

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

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Leimberg’s study of Wodehouse’s gradual transformation from a writer with loose and tangential ties to realism into a writer with essentially no contact with realism at all is both entertaining and perceptive, full of details to delight the Wodehouse scholar. Using that worthy, Psmith, as an early example, she points out that while in *Psmith Journalist* (1912), real-world concerns such as Bowery violence and poverty intrude, by *Leave it to Psmith* (1923), having joined the world of Blandings, Psmith has “hardly a trace of real life left in him” (56).<sup>1</sup> Leimberg finds specific thus-unheralded moments of parody in early Wodehouse, and while not arguing directly that parody belongs to the less-developed narrative habits of the author, she does argue that extended parody of specific works falls out of Wodehouse’s repertoire fairly early. She is right to do so; the question follows as to why Wodehouse drops the use of sustained parodies of particular works from his bag of tricks.

One key example Leimberg examines in some detail is his use of Tennyson’s *Maud* in the 1919 *A Damsel in Distress*. Now this parodic source is a very odd one, and merits closer examination. Wodehouse certainly lends his authority to this exploration, as Leimberg notes, for the hero, George, makes an explicit connection between “his own position and that of the hero of Tennyson’s *Maud*, a poem to which he has always been particularly addicted” (qtd. in Leimberg 61). But if

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\*Reference: Inge Leimberg, “‘Across the pale parabola of Joy’: Wodehouse Parodist,” *Connotations* 13.1-2 (2003/04): 56-76. See also Barbara C. Bowen, “A Response to “‘Across the pale parabola of Joy’: Wodehouse Parodist,”” *Connotations* 13.3 (2003/04): 271-73, and Inge Leimberg, “An Answer to Barbara C. Bowen,” *Connotations* 13.3 (2003/04): 274-75.

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*Maud* is a “Tennysonian romance” (63), it bears emphasizing that Tennysonian romance of this sort has little in common with the romantic bilge Wodehouse makes fun of throughout his work, as in his evocations of that imaginary author of *Only a Factory Girl*, Rosie M. Banks. In fact, in its narrative, mood, and rhetoric, *Maud* is close to Jacobean tragedy: the speaker, an increasingly unhinged lover, has, by cruel chance, killed Maud’s brother and the poem ends with his passing through a frenzy of madness into the certainty of self-sacrifice, joining the British forces in the Crimean War. Tennyson himself called the poem “a little *Hamlet*” (*Memoir* 1: 396), and the beginning of the poem renders a mood of terror and sexual sublimation of the darkest sort: “I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood, / Its lips in the field above are dabbled with blood-red heath, / The red-ribb’d ridges drip with a silent horror of blood, / And Echo there, whatever is ask’d her, answers Death” (198). The darkness of this work seems strikingly at odds with the Wodehouse world. A similar issue arises relative to the other major site of parody in *A Damsel in Distress*: Leimberg notes that Wodehouse is parodying Tennyson’s “Mariana,” going so far as to enact a Cockney child’s rendition of the first famous lines of the poem: “Wiv blekest morss [...]” (76), to deeply humorous effect. “Mariana,” as we know, is no light romance, either—its Arthurian heroine bemoans her self-imposed seclusion and the fact that her lover, long-gone, never returns to her. The prosody is dense with dark images of decay and sexual loathing, while each stanza ends with a variant of the refrain: “She said, ‘I am aweary, aweary, / I would that I were dead!’” (8).

The question arises: why are these two Tennyson works so prominently at issue as parodic sources in *A Damsel in Distress*? Moreover, can we extend our understanding of Wodehouse’s development in terms of his use of parody by thinking further about these two Victorian chestnuts? Parody, after all, usually marks the original as open to critique. In fact, as parodists like Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll imply, not only is the original work open to ridicule, but also the entire worldview that made its utterance possible is risible. For exam-

ple, Carroll's "You Are Old, Father William" from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* parodies Robert Southey's "The Old Man's Comforts," as it skewers the original work's sentimentality and didacticism. But Carroll's work also attacks the idea of didactic poetry more broadly, the idea that children are to be brought up on (and memorize) verse which inculcates, in this case, the virtue of restraint and self-control. "The Old Man's Comforts" implies, further, that old age is preferable to childhood, an Augustan perspective Carroll could never endorse, and thus Carroll's old man is remade into a child of sorts, an acrobatic performer of nonsense who balances eels on his nose for the fun of it.

So when Wodehouse invokes Tennyson's *Maud* and "Mariana," what are we to think? Wodehouse's later work seems blandly—joyfully—indifferent to the affective register of its source material. References to tragic and weighty material such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear* jostle with the rhetoric of advertising copy, W. A. Henley's adventures for boys, Conan Doyle, and lonely-hearts columnists. For instance, in the 1958 *Cocktail Time*, the first chapter references publishers' blurbs, Longfellow's "Excelsior," weather reports ("a lovely day, all blue skies and ridges of high pressure extending over the greater part of the United Kingdom south of the Shetland Isles" [7]), Carroll's Cheshire Cat, Browning's "Pippa Passes," cheap detective fiction ("he was conscious of a nameless fear" [9]), horseracing ("ears pinned back" [9]), carnival barker slang ("every nut a hat" [10]), Restoration farce ("stap my vitals" [12]), big-game hunting ("tiger on skyline" [12]), Gen. Israel Putnam of Bunker Hill fame ("whites of his eyes" [12]), whaling ("there he spouts" [13]), advertising copy ("say it with thunderbolts" [13]), *Henry V*, *William Tell*, and *Paradise Lost*, among others. The references are so mixed together, so variable, and so de-historicized, and they gush so thickly from one to the other, that most readers waste little time working out the provenance of the constituent elements of the stew and instead simply enjoy the flow.

However, in direct and extended parody, such as that which Leimberg describes, the reader cannot help but pay attention to the original, particularly if it is well-known as *Maud* or "Mariana." Wode-

house's aims are complex, I would suggest. First, he is participating in a game just underway in 1919: making fun of eminent Victorians (Lytton Strachey's vitriolic masterpiece was published, we remember, the year before, in 1918). Here, however, an eminent Victorian is mocked, not for hypocrisy or arrogance (these were the key moral failings Strachey exposed in the likes of Florence Nightingale, Thomas Arnold, and General Gordon), but for writing poems marked by emotional excess, tragic self-involvement, and lurid sexuality. It is not, I think, that Wodehouse feels any particular antipathy to Tennyson's lyricism as such, for Leimberg follows in a long tradition of readers who are right to praise the loveliness of Tennyson's verse. Rather, in these two poems, lyricism is put to the service of decadence. Further, neither *Maud* nor "Mariana" can have a happy ending—emotional desolation rules out romantic resolution, and morbidity reigns. Wodehouse's habitual pairings of multiple happy couples are unthinkable in this affective terrain. Here we might return to the quotation from Wodehouse on his methods with which Leimberg begins her essay:

I believe there are two ways of writing novels. One is mine, making the thing a sort of musical comedy without music, and ignoring real life altogether; the other is going right down into life and not caring a damn. (Qtd. in Leimberg 56)

Tennyson here is perhaps a surprising example of an author who "go[es] right down into life [...] not caring a damn"; the judgment at least can be seen to fit in terms of *Maud* and "Mariana."

Wodehouse deplores this particular mode of Victorian despair, particularly erotic despair. In his plots, happy heterosexual romance must triumph. In *A Damsel in Distress*, Wodehouse will update the archaic patterns of romance. The "damsel" is not rescued from a tower, island or enchanted forest but instead leaps into our hero's taxi—the taxi being, of course, the consummate symbol of modernity's decadent deformations of romance, as is confirmed by its role in *The Waste Land* (1922): "[...] when the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting / I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives [...]"

(ll. 216-18). Wodehouse is willing to bring romance up-to-date in some senses, e.g., employing taxis, but he insists that romance have an affect peculiarly suited for his sort of fiction and stage plays: determinative and fated to win, yet shallow, relatively sexless, and carefree. *Maud* and "Mariana" provide exactly apposite exempla for Wodehouse's purposes.

Ultimately, I believe Wodehouse moved beyond sustained parody into his later habitual stew of parodic references because he must have been aware of the dangers inherent in specific parody: that the reader will become too aware of the affective force of the original. For instance, Wodehouse often quotes from *Hamlet*, but puts his quotations among so many other quotations from so many other sources, high and low, that the reader is in no danger of remembering the emotional and narrative impact of Shakespeare's tragedy. I cannot proffer definitively the number of times that Wodehouse makes use of the following lines from Act I, scene v:

I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part  
And each particular hair to stand on end,  
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine. (ll. 15-20)

However, readers of Wodehouse know that the "fretful porpentine" makes an appearance in almost every novel, usually to garnish the description of a character's shock at being put in one or another ridiculous scrape. How ungainly and inappropriate, then, it would be were readers to dwell on the scene from which the lines come, in which the Ghost of Hamlet's father explains his murder by his own brother and his wife's incestuous complicity. Quotations, Wodehouse came to learn, work best when they fly by unheralded, at great comic speed and height, and in flocks unnumbered.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Psmith joins the pre-pig world of Blandings, for in this work Lord Emsworth is obsessed with roses, and the Empress of Blandings is but a gleam in his eye. Wodehouse aficionados no doubt would have welcomed a scene in which Psmith's beautifully white collars and cuffs meet the Empress's predilection for munching any material close to hand.

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