

A Response to “‘Across the pale parabola of Joy’: Wodehouse Parodist”*

BARBARA C. BOWEN

This is a thoroughly enjoyable article, which combines interesting information, a plausible general argument, and a keen appreciation of P. G. Wodehouse’s sense of the ridiculous. Leimberg helpfully stresses P. G.’s love of theatre and construction of stories as though they were plays or puppet shows, and discusses parody in a number of novels and short stories.

The most extended analysis is the first, of *A Damsel in Distress* as a parody of Tennyson’s “Maud.” There is one very minor error, on page 58: George had fallen in love with Maud a few minutes before they met, not “long before”; and I’m not entirely convinced that the versifying *Evening News* reporter is meant to be Hilaire Belloc, though P. G. certainly seems to be imitating Belloc’s verse style. But Leimberg’s retelling of the story, and her comments on how the parody works, are excellent, as are the episodes she chooses from “Honeysuckle Cottage” and *Laughing Gas*.

The “pale parabola of Joy” in Leimberg’s title comes from *Leave it to Psmith*, and is the only line P. G. gives us from the poems of Ralston McTodd, whom Psmith is impersonating. Leimberg’s list of nine similarly structured phrases (67) is hilarious, though I wish she had given us the source in all cases (who came up with “The deep larder of illusion”?). There is also new information here about flower-pots (starting with the ones Baxter throws at Lord Emsworth’s window) and P. G.’s fondness for the syllable *ot*. I did know the poem from *Plum Pie* about the printer who printed “not” instead of “now” (and

*Reference: Inge Leimberg, “‘Across the pale parabola of Joy’: Wodehouse Parodist,” *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/2004): 56-76.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the Connotations website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debleimberg01312.htm>>.

was therefore justifiably shot), but was not aware that Philip Sidney and Mark Twain also enjoyed playing with this syllable.

Leimberg's brief characterisation of Galahad Threepwood as "a true Galahad in purpose, but a Punch in execution" (74) is perceptive, and she is no doubt correct in concluding that P. G. abandoned both direct literary parody and sentimentality in the course of the twenties. There is so much to enjoy here that it seems churlish to point out that the article covers only a few aspects of "Wodehouse Parodist."

Certainly P. G. was an accomplished 'dramatist,' but he was also a brilliant linguist who could pastiche, in a paragraph or a few words, an apparently inexhaustible variety of language contexts. The parable of Joy is a charming parody of 'poetic' language, but I still prefer Cora McGuffy Spotsworth's "Hark to the wavelets, plashing on the shore. How they seem to fill one with a sense of the inexpressibly ineffable" ("Feet of Clay"). And listen to P. G. as the emotional French cook:

"All right? *Nom d'un nom d'un nom!* The hell you say it's all right [...] Not yet quite so quick, my old sport [...] It is some very different dishes of fish [...]" (*Right Ho Jeeves*, ch. 20);

the ponderous German psychologist:

"[...] in 65.09 per cent of cases examined it has been established that at this point [the subject] will with clarity and a sudden falling of scales from the eyes the position of affairs re-examine and to the conclusion will come that he is *auge davonkommen*" (*Hot Water*, ch. 17);

the inhabitant of the Kingdom of Oom, where periphrasis is the normal mode of speech: "O thou of unshuffled features but amiable disposition! Thy discourse soundeth good to me" ("The Coming of Gowf"); the crossword expert:

"Oh, George!" said Susan. "Yes, yea, ay, aye! Decidedly, unquestionably, indubitably, incontrovertibly, and past all dispute!" ("The Truth about George");

or the disillusioned tough American (female) private eye: "Guess I'll be beatin' it [...]. F'all th' bunk jobs I was ever on, this is th' bunk-est" (*Piccadilly Jim*, ch. 24).

These are just a few examples of P. G.'s astonishing ear for speech patterns, which presumably encouraged his delightful technique of juxtaposing characters from quite different *milieux* in the same setting; we are apt to meet, in the stately home of England or the country village, or on the ocean liner, upper-class characters varying in age from the young lovers to the irascible aunt or uncle, alongside servants and crooks in disguise, with perhaps the addition of a temperamental prima donna, a Captain of Industry, a policeman and/or a pig. This melding of literary characters and genres, with the lightest possible touch of satire, is another aspect of P. G.'s parody well worth exploring, and I hope that Leimberg has further installments planned.

Vanderbilt University
Nashville, Tennessee