Middlebrow Wodehouse (ed. Ann Rea, Ashgate 2016)

Chapter 12

Problematic Menswear in P.G. Wodehouse and Dornford Yates

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Introduction

In 1982, the biographer of the novelist Dornford Yates described how Yates would have appeared in the London Underground in around 1910: ‘his morning coat without fault, his boots varnished and in the forenoon his spats fell neatly over his uppers. Spats, you will not need to be told, were not worn after luncheon’ (Smithers 4). Sadly, I did need to be told. I was also unsure what spats were, but I recognized the word, from a Bertie Wooster story: ‘It would have taken a man of stronger fibre than I am to resist the pair of Old Etonian spats which had smiled up at me from inside the window’ (‘Claude and Eustace’ 550).

The sartorial disasters of Bertie Wooster recall a way of life and leisurely dressing now lost. Each now retro garment or accessory is a literary archaeological artifact as well as fashion history, since these items were placed in the stories for a reason. Bertie goes to the Park in his green Homburg hat, his yellowest shoes and swinging a whangee cane, possibly to dance pastoral dances, but certainly to display himself as a dashing and exuberant young man about town (‘Cerebellum’ 404). His antics show us his enjoyment of clothes, but he veers exasperatingly off the path of correct dressing, and has to be brought back into line perpetually by Jeeves. Bertie has some standards about what can and cannot be worn, as we see from his appalled reaction to the ‘crimson satin tie decorated with horseshoes’ worn by a besotted Bingo Little (‘Cerebellum’ 405), but his own dress sense is alarmingly erratic. Jeeves functions as a dress enforcer in their relationship, unexpectedly often to his own advantage.

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1 This tie should not be worn by gentlemen (it is patterned with horseshoes, thus breaking fashion rules). It also makes Bingo ostentatious by its colour and showy fabric (it breaks taste rules). As a gift from a waitress to a gentleman, it is an offence against
The stories of Dornford Yates are also useful for examining the use and abuse of menswear in early twentieth-century middlebrow fiction. Middlebrow fiction was written to be read for relaxation, amusement and simple pleasure. It has been defined as ‘a conservative realist form’ (Brown and Grover 1) with a function of sustenance, rather than distraction, through entertainment (Macdonald, ‘Introduction’ 2). The middlebrow is also a repository for social history, in which the most casual of remarks reveals what the writer expects the reader to know. In Yates, the appropriateness of his hero’s garments is crucial, and must be complete: sartorial disasters are only for Yates’s villains and those on whom the Yates hero must look down. His biographer, above, demonstrates a Yatesian obsessiveness with what could and could not be worn, in a manner indistinguishable from Yates’s fiction.

This chapter attempts to offer a better understanding of how British men were expected to dress during the years immediately after the First World War and into the 1920s, in the context of these two authors. Traditional men’s clothing was then no longer a secure indicator as to which social class, or group, one belonged, and so other indicators developed. The fiction of both Wodehouse and Yates is ideal for detecting these indicators, since it contains complex socio-historical references dating back to Victorian and Edwardian models, but was written for the spry young neo-Georgian of the 1920s and 1930s. I will be discussing selected stories and novels to investigate their masculine clothes-consciousness, and the prescriptive attitudes as to how men should dress. I am interested in the social rules for men’s clothes, and in the enforcers of these rules. In Wodehouse’s fiction, Jeeves is the enforcer, but so are girls and aunts. In Yates, the enforcement is more subtle and complex. Yet the net result is that in Yates the concern with correct clothing for men (Yates’s women are always impeccably dressed) is based on Yates’s heroes’ own anxieties, whereas in Wodehouse, Bertie shows admirable, if misplaced, spirit in flouting the conventions that Jeeves so stoutly upholds.

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the rules of cross-class encounters, and a comment on the depths of Bingo’s besottedness that make him abandon the accepted parameters of taste.
The idea of inclusion is central to my argument, to these two authors’ use of clothes to show who was in and out, and to their genre. Nicola Humble has noted that middlebrow is intrinsically invested in the idea of the process of exclusion and inclusion (Humble, ‘Sitting Forward’ 43). For nearly a hundred years the middlebrow has been argued about in terms of where middlebrow texts and authors belong on the cultural continuum (Macdonald, ‘Introduction’ 11), with the dominant concern being not what these novels or authors are saying, or to whom, but whether they are high-, middle- or lowbrow. The process of exclusion is a more aggressive act than that of inclusion. The fiction of Wodehouse operates to ensure that the protagonists are welcomed in the group, or to find that blights and dreadful fellows might actually be good chaps after all. My argument for this essay is that Bertie’s clothing experiments can be read as a way of showing Bertie’s insouciance over the possibility of being excluded, because he is so confident of his social status. In contrast, Yates’s stories show the anxiety of men who fear they are not correctly dressed, and a corresponding prescriptive message for his readers, who risk being excluded socially if their clothes are not deemed correct.

Laura Ugolini has approached the question of how men’s clothing worked as a social signal in the interwar years by working from ‘notions of group, rather than individual, identity’ (Ugolini 431). I have applied this theoretical point to the men’s fashions in Yates’s and Wodehouse’s stories, to see Bertie, and Yates’s characters, as representatives of their social groups, or class, and also as individuals holding membership of that group. Bertie’s clothing transgressions, and Jeeves’s efforts to keep him from transgressing, can be seen as a sign of Bertie’s secure membership of his group, and of Jeeves’s insecure position on the periphery of that group, as Mr Wooster’s valet. The repeated references by Jeeves to his peers, and to his own feelings about Bertie’s dress sense and self-presentation, support my reading of Bertie’s errors in sock and shirt choice being far more important to Jeeves’s sense of status than to Bertie’s sense of what is right and wrong according to his group’s rules. The French critic Farid Chenoune has noted that ‘British valets were the repository of the dogma of masculine stylishness, as incarnated by Jeeves in the novels of P.G. Wodehouse’ (Chenoune 113). Bertie routinely breaks free from this dogma, for the sheer pleasure he takes in his clothes, and from youthful irreverence. He has no real
fear of being ejected from the group, to which he belongs by birth, schooling and other social networks, whereas Jeeves’s security of tenure relies solely on his association with Bertie and his maintenance of the traditional codes. There are occasional mentions of Jeeves’s club, where he mingle with other gentlemen’s gentlemen, and where a well-dressed master maintains the status of his man. Bertie reflects on what might happen to Jeeves at his club if Bertie failed him: ‘I hated to think of a squad of butlers forming a hollow square while the Committee snipped his buttons off’ (CW 290). In contrast to this, Dornford Yates’s characters approve of a particular and rather old-fashioned code of dressing – conservative realist – which may not be transgressed. Those who do are derided, occasionally with a breathtaking viciousness. Their attentiveness to this can be read as anxiety about acting inappropriately for their class, whereas Bertie simply doesn’t need to care.

The Literary and Social History

The light fiction of Wodehouse and Yates was highly popular, and commercially influential. Their stories were published first in weekly or monthly popular periodicals in the USA and in the UK, but the two magazines most commonly associated with Wodehouse and Yates, respectively, were the Strand Magazine and the Windsor Magazine. Both writers specialized in a recurring set of characters, a ‘world’ into which the reader entered gladly with an increasing sense of familiarity. The default Wodehouse male lead is the mild-mannered buffoon or hapless young man about town; the typical Yates hero is the dispossessed ex-officer and romantic parti. Their primary habitat and interests were urban society and its pleasures, and the clothes suitable for these locations form the material over which the challenges of taste are issued. Wodehouse’s young men about town and Yates’s class defenders are clothes-sensitive to a degree that makes their garments, as expressions of their taste, extensions of their characters within the

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2 Bertie is referring to Kipling’s poem ‘Danny Deever’ (1890), in which a soldier found guilty of murdering a comrade is formally stripped of his buttons and rank identifiers that carry the regimental identity, and then executed in the presence of the regiment. The poem was a Victorian recitative piece, and highly dramatic, which may explain why Bertie uses it rather inappropriately in this context. Jeeves will not be killed, but he will certainly lose status if Bertie lets him down.
wider worlds that their authors created from large and loosely linked series of short stories and, later, novels.

The condescension in Smithers’ tone in the quotation with which this chapter began is a useful indicator of an essential difference between Yates’s and Wodehouse’s attitudes to clothes in their fiction. Such calm superiority would be funny in Wodehouse, but is intimidating in Yates. Without any humour, we are faced with arrogance, against which a natural defence is facetiousness. If spats could not be worn in the afternoon, what did the wearer do with the spats to get home without scenes of public ridicule? Spats are short gaiters of cloth, and can be folded: were they carried home in the briefcase or pocket, for putting on next morning? What, exactly, were spats for? If they were worn to protect the shoe from mud and rain, what if it rained in the afternoon, but not in the morning? In the 1920s Punch wondered whether spats were originally worn to protect the trouser leg from shoe-blacking, but concluded that their principal uses were to disguise an ugly or worn-out sock, or to prevent the back of the turned-down trouser leg from catching in the shoe (Punch 24). Smithers’ comment shows that by the 1910s the wearing of spats had accrued rules of taste, whether or not they made sense vis-à-vis the garment’s function. Bertie’s Old Etonian spats offended Jeeves so much that he burned them before Bertie had given him permission (‘Claude and Eustace’ 564). In the context of Jeeves’s normal deference in other stories of the period (1923), this was taking an unusual liberty, and indicates the power of clothes to cause trouble.

Laura Ugolini notes the persistence of the importance of spats into the 1930s, citing J.G. Sinclair’s 1931 memoir: ‘A mere shade in the color of your spats sets up a subtle social standard’ (Ugolini 431). Wodehouse himself hated wearing spats, describing having to wear them with morning dress at Ascot as ‘absolute torture’ (McCrum 165). The turned-up trouser was also subject to rules. Punch speaks of turned-down trousers being acceptable in certain circumstances, for instance ‘weddings, garden parties, business luncheons, and so forth’ (Punch 24). These were formal occasions, at which gentlemen wore the dress of a generation earlier. For day wear and off-duty wear, a different fashion prevailed. A Yates ex-officer hero has to dress down as a footman to get a job, but as soon as he has left the interview and turned the corner of the street, he quickly folds up his trouser turn-ups again (Yates, Anthony Lyveden
This is a reminder of the differences between how gentlemen and manservants dressed. In Yates, appearance is crucial for gentlemen as a measure of their dignity and self-respect. A Yates hero could spend a whole story fretting over the loss of a favourite hat, because the Yates hero risks being made to look a fool by his clothing mishaps (Yates, ‘Hat’).

Why are sartorial disasters funny in Wodehouse, but potentially character-destroying in Yates? In most of the Wooster stories of the 1920s, clothing is the currency of power. Bertie’s submission to Jeeves over purple socks and other ill-advised purchases is a form of reward for the valet. Routinely, Bertie acquires a particular item of menswear as a bid for freedom or autonomy, or as an indication of what he thinks is his superior taste, or to uphold his status as the employer in their relationship, but Jeeves’s tastes and desires always triumph. Bertie admits he is wrong because he needs, or needed, Jeeves’s help, and this becomes more important than the clothing fad of the moment, which is thus sacrificed. This inverted power relationship between master and man makes Jeeves the master, because he wields power over Bertie’s clothes: this is an inherently comic situation. Aunts and girls also act as sartorial authorities. Aunt Dahlia approves of Jeeves’s resistance in the past to Bertie’s moustache, purple socks, and soft-fronted shirts with dress-clothes (‘Spot of Art’ 461). A girl in whom Bertie is interested is sarcastic about his wearing loud checks: “‘In mourning?’ she asked, eyeing the trouserings (‘Clementina’ 481).

In Yates’s fiction the wrong clothing is not funny, and servants keep their place. The gentleman-footman of the trouser turn-ups mentioned above only wears his lower-class clothes on duty, and relaxes into more class-appropriate upper-class tweeds and flannels on his day off. It is simply unthinkable that he, a gentleman, should wear anything other than gentleman’s clothes when he is not required to dress otherwise. Interlopers to both Wodehouse’s and Yates’s fictional social circles reveal their inadequacies, and thus their unsuitability for membership, by a failure to dress well. Both writers subscribe to the conservative trope that well-cut tweed is socially superior to a City bowler, because tweed is country clothing, suggesting familiarity with or ownership of a country estate, whereas the bowler signifies a need to earn a living. In Yates’s fiction the equation is straightforward: readers are expected to align
themselves with the values of Berry, Boy and Jonah, which are supported by their perfectly chosen clothes, and by their conservative norms.

In Wodehouse the equation is inverted. Bertie is a knowledgeable buffoon with frequent lapses in taste, displaying a confident rashness in his clandestine purchases that indicates a long history of failing to adhere to the conservative norm. As we see above with the incident of Bingo Little’s crimson satin tie, Bertie can be very conservative indeed about others’ poor taste in clothes. He also does not show signs of déclassé behaviour in any other aspect of his character. His impulse buys and rebellious purchases are aberrations in an otherwise conservative way of life. In a world where insiders dress badly, but with charm, and where outsiders can have perfect dress sense but be appalling blights, Wodehouse conveys an assurance of security within the group that transcends the Yatesian ideal of conservative good taste. Security in social groupings was becoming important during and after the First World War, when social barriers were becoming more permeable. Those on the fringes of different social strata felt the need for extra vigilance in policing these leaking boundaries. Jeeves’s vigilance was for his own profession, which would be redundant if he and his kind were not needed to teach the new gentlemen the right standards.

Before the First World War, men indicated their social class by how they dressed. Men of the upper classes and the higher professions, as we have seen, wore morning dress with gloves and tall silk hats, with or without spats, and ‘dressed’ in prescribed clothing for dinner every evening. Some occasions required particular garments, for instance at Royal Ascot and at court, and there were formalized rules and expectations about the dress men should wear in the country, and at different times of the day. Officers in the armed forces had their own forms of dress for these occasions, but the same prescriptive rules were in place. There was little room for experimentation for the dandy of the period, the ‘knut’:\(^3\)

A “knut”, who succeeded the “masher” of the 1890s, was quintessentially Edwardian, a “fashion-eddy” with antecedents in the fops and dandies of Restoration comedy and the plays of Sheridan. […] Wodehouse

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3 The earliest reference for ‘knut’ in the OED is 1911, as a synonym for ‘nut’, also a slang term for ‘a fashionable or showy young man’ (1903). There was a contemporary vogue for the use of the initial letter ‘k’ in modish new fads, as in ‘kinema’ (1914).
himself wrote that the knut was descended from “the Beau, the Buck, the Macaroni, the Johnnie, the Swell, and the Dude” and should be distinguished from “the Blood”, a young man who causes riots in restaurants. (McCrum 84)

Philip Hoare notes that the ‘k-nut’ of the immediate pre-First World War period was influential on the style of the dashing British officer, which in turn brought into being the twentieth-century male dandy, epitomized by the actor Basil Hallam (1889–1916), the novelist Hugh Walpole (1884–1941), the artist Philip Streatfeild (1879–1915), and the satirist and wit ‘Saki’ (1870–1915) (Hoare 266). Notice that at the beginning of the war, the heyday of the ‘knot’, these icons ranged in age from 25 to 44 years: the knut was not necessarily a youth phenomenon. Nor was he necessarily upper class: Shannon describes him as suburban, lower in class than the ‘masher’ who was himself a ‘lower-class dandy’ (Shannon 144). Wodehouse wrote about many pre-war young men in addition to Bertie Wooster, most notably Psmith and Piccadilly Jim, who were also interested in a leisured social life and being well dressed. None of these were described as dandies or knuts: their dialogue and behaviour was enough for readers to discern their social categorization, which was middle class and upwards, not dependent on their clothes. Bertie is also not a dandy, despite his pleasure in clothes, because he does not dress for aesthetic perfection, but only to please himself.

After the war, the effects of new technologies, social systems and a struggling world economy were seen in the simple but effortlessly pervasive phenomenon of how people dressed. In Britain demarcations between class appearance had become blurred at the edges. The experience of military service gave many men the opportunity of social movement, both up and down, based on their new connections, and on their war record, now a social currency. They could no longer rely on their former social and professional expectations in a Britain where employment opportunities were not only not as they had been before the war, but fluctuated alarmingly throughout the 1920s and 1930s. At a technical level, even changes in ‘the production and distribution of clothes had ensured that working-class and lower middleclass men and women could afford to dress in very similar ways to the better off among the middle class’ (Ugolini 428). Clothes became more relaxed, in how they looked and when they were worn.
Innovations in textiles, fastenings and construction permitted greater variations in style, colour, texture and form. Men’s clothing also shifted from being a rigidly defining signifier of class or of profession to becoming a marker of membership of more closely defined, and also more disparate, male groups (Ugolini 431). The correct garment became a condition of passage and entry, as well as a code to be negotiated successfully. In a way, this was very similar to the morning dress and silk hat of the Edwardian generation: to look like a gentleman one wore the clothes. The catch was, to wear the right clothes one had to know how they were worn, and maintained, and had to be able to afford the clothes: this was hard in the pre-war period if you lacked the social training or income. To wear the clothes of a post-war group convincingly, one was less likely to need concomitant income or experience: one simply observed the models presented in the newspapers and magazines, on the streets, in the cinema, and, most importantly, in the shops. Clothes were cheaper and far more of them were sold over the counter as ready-to-wear. Tailoring was still important, but the upper classes also wore ready-to-wear, as did those men from other points on the class continuum. Yates demonstrates concern about men’s appearance in his fiction of the 1920s and 1930s, but it is in his stories of the decade 1914–23 that he writes clothes anxiety most frequently, when he himself was establishing himself first as a solicitor, then as a young army officer, then as an author. Entering so many different groups while experiencing the undercutting social uncertainties caused by war may have influenced his concerns in fiction from this period for his male characters, since after the 1920s his fiction is more interested in prescribing women’s behaviour than men’s clothing.

Yates

Dornford Yates’s first short story was published in 1910: his last work appeared in 1958. He published 21 novels, several fictionalized memoirs and over 100 short stories. The defining characteristics of his fiction were mannered plots of social comedy, or action-dominated thrillers, depicting increasingly ossified social attitudes. He was vehemently against class transgression, and vehemently for gender distinctions, expressing this conservatism in a fascinatingly retrogressive vocabulary. Yates attracted aspirational
middle-class and lower-middle-class readers, and readers of middlebrow fiction, who read him for the pleasure of his masterly plots, the timeless wit in his storytelling, and for his nostalgia for pre-war social conditions. It is paradoxical that the classes at whom his novels were marketed were often those who attracted derision and contempt from Yates’s characters for their errors in dress or conduct. His novels deal constantly with slippages on the social scale, and were openly prescriptive (Macdonald 2015).

His early fiction consisted of short stories about the five Pleydell and Mansel cousins. Berry Pleydell is the head of the family, who is married to his cousin Daphne, Boy Pleydell’s sister. Their cousins Jill and Jonah Mansel live with them, and later Boy’s American wife, Adèle, joins the group. All are of the gentry class, and have a country house in Hampshire where they stay at weekends and in the summer. Boy practises as a lawyer in Town, Jonah, the lead character in many of Yates’s thrillers from the mid-1920s, is a gentleman adventurer of private means, and Berry is a landowner and local magistrate. All three men served admirably in the war. Berry Pleydell is the supreme wit of the group, while Boy is an alter ego for Yates himself. They socialize with a wider group of characters, and it is noticeable that, of all this large group of uniformly charming pre- and post-war ladies and gentlemen, Boy and Berry have the strongest interest in clothes. All of Boy’s flirtations begin with a description of the lady’s dress and perfect shoes. More importantly, Boy and his group are repeatedly associated with the correctness of their own and other men’s clothes. Eight of the fifteen stories printed in Yates’s first short story collection, The Brother of Daphne (1914), contain remarks or plot drivers based on the correct clothing for men. Eight of the eleven chapters in the next Berry collection, Berry & Co (1920), have the same concerns. These are not just decorative details: the concern with how men should dress is central to characterization, and often to turns in the plots. In the intervening collection, The Courts of Idleness (1920), the short stories that feature the Pleydells have a strong male clothes-consciousness; those that do not, do not. Yates’s first novel, Anthony Lyveden (1921), which was published in serial form in the Windsor immediately after the stories in Berry & Co, contains one or two brief details of men’s clothing, including the telling remark about trouser turn-ups noted above. This is, however, not a Berry novel, and Boy is not the narrator, so there is no overwhelming concern about men’s clothing here.
Yates’s earliest stories often feature the fancy-dress craze of the pre- and post-war periods. Attending balls and parties in masks, costumes and other fancy dress was a middle-class activity, since many of these events were public, but required some knowledge and investment in the costumes. Solely upper-class balls would have been held privately, by personal invitation rather than by tickets for sale. But for the public events described by Yates there is an informal gatekeeping in place for this risky activity of dancing with masked strangers without knowing their antecedents or name.\(^4\) Tickets are sold by the women organizing the parties, which are often for charity, and will not be sold to those without the money or the right social connections. The maintenance of social status by using fancy dress is also important: one can use it to not be known, and also to signal membership of a group by that usage.

In ‘Punch and Judy’ (1911), Boy brings out an old Pierrot costume he had worn ‘two years ago at a fancy-dress ball’ for an episode of flirtation and disguise (Yates, ‘Punch and Judy’ 19). Disguise is important because Boy, and the lady of the moment, must not be recognized by the grinning peasants whom they are entertaining as part of a bet, because their social status depends on it. Ladies and gentlemen do not take to the stage without loss of face, but private theatricals and costume balls are acceptable. In ‘The Judgement of Paris’ (1914) the cousins make plans to attend a fancy-dress ball in London as characters from Cervantes. This taste for dressing up continues after the war, when they go to a masked ball in Cairo (Yates, ‘Beauty’). When they attend a gold and silver fancy-dress ball at the Royal Albert Hall, Jonah is becoming reluctant: ‘I always feel such a fool in fancy dress’ (Yates, ‘Hat’ 60). To be a good sport, to be part of the group, one must do as the group does, even if it means wearing ridiculous outfits. Boy dresses up for the sake of the group, to be able to participate in the group’s activities, with a certain manly resignation. Berry makes pointed comments in this story about the inconvenience of fancy dress without pockets, and there is a great deal said about the impracticality of these flimsy garments worn in a car in winter. But dressing up produces humour, and a topsy-turvy

\(^4\) There is an obvious connection here with the masquerades and routs of the eighteenth century, and with the London locations for such public displays of calculated social risk-taking, at Vauxhall and Ranelagh.
freedom from rules that is necessary to sanction Boy’s poodle-faking: he needs some license to kiss girls of his own class at a public ball, but he must also show a guarantee of his membership of the group. By remaining gentlemen, Boy and Berry remain secure in their status while wearing ruffs and cloth of gold. The essential foolishness of the costume was somehow transcended by its role in a communally agreed group activity. Even in the 1930s, Wodehouse, or Bertie Wooster, was able to say that a Pierrot costume was worn by ‘every other well-bred Englishman’ (RHJ 18).

A transitional moment for Boy that draws him away from socially sanctioned disguise towards risk-taking in the wrong clothes occurs when he dresses as a chauffeur, in the story ‘All Found’, first published in 1914. The girl in the case is appalled at the social risk Boy takes in continuing to drive her uncle and aunt around the country in the disguise of a lower-class servant. On coincidentally encountering the Pleydell car, which has broken down, Boy is instructed by his ‘employer’ to help Berry fix the car, and Berry takes full advantage of this situation to torment Boy, trying to make him break his disguise. For the girl’s sake, Boy, of course, cannot allow this to happen, and he stoically endures his brother-in-law’s jibes. In general, Berry’s humour often sails close to the wind in Yates’s fiction, an interesting indication of how attracted Yates felt to the risk of breaking rules and crossing boundaries. The girl in ‘All Found’ is also upset on Boy’s behalf because he has to behave like a servant when she knows he isn’t one. She insists that he keep his cap on instead of removing it in her presence, as would normally be expected of a servant. ‘And sit down. Sprawl about. Light a cigarette. Shake me. Kiss me, if you like. Anything to show you’re my own class and not a servant’ (Yates, ‘All Found’ 245). Yates invokes a thrilling risk of class transgression with this invitation, as well as suggestive innuendo, but it is a safe risk, since Boy will know how to behave, and will not allow the girl to be caught kissing a servant. By showing the boundaries of gentlemanly behaviour through a gentleman wearing a servant’s uniform, Yates is reinscribing the social codes that he felt were in danger of being breached. A similar situation is presented in ‘The Desert Air’

\[^{5}\] For Yates this would have been the worst a woman of the gentry class or above could do: his astoundingly vitriolic short story ‘Ann’ (formerly entitled ‘Mésalliance’, 1924) sanctions this by a tragic conclusion.
(1919) where Adèle is taken flying, but has to be disguised as a man. Rather than simply wear a man’s trousers, or perhaps because this would involve her removing her skirt, Boy insists that Adèle wear the cut-off legs of a pair of trousers under her skirt, fastened with garters, which would thus show below the borrowed flying coat. The elaborate nature of this disguise prevents a lady having to demean herself (according to Yates’s conservative social codes) by wearing trousers. It also prevents her from having the freedom of movement, and of identity, that trousers would have given her: this is typical of Yates, and Boy. Women may not stray, in any way. Clothing is extremely important because its correct use signals membership of the group. Careless or inappropriate use risks expulsion from the group, or at the very least its collective disapproval.

Boy’s clothes are noted frequently in the fiction: in the City he wears spats, gloves, a bowler or other hat made for him in Bond St (Yates, ‘Hat’ 65), carries a cane, and wears shirts made for him in St James’s Square (Yates, ‘Picture’ 118). In the country he wears white trousers in the morning, breeches for a walk (Yates, ‘Dark’ 60), and Harris tweeds for afternoon outings (Yates, ‘Love Scene’ 186, ‘Nobby/Blue Bandala’ 291). For formal occasions and weddings he wears full morning dress, which means a stiff white shirt and collar, a waistcoat, a morning coat, striped cashmere trousers and patent-leather boots, with a top hat. When driving to the wedding, he transports his hat in a ‘stiff-white hat-box’ in the footwell of the car, and wears a light overcoat over his morning dress (Yates, ‘Nobby/Wedding’ 142–4). The details of how a gentleman should dress are matter-of-fact and unfussy, well integrated into the narrative. However, since Boy’s interest in clothes and how he appears to girls are the main aspects of his characterization, and because wearing the wrong clothes threatens his social countenance, Boy must risk his sartorial perfection, again and again, for the sake of humour. Yates counted on his readers to share Boy’s concern about public opinion of his clothes when he dresses incorrectly, or, more importantly, does not dress correctly for his group, or class. Frequently, he is teased by the girl of the moment for being improperly dressed – “You shouldn’t wear made-up ties”, she said severely […] “And dickeys are going out too” (Yates, ‘Picture’ 119) – or for not wearing his clothes properly: ‘[Y]ou don’t take much care of
your clothes […] nearly all the men I know hitch up their trousers when they sit down’ (Yates, ‘Dark’ 59).

In a suggestive early story of 1914, Boy appears hatless, caneless and gloveless in a baths warehouse (for good reasons), and is mistaken for a salesman by a lady. His gentlemanly appearance might allow Boy to pass as one of the partners of the firm, which would have placed him much further up the social scale from that of the shopboy that his youth suggests, but his hatlessness simultaneously lowers him socially. His accent, his vocabulary, and the fact that he teases her familiarly and confidently while pretending to show her the baths, make her confused, and increase the reader’s enjoyment of the compromising situation in which Boy’s inappropriate dress has placed him (Yates, ‘Bath’ 200). Since Boy is a consummate flirt, clothes-consciousness becomes a performative aspect of masculinity, in terms of social authority and marriageability. In Yates’s view, for a man to be hatless in public in this story from before the war was a serious social solecism. After the war, to be hatless was merely a matter of loss of dignity (see discussion below of the Prince of Wales). In 1920: ‘I felt that the spectacle of a young man, hatless but otherwise decently dressed and adequately protected from the severity of the weather, needed but the suggestion of impatience to make it wholly ridiculous’ (Yates, ‘Hat’ 64). Even after a car crash in the countryside on the way to the wedding, Boy feels he has to excuse his now inappropriate clothes: ‘I was also conscious of being improperly dressed in an unusually loose grey overcoat, tweed cap, striped cashmere trousers and patent-leather boots’ (Yates ‘Nobby/Wedding’ 144). This self-mockery is clearly offered up as humour, but it is significant that inappropriate clothing is its source. Since clothes make an immediate impression on the casual passerby, whereas birth, education and class culture can only be discovered by investigation, the importance of the right clothes is very high.

Naturally Yates used inappropriate clothes as a way of characterizing the enemy. He rarely misses a chance to vilify an opponent of the Pleydells, or someone they despise, in terrible clothes. Berry’s bullying of some social inferiors, for his own and the readers’ amusement, is supported by Boy’s disapproval of the way his victims dress. To dress above or out of one’s station, or even in a way that offends members of a different group, is enough to justify persecution (Yates, ‘Clothes’ 33). Six years
later, the Chief Constable who challenges Boy is described as ‘a coarse-looking man, generously designed and expensively overdressed’ (Yates, ‘Noggin’ 29). He is not only ugly, but has poor taste in clothes: a double condemnation. Berry’s bullying continues after the war with the teasing of Mr Lewis, a ‘prosperous-looking individual with a slip in his waistcoat\(^\text{6}\) and a diamond ring’, who claims Berry as a college acquaintance. The unwelcomeness of this proffered intimacy is reinforced by his showy taste in clothes: Mr Lewis is not One of Them (Yates, ‘Education’ 119). Unusually, Yates continues the carping about Lewis’s wrong kind of clothes in a three-way gatekeeping exchange between Berry, Boy and Jonah. Berry implies that, at college, Lewis had too many boots and shoes to be a gentleman. Boy continues immediately: ‘I could spare the diamond but at least he’s not wearing a cummerbund and sand shoes.’ And then Jonah remarks: ‘[H]e’s keeping them for Henley. You won’t catch him out on dress,’ which is precisely what they are doing. The unusual reiteration of the criticism of Lewis’s clothes – Yates’s touch was rarely so heavy-handed – shows us how unsuitable Lewis is for the membership of the group that he so clearly wants to join (Yates, ‘Education’ 122).

Chenoune noted that the cohesiveness of the English gentry’s masculine ethic was nurtured on a powerful sense of belonging to an elite circle of exclusive public schools, universities, regiments, clubs, sports teams and tailors (Chenoune 63–4). If, after the war, access to these circles was easier, and more open, and a younger generation was growing up uninterested in sharing the values of the generations who had fought in the war, it would seem reasonable to assume that Yates, approaching his forties in the early 1920s, was feeling beleaguered and oppressed by a society whose values were not the same as those with which he suffused his fiction. Two further examples of how Yates uses incorrect men’s clothing as a reinforcement of the wearers’ vile qualities will establish that errors of taste – a classic middelbrow concern – were a powerful visual indication of wrongness, and that Yates’s readers would have accepted and learned from this.

\(^{\text{6}}\) A slip is a false lining designed to show against the shirt from underneath the upper edge of the waistcoat, deriving from early Victorian dandy fashions for wearing one waistcoat on top of another. We infer that Yates considers this to be in poor taste because it is ostentatious and unnecessarily complicated, much like the diamond ring.
A visitor to the area, Mr Dunkelsbaum, is loathed already by the Pleydells for being German, but he also looks like a ‘vicious, over-fed pug […] smug, purse-proud and evil […] bloated […] coarse [with an] unwholesome pallor’. His clothes finish him off completely: under

a silk-faced overcoat which he wore unbuttoned, the rich contour of a white waistcoat thrust its outrageous way, spurning the decent shelter of a black tailcoat and making the thick striped legs look shorter than ever. A diamond pin winked in the satin tie, and a black bowler hat and patent-leather boots mercifully covered, the one his crown and the others his short fat feet. (Yates, ‘Dunkelsbaum’ 235)

Dunkelsbaum is tormented, thwarted and victimized, all because he wants to buy an estate neighbouring the Pleydells’ own land. Two stories later in the same collection, Herbert Bason commits the crime of criticizing, and then petulantly kidnapping, the Pleydells’ dog. Bason is described as ‘short and fat and […] greasy […] bright yellow hair and a ridiculous moustache […] very watery pale blue eyes […] white flannel suits aren’t becoming to every figure, are they? Most of the rest of him was mauve – shirt, socks and handkerchief. Oh, and he had a tie on his pin’ (Yates, ‘Nobby/Blue Bandala’ 292). This description is vintage Yates: it is obliquely, subtly funny, and depends on class- and clothes-consciousness from the reader to work. He was a master of the effortless and devastating retort that wasted nothing in the delivery. His readers loved it. They would also have lapped up the message that to taunt someone for their wrong clothing was part of being a debonair wit. The humour lies mostly in the ridiculous visions evoked by Yates’s juxtaposition of vocabulary, and the scorn of the character’s voice. But without awareness from the reader of what the rules are, the humour will not work effectively. To see the joke, one must appreciate which rules are being broken, and are thus being criticized. In this way, Yates is educating his readers in a particular way of regarding particular clothes, a didactic message based on class awareness of the boundaries one may or may not cross.

Underneath these perfectly structured messages of rejection, there is a strong sense of anger, possibly also of fear. So much energy and wit was devoted to these comic put-downs, that we must consider what was driving this anger, and to whom he was speaking. Farid Chenoune notes of the post-war world, that
savoir-faire became synonymous with a lust for life, with pleasure-seeking, with liberated behaviour […] In dance halls […] a line of new male figures took the floor – businessmen, sports idols, screen stars, cosmopolitan parvenus, worldly gigolos, fast-living middle-class youth and the scions of old families in decline, not to mention taboo-breaking artists.

(Chenoune 143)

This was the new world Yates was afraid of, and that he was keeping at bay through his fiction. His villains, in the Berry stories at least, are social interlopers because they trespass on traditional gentry and class territory. The effect on his readers of his prescriptive examples may have been encouraging, or may have been privately humiliating. The humour would taken away the sting of criticism, but the bullying tone may not have been reassuring.

**Wodehouse**

P.G. Wodehouse first published his comic fiction in 1902, almost a decade before Yates, but until the appearance of Bertie Wooster and Jeeves, men’s clothes were not particularly prominent in his stories. Very occasionally Psmith noted clothes that he approved of, but his remarks were not developed. Reggie Pepper got into calamities much as Bertie did, but clothes were not his interest. Bertie and Jeeves first appeared together in the American Saturday Evening Post, in ‘Extricating Young Gussie’ (1915), and in ‘Leave it to Jeeves’ (1916). In the first paragraph of ‘Leave it to Jeeves’, clothes are clearly important:

> I remember meeting Monty Byng in Bond Street one morning, looking the last word in a grey check suit, and I felt I should never be happy till I had one like it. I dug the address of the tailors out of him, and had them working on the thing inside the hour.

> “Jeeves”, I said that evening. “I’m getting a check suit like that one of Mr Byng’s”.

> “Injudicious, sir”, he said firmly. “It will not become you”.

> “What absolute rot! It’s the soundest thing I’ve struck for years”.

> “Unsuitable for you, sir”.

Well, the long and the short of it was that the confounded thing came home, and I put it on, and when I caught sight of myself in the glass I nearly swooned. Jeeves was perfectly right. I looked a cross between a music-hall comedian and a cheap booke. (‘Leave it to Jeeves’ 7–8)
This very early manifestation of Bertie’s impetuosity, Jeeves’s omniscience, and also Jeeves’s superior taste, represents the pattern of their relationship as dresser and dressee for the remaining Wooster stories, all the way to the 1970s. The trope that Wodehouse used repeatedly in the Jeeves stories (and it is significant that we know them collectively by the valet’s name, not that of the master) is that Bertie wants to wear something that Jeeves will not approve of. The details of the ensuing power struggle provide the humour, rather than the awfulness of the clothes. Another important point illustrated in the quote above is that Jeeves’s opinions of Bertie’s clothes, and Bertie’s eventual agreement with them, are based on how ridiculous Bertie will look. The point at issue is not that the clothes are wrong for the occasion, or that they are wrong for the group (Monty Byng could wear that suit): the clothes are wrong for Bertie. He risks looking ridiculous, but not looking like a bounder, an interloper or a social climber. His social status will be undiminished even if he merely looks a fool.

We might ask how Wodehouse settled so successfully on the idea of Bertie’s clothing disasters as a recipe for humour. ‘Leave it to Jeeves’, as were most of its fellow stories in the 1919 collection My Man Jeeves, was first written for an American market in the Saturday Evening Post. Bertie the English chump was the object of the stories, and the object of the humour, so Wodehouse’s original intention was to amuse his readers by making the servant’s knowledge and power greater than that of the master. Once the stories were transferred to the British market after the war, Bertie’s fascination with making catastrophic clothes choices would have impacted on British readers in a slightly different way. We have already seen that the post-war class boundaries were being blurred, and that clothes were no longer a sure marker of social position. Yates fought against this by reinforcing the boundaries that his characters appear to have felt more deeply than their social class suggested was necessary. Wodehouse sent Bertie out to explore them with gusto, confident in his class security.

There is more to Bertie’s existence than clothes, though these do focus his mind, such as it is. At the beginning of ‘Jeeves and the Unbidden Guest’ (1916) Bertie has had a triumph:

I was especially bucked just then because the day before I had asserted myself with Jeeves, absolutely asserted myself, don’t you know. You see, the way things had been going on I was rapidly becoming a dashed serf. The man had jolly
well oppressed me. I didn’t so much mind when he made me give up one of my new suits, because, Jeeves’s judgment about suits is sound. But I as near as a toucher rebelled when he wouldn’t let me wear a pair of cloth-topped boots which I loved like a couple of brothers. And when he tried to tread on me like a worm in the matter of a hat, I jolly well put my foot down and showed him who was who. It’s a long story, and I haven’t time to tell you now, but the point is that he wanted me to wear the Longacre, as worn by John Drew, when I had set my heart on the Country Gentleman, as worn by another famous actor chappie, and the end of the matter was that, after a rather painful scene, I bought the Country Gentleman. So that’s how things stood on this particular morning, and I was feeling kind of manly and independent. (‘Guest’ 39–40)

This is a classic Bertean moment of hubris, signalling that a sartorial comeuppance is on its way, and will become the climax of the story. But when this, and other Jeeves stories first collected in My Man Jeeves in 1919, were rewritten for the 1925 collection Carry On Jeeves, clothing power struggles between Bertie and Jeeves were reduced in prominence. The Reggie Pepper stories published alongside the early Jeeves and Wooster stories don’t consider clothes at all, and by the mid-1920s, Bertie and his world had developed other comic possibilities that would allow Jeeves to dominate him. Wodehouse’s school stories dominated the Edwardian era; his young-man-about-town stories – which included Bertie and Reggie Pepper – constituted Wodehouse’s fiction of the wartime period. Bertie and Jeeves were Wodehouse’s most popular characters after the war, but their stories were written in parallel with other stories, about Ukridge, Blandings and Mr Mulliner. Bertie did develop, though not in age as much as in an increasing maturity of outlook that led, by the mid-1930s, to fewer bad-taste decisions in clothes and a (slightly) greater sense of responsibility and worldly wisdom.

Concerns about clothes make political gestures. In The Code of the Woosters (1938) Wodehouse uses clothes to focus his criticism of contemporary Fascist politics. ‘Roderick Spode is the founder and head of the Saviours of Britain, a Fascist organization better known as the Black Shorts’ (CW 237). This satire can be linked to other literary jokes about Fascism, for example Nancy Mitford’s suppressed first

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7 These ‘control’ Reggie Pepper stories were ‘Absent Treatment’, ‘Helping Freddie’, ‘Rallying round old George’, and ‘Doing Clarence a bit of good’. Reggie’s character is much like Bertie’s, but he has more common sense, and almost no interest in clothes.
novel, *Wigs on the Green* (1935), and is rooted in clothes. Spode’s views are shown to be as ridiculous as his black shorts uniform: ‘[J]ust because you have succeeded in introducing a handful of half-wits to disfigure the London scene by going about in black shorts, you think you’re someone. […] “look at that frightful ass Spode swanking about in footer bags! Did you ever in your puff see such a perfect perisher?”’ (*CW* 293). His political power is rapidly undermined when Jeeves discovers his secret:

“No, Mr Spode designs ladies’ underclothing, sir” […]

“Good lord, Jeeves! No wonder he didn’t want a thing like that to come out”. (*CW* 398)

This secret is shameful, reducing Spode the Fascist leader to a figure of ridicule, because, for Bertie and other hearty, manly chaps, ladies’ underwear is the most ignoble form of clothing with which a man could be associated. While by this time someone else is being ridiculed for their clothes, clothes remain crucial as a marker of character, and of position. Wodehouse had briefly moved Bertie from defence to attack position.

Let us consider Bertie’s crimes, working through the 1920s book by book. In *My Man Jeeves* (1919) Bertie’s new suit risks making him look like a music-hall comedian, he buys a hat that Jeeves disapproves of, he wears a pink tie, and he grows a moustache. In *The Inimitable Jeeves* (1923, stories dating originally from 1918), Bertie buys mauve shirts (Jeeves had packed mauve shirts for him in ‘The Aunt and the Sluggard’, 1916, but clearly fashions had changed). He also reaches his own limits of sartorial tolerance by goggling at Bingo Little’s crimson satin tie, but also wears a ‘rather fruity cummerbund’ at which ‘Jeeves shied like a startled mustang’ (‘Aunt Agatha Speaks her Mind’ 421). He wears purple socks and buys the previously mentioned Old Etonian spats. In this collection he scores four offensive items of clothing, but Bingo Little scores two. In *Carry On Jeeves* (1925) we hear more about Jeeves’ attitude to bad dressing: in his previous post he had ‘tendered [his] resignation because [he] could not see eye to eye with his lordship in his desire to dine in dress trousers, a flannel shirt, and a shooting coat’ (‘Jeeves Takes Charge’ 423). Unwisely, Bertie soon after decides to wear a suit in ‘a rather

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8 This was withdrawn shortly after publication after pressure from Nancy’s older sister, Diana, soon to be married to Sir Oswald Mosley, leader of the British Union of Fascists. It has recently been reissued.
sprightly young check’ (‘Jeeves Takes Charge’ 426), and later rashly buys some soft silk shirts for evening wear. In *Very Good, Jeeves* (1930, containing stories dating from 1926), Bertie shows initial resistance to Jeeves’s opinion by disparaging the importance of ties, and eventually explodes into a pair of plus-fours, prompting the reaction: ‘Pardon me, sir, are you proposing to appear in those garments in public?’ (‘Jeeves and the Kid Clementina’ 479).

In the 1930s, Bertie buys a white mess-jacket with brass buttons (*RHJ* 17). Earlier in the stories, Jeeves’s retaliations had taken the form of sending back the mauve shirts (‘Jeeves Exerts the Old Cerebellum’ 403), destroying the cummerbund (‘Aunt Agatha Speaks her Mind’ 424), giving the purple socks to the lift-boy (‘A Letter of Introduction’ 469), and burning the spats (‘Claude and Eustace’ 564). Continuing to walk heavily along the line that no servant may cross, Jeeves gives the check suit to the gardener (‘Jeeves Takes Charge’ 441), is allowed to burn the pink tie (‘Jeeves and the Unbidden Guest’ 473), sends the soft silk shirts back (‘Clustering Round Young Bingo’ 593), and gives the plus-fours to the poor (‘Jeeves and the Kid Clementina’ 496). The white mess-jacket has a nasty encounter with a hot iron (*RHJ* 209). Jeeves enforces his own taste by rejecting the wrong clothes, and usually acts with violence against the offending garments. He is implacable even when Bertie follows the fashion for soft-fronted silk shirts for evening wear, set by what one would have thought was an impeccable model, HRH the Prince of Wales, later to be (briefly) Edward VIII and the future husband of the American divorcée Mrs Simpson.⁹ ‘His Royal Highness, sir, may permit himself a certain licence which in your own case –’; ‘Soft silk shirts with evening costume are not worn, sir’ (‘Clustering Round Young Bingo’ 573). These remarks from a story of 1925 show that Wodehouse was following fashions closely. The Prince of Wales was by then a media star, photographed perpetually on the Riviera, at the Venice Lido, and appearing in *Vogue* and other illustrated periodicals closely connected with fashion and upper-class society. Chenoune notes that ‘[t]he Roaring Twenties were a period when a succession of models were enthusiastically tried

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⁹ John Betjeman’s poem ‘Death of King George V’ (1937) commemorates the prince on his accession to the throne as the ‘young man who lands hatless from the air’. In a period when men routinely wore hats, the prince chose to adopt a more modern style.
on, sparking hesitation, debate, conflict and scandal’ (Chenoune 143). Bertie was engaging in the sartorial discourse of the day, in which ‘the press regularly resounded with sharp exchanges between supporters and adversaries of conventional etiquette’ (Chenoune 147). There is also the strong possibility that Jeeves is simply old-fashioned. The high-fashion plus-fours that Jeeves objects to in 1930 were worn by the Prince of Wales in 1922 in a portrait by Sir William Orpen (Byrde 48).

By using clothes as an outlet for foolish exuberance, Bertie’s views on clothes do on occasion converge with those of Jeeves, much as a child’s tastes will sometimes grow to agree with those of its parent. One of the earliest characterizations of their relationship can be found in 1916, where Jeeves acts like a nanny patiently beating down a child’s objections:

“I am putting out the brown suit, sir”.
“No, I think I’ll wear the blue with the faint red stripe”.
“Not the blue with the faint red stripe, sir”.
“But I rather fancy myself in it”.
“Not the blue with the faint red stripe, sir”.
“Oh, all right, have it your own way”.
“Very good, sir. Thank you, sir”. (‘Corky’ 456)

In 1917 Bertie nearly makes a mistake, and is astonished at himself. ‘I went and dressed sadly. It will show you pretty well how pipped I was when I tell you that I as near as a toucher put on a white tie with a dinner jacket’ (‘Jeeves and the Hard-Boiled Egg’ 482). (White ties are, of course, not worn with a short dinner jacket, which should only be worn with a black bow tie. White ties are only worn with tailcoats, or what Jeeves, below, calls full evening dress.) In 1922 Bertie describes to a friend how he dresses. ‘As a rule, I’m what you might call a slow and careful dresser: I like to linger over the tie and see that the trousers are just so, but this morning I was all worked up. I just shoved on my things anyhow’ (‘The Purity of the Turf’ 518). By 1925, despite the regrettable white mess-jacket, he is an authority on correct evening wear, instructing his friend Rocky, who is aghast at the thought of the clothes he will have to wear if he moves to the city.
“Good Lord! I suppose I should have to dress for dinner in the evenings. What a ghastly notion!”

I was shocked, absolutely shocked.

“My dear chap!” I said reproachfully.

“Do you dress for dinner every night, Bertie?”

“Jeeves”, I said coldly, “How many suits of evening clothes have we?”

“We have three suits of full evening dress, sir; two dinner jackets –”

“Three”.

“For practical purposes only two, sir. If you remember, we cannot wear the third. We also have seven white waistcoats”.

“And shirts?”

“Four dozen, sir”.

“And white ties?”

“The first two shallow shelves in the chest of drawers are completely filled with our white ties, sir”. (‘The Aunt and the Sluggard’ 496)

Wodehouse reinforces Bertie’s confidence in his taste by indulging in an unusual literary parody. The romantic hero of historical fiction made famous in the early twentieth century by Baroness Orczy’s *Scarlet Pimpernel* novels, and repopularized in the 1920s and 1930s by Georgette Heyer, derived from the eighteenth-century *macaroni*, an early form of the male dandy, cited above. Originally a fop devoted to fashion and exaggerated modes, the twentieth-century macaroni in historical fiction enjoyed a greater emphasis on his physical dominance to compensate for his unmanly interest in clothes. Bertie, most unexpectedly, channels this sartorial masculinity on at least two occasions, in an attempt to assert himself.

I remember reading in one of those historical novels once about a chap – a buck he would have been, or a macaroni or some such bird as that – who, when people said the wrong thing, merely laughed down from lazy eyelids and flicked a speck of dust from the irreproachable Mechlin lace at his wrists. That was practically what I did now. At least, I straightened my tie and smiled one of those inscrutable smiles of mine. (*RIJ* 56; and see also *CW* 319)

The point of this *hommage* is to associate Bertie with the macaroni (a supreme arbiter of fashion), who in the Orczy and Heyer incarnations was either a cheerful fool or a passionate hero, but always a very
masculine man of high fashion and a master swordsman. Naturally, the parody turns the joke against Bertie, but his brief attempt to assert himself in a manly fashion, even if borrowed, does have a fleeting effect: he knows how to dress. Such self-assertion argues a hidden strength in Bertie that is rarely acknowledged.

Bertie’s authority on clothes is acknowledged by the very enforcers who critique his own experiments. His least repellent aunt, Aunt Dahlia (Mrs Travers), is the editor of a struggling fashion periodical called *Milady’s Boudoir*, and commissions Bertie to write an article on ‘What the Well-Dressed Man Is Wearing’ because Bertie simply is a well-dressed man. However, the credit for this status is not all his, and Bertie’s natural pride in being asked to contribute is undermined by his rebellion in the same story over the soft-fronted silk shirts, in which, as we have seen, Jeeves quashes his taste. Reinforcing this higher authority, by 1938 Jeeves is Mrs Travers’s peer reviewer for the new column ‘Husband’s Corner’: ‘It’s full of deep stuff about braid on the side of men’s dress trousers, and I’d like him to vet it. For all I know it may be Red propaganda’ (*CW* 203).

**Conclusion**

To return to my initial question, asking why sartorial disasters are funny in Wodehouse, but potentially character-destroying in Yates, we may reconsider the source of the humour. In Yates, the first-person narrator and Yates alter ago Boy Pleydell makes jokes about his own risk-taking with clothes to his reader. Turning the mockery against others for the same fault, we have seen that the Berry crowd react to a social interloper in the wrong clothes by vilifying those clothes, and thus, by extension, their wearer. We are allowed to laugh at the outsider, but we can’t laugh at Boy, only with him. Boy’s effortless wit as narrator strongly appealed to Yates’s readers. His readers would also have absorbed his message that taunting someone about their clothes was witty. In contrast, Bertie Wooster risks looking ridiculous, but if

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10 At the date of Wodehouse’s first Bertie-as-macaroni parody, in 1934, Georgette Heyer had not yet developed her Regency Buck heroes, who dressed well in a severely plain style.
he thinks he looks like the bee’s knees, he simply doesn’t care what anyone else thinks. His social status is unassailable, since his class, and his family, think that he is a fool in any case.

In Yates, the enforcement of the social rules is strongly dependent on the expectations of the group. The group’s concern with the correct clothing for men is based on anxiety, whether that of Yates or only of Boy, which would have been passed on to Yates’s readers. Bertie shows more courage in flouting conventions, and does not acknowledge Jeeves’s authority on specifics until he is either forced to, or comes to his senses. His independent spirit is demonstrated by his bravery over clothes, and his resistance to such policing. He is an inclusive dresser, welcoming the new and the interesting. Boy polices the choices of others and ruthlessly rejects those who do not fit his prescriptive criteria. Nicola Humble’s observation of the processes within middlebrow fiction that perform validation notes that ‘this obsessive concern about literary categorization is closely related to the elaborate process of ruling others in or out of middle-class status which preoccupied so many throughout the interwar period’ (Humble, ‘Sitting’ 44). We can see the same obsession in Yates, and traces of it in Wodehouse, in the camouflaged commentary of clothes, where the social group – men who count, our kind of people, people one knows – becomes more important while the older parameters of social class were becoming less rigidly defined and restricted.

Where clothing is the currency of power in these stories, Bertie spends freely with confidence, because he knows he has a large account to draw upon. He has security in the group. Boy protects the value of his capital aggressively. We might surmise that he does this knowing that if he loses that currency, there is no more. He has no inherent security in his group. The sartorial transgressions of Bertie, and Jeeves’s efforts to keep him from transgressing, are also a sign of Bertie’s secure membership of his group. It is ironic that, far from being the most powerful character in the Jeeves and Wooster stories, Jeeves actually has a rather insecure position. He exists on the periphery of Bertie’s group, dependent on his position as a valet, and on Bertie’s presentation of Jeeves’s performance. Bertie Wooster, the most foolish, most ridiculous character of the three examined here, is the strongest in his attitude to clothes.
List of references


