

Going to find Stanley: Imperial narratives,
shilling shockers, and Three Men in a Boat.

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Going to Find Stanley: Imperial Narratives, Shilling Shockers, and Three Men in a Boat

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Going to Find Stanley:
Imperial Narratives, Shilling Shockers, and *Three Men in a Boat*

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For over a century Jerome K. Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) has remained a popular book. This satirical account of a holiday misadventure on the Thames has never gone out of print in England; and in America, where countless copies were pirated during the end of the nineteenth century, the work has enjoyed a long period of availability. Translations of this humorous work have appeared in twenty-seven languages. Such a sensational publishing phenomenon did not escape the attention of the press in Jerome's day. However, Stanley Reynold muses, half-sincerely, that even after a century "no one has been able to properly explain the appeal of the book."¹ No one, to recast Reynold's observation, has seriously considered the possibility that the immense popularity of Jerome's best-known work possibly derives from more than its comic set pieces.

There are several reasons for this oversight. Unfortunately, not much of a case can be made for Jerome's collective literary output, despite its ample size. Most of the plays Jerome wrote were often acutely dismissed by reviewers for a lack of substance and originality.² Critical reaction to his more thought-provoking efforts, such as the autobiographical *bildungsroman* *Paul Kever* (1902), was barely more positive. Such a negative consensus, not just during his lifetime but also long afterwards, has fostered the general sense that *Three Men in a Boat* has somehow inexplicably endured in spite of its author's manifest literary insignificance.

Accounts of the journalistic genesis of this book have also discouraged close attention to it. The belief that Jerome initially planned to write a straightforward travel guide to the Thames has reinforced the **[End Page 403]** impression that whatever has been achieved in the finished work was more the result of accident than of design. In fact, a prominent 1927 obituary typically claimed that deft editorial intervention accounted for the book's success—that Jerome actually wrote the travelogue he claimed to have originally planned but that his editor deleted most of the documentary content while preserving the comic material.³ Jerome himself had a hand in this mistaken impression:

I decided to write the "humorous relief" first ... after which, in sober frame of mind, I could tackle the scenery and history. I never got there. It seemed to be all "humorous relief." By grim determination I succeeded, before the end, in writing a dozen or so slabs of history and working them in, one to each chapter, and F. W. Robinson, who was publishing the book serially in *Home Chimes*, promptly slung them out, the most of them.⁴

Robinson probably did excise some of the submitted text, especially the ineptly embedded matter Jerome candidly identified as such. Contrary to the obituary, however, Jerome does not say that he actually composed a travelogue. "Scenery and history," he writes, were added "by grim determination" and then awkwardly worked into the extant humorous narrative. Moreover, such phrases as "grim determination" and "slabs of history" invite his readers to wonder how seriously they should take this account of the book's origins.

What can we ascertain about Jerome's original intention? The prelude to his amusing report of Robinson's editing reads: "I did not intend to write a funny book, at first. I did not know I was a humorist. I never have been sure about it. In the Middle Ages, I should probably have gone about preaching and got myself burnt or hanged."⁵ Doubtless this particular comment contributed to the obituary writer's conflation of authorial intention and Jerome's actual textual execution. But attention to Jerome's comic tone in this passage is as important to observe as it is in what follows concerning editorial excisions. The tone of Jerome's comment undercuts the trustworthiness of his remark; the tone elicits skepticism about veracity in this instance.

There is, as well, this contravening fact, which readers in 1889 readily knew: Jerome's *Idle Thoughts of an Idle Fellow* (1886), a collection of magazine pieces eventually praised in the *London Times* as one of...

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