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A POSSIBLE SOURCE FOR JAMES'S
"THE DEATH OF THE LION"

By DAVID K. KIRBY

In his autobiographical volume entitled *A Victorian Canvas*, the painter William Powell Frith describes a soirée given by Mrs. S. C. Hall:

It was there, on a very hot night in the height of the London season, that I saw—for the only time in my life—a lion thoroughly lionised. The lion was Tom Moore, the poet; and the lionisers, consisting chiefly of ladies, clustered round the little man and nearly smothered him. Moore was so diminutive that I could scarcely see his small gasping mouth, which, in its efforts to inhale the dreadful atmosphere, reminded me of a fish out of water.¹

Readers who are familiar with Henry James's "The Death of the Lion" will be struck by the similarity between the central episode of that story and Frith's anecdote. The narrator of the tale, a journalist, is sent to interview the literary "lion" Neil Paraday. The essay he writes is rejected by his editor as unsatisfactory, but the narrator has meanwhile become quite friendly with Paraday and takes it upon himself to protect him from overeager admirers. His efforts are in vain, however, against the likes of Mrs. Weeks Wimbush, who wants to "lionise" Paraday and invites him to her manor along with the helpless narrator and a number of fashionable guests. At the manor, the demands made upon him by the irrepressible lords and ladies are too much for a constitutionally frail Paraday, and he becomes gravely ill. Meanwhile his latest manuscript has been lost by the guests, who have passed it around excitedly among themselves, yet have not bothered to read it. Paraday dies, and the story ends as the narrator vows to continue the search for the lost manuscript.

Since the volume of Frith's memoirs which contained the Moore anecdote appeared in 1888, James certainly could have read it before beginning his tale in 1894. The author assigned no source to this story in either his notebooks or his critical prefaces, where he recorded the histories of most of his tales.

¹ W. P. Frith, *A Victorian Canvas*, ed. Neville Wallis (London, 1957), 223. This is an abridgement of Frith's rather bulky *My Autobiography and Reminiscences* and *Further Reminiscences*, 3 vols. (London, 1887-1888).

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However, though Frith is mentioned only sporadically in James's writings, he is treated in a manner sufficiently casual to indicate that the two were on familiar terms; and from other, more formal references, it is clear that James held Frith in some esteem.² Thus it would seem extraordinary, under the circumstances, if James had not read the artist's memoirs.

There are, then, four facts which establish Frith's anecdote as a possible source for "The Death of the Lion": the similarity of the basic situation in both cases; the use of the lion metaphor in both; the dates; and the intimacy of the two artists. In addition, there is a fifth characteristic which the tale and the anecdote share. As a literary man, James was more careful with his metaphors than Frith, and he did not make his subject both a "lion" and a "fish out of water" at the same time. However, he apparently found the image of a fish in distress in keeping with the themes of helplessness and entrapment as they are treated in his story, since the narrator at one point refers to himself as a "little fish in the stomach of a bigger one" and notes, in connection with one of Paraday's admirers, that "her net had, all the same, caught many a big fish."³

² See, for instance the offhand reference to Frith in *The Notebooks of Henry James*, ed. F. O. Matthiessen and Kenneth B. Murdock (New York, 1961), 102; also the index of *The Painter's Eye: Notes and Essays on the Pictorial Arts by Henry James*, ed. John L. Sweeney (Cambridge, Mass., 1956) for more formal references.

³ "The Death of the Lion," *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, ed. Leon Edel, IX (Philadelphia, 1964), 87, 89.

