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978-1-107-10585-0 - At Vanity Fair: From Bunyan to Thackeray

Kirsty Milne

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

### *The boy at the Royal Exchange*

The radical publisher William Hone, hero of a blasphemy trial that electrified Regency London, had vivid memories of the first book he owned as a child. It was a woodcut copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, given to him by his father. 'I was full of the incidents in this book; the phraseology wrought into my childish talk; I frequently imagined persons and places as being characters and scenes written of by John Bunyan.' The family having recently moved to London, Hone's father took him to the City to visit the Royal Exchange, perching the little boy on his shoulder so he could see into the quadrangle where business was done. 'I loudly exclaimed, "Vanity Fair, Vanity Fair!" and at the same time inquired of my father something about Faithful, to the twitting of some of the merchants, one of whom smiled significantly and observed, "What the child says is nothing far from true."' <sup>1</sup>

Hone highlights his conviction that Bunyan's story was real, and that he had discovered, in the commercial heart of London, the hostile marketplace where the pilgrims are arrested and Faithful burnt to death. Written for a memoir that Hone never completed, this remembered scene (which would have taken place in the late 1780s or early 1790s) swarms with sub-texts that link it to *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Hone and his father were strangers to London, bewildered outsiders like Christian and Faithful in Vanity Fair. The elder Hone, like Bunyan, was a Dissenter. His son, by annoying the traders with his outburst, was playing the role of Faithful, who publicly denounces Vanity Fair before he goes to the stake. The anecdote is framed to foreshadow Hone's future career as a satirist and parodist, playing up uncomfortable resemblances like the boy at the Royal Exchange. <sup>2</sup>

If Hone's story is unusually explicit in conflating life and text, the to-be publisher was not alone in linking Bunyan's imaginary space to his own experience. Although Vanity Fair is only one episode in the eventful narrative of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, taking up barely a dozen pages out of 267 in the first edition of 1678, it has had a potent and versatile afterlife.

Generations of readers have used *Vanity Fair* as a way of thinking about money and morality, commodification and conformity. New associations accumulated with William Makepiece Thackeray's choice of the name for his best-known novel (1847–1848); further layers of meaning accrued out of Condé Nast's decision to keep *Vanity Fair* as the title of the magazine that he bought and re-launched in 1914. In this rich and complex process of transmission, the origins of the phrase have been obscured – and with them the paradox that a seventeenth-century puritan should have produced a familiar motif of modern consumerism.<sup>3</sup> This study recovers the origins of this cultural trope, and shows how closely tied are the cultural legacies of puritanism within modern consumer society. Indeed, as shall be shown, *Vanity Fair* is an important image for modernity, one that may not reconcile the social and religious discipline of a hale puritanism with the insouciant freedoms of a market-driven economy, but one that is a flashpoint for these competing, and even complementary, energies.

At *Vanity Fair* tells the story of Bunyan's runaway metaphor, exploring how *Vanity Fair* was transformed from an emblem of sin and persecution into an aspirational showcase for celebrity, wealth and power. This is a literary history, bookended by a pair of famous authors and asking questions about reception, adaptation and influence. But it is also a study of how ideas are transmitted, and how a familiar text can be used to express and grapple with cultural change. Over time, as I shall show, Bunyan's dystopian fantasy is pressed into service as a way of characterising what we would now think of as consumer capitalism, channelling memories that inform and unsettle modern hedonism.

The narrative momentum for the project comes from the dramatic changes in meaning and context that *Vanity Fair* undergoes, specifically in the period 1678–1848. What is offered is not a comprehensive history of the fortunes of puritanism on the one hand, nor of *Vanity Fair* on the other. Although there is a brief concluding encounter with Condé Nast's 'entertaining magazine for Moderns',<sup>4</sup> the story leaves off with Thackeray, at which point the main cultural work of transformation is done. Readers who remember 'Vanity Fair' as the *zeitgeist* magazine of the 1980s and 1990s will be able to supply this latest instalment, and to appreciate fully the strangeness of the trajectory from puritanism to consumerism.<sup>5</sup> The period 1678–1848, it shall be seen, bounded by *The Pilgrim's Progress* and Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, comprises the lesser-known part of the story and indeed, the crucible for change. While in Bunyan *Vanity Fair* is a place of trial and terror, within a few decades it has migrated out of its parent text and into common idiom, losing its religious overtones and becoming

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associated with consumption, leisure, and the idea of social life as a performance. A familiar example from a well-loved classic is the chapter ‘Meg Goes to Vanity Fair’ in Louisa Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868), which describes a young girl’s experience of having nothing to wear at a party given by rich friends. Alcott has been denounced for trivialising Bunyan and ‘reversing’ the meaning of Vanity Fair, yet her treatment is entirely consistent with the trend that I investigate here.<sup>6</sup>

With authors Bunyan and Thackeray defining the chronological boundaries of this book, the subject is, however, ‘Vanity Fair’, understood as a persistent intertextual phenomenon that maintains a high degree of autonomy from the authors with whom it is most commonly associated.<sup>7</sup> While there is a rich tradition of the images of Vanity Fair in the many illustrated editions of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* from Bunyan’s time to our own, the interest here is in the dissemination of the verbal motif, as it is readily appropriated into other textual contexts.<sup>8</sup> My research reveals the textual afterlife of Vanity Fair in novels, letters, journalism and light verse – texts which fall below the canonical radar, but which prompt a reappraisal of Bunyan and Thackeray as the best-known exponents of a dynamic and fiercely contested tradition. Canvassing a range of material, from pamphlets and periodicals to sermons and satires, I show how the idea of Vanity Fair has been tamed, secularised and feminised, becoming associated with consumption, pleasure and the notion of social life as a performance. Using the concept of cultural memory, I try to explain *how* such changes happen, portraying a process in which anonymous journalists and booksellers play a part alongside well-known authors such as Ben Jonson, Samuel Richardson and Thomas Carlyle. By tracking the phrase ‘Vanity Fair’ against this shifting background, I seek to illuminate the relationship between the individual and the collective imagination, between what is culturally available and creatively impelled.

Seen in the context of this larger story, Bunyan and Thackeray – authors who have fallen spectacularly out of fashion – are released from some constricting stereotypes. Bunyan, often viewed as a tiresome sermoniser or naive original, emerges as an author whose creation of complex metaphors puts him in dialogue with modernity. Thackeray, variously interpreted as a cynical club bore or a radical critic of commodity culture, is here revealed as an anxious conservative, invoking a version of Vanity Fair that upholds the social order even as he flays it.

In *At Vanity Fair*, these transformations have been tracked through a history of printed descriptions of the image of Vanity Fair. While there is room for a study of oral and visual transmission of this motif, a study of

printed material allows us to assess precise terms that people understood and used at the time. It is true that many readers first came to Bunyan through oral means: reading aloud. Indeed, Bunyan himself came to his religious conversion through auditory means, in *Grace Abounding* relating his hearing of ‘a voice [that] did suddenly dart from heaven into my soul’ and then his overhearing a religious discussion: ‘I came where there was three or four poor women sitting at a door in the sun, and talking about the things of God; and being now willing to hear them discourse, I drew near to hear what they said.’<sup>9</sup> Yet in *Grace Abounding* the transmediation from orality to literacy is already underway; Bunyan recounts taking up the Ranter’s books, and then at last the Bible, which he reads ‘with new eyes’.<sup>10</sup> While there is room for a study of the motif of Vanity Fair in oral transmission, and indeed Bunyan describes his relation as a ‘telling’, this study takes as a starting point that Bunyan was himself evoking a reading culture, as he demands in his Conclusion: ‘NOW Reader, I have told my Dream to thee. / See if thou canst Interpret it to me.’<sup>11</sup> This is a study, then, of words, words whose cultural meanings change; words that provide a repository for conflicting obligations; words that acquire special meanings that may be tracked and compared through their usage. Understanding the changed meanings of specific words is made possible by new technologies, in particular the digitisation of print collections and the growing precision of internet search engines. Without them, the ubiquity of the phrase ‘Vanity Fair’, and its trajectory from *The Pilgrim’s Progress* into different kinds of discourse, could not have been established and tracked, making this a twenty-first-century project that would have been impossible as recently as a decade ago.<sup>12</sup> While there are drawbacks to the use of electronic databases, they fill in a ‘thick’ print background that was previously inaccessible, offering new evidence of how ideas circulated through texts and how canonical writers appropriated and transformed them.

Imagining a process of print dissemination and cultural transformation over and across time is central to my story, and this kind of chronological reach is at variance with the prevailing preference within both the history of ideas and in literary studies of studying texts in their immediate historical contexts. Contemporary historicism, in Wai Chee Dimock’s polemical characterisation, ‘rests largely on semantic synchronism: the meaning of a text is understood to be the property of the historical period in which it originated . . . undisturbed by anything beyond’.<sup>13</sup> It would of course have been possible to have approached Vanity Fair in the spirit of ‘semantic synchronism’, through a study of seventeenth-century fairs and their

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cultural meanings. Chapter 2, which examines Vanity Fair's relationship with fairs in anti-Catholic satire and Civil War polemic, owes an obvious debt to the forensic burrowings and generic juxtapositions of the approaches of 'new' historicism or 'ideas in context' at their best. But my book as a whole responds to Dimock's case for 'restoring the temporal axis to literary studies', and her call for critics to engage with 'the dynamics of endurance and transformation that accompany the passage of time' (technically an easier proposition now than in 1997, when her argument was made). 'New historicism', while illuminating context and reinforcing a sense of estrangement from the past, cannot explain the *persistence* of Vanity Fair – why these two words of Bunyan's have survived when many thousands are forgotten. These are questions of literary effect, of how language can be used to resolve – or to restate – social contradictions and accommodate change. While Bunyan and Thackeray have all but vanished from contemporary bookshelves, Vanity Fair has proved more resilient than either.

Indeed, what is remarkable about Vanity Fair are the semantic, tonal and contextual changes the phrase undergoes, both inside and outside the texts with which it is most closely associated, and a diachronic approach is thus highly desirable. Bunyan's fair is an alienating marketplace where the intruding pilgrims are arrested and dragged before a kangaroo court; the mere fact of their being different, in dress, manners and religion, means they cannot pass unscathed. Thackeray's fair is a busy, indifferent playground that assimilates intruders as long as they perform convincingly. The pilgrims' active role has been taken by a female intruder, Becky Sharp; their censorious certainty finds faint remembrance in a narrator who presents himself as part preacher, part fool. While still a site for satire, the fair is no longer a place where religion has a public and divisive role; world-weariness and ambivalence substitute for Bunyan's cosmic stand-off between good and evil. With Thackeray, Vanity Fair is portrayed as having thrills and attractions that are never conceded in Bunyan's version.

Chronological breadth is vital to understanding these changes. While the radical revision of Vanity Fair has been variously attributed to Thackeray's personal cynicism, a Victorian crisis of faith, or the dizzying cycles of nineteenth-century capitalism, many of these changes, when seen in the long diachronic perspective, however, are far from being peculiar to Thackeray. Indeed, they are apparent within a few decades of *The Pilgrim's Progress* being published. As I show in Chapter 4, Vanity Fair in the eighteenth century was rapidly secularised and feminised, sloughing off Bunyan's atmosphere of cruel intolerance but retaining the idea of the fair

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as a leisured public space, and the memory of puritan censure. The texts implicated in this process are often by little-known authors or exist in an ephemeral form (newspaper articles, for instance) that can only now be easily retrieved by electronic searches across digitised archives. These new techniques reveal an active process of revision and mutation that began long before Thackeray's novel, and which throws up important questions about the relationship between literary transmission and semantic change.

In this wide diachronic study, one must be aware of certain risks. The first is that to follow a text across time is to court misrepresentation and distortion. Literary history carries with it the temptations of teleology, evident in narratives that march towards modernity or harbour an *ex post* agenda. The transformations in *Vanity Fair* are indeed strongly suggestive of larger cultural trends: secularisation; urbanisation; eighteenth-century debates over luxury; Victorian crises of faith. While such narratives have obvious relevance for this book, I do not attempt to reproduce them, nor do I treat *Vanity Fair* as a proxy for them. To do so would be to presume that literary texts simply reflect external circumstances, and to impose retrospective coherence on a story that is not straightforward.<sup>14</sup> For instance, *Vanity Fair* never quite loses its associations with oppression and resistance. In 1927, when Condé Nast's magazine was advising on how to dazzle at dinner parties, the Black consciousness leader Marcus Garvey wrote a poem called 'The White Man's Game – His *Vanity Fair*', attacking colonial injustice.<sup>15</sup>

The second instinctive objection to a study that tracks a text across time is the risk of discounting or flattening individual reactions in the interests of a coherent narrative. For some, there is an inherent contradiction between 'the generalising discourse of literary history and the individuality of literary response', a tension that is discussed in the next section.<sup>16</sup> But it ought to be possible to write literary history that accumulates convincing evidence of cultural trends without submerging the individual reading that may resist or challenge them.

Hone's account of his childhood reaction to *The Pilgrim's Progress* is a case in point. On the one hand, it converges with trends that are described in my third and fourth chapters. From the early eighteenth century onwards, readers frequently identify *Vanity Fair* with a real place, often a city like London or Paris, and even with a named public space, such as Ranelagh Gardens or the Palais Royal. On the other, Hone's projection of *Vanity Fair* onto the Royal Exchange is unusual – I have found no other eighteenth-century examples of this, however predictable the comparison might seem – and

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raises interesting questions about the extent to which his response is individually determined, tied up with the book history of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, or connected to broader historical shifts in attitudes. Far from erasing the individuality of Hone's reading, a long timescale enriches and complicates it. What triggered the little boy's sense of recognition? Was it a genuine collision of imagination and experience, this being the first big, formal marketplace he had seen? Or was there a visual cue in his copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*? The standard images of Vanity Fair, recycled in old woodcut illustrations throughout the eighteenth century, include formal arches and fluttering pennants that might have matched what he saw at the Royal Exchange.<sup>17</sup> (See Fig. 1.) There may even have been a direct verbal prompt. Hone's treasured edition of *The Pilgrim's Progress* could have included the spurious *Third Part* (1693), not written by Bunyan but frequently bound in with Bunyan's original. In this version, as I explain in Chapter 3, the pilgrims arrive in the city of Vanity at 'a place called the Exchange, where merchants meet and traffic'.<sup>18</sup>

Colouring in this hinterland should not detract from the individuality of Hone's response. It is no wonder that the author of *The Political Litany* and *The Sinecurist's Creed* – two of the pamphlets which led to his prosecution for blasphemy in 1817 – should be alive to the violent incongruities of Bunyan's Vanity Fair, where 'Wives, Husbands, Children, Masters, Servants, Lives, Blood, Bodies, Souls' are up for sale alongside 'Silver, Gold, Pearls, precious Stones, and what not'.<sup>19</sup> By setting Hone's reaction within a broader timescale, however, we can see him as part of a collective process of appropriation. Looking back to the late seventeenth century, it becomes clear that he was not alone, though unusual, in equating Vanity Fair and the Royal Exchange; looking further towards the middle of the nineteenth century, his merging of the two – with all the disapproval and alienation it implies – becomes part of a shift towards associating Vanity Fair more precisely with financial markets and a recognisably modern form of capitalism.

My point is that the individual reading cannot be separated out from the collective memory. Texts carry with them the freight of the past, including their appropriation by other, earlier readers. As subsequent chapters will show, many recurrent features of how Vanity Fair is used and portrayed, such as the active presence of women in the fair, or the merging of two pilgrims into one unheeded preacher, derive not directly from Bunyan but from other memories and texts. I use the term 'appropriation' not in the sense of 'a hostile takeover' (although that is sometimes the case), but in the more neutral sense of 'making one's own'.<sup>20</sup> It is a key word in the



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Fig. 1. The pilgrims in chains at Vanity Fair (1695). Note the bishop, left, and the fluttering pennants, possibly shop signs.



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work of the historian Roger Chartier, who uses it to discuss ‘the variety and instability of meanings assigned to the same text by different audiences’. My account of Vanity Fair responds to his call for ‘a social history of the uses and misunderstandings of texts by communities of readers who, successively, take possession of them’.<sup>21</sup> But it also suggests that too narrow a definition of ‘texts’ and ‘readers’ can restrict our understanding of how a trope is transmitted. The concept of cultural memory, as I explain later, allows for the intrusion of other texts, traditions and historical conditions to create an idea of Vanity Fair that seems far distant from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.

Each chapter in *At Vanity Fair* investigates a different kind of appropriation and moment of cultural change. Chapter 1 analyses how Vanity Fair has been co-opted as a realistic description of a seventeenth-century fair, or as a critique of twentieth-century capitalism. Chapter 2 argues that Bunyan challenged and subverted an existing trope – that of the disruptive puritan, familiar from Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* – by substituting his brave pilgrims, martyred by a cruel and arbitrary regime. Chapter 3 looks at how Vanity Fair is modified in early imitations of *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (including Bunyan’s own *Second Part*), examining these changes in detail to catch the moment of mutation. Chapter 4, by contrast, takes a long view, ranging across the eighteenth century to show how Vanity Fair migrates out of its parent text and is appropriated as an idiom for conceptualising public space and leisure. Chapter 5 looks at how the trope becomes, in Thackeray’s novel, a vector for cultural memory, but also an expression of cultural change; a way of negotiating with the puritan inheritance of the mid-nineteenth century, but also a way of suppressing or bypassing it.

In what sense did Thackeray adopt this phrase?<sup>22</sup> There is something unsatisfying about resolving the question by recourse to a timeless ‘vanitas’ tradition. Scholars studying authors Bunyan and Thackeray routinely cite a biblical source, Ecclesiastes 1: 2 (‘Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity’) as if that were sufficient explanation, without exploring how a biblical verse became textually embodied specifically as a fair or market.<sup>23</sup> Scholars on Thackeray usually invoke a debt to *The Pilgrim’s Progress* without referencing the allusion to Bunyan.<sup>24</sup> In the few cases where critics have directly compared Thackeray’s treatment of Vanity Fair with Bunyan’s, the resulting accounts of contrast – or congruence – have been skewed by exactly the kind of grand narrative I hope to avoid.<sup>25</sup>

The difficulty is that Vanity Fair has been perceived for so long as a commonplace, too familiar to warrant further enquiry, and that lack of scrutiny, it is suggested, neglects important ways in which literary texts

generate cultural change. Bunyan's status as a shared cultural resource, almost as familiar as Shakespeare or the Book of Common Prayer, persisted until the mid- to late twentieth century. In their 1963 edition of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson felt able to quote from *The Pilgrim's Progress* without mentioning the source or the author, assuming that readers would recognise where it came from.<sup>26</sup> Half a century later, such an assumption would be out of the question: instead, Bunyan's book is said to be 'currently one of the most unpopular works among English literature's greatest bestsellers' and 'one of the most spectacularly untrendy works in the canon'.<sup>27</sup> Today, 'Vanity Fair' is invariably connected with Thackeray's novel or the Condé Nast magazine, rarely with Bunyan, a degree of estrangement which makes possible new readings of the original episode in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Yet 'Vanity Fair' remains embedded in the language – as a phrase, a title, a brand name – and its status as a commonplace tends to repel or evade interrogation of what it means and where it came from. The critic Charles Whibley captured this quality when he called it 'a place which all men would recognise'.<sup>28</sup>

This was certainly true of the young William Hone, sitting on his father's shoulders and observing the bustle of the merchants at the Royal Exchange. He 'recognised' Vanity Fair immediately, and remembered that moment for many years, so that his visit to London merged with his childhood passion for *The Pilgrim's Progress*. That slippage – between reading a text and transmitting a memory – is an important theme in the story of Vanity Fair.

### **Histories of remembering: approaching Vanity Fair**

Hone's recollections illustrate how reading is complicated not only by the historical situation of the reader but by memory. Hone appears to give an account of reading Bunyan, but in fact he does nothing of the kind. He remembers using Vanity Fair to make sense of the Royal Exchange – an adult's memory of a child's impression of a passage in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Such a real reader's memories are more chaotic, and more pragmatic, than would be suggested by the model produced in a 'reader-response theory' that relies on a Platonic notion of the solitary reader – 'implied', 'ideal', sometimes 'resistant' – who pays conscientious attention to authorial cues.<sup>29</sup> Hone and other historical readers read books and forgot them; they read a few pages and gave up; they hunted for a particular passage or topic. Sometimes they were not strictly 'readers' at all, but people who formed an idea of a text without having actually read it. Orwell wrote of