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'Unmistakeably visible': Queen Victoria in Frith's *The Marriage of the Prince of Wales*

Pamela Fletcher

When William Powell Frith was asked to paint the marriage of Prince Albert and Princess Alexandra in 1863, it was impressed upon him that the 'great object with the Queen herself' was that she be 'unmistakeably visible' in the composition. In this article, I offer a close reading of the resulting painting and its reception, arguing that Victoria's decision to commission the picture from Frith lent a very particular set of contexts to the form and content of her visibility. In 1863 Frith was at the height of his fame for his modern-life subjects, *Ramsgate Sands*, *Derby Day*, and *The Railway Station*. By commissioning the 'successor' to this series, Queen Victoria placed herself quite deliberately into the very visible context of 'modern life', both in the painting and at the Academy. In Frith's ingenious composition, Victoria sits high above the crowd, clearly visible to the viewers of the picture, presiding over her citizenry and the continuation of her dynasty, even if within the space of the picture itself only the loving few can see her. Represented as both aloof from and fully present within the contemporary moment, Queen Victoria is unmistakeably visible both as the vigilant monarch and the secluded widow.

When William Powell Frith was asked to paint the marriage of Prince Albert Edward and Princess Alexandra of Denmark in 1863, it was impressed upon him that the 'great object with the Queen herself' was that she be 'unmistakeably visible' in the composition.[1] As the painting progressed, Victoria continued to play an active role in stage-managing the public presentation of herself and her family, reviewing the initial design and its successive stages. The finished painting was displayed at the Academy in 1865 (*Fig. 1*), where it was an instant hit, attracting large crowds and requiring the protection of a railing and two policemen. The painting was a spectacle, precisely at the moment Victoria herself was conspicuously absent from public view. Following the death of her beloved husband in 1861 she had entered deep mourning, but had not yet reappeared in public life to the extent that her people had expected. At a moment of increasing political pressure, the wedding and its commemoration in paint was thus an important moment in the representation of the continued vitality of the Queen and her dynasty as she moved into the role of widow.[2] In this article I offer a close reading of the painting and its reception, arguing that Victoria's decision to commission the picture from Frith lent a very particular set of contexts to the form and content of her visibility, locating the wedding and her royal authority within the emergent genre of modern-life subjects, and harnessing its power to signify the here and now — and to elevate the fleeting present moment to the timeless status of fine art — to shape her royal image at a critical point in her reign.

Indeed, the question of visibility was a pressing one for both Victoria and her chosen artist as their paths intersected between 1863 and 1865. Even after the traditional mourning period had ended, Victoria remained in seclusion and, as the months, and then years, passed, public pressure mounted and her invisibility became an increasingly persistent cause for complaint in newspapers and political commentary.[3] In meeting these challenges Victoria not only had to face public scrutiny, she also needed to find

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[1] Charles Eastlake to William Powell Frith, 12 February 1863, quoted in Oliver Millar, *The Victorian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 69. Millar cites the Letter Book in possession of the artist's descendants as his source.

[2] For discussion of this fraught moment in Victoria's public presentation, see Adrienne Munich, *Queen Victoria's Secrets* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), especially Chapter 4, 'Imperial Tears'; and Margaret Homans, *Royal Representations: Queen Victoria and British Culture, 1837–1876* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Homans's brief discussion of the Frith painting emphasizes Victoria's position as both spectacle and spectator, arguing that she 'actively performs her absence' (p. 62), as part of a larger reading of Victoria's claims to power as consistently couched in terms of its renunciation (pp. 60–62). The most complete account of the picture is Jeremy Maas's wonderful short book, *The Prince of Wales's Wedding: The Story of a Picture* (London: Cameron & Tayleur in association with David & Charles, 1977). It is also thoroughly documented in Millar, pp. 67–73. I am deeply indebted to both of these scholars.

[3] Homans charts the increasing public criticism through 1863 and 1864, leading the Queen to defend herself in a letter to *The Times* on 6 April 1864 (pp. 63–67).

Fig.1. William Powell Frith, *The Marriage of the Prince of Wales with Princess Alexandra of Denmark, Windsor, 10 March 1863*, 1863–65, oil on canvas, Royal Collection. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2021.

a new form of self-representation. As Adrienne Munich argues, Albert's death was more than just a personal loss for Victoria. It 'threatened their monarchical formula' in which the potential threat of a female ruler was muted by Victoria's reinscription into the conventional gender hierarchy of marriage and wifely submission (p. 11). The two years between the commission of the painting and its public exhibition, then, were critical ones in her emergent representation as a widow, as she reconfigured the terms of her public image. Frith, too, was deeply concerned with questions of visibility at this moment. After his smashing successes at the Academy exhibitions of 1854 and 1858, he had shocked the art world by choosing to exhibit his next major painting, *The Railway Station* (1862), at a private gallery. He — and his dealer — had been richly rewarded with viewers and publicity, and in 1863 he was poised to capitalize on this success, having just signed a contract for the biggest undertaking of his professional life to date: a series of 'The Times of Day' to be promoted by one of the most important dealers in mid-century London, Ernest Gambart.[4] Setting this commission aside could not have been an easy decision, but the artist was under some real pressure. He had already turned down Victoria and Albert's invitation to paint the marriage of the Princess Royal

[4] William Powell Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences*, 3 vols (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1888), I, 236.

in 1858, pleading that his work on *Derby Day* fully occupied his time. This royal event, the marriage of the heir to the throne, was of even greater national importance than the marriage of Princess Victoria, and it seemed impossible — or at least unwise — to decline a second time. It was also, of course, a commission guaranteed to bring the artist a new kind of public attention and, while he was taking a significant financial loss, the market-savvy Frith might well have seen it as a risk worth taking.

The timetable for the commission was fairly compressed: the engagement was announced in the autumn of 1862, negotiations with Frith began in January 1863, and the wedding was to take place in March. Sir Charles Eastlake, president of the Royal Academy, served as the intermediary between Frith and the palace, and the evidence suggests the Queen herself took a fairly active role in thinking through details of the composition.[5] Negotiations carried on through January, February, and early March, with communications passing between Victoria, Sir Charles Phipps (keeper of the Privy Purse), Eastlake, and Frith. The first question was the scope of the picture and its price. Victoria seems to have originally imagined a fairly small scene focusing on the main event of the marriage itself, while Frith advocated to paint 'the entire scene, as an historical subject' rather than 'some episode in it'.[6] After some back and forth on this point (and the price), Frith drew a line in the sand, writing on 26 January 1863:

> I still venture to hope that the Queen will permit me to endeavour to realize so great a scene in my own way. Unless this can be conceded to me, I must resign the enviable task to some other hand & I need scarcely say with how much regret I should see so remarkable an opportunity of distinguishing myself pass away.[7]

The Queen agreed to Frith's price of £3000 the next day but continued to have concerns about the format of the picture. As Phipps wrote to Eastlake on 27 January:

> The Queen had not desired so large a picture as Mr Frith appears to contemplate but H.M. would not wish to restrict (further than is absolutely necessary) Mr Frith in his mode of treating the subject proposed to him, still less would H.M. desire that any diminution should be made of the remuneration which he considered sufficient for his time & the exercise of his skill.

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[5] Victoria and Albert were active art patrons and collectors and after Albert died Victoria took a leading role in many of the memorial projects dedicated to him. See Jonathan Marsden, *Victoria & Albert: Art & Love* (London: Royal Collection Publications, 2010).

[6] Charles Eastlake to Charles Phipps, 19 January 1863, quoted in Maas, p. 15.

[7] William Powell Frith to Charles Eastlake, 26 January 1863, quoted in Maas, p. 16.

However, Phipps added, 'the Queen would wish to see you after Her arrival at Windsor, to arrange with regard to the size and shape of the proposed picture.'[8] After Eastlake met with the Queen on 12 February, bringing along a two-foot ruler to show her, along with Princess Alice and Prince Louis of Hesse-Darmstadt, the scale of the proposed canvas and figures, she agreed to the size and scope, as long as certain conditions were met (Maas, p. 18).

The Queen was keenly aware of a pictorial challenge the painter would face. The wedding was to be held in St George's Chapel at Windsor and Victoria would not take part in the procession or be present at the altar, as she and Albert had been at Princess Victoria's wedding; instead, she planned to view the ceremony from the royal closet above the nave.[9] While reluctant to be seen in person, she was eager to be represented pictorially. In recounting the meeting to Frith, Eastlake tried to convey the Queen's priorities:

> The great object with the Queen herself & with those who are interested in this subject is, that the picture should comprehend the part of the chapel, above, where the Queen herself will be placed — & this is considered so important as to make it a question whether the picture should not be high rather than long. At all events it should be high enough to include with sufficient prominence the part of the chapel where H.M. is to be.

After some negotiation, it was agreed that Frith could submit two sketches after the event — one horizontal and one vertical — but in both the Queen was to be 'unmistakeably visible'.[10]

The Queen gave her final approval to the horizontal design in April 1863, meeting with Frith for half an hour to go over the sketch he had prepared after the experience of

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[8] Charles Phipps to Charles Eastlake, 27 January 1863, quoted in Maas, pp. 16–17.

[9] The unusual choice of venue outside London was the Queen's and she defended it on the grounds that it was Albert's wish although, as Bertie's biographer Jane Ridley notes, those close to her believed it was so that she could sit apart from the crowd in the royal closet. See Jane Ridley, *The Heir Apparent: A Life of Edward VII, the Playboy Prince* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 90.

[10] Charles Eastlake to William Powell Frith, 12 February 1863, quoted in Millar, p. 69. Maas reproduces the letter from Eastlake to Frith about the sketches. Dated 15 February, it reads 'My dear Sir, I had an opportunity of explaining to H.M. yesterday your wish to submit two sketches — one treating the proposed subject as a high picture, the other one treating it in length. The Queen appeared to be much pleased with your having come to this conclusion and quite approved of it. Believe me, faithfully yours, C. L. Eastlake.' Eastlake added a further note — crossing the paper — 'The question is quite open with regard to the two modes of treatment. I do not suppose that H.M. is biased either way. My impression is that your own opinion will have its due weight' (Maas, p. 20).

the wedding itself.[11] In the end Frith persuaded Victoria that his more ambitious vision for the picture was a worthwhile undertaking. But why was he so determined on the horizontal format? I would argue that the horizontal orientation was very much a part of his desire to 'realize so great a scene in [his] own way', conceptualizing the painting as the next in his series of modern-life subjects.[12] In 1863, as we have seen, Frith was at the height of his fame, having just made a huge public splash with the sale of *The Railway Station* to a dealer for a jaw-dropping price. This was the third in a series of large-scale paintings of modern life, beginning with *Life at the Sea-Side (Ramsgate Sands)* in 1854 and turning Frith into a household name with *Derby Day* in 1858. These three paintings of contemporary life, which told multiple stories about the impact of modernity on the private lives and feelings of the British citizenry, had made Frith famous, and his success was a central part of a larger shift in the contemporary art scene, as painting subjects from an emphatically modern urban life was increasingly recognized by artists and critics alike as a new — and particularly British — genre.

In the late 1840s and early 1850s many artists and critics felt that contemporary art had fallen into a rut, recycling the same old literary subjects and historical anecdotes. For some observers, the solution seemed clear: in the words of Tom Taylor, writing in *Punch*, 'for Art to be a living thing amongst us, she must deal with subjects and themes from life.'[13] Changing conceptions of science and history also gave rise to new demands for the close observation of nature and historical detail, and in the early 1850s artists like Frith and his younger contemporaries the Pre-Raphaelites began experimenting with subjects drawn from everyday urban life. By the later 1850s there was something of a fad for such subjects, as such as Ford Madox Brown, Augustus Egg, Emily Mary Osborn, and many others experimented with turning the contours of contemporary experience into art, together creating a body of work that has come to be recognized — for better or worse — as typifying high Victorian art: emotionally charged and richly detailed scenes of family dramas and topical sensations.[14] Critics quickly recognized the new trend in painting and worked to define its main characteristics. Surveying the Academy of 1858, the critic for the *Literary Gazette* observed that the 'scriptural or

[11] In his *Autobiography*, Frith records his diary entry from 7 April 1863: 'To Windsor to see the queen, who spent more than half an hour with me. Seemed to be much pleased with the sketch, and was most agreeable; consented to all I proposed. The picture to be ten feet long. All charming so far' (I, 237). It is not quite clear how this sketch relates to the two proposed sketches, one vertical and one horizontal. Frith does not mention preparing two versions.

[12] There were, of course, precedents for horizontal images recording royal occasions but Victoria's preference for the vertical indicates that she, at least, was not primarily concerned with that precedent.

[13] [Tom Taylor], 'Punch among the Painters, No. 3', *Punch*, 27 May 1854, p. 222.

[14] The story of the emergent genre of the modern-life subject and its history in the 1850s and 1860s is the subject of my manuscript-in-progress, *The Victorian Painting of Modern Life*.

historical themes' that had previously defined 'High Art' had largely disappeared from the exhibition, but that

> in their place, and by the same hands, we have such pictures of our own time — realities of this latter half of the nineteenth century — so dissimilar, and so unequal in power, yet all so true, as Frith's 'Derby Day,' Stone's 'Missing Boat,' O'Neil's 'Eastward Ho!,' Egg's sad 'Past and Present,' Wallis's 'Dead Stonebreaker,' and Carrick's 'Weary Life'.

The critic went on to identify this tendency as something new and particularly responsive to the realities of mid-century:

> This change in the choice of subjects is, on the whole, one of the most noteworthy matters illustrated by this year's exhibition. Evidently it is a consequence of the increased and increasing tendency of the present day towards reality and matter-of-fact. But along with it we see evidence of another assimilation with the intellectual tendencies of the day. Our younger painters are not content to depict current matters with a view, like their predecessors, merely to inform, to delight, or to amuse the spectator. They are 'earnest' men. Their aim is to instruct.[15]

By 1862 William Michael Rossetti felt able to proclaim modern-life subjects' dominance: 'Of subjects recommendable to our school as a body [...] the best, we think, are clearly those of our own day.'[16]

Rossetti was, of course, a supporter of the Pre-Raphaelites, but he was writing in the year of Frith's triumph with *The Railway Station*. Modern-life subjects by artists working in a wide range of styles were in the ascendency and Frith was poised to take advantage of the surge in popularity of the type of picture he had pioneered. Having sold *The Railway Station* to Flatou for £4500, he had just signed a contract for £10,000 with the rival dealer Gambart for three large paintings of modern London street life: *Morning*, *Noon*, and *Night*. In setting aside this work for the royal commission, he may well have worked to imagine a way the new picture could be a replacement for the lost series. Indeed, part of the negotiations concerned his ownership of the copyright for the purpose of selling engravings and his right to exhibit the painting, suggesting he intended to publicize and profit from it just as he had done with his other modern-life scenes (Maas, pp. 22–24). He may also have seen in the commission a broader canvas for his painterly ambitions: if a lower price for the picture was inevitable,

[15] 'Fine Arts', *Literary Gazette*, 3 July 1858, pp. 21–22 (p. 21).

[16] W. M. Rossetti, 'The London Exhibitions of 1861', *Fraser's Magazine*, November 1861, pp. 580–92 (p. 587).

perhaps the national importance of the subject could help secure Frith's reputation as the pre-eminent painter of modern life and elevate his subject matter to the level of contemporary history.[17]

The Queen's agreement to pay for a bigger picture than she had originally wanted may also have been, in part, a recognition of the commissioned picture's potential place in this series of modern-life scenes. Victoria was, of course, well aware of Frith's increasing identification with this type of painting and had been — together with Albert — engaged with his work for several years. At her visit to the Academy in April 1854, the Queen had asked to buy *Life at the Sea-Side* but was informed it was already sold: in Frith's later recollection, 'Eastlake presented me to the queen. She was delighted with "Seaside." Wanted to buy it — found she couldn't, and gave me a commission for a similar subject' (Frith, I, 180). Evidently making further enquiries to Eastlake, they learned the dealer Lloyd was the owner; Frith recalls that negotiations were then opened up and Lloyd agreed to sell it at the price paid, but retained possession of the picture for three years so an engraving could be made (Frith, I, 181; Millar, p. 75). The picture was eventually hung in the Visitor's Sitting Room at Osborne (Millar, p. 75). Several years later the royal couple particularly sought out *Derby Day* at their private view of the Academy exhibition, as Frith noted in his diary:

> When the queen came into the large room, instead of, as she invariably did, looking at the pictures in their order according to the catalogue, she went at once to mine; and after a little while sent for me and complimented me in the highest and kindest manner. (I, 201)

Albert communicated more substantive comments, as Frith noted:

> He told me why I had done certain things, and how, if a certain change had been made, my object would have been assisted. How the masses of light and shade might still be more evenly balanced, and how some parts of the picture might receive still more completion. (I, 201)

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[17] Frith had suggested such a subject to Victoria earlier in his exploration of modern-life subjects. In 1855 — at a time when, according to his *Autobiography*, he was casting about for suitable subjects to follow his success with modern-life subjects in *Life at the Sea-Side* — he followed up with Charles Phipps about Victoria's expressed wish to commission a picture from him. She had broached the idea during her visit to the RA summer exhibition in 1854 and Frith was unsure if the purchase of *Life* had superseded this request. He offered her his next picture — the birthday scene he thought of as his next modern-life scene — but also suggested painting the Queen reviewing wounded troops from the Crimea, calling it a subject 'one I should greatly like to paint, even if I have not the honour to paint it for the Queen, & I venture to ask for permission to be allowed to witness any future scene of the kind: without really *seeing* the occurrence it would be impossible for any one to do it justice' (quoted in Millar, p. 68). He was, however, informed that the purchase of *Life at the Sea-Side* had fulfilled the commission (Millar pp. 67–68).

Victoria and Albert were clearly interested in Frith's massively popular innovations in modern-life painting, with the artistically inclined Albert perhaps taking a particular interest. By commissioning the successor to this series, I would argue that Queen Victoria was choosing quite deliberately to place herself into the very visible context of 'modern life', both in the painting itself and at its public exhibition in London, to which she had agreed.[18]

The wedding took place on 10 March 1863 and Frith was there, sketchbook in hand.[19] The wedding was joyously welcomed in the press, but the Queen found it an emotionally difficult experience, anticipating it would be 'far worse than a funeral to witness'.[20] She arrived privately at the chapel for the ceremony and sat apart from the crowd in the oriel window known as Catherine of Aragon's closet, dressed in mourning. The chapel itself was saturated in memories of Albert, both in life and in death; his body had been interred there until its removal to the recently built mausoleum at Frogmore in December 1862, and the newly unveiled East Window behind the altar — adjacent to the Queen's perch — was dedicated to his memory and included fourteen scenes from his life. Indeed, it is through this window that the light that falls on the depicted ceremony comes. During the ceremony the Queen made herself visible to smile at her daughter-in-law and son as they each processed to the altar, but upon hearing the chorale composed by her late husband, she reportedly burst into tears, retreating into the shadows of her closet, and remaining there for the rest of the ceremony.[21] As she recorded in her journal after the event was over:

> Oh! what I suffered in the Chapel, where all that was joy, pride & happiness on Jan: 25. '58 [the date of the Princess Royal's marriage], was repeated *without* the principal figure of all, the guardian angel of the family being there. It was indescribable. At

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[18] There were extensive debates over copyright and exhibition rights (Maas, pp. 22–24). Contemporary art critics certainly made the connection. As part of a small skirmish in the press about Frith's proposed fee for the picture, the *Illustrated London News* noted (in Frith's defence), 'the artist [...] submitted that a more comprehensive representation — treating the subject with the completeness so remarkable in his 'Railway Station' and 'Derby Day' pictures — might be more desirable and acceptable (which it doubtless will be to the whole nation)' ('Fine Arts', *Illustrated London News*, 7 February 1863, p. 158).

[19] Frith's request to bring a photographer was refused as the Queen had already asked Vernon Heath; no successful photographs resulted. Maas notes that Heath — who was the nephew of Robert Vernon — had 'earned a special place in the Queen's priorities by having taken the last photograph of the Prince Consort' (pp. 21, 31). On the press presence at and coverage of the wedding, see John Plunkett, *Queen Victoria: First Media Monarch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 229–37.

[20] Queen Victoria to Crown Princess of Prussia, 4 February 1863, reprinted in *Dearest Mama: Letters between Queen Victoria and the Crown Princess of Prussia 1861–1864*, ed. by Roger Fulford (London: Evans Brothers, 1968), p. 173.

[21] Maas, pp. 27, 35. On the ceremony, see Maas, pp. 25–39; Christopher Hibbert, *Queen Victoria: A Personal History* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), pp. 303–05; Ridley, pp. 90–92; and Richard Hough, *Edward and Alexandra: Their Private and Public Lives* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), pp. 85–95.

> one moment, where I first heard the flourish of trumpets, which brought back to my mind, my whole life of 20 years at *his* dear side safe, proud, secure & happy, — I felt as if I should faint. Only by a violent effort, could I succeed in masking my emotion![22]

Her awareness of Albert's loss pervaded her experience of the event, as it had pervaded the arrangement of the marriage itself. Albert had been determined that their eldest son Albert Edward, familiarly known as Bertie, should marry as soon as possible after his affair with Nellie Clifton, which had shocked and angered his parents. They had begun making arrangements for the match with Alexandra together, but Victoria concluded them herself, in the midst of her prolonged mourning (Hough, pp. 54–55, 62–73). From Victoria's perspective, then, the marriage was a continuation of Albert's parental guidance for his eldest son as much as it was a step into the dynasty's future.

The commission of Frith's picture and the process of its painting was equally tied to her mourning. In choosing Frith to paint the marriage, she was in a sense following up on the couple's thwarted desire to have him paint the marriage of their first child to wed, and Albert remained a vivid presence in her mind throughout the picture's commission and execution. The regular meetings with Charles Eastlake in which the picture was discussed were noted in her diaries as meetings about various memorials for Albert. For example, on 12 February 1863, on the date that Eastlake's letter to Frith describes the meeting to show the Queen the proposed scale and orientation of the proposed picture, her diary records the meeting as concerning Albert's memorial, noting that she had gone with Eastlake (and others) 'to St. George's Hall to look at the architect's designs for the Memorial to beloved Albert'. She also records that she had visited the mausoleum at Frogmore twice that day.[23]

Frith, too, found the picture stressful to paint, in part because getting sittings with his elevated subjects — and with their clothing and jewellery — was a logistical and social nightmare. Frith recounted the long process with great humour in a chapter of his *Autobiography* and Jeremy Maas's account of the picture tells the story of his increasingly desperate attempts to secure sittings with the many attendees with the help of Lady Augusta Bruce and other members of the royal household. Frith was finally granted permission to set up his easel in the Rubens Room at Windsor Castle for nearly seven weeks in November and December 1863, where his picture became a topic of conversation and where he managed to capture many crucial likenesses (Maas, p. 66). During this time he was in closer contact with the Queen than during the initial

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[22] *Queen Victoria's Journal* (*QVJ*), 10 March 1863 <www.queenvictoriasjournals.org> [accessed 27 November 2021], emphases in original.

[23] The summary of Eastlake's letter to Frith describing this meeting (and noting that the letter dated 12 February was written the same day as the meeting with the Queen) is in Maas, p. 18.

negotiations and it is tempting to imagine that this is what he is recalling when he wrote in his *Autobiography* that 'the queen, being herself an artist of experience and ability, more than once assisted me by suggestions'.[24] They may even have discussed the painting in the context of Frith's other work. The *Illustrated London News* reported on 28 November 1863 that Frith had 'had the honour, on Monday, of submitting his picture of the "Railway Station" to the Queen at the castle', and it is tempting to imagine a conversation comparing the two pictures.[25]

The potential difficulties were not only logistical, however. As the Queen had predicted, her position in the balcony above the crowd posed significant compositional and aesthetic challenges. By this point in his painting career, Frith had figured out how to effectively compose his large groups, which tended to be organized around a single central incident, with subsidiary incidents extending out in a horizontal line across the canvas. Scholarly attention has tended to focus on these paintings, most notably *Derby Day*, as 'panoramas', portraits of 'the crowd'.[26] Yet they are also deeply narrative pictures, drawing a series of small stories together around a central thematic subject. For example, in *Derby Day* Frith uses the crowds at the annual spectacle of the horse race to tell a story about money — its allure, its lack, and the things people will do to get hold of it (*Fig.* 2). The story is told by reading along the horizontal frieze of figures, which Frith has divided into three major groupings. Open spaces of green grass punctuate the foreground, leading the eye in and out of the picture's space in a curve along its length and drawing the viewer's eye to these three main vignettes. Each grouping centres on a figure dressed largely or partially in white, set facing slightly off to the right: the swindled young man on the left who turns out his empty pockets in disbelief; the central vignette of the acrobat family performing for money while the hungry child is distracted by a lavish picnic; and the 'fallen woman' who has exchanged her virtue for material gain, sitting alone in a carriage to the right. The composition is carefully designed to pull the viewer's eye and attention to these moments of introspection among the crowd, in a counterpointed rhythm of attention and scanning. As the stories accumulate, they build a thematic focus on money or the lack of it, telling a complex set of stories about money, the ways it circulates, and its effects.

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[24] The paragraph begins with an expression of regret that he was 'deprived, by the lamented death of the prince consort, of a critic whose remarks would have been of great use to me' (Frith, I, 246).

[25] 'The Court', *Illustrated London News*, 28 November 1863, p. 539. The Queen would not have seen the picture when it was first publicly exhibited in 1862 as she was in deep mourning; the Prince of Wales, however, did see it at Flatou's gallery and subscribed to the engraving. See 'The Court', *Illustrated London News*, 6 September 1862, p. 258.

[26] Mary Cowling's account of the picture is by far the most thorough. The painting is mentioned in nearly all histories of Victorian art but, oddly, has not generated much substantive interpretation beyond Cowling's reading. See Mary Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist: The Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 232–316.

Fig.2. William Powell Frith, *The Derby Day*, 1856–58, oil on canvas.

Life at the Sea-Side and *The Railway Station* share this same basic pictorial and narrative structure, and Frith uses it, too, in his depiction of *The Marriage of the Prince of Wales*, though with some adjustments made necessary both by the occasion and the Queen's requirements. In particular the Queen's position above the crowd meant that he needed to accommodate his structure to draw attention to a vertical axis. He also needed to figure out how to invest a series of portraits with a larger narrative, engaging viewers in a story filled with the 'human interest' and thematic breadth he had come to realize was critical to a modern-life subject's success (Frith, I, 130). In this painting, I will argue, the underlying story Frith tells is about Queen Victoria at this fraught moment in her reign. Just as the horse race in *Derby Day* is the occasion for a meditation on money, the wedding becomes the occasion for a story about Victoria and monarchy. Reading that story requires attending closely to the painting's pictorial structure, noting both how Frith moves the viewer's eye across the canvas through the composition and on whom he lingers. As our eye moves through the crowded scene, Frith repeatedly uses the gazes of the attendees to draw our attention to the vertical space in which the Queen sits, both drawing our eye upwards to the balcony and putting a select group of attendees in closer contact with Victoria.

The group on the far left of the canvas is the closest to the viewer spatially, and the eye is pulled into the scene through a small gap in the robes and the gaze of a little girl — Princess Thyra of Denmark, Alexandra's sister. The women beside her create a stepped diagonal line through the ascending heights of Princesses Dagmar and Christian of Denmark — Alexandra's other sister and her mother. This line does a lot of work compositionally. It brings the viewer's eye to the group of two men who act as the 'supporters of the Bridegroom' — Prince Frederick William, the Crown Prince of Prussia (the Princess Royal's husband) and Ernest II, the Duke of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha.

The latter was the late Prince Consort's brother and his gaze is fixed on the Queen, his sister-in-law. The line of Alexandra's female relatives also mirrors the diagonal of the gorgeous purple and yellow train worn by Victoria's cousin the Duchess of Brabant, and is continued by her red sash and silhouetted profile turned up to see the cloistered Queen. Finally, the line of women also serves to frame the Maharajah Duleep Singh, who had headed the procession into the chapel.

Duleep Singh was the last ruler of the Sikh Empire, deposed while still a child by the British in 1849. In 1854 he was sent to England, beginning a long and surely difficult relationship with the royal family. The Queen seems to have been quite fond of him; her private journals include detailed accounts of his frequent participation in family outings and dinners, where he was seated regularly next to her. (I have found no evidence of his feelings about her.) He was given a similar prominence at the wedding, heading the processional into the chapel. Maas speculates this was because he was not subject to the European squabbles which made questions of precedence and arrangement among the attending royals, apparently, an enormous headache.[27] Historian Priya Atwal notes an alternative explanation for his precedence, arguing that the Queen was invested in a dynastic definition of rank though 'blood' and although he had been deposed and was therefore no longer, strictly speaking, royalty, he met her criteria for inclusion in a 'close family' of royals through his inherited identity.[28] This second argument seems more closely linked to his compositional prominence. Visually, he is located in an area of the picture filled with many heirs to European thrones, including those of Denmark, Prussia, Belgium, and of course, the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland, all of whom gather below the presiding Queen. Victoria was not yet Empress of India in 1863, but her ascendant power there is also, perhaps, signified by Duleep Singh's attending presence. At this moment, when her subjects were growing increasingly unhappy with Victoria's prolonged absence from public view, the Queen asserts not only the importance of hereditary monarchy but also her pre-eminent status among rulers.

Moving on from this collection of depicted royals, the viewer's eye is drawn to the Queen's two younger sons Princes Leopold and Arthur — in their Scottish dress — who bridge the gap between the royal attendants and the central scene of the marriage.[29] Once again, Arthur's glance directs us back up to their mother, his gaze creating a line of sight

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[27] Maas, p. 31. Maas also notes his symbolic importance: 'Without a doubt, the most exotic touch in the Wedding Picture is the portrait of the Maharajah Duleep Singh. Proudly and conspicuously he stands, a symbol of Empire, a most demonstrative token of the Queen's Majesty and no less eminent than the Koh-i-noor diamond that had been surrendered to her upon the annexation of the Punjab, of which Duleep Singh himself had been the last ruler' (p. 85).

[28] Priya Atwal, '"Dynastic diplomacy" and the Global Politics of the Anglo-Punjabi Royal Friendship, 1806–1854', *Global Intellectual History*, 30 July 2020 <https://doi.org/10.1080/23801883.2020.1796234>.

[29] On the meanings of Scottishness within Victoria's familial iconography, see Munich, pp. 35–48.

that also includes the wedding couple. The centre of the canvas is occupied by the bride and groom, framed by a large mass of women in white — on the left the bridesmaids, on the right the Queen's daughters. Within their midst the two dark uniforms of the Prince of Wales and Alexandra's father, Prince Christian of Denmark, frame the bride at the moment the prince puts the ring on her finger, thus consecrating their union. Again, two noticeable figures direct our attention upwards, as the bridesmaids Lady Diana Beauclerk and Lady Victoria Scott — the Queen's god-daughter — incline their gazes to the Queen.

This central compositional group comes to an end in the gap behind the presiding Archbishop of Canterbury, but here we see a divergence from Frith's normal compositional practice. The next and final grouping is a cluster of clergymen who visually close off the horizontal frieze, wrapping around towards the viewer and ending the picture — so to speak — with the vibrant red back of the Dean of Windsor. However, while this small grouping would usually feature one final vignette, the group of clergy are emphatically non-narrative. They all look towards the bridal couple and are not interacting with one another in any way that might suggest individuality or interiority. Instead, a large empty area of carpet sends our eye searching through the right-hand side of the picture. We are guided in this search by the guards whose lances point upwards, the inverted triangle created in the negative space carved out between their bodies, and the arch which peaks between them, pulling our gaze up to the closet from which the Queen looks on. She leans slightly forward and looks down towards the ceremony and the crowd. Her pose, with hands clasped before her, mirrors that of the Duchess of Brabant, and their interlocking gazes structure the central composition of the picture. It is worth emphasizing that Frith invented this mirrored pose at considerable trouble: the duchess would not sit for him and even getting her splendid dress was a headache, requiring that he promise to abstain from drinking beer or smoking in his studio while it was there.[30]

The official floor plan makes it clear that any number of people could have been visually singled out in this way (*Fig. 3*), so why was the duchess the one assigned this central compositional role? Marie Henriette of Austria, the Duchess of Brabant and future Queen of Belgium, was the daughter-in-law of the Queen's beloved Uncle Leopold. They had met soon after Marie Henriette's marriage to Prince Leopold II in 1853, when the young couple paid an extended visit to Victoria, Albert, and their family during which she became quite fond of the young duchess. Victoria's diary records that the two spent nearly every day of the seven-and-a-half week visit together, riding, dining, playing cards, and taking various excursions; the Queen had William

[30] Frith, I, 240. In the end, he painted her likeness from a photograph.

Ross paint a miniature portrait of her young cousin and wrote of her as 'dear Marie to whom I am warmly attached & as if she were a child of mine' (*QVJ*, 11 November 1853). The attachment remained close over several visits in the later 1850s, during which time Marie and Leopold had several children and, seemingly, became somewhat less happy together. In light of the words in Victoria's journal on the night of the marriage comparing her solitary state to her happily married daughters and new daughter-in-law, the Queen may have experienced a bond of fellow feeling with Marie, who attended the wedding alone while Leopold II spent the winter in Egypt.[31]

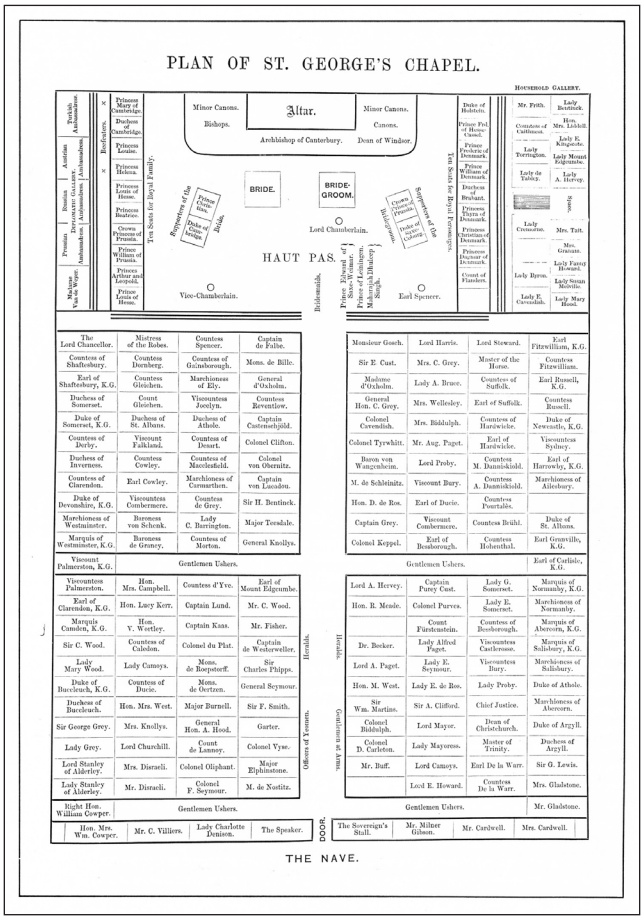

Fig.3. 'Plan of St. George's Chapel', in W. H. Russell, *The Wedding at Windsor* (London: Day, 1863); reproduced in Jeremy Maas, *The Prince of Wales's Wedding: The Story of a Picture* (London: Cameron & Tayleur, 1977), p. 33.

[31] On 10 March 1863 Victoria noted in her diary (*QVJ*): 'Here I sit lonely & desolate, who so need love & tenderness, while our 2 daughters have each their loving husbands & Bertie has taken his lovely pure sweet Bride to Osborne, — such a jewel whom he is indeed lucky to have obtained.' There is no mention of a reason for Leopold's absence from the wedding in Victoria's account, but on 21 October 1862, Victoria had noted that Leopold had embarked for Egypt 'where he is to spend the whole winter'.

The duchess had also played a meaningful role in the arrangements for the marriage. Marie greeted Victoria during her stopover at Brussels in September 1862, when the Queen was to meet Alexandra and her parents and arrange the marriage. Arriving at Laeken, Victoria broke down upon seeing her Uncle Leopold who then took her 'upstairs to Leopold & Marie's rooms, where Albert & I had lived (10 years ago). No words can describe what I felt' (*QVJ*, 2 September 1862). Victoria travelled on to Reinhardsbrunn Castle, where she received a letter from Bertie describing the final step of the betrothal. After the young couple's first meeting and Bertie's request to Alexandra's parents for her hand, the scene was set for the proposal. Walking in the garden at Laeken, Alexandra's mother, Princess Christian, and Marie 'walked in front', as Bertie recounted, '& I walked with Alexandra some distance behind. Philip took charge of the rest of the party'. Bertie proposed, Alexandra accepted, and, in Bertie's account,

> I then asked her if she liked me. She said yes. I then kissed her hand & she kissed me. We then talked for some time & I told her that I was sure you would love her as your own.[32]

In the Queen's absence, at this delicate moment, Marie took on a surrogate role for Victoria.

In any case, while there is no documentary evidence as to whether or not Frith was instructed to give the duchess a prominent position for personal reasons, there were pictorial reasons to do so. As the artist later recalled: 'She was a very handsome woman, in a prominent position in the foreground; in fact, in what we call the very "eye of the picture"' (Frith, I, 239–40). It is tempting to ascribe a double meaning to Frith's words: she is both a central figure drawing the eye through her beauty and gorgeous dress, and our viewing proxy, the 'eye' through which the most important element of the scene comes into view. Her long purple train extends from the lower left corner of the canvas along a long swathe of the foreground, sweeping upwards, the eye drawn by the gold embroidery, pulling the viewer into the picture and inclining the eye up across the space of the chapel to meet the gaze of the presiding Queen. Wearing the royal purple and gold, the colours Victoria had worn at the wedding of her daughter five years earlier, the duchess stands in for Victoria here, as she had at the proposal. Her status as substitute, however, is made clear by her gaze, her clearly delineated and spotlit profile looking up and to the right rather than at the bridal couple.

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[32] Albert, Prince of Wales to Queen Victoria, 9 September 1862, copy of letter pasted into Queen Victoria's diary entry for 11 September 1862.

As our gaze lifts alongside the duchess's, we see the Queen isolated in her balcony. In an oil sketch for the painting (*Fig. 4*), Frith had shown the monarch surrounded by her attendants, but in the final version he has pushed those three women into the far back corner of the balcony, leaving Victoria alone in a solitude emphasized by contrast with the crowded balcony to her right. Framed by the gilded architecture of the box, which sets her off as if in a picture frame, her image recalls a formal portrait. And yet its composition is unbalanced: she occupies only half the frame, leaving an empty space where her missing consort should be standing. He is, however, present in effigy. Victoria's costume was shaped entirely around her absent husband, as described in her diary:

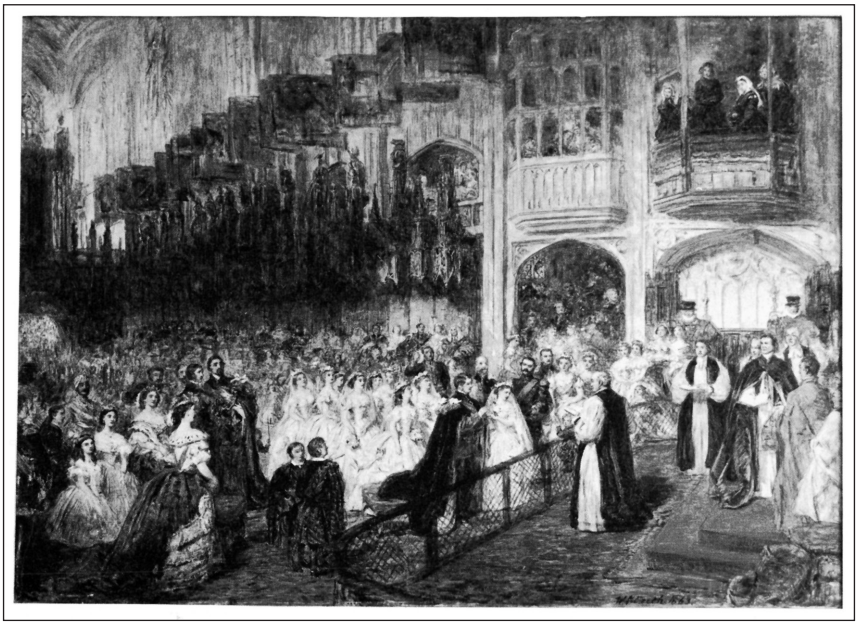

Fig. 4. William Powell Frith, Sketch for *The Marriage of the Prince of Wales*, private collection; reproduced in Oliver Millar, *The Victorian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 70.

> Cold from nervousness & agitation I dressed, wearing my weeds, but a silk grown with crepe, a long veil & my cap, & for the 1rst time since Dec 61! the ribbon star & badge of the Order of the Garter, the latter being one my beloved one had worn, also the 'Victoria & Albert' order, on which I have had dearest Albert's head put above mine & a brooch containing a miniature of him set round with diamonds, which I have worn ever since 40.[33]

[33] *QVJ*, 10 March 1863. The 'Victoria and Albert Order' was a deeply personal one. The couple had given cameos depicting their two profiles as confirmation gifts to their daughters; after Albert's death, Victoria established the Order with the

Frith picks out the bright blue of her sash and the glitter of the badges against her dark dress, highlighting the signs which convey both her royal status and her personal loss.

This doubled reference to the personal and the political is, in a sense, the key to the picture. Frith has transformed the royal wedding into one of his scenes of modern life or, rather, fused the ancient genre of the royal ceremonial portrait with the contemporary modern-life subject. In so doing he creates a generic analogue to what Munich identifies as one of Victoria's most powerful representational strategies — the 'unique ordinariness' of the Queen as embodiment of the ideal cultural role of middle-class wife and mother (Munich, p. 22). The intended viewing context for the picture was an essential part of securing this double signification. Early in the negotiations, Frith had secured the right to exhibit the finished painting in London, and the Academy was the obvious venue. It appeared at the Summer Exhibition of 1865, hung in what several reviewers called 'the place of honour' in the East Room of the National Gallery; the same room, though not, I think, in the same position that *Derby Day* had been hung.[34] In this context it attracted viewers not only as an image of the royal family and a still recent national event, but also as the latest in the series of Frith's incredibly successful scenes of contemporary life. (This double status was also indicated by the attribution of authorship in the catalogue to them both, as the italicized font used to indicate the artist's name read, in this case, *Painted for the Queen. W. P. Frith, R.A.*)

As it appeared in the social spaces of the Academy exhibition, the long horizontal of the 'crowd' of luminaries in the *Marriage* both references and repopulates Frith's earlier crowds, becoming one more 'turn of the kaleidoscope' in his ongoing record of the here and now.[35] Victoria sits high above her subjects, clearly visible to the viewers of the picture, presiding over her citizenry and the continuation of her dynasty, even if within the space of the picture itself only the loving few can see her. Their gazes are critical to the picture's work. Not only do they compositionally direct our attention to the most important figure, they also work to build a story about the Queen and her dynasty through accumulated incidents, in the mode of reading viewers had learned to bring to Frith's canvases. Here, rather than speaking of money, say, as in *Derby Day*, the distracted guests flesh out the story of Victoria's life and loss. Ernest (Albert's brother)

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cameos as their badges. Her own cameo had Albert's profile placed in front of the Queen's, a unique iconographical instance (Marsden, pp. 332–33).

[34] 'Exhibition of the Royal Academy', *The Times*, 29 April 1865, p. 12. Also called 'the post of honour'. See 'The Academy Exhibition', *London Review*, 22 April 1865, pp. 430–31 (p. 430).

[35] This turn of phrase echoes contemporary metaphors used for Frith's paintings. In 1854 the *Art Journal* critic praised *Life at the Sea-Side* for 'the power of delineation and pointed satire of this composition, which at each turn of the kaleidoscope presents a new picture'. See 'The Royal Academy: The Exhibition, 1854', *Art Journal*, June 1854, pp. 157–72 (p. 161).

and Arthur (Albert's son), form a triangle of gazes with the Queen, reminding us exactly who is missing. The line of sight from the duchess to the Queen creates a strong diagonal axis, one that positions Victoria within the arc of a woman's life: from bride, represented here by the two bridesmaids in white who look up at the Queen, as well as Alexandra; to young wife and mother, here, the duchess, surrounded compositionally by children; to widow, Victoria in the present moment, occupying only half of the space in the square that frames her, leaving room for the memory of her absent consort.

While the title of the picture and its ostensible subject is the marriage of Bertie and Alexandra, its real subject is Victoria, in a new stage of her reign.[36] In her private person she grieves the loss of Albert, her devoted husband and the father of her children. United by the bonds of affection, her family — her children and her relatives across Europe — share her grief, gazing up at her in loving concern. But their gazes are also directed to their ruling monarch, looking upwards as she sits posed in royal splendour with the chivalric attributes of monarchy highlighted against her dark dress. In her political body she remains paramount, the apex of the assembled crowd of royals and subjects, still ascendant over all. Victoria's double presence as individual and as image of the monarch is matched and represented by the fusion of genres Frith has forged: bringing together the 'human interest' of the emerging modern-life subject with the traditions of royal portraiture and the painting of contemporary history, he shapes a version of Victoria that is both intimate and regal, invites empathy and commands respect.

Represented as both aloof from and fully present within the contemporary moment, Queen Victoria is unmistakeably visible as — simultaneously — the vigilant monarch, the wife and mother, and the secluded widow. But this formal analysis and interpretation of the picture in isolation does not quite do justice to Frith's — and Victoria's — real genius in thinking through the work of the picture in the context of modern-life subjects in the mid-1860s. Imagine seeing this ten-foot long canvas hung at eye level, drawing hordes of viewers, so that you approach it through a mass of people, all with their backs turned towards you as they gaze at the depicted wedding. They — and you — thus fill in the gap that Frith's composition has left in this circle of privileged onlookers, standing right behind the duchess and the dean, filling in the space Frith has left you, the public. And as you get up close to the painted canvas, the angle of your head tilts up, mirroring that of the duchess, as you lift your eyes to look at your Queen.

The experience of seeing the picture thus becomes a moment of royal homage, a sighting of the Queen in all her roles, enacted in the viewing moment, surrounded by a particular set of people, forged for a moment into a public. This reading of the picture

[36] On the representation of Victoria as widow, see Munich, pp. 79–103; and Homans, pp. 58–156.

suggests its viewing contexts are central to its meaning, and so I will end this article by posing some questions about the continued life of the picture that I have yet to answer. Frith and Flatou, who owned the copyright, had been granted permission to exhibit the picture in London for three years, and so it remained visible during the years when Victoria's isolation from public view continued and became the source of increasing public protest.[37] It was hung in Buckingham Palace when Victoria took possession of it, and in 1872 she commanded it should remain there (Millar, p. 73). And yet the picture — and its replicas — circulated widely, if selectively, in the years of her reign and her son's.[38] What, then, did it feel like to see this representation of sovereignty in London in 1870, exhibited in aid of the distressed peasantry of France, at a moment when France's last emperor had been overthrown and the Third Republic established? In Scotland in 1873? In Philadelphia in 1876, at the centennial of the American Revolution? In Australia in the early 1880s at the first international exhibitions to be held here?[39] And, finally, in India once Edward VII had ascended the throne, as King of the United Kingdom of Britain and Ireland and Emperor of India?[40]

Each of these episodes created Victoria's public anew. And as the picture moved through the time and space of Victoria's — and then Edward's — realm, its meanings expanded. It captures a moment in time — an episode of the contemporary life of 1863 — but its subject also points towards the future, both in its dynastic implications and the fact that the figures depicted in the painting, unlike those in his other modern-life scenes, are individuals, who themselves age alongside the picture. With the passage of time the assembled royals assumed new roles — eventually, of course, Bertie and Alexandra become King and Queen, but there are many other ascents: Marie becomes Queen of Belgium, Alexandra's parents become King and Queen of Denmark, her sister Dagmar becomes Empress of Russia, and Princess Victoria's kilted little son becomes Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. The meanings of the picture thus shift — maybe even become more obvious — as time passed. And so too does Frith's accomplishment, as his aim to reshape the unruly and unlovely present into the language and lasting power of art becomes a chapter in both royal history and the history of art.

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[37] I do not have a full accounting of its history during this period but it was certainly on view as indicated by an advertisement in the *Illustrated London News*, 22 June 1867, p. 618.

[38] For more on the role and meanings of replicas in Victorian art, see *Victorian Artists' Autograph Replicas: Auras, Aesthetics, Patronage and the Art Market*, ed. by Julie F. Codell (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[39] The picture was exhibited in three venues during its trip to Australia: the International Exhibition, Sydney (1879), Brisbane (1880), and Melbourne (1880–81) (Millar, p. 73).

[40] Millar notes that the copy commissioned by James Brooks 'was one of the copies sent out to India by Edward VII'. It was part of a series of copies of 'some of the ceremonial pictures, for loans to colonial and provincial exhibitions' made in the 1890s (pp. 73, 111).