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## Chapter 1

### Know Your Audience: Middlebrow Aesthetic and Literary Positioning in the Fiction of P.G.

#### Wodehouse

Ann-Marie Einhaus

Although praised exuberantly by Evelyn Waugh and Hilaire Belloc, translated into dozens of languages and avidly read worldwide, it appears that P.G. Wodehouse is everybody’s favourite comic author, but nobody’s canonical writer – except when seen as the centre of his own particular canon of Wodehouseiana. In his 1953 review of *The Inimitable Jeeves*, Julian Maclaren-Ross deplored that ‘in spite of the superlatives with which these [reviews] are studded, the reviewers seem content to pigeon-hole him conveniently as ideal light reading for beach, train, or week-end trip’ rather than probing further (351). This essay strives to explain Wodehouse’s status as a popular writer, whose work is read with enjoyment by academics, critics and the general reader alike, as resulting from his particular positioning within the literary field, scrutinizing his relationship to both popular commercial fiction and avant-garde literary output. Wodehouse as a writer of enduring popularity and yet non-canonical status fits in with a range of critical discourses of the middlebrow, both modern and contemporary. Like most writers, however, he inevitably puts his own stamp on the term ‘middlebrow’. But how middlebrow is Wodehouse, and how far does he subscribe to a middlebrow aesthetic? As Erica Brown and Mary Grover have recently reasserted, the middlebrow remains notoriously hard to define, and is more often than not approached purely in contrast to its avant-garde contemporaries (Brown and Grover 1–21). Despite the efforts of a whole range of recent critical studies, ‘middlebrow’ largely remains ‘a pejorative label, its dismissive effect designed to credit its users with superior powers of discrimination’ (Brown and Grover 1–2). The purpose of this essay is not to pin such a pejorative label on Wodehouse’s writing. Rather than take the term ‘middlebrow’ for granted, it will investigate precisely what qualities of Wodehouse’s writing can be termed middlebrow and why Wodehouse’s particular brand of the middlebrow can be seen as closely linked with J. B. Priestley’s original defence of the middlebrow – or ‘Broadbrow’ – as ‘an

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inclusive stance’, a ‘happy medium’ (Pollentier 46), part of a long tradition of such writing reaching back as far as Shakespeare. Like Priestley, the early champion of the middlebrow, Wodehouse reclaimed Shakespeare as a popular writer whom Robert Scholes has boldly identified as an early practitioner of ‘durable fluff’ (Scholes 144).

One of the core distinctions made between ‘literary’ and ‘middlebrow’ writers is that between the writer-as-artist and the writer-as-craftsman. The distinction between these two understandings of literary production largely hinges on the question of audiences and expectations: problematic though Bourdieu’s theorizing of middlebrow culture may be, his definition of middlebrow works of art as ‘entirely defined by their public’ (Bourdieu 125) holds at least a grain of truth. It is of course naive to assume that the writer-as-artist cares only about his or her own aesthetic practice and is contemptuous of attracting a wider readership. The desperate struggle on the part of many modernist writers to find such an audience and make a living disproves such notions of exclusivity, and conversely, ‘middlebrow’ writers can be highly reflective of their literary practice. However, it seems fair to argue that there is a difference between the two opposing poles of artistry and craftsmanship in terms of how these two elements are weighted and that middlebrow writers place far greater emphasis on meeting audience expectations.

Wodehouse in particular felt that it was a fundamental part of the ethos of the professional writer not to startle and challenge one’s readers, but to satisfy expectations once raised by maintaining a consistency of style and approach without, however, succumbing to tedious predictability. In Wodehouse’s opinion, ‘professional’ writing is first and foremost readable, pleasurable, and free from any moralizing or aim to challenge or educate readers. Although Wodehouse’s writing does not tally with what Bourdieu has described as *l’art moyen*, it can usefully be described with reference to Bourdieu’s different fields of cultural production, in that Wodehouse borrows freely from a whole range of both high and low cultural sources, all the while situating himself freely and unashamedly in the commercial mass market as an example of the ‘ordinary novelist, the straightforward, horny-handed dealer in narrative, who is perfectly content to turn out his two books a year’ (‘The Super-Novelist’ 49) – in short, a

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craftsman who is through Wodehouse’s very use of language linked to the physical exertion and productive handiwork associated with hard-working average citizens rather than the moneyed intelligentsia.

It is in the nature of Wodehouse’s demonstratively practical rather than intellectual approach to writing that his literary aesthetic was never articulated in the form of a manifesto or critical essay. In his defiance of highbrowism that occasionally borders on anti-intellectualism, Wodehouse is in many ways a perfect illustration of Nicola Humble’s concept of the camp middlebrow (*Middlebrow Literary Cultures* 220), with its refusal to take itself and the world around it seriously while still delivering what readers want to see. Where Priestley addressed the debate over the cultural validity of middlebrow writing in articles and broadcasts as well as fiction, Wodehouse does not get involved in public debates beyond the occasional flippant article in a popular magazine, and restricts his comments to comic portrayals of both highbrow writers and lowbrow readers. However, looking at his mostly casual but ample comments on writing, audiences and the creative process in letters, articles, fiction and non-fiction, it quickly becomes apparent that Wodehouse’s approach to literature was characterized by a sense of democracy in culture, and shaped by his middle-class background. Wodehouse began his career equipped with an excellent secondary education from Dulwich College, but was denied a university education on financial grounds. Negative evaluations of middlebrow writing ascribe to it a strong aspirational element, an air of pretence, of striving to be high culture and yet failing to deliver literary and aesthetic excellence. Having experienced, like many ‘middlebrow’ writers, the life of an unwilling clerk, Wodehouse’s main aspiration was not to be a ‘literary’ writer, but to make a living by his pen in a manner that he saw as both lucrative and enjoyable. As such, Wodehouse had no compunction about turning out what would sell, albeit with a keen eye on what he perceived as quality writing. Despite his lack of overt engagement in critical debates about authorship, Wodehouse shows a high degree of self-reflexivity on writing processes and the writer’s profession characteristic of middlebrow texts. As Brown and Grover note, ‘if there is one trope which pervades writing labelled middlebrow it is the representation of the act of writing itself’ (15). This

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reflects Wodehouse’s identity as a reader for pleasure as well as a writer: as we will see below, authorship and particularly a sense of craftsmanship are inscribed deeply in Wodehouse’s writing.

Wodehouse’s professional aesthetic, then, is based on three main tenets, all of which can be classed as middlebrow in one sense or another:

1. It assumes a position in-between highbrow intellectualism (negatively characterized as impenetrable and elitist) and affectionately derided popular forms (ridiculed as overly contrived and predictable).
2. It emphasizes the importance of readability, including the belief that reading pleasure can be repetitive and repeated without detriment to quality.
3. It refuses to take itself and the process and profession of writing entirely seriously, and is suspicious of ‘literary’ writers on the grounds of their perceived unmitigated seriousness about their own output.

Wodehouse, especially during the early decades of his career, was writing in a climate in which the literary celebrity had become a common phenomenon. Popular and ‘middlebrow’ writers of various calibres, such as Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy, Marie Corelli, W.J. Locke, E. Phillips Oppenheim, Baroness Orczy or Edgar Wallace, were well known to vast audiences, not simply for their books, but through interviews and feature articles in popular papers and magazines (Bloom 181). The prospect of joining the ranks of such successful writers must have seemed eminently desirable to an aspiring young author like Wodehouse who, due to constraints upon his parents’ finances, found himself unable to attend university upon leaving school and had to rely on commercial success as a writer to escape from a monotonous existence as a lowly bank clerk. In comparison, the life of a perpetually cash-strapped avant-garde artist was less appealing to a young writer dependent on his pen, who had been raised not only on the classics, but also on popular Victorian novels and magazine fare. Besides studying Latin and Greek for university scholarship exams that he would never sit, the young Wodehouse read and enjoyed Shakespeare’s plays and Thackeray’s novels and was familiar with magazines such as the *Captain*,

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*Pearson’s Weekly*, *Tit-Bits* and the *Strand* – as evidenced in his early letters – cementing his enjoyment of competently written, entertaining prose. As Sophie Ratcliffe notes in her recent edited volume of Wodehouse’s letters, Wodehouse is one of those twentieth-century writers who, having experienced their fair share of modern upheaval and displacement in the wake of two world wars, ‘may have eschewed the techniques of modernism, but [...] still provide stylistic paths through the same insecurity that the modernists exposed’ (4). Whereas formal experimentation and fragmentation served this purpose for the modernists, Wodehouse tackles the vagaries of the modern experience by moulding together old and new, the popular and the intellectually challenging in a satirical mix that treats the fears and insecurities of modern life lightly.

### **Wodehouse and the Academy**

A recurring question in biographies and memorial volumes on Wodehouse is why there is so little serious criticism to counterbalance the enthusiastic eulogies of his admirers. Laura Mooneyham explains Wodehouse’s extra-canonical status by pointing to the fact that Wodehouse’s writing, both comic and popular, is diametrically opposed to the tenets of literary modernism that have come to inform academic critical practice. Mooneyham identifies a whole range of aspects in which Wodehouse’s writing runs counter to modernist ideas of what literature should be, such as his resolute indifference to notions of originality and innovation beyond a playful engagement with literary models; his extreme attachment to well-crafted, intricate plots and consequent rejection of ‘plotless’ fiction; and his belief in readability and closure as opposed to the fragmentation and openness that characterize so many modernist novels and short stories (Mooneyham 119–21). Wodehouse’s work can also be seen as defying serious treatment through its own refusal to take anything seriously, including itself, and by aiming explicitly for popular and not critical success. As Mooneyham observes, Wodehouse himself was the first to ‘[accept] his chosen conventionality’ and indeed to defiantly posit himself against serious critical appreciation (122). With characteristic hyperbole, Wodehouse diagnosed the underappreciated status of the comic writer more than once, such as in his 1966 ‘Note on Humour’:

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Humorists are often rather gloomy men, and what makes them so is the sense they have of being apart from the herd, of being, as one might say, the eczema on the body politic. They are looked down on by the intelligentsia, patronized by the critics and generally regarded as outside the pale of literature. People are very serious today, and the writer who does not take them seriously is viewed with concern and suspicion. (‘A Note on Humour’ 316)

Albeit tongue-in-cheek, Wodehouse here perceptively addresses his own lack of canonicity and links it to the low reputation of comedy as a genre in a manner similar to Mooneyham’s.

### **Critical Reception**

Literary critics appear to like Wodehouse despite the fact that they for the most part fail to dedicate serious research to him. His main selling points are his grasp of language and rendering of a variety of idioms, his literateness, and his deft use of generic conventions. In all respects, Wodehouse shows a keen awareness of the literary and critical scene(s) around him and uses calculated irreverence towards canonical authors and their critics to position himself on the fringes of highbrow culture and at the same time to reject its elitism. Wodehouse engages with high as well as popular culture sufficiently to appeal to the widest possible range of tastes, offsetting his exuberant ‘popular’ plots with a dose of high-cultural references. Between 1910 and the Wodehouse centenary in 1981, the *Times Literary Supplement* alone published in excess of 50 reviews of Wodehouse’s books, which at times express regret over a slight lapse in originality and verve, but time and again praise new peaks of Wodehouse’s comic talent and particularly his enduring stylistic prowess. H.O. Lee noted the comic potential of the ‘idealized music-hall English’ and ‘gift of heavenly jargon’ evidenced in *Damsel in Distress* as far back as 1919 (Lee 590), and other reviewers continued in the same vein, from Maurice Richardson’s verdict that ‘his similes are vivid and telling, while the use of literary *clichés* and mixed metaphors to secure comic effects is as adroit as ever’ (Richardson 449), to Richard Usborne’s praise of Wodehouse’s ‘Bertie’s burble’ prose as ‘always, and still, a wonder and a joy’ (Usborne [‘Fair-Weather England’] 1455). A number of scholars, first and foremost Inge Leimberg and Laura Mooneyham White, have also noted this most conspicuous quality of

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Wodehouse's style, coupled with his use of literary allusion and pastiche. Indeed, his use of a variety of different idioms can be seen as Wodehouse's one area of innovation and variation, in that he is constantly moulding his language, similes and register to the subject matter he is addressing, from golfing to romance and from crossword puzzles to fishing.

Wodehouse's literateness is similarly an aspect of his writing that has been noted by a range of critics and reviewers, who focus primarily on his affectionate irreverence towards the canonized great, first and foremost Shakespeare. Indeed, one of the most noticeable features of Wodehouse's fiction is its remarkable intertextuality, both in terms of reusing his own material in new guises and in its comic use of literary allusion. Ratcliffe and others observe how widely and variedly Wodehouse read, from popular detective fiction to Balzac and Austen (Ratcliffe 5). His reading finds expression in innumerable comic uses of literary (mis)quotation, embedded in the text or as part of his characters' dialogue. At the same time, Wodehouse also freely borrows from and refers to popular cultural products, from pulp fiction to musical theatre and film, drawing on his own extensive knowledge of the commercial entertainment market as a writer of magazine fiction, musical lyricist and erstwhile Hollywood scriptwriter.

John Hayward, praising 'the inimitable verbal wit, the grotesquely distorted literary echoes and the pure fantasy of simile and metaphor that are Mr. Wodehouse's chief claim to literary distinction', claims that 'it would be easy to show how almost every single novel of his contains passages that prove, explicitly or implicitly, his familiarity with the work not only of Shakespeare but of a large number of the best English writers from Chaucer onwards' (Hayward 29). While Wodehouse was certainly a prolific reader as well as writer, with a solid education in the classics and a lifelong enjoyment of Shakespeare's work, he himself freely tells us that not all his literary allusions stem from the inexhaustible store of his literary memory. In his semi-autobiography 'with digressions', *Over Seventy*, Wodehouse enthusiastically praises the usefulness of 'Bartlett's book of *Familiar Quotations*, that indispensable adjunct to literary success', claiming in his characteristic self-deprecating manner, 'I am not very bright and find it hard to think up anything really clever off my own bat, but give me my Bartlett and I will slay you' (*Over*



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*Seventy* 39). Despite this demonstrative modesty, Wodehouse’s skilful use of literary allusion is the best proof of his knowledge beyond Bartlett, without which a mere dictionary of quotations would have been of very limited benefit. Ratcliffe’s edited letters show us a Wodehouse who capably argues with his novelist friend Denis Mackail over a reference to Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ in Wodehouse’s *The Old Reliable* (1951) which Mackail had flagged up as flawed, establishing at last that they were looking at different versions of the poem (Ratcliffe 442–3). He can also be seen to mockingly upbraid his biographer, Richard Osborne, for his failure to recognize a quotation as originating from Robert Browning’s poem ‘Incident of the French Camp’, although he himself admittedly misremembers the poem’s title (Ratcliffe 488).

Whether or not the plentiful ‘allusion, imitation, rewriting, parody and quotation’ (Säckel 137) that characterize Wodehouse’s work are the result of private study or intelligent gleaning, their effect is crucial to Wodehouse’s success. His multiform use of literary models, from classical literature to contemporary fiction, marks his writing as intelligent humour beyond mere slapstick and situation comedy. Wodehouse not only shows a degree of reliance on his readers’ knowledge of key canonical as well as popular texts (Säckel 140), but also appeals to more educated readers by allowing them the gratification of recognizing these passages. His casual use of high-cultural references is a fundamental part of what can be called Wodehouse’s specifically middlebrow aesthetic, in that he assumes readers’ familiarity with both popular and canonical writing, yet refuses to treat it either reverentially or disdainfully. As Scholes suggests,

P.G. Wodehouse assumes that his readers share Jeeves’s knowledge [of Shakespeare] rather than Bertie’s ignorance. [...] This is a Light Modernism that insists on its connection with the canonical masters of English literature, and it has been written for an audience that knows the work of those masters and can appreciate the various montages, pastiches, and outright mis-appropriations of the elder writers by the authors and characters of these modern texts. (Scholes 183)

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Shakespeare’s tragic heroes are invoked as regular means of comparison, such as in Wodehouse’s description of one of his temporarily jilted golfing lovers, ‘I should now reveal that he was as fiercely jealous a man as ever swung an aluminium putter. Othello might have had a slight edge on him in that respect, but it would have been a very near thing’ (‘Feet of Clay’ 85).

Wodehouse not only leans heavily on Shakespeare in terms of echoing and adapting the playwright’s work for his own comic purposes, he also ‘rereads the bard’s “high brow” works as popular entertainment in their own time’ (Säckel 143) and aligns himself with Shakespeare as a hard-pressed professional writer at the mercy of editors, theatre managers and deadlines (*Over Seventy* 60). Transferring his own experience of writing for the stage onto Shakespeare, Wodehouse effectively declares him a fellow middlebrow, and a writer who, as Scholes puts it, ‘had once been regarded as satisfying a thirst for outrageous stimulation’ (Scholes 30), practising a similar mixing of high and low culture in his own time. Indeed, Wodehouse’s use of popular and highbrow material not only constitutes a perfect example of the ‘middle road’ advocated by Priestley, but is also not dissimilar to Shakespeare’s experimentation with different dramatic forms and his eclectic use of the classics, historical writing, folklore and a variety of other literary sources.

Besides Shakespeare, Wodehouse’s fiction also shows ample leanings on a variety of other canonical writers, including such an eclectic selection as Henry James, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Burns, W.H. Auden and Gustave Flaubert.<sup>1</sup> Even Rabindranath Tagore makes an appearance in Wodehouse’s fiction, when a young writer proposes to give up his lucrative popular mystery thrillers in order to follow his poetic muse and stresses the merits of an inexpensive vegetarian diet to his concerned family by pointing to the frugal habits of the Nobel prize-winning Bengali poet (‘Rodney has a Relapse’ 141).

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance M.R. Davis Wernsman’s reading of Wodehouse’s short story ‘Honeysuckle Cottage’ as a tribute to the work of James in ‘The Figure in the Carpet of “Honeysuckle Cottage”: P.G. Wodehouse and Henry James’, *Henry James Review*, 26: 1 (2005), pp. 99–104.

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The comic romance and adventure plots Wodehouse adapts for his work also work, however, on a less intellectual level. Recognition of famous literary allusions and misquotations heightens enjoyment of Wodehouse’s artifice, but failure to detect them does not prevent a reader’s following the plot or deriving enjoyment from the characters’ trials and tribulations. This is guaranteed partly through ample doses of situation comedy, the importance of which Wodehouse himself stressed when commenting at length on the importance of ‘scenes’. In letters to his writer-friend William Townend, Wodehouse emphasized this point repeatedly (and repetitively), writing in 1923, ‘The more I write, the more I am convinced that the only way to write a popular story is to split it up into scenes, and have as little stuff between the scenes as possible’ (*Performing Flea* 19–20).<sup>2</sup> By ‘stuff’, Wodehouse was presumably referring to passages of moralizing – the ‘orgy of didactic utterance’ for which he chastises Wells and Bennett in his 1919 *Vanity Fair* article titled ‘The Super-Novelists: Suggestions for a League for the Restraint of Popular Authors’ (‘The Super-Novelists’ 49) – as well as lengthy passages of description and characterization, which he tends to condense into short, witty paragraphs.

Time and again, commentators and critics also stress Wodehouse’s professionalism. Introducing *Performing Flea*, a volume of (heavily edited) letters from Wodehouse to him, William Townend noted his friend’s skill as a professional writer, not shying away from making the same distinction between writer-as-artist and writer-as-craftsman that Wodehouse himself frequently made:

Almost from the very beginning he knew his job. As Peter Quennell wrote of him a year or two ago: “Though not one non-literary reader in a thousand will lift his eyes from the page to consider Wodehouse as an artist, a fellow-hack cannot fail to admire the extraordinary skill with which, judged by professional literary standards, he goes about his business. Every sentence has a job to do and [...] does it neatly and efficiently. Bertie Wooster may live in a perpetual haze, but P.G. Wodehouse knows at any moment of the story exactly what he is aiming for”. (*PF* 9–10)

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<sup>2</sup> He repeats this sentiment in 1929, ‘The longer I write, the more I realise the necessity for telling a story as far as possible in *scenes*, especially at the start’ (*PF* 48).

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Taking a closer look at this evaluation of Wodehouse’s craftsmanship, it is striking how Quennell unashamedly refers to both himself and Wodehouse as ‘hacks’ working to ‘professional literary standards’ which are implicitly contrasted with a less ‘efficient’ and ‘neat’ (but presumably more ‘artistic’) way of writing that is less sure of its aims and methods. Craftsmanship is thus clearly linked to marketable ‘skill’ rather than a romanticized concept of authorial inspiration, and the writer-as-craftsman aims to produce ‘works that decline the masterpiece gambit and aim at a lower but genuine level of artistic production – the level of craft, as opposed to art, perhaps, or the level of entertainment, as opposed to what I called “representation” in discussing Lukács’ (Scholes 12).

### **A ‘Writer’s Writer’?**

It has often been claimed that Wodehouse is a ‘writer’s writer’, but this claim has to be qualified. If he is a writer’s writer, he is one primarily for writers who regard themselves as craftsmen in the sense outlined above. As one reviewer observes, ‘Not a Kafka or a Sartre but a different kind of writer’s writer, Wodehouse plays on a fine appreciation of word play, making him for many [...] “a lord of language”’ (Robbins 1435). Wodehouse aims his work at readers who can appreciate its wide range of references and allusions, from popular to canonical, in a manner reminiscent of Priestley’s definition of the ‘Broadbrow’ as a reader (and writer) whose tastes are eclectic and who judges each cultural product placed before them on its own merits (Pollentier 45). A remarkable number of novelists and poets are portrayed in Wodehouse’s work; indeed, ‘in the whole Wodehouse corpus there is no profession, not even that of gentleman of leisure, which bulks so large as the author’s own’ (Willett [‘Profession of Letters’] 958). The same is true of the publishing industry, represented by Wodehouse’s fictional publishing magnate, Lord Tilbury, and various other publishers and magazine editors, and of the practice of reviewing and endorsing other writers’ books.

However, Wodehouse is critical of his fellow writers as a writing professional, not as an artist, offering many witty insights into writing and publishing practice and the practical concerns even ‘literary’ writers are subject to, but with a limited understanding of a writerly agenda other than his own. This may

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be why most of Wodehouse’s ‘highbrow’ writers – stereotyped as *vers libre* poets and gloom and doom-ridden modern novelists – do not seem to genuinely like what they write. If all writers write in equal measure, not simply because they need to make a living, but first and foremost because they enjoy their writing, as Wodehouse claims in response to Dr Johnson’s dictum that ‘nobody but a blockhead ever wrote except for money’ (*Over Seventy* 73), it must have seemed to him peculiar that anyone might want to produce literature that he saw as bleak and dispiriting. In the ‘Battle of the Brows’, Wodehouse sided with those middlebrow readers who expected their reading to be both edifying and entertaining, and clearly considered the highbrow reader as ‘someone who pretended to like what he did not understand’, and the highbrow writer as a disingenuous kill-joy (Baxendale [‘Priestley and the Highbrows’] 559).

Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* eloquently demonstrates that both modernist, experimental writers and openly business-oriented authors like Wodehouse appreciated the necessity of earning a living and of enjoying the process of writing. Whereas Woolf considers money and space as prerequisites for writing, Wodehouse is ready to embrace writing itself as both the means and the end of obtaining money and space. Commenting on her work on Roger Fry’s biography in her diary entry for 1 May 1939, Woolf portrays its writing as an arduous, exhausting task, not simply because of the time it takes, but because of the nature of the writing – the chore of the biographer as opposed to the artistic work of the novelist:

A bad morning, because I’m dried up about Roger. I’m determined tho’ to plod through & make a good job, not a work of art. Thats the only way. To force myself on – & yes to relax with a [*indecipherable*] fiction: & then a few days in the Cotswolds. But there’s no blinking the fact that it is drudgery & must be; & I must go through with it. (Bell and McNeillie 217)

Woolf here does not mean to imply that all ‘highbrow’ writing is ‘drudgery’ and tantamount to suffering. Rather, by explicitly stating that her biography is intended to be ‘a good job, not a work of art’, she posits it against other, more creative kinds of writing that are not bound by the professional drudgery of producing a biography. Nevertheless, her acceptance of the arduousness of the task indicates an implicit acceptance of writing as a potentially painful and draining process. Wodehouse, on the other hand, is

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perfectly happy to consider all and any of his writing as ‘work’, and although he is similarly aware of the effort involved, it does not prompt him to despair of his artistic integrity:

I now write stories at terrific speed. I’ve started a habit of rushing them through and then working over them very carefully, instead of trying to get the first draft exactly right, and I have just finished the rough draft of an eight thousand word story in two days. It nearly slew me. As a rule, I find a week long enough for a short story, if I have the plot well thought out. (PF 15)

The sense conveyed in this remark, namely that Wodehouse regarded writing as both a profession and something he did ‘for the pleasure of turning out the stuff’, crucially defines his relationship to other writers (PF 123). Like many of his novelist contemporaries, he had no wish to be considered a ‘highbrow’ and was, to speak with John Baxendale, simply ‘applying different criteria of discrimination’ (Baxendale [‘Popular Fiction’] 567) as to what constituted a good novel or short story.

To a large extent Wodehouse’s attitude is a product of his time, in which many middlebrow writers positioned themselves in a similar manner and derided highbrowism as unhealthy and, as A.P. Herbert put it in *Punch* in 1927, ‘incapable of cricket, unacquainted with golf, [and] wholly without patriotism or decent feeling’ (Baxendale [‘Priestley and the Highbrows’] 72). There are strong affinities visible, for instance, between Wodehouse’s comments on ‘highbrowism’ and Priestley’s. Unlike Priestley, he did not become involved in popular debates in the media, but his 1919 *Vanity Fair* article, as well as the various letters considered in this essay, show that he engaged with contemporary literature in a lively manner. Wodehouse is irreverent in both directions, high and low, but more affectionately so towards the lowbrow and towards established classics, suggesting that he is particularly suspicious of the avant-garde and their claims to exclusivity. Generally speaking, Wodehouse offers ample if humorous criticism of other writers across the entire spectrum of ‘brows’. His *Vanity Fair* article on the subject of ‘Super-Novelists’, for instance, criticizes Arnold Bennett and H.G. Wells for moving from readable and pleasantly predictable fiction to what Wodehouse considers didactic ‘tracts’ (‘The Super-Novelists’ 49),

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which offers us a wholly different angle on these writers’ perceived flaws compared to Woolf’s opinion that Bennett’s fiction was ‘shallow, unadventurous and aesthetically outmoded’ (Brown and Grover 5).

### **Wodehouse and the Avant-Garde**

Where he took fellow middlebrow writers like Bennett to task for moralizing, Wodehouse’s relationship to avant-garde writers – the boundaries between modernists, Futurists and Imagists are blurred to him – is characterized by a determined dislike of intellectual pretension and formal experimentation. This is expressed through ample parody of ‘artistic’ writers in Wodehouse’s work, always witty if often inaccurate, or at best extremely reductive. As Willett notes, Wodehouse’s parodies of modern(ist) poetry are not his best, appearing as if he had never really read any. This also holds true for his skewed references to Russian fiction as invariably depressing and lacking a coherent plot (Willett [‘Profession of Letters’] 958) Wodehouse’s rant about footnotes in *Over Seventy*, which takes up the entirety of the foreword to that volume, exemplifies in many respects what he disliked about ‘intellectuals’, namely obscurity, elitism and a lack of understanding for the entertainment value of fiction. In his five-page rant, Wodehouse chastises the users of footnotes for either redundancy or a desire merely ‘to show off the writer’s erudition’ (*Over Seventy* 11) in an argument based almost solely on the negative propensity of such footnotes to disrupt the flow of reading. Although characteristically entertaining, Wodehouse’s criticism here, as elsewhere, appears dangerously close to narrow-minded anti-intellectualism. However, Wodehouse’s sarcasm is levelled at affectation, elitism and what he considers as exaggerated seriousness, rather than scholarly practice or experimental writing as such. As suggested above, Wodehouse’s antagonism to experimental writing appears based primarily on a lack of understanding of, or appreciation for, literature that did not seem to him to be giving anyone any pleasure. Such a view is inextricably linked with his own philosophy of writing, which championed readability, commercial viability and the importance of a well-crafted style. As an avid reader as well as writer, Wodehouse wrote the kind of books he enjoyed and his fiction and plays alike are characterized by a distinct privileging of his readership as the measure of quality. Readability is all, and as Wodehouse himself both read and wrote

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for entertainment rather than to express himself artistically, he evidently found it hard to conceive of the possibility of other approaches.

As Wodehouse advised his friend Townend on numerous occasions, good knowledge of one’s audience and editors was essential to success as a writer:

When you get a plot, examine it carefully and say to yourself: “Is this a popular magazine plot?” If it isn’t, simply don’t attempt to make it a popular magazine story. Just put all you know into it and write it the very best you can and confine its field to the really decent magazines like *Blackwood’s*, the *Cornhill*, etc. (PF 18–19)

His advice to Townend clashes irreconcilably with modernist notions about the aims and process of writing as geared towards a more faithful representation of modern human existence, which Wodehouse would quite possibly have regarded as amateurish and unhelpful. Wodehouse’s ideal story has a densely knit, fast-moving plot and characters that exist primarily to further such a plot. Such a notion could not be further from Woolf’s call in ‘Modern Novels’ (later reworked as ‘Modern Fiction’), ‘Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness’ (‘Modern Novels’ 33–4). Woolf proposes that:

The writer must get in touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to cooperate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one’s eyes shut. (‘Character in Fiction’ 431)

Wodehouse might well have agreed wholeheartedly with the sentiment of this passage, but would have interpreted it in an entirely different manner. Although his characters are far from complex, they are nevertheless instantly recognizable types to readers who are familiar with the world of popular fiction, and appear to them as ‘real’ and relevant as Woolf demands. Wodehouse sees his obligation as not simply to his own artistic and aesthetic integrity (which was inherently pragmatic), but to his readers and editors.



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Wodehouse’s problem – if it can be called this – with modernist fiction is aptly diagnosed by A.C. Ward in his 1924 study of short fiction:

[O]bjection is made against a particular type of contemporary story on the ground that it has no plot and contains no action. When that complaint is made in regard to some specific piece of work, it is often difficult to refute, inasmuch as the due appreciation of all works of art depends upon the sharpness of perception (and in many cases upon the degree of curious interest) brought by the observer. [...] Unless there is approximate harmony between the perceptions of the reader and those of the writer, there is little likelihood of sympathetic apprehension of the artist’s aims. (Ward 17–18)

Taking Ward’s apt diagnosis as our point of departure, it is easy to see that a writer like Wodehouse, who from the earliest stages of his career was keenly aware of the need to write for specific audiences – from the readers of public-school magazines to adult readers interested in light fiction – reacts with mingled annoyance and incomprehension to writers who seem to disregard their readers altogether. While of course avant-garde writers target specific audiences just as much as commercial writers like Wodehouse do, these were often far narrower and their tastes alien to Wodehouse, whose advice to Townsend cited above demonstrates that his point of reference was the educated ‘middlebrow’ reader of fiction magazines such as the *Strand*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, or *Collier’s*. In his short stories and novels alike, Wodehouse’s priority is a fast-moving, entertaining plot, embellished with comic flourishes, rather than the subtle character studies of modernist fiction. If Wodehouse wrote the kind of fiction that he enjoyed most – and his letters as well as his fiction provide ample evidence that he neither enjoyed nor understood experimental writing – it is but a logical consequence that he suspected intellectual writers of disingenuousness. Given half a chance to abandon the unhealthy life of avant-garde salons and obscure poetry, Wodehouse suggests, most ‘highbrows’, like the notorious avant-garde poet Rodney Spelvin in *The Heart of a Goof*, will gladly seize the opportunity to be redeemed by golf and/or a sensible woman of a thoroughly unintellectual mindset:

“I am thirty-three years old”, continued Rodney, “and for fourteen of those thirty-three years I have been writing poetry – aye, and novels with a poignant sex-appeal, and if ever

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I gave a thought to this divine game it was but to sneer at it. But last summer I saw the light”. (‘The Purification of Rodney Spelvin’ 245)

That Wodehouse himself enjoyed his writing is visible not just from his letters to friends and family, but the praise from critics and reviewers. Willett is not the only one to point out his sense that even Wodehouse’s prefaces ‘are written by someone obviously enjoying himself’ (Willett [‘Much Obligated’] 1305). To Wodehouse, the antithesis of the humorist or writer of ‘light fiction’ is the one who writes ‘thoughtful novels analysing social conditions’ (*Over Seventy* 82). Predictably, Wodehouse had no great liking for the modernist kind of short story that required the reader to fill in gaps in the narrative, which becomes clear in his casual remark about the short fiction of American writer John O’Hara, whose collection *Pipe Night* (1945) prompted him to comment: ‘What curious stuff the modern American short story is. The reader has to do all the work. The writer just shoves down something that seems to have no meaning whatever, and it is up to you to puzzle out what is between the lines’ (*PF* 142). Nor does Wodehouse reserve his criticism for specifically modernist writing. While his dislike for what he saw as the intellectual pretension of highbrow writing remains, the targets of his parodist snipes change over time with changes in literary fashion. Following the wane of literary modernism, subsequent literary ‘schools’ are equally subjected to mocking treatment in Wodehouse’s fiction. In 1966, for instance, the Angry Young Men are the topic of a conversation between Jeeves and Wooster and a good example of how Wodehouse continually updates even his ostensibly timeless serial stories (‘Jeeves and the Greasy Bird’ 11). Disparate though these two schools of writing are, it is possible for Wodehouse to object to both modernists and Angry Young Men because the basis of his disapproval is not one particular style of writing, but the aura of exaggerated seriousness surrounding ‘highbrow’ writing. With reference to modernism in particular, Wodehouse criticizes what he perceives to be a cult of obscurity meant to exclude rather than include readers, and the peculiarities of the modernist literary scene pertaining, for instance, to modes of publication. An example of this latter point can be found in Wodehouse’s earlier short story ‘Came the Dawn’ (1927), in which a young man with avant-gardist poetic pretensions presents

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his rich uncle, owner of a pickle factory, with his startling modernist composition, ‘Darkling: A Threnody’, to be used as advertising copy. The uncle’s reaction is first one of bemusement, then outrage, and he has the offending nephew removed by his butler (‘Came the Dawn’ 102–3).

The young poet’s tastes in ‘Came the Dawn’ mock particularly the trend for small print-runs and deluxe editions that Lawrence Rainey, among others, has identified as an avant-garde marketing strategy in its own right, one which exposes highbrow disdain for commercial writers as somewhat hypocritical (Rainey 42–76). It also picks up on what Wodehouse clearly regarded as a sad lack of awareness of popular tastes in literature. In the end, the deluded young poet, Lancelot, is saved from mishap (and further attempts at modernist poetry) by the offer to become a film star in Hollywood, which he gladly accepts, having been thoroughly disillusioned by the equally frigid reception given to both his poetry and his proposal of marriage by the object of his affections. This narrative solution conveys Wodehouse’s suspicion that highbrow writing pleases nobody, not even those who produce it, and suggests that only the popular marketplace offers an economically viable and successful existence to aspiring writers and artists. Similarly, the poet Rodney Spelvin – one of the recurring characters in Wodehouse’s golfing stories – is ultimately saved from the gloomy and penniless existence of an avant-garde poet by ‘golf and the love of a good woman’ (‘Rodney has a Relapse’ 132). Rodney gives up producing ‘a slim volume of verse bound in squashy mauve leather at the drop of a hat’ (131) in order to support his wife and child by writing far more lucrative mystery thrillers. Such instances of highbrow writers being ‘cured’ also attracted the notice of reviewers: Willett speaks of a character in *Plum Pie* as ‘another skilled professional who has learnt the error of attempting to be too highbrow’ and diagnoses Wodehouse as admiring in a writer a ‘kind of unpretentious competence’ (Willett [‘Profession of Letters’] 958), the quintessential writer-as-craftsman advocated by middlebrow professionals such as Priestley. As suggested above, these instances of humorous criticism seem to suggest that, although he is toeing the line of anti-intellectualism, what Wodehouse really quarrelled with was exaggerated seriousness and intellectual pretension: ‘If

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Wodehouse really disliked anybody it was probably, as Usborne says in *Wodehouse at Work*, the phony and pretentious literary man’ (Garrard 49).

### **Wodehouse and Popular Culture**

However much there is to say about Wodehouse’s quarrel with avant-garde culture, it is but one side of the story, as Wodehouse also engaged closely and continually with popular fiction, in particular the romance and mystery genres. Garrard observes how

It was said of him that “he had read more books not worth reading than any man in England”: of course, he knew the classics as well, but the lower strata of literature – most notably the “woman’s romance” (no longer called the “shopgirl’s novel”) and the thriller obviously fascinated him, and they and their producers make glorious appearances in many of his books. (Garrard 49)

Whereas Woolf and other modernist writers opted for radical formal and structural experimentation, the exploration of new topics and new ways of representing consciousness in order to distance themselves from mainstream fiction, Wodehouse was less radical in his approach. His critique of mainstream, popular writing addresses such texts on their own terms, working within genre conventions only to parody them on the level of plot and dialogue. He shows himself as critical of popular literature and culture as of avant-garde writing, despite the fact that he uses and adapts popular forms throughout his work. This play with the conventional is closely connected to his parody of elite literature in terms of literary positioning. If he mocks Bloomsbury in his fiction and letters, he also mocks and satirizes clichés of popular or pulp fiction. A passage from Wodehouse’s short story ‘Rodney Fails to Qualify’ encapsulates beautifully the commonplaces of popular romance, when an impressionable young girl launches into what is clearly an almost word-for-word rendition of her favourite novel’s erotic gushing, only to unconsciously collapse the melodramatic sentiment of the book by a banal allusion to her mother’s rheumatic ailment:

She gazed yearningly at the chandelier.

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“I wish mother would take me to Algiers next winter’, she murmured, absently. ‘It would do her rheumatism so much good’. (‘Rodney Fails to Qualify’ 170–71)

The same technique of comic deflation is used by Wodehouse time and again, such as in the short story ‘The Truth about George’, in which former stammerer George Mulliner is cured of his speech impediment and united with the crossword puzzle-loving girl of his dreams in a festival of purple prose, but has to temporarily leave her after his passionate declaration of love to hide from a vengeful mob in her basement: “I will follow you to the ends of the earth”, replied Susan, passionately. “It will not be necessary”, said George. “I am only going down to the coal-cellar” (‘The Truth about George’ 30).

Popular writers, especially lowbrow ‘lady novelists’ in the mould of Ethel M. Dell and Ruby M. Ayres, are given short shrift and provide essential protagonists in many of Wodehouse’s stories. Perhaps the best-known and most entertaining parody of popular fiction in Wodehouse’s body of work is his short story ‘Honeysuckle Cottage’ (1925), in which a deceased romantic novelist affects the hard-boiled detective fiction of her nephew from beyond the grave, described by Wodehouse himself at the time of writing in 1924 as ‘the damnedest funniest idea I’ve ever had’ (Ratcliffe 168).

From Rosie M. Banks, popular writer of magazine romance and wife of one of Wodehouse’s recurring Drones Club characters, Bingo Little, to Leila Yorke, the benevolent and best-selling romantic novelist of Wodehouse’s 1961 novel *Ice in the Bedroom*, sentimental female novelists make frequent and regular appearances. Like Wodehouse’s avant-garde poets, Leila Yorke herself doubts the quality of her writing, which she readily recognizes as ‘too sweet for words’ (*Ice in the Bedroom* 37). At the same time, Leila resents the snide criticism of intellectually minded reviewers and has decided to write ‘[w]hat some call an important novel, and others significant’, a goal she feels is easily achievable, echoing Wodehouse’s own view on modern experimental fiction: ‘All you have to do is cut out the plot and shove in plenty of misery’ (*Ice in the Bedroom* 38, 39). Where highbrow novelists and poets are frequently cured, in Wodehouse’s *œuvre*, of their elitist ways, Leila’s intentions of changing tack and writing intellectual fiction are never ultimately carried out. Leila is deterred from her plans both by the (rather

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disdainfully highbrow) 'vision of all those thousands of half-witted women waiting with their tongues out for their next ration of predigested pap from my pen', feeling it would be 'cruel to disappoint them', and also by the thought of what a 'ghastly sweat' it would be to produce 600 pages of gritty social critique, explaining that 'the first lesson an author must learn is to make things as easy for himself as possible' (*Ice in the Bedroom* 157). In what can be regarded as the quintessential middlebrow turn, Wodehouse via Leila Yorke rejects both the 'predigested' lowbrow approach that takes literary formulas to their extreme, and what he sees as highbrow seriousness bereft of entertainment value, in favour of Priestley's 'middle road'.

Yorke's statement that 'the first lesson an author must learn is to make things as easy for himself as possible' betrays the voice of a middlebrow professional who – like Wodehouse – is committed to a high quality of writing and constantly reflects on her own creative practice, but is equally not averse to recycling good material and sticking to a winning formula. It is significant in this sense that Wodehouse portrays Leila Yorke as a sensible and down-to-earth lady of middle age with an infallible business instinct, rather than an air-headed sylph. While Wodehouse may happily parody popular romance in his turn, his sympathies are nevertheless on the side of the Leila Yorkes of this world, rather than on that of the disdainful critics. Although Wodehouse rarely takes his own romance plots seriously, and although dismissive references to female sentimental novelists abound in his work, he nevertheless acknowledges the centrality of romance formulas to the success of popular fiction. The plot of almost every single Wodehouse novel and short story revolves around the surmounting of varying obstacles in the way of love. His success lies in the tongue-in-cheek manner in which he delivers popular romance plots, yet simultaneously points to their formulaic nature by using unusual twists and comparisons, exaggerated parodist language and overt references to well-known tropes and formulas. 'It's curious about Freddie,' observes one of Wodehouse's Drones about his recurring romantic anti-hero, Freddie Widgeon, whose manifold romances invariably end in disaster. 'He rarely fails to click, but he never seems able to go on clicking. A whale at the Boy Meets Girl stuff, he is unfortunately equally unerring at the Boy Loses Girl'

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('Bramley is so Bracing' 38–9). In perpetually depriving characters like Freddie of their happy ending, Wodehouse adapts popular sentiment to the needs of the intelligent comedian.

Even beyond the romance genre, Wodehouse's characters habitually and self-consciously emulate well-known tropes and figures from popular fiction. Throughout many of his stories, popular mystery and spy thriller writer E. Phillips Oppenheim looms large, referenced and alluded to repeatedly by Wodehouse's narrators and characters, and quoted as a byword for unlikely but convenient explanations, as for instance by the abovementioned Freddie Widgeon in a bid to explain away the suspicious appearance of a blonde girl in his company ('Bramley is so Bracing' 44–5).

Even though the mature Wodehouse jokingly declared that in his early days as a popular magazine writer he simply produced 'the kind of thing the magazines liked' (*Over Seventy* 24), he is aware of the limitations and pitfalls of being a popular magazine writer. Revisiting his early years as an aspiring writer, Wodehouse recalls attempting to mould his stories to what he considered to be desirable magazine fare, which resulted in 'mushy sentiment' rather than the humorous stories that subsequently made his name (*Over Seventy* 22). While obtuseness and intellectual pretension are his primary objections to much 'literary' writing, Wodehouse's main points of attack on popular and pulp writing are exaggerated sentiment and tedious predictability. Instead of simply chastising popular writers for their trade, however, Wodehouse opts for a more constructive critique: on the one hand, he subverts genre formulas and stock-in-trades by putting his own twist on them, and on the other, he imbues his narrators and characters with a literary self-consciousness as products of popular fiction, with a noticeable tendency to compare their own predicaments to fictional models in the thriller and romance tradition.

### **Audiences, Self-Image and Literary Positioning**

Wodehouse's borrowing and critiquing of highbrow and lowbrow elements results in a wide appeal that gratifies readers with knowledge of both fields, effectively addressing an idealized middlebrow audience of eclectic taste, who have forayed into the world of popular entertainment as well as that of high culture. By offering humorous commentary on both literary and commercial writing, Wodehouse's fiction can

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best be understood by readers with some knowledge of both fields and their cultural tropes, features and prejudices, but will still appeal to readers firmly rooted within just one or the other. This quality of Wodehouse’s writing places him squarely in the context of a sophisticated but pleasure-seeking middlebrow culture, which Catherine Keyser has aptly defined as characterized by ‘the ability to appreciate high art, the self-confidence to make fun of it, and the reflective ability to see oneself as others might’ (Keyser [‘Robert Benchley and Dorothy Parker’] 132).

Despite the fact that Wodehouse never attended university, students at Oxford and Cambridge, during the first half of the twentieth century at least, viewed him as a ‘cult’ author. Letty Grierson, who was present at the conferral of Wodehouse’s honorary doctorate at Oxford in 1939, describes the ‘Wodehouse cult in the English Universities’, with undergraduates ‘crowded close and [cheering] Wodehouse with respectful hilarity’ on the occasion and the ‘jargon, the sheer Wodehouse-ese that all the men I knew at Cambridge used’ (Grierson 31–2). Similarly, Wodehouse’s American biographer and compiler of a bibliography of his first editions records how he discovered, after having published a column on Wodehouse in his college newspaper, that ‘many fellow students, teachers, and administrators were fans of his and that Wodehouse wasn’t my private preserve after all’ (Jasen 1981, 34).

However, Wodehouse’s popularity was, and is, not restricted to a university context. Jokingly trying to assess his audience impact, Wodehouse points to his success with juvenile audiences, noting with delight the theft of 36 of his own books from a public-school library, as opposed to only ‘five John Buchans, seven Agatha Christies and twelve Edgar Wallaces’ (*Over Seventy* 63–4). Albeit in a joking manner, Wodehouse’s choice of this story as an indicator of his popularity reveals much about his idea of an ideal audience. His delight at being loved by schoolboys is characteristic of the kind of readership Wodehouse preferred: pleasure-seeking readers who will not tolerate any reading material that does not satisfy their craving for humour and entertainment.

This raises the question of where all this leaves us with regard to Wodehouse’s position in the ‘Battle of the Brows’. His *TLS* reviewer, Willett, suspected Wodehouse of deliberately promoting his own



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image as a down-to-earth professional, the ‘bluff journeyman writer who is no highbrow but does an efficient job and is as normal in his tastes and pursuits as the next man’ (Willett [‘Profession of Letters’] 958). Willett’s is perhaps the most apt description of Wodehouse’s positioning within the literary scene and the self-image he promoted both through his fiction and autobiographical writing. Wodehouse was aiming for a middle path between popular, commercial and critical success, rejecting extremes on either end of the scale, with perhaps just a touch of anti-intellectual resentment. By positioning himself at the nexus of highbrow and lowbrow literature, by parodying, adapting and referring to conventions from both literary camps, Wodehouse hit upon the quintessential middlebrow formula. Accessible to a wide range of readers through popular plots, making them palatable to the educated by subverting genre conventions just enough to distance himself from dreary formulas and by displays of what Nowell-Smith calls ‘phraseological pyrotechnics’ (Nowell-Smith 517), Wodehouse continues to appeal to the greatest possible audience. Wodehouse as a reader is also reflected in his own literary creations, with characters who can think of no more relaxing a way to spend their evenings than to ‘curl up on the sofa with a good book’ and a ‘mild gin and tonic’ (‘Stylish Stouts’ 159). Despite Wodehouse’s essentially pragmatic philosophy of writing, he wrote to exacting personal aesthetic standards and with a lively awareness of the literary scene around him. His views on fiction and distrust of experimental writing tally with those of fellow novelist and contemporary Ethel Mannin, who expressed the sentiment that a good book was not one ‘which is dubbed clever simply because it is mainly unintelligible and written in an obscure manner’ (Baxendale [‘Popular Fiction’] 558), but one that captivated the general reader. Like his fictional creation, the popular novelist Leila Yorke who ultimately gives up her ambition to write a gritty realist novel in favour of continuing to produce the light romance her readership loves and expects, Wodehouse always prioritized the expectations of his readers over those of the critics and showed an equally anxious and astute awareness of the readers for whom he was writing. Perhaps this explains why Wodehouse continues to be read with pleasure today, when so many of his equally successful contemporaries have dropped off our radar altogether.

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