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EDITORIAL OBSERVER

Reading Thackeray's 'Vanity Fair' With the Illustrations Intact

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The Penguin edition of William Makepeace Thackeray's "Vanity Fair" has a new cover. It shows Reese Witherspoon, who plays Becky Sharp in the new film version, staring balefully at the reader. Whether this "Vanity Fair" does justice to the novel is not really the right question, of course. But it's likely that Becky Sharp - one of the wildest characters in English literature - will be too much for any actress, even the estimable Ms. Witherspoon.

There's a tension between great novels and the all-too-often not-great movies made from them. It's wise to keep Laurence Olivier's Mr. Darcy bottled in memory so he doesn't contaminate Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy. More equal works - say, Robert Penn Warren's "All the King's Men" and Robert Rossen's 1949 film- coexist in an almost fused state, as if the movie were a particularly cogent illustration of the novel.

But Thackeray illustrated himself, something that is often forgotten. I first read "Vanity Fair" in the Penguin English Library edition - a familiar brick of smallish type uninterrupted by anything as frivolous as an etching. Years ago in London, I bought a cheap, dilapidated, two-volume edition of "Vanity Fair" that was published in 1869, some 21 years after the novel first appeared as a monthly serial. What made the set worth buying was Thackeray's original illustrations - a title page, 38 etched plates, 83 vignettes and 66 initials. When I reread the book recently, this was the edition I used.

If you listen to the electronic chatter of our brave new world, you might almost be persuaded that there's nothing very kinetic about a mere book. Compared with a movie or a Web page or a recorded version of a novel downloaded to your iPod, the text of an actual book just lies there, waiting for something to be done to it. Good readers, of course, bring the kinetics of imagination to the text. And compared with the genuine collaboration that exists between readers and a writer, the dynamism of hypertext, for instance, looks preposterously mechanical. "Vanity Fair" is a case in point.

As it was originally published - illustrations intact - Thackeray met his readers more than halfway. He is an interlocutor in his novel as much as its narrator. He patrols the scenes of "Vanity Fair" - London high and low, the battle of Waterloo, the prosperous ducal town of Pumpnickel - happy to intervene when a point needs clarifying, eager to field readers' comments even as the novel is unfolding. Thackeray is always present as an illustrator, too. Each chapter begins with an ornamented initial. The capital "I" of Chapter XVII, for instance, shows a painting of the immense Jos Sedley - collector of Boggley Wollah - seated upon an elephant, a painting that has a role to play much later in the book.

Readers now are used to the notion of a graphic novel, like Art Spiegelman's "Maus," in which text and illustration tell the story together. But something very different happens in "Vanity Fair." Reading that 1869 edition, I found the story of Becky Sharp's outrageous contention with the world around her swelling in imagination again. But there was also room to admire that crisp mid-Victorian typeface and Thackeray's droll quarter-page vignettes. They pop up with the lightness of touch, the glibness, that characterizes Thackeray as a writer at his best. They are comments,

often ironic, on the picture developing in a reader's mind.

Every couple of chapters a full-page etching appears, almost ceremonially. It's hard to decide what these illustrations really intend. "A Family Party at Brighton," for instance, shows Becky Sharp, with wickedly arched eyes and her "famous frontal development," flirting with George Osborne on a moonlit balcony, while her husband and Osborne's sad little wife, Amelia, look on from inside. The etching is not how I imagine the scene. And it isn't really how Thackeray's words imagine it either. The picture doesn't really help tell the story. It pauses the story, giving the reader a moment to linger over a critical episode.

Publishers strip Thackeray's etchings from reprints of "Vanity Fair" for reasons of cost and from a sense that, given the primacy of the text, the illustrations must be irrelevant. We're meant to read as moderns, not as Victorians, who waited eagerly for the next monthly number of "Vanity Fair," poring over the words and illustrations. We take for granted the dynamism, the pace of cinematic story-telling. But compared with a comedy as rich and sprawling as "Vanity Fair," a movie nearly always shows us too much of the world and not enough of the story. Compared with the way we moderns get to read "Vanity Fair," with an almost puritanical lack of ornament, the Victorians may have been better off.