Gender Politics in the Showman's Discourse; or, Listening to *Vanity Fair*

As the title suggests, this essay is an effort to think about the relationship between reading narrative and listening to it. More particularly, it is concerned with developing an understanding of "voice" and illustrating how voice functions as part of narrative discourse. Influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin, I emphasize the connection between voice and ideology: to listen to narrative is, in part, to listen to values associated with a given way of talking. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* provides a rich site for exploring voice because the Showman's virtuoso performance is fascinating in itself and revealing of Thackeray's attitudes toward Victorian patriarchy. As in the essay on *The Waves*, my emphasis here is more on the textual phenomena and their shaping by an implied author than on readerly subjectivity, though once I move to evaluate the Showman's voices, my ideological commitments as a flesh-and-blood reader become significant.

The first version of this essay was written for a collection concerned with complicating our views of male writers' relations to patriarchy, *Out of Bounds: Male Voices and Gender(ed) Criticism*, edited by Laura Claridge and Elizabeth Langland (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990). In that version I distinguished between my rhetorical approach to Thackeray's discourse and what I called "one kind of feminist perspective." In this revision, I have eliminated that differentiation because, for reasons I discuss in the introduction, it now seems to me misleading. In looking at voice rhetorically, I am looking at ideology, and my evaluations of that ideology are very much
influenced by my interactions with feminist theory (and many flesh and blood feminists). For these reasons, my rhetorical analysis and evaluation is consistently informed by "one kind of feminist" ideology.

Thackeray's decision to survey the booths of Vanity Fair by charting the progress of Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, two very different women, leads him into numerous representations of and reflections on women in patriarchy, while his own virtuoso performance as the Showman of Vanity Fair leads him to adopt many poses and to speak in many voices. Consequently, Vanity Fair provides fertile ground for investigating voice and its relation to ideology as well as for exploring the role of voice in relation to other elements of narrative. I will undertake such an investigation and exploration here by first setting forth a rhetorical understanding of voice and then employing that understanding in the analysis of two passages whose gender politics seem to be significantly different from one another. I will extend the analysis by evaluating Thackeray's deployment of voice and by considering how my rhetorical and ideological commitments shape that evaluation.

The Concept of Voice: Some Rhetorical Principles

Voice is one of those critical terms (genre, theme, style, irony, pluralism are others) that are frequently used but rarely defined with any precision. The result is that we now have no commonly accepted meaning for the term, no clear understanding of what constitutes voice, let alone what makes one kind of voice more effective than another. The understanding I propose here is dictated in large part by my purpose in defining it: I want to talk about voice as a distinct element of narrative, something that interacts with other elements like character and action but that makes its own contribution to the communication offered by the narrative.

My understanding of voice comprises four interrelated principles about language in use. (1) *Voice is as much a social phenomenon as it is an individual one.* This principle follows from the observation that wherever there is discourse there is voice. Just as there can be no utterance
without style, there can be no utterance without voice—although, of course, just as some styles are more distinctive than others so too are some voices. In the case of, say, a letter from the university registrar to the faculty stipulating that grades must be submitted by a certain date, one might be tempted to say that there is no voice in the discourse, that what speaks is some bureaucratic machine. In one sense, this might be true: the discourse may not be at all expressive of the registrar himself or herself. But that is just the point: the letter does not signal the absence of voice but rather the presence of one voice rather than another. We recognize that voice not because we recognize the author of the letter but because as social beings we have heard that voice speak to us on other occasions.³ The example also indicates that, in adopting this principle, I am postulating that although voice is a term that seems to privilege speech over writing, it is a concept for identifying a feature of both oral and written language.

(2) Though mediated through style, voice, as Bakhtin suggests, is more than style and in a sense is finally transstylistic. Voice is the fusion of style, tone, and values. There are markers of voice in diction and syntax, but the perception of voice also depends on inferences that we make about a speaker’s attitude toward subject matter and audience (i.e., tone) and about the speaker’s values. Style will reveal the register of a voice and sometimes its location in space and in time relative to the things it describes and to its audience. But for inferences about personality and ideological values, style is a necessary but not a sufficient condition: by itself style will not allow us to distinguish among possibilities. The same sentence structure and diction may carry different tones and ideologies—and therefore different personalities—while the same personality and ideology may be revealed through diverse syntactic and semantic structures. For example, in the first chapter of Pride and Prejudice, Mrs. Bennet echoes the diction of the narrator’s famous opening remark that a “single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife” by referring to Mr. Bingley as “a single man of large fortune.” The similar style is spoken with different tones—the narrator’s voice is playfully ironic, Mrs. Bennet’s is serious and admiring—and communicates different values: the narrator mocks the acquisitiveness behind Mrs. Bennet’s speech. Austen uses the similar style to emphasize their different voices, their different
values and personality. Later, in describing Mrs. Bennet at the end of the chapter, Austen changes the tone of the narrator’s voice. “The business of her life was to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news.” Although the change in tone indicates a difference in the voice, the consistency of the values expressed enables us to regard the difference as a modulation in the voice rather than the adoption of a whole new one.

A corollary of the principle that voice is more than style is that voice is also more than speech act or, to put it another way, the relation between style and voice is similar to the relation between voice and speech acts. If a speaker typically gives commands rather than making requests or extending invitations, this speech behavior will influence our perception of her voice. Nevertheless, a request and a command can be spoken in the same voice. Imagine an even-tempered benevolent middle manager who would say first to his supervisor and then to his secretary, “Could you please give me the documentation on that?” The illocutionary force of the sentence, when directed to the supervisor, is that of a request, and, when directed to the secretary, the illocutionary force is that of a command. Provided that the middle manager conveys the same respect to each and the same understanding of the power hierarchy in the organization, the voice of each utterance will still be the same. Two commands can be spoken in two different voices, as Shakespeare shows us through Lady Macbeth: “Come, spirits, unsex me here!” and “Out! Out! Damned spot!” In sum, locutionary and illocutionary acts both contribute to but do not determine our sense of voice.

(3) As Wayne C. Booth and Mikhail Bakhtin (among numerous others) have amply demonstrated, the voice of a narrator can be contained within the voice of an author, creating what Bakhtin calls the situation of “double-voiced” discourse. Significantly, the presence of the author’s voice need not be signaled by any direct statements on his or her part but through some device in the narrator’s language—or indeed through such nonlinguistic clues as the structure of the action—for conveying a discrepancy in values or judgments between author and narrator. (In fact, one of the defining features of homodiegetic narration is that all such discrepancies must be communicated indirectly.) In the first sentence of Pride and Prejudice, Austen’s style and tone allow her to communicate the way
she is undermining a literal reading. In homodiegetic narration, our perception of the authorial voice may have less to do with style and tone than with the social values at work in the discrepancy between the voices. When Huck Finn makes his famous declaration, “All right, then, I’ll go to hell,” there is nothing in Huck’s sincerely resolute voice to signal that Twain is double-voicing his utterance. We hear Twain’s voice behind Huck’s because we have heard and seen Twain’s values earlier in the narrative; we thus place Huck’s sincere resolution within a wider system of values that allows us to see his decision to accept damnation as a decision confirming his ethical superiority.

Double-voicing can, of course, also occur within the explicit syntax or semantics of an utterance. When Voltaire has a speaker say, “As luck would have it, providence was on our side,” he is using the style to bring two different social voices into conflict. In cases such as this one, the author’s voice functions as a crucial third member of the chorus by establishing a hierarchy between these voices.

(4) **Voice exists in the space between style and character.** As we attribute social values and a personality to voice, we are moving voice away from the realm of style toward the realm of character. But voice, especially a narrating voice or a “silent” author’s voice, can exist apart from character-as-actor. Voice has a mimetic dimension, but it need not have a mimetic function. That is, voice exists as a trait of a speaker, but it need not be the basis for some full portrait of that speaker. In many narratives, especially ones with heterodiegetic narrators, the voice of the narrator will be his or her only trait, though modulations within a voice will reveal more traits. In homodiegetic narratives, the narrator’s voice is more likely to be one trait among many. The same holds true for the voices of characters in dialogue.

Two main consequences follow from these four principles. (1) Voice is an element of narrative that is subject to frequent change as a speaker alters tones or expresses different values, or as an author double-voices a narrator’s or character’s speech. The corollary of this point is that even as voice moves toward character, it maintains an important difference in its function. Whereas many narratives require consistency of character for their effectiveness, **consistency of voice is not necessary for its effective use.** (2) Voice is typically a part of narrative manner, part of the how of narrative rather than the what. That is, like
style, it is typically a mechanism (sometimes a crucial one) for influencing its audience’s responses to and understanding of the characters and events that are the main focus of narrative. Like any other element, voice could itself become the focus of a specific narrative (arguably this situation obtains in Tristram Shandy), but more commonly it will be a means for achieving particular effects. Thus, we cannot expect an analysis of voice to yield a comprehensive reading of most narratives, though we should expect that such an analysis will enrich significantly an understanding of the way any narrative achieves its effects.

Just as the first three principles in my account of voice move the concept away from style and toward character, these two consequences of the principles move the concept back toward style. The point again is that voice exists in the space between style and character.

Some Functions of the Showman’s Multiple Voices

To understand the functions of the Showman’s voices, we need a fuller explanation of the context in which they are heard. Broadly defined, Thackeray’s purpose in the narrative is to expose the condition of universal vanity he describes in the final paragraph: “Ah! Vanitas Vanitatem! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?” To achieve this purpose, Thackeray invents his dramatized male narrator and has him tell the story of the progress of two very different women through a society that consistently reflects and reveals the ineradicable but multifarious vanity of its inhabitants. This story is frequently (even ubiquitously) linked with gender issues: not only does the male narrator comment on the careers of the women but those careers themselves expose the patriarchal structures as well as the vanity of society. Again speaking schematically, we can see that Thackeray takes his two female characters, places them in the same setting but in different circumstances in the opening chapters, then sends them off in different directions so that he might conduct a relatively comprehensive survey of nineteenth-century society. He then reunites them at the end of the narrative as a way to achieve closure.

He uses Amelia to explore the workings of vanity in the private
sphere—the realm of the home and the heart—and he uses Becky to explore those workings in the public sphere—the realm of social climbing and social status. In keeping with his overriding thematic purpose, Thackeray uses Amelia and Becky to expose the vanity of others and to exemplify certain vain behaviors. In the case of Becky, the procedure is effective and straightforward: he gives her a temporary license to succeed in her vain pursuits by playing on the greater vanity of others, and then once she has exposed that vanity in creatures ranging from Miss Pinkerton to Lord Steyne, he takes the license away and emphasizes what has never been far from the foreground of the narrative: Becky’s own vanity-driven life. In the case of Amelia, however, the situation (though not her character) is more complicated: he uses her constancy, love, and dependence on George first as a way to expose the vanity of George and those like him; later Thackeray tries to expose the negative side of these very same qualities as he shows how they ultimately undermine Dobbin’s estimation of her worth—and the chance for their happiness together when he finally succeeds in marrying her.

Although the stories of Becky and Amelia have clear beginnings, middles, and ends, although the characters move from an initial situation to a final one, the principle controlling the linking of episodes is, for the most part, additive rather than integrative. That is, unlike a novel by Jane Austen in which the significance of each episode derives from its consequences for and interaction with later episodes, *Vanity Fair* is built upon episodes that typically derive their significance from their contribution to the overriding theme of ubiquitous vanity. One consequence of this broad design is that it allows Thackeray to vary the way in which he treats his characters. Sometimes they appear to be autonomous beings for whom he wants us to feel deeply, sometimes they are obvious artificial devices for making his thematic points, and sometimes they are largely incidental to the Showman’s disquisitions about the workings of society. In other words, Thackeray’s narrative fluctuates the audience’s attention between the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic components of the narrative.

One consequence of this narrative design is that it allows the Showman great freedom in his use and selection of voice: he can move from intimacy to distance, from formality to informality, from treating the
characters as puppets to treating them as people provided that the movement remains in the service of the thematic end. Indeed, because of the additive structure and the length of the whole narrative, it is almost incumbent upon Thackeray to take full advantage of that freedom and make the narrator's performance one source of our sustained interest in the narrative. The performances I will focus on here, while not fully representative, illustrate many other transactions that go on between Thackeray and his audience.

As this way of talking about the narrative performances indicates, I see the Showman as Thackeray's mouthpiece: the only distance between author and narrator is created by the audience's knowledge that the narrator is created. On this reading, the Showman is the knowing source of the numerous ironies of the narrative discourse. Thackeray, in other words, does not communicate to his audience behind the Showman's back, but rather uses the protean Showman as the orchestrator of virtually all the narrative's effects.

In chapter 3, the Showman comments on Becky's interest in Jos Sedley:

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. What causes young people to "come out," but the noble ambition of matrimony? What sends them trooping to watering-places? What keeps them dancing till five o'clock in the morning through a whole mortal season? What causes them to labor at piano-forte sonatas, and to learn four songs from a fashionable master at a guinea a lesson, and to play the harp if they have handsome arms and neat elbows, and to wear Lincoln Green toxophilite hats and feathers, but that they may bring down some "desirable" young man with those killing bows and arrows of theirs? What causes respectable parents to take up their carpets, set their houses topsy-turvy, and spend a fifth of their year's income in ball suppers
and iced champagne? Is it sheer love of their species, and an unadulterated wish to see young people happy and dancing? Psha! they want to marry their daughters; and, as honest Mrs. Sedley has, in the depths of her kind heart, already arranged a score of little schemes for the settlement of her Amelia, so also had our beloved but unprotected Rebecca determined to do her very best to secure the husband, who was even more necessary for her than for her friend. (28)

For the most part, the Showman speaks here in the sociolect of the genteel upper middle class. He is someone who knows and feels comfortable in the social circuit of that class: the well-informed gentleman speaking politely but firmly—and with a certain air of superiority—to a group of women from the class. His diction is generally formal, but he will occasionally drop the register to something more familiar: “mammas” or “take the trouble off her hands.” Furthermore, the genteel and formal qualities of the voice are reinforced by the parallel structure of the rhetorical questions and their well-chosen concreteness, as, for example, in “four songs from a fashionable master at a guinea a lesson.” In adopting his air of knowing gentility, the Showman also positions himself at a considerable distance from Becky: he calls her “Miss Rebecca Sharp” at the outset, and even later when he speaks of her as “our beloved but unprotected Rebecca,” his sympathy does not overpower the distance. As a result of the genteel stance and the cool distance from Becky, the voice appears to be considering her as a “case,” one that he is finally sympathetic to, but one that he is interested in as much for what it generally illustrates.

Within this general sociolect, there are significant modulations—so significant, in fact, that even as we read we come to see the dominant voice as a pretense, one that the Showman puts on to expose the limitations of the values associated with it. The Showman’s strategy is twofold: he occasionally lets a certain aggressive element enter the genteel voice and, more dramatically, he temporarily shifts to a voice that is critical of the dominant one and then lets this voice invade and subvert the dominant. One major consequence of this strategy is that while making his apologia for Becky, the Showman offers a powerful indictment of courtship behavior in this male-controlled society.
The Showman adopts the genteel voice right away, but in the second half of the first sentence the voice momentarily drops into a different, franker register as the Showman mentions "the task of husband-hunting." The phrase not only calls to mind the image of the social circuit as a jungle where women are the predators, men the prey, but also insists on the hunt as work rather than sport. Although the Showman quickly regains his genteel voice, everything he says in the rest of the sentence is now double-voiced, undermined by the candid, antigenteel voice of the earlier phrase.

When the genteel voice calls the business of the hunt "delicate matters," we register the discrepancy between this description and "the task of husband-hunting" and the corresponding conflict between the values associated with each; in addition, the use of "delicate matters" privileges the antigenteel voice: his reference to "the task of husband-hunting" makes the phrase "delicate matters" an ironic euphemism.

When the Showman modulates his voice from genteel to informal and affectionate with his reference to "mamas," the earlier presence of the frank, antigenteel voice strongly ironizes the new modulation—and indeed, the whole clause in which it appears. When he tells us that the task of husband-hunting is "generally, and with becoming modesty, entrusted by your persons to their mammas," we recognize the disparity between the image of the hunt and the alleged modesty of those in the hunting party. Moreover, we infer that the "young persons" have no choice about "entrusting" the hunt to their "mammas": the mammas manage, whether the daughters wish them to or not, as we learn later when we are told that "Mrs. Sedley . . . has arranged a score of little schemes for the settlement of her Amelia." We see, in short, that the real predators are those we usually call "mammas." This realization in turn adds another layer of irony to the phrase "kind parent to arrange these delicate matters."

The initial reference to husband-hunting as a "task" is echoed in the aggressive note that repeatedly creeps into the Showman's use of the genteel voice: "what sends them trooping to watering-places?" "What keeps them dancing?" "What causes them to labour?" (It is worth noting here, if only in passing, that the grammar of the passage suggests that "them" refers to "young people" but "young people" ac-
tually means "young women.") "What causes respectable parents to take up their carpets, set their houses topsy-turvy, and spend a fifth of their year's income?" The aggressive note is given more emphasis toward the end of this series of questions, when the Showman slides smoothly from the genteel voice to the franker, antigenteel one of the first sentence. His reference to the young people wearing "Lincoln Green toxophilite hats and feathers" is parallel to the previous phrases about their learning musical instruments. But once the topic of archery is introduced through this description of their clothes, the Showman quickly appropriates the earlier hunting metaphor: what keeps them doing all these things "but that they may bring down some 'desirable' young man with those killing bows and arrows of theirs?"

The result is that the Showman strongly reinforces the subversion of the social values implied in the dominant voice: These genteel "young persons" and their "mamas" are no better than prisoners of their patriarchally imposed task, the purpose of which no one has even mentioned yet—nor has anyone apparently given any thought to what happens once the hunter has bagged her game.

The critique of "courtship" in the Fair reaches its high point in the final sentences of this passage as the Showman turns to answer his own questions about the motives for the behavior he describes. His interjection, "Psha!" followed by the direct assertion, "they want to marry their daughters," marks the entrance into the passage of a third voice—a more honest, more direct voice than the genteel one that has been speaking so far. With this third voice, the Showman is overtly setting himself above his genteel audience to reject their pretense and speak a truth that they also know but don't usually admit. This shift then sets up the final statement as an apologia for Becky's behavior, one that is convincing according to the values associated both with the genteel language he once again adopts—"so also had our beloved but unprotected Rebecca determined to do her very best to secure the husband"—and, significantly, with the new superior voice: "who was even more necessary for her than for her friend."

Because the new voice is clearly superior to the dominant one and because it is not ironized the way that the genteel one is (note all the undercutting in the description of "honest Mrs. Sedley" and her
“schemes”), the apologia has real force. Yes, what Becky is doing is no different from what every other woman in this jungle does; yes, precisely because she has “no kind parents,” a husband is more necessary for her than for Amelia. Yet the presence of the earlier subversion of the dominant voice and its values complicates this apologia. The case for Becky works only in terms of the values that we have been made to question by the earlier interaction between the voices; the case does not recognize how the very role that Becky “justifiably” adopts (i.e., mamma’s role) has been exposed as itself constrained by patriarchy. Consequently, by the light of the values associated with the frankest voice of the passage, the apologia is unconvincing. In this sense, then, the superior voice of the last few sentences of the passage is itself undercut; though it drops the pretenses of the genteel voice, it does not question the basic assumptions and values of the upper-middle-class social circuit.

Evaluating the Showman’s Voices

The interaction between this superior voice and the earlier, antigen-teel one highlights an important effect of the passage that is characteristic of Thackeray’s position throughout the novel. By insisting on both the limitations of and the constraints on Becky’s behavior, the Showman offers a critique without offering an alternative. The power of the Fair is such that virtually no one can get outside it. The corollary of this point has been well illustrated by the analysis of the passage: the power of the patriarchy is also often such that no one can get outside it. It seems fair to conclude—at least tentatively—that Thackeray’s analysis of Vanity Fair is in part a critique of the patriarchy by one of its own, the Showman. Let me now probe that conclusion, first by looking at some other elements of the chosen passage, at the novel more generally, and at one more passage (albeit not with the same degree of attention to detail).

The very positioning of the male voice in relation to the “ladies” addressed in the passage raises a question about the thoroughness of the critique, about whether the rhetorical setup of the passage works
against the message conveyed through the modulation of the voices. Note, first, that the address to "ladies" is made in the Showman's genteel voice, the one that is most undercut in the whole passage. As that voice takes on and reflects the values of the genteel society, it takes on the assumption that the man can tell the "ladies" the truth about their behavior. When we see that this voice doesn't have the truth, this assumption is itself called into question. In that respect, the narrator-audience relationship reinforces rather than undercuts the message conveyed through the voices.

The passage, to be sure, does not suggest that the "ladies" see the full critique; instead, it presupposes that they will agree with the superior voice of the final sentences. But that presupposition does not mean that the Showman is talking down to them as much as it suggests that these "ladies" of genteel society, like Becky, the mammas, and the superior male voice, are caught in the trap of patriarchy.

Nevertheless, even as the analysis indicates Thackeray's considerable virtuosity in the manipulation of voice, it also suggests a potentially negative—or at least rhetorically risky—side to that virtuosity. The complex interplay of voices and their effects leads us back to their source, to what we might call the metavoice of the Showman. In addition to the qualities of wit, intelligence, learning, and a willingness to criticize, the Showman's virtuosity here involves a fondness for ironic one-upmanship: his communication to us comes at the expense of his addressed audience of "ladies." We—male and female readers alike—are invited to stand with him, to compliment him and ourselves on our superior knowledge as we look down on the Fair and those caught in it. Although there are places in the narrative when the Showman indicates that he too can't escape the traps of vanity, his frequently displayed penchant for one-upmanship at the expense of his characters and his addressed audiences creates a problem for many flesh-and-blood readers who seek to join the authorial audience. The invitation to stand with the Showman looking down on Amelia, Dobbin, George, Becky, Jos, Jones at his Club, genteel ladies, or whoever else the Showman names makes such readers uncomfortable: we feel that we're asked to participate in the metavoice's smugness or snideness or superciliousness. This feature of the metavoice obviously has
consequences for any evaluation of it, but it has an especially noteworthy role in our efforts to assess Thackeray’s attitude toward Victorian patriarchy.

When we look at the novel more broadly than we have so far, we soon see that the Showman is hardly Jane Eyre’s brother under the skin. His most obvious limitations are that he does not follow through on his insights into the patriarchy’s shaping of women’s behavior and that he sometimes reveals his own complicity with the patriarchy. Many instances could be cited to make these points, especially his ambivalent treatment of Amelia, but perhaps the clearest evidence is in the famous passage in chapter 64 describing Becky as “syren.”

I defy any one to say that our Becky, who has certainly some vices, has not been presented to the public in a perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner. In describing this syren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster’s hideous tail above water? No! Those who like may peep down under waves that are pretty transparent, and see it writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses; but above the water line, I ask, has not everything been proper, agreeable, and decorous, and has any the most squeamish immoralist in Vanity Fair a right to cry fie? When, however, the syren disappears and dives below, down among the dead men, the water of course grows turbid over her, and it is labor lost to look into it ever so curiously. They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to 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 examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims. And so, when Becky is out of the way, be sure that she is not particularly well employed, and that the less that is said about her doings is in fact the better. (617)

The interplay among voices is characteristically complex here, as the Showman gives the very picture he is praising himself for having suppressed. He uses a refined, almost prissy voice to compliment himself for his decorum, and then, when talking about what he has not done,
he adopts a melodramatic voice that likes to dwell on the seamier side of things. The alternation between these voices is clear and striking throughout but perhaps nowhere more so than when it occurs within the same sentence: “has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster’s hideous tail above the water?” The hierarchy established between the voices brings the snideness of the Showman’s metavoice into play. The melodramatic voice is privileged here: the chief effect of the passage is to convey the Showman’s clear condemnation of Becky as a hideous female creature. The refined voice acts as a cover under which the Showman asserts that Becky is ugly, fiendish, and murderous. Thackeray’s early understanding of how Becky’s behavior can be seen as shaped and constrained by the patriarchy seems to have vanished. Instead, the Showman enjoys himself at Becky’s expense and asks us to do the same as he links her with a whole group of creatures whose evil derives in part from their femalelessness and especially from their female sexuality.

In linking Becky this way, the Showman is performing an all-too-familiar misogynist maneuver, one that ought to be kept in mind as a severe limit on any unqualified claim that Thackeray’s critique of Vanity Fair is also a critique of patriarchy. Furthermore, the snideness with which the whole maneuver is carried out makes the Showman’s voice not simply one that is complicit with the values of patriarchy but one that is actively perpetuating them.

At the same time, Thackeray’s sliding away from the critique of patriarchy in his representation of his female characters is worthy of further thought. Why should his representation be inconsistent in this way? Or, to put the question another way, are there good—or at least plausible—reasons, within the working of the narrative itself, why his attitude toward the patriarchy would seem to shift from one point in the narrative to another?

Thackeray is a moralist as well as a social analyst, and he insists on locating some instances of vanity and its related sins—as well as its opposite virtues—in individuals themselves: consider his treatment of Jos Sedley on the one side and of Dobbin (for most of the narrative) on the other. Since his aim is to show the multifarious and ubiquitous operations of vanity, sometimes he uses Becky and Amelia as instruments for exposing vanity in others or in the structures governing the
society, and at other times as exemplars of certain manifestations of the problem. If Thackeray used his female protagonists only as instruments of exposure, then his critique of patriarchy would be stronger and more consistent, but his demonstration of the omnipresent workings of vanity would be weakened. At the same time, of course, there is no necessary link between his location of vanity within individual women and the kind of misogyny that emerges in the passage we have just examined. Furthermore, on this last point, I think that a defense based on an appeal to historical and cultural difference is only partially successful. It is sensible and important to remember that we cannot expect Thackeray or any other author to escape entirely the ideology of his or her time and place and that, therefore, we ought not to evaluate voices and ideologies solely according to their conformity with our own. At the same time, an act of evaluation is, to some extent at least, an assessment of a text’s value to us now, so our own values do matter. If condemning the entire book for the misogyny of the Becky-as-siren passage (and some others) would be a rash judgment, then overlooking or dismissing that ideology would be an evasion of the evaluative task. At the same time, we need to be clear about the nature of our evaluative claims. It is one thing to object to Thackeray’s larger narrative project as we might do if we concluded that he should have written a consistent critique of patriarchy. It is quite another thing to say, as I have done here, that in the execution of his critique of the operations of vanity in Victorian society, he himself sometimes critiques patriarchy, sometimes trades in misogynistic stereotypes. More generally, the analysis suggests that listening to the Showman’s voices deepens our engagement with Thackeray’s narrative to the point that we must talk back to it—and that talking should in turn provoke more listening.