

OLLI, Fall, 2020, The Victorian Family on Film and TV, Lost and Found

“Vanity Fair,” 1988 TV Series, based on the 1847 Novel by William Makepeace Thackeray

The Cast:

Eve Matheson as Rebecca Sharp  
Rebecca Saire as Amelia Sedley  
Simon Dormandy as William Dobbin  
Jack Klaff as Rawdon Crawley  
David Swift as Mr. Sedely  
James Saxon as Joseph “Jos” Sedley  
Gillian Raine as Mrs. Sedley  
Benedict Taylor as George Osborne  
Shaughan Seymour as Pitt Crawley  
Phillippa Urquart as Miss Briggs  
Freddie Jones as Sir Pitt Crawley  
Ray Mort as Raggles  
Robert Lang as Mr. Osborne  
John Bowler as Wenham  
Hilda Fenemore as Mrs. Firkin  
Jane Gambler as Maria Osborne  
Alastair Haley as Georgy  
Irene MacDougall as Lady Jane Sheepshanks  
Adrian Ross Magenty as Tom Stubble  
John Shrapnel as Lord Steyne  
Siân Phillips as Miss Matilda Crawley  
Tony Doyle as Maj. O’Dowd  
Allan Surtees as Horrocks  
Allister Bain as Sam  
Eileen Colgan as Peggy O’Dowd  
Dawn Keeler as Lady Bareacres  
Vicky Licorish as Miss Schwartz  
Amanda Murray as Ann Dobbin  
Fiona Walker as Mrs. Bute Crawley  
David Horovitch as Rev. Bute Crawley

Of the 16 episodes, directing credit of 8 of the episodes goes to Diarmuid Lawrence, and 8 to Michael Owen Morris. The adaptation was done by Alexander Baron.

This list of characters in the novel is very long. I find the Crawley family hard to keep track of: The patriarch is Sir Pitt Crawley, a “dirty old man,” who has a parson brother, the Rev. Bute Crawley, who has a conniving wife. Sir Pitt had two sons by his first wife, Pitt, the elder, a pious bore, and Rawdon, a drinking, gambling, wenching army officer. Sir Pitt’s half-sister is Miss Matilda Crawley, a rich spinster who is fawned on by all the family.

“Vanity Fair” adaptations: 4 silent films, 3 sound films, many radio serials, many stage versions, and 6 TV series. Notable TV series and a film version: 1967, with Susan Hampshire as Becky; 1987, with Eve Matheson as Becky; 1998, with Natasha Little as Becky; 2004, (film) with Reese Witherspoon as Becky; 2018, with Olivia Cooke as Becky. This last version is available in the U.S. only in a Region 2 version.

Thackeray (1811-1863) was born in Calcutta, where his father was a collector in the East India Company. His father died when he was three, and at age 6, he returned to England. He was educated at Charterhouse, and at Trinity College, Cambridge, which he left in 1830 without a degree, having lost part of his inheritance through gambling. He visited Paris, and spent the winter of 1830-31 in Weimar, where he met Goethe, then the most famous writer in Europe. After a brief period studying law, he began a career in journalism in 1833. He also studied art in London and Paris. With no money left from his inheritance, he earned a meagre living in Paris from 1834 to 1837 as a correspondent for a London newspaper. He married Isabella Shave in 1836. After three children, Isabella suffered a mental breakdown from which she never recovered. During the 1840s, Thackeray began to be well known as a writer, sometimes under assumed names. In 1842, he began to write for “Punch,” and also to contribute caricature drawings. In 1847, his first major novel, “Vanity Fair,” began to appear in serial form. This was followed by “Pendennis” in 1848-50, and in 1852, “The History of Henry Esmond.” In 1851, he gave a series of lectures on “The English Humorists of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.” He visited the United States in 1851-3 and 1855-6, where he delivered his lectures. In 1860 he became the first editor of the “Cornhill Magazine.” He died unexpectedly on Christmas Eve of 1863.

Thackeray was deeply influenced by the English novelists of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly Henry Fielding. “Vanity Fair” was his masterpiece, and like Fielding, he employed an intrusive narrator, who becomes the friend of the reader. Unlike Dickens, Thackeray was comfortable in writing of the upper classes, and his novels lack the eccentric characters of Dickens. “Vanity Fair” has an epic sweep, and covers, from 1812 on, some eighteen years in the lives of his characters. The title “Vanity Fair” comes from the 17<sup>th</sup> century allegorical novel “A Pilgrim’s Progress” (1678) by John Bunyan. “Vanity Fair” is section 6 of the novel.

“Vanity Fair” was described by Thackeray as “a novel without a hero,” and it has two heroines, the roguish Becky Sharp, and the virtuous and long-suffering Amelia Sedley.

Dickens and Thackeray had a cordial, if guarded, relationship. They quarreled over Dickens’ affair with Ellen Ternan, but they made up later. Dickens was more popular, selling more issues of his serials, and Thackeray appealed to a more sophisticated level of reader.

Charlotte Brontë became a close friend of Thackeray’s, but she refused to be introduced to Dickens.