

NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

ISSUE 16.2 (Summer 2020)

Adapting Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* after #MeToo

By Rebecca Richardson, Stanford University

<1>Many years after Thackeray died, John Esten Cooke recalled a conversation with him that had touched on Becky Sharp. “[T]here is one mystery about her,” Cooke had ventured, “which I should like to have cleared up” (251). Recalling the end of the novel and the infamous illustration of Becky Sharp holding a dagger in Jos’s chamber, Cooke inquired “Did Becky kill him, Mr. Thackeray?” (252). As Cooke remembers it, Thackeray “smoked meditatively,” a “‘slow smile’ dawning on his face,” and then proclaimed “I don’t know!” (252). Thackeray had purposefully built gaps like this one into the novel, and, even years later, he resisted filling them in. Across *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray’s narrator is difficult to pin down, wavering between a seemingly omniscient perspective and an embodied role in the diegetic story world. But he is particularly slippery when it comes to Becky’s character, whom he likens to a mermaid—one that he has carefully described “above the waterline,” never showing us “the monster’s hideous tail” (637-38). As a result, the novel leaves open questions: Does Becky in fact have an affair with Lord Steyne, or is she unjustly gossiped about? Does she kill Jos, or does he die of natural causes? These open questions offer gray spaces for Becky’s character to occupy, forestalling a final verdict of guilty or innocent.

<2>In distinction, adaptations of *Vanity Fair*—across film, television, and theater—have tended, like Cooke, to seek a final verdict. Recent adaptations, including Mira Nair’s 2004 film, Kate Hamill’s 2017 play, and Gwyneth Hughes’s 2018 miniseries, provide clearer answers to those big gaps in the novel’s narration. As this essay will argue, these decisions about how to portray Becky Sharp’s character are particularly loaded after #MeToo. This character has long provided an opportunity to think about the representation of an ambitious woman who employs her sexuality to get what she wants, but now adapters face even more pressure to think through the implications of this character’s portrayal. Significantly, recent adaptations have tended to return a verdict in favor of Becky Sharp, who emerges as comparatively innocent of the worst crimes suggested in the novel. The idea that Becky might murder Jos has proven especially difficult for adaptations to stomach. In fact, far from murdering Jos, in Nair’s version Becky is shown in the final scenes arriving with him in India, happily riding elephants. Likewise, the last glimpse of Becky in the 2018 miniseries is nearly the opposite of a murder scene: Becky hugs Amelia upon discovering that she has already written to Dobbin to reconcile with him, and then, in the next scene, she watches from a distance as Dobbin arrives and is reunited with Amelia.<1>

<3>Most interestingly, these recent adaptations also declare Becky Sharp innocent—or at least more sinned against than sinning—in her relationship with Lord Steyne. Where the novel resists showing us what exactly transpires between Steyne and Becky, Nair’s film depicts Steyne sexually assaulting Becky. Hamill’s 2017 theatrical adaptation and Hughes’s 2018 miniseries

both expand on this interpretation, drawing out and at times explicitly thematizing the physical and sexual violence that Becky Sharp is threatened with or subjected to. In the process, these adaptations have translated the gaps and gray spaces of the novel, asking not if Becky is guilty of an affair, but whether she consents—or could meaningfully consent—to a sexual relationship with Steyne. These recent adaptations thus offer important case studies for contemporary debates in the wake of #MeToo about another sort of gray space: between consensual and nonconsensual sex. At the same time, in imagining how Becky Sharp’s character could be less a perpetrator and more a survivor of others’ wrongdoing, these adaptations have reactivated old questions about this character’s likability. When Becky’s character is portrayed as more or less guilty of pursuing a transactional affair with Steyne, audiences might in turn be more or less likely to judge her character and, if she is assaulted, to victim-blame her. While reviewers have not always commented on Becky’s likability in relation to the Steyne plotline specifically, they do link her likability to her perceived culpability on other fronts. For example, in a review of Nair’s film, Robert Gottlieb observed that “Playing a possible murderess was never in the cards for the eternally adorable Reese Witherspoon.” As a result of such decisions, Roger Ebert proclaimed this version of Becky Sharp “a little more likeable.” Hughes’s 2018 miniseries has inspired similar reactions. As one *Guardian* review put it, Hughes’s adaptation adheres to the trend of taking the “amoral social climber” of the novel and turning her into someone “warm and relatable” (Dugdale).

<4>In this essay, I’ll take up these questions and the theme of this special issue through the lens of adaptation as well as Neo-Victorian studies. By comparing different versions of a narrative across media and contexts, we can better see—and better teach our students to see—the affordances and limits of both that narrative and various media. Adaptations invite us to use our contemporary perspective to raise new questions about an old narrative, while modeling how we might remake part of our cultural inheritance to fit the needs of the current moment. In the case of *Vanity Fair*, the character of Becky Sharp uniquely presents the opportunity to think through questions about gender and power, both in the Victorian era and our own. As a result, especially in the wake of #MeToo, adaptations of *Vanity Fair* seem necessarily self-conscious and critical. Such self-awareness and self-reflexivity are at the core of Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn’s definition of neo-Victorian texts, which, they argue, are “self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians” (4). This self-consciousness is what distinguishes the neo-Victorian from other ways of engaging with Victorian texts and themes. For example, as Heilmann and Llewellyn point out, just because a work of historical fiction or an adaptation is set in the nineteenth century does not mean it self-consciously engages in reinterpretation (4).

<5>Recent adaptations of *Vanity Fair* have shown a marked interest in critically re-envisioning the novel’s gender dynamics, particularly when they fill in the gaps of Thackeray’s narration to show us Becky and Steyne’s relationship. These adaptations have thoughtfully used such scenes to speak to our own era’s concerns—the newly urgent need to theorize the gray spaces between consent and non-consent, how a character’s “likability” is linked to her perceived guilt or innocence, and what this means for portraying female characters and sexual encounters that fall in the gray spaces. As a result, when these adaptations imagine how the socio-economic and gender dynamics in the nineteenth century (and perhaps also, sadly, today) would give Steyne power over Becky, they importantly question how to represent women as agents and survivors,

particularly when a chief criterion for female characters today is that they be “likable.” Addressing how the neo-Victorian can specifically “[re-think] Victorian gender roles and relations against the background of various feminisms,” Joyce Goggin and Tara MacDonald raise the important point that such work involves “inherent confusion, disorientation, and sometimes pain” (2). There is indeed something unsettling about the fact that recent adaptations have made Becky Sharp’s character more “likeable” while amplifying attention to her vulnerability and pain.

<6>Since the publication of *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp’s character has allowed audiences and adaptations to tap into a particular moment’s debates about gender and power. Despite facing systemic disadvantages, her character manipulates those around her in order to climb the socio-economic ladder. She’s a master of what Lisa Jadwin has called “female double discourse,” able to shape-shift to get what she wants across rhetorical situations (35). Throughout Thackeray’s novel, she explicitly employs her gendered position and sexuality, culminating in the “did she or didn’t she” scandal with Lord Steyne. In short, Becky Sharp climbs despite being systematically disempowered as a woman without name or fortune, but sometimes she does this by leaning into gendered expectations, and very often at the cost of others; her victims include women as well as men, working-class as well as upper-class characters. Questions around Becky Sharp’s character come up in criticism, of course, but they erupt in fresh ways whenever a new adaptation makes its way onto stages and screens. After both #MeToo and the 2016 U.S. presidential election, adaptations seem all the more motivated to re-imagine this ambitious woman’s culpability, likability, and relatability—terms that might conjure another: electability. Fittingly, Kate Hamill’s 2017 theatrical adaptation has Becky Sharp declare “Everyone knows I am a nasty woman” (57).

<7>This attention to Becky’s character has dovetailed with and in part resulted from the tendency of adaptations to center around her character. Beginning with the earliest theatrical productions based on the novel, adapters have faced two key difficulties: the sheer length of the novel and the role of Thackeray’s narrator. Adapters solved the first by re-imagining the narrative’s scope. As the American playwright Langdon Mitchell declared, a play of *Vanity Fair* is “impossible.” But, he pivoted, “Becky is superbly possible” (qtd. in Colby 167). Mitchell’s solution was a popular stage adaptation in the 1890s that announces exactly the extent to which the novel, which was supposed to go without a hero, had been re-imagined around one. Titled *Becky Sharp*, the production became the basis for the 1935 film that shares the name.

<8>Not only do adaptations tend to center Becky’s character, but they also offer more unmediated access to her by eliminating the role of Thackeray’s narrator. This is a striking difference, given how readers and critics have cited the importance of the narrator’s voice in *Vanity Fair*. One 1865 review of a new American edition, for example, notes that, in *Vanity Fair*, “essay is [...] mixed up with narrative, and comment with characterization” (Whipple 639). After Nair’s 2004 version, Gottlieb pointed out that no adaptation quite catches the “essence” of the novel, “which has less to do with the plot or the characters than with the author/narrator’s voice.” And, as we’ve seen, Thackeray’s narrator plays an especially outsized role in crafting our access to Becky Sharp’s character, slyly leaving gaps in the narration and the reader’s knowledge. Nora Gilbert has argued that he thus manipulates “the logic of scandal”: “he tells us that he cannot discuss certain elements of Becky’s life because they are too shocking, too

dissolute, too immoral; then, after showing himself to be on the side of the morally indignant, he goes ahead and discusses them anyway” (548). All of this presents something of a dilemma for *Vanity Fair* adaptations: how much of the hazy scandals to show us, crystallized into actual scenes, and how to signal some distance between the stance or ethics of the production and those of its oft-centralized character.

<9>When adapters imagine Becky Sharp’s character carrying the narrative, they often desire to make her “appealing.” I take this term from an interview with Nair, where she argues that whoever plays Becky Sharp “gets a chance to do everything. She has to be complicated and full of guile as well as wild—and, of course, helplessly in love. She also has to be cunning at times, and completely helpless at other times. She has all of these wonderful contradictions that go into human beings. I wanted to cast an actress who could handle those contradictions while remaining irresistibly appealing” (Porton).<2> To keep Becky “irresistibly appealing” risks the tendency Gottlieb worries about—that adaptations will shy away from suggesting the potentially troubling side of this character under the waterline. Robert A. Colby, although writing about the 1935 version directed by Rouben Mamoulian and based on Langdon Mitchell’s play, observes something of this tendency as well: “Mitchell’s Becky is rather devitalized—coming out pert and naughty rather than unscrupulous. There is a detectable tendency to sentimentalize Becky...” (183). Gottlieb laments such “Hollywoodification” of Becky Sharp, arguing that this is most certainly not a “diva role; she’s a greedy, manipulative, unscrupulous piece of work whose life-trajectory peters out undramatically.” In short, he argues, this “is not a Hollywood story.” And yet, Hollywood keeps using it “as a vehicle for a star” (Gottlieb). This sense that Becky Sharp’s character has been “sentimentalized” or made “appealing” in order to carry the lead, whether in 1935 or 2004, suggests the difficulty, across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, of centering a female character who is not entirely likable.

<10>Roxane Gay has theorized what’s at stake when audiences and reviewers level critiques about a character’s likability—particularly when that character is a woman. Building on Lionel Shriver’s essay, which breaks “likable” down into two parts, moral approval and affection, Gay notes that these criteria are especially tricky for female characters: “In literature, as in life, the rules are all too often different for girls. There are many instances where an unlikable man is billed as an anti-hero, earning a special term to explain those ways in which he deviates from the norm, the traditionally likable. The list, beginning with Holden Caulfield in *Catcher in the Rye*, is long. An unlikable man is inscrutably interesting, dark, or tormented but ultimately compelling, even when he might behave in distasteful ways” (88). This manifests in a preponderance of male anti-heroes—with the Walter Whites, Dexter Morgans, and Jax Tellers far outweighing the Villanelles in today’s television.<3> Given the persistence of such gender roles in today’s media landscape, it is less surprising that adaptations of *Vanity Fair* have consciously or unconsciously made Becky Sharp more “likable” than her novelistic counterpart.

<11>When adaptations push Becky Sharp’s character into the limelight and over the line to likable, they reframe the novel’s concerns with representing gender, sexuality, agency, and power. Every twenty years or so a BBC production of *Vanity Fair* comes out, but the last few decades have seen even more interest: a BBC miniseries in 1987 and then again in 1998; Nair’s 2004 film; Hamill’s 2017 play; and, most recently, Hughes’s 2018 miniseries. Becky Sharp’s character, and the gaps in Thackeray’s narration, have thus uniquely allowed different

adaptations to portray power and sexuality in the same era that has seen legal and cultural sea-changes around the definition and perception of sexual harassment and assault. These sea-changes are most clearly visible in the way that adaptations over the past thirty years have shifted from suggesting a mostly consensual (even if blatantly transactional) relationship between Becky and Steyne, to portraying scenes of sexual assault. This is particularly marked if we just concentrate on the oft-adapted confrontation scene—when Rawdon arrives after having his debt paid early and catches Lord Steyne alone with Becky. In the novel, Rawdon enters the house and hears Becky singing and Steyne’s “Brava! Brava!” When he enters the drawing room, he finds that “[Steyne] had her hand in his, and was bowing over it to kiss it, when Becky started up with a faint scream as she caught sight of Rawdon’s white face” (533). While she protests that she is innocent, the novel leaves open just how intimate Steyne and Becky may have been. The 1987 and 1998 BBC miniseries follow the novel in portraying what appears to be a consensual scene, but they go a bit further in suggesting sexual intimacy: in the 1987 version Becky leans back, smiling, as Steyne bends over her, presumably about to kiss her neck; in the 1998 adaptation she reclines on a sofa while Steyne kneels over her. Nair’s 2004 film marks a turning point: Witherspoon’s Becky is clearly shocked when Steyne isolates her and forces himself on her. Subsequent adaptations, including the 2017 play and 2018 miniseries, have similarly portrayed Steyne sexually assaulting Becky, but with messier dynamics—inviting the audience to grapple with this gray space, where a transactional or unwanted interaction raises question about degrees of consent.

<12>Before turning to these most recent adaptations, however, it is useful to think about how the novel and the earlier adaptations hinted at Steyne’s potential for violence. For example, the 1987 miniseries suggests the violence underlying Becky Sharp and Lord Steyne’s interactions, even if we don’t see this manifest explicitly as sexual assault. In this version, the quick succession of scenes suggests a transactional relationship and quid pro quo: a “discrete carriage” ferries Becky away from her own home in the middle of the night, and Steyne asks her what she wants. But such a transaction of course skews toward Steyne, who holds the real economic and social power. And this power becomes overtly physicalized when he confronts Becky with the lies she’s told about what she does with the money he gives her: he grabs her wrists and snarls “Actresses require managers, Becky. And I am yours” (Episode 7, 8:00-9:30). Throughout this exchange, Becky is on her knees with Steyne towering over her in a chair. When Steyne leans forward to grab her by the wrists, she seems to resist, dropping her previously playful persona and curling her hands into fists. All of this is a far cry from Thackeray’s text, where Steyne is more impressed and amused than angry when he discovers how Becky has made off with the money supposedly meant to repay Briggs. He repeatedly laughs and then thinks “What an accomplished little devil it is! . . . What a splendid actress and manager!” (524). In the novel, Becky retains the role of “manager,” whereas the 1987 adaptation has Steyne claim it and immediately direct Becky’s next course of action.

<13>The 1998 miniseries, like the 1987 version, also hints at coercion or violence between Becky and Steyne—producing a new narrative gap in the process. In this version, when Steyne confronts Becky about what she does with the money he gives her, he suggests they speak with more “privacy”; the two climb into a carriage, and the scene ends. There’s a significant gap here but, when we see Becky next, she is emotional and sniffing—and not for the benefit of a diegetic audience (Episode 5, 35:00-38:00). This is, again, a marked difference from the novel:

Steyne confronts her “good-humouredly” and “compliment[s] her . . . on her cleverness in getting more than the money which she had required” (524). After the carriage drive around Regent’s Park, she flies “to her dear Briggs with a smiling face” to announce the good news that Steyne has offered Briggs a position (525).

<14>We could understand the 1987 and 1998 adaptations as lifting the potential for violence from other passages in the novel and applying it to the confrontation between Becky and Steyne. In fact, the above scenes from the 1987 and 1998 versions are in keeping with the way Thackeray’s narrator portrays Steyne lording his power over the other women in his life. When Thackeray’s Steyne forces his wife to receive Becky Sharp in their home, she retorts “you may strike me if you like sir” (485). Steyne replies “I am a gentleman, and never lay my hand upon a woman, save in the way of kindness. I only wish to correct little faults in your character” (485). But two chapters earlier, the narrator, via some reported gossip, has explained that Steyne has other ways of wielding power than overt physical violence. We learn that “[t]he humiliations . . . which [Lady Steyne] has been made to undergo, in her own house, have been frightful” (466-67). It’s suggested that she “would not be so submissive as she is if the Marquis had not some sword to hold over her” (467). Adaptations of course have a harder time conveying this sort of information, which Thackeray’s narrator is able to report via a certain Tom Eaves, “who has no part in this history, except that he knew all the great folks in London, and the stories and mysteries of each family” (466). In something of a solution to this, the 1998 adaptation translates such narrated gossip into an actual scene: Steyne towers over his seated wife when he orders her to extend an invitation to Becky; he doesn’t strike her, but he menacingly pinches her earlobe, delivering the line from the novel—“I only wish to correct little faults in your character”—as a physicalized threat (Episode 5, 29:30-30:30). Lady Steyne’s upturned and fearful gaze would seem to confirm that there is indeed a threat of violence here.

<15>Adaptations might thus depart from the text to convey the novel’s hints and rumors around Steyne’s violent and/or threatening behavior towards the women in his life. Given how Steyne is shown or rumored to wield power within his family in Thackeray’s text—whether it’s the soft power of information, blackmail, and money, or in fact physical force—adapters are surely right to wonder how this dynamic might manifest itself in his relationship with Becky. The novel, of course, keeps an opaque veil over whether or not they have a sexual relationship. But Thackeray does, at the eleventh hour, suggest the threat Steyne poses to Becky when a proxy warns her to leave town or risk her life:

Whether my lord really had murderous intentions towards Mrs. Becky as Monsieur Fiche said . . . and the factotum objected to have to do with assassination; or whether he simply had a commission to frighten Mrs. Crawley out of a city where his Lordship proposed to pass the winter, and the sight of her would be eminently disagreeable to the great nobleman, is a point which has never been ascertained... (650-51)

All of this is wrapped in the haze of gossip and hearsay but, importantly, Becky—who tends to be clever and a good judge of character—thinks the threat is worth heeding: “the threat had its effect upon the little woman, and she sought no more to intrude herself upon the presence of her old patron” (651). And in fact we have other hints in the novel—often also taken up by adaptations—of how Steyne manipulates the situation with Becky, from removing her “watchdog,” Briggs; to sending her son off to school; to ensuring Rawdon is held for unpaid

debts. Steyne thus employs exactly the tactic we would now recognize as a hallmark of abusive relationships—isolating the subject from others who might be witnesses or protectors.

<16>Recent adaptations thus have good reason to re-imagine the Becky-Steyne dynamics, and to portray Steyne as explicitly manipulative and abusive. As noted above, Nair's 2004 film portrays this in the starkest terms. Witherspoon's version of Becky is an unsuspecting victim when Steyne forces himself on her; it's simply a matter of bad timing that Rawdon walks in at that exact moment. Steyne thus emerges even more clearly as a villain in Nair's film. As Ana Moya has argued, this fits with how Nair portrays Steyne, who, "from the beginning," appears as a "menace, an impersonation of the dangers of the world in which Becky is moving"—in a sort of Dickensian tradition of "dark worldly characters like Fagin or Miss Havisham" (82). Micael M. Clarke similarly reads this version of Steyne's character as a place where Nair loses "the moral ambiguity of Thackeray's narrative" (48). Clarke argues that Witherspoon's version of Becky is "clearly resisting Steyne's demands that she 'repay' the favors he has done her" (48-49). Consequently, Becky stays "an unambiguously sympathetic character in order to retain Thackeray's critique of the economic and sexual dynamics portrayed in the novel" (Clarke 49-50). As many critics have noted, in making Becky Sharp the "unambiguous heroine who gets and deserves all the sympathies of the audience, including that of the feminists," Nair can be seen as adapting this narrative to Bollywood conventions (Stratmann 90). But she can also be seen as adapting this narrative to Hollywood expectations for a "likeable" character; Becky becomes more sympathetic when she is portrayed as a victim of Steyne and bad timing, rather than a willing participant in a transactional and adulterous affair. She seems, in Nair's and Witherspoon's hands, to become a victim who is all the harder to blame.

<17>The 2018 adaptation offers a more nuanced and complicated interpretation of the Becky-Steyne plot. The quick succession of scenes in Episode 6 suggests that, in exchange for being presented at court, Becky presents herself to Steyne alone at night (17:00-22:00). But this scene with Becky and Steyne alone together, which might initially seem consensual even if, again, purely transactional, then veers towards assault—as if crafted to tap into today's debates around the problematic term "date rape." When asked if she has everything she wants, Becky, played by Olivia Cooke, responds with "All I ever wanted was to be accounted a respectable lady"—suggesting that she wants at least to be seen as someone who would not be Steyne's mistress. Far from respecting this request, Steyne tells her to "Aim higher." He kisses her, without her enthusiasm, her participation, or, in short, any sign of consent; he rips off her cloak while her arms remain locked against her sides; and the screen goes black (20:30-21:30; figure 1). Next, we see Becky entering her own house. She looks soberly at the mirror and into the camera lens before forcing a brave smile, presumably in preparation to see Rawdon (21:30-22:30; figures 2 and 3). This scene and its gaps illustrate the difficulties of thinking through the gray space between consent and lack of consent. As Chiara Cooper points out in an essay on #MeToo, it is important to distinguish not just between consent and non-consent, but between "consent and 'wantedness'" (7). Cooke's Becky might seem technically to consent to something by visiting Steyne, but she clearly does not actively desire or want this physical interaction. In my reading, Cooke's Becky seems to be enduring an unwanted encounter simply to hold up her end of a bargain—although it seems from her comment about wanting to be seen as a respectable lady that the exact price has not been made clear and that she wants to signal her hesitation. It's also very possible to read her character as freezing in the moment, or changing her mind entirely.

Sophie Hinds and Bianca Fileborn, also writing about gray space in the wake of #MeToo, argue that, given the complex mix of societal pressures, ideas about sex and gender, and the need to minimize harm in the moment, “it is not always possible to make clear distinctions between pressurized sex, coercive sex and rape” (5). By staging and editing the scene in these ways, the 2018 adaptation leaves the audience with a new gap and gray space. But even without the full scene or more details, Cooke’s Becky seems, at the least, to face pressurized and unwanted sexual activity.

<18>This way of re-imagining a gap and gray space in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* allows the 2018 adaptation to speak more urgently to our own moment. I’m thinking especially of how #MeToo freshly revealed the difficulty that American society and media has with confronting the realities of sexual harassment and assault. Both the wider culture and legal system desire black-and-white clarity, epitomized in the case of a stranger violently attacking someone who verbally and physically resists. This doesn’t leave much room for the nuances of real-world cases: an interaction might start consensually and then turn into assault, a skewed power dynamic can trouble the very concept of consent, and not everyone reacts to a traumatic experience in the same way. Harvey Weinstein’s case catalyzed much-needed conversations about how power dynamics can trouble easy lines between sexual harassment/assault and consent. But this attention came after decades of abuses, as if it took this chorus of accusations to finally force a public reckoning. And even Weinstein’s case seemed relatively straightforward in comparison to Grace’s accusations against comedian Aziz Ansari on *babe.net*. Grace’s detailed story of Ansari’s persistent, unwanted sexual advances led to heated debates about the gray space between consent and assault, with many claiming Grace’s story threatened the validity of the entire #MeToo movement.

<19>Commenting on the problematic ways in which Grace’s story was handled, Hinds and Fileborn have proposed more productive ways to engage with this gray space. As they argue, such a space can usefully acknowledge “the messiness and complexity of at least some experiences of sexual violence” (3). There is of course a risk here: to acknowledge the gray space at all could be seen as “working to excuse or minimize harmful sexual encounters” (3). But, they argue, it is still important “to recognize that not all experiences can be neatly categorized as violence/non-violence” (3-4). Drawing on Lena Gunnarsson’s work, Hinds and Fileborn argue that the gray space importantly “encapsulates those encounters that sit in the interstitial or liminal spaces between dominant constructions of sexual violence/non-violence” (4). This gray space has also helpfully been theorized as a continuum. Karen Boyle, drawing on work by Liz Kelly, suggests that “continuum thinking” around sexual violence “can offer important interventions which unsettle binaries, recognise grey areas in women’s experiences and avoid ‘othering’ specific communities” (19). Boyle argues that such an approach “allows us to understand connections whilst nevertheless maintaining distinctions that are important conceptually, politically and legally” (19). Whereas Nair’s 2004 film seems to desire clarity in the Steyne-Becky plotline, the 2018 adaptation uses Becky Sharp’s character to explore a gray space or continuum, converging with our era’s post-#MeToo debates.

<20>This interest in using the character of Becky Sharp to explore post-#MeToo gray spaces sits uneasily with the ways that Olivia Cooke’s version has been embraced as an empowering character for today’s feminism. In an adaptation that seems otherwise to delight in Becky

Sharp's self-interested social climbing, the Becky-Steine plotline involves a rare portrayal of this character's emotional vulnerability—and one that implicates the audience's gaze when Cooke's Becky directly engages with the camera. The reception to the miniseries has been generally positive, reading Becky's character as a plucky *and* likable go-getter—one who speaks back to outdated gender roles. As Rebecca Reid asserts, "Becky is in control of her own destiny ... daring to put yourself first was a bold, feminist act. Given that women still do the majority of unpaid domestic labour, these are qualities we could learn from." She notes, probably correctly, that a man with Becky's traits would be "lauded as a hero." The problem is "that Becky is that most challenging of things: a protagonist who is unscrupulous, self-interested and female." In the same piece, Claire Cohen proclaims that Becky is "shameless, delightfully morally bankrupt, and I love her for it."

<21>In another review, echoing a term we've seen before, Troy Patterson argues that Becky Sharp, even when she's gold-digging, is "appealing": "Like Mira Nair's sumptuous 2004 adaptation . . . this version translates Becky's conniving into endearing pluck. It doesn't entirely disapprove of her slyness. We're sympathetic to her hustle—you gotta do what you gotta do." But Patterson argues that the adaptation allows for too much sympathy, concluding that, by "[s]oftening Becky's edges and defanging the story's satire, Amazon offers a self-contradictory miniseries without much of a point." It is of course difficult to quantify how much of this perceived "softening" is the result of the way these two adaptations handle the Steine plotline. But the scenes with Steine certainly work hand-in-hand with other elements of Nair and Hughes's adaptations. For example, Nair tends to pay closer attention to Becky's backstory and context in ways that leave more room for "liking" this character. Departing from adaptation precedent, Nair includes early scenes of Becky as an impoverished child—scenes that do some heavy narrative lifting when it comes to sympathetically explaining this character's later attitudes and actions. Nair also, as Gottlieb points out, "prettie[s] up" the rejection of little Rawdy—it is Steine, not Becky, who sends him out of the room in the film. Both Hughes and Nair also suggest some elements of a more genuine friendship with Amelia. As noted above, Becky's final appearance in Hughes's storyline has her watching from afar while Amelia and Dobbin reunite, before turning and walking away alone. In Nair's version, Becky even stays in Brussels to help a laboring Amelia, a plotline that seems to tip a hat to *Gone with the Wind*.<4>

<22>Both adaptations have been accused of making Becky Sharp "appealing," thus "softening" the satire of the novel, at the same time that this character is pushed into more "innocent" territory with the Steine plotline—where she is decidedly not an enthusiastically consenting and free agent in the perceived affair. But Cooke's portrayal preserves more of the character's worst instincts—as if testing out just how far this character can go while still being "appealing." (For example, unlike Witherspoon's version, Cooke's Becky slaps Rawdy herself when she catches him playing with her feathers. When Rawdy protests "I hate you," she replies "The feeling is quite mutual, I assure you" [Episode 6, 28:30-29:00]). Part of the balancing act is staged through the innovation of having Becky Sharp's character break the fourth wall. It's tempting to read this innovation as a sort of translation of the novel's narrator—a way of incorporating the self-reflexive, self-aware voice of Thackeray's narrator into Becky's character. Sophie Gilbert notes this device in her review of the series, praising Cooke for playing up the "nastier instincts," "faux-weeping and flirting and breaking the fourth wall with wry faces whenever she's in the middle of a particularly shameless charade." But, as we've seen, this device of breaking the

fourth wall is not only a way of portraying this character's "nastier instincts" in a way that lets the audience in on the performance—it is also used in the vulnerable moment after the encounter with Steyne, as if to insist on those moments where Becky is not so much sinning as sinned against.

<23>Hamill even more overtly uses such self-reflexivity in her *Vanity Fair*, and most strikingly, I would argue, when she develops the intersecting themes of gender, power, and sexual violence.<5> Both Becky and Amelia break the fourth wall to anticipate and critique the way audiences might imagine them as too weak or too ambitious, and as sympathetic or "deserving" victims. Hamill allows many of her characters a self-awareness that is largely missing from their novelistic counterparts—again, like Hughes's version, seeming to transfer the narrator's slippery self-reflexivity to the characters themselves (and particularly to Becky and Amelia). This strategy helps the audience process what has happened between Steyne and Becky Sharp. And here, again like Hughes's version, this device, so conducive to comedy, is employed to draw out more painful or vulnerable moments for her character, while inviting the audience into her perspective. But importantly, in distinction to Hughes's version of this plotline, Hamill weaves these themes even more heavily into the arc of the play.

<24>In her earliest encounters with Steyne, Hamill's Becky seems able to hold her own, even as Steyne is bailing them out by buying back the house's furniture. When Rawdon worries that "He has a bad reputation," Becky quips "So do we. I can handle him, my love" (79). Despite this initial confidence, the power dynamics soon shift, and in overtly physicalized ways. First, playing charades, Steyne catches Becky by the wrist, threatening "if you quit before the end of the game, you'll regret it" (85). The directions read: "*She stays. Steyne forces her to kneel. Steyne shushes her, turns her face to the curtain, puts her hands up in supplication*" (85). A subsequent scene draws out the extent to which Steyne imagines Becky "owes" him. Much like Nair and Hughes, Hamill makes it clear that their relationship involves a nonconsensual dynamic. First, Steyne insists on the transactional nature of their "friendship," and stresses that she is in his debt:

LS . . . Haven't I been generous with you, hm? Haven't I given you everything you've ever wanted?

B. You have been a wonderful friend.

LS. I've been your lapdog, your pet. Not your friend. Friends do things for each other.

B. Not that.

He holds out his hand.

That's not me.

LS. It's not? All of your flirting and scheming and insinuations. What did you think was going to happen?

B. I thought you were just being—

LS. Charitable? You must know how often that comes at a price.

I believe I've finally made you happy, Rebecca—an effort which has cost me a great deal. Now, won't you make me happy, too? (87-88)

When Becky "decisively begins to leave," according to the stage directions, Steyne switches tactics, moving to threats: "—what will happen to you without my patronage, Mrs. Crawley? What will happen to Rawdon, to your boy at school? Without me, your husband will be transported, and you'll be on the streets—the same streets that you clawed your way up from.

Surely you've come too far now. Surely you don't want to go back. Ingratitude is expensive" (88). When Becky offers to pay him back, Steyne clarifies: "...I don't want the money; I want a little fun" (88). As he reasons, "Everybody saw Crawley storm out last night, and then they saw you leave with me. As far as society is concerned, the deed is done. So what's the harm?" (88). When Becky pleads with him, we get another scene where Rawdon catches them red-handed. Like Nair's version of this confrontation, Becky is clearly a victim of Steyne and bad timing:

B. Please—

LS. Time to pay your debt.

B. I don't want this.

LS. —Be smart, Rebecca.

She comes to him, unwilling. He pulls her down on his lap. She may cry, but she submits. It progresses for a moment—and Rawdon enters. (88)

After such a clearly traumatic scene, where Steyne holds the power and assaults her, it's all the easier for audiences to side with Becky's character. And, further pushing the audience into Becky's corner, Hamill has her break the fourth wall to self-reflexively draw out the audience's reactions. Becky's character calls out the audience for their propensity to blame the victim, defending herself against such accusations: "You think I got what I deserved. You think I'm a bad person, that I asked for it, that I went too far. But I only did what I thought was best; what was smartest. I was trying to play the game" (91). Here, too, portraying Becky's vulnerability seems to do some work in drawing out sympathy. During this address to the audience, the stage directions read "*She breaks a little,*" before Becky's lines: "I wanted to be happy. No, you don't judge me. You don't get to judge me!" (91). To return to the definition of the neo-Victorian that I began with, this is very much a "re-imagining" and "re-interpreting" of the plotline. But the representation of this character's vulnerability and pain again reminds me of Goggin and MacDonald's warning—that thinking through a neo-Victorian and feminist lens can open wounds.

<25>Nor is this an isolated moment in Hamill's play: Becky is re-imagined, throughout the piece, as a character who is threatened with sexual harassment and violence.<6> For example, Hamill's rendition of the chili scene foregrounds the later portrayals of unwanted/coerced/nonconsensual sexual activity. After Becky is urged to try a chili, which of course ends in pain and pleas for water, Amelia objects:

AMELIA: Papa, that wasn't funny.

MR. SEDLEY. Oh, Emmy, Miss Sharp knows how to take a joke!

BECKY. (*Trying to be game.*) Ha ha. (20)

Becky references this scene later, reprimanding Jos: "Yes; you wicked creature, you who were so cruel as to stuff that sizzling hot pepper right in my sensitive little mouth last night! . . . I didn't know big strong men were so fond of putting innocent girls in pain" (22). Hamill thus draws out the potential for this scene to engage with ideas about sexuality and consent. What starts as a scene of flirtation, with Becky indeed "playing the game," takes on an unsettling tone when the power dynamics shift and it turns out Mr. Sedley is directing the joke—which ends not in everyone enthusiastically laughing, all in on the joke, but, rather, in Becky laughing without feeling ("Ha ha.") while "Trying to be game." As the #MeToo movement has freshly brought to light, women have long been pressured to laugh or brush off sexual harassment as a joke, whether to appease others or simply to function in a misogynistic culture. Hamill's play brings together these discussions, experimenting with how to portray being in on a joke or pushed to

play along, and rehearsing the potential for an interaction to start consensually, but to end with a sense of force (“so cruel as to stuff...”).

<26>Hamill’s *Vanity Fair*, even more so than Nair’s or Hughes’s, thematizes the potential for violence, and also the potential for Becky’s character to be seen as a “victim.” This term also arose in reviews of the 2018 ITV adaptation, with one headline asking “*Vanity Fair*’s Becky Sharp: manipulative villain or victim of her time?” (Worsley). Much like the question I began with—“Did Becky kill him, Mr. Thackeray?”—reviewers and audiences seem primed for an either/or interpretation of Becky’s character, a verdict of innocent or guilty. Not only does Hamill’s version offer more context for understanding Becky’s character as a survivor of gendered discrimination and violence, but she also reimagines elements of the plot that suggest a “warmer” and more “relatable” version of this character. For example, Hamill’s Becky repeatedly acts more emotionally invested in others (as opposed to seeming calculating or unfeeling). The most egregious example of this is Hamill’s rendition of how Rawdon and Becky get married. Most adaptations follow the novel in having Rawdon and Becky marry in secret before Sir Pitt proposes. In this scenario, Becky simply marries the best option she has at the first chance—and she regrets that choice when it turns out she could have been Lady Crawley. As Thackeray’s narrator notes, “Rebecca gave way to some very sincere and touching regrets that a piece of marvellous good fortune should have been so near her, and she actually obliged to decline it” (158). In distinction, Hamill’s play has Becky turn down Sir Pitt to hold out for Rawdon, who points out it was risky to count on him to marry her. In this version, then, Becky appears to act more out of love for Rawdon and dislike of Pitt than out of a rational calculation of her best socio-economic options.

<27>The question of how much Becky Sharp cares—or ought to care—for others has been a subject of heated debate among critics and readers since the novel’s publication, with clear ramifications for her perceived “likability.” One especially interesting example comes from Lord David Cecil’s *Early Victorian Novelists* and Walter Allen’s *The English Novel*. Cecil complains that Thackeray made Becky “act inconsistently” with her virtues, and Allen, even more stridently, writes:

Thackeray lies about her three times: when she boxes her son’s ears for listening to her sing (the whole relationship between her and young Rawdon is suspect: it is as though Thackeray cannot allow a “bad woman” to have, however faintly, the normal feelings of a mother); [Or, perhaps, Allen can’t allow himself to imagine a woman without “normal” maternal feelings.] when she blames her husband, in the most melodramatic terms, to Steyne, after he has discovered she had embezzled the money he gave her to pay Briggs; and when in the last pages it is alleged that she murdered Jos Sedley for his insurance money. These actions are flagrantly out of character. (qtd in von Hendy 279-280)

There’s something about Becky Sharp, in the novel and the subsequent adaptations, that draws out these intense reactions—this sense of knowing the “real” Becky Sharp, and either censuring a guilty version of her, or defending a comparatively innocent one. From Thackeray’s Becky to Nair’s to Hamill’s, this character swings between irredeemably “nasty” and “too nice”—as the adaptations swing from imagining Becky tyrannizing over Jos in a shabby apartment, to having this once-and-future couple arrive, triumphant on elephants, for a happily ever after set in India.

<28>Perhaps this is why every generation needs its own version of *Vanity Fair*. These recent adaptations have allowed audiences to work through questions about gender, consent, and transactional relationships. Both the novel and earlier adaptations suggested how the skewed power dynamics between Becky Sharp and Lord Steyne could manifest in violence—given not only the hazy death threat at the end of the novel, but also how Steyne treats the women in his family. But it took more recent adaptations (i.e., Nair’s, Hamill’s, and Hughes’s) to apply these dynamics to the characters’ sexual relationship. At the same time, these adaptations have experimented with how vulnerable and “likable” to make Becky Sharp. The resulting portrayals have made for complicated responses. Critics hold up Becky Sharp’s character, citing how she taps into the ideals of recent strands of feminism—particularly white and middle class—that embrace acting out of self-interest and proudly wear the label of “nasty woman.” But they have been less attentive to the changes made to the narrative’s sexual politics. Hughes’s Becky Sharp has been called a “bad bitch” (Anne Cohen) even as she also draws out the painful and vulnerable moments nascent in the plot. Perhaps such adaptations are attempting a more multifaceted vision of this character, a version who keeps her sense of power even—or especially—in the face of sexual violence. But, at the same time, such portrayals could seem to reveal a concern with playing up only those “nasty” elements that are more “appealing” at this moment in a bid to get the audience on Becky Sharp’s side—and to discourage blaming the victim. These newer Beckys ultimately illustrate the vexed relationship among feminist empowerment, feminine likeability, and sympathetic victimhood.

<29>Adaptations of *Vanity Fair*—and particularly their treatment of Becky Sharp—have long been used to comment on the state of feminism. Susan Hampshire raised such issues with her part in the 1967 BBC production, when she sought to redress Thackeray’s “harsh” treatment of Becky Sharp. As Colby notes, this version of Becky Sharp is “a champion of ‘Fem Lib’ born before her time, for Miss Hampshire, feeling that Thackeray was too harsh on Becky, concluded, on the basis of research of her own on nineteenth-century working conditions, that Becky was in fact a downtrodden victim of society” (186). More recently, Gottlieb has questioned how such politics should be mapped onto adaptations of *Vanity Fair*; with his review of Nair’s film, he concludes “Nair and Witherspoon give the traditional Hollywood tale of a basically decent, life-loving woman whom life has wronged and who is granted a traditional Hollywood happy ending. Their Becky has to be essentially innocent to be rewarded. Who’s the real feminist here?”

<30>We’ve had another round of adaptations since 2004. But many preserve this interest in keeping Becky Sharp “innocent” in many ways—which seems, according to the reactions of both popular audiences and reviewers, to increase her “likability.” However, these adaptations often do so in service of exploring the real power imbalance between Becky and Steyne, and the very real ways in which a person like Becky Sharp could have been exploited by someone like Lord Steyne (and, I’d argue, still would be). These adaptations usefully send us back to the novel and the many hints Thackeray’s narrator provides about Steyne’s potential for violence—from the information he is rumored to wield over his wife to keep her “submissive,” to his potential threat against Becky’s life. These adaptations might also send us back to many other Victorian novels with an eye to how sexual coercion and gendered violence are suggested or hinted at just below the surface. Such ways of reading, especially in the wake of #MeToo, offer lessons for how to critically engage with, as well as how to update and adapt, the narratives we’ve inherited. In an

era of declining enrollment in humanities courses and programs, perhaps there are also lessons here for how we can make Victorian literature relevant to students.

<31>On the one hand, then, novels like *Vanity Fair* are object lessons in how silences and gaps in narratives, then and now, have obscured and thereby made it easier not to address, let alone dismantle, what we now recognize as rape culture. On the other hand, recent adaptations point to the potential of such gaps and gray spaces to spark discussions post-#MeToo. Research into this continuum or gray space points us to the nuances between consensual sex and sexual assault. As Hinds and Fileborn observe, “overt coercion is not always necessary for women to participate in unwanted sex, as ‘social coercion’ (Conroy, Krishnakumar, and Leone 2015) is often sufficient” (4-5). As we’ve already seen through the above discussion of the 2018 adaptation of *Vanity Fair*, “[h]arm minimization tactics, societal expectations and pressures, and normative ideas around sex and gender roles mean it is not always possible to make clear distinctions between pressurized sex, coercive sex and rape” (Hinds and Fileborn 5). Similarly, and also as noted above, Cooper has distinguished between consent and “wantedness,” drawing on research that examines the prevalence of people consenting to sex even when they don’t want to have sex (7). Such distinctions and vocabulary give us better tools with which to analyze the relationship between Becky Sharp and Lord Steyne—a relationship that challenges any clear-cut definition of consent when adaptations imagine it as purely transactional, and/or as impossibly skewed given Steyne’s socio-economic power.

<32>To teach *Vanity Fair* in the wake of #MeToo is to think about the gaps and gray spaces in Thackeray’s text. Adaptations, particularly when they work with the critical self-awareness associated with the neo-Victorian, can help us work through our responses to those gaps. When adaptations have assumed an entirely consensual affair, they have prevented us from seeing how rape culture works. But these gaps hold new potential in recent adaptations: as this essay has argued, adapters can use them to explore what such gray spaces might look like, crystallized into scenes and into the terms of our own cultural debates. Thackeray’s haziness becomes an opportunity for adapters to, among other things, trace the long history of rape culture. These adaptations also suggest very different visions of how much we should “like” Becky Sharp. When adaptations portray her underdog status as a woman without family or money, as well as her real victimhood at the hands of Lord Steyne, they balance this character’s power with a sense of her vulnerability. But this also makes me wonder to what extent these adaptations have been keen to portray Becky’s vulnerability with an eye to making her character sympathetic and “appealing.” From this vantage, adaptations can seem to fall into the old trap of imagining that audiences need to see women as likeable and relatively innocent in order to sympathize with them and condemn the sexual violence they face. I could imagine, particularly in discussion with students, brainstorming what future adaptations might do, and if there are other ways of making this powerful character “appealing” while also thinking through the power dynamics of the Becky-Steyne affair—or of abandoning the desire to be appealing altogether.



Figure 1. From Episode 5, *Vanity Fair*, 2018. Image courtesy of ITV Archive.



Figure 2. From Episode 5, *Vanity Fair*, 2018. Image courtesy of ITV Archive.



Figure 3. From Episode 5, *Vanity Fair*, 2018. Image courtesy of ITV Archive.

Acknowledgements

This essay benefited immensely from various conversations and collaborations. The first inspiration for this project came from thinking about adaptations with the wonderful 2014 NEH seminar on adapting Dickens, led by Sharon Aronofsky Weltman. I am also grateful to everyone who was part of the discussion at the “Women on Neo-Victorian Film and Stage” panel at the North American Victorian Studies Conference in 2019, moderated by Nora Gilbert. But extra thanks are due to this special issue’s editors, Lana Dalley and Kellie Holzer, for their brilliant and thoughtful guidance in shaping this essay for the issue.

Notes

(1) However, the extra-diegetic closing scene does gesture to the novel’s ending. Becky and Jos run past Michael Palin’s Thackeray and onto the carousel that has featured in each episode’s opening. Upon taking their horses, Jos worries it is spinning too quickly. He asks “What if you fall off?” Becky replies “I’ve got nine lives.” Still worried, Jos follows up with “What if I fall off?” Becky pauses, eyeing him, and cheerfully concludes “We’ve got life insurance.” But even this allusion keeps Becky comparatively innocent: this scenario imagines Jos falling off—not pushed off—a carousel, and it remains only a hypothetical.

(2) Nair goes so far as to suggest that Becky Sharp might be “the greatest female role,” arguing that it is “an amazing, multi-faceted role to play. It’s a real saga of a role, to go from 17 years old

to 35. Without sounding hyperbolic, I think it might be the greatest female role” (Porton). Perhaps in further celebration of this role, Hamill herself played Becky Sharp in the run of her play.

(3)Counterexamples to these trends often come in the form of comedies—as if imagining women entering such anti-hero roles is more safely done under the veil of a genre that is premised on transgressing the usual rules and roles. To take just the theme of formerly law-abiding protagonists who turn to the illegal drug trade, it’s interesting to compare *Weeds* and *Good Girls* with *Breaking Bad*.

(4)The parallels between *Vanity Fair* and *Gone with the Wind* have been noted since Mitchell’s novel appeared, making it all the more likely that their different adaptation histories have influenced one another. For work on Mitchell’s inspirations and antecedents, whether she claimed them as such or not, see Pickrel.

(5)Hamill and Hughes might have struck upon the idea of breaking the fourth wall independently; I haven’t been able to trace a line of influence. But the use of dialogue or facial expressions directed towards an extra-diegetic audience, often involving, as in Becky Sharp’s case, a direct gaze, has become increasingly popular, and perhaps not uncoincidentally it seems to be used to give us more access and/or sympathy for less “likeable” characters—from Penn Badgley’s character of Joe in *You*, to Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s portrayal in *Fleabag*.

(6)Hamill also raises the threat of domestic and gendered violence with Sir Pitt, who, commenting on Becky’s plans to be presented at court, tells Rawdon, “Your wife’s mouth is running a bit ahead of her brains, ‘ey boy? Ought to stick to her place ... Smack or two keeps a woman humble; she would have learnt that from me” (Hamill 70). In light of this comment, we might better understand Becky’s decision in Hamill’s adaptation not to marry Sir Pitt and to hold out for his son.

Works Cited

Boyle, Karen. “What’s in a Name? Theorising the Inter-relationships of Gender and Violence.” *Feminist Theory*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2019, pp. 19-36.

Clarke, Micael M. “Celluloid Satire, or the Moviemaker as Moralizer: Mira Nair’s Adaptation of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*.” *In/Fidelity: Essays on Film Adaptation*, edited by David L. Kranz and Nancy C. Mellerski, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pp. 38-59.

Cohen, Anne. “Reese Witherspoon Was Always So Much More Than America’s Sweetheart. *Vanity Fair* Is Proof.” *Refinery29*, March 4, 2019, www.refinery29.com/en-us/2019/03/225796/vanity-fair-movie-review-reese-witherspoon-becky-sharp-performance. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.

Cohen, Claire and Rebecca Reid. “Vanity Fair: Becky’s Selfishness Is a Feminist Act.” *The Telegraph*, 28 August 2018,

www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/vanity-fair/importance-of-becky-sharp-for-women/. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.

Colby, Robert A. "Scenes of All Sorts...' *Vanity Fair* on Stage and Screen." *Dickens Studies Annual*, vol. 9, 1981, pp. 163-194.

Cooke, John Esten. "An Hour with Thackeray." *Appletons' Journal: A Magazine of General Literature*, vol. 7, no. 3, 1879, pp. 248-254.

Cooper, Chiara. "Speaking the Unspeakable? Nicola Lacey's *Unspeakable Subjects* and Consent in the Age of #MeToo." *feminists@law*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2018, pp. 1-19.

Dugdale, John. "False Conceit: Why Is *Vanity Fair*'s Scheming Heroine Misread on Screen?" *The Guardian*, 1 Sept 2018, www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/sep/01/vanity-fair-becky-sharp. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.

Ebert, Roger. "Vanity Fair." *Roger Ebert*, 1 Sept. 2004, www.rogerebert.com/reviews/vanity-fair-2004. Accessed 17 Dec 2019.

Episode 5, *Vanity Fair*, directed by Marc Munden, written by Andrew Davies, BBC, 29 Nov. 1998.

Fileborn, Bianca and Sophie Hinds. "'Girl Power Gone Wrong': #MeToo, Aziz Ansari, and Media Reporting of (Grey Area) Sexual Violence." *Feminist Media Studies*, 3 May 2019. pp. 1-19.

Gay, Roxane. *Bad Feminist*. Harper Perennial, 2014.

Gilbert, Nora. "Thackeray, Sturges, and the Scandal of Censorship." *PMLA*, vol. 127, no. 3, 2012, pp. 542-557.

Gilbert, Sophie. "*Vanity Fair* Is a Misanthropic Holiday Treat." *The Atlantic*, 25 Dec. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2018/12/vanity-fair-review-amazon/578830/. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.

Goggin, Joyce, and Tara MacDonald. "Introduction: Neo-Victorianism and Feminism." *Neo-Victorian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2013, pp. 1-14.

Gottlieb, Robert. "Becky in the Movies." *New York Review of Books*, vol. 51, no. 18, 18 Nov. 2004, www.nybooks.com/articles/2004/11/18/becky-in-the-movies/. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.

Hamill, Kate. *Vanity Fair: An (Im-)Morality Play*. Dramatists Play Services Inc., 2018.

Heilmann, Ann, and Mark Llewellyn. *Neo-Victorianism: The Victorians in the Twenty-First Century, 1999-2009*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

“In Which a Painter’s Daughter Meets a King.” *Vanity Fair*, episode 7, written by Gwyneth Hughes, directed by Jonathan Entwistle, ITV, 21 Dec. 2018.

Jadwin, Lisa. “Clytemnestra Rewarded: The Double Conclusion of *Vanity Fair*.” *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure*, edited by Alison Booth, U of Virginia P, 1993, pp. 35-61.

Moya, Ana. “The Politics of Re-presenting *Vanity Fair*: Mira Nair’s *Becky Sharp*.” *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, vol. 32, no. 2, Dec. 2010, pp. 73-87.

Patterson, Troy. “Amazon’s New ‘*Vanity Fair*’ Turns *Becky Sharp* into an Endearing, Plucky Go-Getter.” *The New Yorker*, 21 Dec. 2018, www.newyorker.com/culture/on-television/amazons-new-vanity-fair-turns-becky-sharp-into-an-endearing-plucky-go-getter. Accessed 17 Dec. 2019.

Pickrel, Paul. “*Vanity Fair* in America: *The House of Mirth* and *Gone with the Wind*.” *American Literature*, vol. 59, no. 1, 1987, pp. 37-57.

Porton, Richard. “Visualizing *Vanity Fair*: Nair Directs Witherspoon in 19th-Century Classic.” *Film Journal International*, vol. 107, no. 9, 1 September 2004, pp. 16-17.

Stratmann, Gerd. “Currying the Victorian Novel: Mira Nair’s ‘Indianised’ Version of *Vanity Fair*.” *ZAA*, vol. 57, no. 1, 2009, pp. 83-91.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *Vanity Fair*. Norton, 1994.

Vanity Fair. Written by Julian Fellowes, directed by Mira Nair, Focus Features, 2004.

Vanity Fair. Created and written by Gwyneth Hughes, produced by Mammoth Screen, distributed by ITV and Amazon Studios, 2018.

“The Very Best of Company.” *Vanity Fair*, episode 12, written by Alexander Baron, directed by Michael Owens Morris, BBC, 22 Nov. 1987.

Von Hendy, Andrew. “Misunderstandings About *Becky*’s Characterization in *Vanity Fair*.” *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 18, no. 3, Dec. 1963, pp. 279-283.

Whipple, Edwin Percy. “*Vanity Fair*, by William Makepeace Thackeray.” *The Atlantic Monthly*, vol. 15, no. 91. May 1865, pp. 639-640.

Worsley, Lucy. “*Vanity Fair*’s *Becky Sharp*: Manipulative Villain or Victim of her Time?” *The Telegraph*, 21 August 2018, www.telegraph.co.uk/tv/vanity-fair/becky-sharp-villain-or-victim/. Accessed 14 March 2020.