

Archived thesis/research paper/faculty publication from the University of North Carolina at Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository: <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/>

**Reconsidering P.G. Wodehouse: A Look Back on the Critical Reception of the
“Performing Flea”**

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2018

By Aaron Ervin

Thesis Director
Professor Dee James

Thesis Advisor
Professor Merritt Moseley

This research focuses on the work of British novelist, Broadway playwright and Hollywood screenwriter P.G. Wodehouse, whose career spanned roughly the first half of the 20th century. He is perhaps best known for his Jeeves and Wooster novels, which are humorous in nature, like most of his work. Specifically of interest is the transformation of Wodehouse's literary "image" over the last 100 years; that is, his reception by literary critics, public intellectuals and famous writers. For most of Wodehouse's career, he was received as little more than a "common," popular author. A writer with certain gifts, some conceded, but also a writer definitively lacking those characteristics which qualify their work for serious critical inquiry. This opinion of Wodehouse is recently transformed. Especially over the past 20 years, literary scholars have exhibited a renewed interest in Wodehouse's work. The hope of this research is to account for this transformation, and highlights one particular reason Wodehouse was overlooked for so long: his popularity. Critics were dubious of the emergence of popular culture and mass produced media, and this skepticism blinded them to the significance of Wodehouse's fiction. Chief among these concerns of critics was the notion that popular, mass-produced works of art served to undermine the progressive values of society, to perpetuate a "status quo." However, using textual evidence from Wodehouse's *Stiff Upper Lip*, *Jeeves*, it can be shown that Wodehouse challenged the prevailing status quo in a number of ways. This paper focuses on two thematic tendencies in Wodehouse's fiction which problematize the early critical presumptions regarding the author's advocating for a continuance of conservative values. The first is Wodehouse's treatment of femininity which, while not progressive by modern standards, portrays women as strong, capable, and intellectually equal to their male counterparts. The second centers on Wodehouse's satire of the aristocracy, which purposefully calls into question the legitimacy of class divisions in English society. An analysis of these thematic tendencies

demonstrates that the fears critics associated with mass-produced media and culture were not applicable to Wodehouse's work, though all of Wodehouse's earliest critics assumed as much.

Wodehouse: student of the “mass audience”

Characterizing the earliest criticism of Wodehouse's work is an admiration for certain “wholesome” qualities he presents, as well as a subtle conflation of his work with frivolity, or “lightness.” An early essay by Augustus Muir entitled “The Popularity of P.G. Wodehouse,” first published in 1927's February issue of *The Strand Magazine*, exemplifies this critical trend. The essay opens with a quotation from William Hazlitt, who stated in a lecture that “Comedy is a ‘graceful ornament to the civil order; the Corinthian capital of a polished society.’ ... [Comedy] reflects the images of grace, of gaiety, and pleasure double, and completes the perspective of human life” (Muir 324). Generally speaking, as a redirected complement to Wodehouse the quotation is quite favorable, but the notion of Wodehouse's work as “ornamental” speaks to the superficiality typical of his earliest criticism. The word carries with it connotations of pleasantness as well as purposelessness. For Muir (via Hazlitt), it's terrific that civilization has the luxury of humorous fiction, but the body of work isn't relevant philosophically. And by implying that Wodehouse's fiction serves as a quaint decoration of real-world power by monumentalizing the “civil order,” Muir subtly dismisses the social relevance of Wodehouse. It may be that Wodehouse possessed few didactic or philosophical aims, but, being so popular then and now, it's a mistake to dismiss the author's social impact. And moreover, because of his popularity, it may also be a mistake to dismiss Wodehouse as socially unaware. Rather, there's sufficient evidence to suggest he cared deeply about the social atmosphere he inhabited, if only to gain greater insight into the commercial viability of his works.

As a criticism of early 20th-century popular fiction, Muir's position is par for the intellectual course. We can contextualize the apprehensiveness to embrace Wodehouse critically with an understanding of the emerging academic critique of the "culture industry," an industry which Wodehouse saw himself as participating in, certainly. As a critical lens, study of the culture industry is best categorized as Marxist, but only to the extent that it criticizes the capitalist system of mass-produced media entertainment. Summarily, scholars of the culture industry investigate the relationship between "producers" of cultural capital and consumers of the industry's production. There existed a consensus within the academic discourse that the "output" of the culture industry--Hollywood films, Broadway musicals, magazines, novels--was neither benign nor beneficent. Most common was the insistence that the culture industry maintained the elite's status quo. For critics of the culture industry, the large-scale dissemination (and accessibility) of artistic works merely represented a new avenue for social control and indoctrination. In his essay "Culture Industry Reconsidered," T.W. Adorno offers a characteristic assessment of the culture industry's dangers:

What parades as progress in the culture industry, as the incessantly new which it offers up, remains the disguise for an eternal sameness; everywhere the changes mask a skeleton which has changed just as little as the profit motive itself since the time it first gained its predominance over culture. (Adorno 3)

It would be a stretch to try and portrait Adorno and Wodehouse as intellectual colleagues in the discipline of cultural studies. Likely, Wodehouse had never heard of Adorno or read his criticism of mass culture. But these two are alike in their recognition of a cultural marketplace. Their respective intellectual engagements with the "idea" *behind* such a marketplace are very stark.

Without question, Wodehouse took a pragmatic approach to literature and value judgements. For Wodehouse, his success as writer and his success in the marketplace were one and the same.

The academic details of the culture industry would not have interested Wodehouse, but it's fair to say he was a "student" of the industry's machinations. Few popular authors of Wodehouse's time better understood the importance, not only of the work they produced, but of the work's "impact" within the marketplace. In *Author, Author!*, a collection of correspondence between Wodehouse and William Townend supplemented with commentary by Wodehouse himself, Wodehouse makes no effort to hide the commercial rationale he utilized to imagine and craft his stories. Wodehouse writes openly of sums he received from publishers for his work, often categorizing "successful" and "unsuccessful" stories based, primarily, on the amount periodicals or publishing houses paid for the pieces (the mental map he maintained between stories and compensation is surprisingly detailed and specific given Wodehouse's overall output as an author). He even remarks candidly on the sums Townend received from magazines (Townend was also a successful author in his own right), and sometimes expresses surprise at particular pieces of Townend's being accepted due to their commercial inviability (in Wodehouse's estimation). In his letters to Townend, it's interesting how often Wodehouse's criticism of Townend's fiction carries with it a commercial consideration. After reviewing a Townend story in a popular magazine of the time, Wodehouse writes to the author,

I have at last got the *Strand* with your "A Couple of Down-and-Outs" in it.

I think the illustrations are good and the story reads fine. It has given me an illuminating idea about your work, and that is that you make your characters so real that, if you're writing for the popular magazines, you can't afford a gray ending. You simply must make a point of having things

all right in the end, or the editor won't risk having his readers' feeling harrowed. (Wodehouse 31)

Certainly, we can't classify Wodehouse's criticism as evidenced by a "close reading," at least not in the academic sense. Rather, the details of the story and Townend's treatment of his subjects are secondary to those aspects Wodehouse identifies as commercially problematic, Townend's mimetic approach to narration and character. Later, in the same letter, Wodehouse comments on another of Townend's "modernist" stories:

It's a very good story and ought to sell all right to one of the higher type magazines, but it was too gray for *Adventure*. You had your characters struggling against Life and Fate and all that sort of thing, and what *Adventure* wants are stories about men struggling with octopuses and pirates. ... You make them think about life, and popular magazine readers don't want to. (Wodehouse 32)

One wonders how truthful Wodehouse was being when he told Townend the story is "very good," or whether Townend believed Wodehouse really liked the story. The subtext seems plain enough: *your story may be good in the aesthetic value judgement sense, but don't expect it to make any money*. Wodehouse's criticism is something like a consolation for the commercial failure he assumed Townend's work would be. Speculation aside, these passages illustrate the extent to which the mass audience and the "culture industry" shaped Wodehouse's approach to creative writing, and even criticism of writing more generally.

The Wodehousian woman

Conceding what the scholars have acknowledged, it may be naive to approach Wodehouse as though he possessed a keen awareness of the social or political climates he inhabited during his life. But looking to the treatment of the young women in his Wooster novels, we can speculate on the extent to which the author unconsciously “imbibed” the Western ethos. In her article “Feminism and the Popular Novel of the 1890s: A Brief Consideration of a Forgotten Feminist Novelist,” scholar Norma Clarke examines the branches of feminism that emerged in the late-Victorian era. The characteristics of the branches she describes are striking in their similarity to the traits exhibited by female characters in Wodehouse’s Wooster novels. Clarke focuses especially on the feminist ideals of novelist Sarah Grand (*The Heavenly Twins*, *The Beth Book*):

Sarah Grand’s feminism, and the novels that embodied it, was firmly in the ‘purity’ school. ... For Grand, the true New Woman showed a ‘gentle diffidence and sweetness of manner’ and, as women, they were naturally noble, morally superior to men, and their mission in life was to raise men to their own high standards. (Clarke 95-6)

Setting aside “gentle diffidence and sweetness of manner,” the image of Wodehouse’s Stiffy Byng passes effortlessly into view. Commanding, overbearing, insistent that her benign will advances all causes, and, most of all, confident that her opinions and expectations exist for the redemption of the men in her life, Stiffy’s character may not be a conscious commentary on late-Victorian feminist ideals, but she’s certainly a reflection of the “New Woman” Grand and other “purity” feminists imagined during that time. Taking Stiffy’s role in *Stiff Upper Lip*, *Jeeves*, as an example, we find a woman convinced of wrong-doing--on the part of Pop Bassett, who, she believes, has jipped a townsman out of a valuable Congolese statue--who resorts to blackmailing the men in her life to bring the situation in line with her moral expectations. We can

see in several places that Stiffy feels she must “raise men to [her] own high standards,” specifically Bertie. Attempting to convince Bertie to steal the statue *back* from Pop Bassett for its original owner, Stiffy initiates this interchange:

“Include me out. I won’t touch it. I know you and your jobs.”

“But this is something quite simple. You can do it on your head.

And you’ll be bringing sunshine and happiness into the life of a poor slob who can do with a bit of both. Were you ever a Boy Scout?”

“Not since early childhood.”

“Then you’ve lots of leeway to make up in the way of kind deeds.

This’ll be a nice start for you. ...”

It’s apparent that Stiffy considers Bertie something of a “moral project,” consistent with Grand’s vision of femininity as a moral counterbalance to the bankrupt patriarchal social order. Of course, Stiffy’s brand of morality is suspect, as she takes no issue with lying and stealing to affect the change she deems morally righteous. Regardless, we can read Stiffy’s character as a commentary on the repositioning of feminine identity that was taking place near the beginning of the 20th century.

Interestingly, Stiffy’s antics, at some point or other, unnerve every male character in the series. In *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, Bertie marvels at the curate Stinker’s willingness to marry Stiffy, remarking that her feminine tenacity is “calculated to bleach the hair of one and all” the men in her life (Wodehouse 205). And even Jeeves, typically an advocate for progressive positions on issues such as gender, is given pause by the mere thought of Stiffy. Together, they liken Stiffy to a “female upas tree,” a woman strewing “disaster from all sides” (Wodehouse 272). In short, the men who encounter Stiffy invariably feel threatened by her assertiveness.

What Wodehouse means to say with Stiffy's character is not perfectly clear. We may expect Bertie to exaggerate Stiffy's character, unreliable narrator that he is, but it's clear that she affects every male character in largely the same way as she affects Bertie. In any case, we can understand Stiffy as a strong, assertive female character on the "radical" side of Grand's feminist spectrum, and Wodehouse makes clear that her strain of feminism poses a threat--real or imagined--to men everywhere.

We can place Madeline Bassett on the opposite side of Grand's feminist spectrum, in the realm of what Grand describes as the "unworldliness" of the virtuous feminist, with additional aspects of grace and gentleness. While Stiffy's strong character makes Bertie feel threatened, Madeline Bassett merely annoys Bertie with her passive, "goofy" femininity. It's true that Madeline Bassett poses a "threat" to Bertie, as she, at various moments, advances the prospect of their marriage together; but the threat to Bertie is not so much Madeline Bassett as the institution of marriage itself. The trouble with Madeline Bassett is she is *too* detached, too lofty and unworldly: "potty as they come," in Bertie's aggravated estimation (Wodehouse 240). Time and again, Bertie expresses frustration with Madeline Bassett's outlook and the role she identifies for herself as a woman. Simply, she neglects her basic feminine duties to men. Madeline Bassett imposes a vegetarian diet on her one-time fiancé, Gussie Fink-Nottle; she speaks openly with men about metaphysical matters, holding that "the stars are God's daisy chain;" she is incapable in the kitchen; and she does not dote on men to an extent which Bertie finds satisfactory. Madeline Bassett is too frivolous, even for Bertie Wooster.

Perhaps the word "mistaken" best summarizes the male estimation of Madeline Bassett's character. To Bertie, her belief in "stars and rabbits and what happen[s] when fairies [blow] their wee noses" is altogether ludicrous. Her interest in folk music constitutes a misguided value

judgement. Even Jeeves chimes in to disparage her unscientific understanding of animal proteins and the perils of the vegetarian diet (Shelley might appreciate the irony were he alive today). Most of all, Madeline is so aloof--or perhaps overly confident--that she completely overestimates Bertie's interest in marrying her, and fails to recognize the legitimate attraction of Roderick Spode. Setting this attitude toward Madeline Bassett beside her "obvious" physical beauty--which Bertie characterizes as a "trap"--we do find cause to suggest that Wodehouse is perpetuating a status quo with respect to patriarchal estimations of feminine worth. Madeline Bassett is beautiful but imbecile, unreliable in the domestic sense but a fitting decoration for masculine power. Something to be tolerated, even appreciated, but not respected.

Generally speaking, both Madeline Bassett and Stuffy Byng represent a shift in feminine identities which evolved over the course of Wodehouse's life, and we can identify a marked apprehension on the part of his male characters to "cope" with the change. But to conflate this apprehension with Wodehouse's own anxiety is problematic. As readers, we're given clues which suggest the male reaction is overblown. Madeline Bassett's metaphysical beliefs are amusing and Stuffy Byng's strong will is, at times, frightful; however, it's the male reaction to these characters that constitutes "the gag." To highlight the absurdity of the male reaction in *Stiff Upper Lip*, *Jeeves*, Wodehouse introduces Emerald Stoker, an American woman from a wealthy aristocratic family. Unlike Madeline Bassett and Stuffy Byng, Emerald Stoker's role is that of the "conventional" woman, and she is generally well-received by all male characters. It's the reasons for this acceptance where we find Wodehouse's commentary: Emerald Stoker coddles men and positions herself as a maternal figure. Early in the novel, Bertie dines out with Emerald Stoker and remarks:

I always enjoyed putting on the nose bag with her, for there was a sort of motherliness about her which I found restful. She was one of those soothing, sympathetic girls you can take your troubles to, confident of having your hand held and your head patted. (Wodehouse 197)

What should we conclude men like Bertie look for in a woman, if not pleasant reminders of their mothers? The prospect of a motherly companion even induces Bertie to ask Emerald Stoker out on a formal date. In the Wooster novels, such an occurrence is practically unprecedented. And later, at wit's end with Madeline Bassett's vegetarian antics, Gussie Fink-Nottle falls madly in love with Emerald Stoker for much of the same reasons Bertie finds her attractive. Here, Gussie Fink-Nottle explains to Bertie his undeniable attraction to Emerald Stoker, and the reason he kissed her despite being engaged to Madeline Bassett:

“... and I'll do it again if it's the last thing I do. What a girl, Bertie! So kind, so sympathetic. She's my idea of a thoroughly womanly woman, and you don't see many of them around these days. I hadn't time when I was in your room to tell you about what happened at the school treat.”

“Jeeves told me. He said Bartholomew bit you.”

“And how right he was. The bounder bit me to the bone. And do you know what Emerald Stoker did? Not only did she coo over me like a mother comforting a favorite child, but she bathed and bandaged my lacerated leg. She was a ministering angel, the closest thing to Florence Nightingale you could hope to find.” (Wodehouse 307-8)

Again we find the agreeable characterization of Emerald Stoker as a maternal figure, a woman who appreciates and accepts her supporting, auxiliary role in the lives of deserving men. Emerald

Stoker's motherly characteristics extend into the culinary arts as well, and Gussie Fink-Nottle's appreciation stems, at least in part, from Emerald Stoker's outright rejection of the vegetarian restrictions for which Madeline Bassett advocates. The two "connect" late at night in the Totleigh Towers kitchen over a steak and kidney pie, which Emerald Stoker makes specifically for Gussie Fink-Nottle. In this instance as well, Gussie Fink-Nottle cannot contain his appreciation for--and attraction to--Emerald Stoker's maternalism.

Whether Wodehouse "bought in" to the Freudian psychoanalytical theories he's clearly invoking is beside the point. Rather, the commentary originates in Wodehouse's critique of the masculine reluctance to accept evolving feminine identities, and his observation that men shirk from these developments because of an unpronounced fear, not because of a dignified and careful rationale. Conceding as much, it becomes difficult to dismiss Wodehouse as a culture industry operative who mindlessly perpetuates the elite's vision of the "status quo." Wodehouse's commentary on the shifting gender roles and relations in the early 20th century is as pointed, insightful, and challenging as it is humorous.

Wodehouse and class (un)consciousness

The remainder of this essay will work through Wodehouse's depiction of class, specifically the British aristocracy. Wodehouse's treatment of aristocratic life is perhaps the safest case for his perpetuating a social status quo, and the commentator to most aggressively pursue this line of criticism is George Orwell. From Orwell's critical collection, *Dickens, Dali and Others*, the article "In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse" focuses primarily on the German internment of Wodehouse after the invasion and occupation of France during the Second World War, and the public scandal which emerged subsequently. However, Orwell makes room for an explication of

the formulaic and thematic tendencies in Wodehouse's fiction which aggravate his socialist sensibilities, chief among those tendencies being Wodehouse's uncritical--and therefore irresponsible--representation of the British bourgeoisie. Like critics before him, Orwell's judgement of Wodehouse precludes any possibility of satire (or meaning) in Wodehouse's work. But Orwell goes farther than his predecessors to explain away deeper readings of Wodehouse and argues that an interpretation of Wodehouse as a satirist of the aristocracy is likely non-English in origin, the result of a cultural mistranslation. Sympathetic readings of Wodehouse are not the result of mistaken aesthetic value judgements; rather, it's a case of mistaken geography. Orwell makes this claim by way of an Indian Nationalist acquaintance who "defended Wodehouse warmly" for his criticism of the aristocracy:

...what interested me was to find that he regarded Wodehouse as an anti-British writer who had done useful work by showing up the British aristocracy in their true colors. This is a mistake that it would be very difficult for an English person to make, and is a good instance of the way in which books... lose their finer nuances when they reach a foreign audience. For it is clear enough that Wodehouse is *not* anti-British, and not anti-upper class either. On the contrary, a harmless old-fashioned snobbishness is perceptible all through his work. (Orwell 234)

This must be the most acrobatic approach to dismissing the intellectual gravity of Wodehouse's fiction; and, equally troubling, Orwell's criticism tacitly advocates for an objective standard of interpretation based on cultural criteria, a standard the author of *Animal Farm* applies to no other artist in his collection.

But what of the “harmless old-fashioned snobbishness” Orwell perceives in Wodehouse’s novels? It’s too much to say, “It doesn’t really exist.” In the Wooster series, it’s clear that Bertie, while identifying with the popular tastes of the lower classes (their songs, their novels), maintains a careful psychological distance from their plight. There are moments when Bertie reflects on the lives of the lower classes, but an ironic distance is always maintained, and we never believe Bertie is sympathetic to the hardships of impoverishment. But we’re never meant to believe he truly understands those hardships either, and perhaps this is what Orwell meant by “harmless.” Still, operating under the assumption that Bertie *is* an aristocratic snob, how does this reflect on Wodehouse’s intentions as an advocate for the aristocratic status quo? What misguided reader picks up a Wooster novel to parse Bertie’s keen insights into the human condition? Rather, we read Bertie’s narrative voice for the ironic naivety he exudes, for the total inversion of rational empathy which is the hallmark of his character. Conceding this much, it becomes impossible to characterize Wodehouse as classist because his protagonists run in wealthy circles; and Orwell’s assertion that “no one who genuinely despised [the aristocracy] would write of [it] so much” all but falls apart. While Wodehouse undoubtedly “intends [Bertie] as a sympathetic figure” and a “traditional stage Englishman” simultaneously, our identification with Bertie has nothing to do with his aristocratic status (Orwell 235). We love the Woosterian aristocratic characters for everything they’re not and ought to be. We love to laugh at how undeserving they are, and their failings only highlight the absurdity of a social system so oblivious to merit.

It’s strangely ironic: Orwell imagined that Wodehouse proactively appealed to readers nostalgic for the Edwardian aristocratic order by “present[ing] the English upper classes as much nicer people than they are,” but Wodehouse’s century of popular appeal has everything to do

with his corrupting the image of a worthy aristocratic elite. Ironically, the lower classes today can find confirmation of their beliefs in a corrupt and irresponsible elite class by turning to Bertie and his dysfunctional family. In this regard, it's Wodehouse's satire of the Edwardian aristocratic way of life which is the most timeless aspect of his fiction. And as for the Woosterian aristocratic depiction, describing those characters as "nice" is not the most obvious choice. If we look to what these characters say and do, words like "frivolous," "oblivious," and "irresponsible" fall much closer to the mark. Bertie's Aunt Dahlia's chief preoccupation is maintaining the allowance for her niche women's magazine *Milady's Boudoir*, which must be subsidized to stay afloat due to a lack of readership. She often resorts to sordid mechanisms such as blackmail to secure the sums her failing paper needs to survive. Her husband, Tom Travers, made a fortune in the Far East and is presumably the most moneyed member of Bertie's family. Uncle Tom's tremendous wealth and influence, however, is wasted on an inexplicable obsession with collecting expensive silver, and when he speaks it's typically to lament the burden of taxation, though his wealth and well-being are never truly in jeopardy. Bertie's close friend Gussie Fink-Nottle pours most of his endowment into the careful study of newts. Sir Roderick Spode uses his title and wealth to organize a small band of right-wing political extremists, The Black Shorts, a fledgling assembly of nitwits who never affect the slightest change in society. And, of course, there's Bertie himself, who idles in the chambers of the raucous Drone's Club, smoking and drinking with aristocratic peers who have also turned away from the responsibilities of their wealth and influence. This is all to say that amongst the ranks of the Woosterian aristocracy, it's difficult to identify even one character we're supposed to truly admire or respect.

We may not be persuaded to *dislike* these characters, as Orwell rightly suggests, but this is more a consequence of Wodehouse's formulaic approach to character and plot rather than a

conscious intention to engender sympathy for the aristocracy. Wodehouse favored literary formulae with proven marketability to a large Western audience, and one of his earliest realizations about popular stories is that there must only be one “heavy,” or villain, a singular focus for the audience’s disdain. At various moments, a member of the aristocracy *is* the villain, such as Sir Roderick Spode in *The Code of the Woosters*, further complicating Orwell’s assertion that the aristocracy is never the subject of scrutiny in Wodehouse’s fiction.

While it’s argued here that Orwell’s reading of Wodehouse is generally unfavorable and even condescending, we must acknowledge the situation which prompted Orwell’s response. Orwell’s purpose was to highlight the disproportionate attention Wodehouse received after his mistaken, perhaps accidental, foray into public political discourse. It seems Orwell perceived a public interest in Wodehouse’s politics by virtue of Wodehouse’s celebrity which, it goes without saying, does not qualify a person as politically insightful or relevant. Still, it seems that Orwell’s judgement of what qualifies as politically or socially relevant is overly strict. In Orwell’s essay on Dickens, from the same collection of essays which featured Orwell’s “In Defence of P.G. Wodehouse,” we find a much more generous and concessional commentary concerning class. Orwell grants Dickens critical favors, perhaps, due to Dickens’ more explicit mode of critique regarding class relations. Orwell reads in Dickens a very obvious conflict between the upper and lower classes, and perceives a “feeling that one is always on the side of the underdog, on the side of the weak against the strong” (Orwell 73). Anyone familiar with the Wooster novels knows that there is no such tendency in Wodehouse’s approach. The English aristocracy is always presented as socially preeminent, grossly powerful without the faintest explanation as to the deservedness of their stature. But in Wodehouse’s explicit treatment of the aristocratic order, it’s difficult to ignore the implied “gag,” which challenges the reader to

question the granted status quo of the Wooster universe. The aristocratic figures in the Wooster novels never satisfy a moral expectation, and this consistency in Wodehouse's treatment of the aristocracy is the surest reason to assume that Wodehouse was offering a critique of the aristocracy's claim to authority.

Conclusion

Critics during the first half of the 20th century thought they had sufficient reason to ignore the literary relevance of P.G. Wodehouse. They held that Wodehouse was a participant in a relatively new Western phenomenon, the mass culture industry, an industry whose unpronounced agenda was to undermine progressive values and perpetuate the existing social order. This reason for dismissing Wodehouse--the notion that his fiction is detrimental to the "character" of a society by its encouraging a mindless acceptance of the "status quo"--can be problematized by a close reading of any of his Wooster novels. The selection of *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*, as the focus for a close reading was a more or less arbitrary decision, as the same commentary flows through all the other Wooster novels. In these works we find many instances where Wodehouse means to challenge the antiquated social status quo of his youth. His female characters, such as Madeline Bassett and Stiffy Byng, serve as strong, capable checks on the prevailing patriarchal order, often inciting male characters to question their preconceived notions of femininity. Regarding class, Wodehouse presents an aristocracy wholly devoid of moral values. Aristocratic characters such as Sir Roderick Spode and Bertie's Aunt Dahlia possess no moral convictions and squander the utility of their powerful social positions on frivolous preoccupations, and such treatment guides Wodehouse's readers to question the legitimacy of the English social hierarchy.

Whatever the reasons for the lackluster criticism of the past, new conversations regarding Wodehouse have emerged in the second half of the 20th century, conversations which presume, like this essay, that Wodehouse deserves a mention in the legacy of English literature. The essay collection *Middlebrow Wodehouse* attests to the renewed critical interest in serious readings of previously denigrated popular authors such as Wodehouse. In “Know Your Audience: Middlebrow Aesthetic and Literary Positioning in the Fiction of P.G. Wodehouse,” Ann-Marie Einhaus mixes reception theory with details about Wodehouse’s writing habits toward an explanation of his “popular” status among readers. Editor Ann Rea contributes “Reading Up or Curling Up with a Book: Aspiring and Promiscuous Readers in P.G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves and Bertie Stories,” wherein she looks at what literature Wodehouse’s characters read in the stories, and argues that the relation of Wodehousian characters to “cultural distinctions determines the power equilibrium between them” (Rea 7). With “The Prison Camp as Public School: Wodehouse, School Stories and the Second World War,” Caleb Richardson approaches Wodehouse biographically, and looks to the author’s earlier stories to explain the German broadcast scandal which prompted Orwell’s essay. Brian Holcomb’s offering, “The Queer Domesticity of Bertie and Jeeves,” which comments on the perpetual bachelorhood of Bertie and his relationship with Jeeves to explain how the Wooster saga challenges heteronormativity, is highly compatible with this essay in its approach.

This new body of work is remarkable in the challenges it presents to critics. The dismissal of Wodehouse for half a century is largely the result of bias and short sightedness on the part of literary critics, as the brilliance of Wodehouse’s work, no doubt, existed from the very start. Are there timeless works created today which, for some inadequate reason or other, are neglected by literary discourse?

Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor W. "Culture Industry Reconsidered." *New German Critique*, no. 6, 1975, p. 12.
- Clarke, Norma. "Feminism and the Popular Novel of the 1890s: A Brief Consideration of a Forgotten Feminist Novelist." *Feminist Review*, no. 20, 1985, p. 91.
- Einhaus, Ann-Marie. "Know Your Audience: Middlebrow Aesthetic and Literary Positioning in the Fiction of P.G. Wodehouse." *Middlebrow Wodehouse: P.G. Wodehouse's Work in Context*, edited by Ann Rea, Ashgate, 2016, pp. 15-34.
- Holcomb, Brian. "The Queer Domesticity of Bertie and Jeeves." *Middlebrow Wodehouse: P.G. Wodehouse's Work in Context*, edited by Ann Rea, Ashgate, 2016, pp. 209-228.
- Muir, Augustus. "The Popularity of P. G. Wodehouse." *Short Story Criticism*, edited by Sheila Fitzgerald, vol. 2, Gale, 1989.
- Orwell, George. *Dickens, Dali and Others*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.
- Rea, Ann. "Reading Up or Curling Up with a Book: Aspiring and Promiscuous Readers in P.G. Wodehouse's Jeeves and Bertie Stories." *Middlebrow Wodehouse: P.G. Wodehouse's Work in Context*, edited by Ann Rea, Ashgate, 2016, pp. 35-50.

Richardson, Caleb. "The Prison Camp as Public School: Wodehouse, School Stories and the Second World War." *Middlebrow Wodehouse: P.G. Wodehouse's Work in Context*, edited by Ann Rea, Ashgate, 2016, pp. 87-104.

Wodehouse, P. G. *Author! Author!* Simon and Schuster, 1962.

---. *Stiff Upper Lip, Jeeves*. Overlook Press, 2012.

Works Consulted

Donaldson, Frances. "Introduction: The Master." *P.G. Wodehouse: A Biography*, by Donaldson, Prion Books, 2001, pp. 1-36.

---. "The Broadcasts: The Aftermath." *P.G. Wodehouse: A Biography*, Prion Books, 2001, pp. 252-258.

---. "The Broadcasts: Berlin." *P.G. Wodehouse: A Biography*, Prion Books, 2001, pp. 207-230.

---. "The Broadcasts: England." *P.G. Wodehouse: A Biography*, Prion Books, 2001, pp. 231-251.

---. "The Camp Note Book." *P.G. Wodehouse: A Biography*, Prion Books, 2001, pp. 171-206.

---. "The Cussen Report and Parliament." *P.G. Wodehouse: A Biography*, Prion Books, 2001, pp. 259-273.

Finn, James. "The Flea Forever." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Carolyn

Riley and Barbara Harte, vol. 2, Gale, 1974.

Galligan, Edward L. "P. G. Wodehouse Master of Farce." *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 93,

no. 4, 1985, pp. 609–617.

Hall, Robert A. “The Transferred Epithet in P. G. Wodehouse.” *Linguistic Inquiry*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1973, pp. 92–94.

Mooneyham, Laura. “Comedy among the Modernists: P. G. Wodehouse and the Anachronism of Comic Form.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 40, no. 1, 1994, pp. 114-136.

Orwell, George. “Wishful Thinking and the Light Novel.” *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Sharon R. Gunton and Jean C. Stine, vol. 22, Gale, 1982.

Pritchett, V. S. “The Zany World of P. G. Wodehouse.” *Short Story Criticism*, edited by Sheila Fitzgerald, vol. 2, Gale, 1989.

Rea, Ann. “Introduction to *Middlebrow Wodehouse*.” *Middlebrow Wodehouse: P.G. Wodehouse’s Work in Context*, edited by Ann Rea, Ashgate, 2016, pp. 1-14.

Tuplin, Roz. “‘A Fairly Unclouded Life’: Upper-Class Masculinity in Crisis in the Early Jeeves and Wooster.” *Middlebrow Wodehouse: P.G. Wodehouse’s Work in Context*, edited by Ann Rea, Ashgate, 2016, pp. 191-208.

Wodehouse, P. G. *How Right You Are, Jeeves*. Simon and Schuster, 2008.

---. *Jeeves and the Tie That Binds*. Simon and Schuster, 2009.

---. *Right Ho, Jeeves*. BBC, 2009.

---, and Frances Donaldson. *Yours, Plum: Letters of P.G. Wodehouse*. Penguin, 1992.