

VERNON LEE AS A CRITIC OF AESTHETICISM IN *MISS BROWN*¹

Leonée Ormond

W.P. Frith's painting, *The Private View of the Royal Academy* (1881), is not one of his best-known works, and, unlike *Derby Day* (1858) and *The Railway Station* (1862), it depicts a very narrow section of the Victorian community: High Society disporting itself on the first day of the Season. Frith spent three years on it, carefully completing portraits of celebrated men and women, among them Frederic Leighton, the president of the Royal Academy, William Gladstone, Anthony Trollope, John Millais, Lily Langtry, the Archbishop of York, Baroness Burdett Coutts, Professor Huxley, and Miss Braddon. These are ranged against rows of accredited and popular works of art to form a splendid tribute to the wellknown and well-to-do, a group portrait of those who had "made it" and could prove it simply by being there. For the historian of Victorian manners, however, the painting has an interest which it would not have possessed had it been done in 1876 or 1885. The private view of 1881 was indeed by the aesthetes, and it was they, not the fashionable parade of familiar faces, who attracted Frith to the subject: "The contrast between the really beautiful costumes of some of the lady habituées of our private view, and the eccentric garments of others, together with the opportunity offered for portraits of eminent persons, suggested a subject for a picture, and I hastened to avail myself of it" (Frith 2:256).

In the foreground, Frith painted several aesthetic ladies, one group surrounding their idol and leader, Oscar Wilde. On the right, looking curiously at the Wilde circle, stands the earliest critic of aestheticism, the *Punch* cartoonist George Du Maurier, who had been making his readers laugh at the cult of beauty since the mid-1870s. Frith's treatment of the dress and mannerisms in *Punch*. The clothes of the single aesthete lady on the left, dressed in a long flowing garment, with a sunflower prominently displayed on her bosom, were based on those of Mrs. Cimabue Brown, the leader of Du Maurier's aesthetic circle. Anthony Trollope was placed next to her because