fitz-Boodle apologises to his readers for departing from tradition: "It is not my fault that my heroine's sensibilities were not more keen, that she had not the least occasion for sal-volatile or symptom of a fainting fit; but it was so" (R 401).

The scene is an important one on several levels. For example, it allows Thackeray to parody the rescue convention. A key dramatic moment of theatre is reduced to slapstick comedy. Traditional male-female roles are reversed, and the

capacity of this genre's ability to characterise men as powerful heroes and women as weaker subordinates is thus undermined. And, because of this reversal, the scene also parodies the writing of such literary conventions. His narrator knows what his readers expect, but Fitz-Boodle cannot produce the standard rescue because his female characters defy the traditional melodramatic script. Morgiana and her mother's vanquishing of authorial control leave Fitz-Boodle in a weakened, apologetic state.

In *Lovel*, a rescue scene becomes a climatic moment in the story. It provides another opportunity to parody melodrama—its conventions and particularly its creation. The narrator, a writer, who cannot make his heroine behave as she is supposed to according to theatrical constructs, embodies a mixture of Pen's infatuation with an actress and Fitz-Boodle's inability to control a heroine within his narrative. As with *The Ravenswing*, Thackeray makes the rescue scene laughable; but *Lovel* deepens the parodic implications, leaving its narrator in the throes of an identity crisis.

Like Fitz-Boodle, Batchelor is a writer, and as a playwright he should be able to perceive the theatricality of Bessy's confrontation with Baker. Even more so than Baker and Bedford, who are also aware of Bessy's former stage profession, Batchelor should realise that she is deliberately acting the part of the distraught heroine. She knows her lines well and she knows how to use her body to assume the appropriate poses: "'Captain Baker! I beg—I implore you,' says Bess, or something of the sort: for the white hands assumed an attitude of supplication . . . . 'Oh! spare me—spare me!' I heard her say, in clear—too clear—pathetic tones" (153).

A similar incident occurs in *The Ravenswing* when Morgiana goes to visit her old flame Eglantine, after her husband is sent to prison. Like Batchelor, he should be

aware of her theatricality, and therefore Eglantine should be immune to her pleas for money. He had already anticipated as much:

> The worthy perfumer was, in fact, resolved to be exceedingly hard-hearted, in his behaviour towards his old love, and acted over at night in bed the scene which was to occur when the meeting should take place. Oh, thought he, but it will be a grand thing to see the proud Morgiana on her knees to me; and me a-pointing to the door; and saying, 'Madam, you've steeled this 'eart against you, you have;--bury the recollection of old times, of those old times when I thought my 'eart would have broke, but it didn't—no, 'earts are made of sterner stuff. I didn't die as I thought I should; I stood it, and live to see the woman I despised at my feet—ha, ha, at my feet!' (415)

Yet, when she does come to see him, as the sobbing damsel in distress, he is powerless to resist her.

Just as Morgiana has thwarted Fitz-Boodle's story, during her encounter with Baker, Bessy deviates from Batchelor's script. After she has made her pleas to the villain in "too clear" tones, the incident takes a curious turn. Something happens which upsets the balance of power:

> And then there came rather a shrill 'Ah!' and then the lion was up in my breast again; and I give you my honour, just as I was going to step forward—to step!—to *rush* forward from behind the urn where I had stood for a moment with thumping heart, Bessy's 'Ah!' or little cry was followed by a *whack*, which I heard as clear as anything I ever heard in

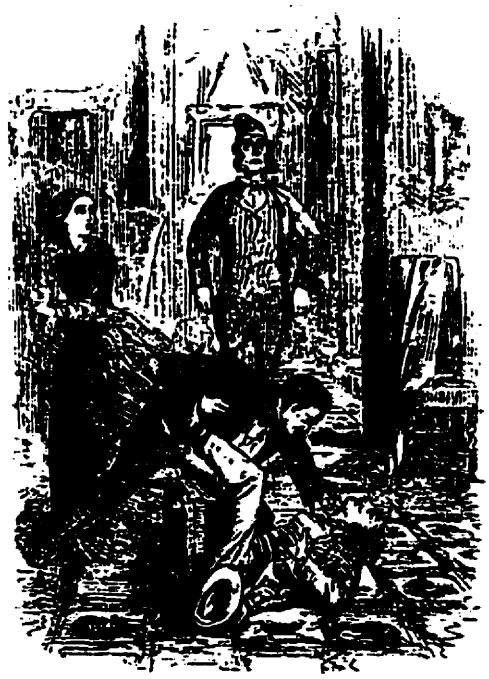
> my life;--and I saw the little captain spin back, topple over a chair heels up, and in this posture heard him begin to scream and curse in shrill tones. (153-154)

Who has administered this "whack" which has sent Baker flying? Batchelor does not tell us; he quickly moves to describe the heroic arrival of Bedford. We learn that it was Bessy herself who delivered the blow only when Batchelor later gains possession of a letter written by Bessy to a doctor, who is also in love with her. [2] In this letter, we gain a deeper insight into Bessy's character as she heaps scorn upon Batchelor for his cowardice in failing to come to her rescue:

> You fancy he is attentive to me? If you looked only a little angrily at him, he would fly back to London. To-day, when your *horrid little patient* [Baker] did presume to offer to take my hand, when I boxed his wicked ears and sent him *spinning* to the end of the room—poor Mr. Batch was so *frightened* that he did not dare to come into the room, and I saw him peeping behind a statue on the lawn, and he would not come in until the *servants arrived.* Poor man! We cannot all have courage like a *certain Edward*, who I know is as bold as a lion. (174).

Why does Bessy turn from pleading supplicant to a fierce defender of herself? Has she gotten tired of waiting for a hero, for Batchelor, to save her? Or is she showing that she is no weak female who needs a hero to rescue her? Batchelor is curiously silent on the matter, although he has previously suggested, while watching her with Baker, that she is a very strong, almost inhuman, woman:

> I believe Miss Bessy would have been a match for both of us. Her white arm was as hard and polished as ivory. Had she held it straight pointed against the rush of the dragon, he would have fallen backwards before his intended prey: I have no doubt he would. It was the hen, in this case, was stronger than the libertine fox, and *au besoin* would have pecked the little marauding vermin's eyes out. (151)



When a hero, Bedford, finally does arrive, it is she—not the villain of Thackeray's play—who laughs, as if acknowledging the absurdity of it all: "'Oh! thank you Bedford!—please leave him, Bedford! that's enough. There, don't hurt him any more!' says Bessy, laughing—laughing upon my word!" (154). Bedford is not really a hero after all, because Bessy has already knocked down Baker. Bedford makes a great show of theatrical heroic action, but it's actually unnecessary because the heroine is

capable of defending herself. Batchelor does not expound upon Bessy's actions because it is clear her nonconformity disturbs him as a man and as a writer.

Unlike Fitz-Boodle, who apologises for not being able to control his heroine's actions, Batchelor becomes anxious and insecure, and his narrative, caught between fantasy and reality, becomes a disjointed, desperate attempt to regain control of his story. In a perceptive study of *Lovel*'s narrator, Ina Ferris observes that after the rescue scene, Batchelor assumes a defensive position, drawing on a series of literary genres including fable, romance, and history, in an unsuccessful attempt to tell his story. None can accomplish the task. As he tries to justify his lack of action in saving Bessy, he becomes "entangled in his own fiction" (61) and finds that "Fiction no longer orders and evaluates the reality which forms its subject but collects impressions that are left unordered and unresolved" (63). Just as Bessy has upset Lovel's notions about what is real and what is illusion, so too does Batchelor keep the reader of his story in a constant state of confusion, unable to separate truth from fiction in Batchelor's words.

Batchelor's insecurity and narrative "breakdown" stem not only from his guilt in the rescue scene, but also because he has lost artistic control, and he has lost his confidence in the belief that art mirrors nature. Bessy does not embody the popular image of the melodramatic damsel in distress, and he is not hero material. Neither in art nor in real life can he be the nineteenth-century archetypal male heroic character, the man who "stands for the embodiment and assertion of authority and strength" (Donohue "Women" 120).

Theoretically, any member of an audience has the potential to be an artist, to create a "story" by projecting his fantasies and desires onto an actress, to imagine himself, as in the case of a melodrama, to be the hero who saves the heroine. But is this to be truly heroic? *Lovel* suggests not; rather, it implies that such dreams embody an image of the false heroic, that the defining male gaze is self-deluding because it sees romantic visions, not the truth. Batchelor has fancied himself in love with Bessy; he believes if he intervenes during her altercation with Baker that a marriage with her is inevitable. But this is a delusional fantasy based on a theatrical image because Bessy—in real life—has never shown any sign she is in love with him. The melodramatic incident brings his relationship with Bessy to a crisis point because it is such a strong image of heroic action, the type which in melodrama leads to marriage. He has only to leap onto the "stage." But reality intrudes. He cannot overcome his misgivings about her former life as a stage performer. Romance is one thing, and reality is quite another: "Fiends and anguish! he [Baker] had known her before? The academy, the life she had led, the wretched old tipsy ineffective guardian of a father—all these antecedents in poor Bessy's history passed through my mind. And I had offered my heart and troth to this woman!" (153). It is a distaste, along with a knowledge that there are questions and aspects about Bessy's life which he can neither answer nor control, that reappears: "Again came the horrible suspicion, the dreadful doubt—the chill as of a cold serpent crawling down my back—which had made me pause, and gasp, and turn pale, anon when Bessy and Captain Clarence were holding colloquy together. What *has* happened in this woman's life? *Do* I know all about her, or anything; or only just as much as she chooses?"(167). Neither is he especially

anxious to have Mrs. Prior as his mother-in-law, knowing full well from past experience, when he lived as a border in her house, that she can get the better of him. The fear that in marrying an actress one also "marries" her disreputable past and family appears in Tom Robertson's 1867 play *Caste*, when Captain Hawtree warns his friend about the ramifications of such a union:

> My dear Dal, all those marriages of people with common people are all very well in novels and in plays on stage, because the real people don't exist, and have no relatives who exist, and no connections, and so no harm's done, and it's rather interesting to look at; but in real life with real relations, and real mothers, and so forth, it's absolute bosh. It's worse—it's utter social and personal annihilation and damnation. (138-139)

Despite his failure to act, Batchelor might have retained his fantasies about Bessy except for one important act on the part of the heroine. Bessy has seen him watching the rescue scene. The actress has looked back at her audience; the female has appropriated the "male gaze."

Looking back on the event, before he reveals it was Bessy who defended herself, Batchelor tries to rationalise his lack of action:

> Now, what was I to do? Wasn't I in a most confoundedly awkward situation? A lady had been attacked—a lady?—*the* lady, and I hadn't rescued her. Her insolent enemy was overthrown, and I hadn't done it. A champion, three inches shorter than myself, had come in, and dealt the blow. I was in such a rage of mortification, that I should have liked

> to thrash the captain and Bedford too. The first I know I could have matched: the second was a tough little hero. And it was he who rescued the damsel, whilst I stood by! In a strait so odious, sudden, and humiliating, what should I do, what could I, what did I do? (154)

What he does so is to walk casually into the room moments later, "arriving like Fortinbras in *Hamlet*" (157), feigning ignorance of the situation. But even Fortinbras has his moments of heroic glory in Shakespeare's play. Batchelor's character more appropriately alludes to the play's reference to Pyrrhus, who "stood,/ And like a neutral to his will and matter/ Did nothing" (II.ii.491-493). Hence, Bessy has nothing but scorn for him:

> 'Thank you, sir,' she said, turning her head over her shoulder, and looking at me with her grey eyes. 'Thank you, Richard Bedford! God bless you! I shall ever be thankful to you, wherever I am.' And the stately figure swept out of the room.
>
> She had seen me behind that confounded statue, then, and I had not come to her! O torments and racks! O scorpions, fiends and pitchforks! (158)

The power of her knowing eyes castrates Batchelor's courtly fantasies, while Bedford's face flashes "with knightly gratitude" at her words. As Roger Copeland notes of the relationship between an observer and an observed, "The voyeur's sense of power often depends upon invisibility and anonymity. Thus, to openly acknowledge the gaze of the viewer may be more disruptive than to ignore it" (144). When Bessy returns Batchelor's gaze, he realises that she has been watching him watching her; the

power of the defining male gaze transfers to her and shatters his dreams. Teresa de Lauretis says film audiences rarely face this problem because they are strictly observers of someone else's drama:

> the spectators are not aware of their own look, of themselves as looking on, as being voyeuristically complicit in the pleasures built into the image; second, they are not aware of the look of the camera, so that they have the impression that the events, people, and places figures on the screen exist somewhere, in an objective—if fictional—world created by the filmmaker, the director, the artist. Thus, having no say and no control over the film's world or its images, the spectators feel exempt of any responsibility, are not personally or individually implicated in the fiction, and are therefore free to enjoy it. (*Technologies* 98)

But, as in Batchelor's case, when the spectator becomes conscious of his own look, and its consequences, he becomes part of the drama. By not acting, Batchelor tries to exempt himself from responsibility; but Bessy's gaze implicates him in the fiction. He is no bystander, no chorus of a play, but the hero who fails to act.

The eyeglasses Bessy wears as part of her disguise are an integral symbol of her gaze and her strength. In a discussion of film theory, which has applications to Thackeray's text, Mary Ann Doane observes that spectacles worn by a woman in cinema signify a lack of female beauty and sexuality. Glasses, then, would aid Bessy in transforming herself into the role of a governess, since "one of the stereotypes of the ideal governess came to be a homely, severe, unfeminine type of woman"

(Peterson 5). Doane says that "The woman with glasses signifies simultaneously intellectuality and undesirability; but the moment she removes her glasses (a moment which, it seems, must almost always be *shown* and which is itself linked with a certain sensual quality), she is transformed into spectacle, the very picture of desire" ("Film" 236). It is those moments when Bessy is not wearing her glasses that she becomes most desirable: when Baker recognises her as the dancer in *The Bulbul and the Rose* who once boxed his ears; when Bedford declares his love for her; when Batchelor sees her as a muse for his love poems; when Lovel proposes marriage; when the mothers call her a temptress and a serpent.

The cinematic woman who wears glasses indicates a desire to see, rather than to be seen. She desires to be the spectator, not the spectacle. Thus, glasses

> do not generally signify a deficiency in seeing but an active looking, or even simply the fact of seeing as opposed to being seen. The intellectual woman looks and analyses, and in usurping the gaze she poses a threat to an entire system of representation. It is as if the woman had forcefully moved to the other side of the specular. (Doane "Film" 236)

The gaze that the woman usurps is that belonging to the male spectator. Laura Mulvey's influential study of spectatorship in cinema identifies the male audience-actress relationship as one in which women are presented as icons of femininity for the enjoyment of men, passive objects to fulfill male fantasies and desires. The male viewer's gaze, argues Sue-Ellen Case, constructs a definition of womanhood that empowers men:

> Given the assumption that stage and audience co-produce the performance text, the meaning of the sign 'woman' is also created by the audience. The way the viewer perceives the woman on stage constitutes another theoretical enterprise . . . . In the realm of theatrical production, the gaze is owned by the male: the majority of playwrights, directors and producers are men. This triumvirate determines the nature of the theatrical gaze, deriving the sign for 'woman' from their perspective. In the realm of audience reception, the gaze is encoded with culturally determined components of male sexual desire, perceiving 'woman' as a sexual object. (118)

But, observes Judith Hanna, the actor on stage does not necessarily have to capitulate to this gaze: "Performers may surrender themselves to spectators' gazes or assert themselves before the gazes and thus manipulate the gazers who partake of fantasy worlds often denied them in real life" (*Dance* 28).

When worn, Bessy's glasses establish her disguise as the meek, unassuming female. To act like a good governess, she must look the part—demure, plain, virtuous, and "nunlike" (145). She can blend into the background, and watch others. A governess' place was always ambiguous—not a servant and not the lady of the house, she nevertheless assumed the duties of both. Bessy knows that in order to maintain her employment, she must allay the fears of Lovel's mother and mother-in-law that Lovel will be attracted to her sexually. She tells Batchelor—looking over the tops of her glasses in a gesture to signify she is being truthful—that this is why she is feigning a romantic relationship with Drencher:

> 'Don't you see the difficulties of my position? Don't you know that ladies are often jealous of governesses; and that unless—unless they imagined I was—I was favourable to Mr. Drencher, who is very good and kind—the ladies at Shrublands might not like my remaining alone in the house with—with—you understand?' A moment the eyes look over the spectacles: at the next, the meek bonnet bows down toward the ground. (147)

The association of eyes with sexuality appears even more prominently in *The Wolves and the Lamb*. Lady Kicklebury dismisses Julia Prior as a sexual threat to her son-in-law because of her "weak" eyes: "Bah! There is no danger from *her*. She is a

most faithful creature, attached to me beyond everything. And her eyes—her eyes are weak with crying for some young man who is in India" (W 37). Touchit, upon whom Batchelor is modelled, also draws attention to her eyes when he confronts Julia about her disguise. But he challenges the notion that her eyes, and her character, are weak and powerless:

> *Touchit.* Is it for that [rheumatism in the head] that you put on the spectacles, and make yourself look a hundred years old?
>
> *Julia.* My eyes are weak, Captain Touchit.
>
> *Touchit.* Weak with weeping for Tom Flight. You hypocrite! Show me your eyes!
>
> *Miss P.* Nonsense!
>
> *Touchit.* Show me your eyes, I say, or I'll tell about Tom Flight, and that he has been married at Madras these two years.
>
> *Miss P.* Oh, you horrid man! [*takes glasses off.*] There!
>
> *Touchit.* Translucent orbs! beams of flashing light! lovely lashes veiling celestial brightness! No, they haven't cried much for Tom Flight, that faithless captain! nor for Lawrence O'Reilly, that killing Editor. It is lucky you keep the glasses on them, or they would transfix Horace Milliken, my friend the widower here. *Do* you always wear them when you are alone with him?
>
> *Miss P.* I never *am* alone with him. (W 24)

Batchelor, although he also draws attention to women's eyes, is never this aggressive when he is with Bessy. In fact, in her letter to Drencher, it is Bessy who makes a point

of stating that Batchelor's eyes are weak—that one has only to look at him, while he is "peeping" at others, to frighten him into submission. When Batchelor first arrives at Lovel's house, he sees Bessy as the epitome of the good governess. She has a "pale face, a tawny head of hair combed back, under a black cap: a pair of blue spectacles, as I live! a tight mourning dress, buttoned up to her white throat; a head hung meekly down: such is Miss Prior" (95). Batchelor is astonished at the change in her since he has last seen her: "What! have six years of slavery so changed the frank daring young girl whom I remember in Beak Street?" (95); he is particularly surprised by her glasses. For him, her eyes most define her character. He would like her to be the uncomplicated ideal heroine of his dreams, someone who acquiesces to his wishes. But she does not follow his "script"; she is too enigmatic. She has eyes which "when you gaze sometimes, you may gaze so deep, and deep, and deep, that I defy you to plumb half-way down into their mystery" (62).

This mysterious quality of her eyes is a source of her power, for it is when she removes her glasses that she most threatens Batchelor's fantasies. For example, during one of their encounters, Batchelor persuades her to remove them:

> in reply to my remark, 'Let me see your eyes,' Bessy took off her spectacles, and I took them up and looked at her. Why didn't I say to her, 'My dear brave Elizabeth! as I look in your face, I see you have had an awful deal of suffering. Your eyes are inscrutably sad. We who are initiated, know the members of our Community of Sorrow. We have both been wrecked in different ships, and been cast on this shore. Let us go hand-in-hand, and find a cave and a shelter somewhere

> together.' I say, why didn't I say this to her? She would have come, I feel sure she would. We would have been semi-attached as it were. We would have that room in either heart where the skeleton was, and said nothing about it, and pulled down the party-wall and taken our mild tea in the garden. I live in Pump Court now. It would have been better than this dingy loneliness and a snuffy laundress who bullies me. But for Bessy? Well—well, perhaps better for her too.
>
> I remember these thoughts rushing through my mind whilst I held the spectacles. (101).

His thoughts are full of fantasies, schemes for actions, but like the subsequent scene of his heroic disgrace, Batchelor thinks too much and does too little. In holding Bessy's spectacles, Batchelor thinks he has "captured" her and her gaze; she can become the object of his romantic longings. But reality intrudes with a succession of jarring, unromantic noises that culminate in the arrival of Bessy's garrulous mother:

> What a number of other things too! I remember two canaries making a tremendous concert in their cage. I remember the voices of the two children quarrelling on the lawn, the sound of the carriage-wheels grinding over the gravel; and then of a little old familiar cracked voice in my ear, with a 'La, Mr. Batchelor! are *you* here?' And a sly face looks up at me from under an old bonnet.
>
> 'It is mamma,' says Bessy. (101)

Similarly, when he is later deciding whether or not to intervene upon the Bessy-Baker struggle, his thoughts are a mixture of romance and reality. At first he

uses her moment of distress as an opportunity to envisage himself as a hero of romance: "I was just going to rush to Bessy's side to clasp her (I have no doubt) to my heart: to beard the whiskered champion who was before her, and perhaps say, 'Cheer thee—cheer thee, my persecuted maiden, my beauteous love—my Rebecca! Come on, Sir Brian de Bois Guilbert, thou dastard Templar! It is I, Sir Wilfred of Ivanhoe" (151-152). But Batchelor is no hero leaping from the pages of Sir Walter Scott's novel:[3]

> I made no heroic speeches. There was no need for Rebecca to jump out of [the] window and risk her lovely neck. How could she, in fact, the French window being flush with the ground-floor? And I give you my honour, just as I was crying my war-cry, crouching my lance, and rushing *a la recousse* upon Sir Baker, a sudden thought made me drop my (figurative) point: a sudden idea made me rein in my galloping (metaphorical) steed, and spare Baker for that time.
>
> Suppose I had gone in? But for that sudden precaution, there might have been a Mrs. Batchelor. I might have been a bullied father of ten children. (152)

Bessy's eyes are even more powerful in her encounter with Baker because she is not wearing her spectacles. Batchelor, using heightened poetical language, notes this fact as he takes his position in the garden:

> I sat by a large lilac bush. I waited. Perhaps she would come. The morning-room windows were wide open on the lawn. Will she never come? Ah! what is that tall form advancing? gliding—gliding into the

> chamber like a beauteous ghost? Who most does like an angel show, you may be sure 'tis she. She comes up to the glass. She lays her spectacles down on the mantelpiece. She puts a slim white hand over her auburn hair and looks into the mirror. Elizabeth, Elizabeth! I come! (148)

The removal of her glasses makes her sexually attractive, and seemingly available, to Batchelor and his poetic outpourings, and it sets up her encounter with Baker, for he now recognises her as Betsy Bellenden—the name she had used while working as a dancer:

> 'I thought I knew you yesterday,' says Baker. 'Only, gad, you see, I had so much claret on board, I did not much know what was what. And oh! Bessy, I have got such a splitter of a headache.'
>
> 'Oh! please—please, my name is Miss Prior. Pray! pray sir, don't.'—
>
> 'You've got handsomer—doocid deal handsomer. Know you now well, your spectacles off. You come in here—teach my nephew and niece, humbug my sister, make love to the sh----. Oh! you uncommon sly little toad!' (153)

Bessy's "naked" eyes expose her true nature. After her marriage to Lovel, she takes on a much stronger presence, causing Batchelor to remark cryptically, "I believe she believes he believes he is the master of the house" (61). Lovel fared little better in his first marriage to Cecilia, who upon her death became immortalised as an angelic work of art. As a portrait she should represent the object of the gaze, the ideal woman—the "angel"—frozen into a painting, something which is looked at but cannot look. And yet Thackeray turns the painting into an image of the false ideal, because Batchelor notes that the eyes of this portrait "followed you about, as portraits' eyes so painted will; and those glances, as it seemed to me, still domineered over Lovel, and made him quail as they had done in life" (128). Bessy, too, comes to dominate Lovel. Just after they become engaged, Bessy, who is not wearing her glasses as Miss Prior specifically notes, begins to take command of her future husband and home:

> 'I can come and share Louisa's room, mamma,' says Bessy. 'It will not be proper for me to stay here at all—until afterwards, you

know. Or I can go to my uncle at St. Boniface. Don't you think that will be best, eh, Frederick?'

'Whatever you wish, my dear Lizzy!' says Lovel.

'And I dare say there will be some little alterations made in the house. You talked, you know, of painting, Mr. Lovel: and the children can go to their grandmamma Bonnington. And on our return when the alterations are made we shall always be delighted to see *you*, Mr. Batchelor—our kindest old friend. Shall we not, a—Frederick?'

'Always, always,' said Frederick.

. . . . . .

'I think you had better put off those men you expect to dinner to-morrow, Fred?' I say to Lovel.

'I think I had, Batch,' says the gentleman.

'Or you can dine with them at the club, you know?' remarks Elizabeth.

'Yes, Bessy.' (194-195)

Lovel's domination by women will continue. The point is made more explicitly in *The Wolves and the Lamb*, which concludes with Milliken's ironic comments about his soon-to-be blissful life with Julia—"'Oh mother! oh, George! oh, Julia! what a comfort it is to me to think that I am released from the tyrany of that terrible mother-in-law'"(54)—just before his future mother-in-law, Mrs. Prior, bustles onto the scene.

Batchelor has revealed from the start of his narrative that Lovel will marry Bessy, so their engagement at the end comes as no surprise. What may be surprising

is the story's final melancholy tone, reminiscent of the gloomy tone at the conclusion of *Rebecca and Rowena*: "*Valete et plaudite*, you good people, who have witnessed the little comedy. Down with the curtain; cover up the boxes; pop out the gas-lights. Ho! cab! Take us home, and let us have some tea, and go to bed. Good night, my little players. We have been merry together, and we part with soft hearts and somewhat rueful countenances, don't we?" (195). *Lovel* concludes not with the happy ending of melodrama, nor with the tableau of the ideal patriarchal family. Does Bessy, like Pocahontas, marry the wrong man? Should she have married Bedford, who Catherine Peters claims is the story's true hero (257)?

In terms of Batchelor's initial discussion about his tale's characters, she does marry the hero—Lovel. Lovel could be considered as another parody of the male rescuer, another example of Thackeray's reflexive look at the convention of the happy ending in drama and fiction. Lovel saves Bessy from the wrath of his mother and mother-in-law when they learn of her past and threaten to turn her out of the house. Like Bedford, and unlike Batchelor and Drencher, he does not mind that she acted on the stage. However, Lovel's motives for rescuing Bessy should be questioned. He seems more eager to assert his authority, for once, over the mothers than he is to declare his love for Bessy. His proposal of marriage has more the aura of fairytale than real life, allowing the Cinderella (as Batchelor has referred to Bessy early in the story) to get her prince. Batchelor calls him the hero of his narrative, yet this continually henpecked man shows little strength of character, and has few appearances other than to come in at the end to play, fleetingly, the hero.

Batchelor begins his retrospective story with a pronouncement about his character: "Who shall be the hero of this tale? Not I who write it. I am but the Chorus of the play" (57). Nonetheless, the tale that follows belies this assertion, for it is very much about him and the writing of drama and fiction. When Thackeray wrote *The Wolves and the Lamb*, he could not find a theatre manager who would produce it. Herman Merivale, who witnessed an amateur performance of the drama in February 1862, as part of Thackeray's housewarming at his new Palace Green home, agreed with others that the play was faulty because "there was a lack of dramatic incident and movement" (349). The reworking of the play into *Lovel* is almost a vindication for this assessment. Due to the addition of Batchelor, it becomes a story *about* the lack of dramatic action, about the very veracity of theatre itself to represent human nature. The person who looks at theatre with romantic eyes, expecting to see the ideal female, has weak eyes. The voyeuristic gaze that looks from a safe distance cannot stand up to the realistic gaze that looks back at him, and so the eyes quail as false romanticism is exposed. Thus in the opening lines of *Lovel the Widower* Thackeray establishes a theatrical context for his story and at the same time he undermines it. The actors in this work cannot conform to traditional roles, and all because the heroine does not yield passively to the imprisoning gaze of the male spectator/playwright. The mighty "whack" she administers to Baker is indeed a levelling blow to cultural images of femininity and masculinity, and to the forces that have created these images.

Notes

[1] Michael Booth notes that Matthew Gregory Lewis' 1801 play *Adelmorn, the Outlaw* includes a prime example of the typical rescue, complete with the kind of dialogue by the heroine—the plea "Unhand me!"—that Morgiana fails to utter, and the rescue by the hero, rushing from a place of safety, that Batchelor fails to perform:

> Brenno. Hold! You fly not! That passion burns in my veins, which, if you refuse to satisfy, force shall compel.
> Innogen. Force!
> Brenno. Think on your situation.
> Innogen. Unhand me!
> Brenno. You are alone.
> Innogen. Monster!
> Brenno. Your cries will be unheard.
> Innogen. Oh, Heavens!
> Brenno. Nay, this struggling—
> Innogen. Help, help! Oh, Adelmorn!
> Adelmorn (*rushing from his concealment*). What shrieks! Villain, desist! (28)

[2] See Louisa May Alcott's short story "Behind a Mask: or, A Woman's Power" for a similar incident. Actress Jean Muir, keeping her professional background a secret, finds work as a governess. Her true nature is revealed to the story's characters when they find letters she has written revealing her plans to win over the family with her deception.

[3] Batchelor's reference to Rebecca of *Ivanhoe* is an ironic parallel to Bedford's situation in that Ivanhoe defends her from Sir Brian de Bois Guilbert, but does not marry her, something which Thackeray "corrects" in *Rebecca and Rowena*.

Conclusion:

> Margaret Sullivan, playing an actress [in *The Moon's Our Home*] who has agreed to give up her career for her Park Avenue husband (Henry Fonda), suddenly bolts, goes to 'Idlewild' (now Kennedy) and is boarding a plane to Hollywood when Fonda comes with some paramedics to capture her. The last shot of the film has Sullivan in a straitjacket, in the back seat of the ambulance, looking up at Fonda with the smile of the blissfully subdued.
>
> Molly Haskell, *Holding My Own in No Man's Land*

The figure of the stage woman as a fictional character in drama, cinema, and literature remains problematic to gender studies. On the one hand, she embodies the strong, independent female who seeks professional employment outside the home. But, because she is also frequently depicted as a woman whose true happiness resides in the domestic sphere, who must abandon her career in order to be contented, her independence is continually undermined. What appears as a character who stands for feminine autonomy is, in fact, an individual who conspires with ideology to sanction the traditional female roles of wife and mother, to endorse the notion of the Angel in the House.

The 1937 film *Stage Door* is a vivid example of this dichotomy. Its portrayal of a group of aspiring actresses gives a mixed message about a woman's place in the acting profession. While its actresses exhibit strength and courage, as they cope with lascivious producers, few job prospects, and low wages, and while it offers a rare cinematic story of females bonding together despite the competitive nature of their profession, the film also implies women are better off working in homes of their own than on a public stage. It concludes with one of their members (Lucille Ball) leaving

the boarding house to get married. Fellow actress Ginger Rogers ruefully comments that "At least she'll have a couple of kids to keep her company in her old age. And what'll we have? Some broken-down memories and an old scrapbook which nobody will look at." The meaning is obvious: for an actress (for any woman) there is no better role than that of wife and mother.

The 1967 movie *Valley of the Dolls* (based on the 1966 novel) provides an even more dismal view of the lives of actresses. The film ends with a woman (Barbara Parkins) refusing a marriage proposal; she walks away from a house (the domestic sphere), a solitary figure. While she offers us an image of a woman who happily relishes her independence, it must be pointed out that she does not play an actress in the film. Three women who *are* cast in the roles of actresses are depicted as anything but independent and happy. One (Patty Duke) becomes addicted to pills and at the end is seen to be verging on madness; another (Sharon Tate), whose husband is confined to an insane asylum, cannot cope with what an impending mastectomy will do to her beauty and commits suicide, and the third, a successful but unmarried ageing actress (Susan Hayward), sums up her life and career when she says to another character, "One day you'll find yourself alone like me and wonder what the hell happened."

Even the light-hearted musical *My Sister Eileen* (1955) implies that the acting profession is inferior to the profession of managing a household. Hence, Eileen, the aspiring actress, reminds her sister Ruth of what their father told them before they moved to New York to find work in the acting and writing fields, "There's eight million people in New York and half of them are men. One of them is bound to be the

right boy for you." And, as recently as 1999, Hollywood offered its viewers relatively nothing new in its depiction of fictional actresses. The plot of *Notting Hill*, a film in which a famous unmarried actress has a relationship with a bookstore owner, is described by its makers as "For both, something or *someone* seems to be missing" (Universal). As Sue Pierman notes in her review of the movie, even financially secure actresses are internally insecure if they are without a man in their lives: "[Julia] Roberts plays an action-film heroine whose roles require her to save the world, though she can't get a handle on her love life. She shines as the beautiful yet vulnerable actress who yearns for her true soulmate." Molly Haskell has observed that this disempowering of the actress as a strong, professional woman is a standard cinematic device aimed at pleasing viewers. Commenting on the 1936 comedy *The Moon's Our Home*, she says

> as with many such films, what we remember is not the scene of surrender but the previous ninety minutes in which the heroine more than holds her own in the battle of the sexes. As in Shakespeare's plays, the happy ending is a convention that satisfies a need for order and resolution while leaving ample room for doubt as to the completeness of the promised joy. (6)

The notions that actresses, successful or not in their careers, are incomplete without a man, that to ignore such a relationship in favour of their careers is unnatural and unwomanly, and that they must marry in order to give a text its requisite happy ending, persists in our present-day culture. Hence, Thackeray's stage women are a refreshing contrast because they inspire new readings about these conventional

representations of femininity. While Haskell's claims about the interpretative reactions of an audience to a film's conclusion are dubious, Thackeray leaves no doubt in our minds that he wants us to think, critically, about the ideas and images of femininity he has presented in his texts.

For example, an illustration in *Lovel the Widower* shows Bessy looking at her reflection in a mirror. We can see her dual image, symbolic of her governess-actress nature and Batchelor's uncertainty about her character. Like him, we may wonder when is she acting—mirroring cultural representations of femininity—and when is she not? Is she a lamb or a wolf? And then we notice that Thackeray has added a third image to ponder. Pictured in the illustration is a woman who never appears physically in the text—"You will never see her alive in this history" (77), says Batchelor—but who appears in other illustrations and is often alluded to in the story. She is Mrs. Lovel—the status and title Bessy will assume when she marries Lovel.

Lovel's first wife, the late Cecilia Lovel is an important figure, especially for what she contributes to the story's look at readings of femininity. She exists now as a large portrait on a wall. Pictured with her harp—which still remains as a fixture in a corner of the Lovel household—she is a perfect model of the Angel in the House, or so her mother insists. However, when Cecilia was alive, she hardly conveyed the qualities of an angel. Rather, Batchelor insists she was a noisy, disagreeable, bossy woman who henpecked her husband: "I thought her a lean, scraggy, lackadaisical, egotistical, consequential, insipid creature" (59). Even though her mother constantly refers to her as an angel, others, including Cecilia's own son, point out she had not been a model of perfection when she was alive:

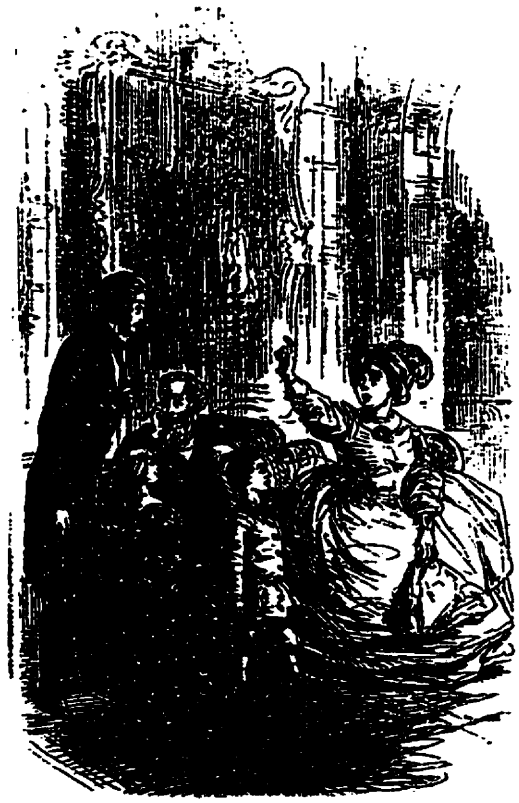
[Lovel] had his little Cissy at his knee: he was sitting under the portrait of the defunct musician, whose harp, now muffled in leather, stood dimly in the corner of the room.

'I am here not at my own wish, but from a feeling of duty towards that—departed—angel!' says Lady Baker, pointing to the picture.

'I am sure when mamma was here, you were always quarrelling,' says little Popham, with a scowl.

'This is the way those innocent children have been taught to regard me,' cries grandmamma.

'Silence, Pop,' says papa, 'and don't be a rude boy.' (78)



Thackeray underscores Cecilia's "angelic" nature with Batchelor's sarcastic references to her harp playing. Cecilia stands in the portrait

> fingering that harp with which she has often driven me half mad with her 'Tara's Halls' and her 'Poor Marianne'. She used to bully Fred so, and be so rude to his guests, that in order to pacify her, he would meanly say, 'Do, my love, let us have a little music!' and thrumpty—thrumpty, off would go her gloves, and "Tara's Halls' would begin. 'The harp that *once*,' indeed! the accursed catgut scarce knew any other music, and 'once' was a hundred times at least in *my* hearing. (77)

Not only is Cecilia a poor harpist for an angel, but she is referred to as an angel only when her mother finds the reference useful in advancing her own importance within the family. For example, Batchelor refers to one incident when Lady Baker

> abused her position. She appealed to Cecilia's picture a great deal too much during the course of breakfast. She hinted, she sighed, she waggled her head at me, and spoke about 'that angel' in the most tragic manner. Angel is all very well: but your angel brought in *à tout propos*; your departed blessing called out of her grave ever so many times a day; when grandmamma wants to carry a point of her own; when the children are naughty, or noisy; when papa betrays a flickering inclination to dine at his club, or to bring home a bachelor friend or two to Shrublands;--I say your angel always dragged in by the wings into the conversation loses her effect. (143)

As part of his reflexive approach to literature, Thackeray parodies the concept of the Angel in the House—the icon of femininity. This story, along with many other texts, suggests that a woman can become this Angel only if she is contained within art—either by playing roles on stage, or by being framed within a portrait. The Angel is an artificial, theatrical, construct, a false representation of femininity imprisoned within as heavy a frame as Cecilia's portrait.

Culture may try to conceal this frame, but Thackeray's stage women make it visible. Of those who are firmly contained by culture within this border, as "portraits" of ideal femininity—ballerinas, Pocahontas, Shakespearean and melodramatic heroines—Thackeray use the intertexuality of parody to make us intensely aware of the makers of the frame. They try to disguise the fact that ballerinas are physical women, not disembodied spirits. They try to romanticise the history of Pocahontas to the extent that her true story has been all but lost. They try to ignore the fact that actresses who become Imogen, Ophelia, and Mrs. Haller on stage are so different in their private lives that they cast aspersions on the ability of playwrights to convey true femininity. They try to categorise anti-authoritarian females, such as embodied by Clytemnestra, as unnatural and evil, because through their defiance the frame becomes exposed.

Thackeray's direct attack on those who make these frames, who "kill" women in art with conventional images, intensifies in *The Ravenswing* and *Lovel the Widower*. The writers/narrators cannot imprison their heroines within art because the borders of the frame become too apparent. Neither woman will acquiesce to the role of damsel in distress. They are not angels, but earthbound women who respond

forcefully when attempts are made to restrict their complex natures within simplified theatrical constructs. They do not fit traditional scripts, traditional images of femininity in culture. Their narrators, having lost control of their heroines' characterisation, then lose control of their stories. They can provide no happy endings, no order, and no resolution for their readers. Both stories, to an even greater extent than Thackeray's other texts, become metacommentaries on literary conclusions and truthfulness in art. For example, each makes reference to the marriages of their principal stage women, thus conforming to modern films' use of the recuperation of the independent actress to the domestic sphere. But Thackeray's texts are much more explicit about the "ample doubt" concerning the "completeness of the promised joy" that Haskell refers to in terms of modern cinema. At the end of The *Ravenswing*, the narrator finds Morgiana is happily married; no longer is she the celebrated Ravenswing. But is she? Woolsey adamantly insists that her sole identity is now "'Mrs. WOOLSEY,'" sharply reminding Fitz-Boodle that she has "long since left the stage." But while that should settle the matter of her character, Fitz-Boodle notes that Morgiana's mother then "trod on my toes very severely, and nodded her head an all her ribands in a most mysterious way" (R 462). In that mysterious nod, Thackeray leaves the text ambiguously open, implying that Morgiana may, like her mother, still be linked to the world of theatre. Woolsey may not have absolute control over her, just as the narrator himself cannot fully control her in the writing of her story.

Lovel ends with the notice of Bessy and Lovel's marriage; the hero is to marry the heroine and all will be right in terms of literary tradition. But Batchelor describes

the even in a language of uncertainty, as if he cannot bring himself to commit it to paper as a *fait accompli*:

> A month afterwards, a cab *might* have been seen driving from the Temple to Hanover Square: and a month and a day after that drive, an advertisement *might* have been read in the Post and Times: 'Married, on Thursday, 10th, at St. George's, Hanover Square by the Reverend the Master of St. Boniface College, Oxbridge, uncle of the bride, Frederick Lovel, Esquire of Shrublands, Roehampton, to Elizabeth, eldest daughter of the late Captain Montague Prior, K.S.F.' (L 195, emphasis mine)

The story, which Batchelor describes as a comedy, ends on an unhappy note (reminiscent of his gloomy conclusion in *Rebecca and Rowena*) that is most unorthodox for a comedy: "Good night, my little players. We have been merry together, and we part with soft hearts and somewhat rueful countenances, don't we?" (L 195).

That Batchelor implicates the reader, as well as his characters, as "little players" in his script is consistent with the other texts in which Thackeray wants his readers to remember that they are reading fiction, that we realise part of this fiction is the way women have been rendered and framed within texts. One of Thackeray's favourite techniques for showing the disparity between fiction and truth was parody. As Margaret Rose says, "In evoking the expectations of an audience for the imitation of a certain work only to 'disappoint' or shock the reader with another text, parody has also enabled the author to attack reader expectations for imitative or representational

works" (185). This attack on expectations is never so clear as in *The Ravenswing* when Fitz-Boodle is forced to apologise to his readers for the unorthodox—untheatrical—behaviour of his heroine. He realises that his readers have been pre-conditioned to expect fictional females will exhibit the behaviour of women on stage. Thus he says defensively, "It is not my fault that my heroine's sensibilities were not more keen, that she had not the least occasion for sal-volatile or symptom of a fainting fit; but it was so" (R 401).

But overturning reader expectations about the behaviour of heroines is not the only way Thackeray inserts his readers into his texts. His interest in the process and reception of art coalesces in his narrators' uncertainties and ambiguities about the stories they are telling. What are we to make, for example, of Batchelor's admission that his story, "though it is all true, [has] not a word of truth in it . . . that his [Lovel's] wife [Bessy] . . . is not the lady you imagine her to be" (L 60)?

The answer lies in our willingness to adopt a critical approach to the images culture presents to us for our consumption. *Lovel*'s self-conscious storyteller, along with the writers and stage women of Thackeray's texts, reminds us of the need to re-evaluate our trust in those who make cultural representations of femininity, and of the need to question fiction's and drama's faithfulness to human nature.[1] His texts offer us the challenge that we can become better, more critical, readers of our culture, and thereby achieve a greater understanding of the complexity of human behaviour.

Notes

[1]One twentieth-century writer who questioned truthfulness in fiction was Angela Carter, who, like Thackeray, often used stage women, including female puppets, circus performers, and actress, to demythologise the feminine images that have become entrenched without our culture, and to overturn literary conventions such as happy endings.

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