Reading Wodehouse Seriously (!?)

Daniel Shaviro, NYU Law School
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Why would one do *that*? (i.e., read Wodehouse seriously)

Fair question; first some background.

*High-end* inequality raises distinctive issues, including qualitative, that literature can help to illuminate.

Manuscript presently on offer: *Dangerous Grandiosity: Literary Perspectives on High-End Inequality Through the First Gilded Age*.

Its ground rules included (1) writing about own society (so not, e.g., *Downton Abbey*); (2) realism (or at least elements thereof); (3) great or very good quality (as judged by me).

“We were now striding out in new directions without a map.” (Paul McCartney re. the Beatles’ White Album.)
Dangerous Grandiosity

Perspectives on the “feel” & social meaning of high-end inequality, from 3 periods, 3 works from each.

Part 1: England and France During the Age of Revolution: (1) Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*; (2) Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et Le Noir*; (3) Balzac’s *Le Père Goriot & La Maison Nucingen*.

Part 2: England, 1840s –> Pre-WW I: (1) Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, (2) Trollope’s *The Way We Live Now*; (3) Forster’s *Howards End*.

Part 3, Gilded Age America: (1) Twain/Warner’s *The Gilded Age*; (2) Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*; (3) Dreiser’s *The Financier & The Titan*. 
On to Part 2?

Let’s see what happens with Part 1 first!

And I seem to have issues with the obvious leadoff (*The Great Gatsby*).

Wodehouse – *Right Ho, Jeeves*, possibly with *The Code of the Woosters* – was going to be #2.

May still be that, or a freestanding article (to submit for publication where?), or nothing.
Decline of the rentier! Bertie Wooster is comfortable but not respected.

We see meritocracy (avant la lettre) moving in – respect for intellect, ability, work, judgment, etc.

Also moving in are American millionaires & other self-made business people.

Status inversion: Bertie can’t even pick his own wardrobe when Jeeves dissents.
But what is the period?

Wodehouse’s greatest works are from the 1930s. But he invented his main fictional worlds & characters before 1920.

There’s definitely some 1920s on display – but no Great Depression, & indeed no World War I (which Wodehouse sat out in America).

*Code of the Woosters* does have Roderick Spode – an odious 1930s fascist based directly on Oswald Mosley.

Critics mainly view Wodehouse as Victorian / Edwardian (& note the modern-looking intra-elite issues in Forster’s *Howards End*).

Or, Bertie just an English stage dude for the Americans? As “timeless as … *A Midsummer Night’s Dream & Alice in Wonderland*”? 
(1) “Mr. Wodehouse’s idyllic world can never stale …. He has made a [fantasy] world for us to live in and delight in.”

Agree!

(2) A “world of pristine paradisal innocence … [N]o Fall of Man…. His characters have never tasted the forbidden fruit. They are still in Eden.”

Disagree! (Although it’s true, no sex or sexual desire. Also, abhorrence of adulthood / seriousness; Peter Pannish aversion to growing up.)

(a) Pervasive selfishness, rivalry, exchanges of disdain.

(b) Their world is a delight for us – but not for them! (Like watching vs. being high-strung little Sylvester here.)
Wodehouse vs. Bertie Wooster

Wodehouse: Dickensian setback, no university / bank clerk -> entrepreneurial self-creation through talent & hard work.

Bertie: went to university where he learned nothing & did nothing; luckily he needn’t be able to do anything.

Complex relationship between author & character HAS to (& does) include a bit of (admittedly bemused) envy.

*Right Ho, Jeeves* is the supreme example of a book in which Bertie gets soundly punished (by Jeeves as Wodehouse’s agent) for presumption.
Right Ho, Jeeves

Like all Wooster books, an anti-romance for Bertie (who aims NOT to get married), unless (with Brian Holcombe in Rea, ed., MIDDLEBROW WODEHOUSE) we see Bertie & Jeeves as the always-restored couple.

“Jeeves,” I said, “may I speak frankly … “What I have to say may wound you.”

The episode of the mess jacket … the Scripture knowledge prize … “mentally negligible.”

Bertie overrules, rebukes & lectures Jeeves – pays humiliatingly in the end, & accepts it.

A “feudal” relationship? … “Get uppish & treat the young master as a serf or peon”?
Attack on upper classes? No, but …

Wodehouse is sometimes read by the non-English as ridiculing the rich & (in Blandings Castle novels) the aristocracy.

His work is far too affectionate for that, as well as reliant on non-radical classic comic conventions (from Plautus to Shakespeare to Cervantes to Oscar Wilde), yet –

*Right Ho, Jeeves* is rife with comedy built on anxiety about personal merit, performance, & the earning of respect.

Written by an author who had been plunged into tireless capitalist striving, while also noting (& resenting) the modernist path to literary prestige.
And the upshot is …

Unfortunately, this is not (yet??) a paper with a thesis.

Your thoughts & feedback would be much appreciated!

Less contingent is my belief that literary works (whether “great” or not) can be sources of qualitative sociological insight – e.g., about class.

Come in, the water’s warm (if not swarming with publishers).