WHEN MASCULINITY MEETS FASHION IN *VANITY FAIR* – A POSSIBLE SUBVERSION OF THE MASCULINE BY THE FEMININE?

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Abstract

This paper aims at analysing the concept of masculinity which has been under the feminists' constant "attacks" for decades. Yet, we wanted to show how a male author depicted a type of 'effeminate' masculinity which stole its way into the Victorian society – the most rigid cultural epoch in history. We chose to discuss masculinity in *Vanity Fair* where Rebecca Sharp permanently attempts at subverting not only the gender roles, but also other well established Victorian binary oppositions: margin vs. centre, master vs. servant, appearance vs. reality. One of the effects of the woman's subversion of male power/ authority is the emergence of dandies, who, despite their elegance and self-made persona, were heavily criticised by Thomas Carlyle or Honore de Balzac who defined them as "clothes-wearing men" – a feature normally attributed to women. Our survey on masculinity ranges from feminist theories to various definitions of masculinity studies or the male sex role identity paradigm, finally concentrating on the relation between femininity and masculinity in William Thackeray's novel. One important aspect of our paper refers to narcissism and the defence mechanisms (such as sublimation, projection, introjection) present in the male characters from *Vanity Fair*, which reinforce the idea that a childhood/adolescence trauma can transform later into personality disorders. Thackeray's representation of masculinity intends to oppose the Victorians' perceptions about this concept and attempts at reversing the traditional gender roles.

Key-words: *dandyism, masculinity, femininity, narcissism, sublimation.*

Introduction

It is true that women, as subjects of masculine oppression, have been the focus of theoreticians for decades, however, because it was the man who was the oppressor, masculinity has indirectly gained just as much attention as femininity

(as a consequence of the feminist movement). Therefore, in the process of highlighting the different treatment society imposed on women, the man got even more publicity, and his image came out stronger than before: the pillar of any patriarchal society, to which women were just mere subordinates. Intricately connected, women and men are somehow the two sides of the same coin, therefore the gradual rise of feminism intended not to discriminate men at all, because he was still in the spotlight. It has been clear to this day that a conceptual equality between sexes is not feasible anytime soon, so this seems to be yet another victory for men and their proclaimed 'masculinity'.

Undeniably, masculinity has so many facets that analysing it only in relation to men would not make at all justice to the concept, as this paper aims to argue. Similarly to 'yin and yang', male and female are inseparable: even the deviations to the norm can be interpreted as consequences and reinforcements of this unavoidable association and continuous interdependence. The women's emancipation cannot happen in total segregation and without having any consequences on men's realities and interests; any changes in the women's universe is bound to produce an imminent echo in the masculine dimension. The more women were conditioned by society, the more legitimate was the general fear that emancipation would change society. The more people wanted "to keep society unchanged, the more they opposed feminism" (Oakley, 1985: 14). From Simone de Beauvoir (1956: 273) and her exegetes, discussions have been and still are very diverse: to Celine Léon, Beauvoir's woman is nothing else but a man (1988: 206), Irigaray argues that the moment women will become one and the same with men, will coincide with their metamorphosis into men, and sadly, they will no longer be women (Irigaray, 1992: 119; Léon, 1988: 206). The debate of the equality of the sexes appears relentless and theorists such as Deidre Bair wonder whether the egalitarianism between men and women would ever be possible and she believes that this would more likely produce women emotionally unavailable, "vain, imbued with their own authority and ruthless in their ambition" (Bair, 1984: 161; Léon, 1988: 199). It is not rare that we encounter such characters, especially in the public eye; if we only were to examine Mrs. Thatcher, the 'Iron Lady'.

In conclusion, the feminist movement, while it focused on addressing the oppression of women, has also unintentionally amplified the presence and power of the discourse of 'masculinity' in society. The women's never-ending attempt to attain gender equality has come to materialise into an interdependent process that affects both men and women. The fear of societal change and resistance to feminism reflect, in reality, numerous deep-rooted anxieties about the potential transformations in the dynamics of the traditional gender roles. Despite the pressure for the women's emancipation, true equality remains elusive, and the idea that women could achieve this may even result in unintended consequences, such as a loss of women's unique identity or a possible emotional disconnection. Therefore, the quest for gender equality is not just about empowering women but also about recognizing the deep, interconnected dynamics between masculinity and femininity that shape both genders.

Gender studies and the debate on the differences between men and women have known three major periods of development (Oakley, 1985: 10). It is not accidental that one of them is the Victorian era. This study (although mainly focusing on the masculinity instances from *Vanity Fair* by William Makepeace Thackeray also aims at being an analysis of the important steps made by theoreticians in answering the following questions: how similar or how different 'men' and 'women' really are, and whether it is relevant to analyse these differences, to establish the way male and female behave and are treated in society (Oakley, 1985: 10).

Theoreticians place a big emphasis on the distinction between the biological 'sex' and the social construct of 'gender'. Since gender is a sociological construction, the human identity depends considerably on unpredictable circumstances like space and time, and it has a distinctive role in shaping the self as well as assigning it various social roles (Sundas & Rahee, 2021: 7). Ann Oakley is certain that while 'sex' is constant, 'gender' is variable and has no biological origin (Oakley, 1985: 188; Sundas & Rahee, 2021: 7), while people are not just born 'men' or 'women', just as Simone de Beauvoir's initial distinction suggested (1956: 273). Biology proves that there is no specific difference between men and women apart from the reproductive function: the presence of a uterus in one body does not suffice for that person to become a caring mother for its offspring – this is something that can only be attained through a specific process of socialization, which can be learned by either men or women (Sundas & Rahee, 2021: 8). Another important aspect is the 'gender' socialization (Sundas& Rahee, 2021: 9): the process through which children are familiarized and taught how to behave in the society and their specific role, according to society rules and regulations. The same scholars argue that gender inequalities come from the process of socializing/training children into different predefined gender roles, offered either rewards or sanctions, according to the context (10). When it comes to the differences between 'manly' and 'feminine' activities, Margaret Mead (1975: 261) argues that what appears to be feminine in a particular society, can be interpreted differently in another society, therefore there is no correlation between the capacities of men and women and their biological heritage. The 'body' appears to have been shaped by 'culture' rather than by 'nature'.

The debate on gender differences reveals that the distinctions between men and women are largely social constructs rather than biological imperatives. This is particularly evident in the difference between 'sex' as a biological category and 'gender' as a sociological one. The process of gender socialization plays a crucial role in reinforcing societal expectations and creating gender inequalities, as children are taught to conform to predetermined roles. Many gendered behaviours are culturally constructed rather than biologically determined. Therefore, gender identity and the roles individuals take on are shaped more by societal influences, making the study of these patterns essential.

1.1. Masculinity Studies
Masculinities studies is a dynamic, integrative academic field, generally dealing with the social construction of what it signifies 'to be a man' (Kimmel &

Bridges, 2011: 1). *Masculinities* scholars study the social role and meanings of this field of research. According to various scholars, the qualities expected in a *gentleman* ('birthright', 'education', 'health', 'income', 'vocation', 'civic responsibilities', 'personal virtue' etc.) have made it difficult to pinpoint an exact definition of the term, because of its common grounds with other fields of study, such as *Masculinities Studies* (Terci, 2015: 8). Scholars agree on the difficulty encountered when defining 'masculinity' and its theoretical implications and highlight the danger of allowing biology to define it, while others look at the consequences of solely supporting the forms of masculinity we identify as convincing, and we end up trusting these forms (Halberstam, 2018: 1). Judith Halberstam also confirms the connection between masculinity and female oppression, or the dependence of the powerful dominant masculinity on minority masculinity: (the 'bad guys', starting with Satan – the original evil man) an example found in any epic story following heroes in their quest (2018: 4). On the other hand, deviant and vicious behaviour, such as violence and aggressivity, is associated in Marshall Segall's opinion with the paternal absence and the unconscious feminine identification with the mother (Segall apud Pleck, 1982: 6).

Tim Edwards identifies three distinct phases of analysis in masculinity studies, called 'waves': starting with the pro-feminist anti-patriarchal writings essentially questioning the sex role paradigm in the seventies, followed closely in the eighties by some form of criticism of the previous wave, related to the hegemony of the most influential masculinity (represented by the white middle class Western male) over to the more suppressed masculinities (associated with race, class and sexuality) (Edwards, 2006: 2, 54), and finally ending with the post-structural cultural studies which insist on the crisis of masculinity, considered by some scholars an invention of modernity, which essentially enhances patriarchy (Edwards, 2006: 20). Edwards concurs with a theory belonging to MacInnes, that gender is "an ideology people use in modern societies to imagine the existence of differences between men and women on the basis of their sex where in fact there are none" (2006: 20). The scholar also emphasizes the aspects which have burdened men throughout history up to the present day: the pressure to achieve and perform, such as 'big boys don't cry' syndrome (Edwards, 2006: 2).

Judith Halberstam investigates further and finds forms of masculinity in femininity itself, arguing that this alternative façade helps enormously with identifying the concept's origins and starting point. Because masculinity in general is a concept mostly linked to power or privilege, it also extends into patriarchy (2018: 2), but also into discrimination – if we think of racism and its implications (outside the conceptual frames of the white male middle-class body). Working class, black (both man and female) and Latino bodies were often associated with 'excessive masculinity', as opposed to Asian ones associated with 'insufficient masculinity' (2018: 2).

After having read all these theories, we conclude that masculinity studies are a dynamic and evolving academic field. Scholars in this field grapple with the challenge of defining masculinity due to its traits overlapping other fields and due to its diverse manifestations across cultures. While a few theorists warn against the reduction of masculinity to biological factors, others examine the societal

expectations and power dynamics that shape masculine identities. Nevertheless, masculinity studies challenge rigid gender norms and uncover the complex ways in which gender, power, and identity intersect across different social contexts.

1.2. The Male Sex Role Identity Paradigm

The Male Sex Role Identity Paradigm (MSRI) has transformed our cultural perspective of the male role since 1930's. It represents the way in which our society developed a "psychology of masculinity" (Pleck, 1982: 1). According to Joseph Pleck, the fundamental difficulty of any individual is securing a "sex role identity" while the failure of achieving this is often identified with 'homosexuality' (1982: 3). Contrary to the way he manifests it, the insecurity in successfully embracing a sex role identity is externalized by a man in the form of a misbehaviour, such as hatred, aggressivity and even assaults on women (Pleck, 1982: 4). A detailed analysis of these forms of misconduct could potentially lead to prevention strategies and prophylactic policies (Pleck, 1982: 4). The MSRI paradigm also relates to what Pleck called "the men's liberation"; the relationship with the father is so important for the boys' future performance as adults and mostly all their insecurities related to embracing their gender role (Pleck, 1982: 7). Androgynous sex role identity – both masculine and feminine at the same time - is listed as the ideal one by MSRI specialists (8). Joseph Pleck interprets this dual dimension as the sex role strain (SRS), offering SRS as an alternative, while criticising MRSI.

We cannot but emphasize the apparent obscurity surrounding masculinity studies. Certainly, these studies are not as popular as feminist studies, but we consider there can be no debate on 'feminism' without scrutinizing 'masculinity'. At the height of the third feminist wave, for example, the women's independence was considered to challenge the institution of marriage (Oakley, 1985: 14), therefore it indirectly threatened men and their domestic stability. Ann Oakley mentions the 1547 proclamation – most likely issued by the men in power – which forbade women to meet, and husbands were 'ordered' to "keep their wives in their houses" (1985: 10). A pamphlet 'Hie Mulier' got published, criticising the of Elizabethan women's independent behaviour. Together with another publication, 'Haec Vir', the circulation of such pamphlets was analysed in connection with the presence on the throne of a female monarch, therefore women were suddenly assumed to be worth more than previously thought. Any change that would perturbate the order of things as it was, was a threat to a system that appeared to be working perfectly. Another pertinent observation made by Oakley is related to the place we should seek for differences between man and women: in biology or culture?

> If men were forced out of their homes to find ways to provide for their family, in both the Elizabethan and Victorian eras, during our times they can finally return and enjoy the benefits of domestic life. With most women enjoying the freedom of having a career, with childcare leave offered to either the father or the mother – this

alternative becomes acceptable, and it is called: the reproductive division between the sexes (Oakley, 1985: 15).

Therefore, the hypothesis – that the emancipation of one side will also affect the other side, proves to be right. Ann Oakley (1985: 16) also believes that no technological progress has been made in the detriment of biology, and this does not smooth the path to a remarkable change when it comes to the human's preconceptions of masculinity and femininity. This is mainly because of the distinction between the biological 'sex' and the cultural 'gender', which refers to either masculinity or femininity. Therefore, the study of masculinity is essential to the understanding of broader societal changes, such as the impact of the women's independence on the male-dominated institutions like marriage, as illustrated by historical examples from the Elizabethan era. Ultimately, the field of masculinity studies offers critical insights into the ongoing transformation of gender roles and the societal forces shaping them.

2. William Makepeace Thackeray's Masculinity – A Reflection on the Victorian Brutal and Oppressive Masculinity

As William Makepeace Thackeray, the English novelist and illustrator, was born in India, Calcutta in 1811 during "the Regency period and its notorious decadence" (Goodin, 2020: 1), we were interested in analysing the English society of the time when *Vanity Fair* was written: 1847-1848. When analysing Thackeray's own masculinity, we have chosen to point out one major Victorian female writer's opinion on *Vanity Fair* and its author, namely Charlotte Brontë. It all started from the "striking differences in narrative tone and style" (Kaye, 1995: 727) between two of the writers' most acclaimed works and the "remarkable affinities between Becky and Jane, strong-minded women who threaten conventional Victorian notions of femininity in their rise from orphaned obscurity to considerable social status" (Kaye, 1995: 727-8). Some critics speak about Thackeray's 'narrative violence' as another expression of 'his own masculinity', while others describe him as "not gay-identified" (Cole, 2006: 132).

Reading the features of the upper class during a period as specific as the Victorian era, this must be preceded by a close understanding of the historical circumstances; we are essentially dealing with a corrupt system which implies that masculine power is absolute. Even Thackeray promises readers that his serial novel will unveil "a story of harrowing villainy and complicated—but (…) intensely interesting—crime" (*Vanity Fair*: 122). His best expression is the one of irony which "extends an iron fist all the more powerful for being inseparable from the velvet glove that covers it" (Cole, 2006: 137) because he is fascinated by the language duplicity and its "seductive and disruptive powers" (Marks, 1996: 78).

Throughout history, the way masculinity was expressed often took the form of abuse. According to Joseph Pleck, the masculine is characterized as aggressive, "concerned with progress and achievement and emotionally detached, while playing certain roles in society: breadwinner, husband, and father" (1985: 10). An atypical example of the masculine ruthlessness depicted by Thackeray refers to Rebecca Sharp's solicitors: they were hired to challenge the insurance company

that refused the payment of the policy, suspecting her of having killed Jos Sedley. However, in the society depicted in the novel *Vanity Fair*, there is a different type of brutality, cunningly disguised through sophistication: "the most sadistic of the police, if not the most abusive, are the fashion police" (Cole, 2006: 137).

Other concepts of great importance for the Victorian era were the 'gentleman', and 'gentlemanliness'. Originally, the 'gentlemen' were identified in the 15th century as "a social group in the English gentry just below the baronets, knights and esquires" (Terci, 2015: 7). Later, these concepts were connected to others such as 'politeness', 'gentility' – traits a true Victorian man had to possess. However, John Tosh argues that politeness was not at all as important for Victorians as it was for Georgians (2002: 455).

When differentiating 'manliness' from 'gentlemanliness' critics like John Tosh rely on 'politeness' to settle the ideological frontier between the two distinct facets of masculinity (2002: 458). 'Gentlemanliness' in Victorian times was more precious if obtained at birth; 'manliness' was something more socially oriented since it "had to be earned, mastering the circumstances of life and thus securing the respect of the peers" (2002: 458). There were some secret formulae to achieve this: mere discipline and hard work. Manliness lay within the grasp of every man who practised self-help with single-minded discipline. Politeness was more associated with rank and nobility, but it did not add any moral meaning to the word gentleman: "we do not mean either a good man, or a wise man, but a man socially pleasant" (Tosh, 2002: 459). But in Tosh's opinion, this transformed the concept of 'manliness' into an even more "slippery concept": "Victorian men were urged to work, to pray, to stand up for their rights, to turn the other cheek, to sow wild oats, to be chaste". Manliness was transformed into a "guide to life deeply rooted in popular culture, and often resistant" (2002: 459) to change.

As manly vigour was traditionally associated with military skills, other traits often connected with manliness were energy, virility and strength. The Victorian scenario transformed the battlefield into the scene of daily responsibilities of the 'breadwinner'. The daily struggle to survive, or whatever it meant to be brave and courageous back in the medieval days, was still needed to prove a man's worth, since life conditions and feeding a family were much difficult tasks than they used to be. War was replaced by the daily struggle to live, to remain independent and to rule over one's household.

The portrayal of masculinity in William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* is deeply intertwined with the social and cultural values of the Victorian era, where masculinity was often manifested through power, aggression, and social expectations. Thackeray's novel reflects a society where the masculine authority is not just physical but also socially and psychologically inherent. His use of irony and narrative violence highlight the Victorian hypocrisy and manipulation of others. The author's portrayal of a corrupt and hierarchical system underlines how the masculine power, while sometimes concealed in sophistication, always finds a way to prevail.

3. Masculinity in *Vanity Fair*

One of the novel's clear aims is directed at emphasizing the ridiculousness of male vanity: Thackeray's male characters fantasize about being seen in the presence of aristocrats just like women were dreaming of. The most visible male figures in the novel are the bourgeois George Osborne and Jos Sedley, "unmanned" middle class male snobs (Cole, 2006: 157) feminized by their vanity, opposing the "hypermasculine aristocrat" Rawdon Crawley, who "symbolically sacrifices his own fashionable ornaments to his all-consuming passion for Becky" (Cole, 2006: 150). The author highlights their femininized vanity, due to "submissive adoration of male aristocrats" while multiplying the instances of the "vain bourgeois snob" (Cole, 2006: 158) – with the womanish Jos utilised for comedy and George, for satire:

> at a grand diplomatic dinner given by his chief, he had started up and declared that a pate de foie gras was poisoned. He went to a ball at the hotel of the Bavarian envoy, the Count de Springbock Hohenlaufen, with his head shaved and dressed as a Capuchin friar. It was not a masked ball, as some folks wanted to persuade you. It was something queer, people whispered (*Vanity Fair*: 741).

As we have previously observed, masculinity in general is always associated with femininity; analysing one will ultimately give insight about the other. Thus, Victorian men are described as being completely dependent on women's submissiveness, which acts as an emphasizer of their own perfection. Amelia, the apparent prototype of the 'angel in the house', pleases and appeals to every Victorian man, some of them declaring themselves openly "the slave of Mrs. Osborne" (*Vanity Fair*: 605). Amelia's most adored trait by Victorian men, is her angelic appearance: "the pretty face which creates sympathy in the hearts of men, those wicked rogues. A woman may possess the wisdom and chastity of Minerva, and we give no heed to her, if she has a plain face" (*Vanity Fair*: 607) and "bright eyes". Moreover, her "weakness which was her principal charm—a kind of sweet submission and softness, which seemed to appeal to each man she met for his sympathy and protection" (*Vanity Fair*: 604) appears to be another trait specific to the 'angel in the house'. However, by the end of the novel, the readers will have found out Amelia's less appraisable features, especially when she conceals procrastination, laziness and lack of fair judgement behind her loyalty to the memory of her late husband when she refuses to marry Dobbin sooner; and these features prevent Amelia from being a true Victorian 'angel in the house'.

Another aspect skilfully depicted by the novelist is the way boys were brought up by single mothers:

> Little George "grew up delicate, sensitive, imperious, woman bred—domineering the gentle mother whom he loved with passionate affection. He ruled all the rest of the little world round about him. As

he grew, the elders were amazed at his haughty manner and his constant likeness to his father" (*Vanity Fair*: 614).

This excerpt demonstrates how, no matter the age and the hour, a woman may always be dependent on a man, be this man her husband, or her son. We are also shown how the feminine traits in a man can lead to brutality and violence, similar to the sublimation in Freud's psychoanalytical theory. According to Freud (1961: 79-80), sublimation is a mature type of defense mechanisms through which socially unacceptable impulses can turn into socially acceptable behaviour – thus, the person's maturity and various degrees of civilization can make one individual function normally in culturally accepted circumstances. In *Vanity Fair*, little George's feminine traits ("delicate, sensitive, imperious, woman bred") are transformed into socially acceptable achievements ("ruled…the world", "domineering the gentle mother", "haughty manner"). Sigmund Freud concluded that sublimation can also illustrate the conflict between the need for satisfaction and the need for security (Geller, 2009: 180). In Thackeray's novel, George's satisfaction may come from his need to be sensitive, however, the Victorian society dictates him to choose the more secure way: to behave like the rest of the Victorian men – to be brutal and domineering with women.

Reaching a venerable old age, Victorian men are reduced to the status of dependent human beings, because they have never had to do anything by themselves: "for this was all that was left after more than seventy years of cunning, and struggling, and drinking, and scheming, and sin and selfishness—a whimpering old idiot put in and out of bed and cleaned and fed like a baby" (*Vanity Fair*: 634). Again, the man is reduced to the condition of a child – a creature dependent on the mother, on a woman – and this dependency makes him transform into a lesser man, into a scheming, sinful and selfish human being. Again, any connection of a man to femininity is brutally rejected by Victorians, calling the man just "a whimpering … idiot". Moreover, funerals were also an opportunity for the Victorian man to 'shine': "as long as we have a man's body, we play our Vanities upon it, surrounding it with humbug and ceremonies, laying it in state, and packing it up in gilt nails and velvet; and we finish our duty by placing over it a stone, written all over with lies" (*Vanity Fair*: 656). This is Thackeray's way of condemning the Victorians' vanity displaced on someone's corpse. The man's body, lying in state, becomes a substitute for the Victorian pride in displaying one's wealth through expensive fabrics and accessories ("gilt nails and velvet"), through impressive tombstones with fanciful obituaries, through grandiose words engraved on those tombstones that were meant to embellish one's image. The author seems to psychologically displace, or project the Victorians' desire to be respected and admired on the funerary ceremonies which are meant to help someone gain the long-sought admiration in death.

John Tosh argues that *gentlemanliness* is different from *manliness*, the latest having so much to do with authenticity:

> While 'gentlemen' continued to value a certain refinement and sociability, manliness spoke to the virtues of rugged individualism,

and this style of masculinity gained in social and political weight as the century proceeded. Politeness was a critical fault-line between the gentlemanly and manly idea (Tosh, 2002: 458).

However, when it comes to *genteelness*, Victorians took much pride in it: "it will be seen that the young lady had come into a family of very *genteel connexions* and was about to move in a much more distinguished circle than that humble one which she had just quitted in Russell Square" (*Vanity Fair*: 100). This is how Rebecca's fate changes after the feminized Jos Sedley escapes from her hands/claws and she is given another chance of climbing the social ladder when she enters the house of Sir Pitt Crawley, the Baronet. In the beginning, Rebecca worries she might not possess the necessary qualities to behave properly in front of this aristocrat and expects she would "be treated most contemptuously" (*Vanity Fair*: 100). Tosh also reiterates that "viewed through the lens of etiquette, politeness was no more than a mask to facilitate and conceal the ambition of the social climber" (2002: 455-6) and *Vanity Fair* is the perfect literary example to observe the phenomenon.

Vanity Fair vividly criticizes the vanity and superficiality that characterize the Victorian masculinity, revealing how men's identity and status were often linked to their external appearance, social position, and material success. This tension between different forms of masculinity—feminized, snobbish, and hypermasculine—exposes the absurdities and contradictions within Victorian gender norms.

3.1. The Victorian Dandy

Victorian culture, as it preached stability, responsibility, and active involvement, fought against dandyism because it stood for "superiority, irresponsibility, and inactivity" (Moers, 1978: 13, Babeți, 2004: 130-133). Victorian culture was simply not *feminine* enough to allow the development of dandyism. George Bryan Brummel was believed to be one of the first English dandies during the Regency, because he wore exuberant outfits (Jacob, 2015: 2); 'the dandy' or the "beau or gallant" (Babeți, 2004: 130-133) was a "social phenomenon" (Gheorghe, 2015: 2) in the 18th century English society. Beau Brummel got imitated by many young men who were almost obsessed with the "physical appearance, refined language, and leisurely hobbies, pursued with the appearance of nonchalance in a cult of Self" (Gheorghe, 2015: 2). The emergence of dandyism was interpreted in relation with the "nostalgia for the old aristocratic custom that is disappearing rapidly" (Jacob, 2015: 3). The British 'dandy' refuses to get involved in the 'bourgeois politics' (Cole, 2006: 3). Thackeray opposes the dandy's "anti-bourgeois virtues" to "the heavy earnestness of the Victorian pose" (Cole, 2006: 138). Balzac in *Traité de la vie élégante* argues that 'a dandy' is a "piece of boudoir furniture, an extremely ingenious mannequin, who can put himself on a horse or on a coach, but a thinking being... never" (1854/1922: 68).

Thackeray's masculine characters defy and live in total opposition with the Victorian ideals: exuding vanity, and instead of occasionally giving an approving gaze to women, they seek it themselves, usually a male gaze from aristocratic men

– "to validate their own fantasies of a Brummell-like physical perfection and social ascent" (Cole, 2006: 137). All young men in *Vanity Fair* are not only obsessed with the aristocratic concept of gentility, but they are also, terribly vain. Both George Osborne and Jos Sedley, and occasionally even William Dobbin, are obsessed with their appearance and clothes and this is shown in the author's repetitive suggestion that each time they passed by a looking-glass, they stopped to admire their reflection in the mirror:

> So, seizing a candle, he looked about for his gold-laced cap, and found it lying in its usual place, on a console-table, in the anteroom, placed before a mirror at which Jos used to coquet, always giving his side-locks a twirl, and his cap the proper cock over his eye, before he went forth to make appearance in public. Such is the force of habit, that even in the midst of his terror he began mechanically to twiddle with his hair and arrange the cock of his hat. (*Vanity Fair*: 435).

This is only one of the many passages in this novel where the author signals how the English society was inflicted with an apparent 'dandyism epidemic' becoming a true 'dandyland' (Babeți, 2004: 55). At the same time, this admiration of one's self-image transgresses the boundaries of narcissism and threatens to fall into the category of snobbery, as Thackeray repeatedly analyses in most of his writings, especially in *The Book of Snobs*.

Fashion reflected in the characters' detailed description of their clothing habits is given a vast amount of space in Thackeray's novel, maybe because of one's exceeding attention and preoccupation for one's exterior self; therefore, the way one is seen by others, is closely linked to one's vanity. The author proves to be a real connoisseur, to be an authority on this field, his attention to details is impressive:

> George Osborne for once was "dressed rather smartly in a blue coat and brass buttons, and a neat buff waistcoat of the fashion of those days. Here was his friend Captain Dobbin, in blue and brass too, having abandoned the military frock and French-grey trousers, which were the usual coverings of his lanky person […] Captain Osborne made his appearance, very smartly dressed, but very pale and agitated […]. He wiped his pale face with a large yellow bandanna pocket-handkerchief that was prodigiously scented." (*Vanity Fair*: 311-2).

> Jos Sedley was splendid. […] His shirt collars were higher; his face was redder; his shirt-frill flaunted gorgeously out of his variegated waistcoat. Varnished boots were not invented as yet; but the Hessians on his beautiful legs shone so, that they must have been the identical pair in which the gentleman in the old picture used to shave himself; and on his light green coat there bloomed a fine wedding favour, like a great white spreading magnolia. (312)

These fragments are only two examples that serve as indices of how Thackeray ironizes the Victorian men's interest in fashion which was usually regarded as the women's attribute. Once, setting off to buy a present for Amelia, gets irresistibly "attracted by a handsome shirt-pin in a jeweller's window which he could not resist" (*Vanity Fair*: 177). The interest in fashion is further complemented by the men's habit of using perfumes and exotic scents to catch the eyes of their admirers even more. The usage of flowers and the intense colours in their clothes further underline the feminine traits of their appearance or an effeminate vanity. This is Thackeray's way of subverting masculinity through exaggerated accessories, colourful clothing and any exaggeration was deeply mistrusted because it was seen as a betrayal of the 'real' manhood.

Men were expected to demonstrate good etiquette and uniforms gained respect and admiration because they proved the man's courage and sacrifice for his own country. Yet, the male characters from Thackeray's *novel without a hero* imitate Beau Brummel from the early 19th century London – a dandy who subverted the men's Puritan style meant to express sobriety and materialism. As the author frequently shows in his novel, the male characters wanted to display a perfect image: starched shirt collars, impeccable cravats, buff breeches or pantaloons, Hessian boots and exquisite gloves. Sometimes the flamboyance in Jos Sedley's dress reveals the author's satire of the sobriety expected from men. His overt exaggeration subverted the masculinity's role of being the foundation of social life, of political institutions. All in all, the male characters possessed ample knowledge of the quality of fabric and cut which signalled their emphasis on the exterior.

We consider the men's interest in fashion as a psychoanalytical introjection through which they imitate the behaviour or the attributes of the women around them. Unlike Freud's theory, in which the ego and the super-ego are built through the introjection of external behavioural patterns into someone's own personality, in Thackeray's male characters, introjection is meant to construct a weak ego by reproducing the behavioural patterns specific to women, who are not the usual Victorian figures of authority. By imitating the feminine attributes or behavioural patterns, Thackeray's men cannot become figures of authority, of control and are more prone to conspicuous consumption, rather than to an austere aesthetic. Furthermore, these dandies were perfect examples of how someone's clothes help the non-aristocrat pass for his betters. Appearance mattered more than reality, hence the male characters' interest in achieving the neatness of their dress, because they needed the approval of other dandies more than the women's attention or admiration. One of George Osborne's male admirers is William Dobbin, who often lends him money. Seduced and abandoned, like a naive and submissive woman, George loses all his cash on the aristocrat's bad gambling habit: "Rawdon was making a victim of [George] as he had done of many before, and as soon as he has used him, would fling him off with scorn" (*Vanity Fair*: 219).

Thackeray's male characters often embody this form of masculinity that stands in opposition with the Victorian ideals of responsibility, duty, and self-

restraint. The dandy valued physical perfection and the high social position above all else and was a figure who rejected the bourgeois principles and embraced a form of elitism that did not appreciate hard work or social responsibility. Thackeray contrasts the dandy's superficiality with the earnestness of the Victorian man, who is expected to demonstrate respect for his duty, to show responsibility and moral integrity. The dandy's obsession with nonchalance and the cult of the self reflect the hypocrisy and vanity of the characters in *Vanity Fair*, making the novel a pointed critique of both the emerging bourgeois class and the fading aristocracy.

3.2. Masculinity vs. Femininity in *Vanity Fair*

The choice of a female protagonist in a novel dealing with vanity (a male oriented trait) is not accidental; in this novel, the male and female characters are meant to echo each other: Becky's image when dressing up as Napoleon is the novel's most representative example of such parallelism: "a dependent narcissist rather than a self-sufficient egocentric, George is in love with an "I" that appears only in the mirror and that is ultimately constructed by the gaze of others" (Cole, 2006: 161). George and Rebecca's vanity lies at the core of their pursuit of obtaining admiration of their self-image and of their own attributes, and this admiration brings them immediate gratification. Although Sigmund Freud's *On Narcissism* appeared only in 1914, long before Thackeray's novel was published, the term originated from the Greek mythology where another young man (like George Osborne) fell in love with his own reflected image. In the 19th century, the reflection is produced through looking-glasses, not necessarily in a pool of water; furthermore, George sees his own reflection in the admiration he gets from his friends and from Amelia, which highly contributes to his megalomania perceived as a personality disorder.

If we are to take into consideration Caligor's, Levy's and Yeomans' definition of narcissistic personality disorder (2015: 416), George's megalomania is characterized by the long series of feelings of self-importance, his excessive struggle to be admired, and his intense craving for gaining people's empathy. In George Osborne, megalomania conceals his insecurities regarding his identity in the Victorian society because he is obsessively searching for public recognition. In Rebecca's case, the woman manifests her megalomania/ narcissistic disorder by spending much time dreaming of becoming successful one day, of getting the power from the hands of the aristocrats, and by trying to get rid of the stigma in the English society. It is true that (according to Caligor, Levy and Yeomans, 2015: 418) the signs of a narcissistic personality are more frequently encountered with young men, than women, hence the evident indices of narcissism in George Osborne, rather than in Rebecca Sharp. Yet, both characters display a tendency towards grandiosity, possibly originating in some kind of trauma in their childhood or youth: George has always struggled to prove his father/family that he deserves to be the heir of a such important fortune, whereas Becky's trauma comes from her inability to have the same social status as the rest of the girls from Miss Pinkerton's boarding school and from her parents' obscure background which will always be thrown into her face each time she wants to climb the social

ladder. Following the criteria indicated in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013: 670), grandiosity in George and Rebecca occurs in different forms: masculinity tends to exaggerate his achievements and talents and expects to be respected and recognized as superior to other people; femininity, on the other, is prone to grandiosity when the woman feels that she can be understood and appreciated only when she associates herself/is associated with other special people or with those having a higher social status. Despite these gendered differences in illustrating grandiosity, we cannot help but observe George's and Rebecca's preoccupations with success, power and their desire to 'outshine' everyone around them.

Another important personality trait that characterizes a megalomaniac is one's excessive need for admiration which occurs in both George Osborne and Rebecca Sharp. Whenever other characters dress elegantly, Becky makes sure to stand out through a particular shawl or other accessories and is sure that other women will be envious of her. All actions initiated by George and Rebecca are meant to impress the others around them, and if one's social status (as in Becky's case) makes people reject and ignore her, our female protagonist makes sure she outsmarts them. She knows she can rely on her intelligence and shrewdness, hence her arrogance and haughty attitude despite her belonging to a lower class.

Finally, megalomania in George Osborne and Rebecca Sharp is illustrated in their sense of entitlement which, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2013: 671), means that these characters set themselves unreasonably great expectations of receiving a favourable treatment from all human beings either due to their beauty or based on their intelligence and power of seduction. When they consider themselves entitled to be treated favourably by others, they also seem to show quite a great lack of empathy, being unwilling to sympathize with others' suffering or to understand others' needs. At the same time, the megalomaniac George and Becky prove to be rather exploitative with their spouses and take advantage of their friends to achieve their personal goals. This intense sense of superiority may be the reason for which Becky tends to monopolize conversations at parties and tries to be the centre of everyone's attention or becomes impatient when Amelia or Jos Sedley try to express their opinions or to gently reproach her something. When George Osborne suffers because his family disapprove of his marriage to Amelia Sedley, his narcissism is displayed through his fits of anger targeting his wife, and his disrespect shown to Amelia and to her family is seen as deliberate and even calculated gesture. A similar behaviour is seen in Becky's treatment of Jos Sedley in the final chapters of the book, when Jos is afraid of her occasional flare-ups of rage or insults.

George and Becky are the most astute social climbers from the novels which often follow transgendering patters created by the author to highlight the impossibility of trespassing the social boundaries. Thackeray is certainly an author fascinated by the duality of opposing pairs: apparent separate entities that against all Victorian expectations often trespass each other's limits and end up intertwining with the other. The author skilfully reflects the sexual and social duplicity in his use of double meaning words (Marks, 1996: 77). Masculine and

feminine roles are reversed: George is both the symbol of a strong heterosexual man: "wherever he went, women and men had admired and envied him" (*Vanity Fair*: 264), as well as an example of a "homoerotic, effeminate snob (Cole, 2006: 163). We concur with Sarah Cole's theory that George Osborne seems to display effeminate traits especially when we consider his narcissistic need to receive recognition from others and to be admired/envied just like women are prone to men's admiration. In this case, George lets himself be subjected to the male gaze in which his body (when admired) becomes an object of desire in the eyes of heterosexual males, like William Dobbin who looks up at him admiring his attitude and who often pays his debts. Although Laura Mulvey (1975: 7), who coined the term 'male gaze', argued that the male is usually the gazer – thus, having an active role – and the female assumes the passive role of being 'looked-at', in *Vanity Fair*, the gender roles are reversed when George struggles to gain everyone's admiration and flaunts his body at parties and at events around London.

The reversal of gender roles becomes even clearer in the mirror scene when Becky and George are staring at each other: "Becky immediately looks beyond her own reflection in order to "fix" another character's weaknesses, which she will eventually turn to her advantage" (Cole, 2006: 159). What Sarah Cole meant through Becky's desire to 'fix' George's weakness, was again an example of a narcissistic need to feel superior to others, to assess one's beauty and qualities in the detriment of others; Becky's Medusa-like gaze objectifies George Osborne as much as a man would objectify a woman with his male gaze. According to Susan Bowers (1990: 222), who in her essay "Medusa and the Female Gaze" continued Laura Mulvey's ideas, the male gaze has an unquestioned existence which is suddenly disrupted by the female gaze when a woman (like Rebecca Sharp, for instance) recognizes herself as the object of the male gaze and rejects being sexually subordinated to the man, thus she objectifies the gazing man (George Osborne in this case) with her female gaze. Practically, the scene in *Vanity Fair* can be compared to a duel of glances between the male and the female in which one tries to overcome the other. The illustration in William Thackeray's novel seems to subtly suggest Rebecca as the winner of this duel between gazers, thus assuming a more masculine role. Thackeray often reverses traditional gender roles, presenting characters who embody both masculine and feminine qualities. The protagonists' shared narcissism and desire for validation highlight how male and female characters in the novel are not defined by rigid gender roles but by the same underlying desire for power and social mobility.

In one of the illustrated editions of the novel, there is an image of Becky Sharp portrayed as a feminine Bonaparte in chapter LXIV. Critics often identify Becky with Napoleon; Hillel Matthew Daleski (1985: 54) praises Becky's intelligence and the way she makes use of it, like a weapon; consequently, she can indirectly be perceived as a good strategist, laying down her "challenge to English society", as Napoleon laid his down before Europe. Through her rise and subsequent fall, Becky fulfils the heroic archetype that Shoshana Knapp attributes to Napoleon, "the angel and the demon: the culture-hero . . . and the outlaw-adventurer" (cited in Marks, 1996: 76). And so, Becky makes her campaign

through the class structures, moving upward "from the nabobs (Jos) through the gentry (Rawdon) and the aristocracy (Steyne) until presented at court when follows her Napoleon-like fall" (Daleski, 1985: 55).

Napoleon is therefore reduced not only to a "political symbol but to a mythological abstraction, put to the service of religion and education for the moral formation of the young" (Daleski, 1985: 56). Dalenski also believes that William Thackeray is very skilled in building mythical figures, out of the ordinary people, as if they were historical figures. Just like the French emperor, Becky manifests the same rebellion against the class structure, against the aristocrats and le nouveau riches (Daleski, 1985: 54; Cuțitaru, 2004: 38). Patricia Marks highlights the author's message to the readers (as cited in Daleski, 1985: 78): native intelligence and acquired skills can make up for the social disadvantage, of birth linked to Napoleon's renowned idea related to a 'carrière-ouverte-aux-talents'.

Therefore, just like the French emperor, Becky challenges the class structure and asserts her intelligence as a weapon, making her a rebellious figure within the constraints of Victorian society. Thackeray thus transforms a female character into a heroic figure (not necessarily into a hero!), analogous to a male leader, highlighting the fluidity of gender roles in the novel. Rebecca Sharp becomes a symbol of a new kind of masculinity, one that is not defined by physical strength or social position or one's inheritance, but by cunningness and self-reliance. Thackeray's portrayal of Rebecca's struggle to defy the class structure and her eventual downfall emphasize the limitations of social climbing, while also suggesting that intelligence and resourcefulness can challenge the traditional gender roles.

Conclusions

This paper aims to be an insight into the concept of masculinity and how this is subverted by the feminine in the 19th century England, as this is mirrored in William Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. The ideas surrounding the concept of masculinity in general initially originated from the feminist approach to literature and culture and they developed in specific distinct phases, together with the feminist theories, as their consequence or even opposing them. This is the reason for which the concept of masculinity and masculinities is not isolated or necessarily stranger to its apparent competitor – the concept of femininity. In *Vanity Fair*, William Makepeace Thackeray criticizes the Victorian ideal of femininity, apparently exemplified by Amelia because her weakness together with her dependence on the male protection become part of her charm, confirming the cultural belief that the true femininity is passive and reliant. The novel's detailed attention to fashion and materialism further emphasizes the link between masculinity and vanity, enhancing the male's tendency to imitate the feminine. Thackeray satirizes the Victorians' obsession with appearances, social status, and rigid gender roles and his satire reveals how deeply rooted vanity and superficiality were capable of shaping both male and female identities. The novel is a critical analysis of the complexities and hypocrisy of Victorian masculinity, illustrating how the craving for a higher social status and the fear of an apparent emasculation tainted every aspect of the man's life.

To conclude, *Vanity Fair* criticizes the Victorian masculinity by exposing its contradictions and superficialities. Through its portrayal of male characters obsessed with vanity, social status, and appearance, the novel reveals the fragility of the masculine ideal in a society that prioritizes appearances over inner substance. The interaction between masculinity and femininity in the novel, especially through characters like Becky Sharp and George Osborne, highlights the fluidity of gender roles and the ways in which William Thackeray uses them to assert his satire and criticism.

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