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An Analysis of Robert Stephen Rintoul's Review of *Vanity Fair*

Rintoul's laconic and suppositional review of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* displays such an excess of faulty analysis, misconceived notions and self-righteous rhetoric, that we are left more with a bemused opinion of the reviewer than an impression of the work reviewed.

The periodic publication of *Vanity Fair*, which Rintoul describes with great contrariness as "piecemeal publication", (58) provides us, in the opening paragraph, with an indication of both the tone of his review, as well as the source of his principal misinterpretation. The logic is simple—he intimates: the episodic publication of *Vanity Fair* has unfortunately (though, it seems, not surprisingly) resulted in a work consisting of a "succession of connected scenes and characters" (58) rather than a "well-constructed story". (58) There are no examples of this lack of interrelation, nor proof of its negative effect. We must therefore recognise that Mr. Rintoul has failed to grasp that the innate nature of fiction, by which I mean its selective quality, obliges this constitution, and that the plot—which might be defined as the continuous presence of rapport, binding those scenes together—is the governing principle that determines a text's classification as "story", or collection of "sketches", and not, as is suggested, the manner in which it was published.

Examined closely, *Vanity Fair* is nothing if not a masterpiece in plotting. The parallel lives of Becky and Amelia, mirror images of advantage, never diverge from their directed course. Viewed with the perspective and objectivity of distance, we see Thackeray has produced not only an ironic tone, but an **ironic structure**, for the plot of

this comic romp through *Vanity Fair* contains many of the Aristotelian elements of tragedy, including: rising action, anagnorisis, followed closely by peripeteia and finally the denouement. Therein lies the irony of structure: a comedy dressed in the clothes of tragedy. In this light, what might be seen as the story's chief weakness: Becky's gradual return to prosperity, which necessitates a lengthy, unconventional and sometimes tedious denouement, seems to be inevitable, for Thackeray, in order to produce that ironic structure, must conclude in the comic mode, and not the tragic.

To befuddle matters further, Mr. Rintoul suggests that a "continuous story" (61) must incorporate a certain "interest", which he elucidates—or rather intimates—as poetic justice, in which unwholesome characters receive their just deserts.

Read as a continuous story, it will perhaps be felt to lack the interest which a story requires, except in the scenes connected with Rowdon Crawley's arrest, release, and subsequent discovery of his wife's liaison with the Marquis of Steyne. (61)

By which he means the anagnorisis, when Becky (at least for the moment) is slapped by the hand of poetic justice, and when, shortly after, Rowdon Crawley, that now languid and equally immoral husband, is forced off to Coventry Island ("sent to Coventry" being a colloquialism for banishment).

Fortune though in *Vanity Fair* is—depending on the character—either stolen or received as a gift. What lesson then can this teach?

Mr. Rintoul is in search not of a novel, but a moral. A moral work, he writes between the lines, is a unified work: "The want of entirety we have spoken of is visible in Rebecca's finale." (60)

It is with lamentable logic that Mr. Rintoul decides that since, in his view, *Vanity Fair* has no moral imperative holding it together, it must therefore be falling apart. The monthly publications then are further proof of this looseness and lack of unity.

Thackeray has no intention, much to the angst of Mr. Rintoul, of providing such a simplistic and guileless moral. And yet, with perfect irony, *Vanity Fair* is a moral work. Certainly, it can come as no surprise that the morality of *Vanity Fair*—a story whose structure, as demonstrated above, is irony, and whose contents is irony*—lies not on the surface, but buried *within* the irony, and personified by the ironic tone of the narrator. The morality, as with most things in *Vanity Fair*, lies below the surface, intimated more than stated, made present by its absence.

When Mr. Rintoul states that the singularity of the characters means that:

. . . no useful deduction, no available rule of life, can be drawn from their conduct; except in that of the elder Osborne, who points the moral of sordid vanity and a grovelling love of distinction, and points it with effect, as his vices are made the means of his punishment (59)

he makes it painfully clear that his analysis of character is as faulty as his analysis of plot, for it is really and similarly a judgement of morality and a desire to see the didactic allocation of happy and unhappy fates upon the virtuous and vicious characters respectively.

Of course, Mr. Rintoul misses the point. It is in the lack of poetic justice that we must see the need of morality in the real world, and it is with this perspective that the “available rule of life” *can* be drawn.

* The “bad” grammar here requests the application of Poetic Licence

Works Cited

Tillofson, Geoffrey. *Thackery: The Critical Heritage*
London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1968