

The Dethronement of the Lion

- a Commentary

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The Dano- African lions that were imported to Kristiansand Zoo and Amusement Park a year ago are thriving. Four cubs were born on the first day of June and the happy news received a lot of media attention: For the first time in history, presumably, a lioness has given birth to offspring in Norway, and we are all welcomed to propose names for the newborn cubs (*VGNett 2008*). Quite a peculiar episode seen from a faunal point of view, since the most polarized question in the domestic debate on indigenous predators is whether the wolf should be allowed to propagate within Norway's borders. The trouble is that wolves are not yet kept in cages, and when a she-wolf has a litter, her cubs are not the object of naming competitions.

The birth of the lions made me think about another event involving lions. In Florence, Italy, on April 1 in 1776, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Peter Leopold, ordered the menagerie in Piazza San Marco to be closed.¹ Since 1550 the Medici family had kept exotic animals in San Marco to be used in animal fights, but also to be viewed, for a fee. There was a second, smaller and private menagerie in the Boboli Gardens, built in 1677. Among the animals in San

Marco, the lions were the most prominent. The tradition of keeping lions in Florence goes back to the period of the *Comune*, and from the Middle Ages to the second half of the eighteenth century there were lions in Florence. The lions were kept in different places in the old centre of the city before they were moved to San Marco. Matilde Simari says about the menageries that "the practice of keeping caged wild animals was so well established as to be considered one of the city's oldest traditions" (Simari 1985:27). The Florentines' interest in the lions and the animals' symbolic importance is shown by the fact that the menagerie in San Marco was called the Menagerie of the Lions even if other animals were kept there as well. The lives of the lions were followed closely; the fertility of the lions, for instance, was interpreted as a sign of future prosperity for the city, as when three lionesses gave birth to six cubs each between 1331 and 1337 (Simari 1985:27).

Who was this duke and why did he no longer find interest in the old Medici menagerie in San Marco? Peter Leopold had succeeded his father in 1765 and was the second from the house of Habsburg-Lorraine to become a Grand Duke. Perhaps the fact that

he was a foreigner meant that he showed little respect for a Medici tradition, but of greater importance is that by the Grand Duke's era, the time had come and gone for the old princely menageries that had furnished the animal combat arenas with four-legged gladiators.² Louise E. Robbins demonstrates in her study of exotic animals in eighteenth century Paris that staged, animal fights had largely disappeared among the upper classes at the beginning of the eighteenth century. From the points of view of scholars and rulers, animals were now to be presented to the public to educate rather than to amuse, and public zoos and natural history museums were to replace the private princely collections of live and dead animals. If these "stylized and highly formal methods of tormenting animals", to quote Keith Thomas, characteristic of staged animal fighting lost interest among the upper classes, animal fights and baiting continued, however, now arranged as public entertainment (Thomas 1996:147). In Paris this kind of public entertainment went on until the early nineteenth century, and in England bull-baiting, badger-baiting and dog-fighting were forbidden by law in 1835 as a result of the SPCA's lobbying (Robbins 2002:71; Thomas 1996:159, Kean 1998: 35ff). Interestingly enough, popular and scientific culture mingled when learned enlightenment naturalists came for curiosity to see new species displayed at Parisian fairs and on the boulevards or in public animal fights (Robbins 2002:85ff).

In 1771, Grand Duke Peter Leopold decreed that the San Marco menagerie should no more accept any animals. This year the residing animals were a lioness, two tigers, two wolves, a vulture, five foxes and a Corsican hound (Simari 1985:28). Probably the two last lions arrived in Florence in 1776. As the Florentine

menageries were abolished, in 1775, other animals reappeared in a modern, scientific setting, *L'Imperiale e Regio Museo di Fisica e Storia Naturale*, later called *La Specola* because of the astronomy observatory completed in 1789.³ In the museum "prodotti naturali", natural products, from the princely curiosity cabinets in the Uffizi galleries and Palazzo Pitti were gathered, exposed according to new, scientific principles and made visible to the public (Thorsen 2006).⁴

The close link between the sovereign and the king of the animals manifested physically in the princely menageries was weakened. The symbolic connotations of lions as animals that belonged to the sphere of emperors and kings were also influenced by scientific and political ideals in the Enlightenment. In his discussion of the change in mentality that takes place in the human-animal relation during the 18th century, Keith Thomas points out that in the 1770s it was no longer acceptable to draw parallels between the world of men and the world of animals, for instance between the king and the lion, because men and animals were different species; men were moral creatures, animals not (Thomas 1984:60f, 68). When the power of kings declined dramatically in revolutionary France, the lion's status plummeted as well (Robbins 2002: 218). Since antiquity the lion had been an emblem of force and ferocity. In art and literature the animal's symbolic meanings are numerous and in part contradictory. The lion stands for large-mindedness and generosity, as well as pride, revenge, fury and obsequiousness (Impelluso 2004:213). What has happened to the lion that for centuries had been the kings' foremost animal to be kept, shown, exchanged between princes, painted, modelled, carried on banners and coat of arms,

a figure in myth and religion?

The closing of the menageries did not put an end to the confinement of wild animals. As Camilla Ruud shows, during the 19th and 20th centuries, the zoo-logic has adopted cleverly to shifting knowledge and policy towards wild life. This zoo-logic was established later in Norway than in many other countries. As a matter of fact, section 15 “Prohibition of public display of animals” in the Norwegian Animal Protection Act of 2004 (*Lov om dyrevern*) forbids the displaying of animals in public, but exemptions from the Act may be granted, for instance to keep wild animals in so-called “dyreparker” which means literally animal parks (rather than “zoos”), a name that evokes associations to space and semi-wild greenery void of the regimen of cages.⁵ In the princely menageries the lions were put on display to be seen and admired by their human peers. In Kristiansand lions have been staged as real animals as well as mediated animals to be seen primarily by children. The once fierce and proud animal has in this setting been split into a number of personalities: the leader, the nice and modest fellow, the shy girl and, lately, the nursing mother. Along with the lions’ lifespan, this narrative can be developed and embellished into a fairy-tale of the first lions that came to Norway, not to the king’s castle, but the realm of the pirate Captain Sabertooth.⁶

Notes

1. My presentation of history of the Medici menageries in Florence is based on Simari 1985.
2. The animals in the royal menagerie in Versailles were moved to a provisional menagerie in Jardin des Plantes in 1773-74 (Robbins 2002:220). The royal menagerie in the Tower was closed in 1834

(Thomas 1984:277).

3. Imperial and Royal Museum of Physics and Natural History.
4. About the history of ‘La Specola’ see Puccetti & Azzaroli 1972, Berzi et al. 1980, Poggesi 2001.
5. <http://www.lovdatab.no/all/hl-19741220-073.html#map004> (Downloaded 06.06.2008)
6. <http://www.captainsabertooth.com/> (Downloaded 06.06.2008)

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