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I

WHEN THACKERAY remarked that “the unwritten part of books . . . would be the most interesting,”¹ he meant, among other things, that the art of implication is the most subtle of authorial decorums. At no time in *Vanity Fair* is that art practiced so well as when Thackeray retires from the stage as “Manager” of his comic history and allows Becky Sharp to enact the tragic charade “The Triumph of Clytemnestra.”² It is a singular performance, played “with such ghastly truth” (p. 494) that it leaves the spectators speechless with fright and admiration. The scandalous identification of Becky, the novel’s mock-heroic adventuress, with the heroic figure of the most majestic female dissembler in the chronicles of myth and history marks the culmination of Becky’s career in the world of vanity. Implied in her “comic” rise from article pupil to lady of fashion is the terrible project of Clytemnestra to revenge herself against a power both envied and resented.

The silent truth of Becky’s “character” is re-emphasized in her second major appearance as Clytemnestra. Her re-assumption of Clytemnestra’s demonic identity in the novel’s penultimate illustration (see next page) haunts the reader’s imagination by ominously suggesting an ongoing campaign of vengeance, an undiminished talent for subterfuge, and, of course, the ghastly literalization of what in Becky’s moment of triumph was represented as an “innocent” charade. In a murderous pantomime, a terrorized Jos Sedley pleads with the “Good Samaritan,” Colonel Dobbin, to deliver him from the demonic schemer, while an inspired Becky balefully looks on from behind a curtain, seemingly awaiting the propitious moment to strike. The illustration presents an “interesting” (in Thackeray’s sense) explanation of Sedley’s suspicious

death, for there is, in fact, no corresponding evidence in the written text to corroborate the visual testimony against Becky. The details of the illustration—and they are designedly indistinct—alone prove incriminating. Becky is Clytemnestra primarily in her *attitude*, in the aggressive and threatening stance she assumes toward her potential victim. Her hand, the agent of her murderous intention, is blurred in shadow, allowing just the suggestion of a poised weapon. The caption identifies Becky with Clytemnestra; the illustration insists on dark equivocations, on a shady and shadowy reality. The only verdict that can be rendered is Rawdon’s anguished but legally dubious earlier judgment on Becky’s seemingly treacherous conduct: “If she’s not guilty, . . . she’s as bad as guilty” (p. 537).

Thackeray claimed that behind all his personifications “there lies a dark moral, I hope” (*Papers*, II, 309). But the meditative Thackerayan “I” who at times almost abuses his authorial license to intrude on the narrative with moral commentary remains conspicuously silent on the psychological, ethical, and social significance of Becky’s impersonation of Clytemnestra and on the “dark moral” explicated through feminine retaliatory or “opportunistic” violence. He communicates Becky’s affinity to Clytemnestra exclusively through the media of charade and illustration. In her two appearances as the murderous queen, Becky becomes pure icon, an unspeakable and speechless image of demonic womanhood. The garrulous narrator’s uncharacteristic reticence in the presence of this icon has never been adequately remarked, much less explained. Thackeray refuses to make the obvious connection between Clytemnestra’s rebellion against the warrior culture that authorizes the sacrifice of her child, Iphigenia, and his own extensive critique of the attitudes toward women and children in the bourgeois, jingoistic, mercantile culture of nineteenth-century England. He never interprets the material of the charade



Becky, clutching what appears to be a sharp weapon, listens to a terrified Jos converse with Colonel Dobbin. (Thackeray's illustration, *Vanity Fair* [London, 1848], Ch. lxvii; reproduced by permission of the Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Princeton University Library.)

and illustration as a didactic allegory of the multiple vanities of familial, social, and political ambitions. Nor does he elaborate the myth of Clytemnestra into a cautionary tale or homiletic parable. He merely displaces it into a network of images that compose, in Dorothy Van Ghent's words, "the face of a gorgon of destiny."³

Van Ghent skillfully traces the cultural derangements adumbrated in the novel's theme of "the fathers" to a classical and Freudian intuition of "the monstrous nature of man." Selecting for comment the "incidental" image of the chronometer "surmounted by a cheerful brass group of the sacrifice of Iphigenia" that summons the Osborne clan to its evening ritual meal, she remarks:

The depths which are suggested by this picture, but quite as if accidentally, are the depths of Greek tragedy and, still further back, of Freud's dim, sub-human, imagined "primitive horde": the "dark leader" with his "hushed female company," and the ridiculous but furious Victorian clock "cheerfully" symbolizing the whole. (p. 149)

I would not argue with Van Ghent's view of Becky Sharp as the condensation of the "imperatively aggressive" and "insanely euphoric" attitudes prevailing in the morally sick civilization represented in *Vanity Fair*. I would only expand consideration of Thackeray's appropriation of classical material to interpret this pervasive cultural pathology. This essay first considers the charades that dramatize the dark classical moral represented in Thackeray's historical fabling and then examines his motive for innuendo, his reasons for submerging his classical and Freudian intuitions of cultural pathology in the depths of his picture of *Vanity Fair*.

II

It is part of the controlling conceit of Thackeray's novel to present history as an extended sequence of performances ("puppet shows") enacting a moral so dark that to illuminate it fully might be politically or spiritually perilous. Thackeray literalizes his controlling metaphor in the chapter "in which a charade is acted which may or may not puzzle the reader" (p. 484). But the apparent decision to clarify his metaphor is cunningly compromised by the riddling nature of the charades.

As a form of verbal "play," charades are designedly opaque. They attempt to communicate a hidden meaning, usually symbolized by a single word that assumes fetishistic properties because its meaning and form are shrouded in an often guilty secrecy. In charades the word is divided into its constituent sounds—the words within the word—and each component is dramatized. The audience, reader, or spectator must then recombine these "floating signifiers" to discover the whole word, whose original and primary significance is again dramatized at the end of the charade in the tableau of the Whole. Although charades appear to play freely with

meaning, their “real” meaning is predetermined in a word that cannot be replaced by, or mistaken for, another word. In the best charades, those combining verbal wit with social or emotional “fact,” the secret word representing the Whole denominates not only a sum greater than its constituent parts but the exact reverse of those parts. Such a feat of verbal reversal and transformation is illustrated in Jane Austen’s *Emma* by Mr. Elton’s charade for “courtship” or in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* by the charades for “Bridewell,” puzzled out by Rochester’s fashionable guests.⁴ Brontë’s charades, like Thackeray’s, are particularly cunning in communicating their ghastly truth. As ironic wordplays, the charades reveal the private and unsuspected torment of Rochester and his mad, imprisoned wife, Bertha Mason, through publicly enacting the word’s two syllables, in tableaux that seem especially grim given the innocent surfaces of “Bride” and “well.”

Charades, then, are never totally gratuitous forms of entertainment. They constitute a mode of verbal double-dealing that involves and often implicates the actors or spectators—sometimes both—in the social or psychological reality dramatized. Charades are dumb shows “to catch the conscience of the king” by playing out a deliberately concealed evil, an ignored social danger, or an obscure external menace or private horror. The incriminating potential of charades is emphasized by the disguises and roles adopted by the concealing-revealing performers who enact them. Thus Thackeray identifies the characters in the first series of charades—Colonel Crawley as Agamemnon, Becky as Clytemnestra—but their social identity dissolves, although not completely, into the drama they enact without being technically guilty. Characters thus assume roles in a play whose meaning is made transparent *through* them but is not necessarily made transparent *to* them. Their assigned roles are charged with a characteristic Thackerayan innuendo and equivocation; to repeat the judgment of Colonel Crawley, these performers, if not guilty, are as bad as guilty. And the same may be said of those in complicity with them—the audience of the charades.

It is the emotionally felt presumption of personal or cultural guilt that pervades and shadows the apparently “innocent” entertainments at

Vanity Fair’s Gaunt House. The charades begin with an oriental tableau depicting a Turkish dignitary and voluptuary examining the “wares” of an Eastern slave trade. Despite the exotic decor evoking an alien, barbaric milieu, the initial moments of this charade announce a universal, not a historically localized, cultural pathology: sexual bondage, enslavement, exploitation, and victimization. As a Nubian slave makes his obeisant salaams to “my lord the Aga,” the fashionable audience responds with a “thrill of terror and delight,” a spontaneous demonstration of feeling that betrays an “exquisite” and volatile sexual fantasy of demonic virility that lies perilously close to the surface of the audience’s “civilized” consciousness.

The icons of sexual imperialism that abound in this charade implicate the spectator-audience in the guilt, not of association, but of attitude, as Becky’s second appearance as Clytemnestra suggests. Thus the Nubian slave’s obeisant salaams to the Kislak Aga eerily recall and comment on the attitude of the idolatrous and slavish Amelia, who, on her wedding night, prostrates herself before her master, George Osborne. And the audience’s “thrill of terror and delight” echoes George’s own exquisite sensation as he gazes on the “slave before him in that simple yielding faithful creature” and feels his soul thrill within him, the “Sultan’s thrill” in sexual mastery and “the knowledge of his complete power” (p. 187).⁵ In exposing the secret fantasies of sexual appropriation masquerading as “lawful matrimonial pleasures” (p. 284), Thackeray attempts his subtlest, perhaps most damaging penetration into the dark and tumultuous instincts underlying the civilized structures of sexual conduct and the social institution of marriage.

The aestheticizing of these sadomasochistic yearnings is represented in the ensuing sequence of the tableau when the entreaties of the beautiful slave girl asking to be returned to her Circassian lover are contemplated as composing an attitude of “beautiful despair” (p. 493). The “obdurate Hassan” only laughs at her sentimental notion of the Circassian bridegroom, mocking the slave girl’s “Arcadian Simplicity” in believing that love, not power, determines the destiny of women in the markets of *Vanity Fair*. The tableau, which contrasts the “genteel” fictions of disinterested love with the sexual im-

perialism of a rich and decadent culture, is resolved through a sudden and completely illusory *deus ex machina*. The repressed takes its revenge on the oppressor, as the Kislak Aga, the black eunuch of the oriental harem, brings in a letter, a ghastly joy transfiguring his face. In an ecstasy of revenge, “grinning horribly,” and ignoring the Pasha’s cry for mercy, the Kislak Aga pulls out a bowstring. The denouement of this revenger’s tragedy is eclipsed in a sudden and decorous blackout that hides the “dark deed” from public view.

The orientalism of this charade may shield the audience from the dramatic immediacy of the eunuch’s murderous revenge. Yet it also provides more than a distancing backdrop against which all contagious fantasies can be played out without fear of censure. The oriental setting accumulates into itself all Thackeray’s previous suggestions in the novel that beneath England’s treatment of women—hypostasized in the Victorian cult of angelic womanhood—abides an unregenerate barbarity, a “Turkish” lust for mastery: “We are Turks with the affections of our women,” the narrator had earlier remarked of the “poor little martyr” Amelia, “and have made them subscribe to our doctrine too” (p. 169). Through Amelia, the angelic figure of self-sacrificing, self-effacing womanhood whose “gentle little heart” obeys “not unwillingly” such despotic doctrines, Thackeray is forced to examine the psychology of female martyrdom. The slave girl in the charades is only a public symbol of Amelia’s private enslavement to a whole system of cultural imperatives. When the narrator attempts to “peer into those dark places where the torture is administered” to such willing victims, he sees a sight so pitiable and incriminating that he breaks out into a hysterical apostrophe to subjugated women that combines compassion for their plight with relief at his own masculine exemption from their “long and ignoble bondage”:

O you poor women! O you poor secret martyrs and victims, whose life is a torture, who are stretched on racks in your bedrooms, and who lay your heads down on the block daily at the drawing-room table; every man who watches your pains, or peers into those dark places where the torture is administered to you, must pity you—and—and thank God that he has a beard. (p. 552)

It is clear that Thackeray harbors no *intrinsic* respect for “the romance and the sentiment of sacrifice” as an expressive vehicle of heroic womanhood, for it is precisely such idealizations that secure Amelia’s bondage.⁶ The narrator’s voyeuristic penetration into the dark chambers of the feminine psyche that house such sentiments unmans him, and he retreats, in a kind of willing “blackout” of his aroused consciousness, from the pitiable spectacle by recalling, uneasily and rather comically, the sexual symbol of his difference and his exemption from such torture—his beard. Such unnerving glimpses of secret martyrdom, unwitnessed victimization, and “Gothic” savagery are appropriated by the first component of the charade word—“Aga,” a cultural symbol of sexual barbarity infecting private life and expanded into public and political forms.

The second charade retains the Eastern background, but the suggestion of violence has been suppressed and transformed into a peaceful tableau. The eunuch has resigned himself to impotent passivity, and Zuleikah, the despairing pastoral lover, is now perfectly reconciled to her victimizer, the Hassan. There is hardly any action in the scene. Instead, interest centers on the imposing figure of an enormous Egyptian head, from which issues a comic song composed by Mr. Wagg. The dominating figure alludes to the Ethiopian king Memnon. According to Lemprière’s *Bibliotheca Classica*, Thackeray’s favorite source for classical material,⁷ Memnon’s heroic death was commemorated by an enormous statue that possessed “the wonderful property of uttering a melodious sound every day, at sun-rising, like that which is heard at the breaking of the string of a harp when it is wound up.”⁸ The statue and the legend it symbolizes emphasize the metamorphic properties of violence. Memnon was killed in combat with Achilles in defense of Priam’s Troy. His mother, Aurora, was so disconsolate at the death of her son that she pleaded with Zeus to grant her sacrificed child an honor that might immortalize him. Zeus complied, and from the funeral pyre of Memnon there arose a flight of birds, the Memnonides. The myth is composed of several motifs involving scenes of violent, yet ultimately stabilizing metamorphosis: the metamorphosis of Memnon’s bloody death into the seasonal re-

turn of the Memnonides in ritual commemoration of the Ethiopian monarch; the transformation of violence into an artifact of civilization; the translation of grief into art, suffering into song. It is this final transformation that is emphasized in the “singing head” of the charade.

The peaceful harmony of this tableau vivant soon proves illusory, however, as the pacific and comic song issuing from the death’s-head modulates into the unexpectedly dissonant and sublime chords of “the awful music of Don Juan.” Like Agamemnon, Don Juan represents a type of sexually imperial masculinity with an immoderate appetite for power, and the strains from the opera provide a rhetorically musical bridge connecting the archaic bloodlusts of a barbaric civilization (the “subject” of the charades) with the sexual vendettas disrupting a more contemporary aristocratic milieu (the social “subject” of *Vanity Fair*). In the Mozartian opera of seduction and betrayal, of sexual transgression and retribution in the name of family honor or divine vengeance, Thackeray sees the same cultural ethos working out its evil destiny: a corrupt ideology of sexual imperialism underlying the myth of love in the Western world. The last of Thackeray’s historical charades reveals the secret identity and cultural primacy of his central figure of virility—Agamemnon, a curious compound of heroic and barbaric manhood: an “Aga,” a figure of sexual barbarism; a “Memnon,” a figure of cultural authority and prestige. With mordant irony, Thackeray bestows on Agamemnon the epithet *anax andron*, the kingly man who will soon pay for the excesses of his manhood and of his kingship. In a sweeping and majestic gesture of feminine revenge, Clytemnestra, alias Becky Crawley, steals the dagger from the hesitant Aegisthus to complete the retribution, but here again the outcome is overcome by darkness.

The scene of the second series of charades moves to more familiar territory, as if to escape the malignancy and potency of the oriental and classical material dramatized in the first sequence. Thackeray’s setting is now Fielding-esque, evoking the atmosphere of low-life farce and the memory of an earlier England where evil took the benign form of rascality. The first tableau of the second series depicts a comic “night” scene in a country house. The action is

desultory: two bagmen play a game of cribbage, a chambermaid warms up the beds and wards off the bagmen’s advances. The scene ends to the dreamy cadences of “Dormez, dormez, chers Amours” (p. 496). If the virulent “Amantium Irae” is exposed and released in the Clytemnestra-Agamemnon charade, here the strain is transposed and modulated into sweeter amatory tones anticipating the love lyric, “The Rose upon My Balcony,” that concludes the entertainments.

But the submerged motif of sexual horror reasserts itself in the second tableau of the new series. The scene remains the same, but the insignia of the house is now revealed to be the Steyne arms, the chivalric “coronets and carved heraldry” that Thackeray has already described as bearing “the dark mark of fate and doom.” Thus even though the scene resembles the merry comings and goings of *Tom Jones*’s Upton Inn (“inn,” of course, is the syllable dramatized in this tableau), the Steyne arms visually suggest an invisible, internal, and still potent fatality at work, recalling Thackeray’s earlier hint that a sexual curse haunts the Steyne house:

It was the mysterious taint of the blood: the poor mother had brought it from her own ancient race. The evil had broken out once or twice in the father’s family, long before Lady Steyne’s sins had begun, or her fasts and tears and penances had been offered in their expiation. (p. 457)

An Aeschylean brooding over the fall of the great house informs Thackeray’s account of evil communicating itself through the mysterious “stain” or taint of blood brought from an ancient race, an ancestral evil that hangs over Gaunt House as a dark reminder of the time “when the pride of the race was struck down as the firstborn of Pharaoh.” The original sin embodied in the fatal union of the Steynes becomes the focus of the deepest progenitive anxieties about familial succession, patrimony, and the decline and eclipse of the aristocracy as a historical heritage. The charades’ suppressed Ovidian theme of metamorphosis and their Aeschylean vision of sexual fate and familial doom combine to revive the repressed but never forgotten memory of unexpiated and unexpiable sins that will be violently avenged. Ominous hints of an avenging agent and future retribution

are conveyed in the final “rustle” of movement at the end of the “inn” charade. As the curtain is drawn, a mysterious, though eminent, guest is being announced, perhaps an Orestes bent on revenge or, as Thackeray intimates, a Ulysses preparing for another kind of bloody homecoming. Christian hopes in the efficacy of penance (the expiatory prayers of Lady Steyne) are eclipsed by the urgency and power of these classical foreshadowings of an inevitable historical reckoning. They are only revived, belatedly, in the mark of Cain that Lord Steyne, after his failed attempt to appease Rawdon and exculpate himself, bears as the “scar” inflicted by Colonel Crawley, the avenging returned husband, in the melodramatic scene that marks the catastrophe of Becky and Steyne’s illicit liaison.

In the final syllable of the second series of charades, anxieties about an impending cultural crisis provoked by the domestic tragedies and hypocrisies of a decaying aristocracy are concentrated into an image of imperial (political) fear. The final tableau shows a ship foundering in unruly seas, despite the heartening medley of “Rule Britannia.” The spectacle of the imperiled ship of state, conventional symbol of maritime England, speaks to the most frightening nightmare haunting the British political mind. As the music of the tableau “rises up to the wildest pitch of stormy excitement,” discharging itself in “gale,” the source of the audience’s uneasy, turbulent emotion (the specter of political unrest and unrule) is mollified by the transfiguration of Becky into Philomele. The charade completes its word: Philomele, “the night-in-gale.”

The pairing of Clytemnestra and Philomele in the character of Becky Sharp is neither fortuitous nor incongruous. Philomele’s story, like Clytemnestra’s, constitutes an elaborate narration of sexual deception, brutality, violation of sacred familial bonds, and violent reprisal. Philomele is also a figure of outraged womanhood, literally concealed and silenced by her sexual seducer and tormentor, Tereus, king of Thrace, husband to Philomele’s sister, Procne. Tereus’ crimes against Philomele, whom he imprisons and mutilates by cutting out her tongue, are, like Agamemnon’s, doubly grave, being the sins of both king and husband. Philomele, deprived of a voice to protest her ravishment, communicates the chronicle of her sufferings through art—the

tapestry she weaves to tell of the sins of the fathers, the living fabric of primal wrongs. Like the scenes that evoke her presence, Philomele’s speechless art reenacts the hidden outrage and silently protests against the oppressor’s power. It is Procne who reads the tale and, like Clytemnestra, disguises her resentments while plotting her treacherous revenge. During the Bacchic orgies she murders her son Itys and serves him to the brutal and brutalizing Tereus in a grisly feast. When Tereus learns of this cannibalistic and retributive rite, his rage is predictably extreme, but his murderous designs against Philomele and Procne are forestalled by his own transformation into a hoopoe, Philomele’s into a nightingale, Procne’s into a swallow, and Itys’ into a pheasant.

These grim classical legends of metamorphosis, fatal sexual unions, incestuous intrigue, familial cannibalism, sacrificed children, and female retaliation mirror and complement Agamemnon and Clytemnestra’s family tragedy and, of course, all the incestuous, spiritually cannibalizing relationships in *Vanity Fair*. Thackeray seems to be following the late, Ovidian version of the myth that makes Philomele the nightingale and Procne the swallow, perhaps because the Ovidian reinterpretation attributes both pathos and the power of representation to the mute, raped sister rather than to the betrayed and betraying wife.⁹ The Ovidian version allows Thackeray to suggest the essential doubleness of Becky as a figure of cultural evil, representing a Clytemnestra and a Philomele, the ravisher and the ravished, the unscrupulous avenger and the plaintive victim. Thackeray’s double image of female fatality culminates in the much remarked description of Becky as a siren of magical powers who lures men to their watery graves. (Clytemnestra simply lures Agamemnon to his bath to kill him.) The Becky-siren, “singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling,” conceals from view a “monster’s hideous tail, . . . writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy” (p. 617). The snake-siren image reveals more about the narrator’s erotic imagination than it does about Becky’s fatal sexuality, betraying as it does the sexual disgust and fear lurking beneath the “perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner” in which he relates her fiendish (Bohemian) adventures. If Becky is a monster with a remark-

able and growing “taste for disrespectability” (p. 625), she is no *lusus naturae*, no freak of nature, but a freak of the culture whose model of angelic womanhood elevates the religious over the erotic instinct. Becky’s “disreputable” character represents the potential for a demonic and malevolent female sexuality in contrast to the respectable but no less selfish “love” of her true opposite and double, Amelia, the martyr to the Victorian feminine ideal who dedicates her life to the “corpse” of her love (p. 172).

III

It was George Eliot who reminded us, citing the authority of Herodotus, that the woman question is not an extraneous or a peripheral factor in the historical analysis of change but a “fit beginning.”¹⁰ Like Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, *Vanity Fair* centers on the lot of women in its description of the origins of cultural crisis and its prophetic assessments of the possibilities for meaningful change. When Thackeray decides to forgo a military history celebrating England’s heroic manhood during the Napoleonic era for a comic history chronicling the amatory and financial fortunes of female “non-combatants” and the men who love them (p. 282), his decision is neither historically frivolous nor inconsequential. The stories of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley expand into paradigmatic fables paralleling and reflecting “those mutations which ages produce in empires, cities, and boroughs” (p. 66), mutations that are recorded in the migration of power from the landed gentry to an ascendant middle class with a ready-money, credit economy.

In the declining aristocracy (whose historical eclipse Thackeray dramatizes by the deep degeneracy of Sir Pitt Crawley presiding over the “rotten borough” of Queen’s Crawley, by the cynicism of Lord Steyne, and by the “Dowagerism” reigning in Great Gaunt Street [p. 451]) and in the rising merchant classes (which he treats satirically), Thackeray perceives, but cannot totally disavow, the same corrupt and corrupting sexual ideology, the wholesale “selling” and emotional victimization of women to ensure the traditional primacy and the economic power of an imperiled social caste. Marriage thus be-

comes the instrument of social and political ambitions, and all sexual attitudes serve to rationalize even as they dissimulate this fundamental, sexually “politic” economy.

Thackeray’s formal appropriation of the Clytemnestra myth in the novel serves as a psychological and *historical* commentary on the unexamined delusions of the Victorian’s sexual ideology. To identify Becky as Clytemnestra is not merely to invoke a psychological explanation for Becky’s “natural” wickedness but to suggest that in the conduct of life the public and the private, the national and the domestic remain inseparable. Attitudes toward women, marriage, sex, because they are present at the very formation and foundation of a cultural order, constitute the primary basis of cultural and social stability. Ideology is all of a piece, so that the private tyrannies authorized by familial self-interest do not confine themselves to the domestic sphere but invariably and inevitably radiate to infect a society’s conception of itself and to motivate the most decisive of national actions.

Becky Sharp is a representative figure whose social ambitions reflect the internal crisis of oppressed womanhood and the external menace of a “French” radicalism comically treated in the “bel esprit” of Miss Crawley, who passionately embraces Voltaire and Rousseau and talks “most energetically of the rights of women” (p. 93). Becky’s radicalism is more subversive and disarming. Her mother was a Frenchwoman, and Becky’s morals seem indebted to the darker elements in French novels. In the denigration and humiliation of women, Thackeray discerns a universal principle of violation that provides the logic of his domestic comedy and informs his intuition, pristinely classical in its pessimism, of the cycle of reprisal that underlies and determines all historical events. In one of the novel’s few sustained moments of seriousness, the narrator comments on the historically decisive battle of Waterloo, a comment that is hauntingly applicable to the outrages committed and authorized by the bitter necessities of war for which Clytemnestra courts revenge in the *Agamemnon*:

. . . you and I, who were children when the great battle was won and lost, are never tired of hearing

and recounting the history of that famous action. Its remembrance rankles still in the bosoms of millions of the countrymen of those brave men who lost the day. They pant for an opportunity of revenging that humiliation; and if a contest, ending in a victory on their part, should ensue, elating them in their turn, and leaving its cursed legacy of hatred and rage behind to us, there is no end to the so-called glory and shame, and to the alternations of successful and unsuccessful murder, in which two high-spirited nations might engage. Centuries hence, we Frenchmen and Englishmen might be boasting and killing each other still, carrying out bravely the Devil's Code of honour. (p. 314)

Shame and glory are the values endemic to a classical ethos, and their legacy is a cursed heritage of hatred and rage, the alternations of successful and unsuccessful murder. In contemplating the sweeping panorama of historical change and struggle, Thackeray discerns an endlessly repeatable cycle of victimization and revenge. Nor is this legacy confined to intercultural, international conflict. The organizing conceit of his novel centers on the interpenetrating metaphors of military and amatory campaigns to secure "positions," establish power, defend hegemony. And the deep interdependence, even identity, between acts of love and war, caricatured in the illustration depicting the comic *mésalliance* of Venus preparing the armor of Mars (p. 282), penetrates far into the rhetoric of the novel's social and political satire.¹¹ Through the controlling image of embattled relations, Thackeray suggests that tyrannies and servilities corrupting the foundation of social life eventually infect the entire cultural order. The mutually reinforcing projects of sexual and political revenge are symbolized in the Iphigenia chronometer, whose steady and remorseless ticking signals an ongoing, if unsuspected, cycle of aggression and retaliation. Becky's second appearance as Clytemnestra keeps this classical concept of familial, racial, and national fatality alive. It suggests that the "strife" between men and women, between the outraged female and the kingly male, is a strife not confined to private realms but, as Clytemnestra warns the chorus in the *Agamemnon*, a "conflict born out of ancient bitterness . . . pondered deep in time."¹²

Thackeray's classicism in *Vanity Fair*, then, validates rather than contradicts the novel's crit-

ical realism and its narrative objective: "to expose," as Lukács rightly argues, "contemporary apologetics."¹³ The mythological material that supports the novel's cultural interpretation and social criticism both reflects and anticipates the resurgent "paganism" whose "dark morals" will dominate the historical imagination of the second half of the nineteenth century. In this sense, *Vanity Fair* is an intriguing transitional text between the self-confident neoclassical novels of Fielding, who could develop potentially contagious Oedipal material within a transforming Christian vision of providentially ordered history, and the bitter, darkly pagan Aeschylean tragedies of Thomas Hardy. As the last two major illustrations of *Vanity Fair* testify, depicting the double face of Becky Sharp as Clytemnestra (see p. 780) and as an ironic exemplum of "Virtue Rewarded," there exists an uneasy and problematic alliance between Thackeray's classical intuitions of cultural disorder and the Christian vision implied by his novel's ironic appropriation of its allegorical original, *Pilgrim's Progress*. The charades, the "play" within the larger historical performance enacted in the novel, are representative of Thackeray's dilemma and his proposed solution: through their *formal* opacity and equivocation, they suggest that the meaning of historical act or cultural "attitude" must be supplied, puzzled out by the spectator or reader. Thackeray deliberately displaces meaning into the external and alienating realm of impersonation, symbolic identification, and illustration, where it is subject to multiple, often faulty interpretations, even though, as the charades tell us, only one conclusion is right and inevitable.

The generic imperative of the charades is never to expose reality in the direct light of complete representation. It is this imperative that shadows and perhaps explains Thackeray's reluctance as a narrator to interpret the central classical myths of the novel and to expose Becky as guilty or innocent of certain sexual or social crimes. Thackeray's reticence in dealing explicitly with these issues may have something to do with the moral climate of his time,¹⁴ but his carefully chosen moments of silence originate, I would suggest, in a kind of ritual reluctance and fear at unveiling the deeper mysteries or hidden laws governing the fate of any society. Vanity, for Thackeray as for the Preacher, is the false

idol of the unregenerate historical world, its dark divinity incarnated in the “Imperial Master,” the “Magnificent Idea,” the “August Presence” of the king who rules. As Thackeray prepares to initiate his readers into what he had earlier called the “mystical language” (p. 367) of vanity and to usher them into the very penetralia of mystery—the entertainments that provide the “high world” of fashion and power with its social rituals—he tellingly invokes the tutelary myth of Semele:

They say the honest newspaper-fellow who sits in the hall and takes down the names of the great ones who are admitted to the feasts, dies after a little time. He can't survive the glare of fashion long. It scorches him up, as the presence of Jupiter in full dress wasted that poor imprudent Semele—a giddy moth of a creature who ruined herself by venturing out of her natural atmosphere. Her myth ought to be taken to heart amongst the Tyburnians, the Belgravians,—her story, and perhaps Becky's too.

(p. 484)

Thackeray's attempt to allegorize the story of Semele into a comic parable of social vanity and class “imprudence,” like his Clytemnestra charade, is only partially successful in concealing the generative meaning of the myth. Semele, a mortal, gains knowledge of divine and immutable form at the expense of her life; her story, and Becky's too, constitutes a cautionary myth linking the *éclaircissement* of the knower with a destructive, if generative, violence that is essentially sexual.¹⁵ Thackeray's allusion to this myth of sexual violence and violation introduces a variation on the novelistic theme of unhappy unions, a theme previously limited to the comic treatment of “*mésalliance*”: the imprudent marriage of Amelia Sedley and George Osborne.

The myth of Semele establishes a correspondence between demystification and annihilation that is crucial in understanding Thackeray's own attitudes toward novelistic knowledge, especially narrative omniscience. Complete knowledge becomes at best an instrument of historical and personal devaluation, as when the narrator “enlightens” his readers that the relics sent to Miss Crawley to effect a reconciliation between Rawdon and his aunt were purchased from peddlers trafficking in the spoils of war. “The novelist,” advises the narrator in sardonic tones, “who

knows everything, knows this also” (p. 318). Here omniscience is in the service of Thackeray's “cynicism,” but the narrator is merely laughing up the reader's sleeve. At worst, complete demystification constitutes what Ruskin, in his troubled response to *Vanity Fair*, calls “blasphemy”—in its scriptural sense of “‘Harmful Speaking’—not against God only, but against man, and against all the good works and purposes of Nature”:

The word is accurately opposed to “Euphemy,” the right or well-speaking of God and His world; and the two modes of speech are those which, going out of the mouth, sanctify or defile the man.

Going out of the mouth, that is to say, deliberately and of purpose. A French postillion's “Sacrr-re”—loud, with the low “Nom de Dieu” following between his teeth, is not blasphemy, unless against his horse; but Mr. Thackeray's close of his Waterloo chapter in *Vanity Fair*, “And all night long Amelia was praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart” (sic), is blasphemy of the most fatal and subtle kind.¹⁶

Ruskin's appropriation of the vocabulary of the sacred to interpret the “speech” of omniscient narration locates the source of sanctity or defilement in the speaker, not in the reality of the thing spoken. Thackeray's blasphemy in the Waterloo chapter is authorized, however, by the conventions of realism that prescribe the unbiased chronicling of event unmediated by palliative illusion. But in the charades of *Vanity Fair*, in the question of Becky's guilty liaison with Lord Steyne, and in the suspicious death of Jos Sedley, Thackeray resorts neither to voiced blasphemy nor to its Ruskinian opposite, euphemy. Rather he resorts to blasphemy's negation: an equivocal and equivocating silence. His *ultimate* reluctance to expose the illusion of love and the myth of good works emanating from God, man, and nature leads him to abscond, like a tormented demiurge, from the scene of the performances, leaving the stage of his history free for his performers to act out blasphemy without speaking it.

Perhaps it is the story of Semele (“her story, and . . . Becky's too”) that remains the fable Thackeray takes most to heart. As the myth suggests, Thackeray's critical silences could be-

tray an anxiety, religious or metaphysical, about the limits of the human power to know and to represent. It is an anxiety Thackeray covertly expresses in his life of Swift, where he sees in Swift's genius—a genius almost Zeus-like in its power “to flash upon falsehood and scorch it into perdition”—an awful and an evil spirit. Thackeray describes Swift in a passage that recalls Semele's imprudent exposure to the glare of a dazzling magnificence:

In his old age, looking at the ‘Tale of a Tub’, when he said, “Good God, what a genius I had when I wrote that book!” I think he was admiring, not the genius, but the consequences to which the genius had brought him—a vast genius, a magnificent genius, a genius wonderfully bright, and dazzling, and strong,—to seize, to know, to see, to flash upon falsehood and scorch it into perdition, to penetrate into the hidden motives, and expose the black thoughts of men,—an awful, an evil spirit.¹⁷

What Thackeray seems to fear in the example of Swift's life and the methods of his art is the fate ordained for the evil genius capable of penetrating into hidden motives and exposing the black thoughts of men: the “maddened hurricane” of a tormented man who suffered “frightfully from the consciousness of his own scepticism” and who “bent his pride so far down as to put his apostasy out to hire” (p. 171). The subjectivism underlying Thackeray's belief that Swift's art was inspired by the misanthropic resentments of a failed opportunist may reflect Thackeray's own fear of spiritual bankruptcy, a fear dramatized in the cynical apostasy of the haunted Lord Steyne, over whose head hovers the Damoclean sword of madness (p. 454). It is this fear that may explain Thackeray's moral and ideological ambivalence in *Vanity Fair*, an ambivalence Arnold Kettle has defined as the desire to “expose illusions and yet keep them.”¹⁸ Such ambivalence lies at the heart of Thackeray's “gentlemanly ideal,” an ideal that

endorses the class-bound ideology his satire exposes.

Thackeray himself defends the moral status of silence when he defines Amelia's reticence as “the timid denial of the unwelcome assertion of ruling folks, a tacit protestantism” (p. 601). In Thackeray's tacit protestantism, so different from the vocal and charged denunciations of Swift, he lays to rest his social and narrative anxieties and exorcises the Swiftian specter of prophetic madness. It is such tacit protestantism that characterizes the melancholic anomie of the novel's broken or inconclusive ending: “Come children, let us shut up the box and the puppets, for our play is played out” (p. 666).

Having opened up a Pandora's box of social and historical evils, Thackeray vainly tries to shut them up in the confines of his fictional puppet box, to “miniaturize” and thus minimize the implications of his fable. As a satirist and critical realist, Thackeray is hopelessly divided between his evil genius for penetration into the hidden motives and invisible laws governing human relations and his Steyne-like cynicism in exposing a reality at once spiritually vain and morally horrifying. Charlotte Brontë rightly saw that the satirist of *Vanity Fair* could lift “the mask from the face of the Pharisee” through the “Greek fire of his sarcasm,” but she mistakenly placed the “levin-brand of denunciation” in the tradition of biblical prophecy. If *Vanity Fair* often speaks as “solemn as an oracle,” its testimony does not resemble the “faithful counsel” of a Micaiah prophesying evil.¹⁹ When Thackeray speaks, he speaks like the impotent prophetess Cassandra, who, in chronicling the *Agamemnon's* dark drama of sexual vengeance, laments that “there is no god of healing in this story” (l. 1248).

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Notes

¹ *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. Gordon N. Ray (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1964), III, 391.

² William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed.

Geoffrey Tillotson and Kathleen Tillotson (Boston: Houghton, 1963), p. 494. Subsequent references are to this edition, and page numbers are cited in the text.

³ Van Ghent, “*Vanity Fair*,” in *The English Novel*:

Form and Function (New York: Holt, 1953), p. 151.

⁴ The charade in *Emma* is as follows:

To Miss _____

My first displays the wealth and pomp of kings,
Lords of the earth! their luxury and ease.
Another view of man, my second brings,
Behold him there, the monarch of the seas!

But, ah! united, what reverse we have!
Man's boasted power and freedom, all are flown;
Lord of the earth and sea, he bends a slave,
And woman, lovely woman, reigns alone.

Although Emma has little trouble puzzling out the charades and supplying the talismanic word—"courtship"—she is unable to interpret them as a parable of power and freedom compromised by love (see *Emma*, ed. Lionel Trilling [Boston: Houghton, 1957], Vol. 1, Ch. ix, p. 54). For the charades in *Jane Eyre*, see *Jane Eyre* (New York: Norton, 1971), Ch. xviii, pp. 160–62.

⁵ Brontë's Rochester assumes a similar character in the charade he performs as "the very model of an eastern emir," but Brontë proves her talent for equivocation by refusing to specify whether he is "an agent or a victim of the bowstring" in a pantomime drawn from "the patriarchal days" (*Jane Eyre*, p. 161).

⁶ Romances portraying the sexual subjugation of women are codified in their most engaging form in *The Arabian Nights*, the oriental collection of tales that Thackeray identifies as the primary text of childhood. Dobbin loses himself in daydreams inspired by the oriental magic of the tales (p. 47), and Becky, too, seems to fashion her dreams of glory and prosperity on the model of "charming Alnaschar visions" (p. 28). Alnaschar's "charming" visions of fantastic wealth, however, generate more volatile fantasies of criminal sadism and sexual omnipotence. Moreover, the frame story of the *Arabian Nights* also concerns a reign of terror pursued by a once benign pasha who, disillusioned in love, systematically sets out to depopulate the ranks of womanhood. Scheherazade is the clever, scheming woman who, like Becky, weaves fictions to buy time to circumvent or redirect the violence that may eventually claim her as its victim.

⁷ John Loofbourow, *Thackeray and the Form of Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 61.

⁸ J. Lemprière, *Bibliotheca Classica* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1888), p. 740.

⁹ See Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (New York: Braziller, 1957), pp. 165–69. The two versions are at the heart of the "confusion" in Arnold's poetic treatment of the myth in his "Philomela." Both Swinburne ("Itylus") and Eliot (*The Waste Land*) conform to the Ovidian reinterpretation of the myth.

¹⁰ Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. Gordon S. Haight (Boston: Houghton, 1956), Bk. I, Ch. xi, p. 71.

¹¹ See Edgar F. Harden, "The Fields of Mars in *Vanity Fair*," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 10 (1965), 123–32.

¹² *The Oresteia*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1967), ll. 1377–78. All further citations will be to this translation.

¹³ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel*, trans. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell (London: Merlin, 1962), p. 202. Lukács does not specify, though he might, that it is primarily the classical allusions that undermine the apologetics of the current historical regime. As a meditation on vanity that eschews, even as it competes with, the "braggart heathen allegories" of classical myth, the novel's Christian moralizing addresses a more pervasive malaise: *contemptus mundi*. Thackeray's classicism is more culture-bound than his "Christian" stance because it is more involved with the specific orders of time.

¹⁴ Thackeray explicitly addresses and implicitly deplores "the moral world" of readers whose Pharisaic habits force the narrator to adopt euphemy for plain speaking, innuendo for declaration: "We must pass over a part of Mrs. Rebecca Crawley's biography with that lightness and delicacy which the world demands—the moral world, that has, perhaps, no particular objection to vice, but an insuperable repugnance to hearing vice called by its proper name" (p. 617). Since this well-known passage only serves to introduce the infamous description of the Becky-siren, Thackeray seems to be indulging in his own brand of feigned delicacy.

¹⁵ Out of the catastrophic union of Semele and Zeus is born—or rescued—the infant Dionysus, who becomes the tutelary god and founder of orgiastic rites dominated by, and appealing primarily to, women. These Bacchic rites play a role in the tragedy of Tereus, Procne, and Philomele. Leo C. Curran points out that in the later Ovidian version of the Semele myth the association between sexual and divine violence is clear: "Ovid's language is explicit in indicating that Semele's immolation takes place *during* the act of intercourse and not merely when Jupiter approaches her" (see "Rape and Rape Victims in *The Metamorphosis*," *Arethusa*, 11 [1978], 239, n.).

¹⁶ John Ruskin, *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884; rpt. in *Thackeray: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson and Donald Hawes [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968]), p. 87.

¹⁷ Thackeray, "Swift," *The English Humourists*, in *The Works of William Makepeace Thackeray*, Cornhill ed. (New York: Scribners, 1911), xxi, 171.

¹⁸ Kettle, *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London: Hutchinson, 1951), p. 169.

¹⁹ See Charlotte Brontë's preface, dedicated to Thackeray, in *Jane Eyre*, 2nd ed. (London, 1847).