A NOVEL WITH A DIVA: BECKY SHARP AND THE OPERATIC TRADITION

by

VIRGINIA BOYETT BLEDSOE

(Under the Direction of Anne Williams)

ABSTRACT

Addressing the common critical problem of interpreting Becky Sharp in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, I argue that Becky sharp may be best understood as an opera diva. I examine the theoretical issues of an interdisciplinary study of music and literature, and specifically focus on the operatic tradition as an effective and revealing way to read literature. This thesis also suggests that reading Becky as a diva reveals what makes her such a dangerous presence both in the novel and in critical and popular reception.

INDEX WORDS: William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, Becky Sharp, opera, diva, music and literature
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B.A., Middle Tennessee State University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2006
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May 2006
DEDICATION

For my family.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to offer special thanks to Dr. Anne Williams, Dr. Tricia Lootens, and Dr. Roxanne Eberle; your advice and instruction have been invaluable. I would also like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Kraft, whose course provided some important connections for this project. To the friends, colleagues, and family members who helped along the way, please know that you are appreciated. To Jonathan, thank you for always being so patient, supportive, encouraging, and loving. Finally, I want to thank my parents for always supporting me (financially and otherwise); you have made me who I am.
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Introduction

Critics and the public have always had problems reading Becky in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*. The debate is waged largely over the issue of Becky’s character and the attempt to decide whether her actions are justified. It is also difficult to determine how the author feels about the novel’s main character, and critics have disagreed since *Vanity Fair*’s publication about whether Thackeray seeks to excuse Becky as a product of a flawed society or if he seeks to expose her as a threat to a vulnerable aristocracy. This desire to define and categorize Becky is important, because it reveals that we are not comfortable with Becky as she is. I argue that although Thackeray presents Becky as a threat, he is also critiquing the society that makes her actions necessary. My discussion, then, will not focus on defining Becky as heroine or villain; rather, I would like to uncover what makes Becky such a threatening presence in *Vanity Fair*.

The obvious response to this question is that Becky is threatening because she performs ideal femininity, manipulating and penetrating the supposedly impenetrable aristocracy. Becky’s ability to perform to expectations of class and gender is certainly a cause for anxiety, but Thackeray insists throughout the novel that Becky’s imitations are not the sole cause for alarm. After all, many females perform femininity, and many critics suggest that gender is always a construction or performance.¹ My discussion of Becky Sharp’s performances will examine the history of performed femininity in fiction and will reveal the frequency of such performances.
Because such performances are so frequent, the idea that Becky performs ideal femininity does not go quite far enough in explaining her as a threat to society. The complexity of Becky’s character can best be explained by comparing her to a more infamous counterpart, the opera diva.

Robert Bledsoe in “Vanity Fair and Singing” and Joe Law in “The Prima Donnas of Vanity Fair” have each noted the connections between the Thackeray’s novel and the musical arts. These articles, published in 1981 and 1987 respectively, discuss and analyze the musical allusions in Vanity Fair, explaining the references to specific operas, composers, and vocalists. Specifically, Law’s article finds in Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley strong evidence of “the diva,” an opera presence and personality with its own set of stereotypes. Citing such characteristics as “duplicitous,” “greed[y],” and, above all, “selfish” (Law 95-101), Law (perhaps unconsciously) reiterates what many critics who incorporate musical analysis into their literary studies have begun to notice: opera and the opera diva provide an illuminating way to reveal that performed femininity, whether domestic or as public spectacle, is a threatening reality.

The unsettling reality of performed femininity as currency for financial stability is blatantly exhibited in the world of professional opera. Female opera divas also perform various aspects of femininity in exchange for financial stability; that is, they sing and act for money. If the diva convincingly portrays the ideal feminine heroine on stage and can make a profit by doing so, it logically follows that she is capable of the same performance off-stage as well. I contend that this is the problem with Thackeray’s heroine: Becky Sharp is a diva, acceptable as a spectacle, but a serious threat to polite society. Indeed, Becky Sharp’s very name brings to mind the musical symbol, and her character is also sharp, in the musical sense of the term (music that

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1 See Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble for a thorough examination and analysis of gender as a constructed performance. Nancy Armstrong’s Desire and Domestic Fiction also considers aspects of performed femininity,
is “sharp” is off-key, strident, uncomfortable for audiences). The narrator’s question of the boarding school mistress echoes as Becky moves throughout the novel: “Oh, why did Miss Pinkerton let such a dangerous bird into her cage?” (Thackeray 17).

concentrating on the idea in the history of domestic fiction and women’s writing.
The ‘Problem’ with Becky: Critical Interpretation, Performed Femininity, and

*Pamela*

Despite being attractive, talented, intelligent, witty, and accomplished, Becky is still consistently described as dangerous. She is called a “dangerous bird” and a “viper” on more than one occasion. Why exactly is Becky so dangerous? Nancy Armstrong, in her introduction to *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, discusses the threat of women like Becky and suggests that the danger has to do with sexual desire: “Nor do novels often question that such desire, if it is not so domesticated, constitutes the gravest danger and root of all other threats – to society” (6-7).

Perhaps the idea that Becky is not solely defined by her position in the domestic sphere is what prompts critics to read her as such a “bad” person. Robert Bledsoe’s “*Vanity Fair* and Singing” condemns both of the novel’s leading female characters:

> Just when we think that Amelia is supposed to be all good, if a bit dumb, we begin to perceive her parasitical egotism. Becky is even more horrifying. Readers sometimes deem this totally exploitative and destructive character rather likeable (on account of her “vitality,” or some such euphemism) – a fact which grimly confirms Thackeray’s assertion that he is holding up a mirror, and which suggests that the warped reflection is not so much in the mirror as it is in the bourgeois society, comprised of both characters and readers, which the mirror reflects. (55)

Bledsoe’s condemnation of Becky becomes even sharper: “But of course she is not innocent: she is guilty of perverting every essential human moral value for the sake of her egotism, not just in
one situation, but in the whole series of choices she has made for her life” (59-60). These judgements are particularly revealing, especially when one closely regards Bledsoe’s wording. Having agreed that *Vanity Fair* represents a reflection of society, it would seem that Bledsoe is himself threatened by Becky’s “egotism;” after all, are not the readers’ faces reflected in the mirror? Indeed, Joseph Litvak notes, in “Kiss Me, Stupid: Sophistication, Sexuality, and ‘Vanity Fair,’” that Thackeray exhibits “a mixture of admiration and condescension” towards Becky: “The sharper Becky seems, the more Thackeray needs to shove her back into the frame of his moralistic puppet show, reducing her to a laughable girlish naïveté” (233). Thus even Thackeray senses the danger of Becky’s potential; he is another audience member who hears her ‘sharp’ tonality and seeks to flatten her into harmony with the other characters.

Countless other critics make similar judgements on Becky’s character. Law repeatedly describes both Amelia and Becky as “selfish,” adding that Becky is also “duplicitous and greedy.”² The difference between the two – and what shields Amelia from the censure Becky receives – is the degree to which each actually resembles the operatic diva:

> Perhaps the first thing that should be noted about these references is the distinction between Becky’s and Amelia’s connection with operatic heroines: Amelia goes to the opera as a spectator; Becky, however, is a performer. As in the initial portions of the novel, she is consciously playing the roles of someone she is not, and she is performing for profit. (Law 105)

The term “consciously” in this passage constitutes the whole of the ‘problem’ with Becky. She is consciously manipulative, whereas the ideal woman should only be unconsciously so. This consciousness, inherent in any operatic performance, is what makes divas so threatening: by appearing on stage as some ideal feminine heroine, the diva is admitting that she is capable of
performing the ideal, she has practiced it (perhaps on you), and she is performing it for financial gain (perhaps at your expense).

Consider, for example, Law’s discussion of Wilhelmine Schroeder-Devrient. He admits that Thackeray praises her musical virtuosity: “The praise of Schroeder-Devrient in both the diary entries and in this brief episode in *Vanity Fair* is undoubtedly genuine” (101). However, Law cannot help mentioning the diva’s personal history, if only to insist that Amelia was not conscious of it (otherwise, he suggests, she certainly would not have admired the performer so much):

An awareness of her achievement, however, need not preclude the knowledge that the singer was, in her private life, far from a model of heroic conjugal loyalty. Her first marriage ended in divorce on the grounds of her confessed adultery, and she subsequently had two more husbands and a number of lovers. Her extramarital activities were an open secret, and she once complained of the way in which English “ladies stare at me and quiz my behavior.” Amelia, however, seems wholly unaware of any discrepancy between the woman on stage and the character she portrays, a bit of naiveté which accords well with her own lack of self-knowledge. (101-102)

Amelia’s “lack of self-knowledge” excuses her, while Schroeder-Devrient’s “open secret” is a condemnation; again, the woman’s awareness of her indiscretion plays a large part in determining her guilt or innocence.

In “An Irony Against Heroes,” A.E. Dyson is more forgiving of Becky’s behavior: “Becky... is ostensibly bad, yet her heroic qualities shine out against Amelia’s faults. She is sparkling, clever and resilient; from her earliest years she has had to live by her wits, and if the

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2 Law p.87-110.
world is against her, is this not mainly because she inherited neither status nor wealth?” (170). Indeed, Dyson’s statement seems quite accurate; Becky is threatening because she is able to perform what she has not inherited. Dyson’s statement would be true of the opera diva as well. As a woman working, and specifically, a woman working at performing ideal femininity on stage, in public, for money, the diva is also performing what she has not inherited. Yet the diva still has fans; respectable people go to see her perform, and she is often celebrated for the roles. What is it, then, that makes Becky and the diva so threatening?

*Vanity Fair* ends with an illustration, drawn by Thackeray, of an angelically smiling Becky Sharp occupying a booth in Vanity Fair. The caption reads: “Virtue Rewarded: A Booth in Vanity Fair” (879). John Sutherland, editor of the 1998 Oxford World Classics edition of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* briefly describes the events preceding Thackeray’s final illustration:

Then, in 1827, there is a spin of the wheel; Becky is plunged into (deserved) ruin, Amelia comes into (deserved) good fortune. But with an ironic twist, Thackeray brings both heroines into final equilibrium. As we first meet them, Regency girls, together in a coach, so we leave them, now two early-Victorian ladies, either side of the charity stall which declares their mutual respectability in the eyes of the world. (ix)

It is difficult then, as Sutherland implies, to determine which female character is the actual heroine. Sutherland appropriately describes Becky as “clever, selfish, bohemian and (initially) poor” while Amelia is “good, stupid, bourgeois and (initially) rich” (viii). Neither is an obvious characterization of a traditional heroine. Readers of *Vanity Fair* are left to imagine the ideal
woman\(^3\) by studying her absence, rather than her presence. However, the last illustration of *Vanity Fair* provides an allusion to a literary heroine, a predecessor of Thackeray’s Becky and Amelia by a century.

Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* is a didactic epistolary novel in which a good, modest, and above all, chaste servant girl is pursued by a libertine. Pamela’s good example eventually reforms Mr. B, and she is rewarded with a marriage that drastically improves her socioeconomic status; she is raised, by her goodness and beauty, from a servant to the wife of an aristocrat. Although Richardson intended the work to be a means to “Divert and Entertain, and at the same time to Instruct, and Improve the Minds of the Youth of both Sexes” (3), it met with a mixed critical and popular reception. Many critics doubted Pamela’s sincerity in repelling her persistent suitor. Fielding, Richardson’s contemporary (whom Thackeray widely acknowledged as a literary influence) felt so strongly that Pamela’s narrative was a performance of modesty that he wrote *Shamela*, one of many *Pamela* parodies that followed in the wake of the novel’s publication.

According to critics like Fielding, Pamela is not the ideal woman; on the contrary, she is performing to society’s expectations of the ideal woman. Her insincerity and ulterior motives make her the opposite of ideal femininity. The anxiety revealed by these parodies, then, implies a wider cultural anxiety about the characteristics of the ideal female, and whether these characteristics might be performed by a specimen less than worthy of the term. Thackeray’s reference to the subtitle of *Pamela* seems to echo these anxieties about feminine duplicity and performance: if Becky and Amelia are examples of “virtue rewarded,” what exactly is virtue, what is the reward, and has society (and the reader) been duped? Richardson’s fiction has as its

\(^3\) For an interesting study on the ideal man in Richardson and Thackeray, see Kenneth L. Mohler’s “Evelina in Vanity Fair: Becky Sharp and her Patrician Heroes,” published in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 27, No. 2,
primary goal to present the ideal hero and heroine in the hopes that the reader might be educated, and Thackeray is writing in a tradition based on and yet reacting to the ideals set by Richardson that have become entrenched by the nineteenth century.

While Thackeray insists that Richardson’s “Muse… ‘was attended by old maids and dowagers, and fed on muffins and bohea’” (Eaves and Kimpel 1), I argue that Thackeray shares Richardson’s definition of the ideal woman. The difference is that Richardson presents living, breathing examples of ideal men and women in his novels while Thackeray acknowledges, by refusing to cast an ‘ideal female’ character in his performance, that such paragons cannot actually exist in a society so easily fooled by imposters. Pamela is Richardson’s ideal woman; Thackeray’s ideal woman can be pieced together by examining her absence in *Vanity Fair*.

The history of the threat posed by performed femininity is extensive, and the amount of critical work done on the topic is possibly even more so. The critical and popular reception of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* was one of the first instances where ideal femininity, presented in fiction, was questioned and critiqued. Pamela, like Becky, is poor. Although Richardson insists that it is Pamela’s supreme virtue which catapults her to the aristocracy, critics wonder if hers is not merely a performance. Becky’s primary sin is this: that she knowingly imitates an ideal femininity that she does not actually possess in order to elevate her own social status, thus fooling actual members of polite society who achieved their positions the traditional way – by being born into a wealthy and prominent family. It is this ability to perform the conventions of gender that make society so suspicious – and often afraid of – the opera diva as well.

It is not difficult to identify what Richardson regards as feminine virtue, although the feminine ideal is wrought with social double standards and is difficult to maintain. Tassie Gwilliam’s *Samuel Richardson’s Fictions of Gender* contains several excerpts from eighteenth-
century conduct books that reveal the ideals of femininity and even acknowledge the perilous balancing act that being the ideal woman requires. She defines duplicity as one of the “cardinal sins in the traditional model of femininity that Richardson both employs and questions” (Gwilliam 15). Gwilliam notes that the ideal female has a difficult task if she is going to prove her modesty, chastity, and sincerity and attract a husband at the same time: “The ideal woman must not only construct herself for a vigilant – and perhaps capricious – male gaze, she also must not see herself as the object of the gaze she courts; her skill in dress must be unreflecting, her response to responses inattentive” (22). Specifically, Gwilliam examines the double language of these conduct books, which teach the young woman to dress to please men without being conscious that she is dressing to please men. John Gregory’s *A Father’s Legacy to His Daughters* provides an example: “A fine women shews her charms to most advantage, when she seems most to conceal them. The finest bosom in nature is not so fine as what imagination forms” (qtd. in Gwilliam 22). This advice is both disturbing and revealing; Gregory asserts that his authority, as a man, makes him an expert on the most effective way for his daughters to win husbands.

Gregory’s example of the attractively covered bosom echoes Richardson’s own descriptions of Pamela’s dress. As Pamela plans to return home to her parents in order to protect her virtue and geographically distance herself from Mr. B, she narrates the purchase of a carefully selected wardrobe: “So, thinks I, I had better get myself at once ‘quipt in the Dress that would become my Condition; and tho’ it might look but poor to what I was us’d to wear of late Days, yet it would serve me, when I came to you” (Richardson 45). Pamela realizes that the clothing her late mistress gave her would not be appropriate for her new life and does not wish to appear to be dressing above her station. Richardson presents this as evidence of Pamela’s
humility and virtue; she would rather decline in status and appearance than sacrifice her virtue. However, Gwilliam argues that Pamela is aware of how attractive her new, simple wardrobe is to her admirers:

There I trick’d myself up as well as I could in my new Garb, and put on my round-ear’d ordinary Cap; but with a green Knot however, and my homespun Gown and Petticoat, and plain-leather Shoes; but yet they are what they call Spanish leather, and my ordinary Hose, ordinary I mean to what I have been lately used to; ‘tho I shall think good Yarn may do very well for every Day, when I came home. A plain Muslin Tucker I put on, and my black Silk Necklace, instead of the French Necklace my Lady gave me, and put the Ear-rings out of my Ears; and when I was quite ‘quip’d, I took my Straw Hat in my Hand, with its two blue Strings, and look’d about me in the Glass, as proud as any thing. – To say Truth, I never lik’d myself so well in my Life. (55)

Pamela’s meticulous attention to the detail in her dress suggests that each component is carefully selected to create a desired effect. She remembers her finer clothing, but acknowledges in the last sentence of the above passage that her new, self-selected outfit is more becoming. Although Pamela insists she has “an humble Mind” (55), she is admittedly “as proud as anything” with her appearance. Mr. B is taken with the country girl costume as well and finds himself unable to control his desire. When Pamela scolds him, Mr. B retorts that Pamela has consciously made herself attractive for his sake: “I was resolved never to honour your Unworthiness, said he, with so much Notice again; and so you must disguise yourself, to attract me, and yet pretend, like an Hypocrite as you are –“ (57). Pamela is horrified by this accusation,
but Mr. B’s assessment of her intentions simply reflects what the eighteenth-century conduct books suggest as appropriate for women.

In *Sermons to Young Women*, Fordyce describes the difference between appropriate feminine desire and inappropriate forwardness:

To get into men’s affections, women in general are naturally desirous. They need not deny, they cannot conceal it. The sexes were made for each other…. When you show a sweet solicitude to please by every decent, gentle, unaffected attraction; we are soothed, we are subdued, we yield ourselves your willing captives. But if at any time by a forward appearance you seem resolved, as it were, to force our admiration; that moment we are upon our guard and your assaults are vain. (qtd. in Gwilliam 23-24)

Mr. B’s complaint then, is not that Pamela has used her simple costume to attract his admiration, but that she then repulses the advances that he feels are a natural response. It is in this way that Pamela has committed the sin of duplicity; she has attracted him (and he assumes she means to) without accepting his admiration.

Critics of Richardson’s *Pamela* share Mr. B’s opinion. Gwilliam presents a critic contemporary with Richardson who echoes Mr. B’s scathing accusations: “The anonymous eighteenth-century author of “Critical Remarks on Sir Charles Grandison, Clarissa, and Pamela” remarks that “Pamela is a pert little minx whom any man of common sense or address might have had on his own terms in a week or fortnight” (27). Bernard Kreismann, in *Pamela-Shamela: A Study of the Criticisms, Burlesques, Parodies, and Adaptations of Richardson’s “Pamela,”* published in 1960, similarly insists that “behind the Pamela who minces across [the novel’s] pages [is] the Shamela whom Fielding exposed” (qtd. in Gwilliam 26-27). Gwilliam
compellingly argues that the anti-Pamela literature that followed the publication of *Pamela* reveals the need for male critics to “diffuse what they interpret as a feminine threat” (27). A duplicitous female, then, is powerful and threatening to patriarchal control.

In “Faking It: Female Virginity and Pamela’s Virtue,” Corrinne Harol takes Gwilliam’s argument a step further, finding that Mr. B’s constant ‘testing’ of Pamela’s virtue is compensation for his inability to ‘test’ her virginity. Indeed, the reader is invited to ‘test’ Pamela’s virtue as well: “Pamela’s epistolary accounts of her heroic attempts to preserve her virginity produce evidence about her interiority and thus allow readers to evaluate her ‘virtue’” (198). This testing reveals anxiety over the possibility that a man might be fooled by a pretending woman, or the possibility that “virtue, like virginity, can be faked” (199). If ideal femininity is, as Joan Riviere describes, as “something that “could be assumed and worn as a mask”” (Riviere 307), then it is certainly a threat to patriarchal power; on the other hand, it is also “a dangerous tool that can be turned back on her in the form of accusations that she is duplicitous, hypocritical, or a usurper of masculine prerogative” (Gwilliam 25). Pamela feels the effect of these accusations, but is not, Richardson insists, using her ‘feminine wiles’ deliberately. However, a female who recognizes the opportunity to be duplicitous and uses duplicity for her own purposes is dangerous indeed: “Once femininity’s doubleness is extolled for its ability to provoke pleasure or to create identification, the woman’s power to use duplicity – her body’s multiplicity – for her own ends has been set in motion and cannot be recalled” (Gwilliam 26).

A generation later in *Vanity Fair*, Thackeray’s narrator acknowledges this potential: “A woman with fair opportunities, and without an absolute hump, may marry WHOM SHE LIKES⁴. Only let us be thankful that the darlings are like the beasts of the field, and do not know their own power. They would overcome us entirely if they did” (34). According to the narrator’s
admission, then, Richardson’s Pamela is one of those beasts of the field. Becky Sharp, however, is exactly the type of “darling” whom the authors of conduct books seem to fear, who knows how to work within the system of feminine ideals to ensure her own upward mobility.

Thackeray describes Becky as a diligent, doting wife to Rawdon Crawley: “When he came home she was alert and happy: when he went out she pressed him to go: when he stayed at home, she played and sang for him, made him good drinks, superintended his dinner, warned his slippers, and steeped his soul in comfort” (Thackeray 208). These actions are worthy of Pamela, the “affectionate wife” and “faithful friend” that Richardson describes in his introduction to Pamela, Volume II. The narrator of Vanity Fair is not deceived, however, by Becky’s display of domestic bliss:

The best of women (I have heard my grandmother say) are hypocrites. We don’t know how much they hide from us: how watchful they are when they seem most artless and confidential: how often those frank smiles which they wear so easily, are traps to cajole or elude or disarm – I don’t mean your mere coquettes, but your domestic models, and paragons of female virtue. (Thackeray 208)

Any woman, then, who would encourage her husband in any way towards any goal is labeled a hypocrite by the narrator.

Lisa Jadwin, in “The Seductiveness of Female Duplicity in Vanity Fair” notes that Thackeray presents female duplicity as “both socially sanctioned and commonplace” (663). Even more frightening than duplicity in an unmarried young woman (the possibility of which caused so much anxiety in readers of Pamela) is the idea that wives may be duplicitous as well. Yet Becky is only being consistent. Her career throughout the novel is ambitious; she is concerned, from the second chapter, with finding a husband: “If Mr. Joseph Sedley is rich and

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4 Emphasis in original.
unmarried, why should I not marry him? I have only a fortnight, to be sure, but there is no harm
in trying” (Thackeray 23). The narrator ironically described this attempt as “laudable,” and notes
how quickly Becky assumes her quest by “redoub[ling] her caresses to Amelia,” Joseph Sedley’s
sister and Becky’s ‘friend’ and classmate (23). At the same time the narrator presents what
Becky would have the reader believe (“Feel my heart, how it beats, dear! said she to her friend”),
her duplicity is exposed by the innocent Amelia: “No, it doesn’t,” said Amelia” (23).
Throughout the novel, Becky is predictably and deliberately double: “Becky spends years
perfecting her technique, learning to deploy double-discourse in two primary ways: as a trap and
as a weapon” (Jadwin 665). Again, here is evidence of an artist rehearsing and crafting her
performance.

Jadwin’s article details, particularly, a moment in Becky’s seduction of Joseph Sedley in
which Becky performs the part of ideal femininity, overcome by the gentle advances of a suitor:

she gave him ever so gentle a pressure with her little hand, and drew it back quite
frightened, and looked first for one instant in his face, and then down at the carpet
rods; and I am not prepared to say that Joe’s heart did not thump at this little
involuntary, timid, gentle of regard on the part of the simple girl. (qtd. in Jadwin
665)

Becky is affecting the kind of confusion Pamela demonstrates when she realizes Mr. B’s
intentions during an encounter in the Summer-house of the estate: “I stood all confounded, and
began to tremble, and the more when he took me by the Hand; for now no Soul was near us”
(Richardson 23). It is important to note, however, that Becky is the one to apply the pressure to
Joseph Sedley’s hand; Pamela is completely unaware of Mr. B’s admiration. Regardless, in both
situations, the effect is the same. Joseph Sedley’s heart begins to “thump” at what he perceives
as “involuntary, timid, [and] gentle” (Thackeray qtd. in Jadwin 665), and Mr. B is so moved by Pamela’s timidity and modesty that he can no longer control himself: “he kissed me two or three times, as if he would have eaten me” (Richardson 23).

Becky’s forwardness is covered by the performance of ideal femininity, and Joseph reacts just as the eighteenth-century conduct books predict: “When you show a sweet solicitude to please by every decent, gentle, unaffected attention; we are soothed, we are subdued, we yield ourselves your willing captives” (Fordyce qtd. in Gwilliam 23-24). Her performance of virtue and Pamela’s actual virtue are equally rewarded; Pamela shares in Mr. B’s status and fortune at the end of Richardson’s novel, and Becky shares in Joseph Sedley’s fortune at the end of Thackeray’s. Although Thackeray suggests that Pamela’s ideal femininity may be too much to expect, Becky’s duplicitous performance in *Vanity Fair* suggests that the ideals developed in Richardson’s fiction, whether truly embodied or affected, are still the ones rewarded in the nineteenth century. Becky’s performances throughout *Vanity Fair* both mock Pamela’s sincerity and reinforce its value.

Class mobility is an important issue in both *Pamela* and *Vanity Fair*. Each heroine finds her situation improved despite low birth. Pamela’s parents are poor; she is the personal servant to an aristocratic Lady. Becky is born to a French opera-girl and a poor artist; she works as a tutor in a boarding school and then as a governess to a wealthy family. Pamela, in keeping with ideal feminine humility, never seeks to rise above her station. She is shocked when her parents mention that Mr. B might have less than honorable intentions: “But yet I hope there is no reason; for what Good could it do to him to harm such a simple Maiden as me? Besides, to be sure, no Lady would look upon him, if he should so disgrace himself. So I will make myself easy; and indeed, I should never have been otherwise, if you had not put it into my head” (Richardson 19).
Pamela does not mention the possibility that her master might be the means to improve her rank; she instead only expresses concern that Mr. B will demean himself and damage his own marriage prospects. Her artlessness and complete lack of duplicity will not allow her to conceive of the thought that someone so far above her could consider her as anything but a servant. Even when Pamela can no longer deny Mr. B’s intentions, she continues to insist that Mr. B observe the class difference between them. During his encounter with Pamela in the Summer-house, Mr. B seems confused as to why a servant would be so protective of the virtues normally reserved for and observed by the upper classes: “What a foolish Hussy you are, said he, have I done you any Harm?” (Richardson 23). Pamela’s response is centered on the class difference that innocent Pamela assumes one cannot overcome: “Yes, Sir, said I, the greatest Harm in the World: You have taught me to forget myself, and what belongs to me, and have lessen’d the Distance that Fortune has made between us, by demeaning yourself, to be so free to a poor Servant” (Richardson 23). Pamela’s innocence has been violated in more than one way. She can no longer assume that Mr. B is not interested in her sexually (a difficult admission for a girl who, by definition of her virtue, cannot acknowledge her own sexuality), nor can she assume that class difference will be a barrier in Mr. B’s pursuit. She is forced to recognize (although she continues throughout the novel to insist that she does not) that she might be raised in social or at least financial condition by Mr. B’s preference.

Conversely, there is no innocence to shatter in Becky Sharp: “But she had never been a girl, she said; she had been a woman since she was eight years old. Oh, why did Miss Pinkerton let such a dangerous bird into her cage?” (Thackeray 17). This description presents Becky as a bird (a typical emblem of femininity) outside of the cage of privilege, trying to get in. Becky attempts this with Jos Sedley, and although she trembles and diverts her eyes in appropriate
modesty, she acknowledges her intentions: “If Mr. Joseph Sedley is rich and unmarried, why should I not marry him?” (23). This declaration is the opposite of Pamela’s reaction to Mr. B’s advances. The narrator of Vanity Fair excuses Becky’s scheming, insinuating that most mothers provide the same service:

If Miss Rebecca Sharp had determined in her heart upon making the conquest of this big beau, I don’t think, ladies, we have any right to blame her; for though the task of husband-hunting is generally, and with becoming modesty, entrusted by young persons to their mammas, recollect that Miss Sharp had no kind parent to arrange these delicate matters for her, and that if she did not get a husband for herself, there was no one else in the wide world who would take the trouble off her hands. (26)

The method of negotiation is the same, then, regardless of who participates in the negotiation. Becky is consciously operating within the system Gwilliam describes in her analysis of Fordyce’s advice to young women: “Fordyce implies that femininity is duplicitous, but accepts that duplicity as the price voluntarily paid by men for women’s submissive focus on their desires” (24). As Thackeray seems to acknowledge, Becky is performing as men would have her to perform, and it is obvious that Joseph Sedley is pleased and “highly flattered” (Thackeray 30) by Becky’s performance; yet Becky does not use duplicity only as a means for focus on male desires. As Bledsoe’s assessment of Becky reveals, she is not concerned with making men happy for the sake of men’s happiness; she is concerned with making men happy for the sake of her own personal goals.5

Becky’s sin, then, is not the performance, but that she is a bit too conscious of it and that she promotes her own desires as she appears to satisfy someone else’s. Both the charmingly
naïve Pamela and the artful Becky, however, receive the same “reward”: a booth in Vanity Fair. Jadwin notes that Thackeray had Richardson to thank for Becky’s opportunities for advancement: “Women, on the other hand, as every reader of Pamela knows, enjoyed a unique potential for social mobility through hypergamy, or marrying up; they could put their talent for imitating innocent ideality to the service of their material ambitions” (670). Thackeray suggests, then, that society cannot tell the difference between a Pamela and a Becky; that it would take a metaphorical “princess” to discover the “pea” of immodesty or duplicity in a false feminine ideal.

Richardson does not allow readers to suspect Pamela of duplicity based on the text alone. In fact, Mr. B. repeatedly tests Pamela on behalf of the readers; her persistent modesty and virtue during these trials should, Richardson insists, remove any suspicions. Richardson provides her private letters and thoughts, and readers may thoroughly investigate her sincerity. Based on the text, Pamela has no history of performance. Becky Sharp, however, is a performer from the text’s opening pages. Moreover, Thackeray establishes his entire novel as a performance. Because she is an acknowledged performer, and because the novel is an acknowledged performance, the characters in the novel have reason to suspect each other, and the reader has reason to suspect them all. Becky is dangerous, in a way that Pamela can never be, because of her history of performance. But before we return to that history, we must consider a prior question: can one read literature as opera?

5 See Bledsoe quotation on p.4.
Opera and Literature: Theoretical Considerations

Reading Becky as a diva and Vanity Fair as an operatic performance requires an acknowledgement of the problems inherent with any attempt at interdisciplinary interpretation. Critics of music and literature alike note the risks involved with combining the two disciplines for study. In his book Literature as Opera (1977), Gary Schmidgall examines literary works or subjects set to music. He bemoans the obstacles of this particular interdisciplinary field of study:

It has been my experience and observation that the study of literature and music is a sadly neglected field. Professors of literature are by and large indifferent, if not hostile, to musical translations of works within their domain. Professors of music are for the better part preoccupied with performance, strict musical analysis, and musical history. (28)

The uncomfortable schism Schmidgall mentions is further explained by Steven Paul Scher in a 1972 essay entitled “How Meaningful is ‘Musical’ in Literary Criticism?”:

I see the major reason for such skepticism in the lack of a clearly defined critical terminology and in the predilection of some critics for a set of terms based on little more than metaphorical impressionism. Particularly in discussions of possible correspondences between literature and music, critics often seem to abandon all restraint in matters of appropriate linguistic usage and succumb to the Dionysian, demonic power of music. (38)

The problem, then, is not that the arts are combined, but that they are clumsily analyzed. Scher published several other essays on literature and music (the collection quoted includes
essays published through 2004). His ideas about appropriate terminology and his skepticism of a musical analysis that amounts to little more than a loose metaphor seem to have been duly noted by current literary critics. For example, Paul Robinson’s *Opera and Ideas* is a comprehensive study of opera as a key to understanding intellectual history, and his work is firmly founded on and completely inseparable from a very technical musical analysis. Like Robinson, other interdisciplinary critics seem intent on combining the arts only when it is relevant and helpful to both disciplines; those who research the field of music and literature will now find much more than an essay or two discussing the ‘musical’ nature of a popular poem. Susan McClary’s *Feminine Endings*, for example, is a groundbreaking study that combines musicology with concepts typical of feminist literary criticism. Her study, which seeks to expose and explain the language of music theory, is a model for the type of interdisciplinary work that maintains the artistry and integrity of both music and literature.

The connections between music and literature really are significant, especially in the study of opera. Opera, after all, combines music and text. The combination of music and text in opera has created a widely expanding field of opera criticism written by literary critics and literary criticism written by musicologists or, at the very least, by literary critics with the conventions of opera in mind. Following the idea that an interdisciplinary study of music and literature should be founded on firm and relevant connections between the two arts, Susan J. Leonardi and Rebecca A. Pope explain, in *The Diva’s Mouth: Body, Voice, and Prima Donna Politics*, that the musical diva is arguably the most powerful presence in opera. She is an important figure for literary study because of her

significance for a variety of writers, readers, listeners, admirers, detractors, lovers,

to wonder about the complex gender politics inherent in the diva stereotype, the
complicated sexual politics of the opera, the feminist and queer reworking of those politics, the implicit gender and sexual politics of the diva who, with a powerful voice and from a position reached by incredible discipline and steely ambition, sings traditional love lyrics and dies a sacrificial death or who, alternatively, even alternately, dons trousers and sings traditional love lyrics to another woman…(7)

Thus the diva, as a celebrity, a professional, an artist, and a woman, is an important social presence. Thackeray’s allusions to operas, opera-houses, and even to specific divas suggest that he was familiar with the opera diva and of the stereotypes she embodies. Many if not most Victorian ladies and gentlemen would have been familiar with opera, as it was an important dimension of upper and upper-middle-class social life.

To study the diva is to discover and uncover her audience’s concerns, fears, ideals, and social conventions. Her physical presence may disturb Victorian conventions of the body and the female. In Bodily Charm: Living Opera, Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon study the opera performer because her very body is significant, focusing on the physical process of singing and listening. Just as “to train the voice is to train the body” (123), to critique the voice (or to perceive the voice) is to critique the body. The corporeality of singing becomes important to the interpretation of literature when one realizes the extent to which the singing body, as well as the “perceiving body” of the audience member, is inherently sexualized. The authors refer to Roland Barthes’s consideration of musical eroticism in S/Z in order to describe the sexual experience of singing and perceiving. Barthes writes:

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6 The two chapters “The Performing Body” and “The Perceiving Body” in Bodily Charm: Living Opera thoroughly consider the semiotic relationship between an audience and performer and discuss the very physical nature of both performing in opera and attending an opera performance.
This music’s erotic quality (attached to its vocal nature) is here defined: it is the power of lubrication; connection is a specific characteristic of the voice, the model of the lubricated is the organic, the “living,” in short, seminal fluid (Italian music “floods with pleasure”); singing (a characteristic generally ignored in aesthetics) has something coenesthetic about it, it is connected less to an “impression” that to internal, muscular, humoral sensuality. The voice is a diffusion, and insinuation, it passes over the entire surface of the body, the skin… Music, therefore, has an effect utterly different from sight; it can effect orgasm.

(Barthes 109-110)

As this passage clearly indicates, a person who sings for an audience initiates a physical connection without actually touching. This idea adds significance to literary drawing room scenes in which the accomplished young woman performs for male suitors.
The Opera and the Players

It is not at all difficult to conceive of *Vanity Fair* as a novel of performances. What the novel more subtly presents, although it is no less compelling, is the idea that these performances are operatic. The relation of *Vanity Fair* and opera (and specifically of the diva) extends beyond a simple explication of Thackeray’s many musical allusions (which extend throughout all of his works). Joe K. Law explains the difference between reading the specific allusions and reading Becky as an operatic presence:

[Thackeray’s] operatic allusions typically provide moments of local illumination, often suggesting the character of minor personae or adding wry commentary on human nature. In *Vanity Fair*, however, the operatic allusions take on a greater structural significance and thematic importance than in his other works. . . . With Amelia Sedley Osborne and Rebecca Sharp Crawley, he drew upon his knowledge of opera to create an operatic analogy to his novel, casting these two women as the rival prima donnas in his own work. (88-89)

Reading Becky as a diva requires more than explaining a few veiled allusions. It is not enough to name Becky a diva as Law does quite simply and compellingly; I explore the reasons why the diva is threatening, explaining in the process why critics and readers have so much trouble reading Becky.

It is helpful to contextualize this examination of Becky as a diva by thoroughly exploring her performance venue. As the Manager of the Performance himself insists, *Vanity Fair* is that venue. The first page of Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* establishes the entire work as a performance.
“Before the Curtain,” the novel’s short disclaimer of a preface directs the reader’s attention to the “actors and buffoons” and other various characters, costumed and painted for the performance (Thackeray 1). The “Manager of the Performance” further describes the what the reader (or audience member) will encounter: “There are scenes of all sorts; some dreadful combats, some grand and lofty horse-riding, some scenes of high life, and some of very middling indeed; some love-making for the sentimental, and some light comic business; the whole accompanied by appropriate scenery, and brilliantly illuminated with the Author’s own candles” (Thackeray 2). This performance will include dancers, puppets, and actors, all following a script and performing to an audience; the performance is by definition an opera buffa.

The narrator of *Vanity Fair* defines the work as an opera buffa; however, as is characteristic of Thackeray, one single classification is not enough. The novel’s historical setting also aligns it with grand opera. What I find is a conflation of the two: the historical events, normally the focus of the grand opera, are incidental while the day-to-day, smaller scale activities of the non-historical characters are the most dramatic and important. *Vanity Fair* reflects some of the most notable conventions of opera. It is dramatic and over-the-top and, although presented as a mirror of society, the reflection actually violates verisimilitude. The scenes are intense, the characters are overstated, and everyone is part of the performance.

The narrative consistently references the musical ability or taste of the characters, rendering the musicality of the performance impossible to mistake. Miss Pinkerton’s letter to Amelia Sedley’s parents specifically mentions the performing arts as the first of Amelia’s accomplishments: “In music, in dancing, in orthography, in every variety of embroidery and needlework, she will be found to have realized her friends’ fondest wishes” (5). The narrator reinforces those accomplishments as admirable aspects of Amelia’s virtue, noting that “she
could… sing like a lark, or a Mrs. Billington, and dance like a Hillsberg or Parisot” (6). Every well-bred young lady, then, should be an accomplished musician and dancer. Before the lives of the characters have even begun to unfold, musical performances are already vital.

Well-bred young ladies perform privately in drawing rooms; well-bred young gentlemen attend the opera. Jos Sedley goes as a matter of course: “he frequented the theatres, as the mode was in those days, or made his appearance at the opera, laboriously attired in tights and a cocked hat” (27). The language with which the narrator describes Jos as an audience member reveals that he is also a performer; he makes an “appearance” and is “laboriously attired.” Jos is an uncomfortable and unconvincing performer – his attempts to perform, as a gentleman, socioeconomic ideals of high fashion consistently position him as a subject for ridicule.

Like Jos, other characters throughout the novel attend the opera as a symbol of prosperity and sophistication. Becky laments that, because she is unable to marry Sir Pitt, she will not have the luxury of regularly attending the opera:

Rebecca thought to herself, in all the woes of repentance – and I might have been my lady! I might have led that old man whither I would. I might have thanked Mrs. Bute for her patronage, and Mr. Pitt for his insufferable condescension. I would have had the town-house furnished and newly decorated. I would have had the handsomest carriage in London, and a box at the opera; and I would have been presented next season. (186)

A box at the opera would allow Becky to join the other characters in their performances of wealth and social status.

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7 Interestingly, Joe K. Law notes that Mrs. Billington, a renowned eighteenth-century vocalist, was not a ‘typical’ diva: “In her personal life, the character of her mind was not that usually associated with the popular image of the prima donna, for Mrs. Billington was noted for the sweetness of her temper and her generosity towards her rivals” (90). The various characteristics of the opera diva will be discussed later in much greater detail.
Becky and her fellow players do get the chance to perform for each other in the opera house in Brussels. Indeed, part of the ‘character’ of the upper and upper-middle-class individual involves displaying cultural sophistication. For this reason, the characters of *Vanity Fair* (performers themselves) must also attend opera performances. The effect is an opera within an opera, and as a result everyone, even the reader, is also playing a role. An evening at the opera provides Becky and the other performers in *Vanity Fair* with an ideal venue for both viewing and performing. Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon note the social aspect of being an opera audience member: “Even into the nineteenth century in a European opera house, the crowd would only quiet down when a famous singer appeared on stage. The stage was certainly not the only attraction. . . the audience was there to be observed as well as observe” (170). From their comfortable, status-symbol boxes in a Brussels opera-house, Becky, Mrs. O’Dowd, George, Amelia, and others perform for one another and for other opera-goers, able both to see and to be seen, to perform and to view the performance. Here, men and women perform ideals of class status, gender, marriage, and various levels of cultural accomplishment. Each is costumed according to his or her role, including modest Amelia as “the pretty little woman in white” (349). The narrative gathers them all together for the most dramatic impact, privileging the small event of attending the opera as one of the most important in the novel. Becky’s performance on this particular evening is very important; social positions are defined, strengthened, reinforced, or diminished according to each character’s performance.

One of Becky’s particular rivals for the evening, the colorful Mrs. O’Dowd, gives her own solid performance. Mrs. Major O’Dowd performs a level of cultural sophistication:

…the Brussels opera-house did not strike Mrs. O’Dowd as being so fine as the theatre in Fishamble Street, Dublin, nor was French music at all equal, in her
opinion, to the melodies of her native country. She favoured her friends with these and other opinions in a very loud tone of voice, and tossed about a great clattering fan she sported, with the most splendid complacency. (348)

In addition to performing marital happiness, the foreign setting allows Mrs. O’Dowd to perform Irish nationality just as the other characters have an uncommon opportunity to perform Englishness.

Complex as this opera at the opera is, Becky clearly steals the show: “[Becky], too, gives a brilliant performance in the Belgian opera house. She does not sing there, but all eyes are on her as she dazzles General Tufto and George Osborne, wholly eclipses poor Amelia, and even silences Mrs. O’Dowd” (Law 92). Becky’s performance is a success. Her rivals are (if only momentarily) defeated, and her audience returns home to envy and admire her.

Thus far, the Manager of the Performance has delivered exactly what he has promised: the performance at the opera, set against a background of music, dancing, lighting, scenery, costuming, and makeup, is a complicated and multi-faceted one. Most of the performances discussed thus far have been public ones. However, like good opera singers, the performers in the opera *Vanity Fair* must have a place to rehearse.

As all truly successful performers must practice consistently, Mr. Osborne, a would-be member of the upper class, is constantly rehearsing and researching his character. Mr. Osborne performs his idea of the aristocracy, reveling in any connection that might raise his family by association: “The old gentleman pronounced these aristocratic names with the greatest gusto. Whenever he met a great man he grovelled before him, and my lorded him as only a free-born Briton can do. He came home and looked out his history in the *Peerage*: he introduced his name into daily conversation; he bragged about his lordship to his daughters. He fell down prostrate
and basked in him as a Neapolitan beggar does in the sun” (154). The elder Mr. Osborne uses friends and acquaintances only as they are socially necessary: “I don’t deny that Sedley made my fortune, or rather put me in the way of acquiring, by my own talents and genius, that proud position, which, I may say, I occupy in the tallow trade and the City of London” (155). His social performance extends to every aspect of his and his family’s lives; his children find their marriage market restricted, their friendships limited, and their activities monitored based on their father’s aristocratic aspirations. These aspirations are only a performance, however; regardless of his high connections and financial net worth, Mr. Osborne is still a merchant, an actor costumed and constantly rehearsing the dialect of his character.

Although Mr. Sedley’s rehearsal crosses the boundary of public and private by virtue of his being involved in business, most characters must practice elsewhere. These rehearsals, often more crucial than any public performance in terms of professional or personal development, take place within the domestic sphere. Becky begins performing immediately upon her first visit to the Sedley home, realizing that Amelia has a wealthy and unmarried brother: “She redoubled her caresses to Amelia; she kissed the white cornelian necklace as she put it on; and vowed she would never, never part with it” (23). After meeting Jos Sedley, Becky has a more informed concept of her audiences, and she prepares accordingly for the first meeting. She chooses an appropriate costume and inwardly rehearses her lines:

Downstairs, then, they went, Joseph very red and blushing, Rebecca very modest, and holding her green eyes downwards. She was dressed in white, with bare shoulders as white as snow – the picture of youth, unprotected innocence, and humble virgin simplicity. ‘I must be very quiet,’ thought Rebecca, ‘and very much interested about India.’ (29)
One of Becky’s early performances, this crucial private appearance is unfortunately not as successful as her subsequent attempts. She is not as convincing as she will be as a more seasoned performer; Mr. Sedley immediately divines Becky’s intentions: “Here is Emmy’s little friend making love to him as hard as she can; that’s quite clear; and if she does not catch him some other will” (Thackeray 36). Her transparency renders her performance ineffective; Jos he is embarrassed and proud, frightened away from Becky by George Osborne’s comments on her low social status.

Becky learns from this flawed debut, however. Her performance at the Sedley's will prepare her for more important appearances, such as the previously discussed performance at the opera in Brussels. Although she fails to convince more discerning members of the Sedley family (including the domestic servants,) in Brussels, Becky has learned how to interact with the aristocracy. She has learned more appropriately to imitate their conventions, and her status as a married woman allows her to perform more confidently than as a single young lady.

On this and countless other occasions, the narrative positions Becky and Amelia as rivals. Before and after the visit to the opera house in Brussels, both Amelia and Becky perform vocally for an audience; however, Amelia only performs in private circles (and often by mistake).8 Perhaps the ‘erotic quality’9 of music explains Amelia’s embarrassment at being overheard. Significantly, Becky gives both private and public performances. More than any of the other characters, however, Becky seems aware of the power of her musical performance and uses it accordingly.

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8 Thackeray emphasizes Amelia’s modesty: “He had arrived with a knock so very timid and quiet, that it was inaudible to the ladies upstairs: otherwise, you may be sure Miss Amelia would never have been so bold as to come singing into the room” (58-59).
9 See Barthes’s ideas on the erotic quality of live performances, p. 23.
Although Becky and Amelia may at first appear unmatched in skill, every opera diva must experience the threat of a rival performer. Thackeray details Amelia’s performance capabilities in contrast to Becky’s. Generally described as genuine, Amelia performs more modesty than she is capable of feeling: “Having expended her little store of songs, or having stayed long enough in the back drawing-room, it now appeared proper to Miss Amelia to ask her friend to sing. ‘You would not have listened to me,’ she said to Mr. Osborne (although she knew she was telling a fib), ‘had you heard Rebecca first’” (41). Amelia performs the polite convention of asking Becky to sing, a convention that gives Becky her finest opportunity to impress. Although Amelia may not appear to have the advantage in many situations, Law warns the reader not to ignore her appeal: “There is, however, a strength in this passivity which should not be overlooked” (97). Indeed, if the two women occupy the same social status at the end of the novel, one could most likely make an argument for Amelia’s skill as a performer.
A Novel with a Diva

As these multiple layers of music and drama discourse suggest, *Vanity Fair* is a novel designed with performance in mind. Though Thackeray doubtlessly intends to reveal the various performances of most (if not all) of his characters – Mr. Osborne performing class and Jos Sedley performing fashion – Becky’s performances are the most diva-like. Leonardi and Pope in *The Diva’s Mouth* note that “both the masculinist and the revisionary traditions agree that the diva makes visible the seams and fissures of a culture’s gender and sexual ideology” (21). It makes sense, then, that Thackeray would write a “novel without a hero;” in order to hold a mirror to the face of Victorian society, he has written a novel with a diva. Leonardi and Pope’s entertaining and convincing study discusses the operatic diva tradition, including how the diva is perceived and received by audience members on and off stage. Their analysis does not include Becky Sharp, but it certainly could. Leonardi and Pope’s characteristics of a diva inform a traditionally problematic reading of Becky.

Becky’s very first entrance in *Vanity Fair* is stereotypically diva-like. In a dramatic gesture, Becky throws her *Johnson’s Dictionary* from the coach: “Miss Sharp put her pale face out the window, and actually flung the book back into the garden” (10). Becky excuses her actions by pointing out that “Revenge may be wicked, but it’s natural… I’m no angel” (15). Just in case the reader has missed the effect of the scene, the narrator comments: “Miss Rebecca was not, then, in the least kind or placable. All the world used her ill, said this young misanthropist, and we may be pretty certain that persons whom all the world treats ill, deserve entirely the treatment they get. The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face” (15). Our initial impressions of Becky are accurate, then; she is a diva. Amelia, of course, is sufficiently shocked to protect her from any censure, but Becky remains unapologetic and
satisfied with her response to her former employer’s kindness. Leonardi and Pope, discussing the Metropolitan Opera’s famous firing of diva Kathleen Battle, note that temper tantrums like Becky’s are expected of the typical diva: “Such autocratic behavior is, of course, a favorite motif of diva narratives, and along with promiscuity and professional jealousy practically constitutes the diva stereotype” (83).

The diva stereotype to which Leonardi and Pope (and Law) refer is an enduring one. It is helpful to establish first the characteristics of the nineteenth-century diva, the diva who would have been familiar to the first readers of *Vanity Fair*. Significantly, Leonardi and Pope note that “the nineteenth century was the golden age of diva worship” (43). Divas were so well known and ardently admired that “[n]ineteenth-century fans often unharnessed the horses from the diva’s carriage and after her performance pulled the carriage from the theater to her hotel themselves” (43). As diverting as the tales of nineteenth century “diva worship” are, the diva stereotype and its relevance to representations of Victorian femininity are perhaps best illuminated in the person of Jenny Lind, a famous nineteenth-century diva. Although the elements of the diva stereotype, which would be familiar by today’s standards, were still popular – Leonardi and Pope refer to “the fiery, willful, and risk-taking Romantic diva epitomized by Malibran and Pasta and their Norma’s and Medeas”(44) – Jenny Lind provided a reaction to this stereotype and became the opera’s “assertion of Victorian True Womanhood” (44). The following description of Jenny Lind’s persona reveals that both the stereotype and the resistance of the stereotype were conscious performances:

… Lind had carefully constructed a public persona as an anti-diva who, unlike her sister divas, was religious and morally upright (some said smug and sanctimonious), shy and modest, reluctant of fame and longing for her Swedish
home – as a singer, in other words, whose thoughts and actions were as pure as her voice. Lind appears to have understood that the public’s interest in a diva extended to her private life and constructed an off-stage personal that reversed conventional expectations; the public expected scandal so she provided virtue. In other words, she provided middle-class ticket buyers with a model of their own ideals. The shrewdness of this image suggests the extent to which Lind was, in good diva fashion, calculating and ambitious. (Leonardi and Pope 45)

The depiction of both the traditional stereotype and the reaction against it illustrate both the influence of the opera diva on her community and the extent to which she represents, in private and public life, the concept of ideal femininity. Whether the diva is subverting traditional gender roles (which, as Leonardi and Pope’s discussion of Lind suggests, she always seems to be) or performing them to perfection, the nineteenth-century diva is a prominent figure. Moreover, her characteristics are so firmly established that they will endure throughout the passing generations, creating a broad but clearly defined stereotype that is still recognizable and very little changed. For this reason, even literary divas created in later time periods (or actual divas who perform long after the end of the Victorian age) connect to Thackeray’s diva.

We have already established that Thackeray is aware of the diva as a social figure; specific divas even make cameo appearances in the novel. Indeed, critics such as Law and Sutherland have often noted that Becky seems to resemble the opera divas to whom Thackeray alludes; it is evident that Becky is a diva in every sense of the term. Moreover, reading Becky as a diva is compelling if simply because the stereotype remains intact; twenty-first century readers will recognize the same characteristics that Thackeray’s readers would have noticed. We do not have to read far to find them.
The narrator’s early descriptions of Becky immediately construct her as a diva according to the popular stereotype. Becky is not only spiteful when wronged, but she is also musically adept, intelligent, and, above all, professional and ambitious. Becky practices “her music… incessantly” (19). If they are to be truly successful financially, opera divas must practice their art constantly. Leonardi and Pope point to the 1936 novel Of Lena Guyer, in which the diva Lena is constantly rehearsing: “Lena’s capacity for work is, as we have seen, enormous. This motif, too, is repeated throughout the text: she “works like a . . . fiend” (20); she had an absolute disregard of how much work she did” (51)” (Leonardi and Pope 107). Indeed, Becky is so musically talented that “one day, when the girls were out, and she had remained at home, she was overheard to play a piece so well, that Minerva thought wisely, she could spare herself the expense of a master for the juniors, and intimated to Miss Sharp that she was to instruct them in music for the future” (19). At this early point, Becky’s devotion to practice has already paid off; Becky’s skill places her in a position to demand compensation and respect. Becky’s insistence on respect and payment mark her as not just an accomplished young lady, but as a professional performer.

Leonardi and Pope remind readers that by definition, opera divas are “women at work.” Becky is not devoted to music for the sake of its beauty alone. She is also ambitious, and as the rest of the novel will reveal, she has used her opportunity to improve her skill in order to influence and impress those who are in a position to improve her position. Becky responds to Minerva as a hardened professional unwilling to share her talent without compensation: “Give me money, and I will teach them” (20). Unlike Amelia, who sings only when she thinks no one is listening, or to please her friends, Becky sings and plays, however indirectly, for money. It follows, then, that Thackeray would select for his prima donna a character who must work to
sustain herself, and although Becky is employed as a governess, her musical prowess, and her ability to completely imitate ideal femininity, that allows her to climb the social ladder. From her initial performances for Joseph Sedley to her ultimate performance for the king, Becky sings her way from orphaned governess to Lady Crawley in a booth at Vanity Fair.

Indeed, the first few chapters of Vanity Fair leave no corner of the diva stereotype unexplored in the narrator’s descriptions of Becky. Becky’s questionable pedigree is almost immediately mentioned. The narrator first mentions that Becky’s mother was a French opera-girl, but that “the humble calling of her female parent, Miss Sharp never alluded to, but used to state subsequently that the Entrechats were a noble family of Gascony, and took great pride in her descent from them. And curious it is, that as she advanced in life this young lady’s ancestors increased in rank and splendour” (16). Not only does this short passage indicate that Becky has opera origins, and that these origins are something of which a well-bred young lady would be ashamed, but it also provides Becky with an interesting opportunity to perform birth and family rank.

Like any skillful diva, Becky chooses her roles carefully. Being an orphan allows Becky a certain degree of anonymity, and she is able to construct her own heritage to suit her audience. The wealthy Crawley family becomes convinced that Becky is of noble birth:

Indeed it was from this famous family, as it appears, that Miss Sharp, by the mother’s side, was descended. Of course she did not say that her mother had been on the stage; it would have shocked Mr. Crawley’s religious scruples. How many noble emigrées had this horrid revolution plunged in poverty! She had several

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10 Leonardi and Pope, p.82
11 That Becky’s mother was a French opera-dancer is significant. As a dancer, the audience would have constantly been focused on her body, which she voluntary put on display. Moreover, French opera dancers were particularly notorious.
stories about her ancestors ere she had been many months in the house; some of which Mr. Crawley happened to find in D’Hozier’s dictionary, which was in the library, and which strengthened his belief in their truth, and in the high-breeding of Rebecca. (110)

Becky’s manners, education, and accomplishments (not the least of which is her musical talent) would, according to the cultural cliché, support her claim to noble heritage, and she is obviously clever enough to research the French aristocracy, knowing that the haughty Crawleys would doubt her story. Becky has, by this point in the novel, completely researched her part. Having learned from her experiences at the Sedley’s the importance of treating the family servants kindly (all of the Sedley servants were happy at Becky’s departure), she is respectful and modest to the servants in the Crawley household: “She was almost mistress of the house when Mr. Crawley was absent, but conducted herself in her new and exalted station with such circumspection and modesty as not to offend the authorities of the kitchen and stable, among whom her behaviour was always exceedingly modest and affable” (111). She has learned from her mistakes and is now a more effective performer; she is even able to convince an entire family of British aristocrats that her family was the French equivalent of their own. The success of Becky’s performance reveals not only that Becky is an accomplished actress, but that it is not that difficult for an intelligent, attractive, and accomplished woman to pretend the one thing that can not be learned into existence; Becky has constructed an aristocratic heritage. The reason for her performance is obvious: Becky has learned, from her rejection by Joseph Sedley, that one must be well born in order to be well married. As always, Becky chooses this role because it will advance her career. Constructing an origin is yet another exhibition of the diva’s characteristic greed, ambition, and deceit.
Not only is the diva considered greedy, ambitious, and selfish (by virtue of being focused on her art and her career rather than her husband’s art or career), but she is also considered licentious or morally loose (by virtue of voluntarily placing her body on display to be admired). In Chapter Two of *Vanity Fair*, immediately after revealing Becky’s questionable parentage, the narrator relates a rumor of an affair between Becky and a young reverend. This account establishes this stereotypically diva quality in Becky’s character. The narrator describes Becky as a siren:

> She was small and slight and person; pale, sandy-haired, and with eyes habitually cast down: when they looked up they were very large, odd, and attractive; so attractive, that the Reverend Mr. Crisp, fresh from Oxford, and curate to the Vicar of Chiswick, the Reverend Mr. Flowerdew, fell in love with Miss Sharp; being shot dead by a glance of her eyes, which was fired all the way across Chiswick Church from the school-pew to the reading-desk. (16)

Although this passage illustrates how powerful Becky’s charms can be, it does not convict her of anything but flirtation. Any real indiscretion is implied later, as Becky and Amelia are leaving Chiswick:

> Thus the world began anew for these two young ladies. For Amelia it was quite a new, fresh, brilliant world, with all the bloom upon it. It was not quite a new one for Rebecca (indeed, if the truth be told with respect to the Crisp affair, the tart-woman hinted to somebody, who took an affidavit of the fact to somebody else, that there was a great deal more than was made public regarding Mr. Crisp and Miss Sharp, and that his letter was in *answer* to another letter). But who can tell you the truth of the matter? (21)
While this passage seems to incriminate Becky, the question at the end leaves it indeterminate.

The opera diva is in a similar position. Society will discuss the rumors of her private life, but no one will really know if the licentious label is justified.

The diva as siren is a prevailing stereotype that Leonardi and Pope discuss “Singing His Mind Away,” chapter two of The Diva’s Mouth. The following passage, though considering the diva in general, could just as easily be a description of Becky:

But it is the diva, the woman with a voice – huge, sexy, powerful, relentless – who is the literal heir to sirenic power and sirenic threat. Since the diva became a presence in the world of art and entertainment in the eighteenth century, she has been a presence as well in fictional narratives, which almost always associate her with her Homeric antecedents and almost always suggest that she shares, though sometimes unwittingly, their lethal allure. Such voices with their attendant power can be, of course, both feared and desired, both denounced and celebrated, both repressed and promoted – often in the same text. (49)

Indeed, Thackeray represents Becky in a similar manner (although with a much greater emphasis on her threatening qualities):

When, however, the siren disappears and dives below, down among the dead men, the water of course grows turbid over her . . . They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examinee the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims. (813)
Thus the diva, while performing onstage, is beautiful enough to behold, but the diva in her natural element is dangerous indeed. This dichotomy of the diva explains Becky’s vacillation between admiration and censure, even between success and failure. The threatening aspect of Becky’s divahood will be thoroughly explored later; it is enough at present that she is characterized by this diva duality. And it is not only the possibility of the siren’s success that characterizes the diva; that is, she is not merely capable of seduction. The traditional motif of the opera diva is that she actually does seduce. Questions concerning the diva’s sexual behavior, whether motivated by ambition or competitiveness (or both), are automatic, as Thackeray’s early description of Becky illustrates.

Leonardi and Pope agree that the diva stereotype connotes some sort of moral flaw or failing: “To be a diva is, all these narratives suggest, to be already corrupt and/or corrupted. But, as we have seen, there is a stage prior to divahood in which the young singer is innocent, spontaneous, appealingly on the brink of becoming a woman” (63). Thackeray does not allow the reader to witness this pre-diva stage in Becky’s existence; the narrator only insinuates that her innocence did not last long: “But she never had been a girl, she said; she had been a woman since she was eight years old” (17). The very presence of this narrative detail supports the idea of the corruption that Leonardi and Pope discuss. Though the narrative suggests Becky’s innocence is lost to poverty, not sexual laxity, it is evident that Becky has learned to use her powers of persuasion to her advantage: “Many a dun had she talked to, and turned away from her father’s door; many a tradesman had she coaxed and wheedled into good humour, and into the granting of one meal more” (17). Thus Becky begins her “career” out of financial necessity, although her reasons for maintaining her diva character are not so easily identified.
Ambition and questionable morals established, many critics also find it difficult to deal with Becky’s “unnatural” response to marriage and children. Leonardi and Pope’s “Diva Truths, Diva Lies, Diva Lives” in *The Diva’s Mouth* explores the personal lives of several prominent divas and is especially concerned with the effect of marriage and motherhood on the career and reputation of these opera performers. Many diva biographies or autobiographies published in the twentieth century reflect the diva’s concern about the conflict of marriage and motherhood with such a demanding career: “She claims repeatedly that her marriage and her children are much more important to her than the opera stage” (133). These divas are combating the stereotype that a working woman, especially a woman working as a public spectacle, using her own body and voice for her livelihood, must necessarily be violating traditional standards of femininity. If this is true of twentieth-century divas, how much more so must it be true of nineteenth-century divas? Following the assumption that divas are unwomanly in this respect, Thackeray’s narrator notes that Becky “had no soft maternal heart, this unlucky girl” (19).

Indeed, Becky is no mother. Thackeray reveals Becky’s lack of affection for children in the first accounts of her employment as a governess and teacher. She admits that she does not care at all for her pupils at the Crawley’s: “The rector’s wife paid me a score of compliments about the progress my pupils made, and though, no doubt, to touch my hear – poor, simple, country soul! – as if I cared a fig about my pupils!” (123). When Becky gives birth to her own son, she can hardly be bothered with him at all, leaving the responsibility of his care to a nurse and the child’s father, the doting and increasingly pitiful (and increasingly honorable) Rawdon. The narrator specifically mentions that it is Becky’s career – that is, her interest in increasing her social status by whatever means necessary – is far more important to her than her child. Her

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12 The “she” to which Leonardi and Pope refer, here, is Beverly Sills in her 1987 autobiography (Leonardi and Pope 133).
indifference is in marked contrast to Amelia’s almost smothering devotion of her son George:

“How his mother nursed him, and dressed him, and lived upon him; how she drove away all nurses, and would scarce allow any hand but her own to touch him... This child was her being. Her existence was a maternal caress” (447). Amelia’s attachment emphasizes Becky’s callousness as Becky leaves her son behind (voluntarily, of course) to join her husband abroad:

“The parting between Rebecca and the little Rawdon did not cause either party much pain. She had not, to say truth, seen much of the young gentleman since his birth. After the amiable fashion of French mothers, had placed him out at nurse in a village in the neighborhood of Paris…. Rebecca did not care much to go and see the son and heir. Once he spoiled a new dove-coloured pelisse of hers” (460-461).

When Becky does live with her child, she is still little interested in his activities or welfare. Becky would rather discuss music with her aristocratic acquaintances:

Rebecca, my lord Steyne, and one or two more were in the drawing room taking tea after the opera, when this shouting was heard overhead. “It’s my cherub crying for his nurse,” she said. She did not offer to move to go see the child.

“Don’t agitate your feelings by going to look for him,” said Lord Steyne sardonically. “Bah!” replied the other, with a sort of blush, “he’ll cry himself to sleep,” and they fell to talking about the opera. (476)

Becky’s social life, her career, is all-encompassing, and she unhesitatingly sacrifices a woman’s “natural” privilege of motherhood in order to focus entirely on the former. Thus Becky prefers her art to her family in a way that is troubling to readers and critics alike. Reading Becky as a diva makes this anomaly plausible: Becky is not just a nineteenth-century lady; she is a professional artist and performer.
Becky’s career as a socialite is all the more complicated because she must constantly perform. She has neither birth nor money to recommend her, and therefore must pretend to claim both. The chapter entitled “How to Live Well on Nothing a Year” details the complexity of Becky’s responsibility. She has become the manager of her husband’s financial endeavors, most of which include card-playing and avoiding creditors:

Easy and pleasant as their life at Paris was, it was after all only an idle dalliance and amiable trifling; and Rebecca saw that she must push Rawdon’s fortune in their own country. She must get him a place or appointment at home or in the colonies: and she determined to make her move upon England as soon as the way could be cleared for her. (457)

In “The Prima Donnas of Vanity Fair,” Joe K. Law likens Becky to another diva manager, Angelica Catalani (1780-1849). Law remarks that “the financial aspects of Catalani’s career also attracted a good deal of notice. Spohr’s commentary indicates that he had paid seven times the regular price for his ticket to hear her. Such was often the case when Catalani sang. Together with husband Valabregue, Catalani had also become an operatic manager, economizing on all elements of the production in order to pocket as much money as possible” (92). Law further notes that “Becky’s mixing of music and finance connects her with Catalani, as does the brilliance of her solutions of mechanical difficulties, both musical and otherwise” (93). Becky’s management of her husband’s economic affairs, especially because she seems to take little interest in any other aspect of his life, is a reversal of traditional gender roles; although Rawdon may be the means through which Becky acquires her wealth and status, it is clear that

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13 In addition to her vocal talent.
she supports herself (and her husband by extension) by her wit, her charm, her persuasiveness, and her talent.14

It is appropriate to remember, at this point, that divas are not just working women; otherwise, Becky could have just as easily remained a governess. The diva is also an artist, and as such performs because she enjoys the art of performing. The diva’s awareness of her audience, and her symbiotic relationship with it constitute yet another distinguishing character trait of the diva. Becky is constantly aware of her audience; her public persona is so multi-faceted and nuanced that she rehearses and maintains it constantly. She only seems to lower her public mask in her most solitary moments, or in the privacy of her own thoughts. As Tricia Lootens points out in *Lost Saints: Silence, Gender, and Victorian Literary Canonization*, “no curtain ever drops on the performance of feminine virtue” (62), and Becky must constantly be guarded, aware of every movement and expression, verbal or otherwise. Lootens quotes George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* to illustrate just how minute such considerations must be: ““Every deed and muscle” of such a would-be heroine must be “adjusted to the consciousness that she [is] being looked at” (61). Becky is unfailingly aware of her audience, certainly; her costumes, movements, activities, and particularly her repertoire choices express Becky’s constant attention to the needs of her particular audience. Just like the young lady who would successfully perform femininity, an opera diva must exercise the same audience awareness and attention to detail if she is to play her role convincingly.

Any time Becky offers a musical performance, it is specifically designed to suit her audience’s preferences, or, more accurately, her audience’s weaknesses. When she performs for

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14 Pages 92 and 93 of Law’s “The Prima Donnas of *Vanity Fair*” provide a detailed and convincing comparison of Becky to Catalani, including Becky’s performance (as a spectator) at the opera in Brussels, her use of music “exclusively for financial gain” and her use of varied “repertoire to ingratiate herself more profitably with her audience” (93).
Jos Sedley in the novels opening chapters, Becky is dressed as the embodiment of innocence, sits demurely behind her instrument, and sings “simple ballads” (42). The effect is complete. Becky appears innocent, honest, pitiful, unassuming, humble – all expertly combined with Becky’s striking vocal talent, and Jos is accordingly affected: “Joseph Sedley, who was fond of music, and soft-hearted, was in a state of ravishment during the performance of the song, and profoundly touched at the conclusion. If he had had the courage… Joseph Sedley’s bachelorhood would have been at an end, and this work would never have been written” (42). It is circumstance that spoils the mood, for Becky gives a most convincing and compelling performance.

Of course, Joseph Sedley makes an easy audience for Becky to entertain and convince. Others, such as the gentlewomen of the Steyne household, are much more skeptical and far less likely to believe, much less appreciate, Becky’s performance. At her very first entrance (which is indeed theatrical and dramatic), Becky is perfectly in character:

Becky took it, however, with grateful humility, and performing a reverence which would have done credit to the best dancing-master, put herself at Lady Steyne’s feet, as it were, by saying that his Lordship had been her father’s earliest friend and patron, and that she, Becky, had learned to honour and respect the Steyne family from the days of her childhood. (617)

The actress (note the musical reference to “the best dancing-master”) has thought of everything, preparing the stage for her more risky musical performance. When Becky’s attempts at conversation have failed, it is her singing that completely melts Lady Steyne’s icy veneer: “She sang some religious songs of Mozart, which had been early favourites of Lady Steyne, and with

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15 “It” in this instance refers to the cold manner in which Becky is received by her hostess, who is quite livid after being forced to invite Becky to the gathering.
such sweetness and tenderness that the lady, lingering round the piano, sat down by its side and
listened until the tears rolled down her eyes” (619-620). If her choice of repertoire is any
indication, Becky performs deliberately for her audience, and her heightened sense of audience
awareness is yet another level of Becky’s superior artistry.

The diva’s relationship to her audience extends far beyond the understanding of popular
preferences. As Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon demonstrate in Bodily Charm: Living
Opera, the relationship between the audience member and the performer is a semiotic one: “In
other words, live opera is not a one-way communication, a simple stimulus from the stage
followed by a response from the audience” (162). The author’s provide an explanation from
legendary opera vocalist Pavarotti to illustrate:

The aria goes well and the audience makes me aware of them with their applause
– nothing wild, but cordial, bordering on warm. It is amazing how you can feel
audience reactions to you even before the applause. It is something you sense in
an almost psychic way. I have rarely been surprised by the audience’s response at
the end of a piece – its coldness, its indifference, or its whole-hearted enthusiasm.

I can feel it before they show it. (qtd. in Hutcheon and Hutcheon 163)

One can imagine, similarly, that Becky would not be surprised by any audience response. Yet
although she may not be surprised, she is certainly not unaffected. The response of Becky’s
audience after her performance in a charade at one of Lord Steyne’s parties thrills her: “Little
Becky’s soul swelled with pride and delight at these honours; she saw fortune, fame, fashion
before her” (652). Thackeray’s description of the ‘ecstasy’ excited by Becky’s performance
brings to mind Barthes’s notion of music’s erotic capabilities. Like her audience, Becky is
stimulated by her own performance, enjoying the compliments to such an extent that she even
remains in her costume to dance and mingle with her audience (652). Like the operatic
performers discussed in *The Diva’s Mouth* and *Bodily Charm*, Becky requires an audience
response to remain stimulated. When she feels she has retired one role, she longs for the next:
“‘I wish I were out of it,’ she said to herself. ‘I would rather be a parson’s wife, and teach a
Sunday school than this; or a sergeant’s lady and ride in the regimental wagon; or, oh, how much
gayer it would be to wear spangles and trousers, and dance before a booth at a fair’” (637-638).
Becky delights in affecting audiences in a variety of roles; just as the opera diva plays heroine
after heroine, Becky is continuously looking forward to her next role.
The Diva Off-Stage: A ‘Dangerous Bird’

Like an opera diva who, by virtue of performing on stage, confesses her ability to convincingly imitate ideal femininity, Becky is threatening because she shows the same potential. Becky is a diva, and divas are acceptable only as spectacle; that is, they are meant to be on stage, where boundaries are clear and tangible and where audience members can be certain that the diva is acting. Otherwise, polite society is subject to the kind of danger Thackeray suggests in his graphic metaphor of Becky as a mermaid. Divas are not meant to mingle with polite society, where it is far more difficult to tell the real ladies from the imposters.

The first character to experience the discomfort caused by Becky’s traversing of the boundaries of the stage is, of course, Jos Sedley. After Becky’s brilliant performance at the Sedley’s, Jos declares: “‘I'll go and see the Forty Thieves,’ said he, ‘and Miss Decamp’s dance’” (Thackeray 31). To this statement, John Sutherland offers the following annotation:

The Tillotsons propose Adelaide De Camp (d. 1834, sister of Ms. Kemble). It could also be the better known Marie Therese De Camp, who married Charles Kemble in 1806. Whichever, the point is that Jos can admire fast, fashionable women on stage (the demimondaine De Camp background was, incidentally, not unlike Becky’s) but is terrified of them in the flesh. (888)

This is indeed the point: Jos recognizes the threat of blurred boundaries. He is far more comfortable knowing that such a woman is performing than questioning whether or not he is being duped. It is also probably not “incidental” that Becky’s background matches the actual opera diva to whom Thackeray alludes. Thackeray obviously intends by this allusion for the reader to associate Becky with her. The interaction represented here is the basis for Becky’s
reception throughout the novel and into the world of critical and popular reception beyond. She continues to make everyone nervous: other characters, the author, and critics.

Other important characters feel the discomfort and even betrayal at discovering Becky as a diva. Before Becky’s clandestine marriage to Rawdon Crawley, the dowager Miss Crawley keeps Becky as her closest companion. Miss Crawley is lavish in her praise, considering Becky to be a romantic and interesting subject, even inspired at one point to declare, “you ought to have no superior, and I consider you, my love, as my equal in every respect” (127). Regarding the possibility of marriage, Becky is merely a character in a French romance to Miss Crawley: “‘I adore all imprudent matches. – What I like best, is for a nobleman to marry a miller’s daughter as Lord Flowerdale did – it makes all the women so angry – I wish some great man would run away with you, my dear; I’m sure you’re pretty enough’” (128). When it is revealed that Sir Pitt has proposed to Becky, Miss Crawley can still be democratic and practical about Becky’s situation, although the narrator makes it clear that her affections are not unconditional:

‘Well, Becky would have made a good Lady Crawley, after all,’ Miss Crawley remarked (who was mollified by the girl’s refusal, and very liberal and generous now there was no call for her sacrifices). ‘She has brains in plenty (much more wit in her little finger than you have, my poor dear Briggs, in all your head). Her manners are excellent, now I have formed her. She’s a Montmorcey, Briggs, and blood is something, though I despise it for my part; and she would have held her own amongst those pompous stupid Hampshire people much better than that unfortunate ironmonger’s daughter.’ (183)

The narrator deliberately states that Miss Crawley is capable of such a generous judgement only because Becky has refused Sir Pitt; no one, not even the democratic Miss Crawley, would
willingly allow an opera diva a place in the aristocracy. But because she is still not immediately connected to the family, Miss Crawley can maintain her romantic notions of Becky as a character, a (more worldly) Pamela waiting to be swept away be an aristocratic Mr. B. When Mr. B is discovered to be Rawdon Crawley, however, Miss Crawley’s response is quite different from her previously stated opinions; at Mrs. Bute’s revelation that “her mother was an opera-girl, and she has been on the stage or worse herself,” Miss Crawley screams and faints (198). The diva has descended from the stage to mingle amongst the unsuspecting gentry; she has fooled them, and has become one of them by artful and malicious imitation.

Miss Crawley finds Becky amusing when she is a character in a romance, but Becky is terrifying when her performances have captured Rawdon. Miss Crawley’s ideas about a rich young man ‘running away’ with Becky are only acceptable as an amusing story line; the whole situation is out of the question in real life. Of course, Becky herself has not changed. She is still witty, intelligent, and attractive. The difference is that she has trespassed, deceived the gatekeepers of the aristocracy into letting an imposter slip into a supposedly impenetrable community.

There are countless other examples of this kind of treatment regarding Becky. She is at first accepted, and then rejected, based on whether or not the other party in question is aware of Becky’s personal history. These inconsistencies reveal as much about society as they do about Becky. She may indeed be manipulative and deceitful, but she is only trying to operate within a system that requires such behavior of those who are not well-born but who do not wish to remain poor. In this respect, Becky is a success; she creates the character of Lady Crawley by consistently posing as something she is not. Without the privileges of birth and fortune, she performs ideal femininity and social status so well that the originals do not detect the imitation.
Whose fault is this? Critics (and other characters in the novel) who blame Becky alone are ignoring what Thackeray himself insisted should be the effect of his novel:

> My object is not to make a perfect character or anything like it. Don’t you see how odious all the people are in the book (with the exception of Dobbin) – behind whom all there lies a dark moral I hope. What I want is to make a set of people living without God in the world (only that is a cant phrase) greedy, pompous, mean perfectly self-satisfied for the most part and at ease about their superior virtue.\(^{16}\) (qtd. in Dyson 169).

It is difficult to miss Thackeray’s judgement in these lines of all of the performers in *Vanity Fair*. It seems hypocritical to focus all of one’s negative judgement on the diva only because she is the most talented and successful. One must remember that Vanity Fair is a stage, and every character is a performer. The supporting characters, however, remain in one sphere and are easy to identify. For example, although Mrs. Bute is a conniving and scheming woman, she is still first and foremost a wife and mother, and arguably only seeks a better legacy for her children (that they deserve by being born into the family). Becky trespasses, moves from the stage to the audience and back again, and is probably always performing. Dyson suggests that Thackeray constructed Becky for the very reason that she makes everyone anxious: “And very occasionally – though on particularly important occasions, as it turns out – he throws open the enigma of life itself as part of his art: who *can* be sure when Becky is telling the truth?” (165). Becky, the diva, is the ideal subject for a novel that seeks to hold a mirror to life. As a diva, Becky reveals the dubious and precarious state of the aristocracy, of domesticity, and of femininity.

The 2004 film version of *Vanity Fair*, directed by Mira Nair, is a final example of the still persistent need to reconstruct Becky’s character into someone more palatable. Rather than
condemn Becky’s duplicity, Nair softens Becky into a victim of class discrimination. Richard Porton’s “Visualizing Vanity Fair,” published in September of 2004 in Film Journal International, contains both a review and an interview with the film’s director. The author’s opening description of Becky and the plot of Vanity Fair is mild. He presents the diva as fiery, but in a “cute” way:

Reese Witherspoon plays one of literature's most charming social climbers, the indefatigable Becky Sharp. In her relentless quest to find her place in a frequently hostile world and elevate her status in English society, Becky encounters a host of colorful aristocrats, rogues, dashing gentlemen and disillusioned women. In certain respects, Becky is a more nuanced version of the resourceful, determined heroines Witherspoon played in Election and Legally Blonde. An impoverished graduate of a tony boarding school, Becky makes use of the contacts she acquires while working for a dissolute country squire, Sir Pitt Crawley (Bob Hoskins). She eventually lands a handsome but not particularly well-heeled husband, Rawdon Crawley (James Purefoy), and then finds herself, somewhat against her own better judgment, ensnared by the powerful, but decidedly malicious, Marquess of Steyne (Gabriel Byrne). (Porton n.p.)

Significantly, this description shifts responsibility away from Becky and towards Lord Steyne. Although Thackeray and the characters in Vanity Fair the novel may find Becky “charming,” her charm is warily received. Nair’s description of Becky is even more softened, so much so that the Becky of Thackeray’s novel is almost completely lost: “I cast Reese because she really could carry the film. It's 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. The actress gets a chance to do everything. She has to be complicated and full of guile as well as

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16 This letter, written by Thackeray to his mother concerning Amelia, is dated July 1847.
wild--and, of course, helplessly in love” (Porton n.p.). Is it possible that Becky could be helplessly in love? The Becky that smirks at the reader from Thackeray’s illustrations, or who sleeps comfortably after her husband leaves for battle, certainly does not appear to be helpless at all.

Porton questions Nair’s interpretation of Becky as a softer character, noting that other adaptations have not been as kind in representing the diva. Nair’s response reveals what she must have felt would be necessary in order for a film Becky to be palatable to a commercial audience: “It just portrayed her as a cunning, conniving woman in a hurry to get to the top. That's not as interesting to me as all of the facets of her personality that make her appealing, charming and, of course, make her get her way” (Porton n.p.). Nair seems to be following the idea that, as a woman and heroine of a novel or film, Becky must have some ‘redeeming’ qualities, aspects of her personality that would endear her to her audience and connect her with other, more romantic heroines. We must still correct her, make her something she is not by imagining the traditional softness that the narrative deliberately omits. Although Reese Witherspoon could have certainly portrayed a Becky true to the character Thackeray created, Nair’s commentary reveals that society still is not ready to receive her. Society is still threatened by the diva of *Vanity Fair*, who crosses boundaries as easily as one might jump down from the edge of the stage and seamlessly blends in with her audience, even as she continues her flawless performance.
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